

2014

You're an Austen Heroine! Engaging Students with Past and Present

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Recommended Citation

Breashears, Caroline (2014) "You're an Austen Heroine! Engaging Students with Past and Present," *ABO: Interactive Journal for Women in the Arts, 1640-1830*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 1 , Article 5.
<https://www.doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.5038/2157-7129.4.1.4>
Available at: <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/abo/vol4/iss1/5>

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You're an Austen Heroine! Engaging Students with Past and Present

Abstract

In my senior seminar on Jane Austen, I seek to engage students in multiple ways. On one hand, I want them to connect with Austen's world and to reflect on what it means to them; on the other hand, I want them to understand the very real differences of that world and how they inform her novels. One strategy for engaging students in these ways is through interactive games. Studies have shown that many modern games have features similar to those stressed by engaged learning, so game design can be adapted for pedagogical purposes. I discuss the purposes, design, and play of my PowerPoint game "You're an Austen Heroine!" I invite interested readers to see the game in the attached file.

Keywords

Jane Austen, engaged learning, game design, historical contexts, connections

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Cover Page Footnote

I demonstrated this game during one of the pedagogy sessions organized by the Women's Caucus at the American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies Conference 2013. Many thanks to Heather King and Srividhya Swaminathan for including me in their panels on "Let's Get Engaged!" I also thank my Jane Austen senior seminars for really awesome feedback and discussions about engaged learning.

In an episode of *The Chaser's War on Everything* (25 April 2007), Chris Taylor introduces one of his famous stunts by alluding to a survey of Australian women: "Eight out of ten women would rather spend the night with Mr. Darcy than Brad Pitt." Jane Austen's hero, he notes, is the top fantasy for Australian women. Taylor therefore decides to test "if you really could pick up a girl using nothing but the lines and the looks of Mr. Darcy." Dressed in a top hat and sporting a dashing set of sideburns, Taylor trolls the streets asking women if he can escort them. They flee. Desperate, he imitates a scene from the most famous BBC adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* (1995), diving into a fountain and then strutting around in his wet shirt. One retreating woman admits, "I find you odd" (*Chaser's War*).

I show this episode in my seminar on Jane Austen, where students chortle over the gap between fantasy and reality. I also use it to prompt discussion about the questions that frame our course: What is it about Austen and her works that intrigues us? To what extent are we actually reading—or misreading—her novels? In other words, what aspects of Austen's time does Mr. Darcy represent, and would my students really want to get up close and personal with those sideburns? The course enables us to tackle these questions with a two-part structure. We begin by reading Austen's novels and situating them within their historical contexts. How does Mr. Darcy, for instance, show Austen's engagement with early nineteenth-century ideals of masculinity and elite responsibility? We then consider recent films inspired by Austen's works, trying to determine what they mean for us. How do adaptations (such as *Bridget Jones's Diary*) reveal timeless themes in Austen's novels as well as more modern concerns? Why does the miniseries *Lost in Austen* suggest that Amanda Price prefers Darcy and a fictional world to her boyfriend and modern London? Ultimately, I want students to connect with Austen's novels while understanding their complex engagement with historically specific issues.

To accomplish these objectives, I include a range of engaged learning assignments—assignments requiring students actively to make meaning—such as student presentations on historical contexts and role-playing exercises set in the present.¹ The final activity of the semester is an interactive PowerPoint game, "You're an Austen Heroine," in which the class plays through a range of scenarios inspired by Austen's novels, with the goal of reaching a happy ending (as defined by Austen). In some ways, this game resembles other activities I use, requiring students to reflect on Austen's contexts and even to connect emotionally with Austen's world through role-playing. It differs, however, in drawing upon game design in ways that enable me to achieve additional objectives. First, it focuses on *a* character navigating Austen's world, not a particular character in a discrete scene in one of her novels. As a result, it requires students to synthesize what they have learned in relation to Austen's novels and contexts generally. Second, it tracks that character from beginning to end, encouraging students to reflect on how Austen's protagonists must think strategically to achieve their individual desires within a world with particular social expectations, family obligations, and moral values. Finally, the game is played as a class, so that at each stage students can discuss their choices. Together, they debate whether to hop into that fast phaeton with Mr. Smooth, what Austen's novels suggest about decorum, and how their twenty-first century values influence their choices. The result is an effective review of our semester's work that prompts a deeper level of engagement. Below I discuss the rationale and design of this game within the context of my course. I end with a description of game play and my students' responses. Interested readers may view, use, and/or modify the game (Attached

separately. Please note: the game is not available for commercial sale. Anyone wishing to use or adapt the game should make proper acknowledgement to the author.).

I use “You’re an Austen Heroine!” in a senior seminar for English majors limited to 12 students. Enrollment has ranged from 6 to 12 students, mostly women; last semester, I had 9 students, including (for the first time) 2 men. The size of the class encourages a comfortable environment in which students are friendly and vocal. They want to talk. However, Jane Austen can seem alien to many of them, especially those who have never read her novels and have little understanding of their contexts. Since we do not require our English majors to take any courses in literature before 1900, they are unprepared to analyze the significance of Harriet Smith’s parentage or Lydia Bennet’s elopement with Wickham. We therefore spend a lot of time in the first half of the semester on historical contexts. For instance, I briefly lecture on the rules and social significance of dance, inviting students to analyze how Austen uses scenes of public and private balls to reveal character. I also require students to deliver presentations on particular contexts, such as money, class, religion, female education, landscape, the navy, and ideals of masculinity. Without such contexts, Nora Nachumi reminds us, “students . . . may easily miss vital information about characters, plots and themes. In addition, they may impose their own expectations and values upon the texts, and thereby judge and reject certain protagonists.” In the latter part of the course, students write a substantial term paper on a topic of their choice, and we discuss how our culture adapts Austen’s novels in films and Austenuations, such as *Aisha* and *Bride and Prejudice*. What messages still resonate, even across cultures, and what has been changed? Because students have a sense of historical contexts, these discussions are more informed. They are also informal and ongoing. My goal is a consistent habit of reflection that enables students to deepen their insights over the course of the semester.

Nevertheless, connecting with Jane Austen remains challenging, particularly when students encounter a character such as Fanny Price. Intellectually they know that Fanny’s situation and education shape her behavior, but reciting standards of female education during a formal presentation differs from understanding what drives Fanny. Their emotional distance impedes deeper understanding. I have therefore experimented with engaged learning activities that emphasize a first-person standpoint in relation to the texts. For this purpose, role-playing activities can be surprisingly effective. Peggy Schaller, for instance, has demonstrated how role-playing the French Revolution (in French) helps students to develop an understanding of the eighteenth century while honing their language skills. My students also find such exercises effective. When I asked them what “engaged learning” meant to them, they did not mention giving presentations on historical contexts, which encourages a third-person standpoint. No, as one student said, “We’re able to engage more fully with the character[s] when we have to embody them and become them in class, and this way we’re allowed deeper insights into the motivations of the characters and so it makes us engage with the text more fully as a whole.”² Students in my class also expressed a preference for structured role-playing activities, and they enjoyed modernizing texts so that they seemed more real. One student, for instance, suggested that we reimagine one of Austen’s balls as a dance club.

A very brief example will illustrate this kind of activity and enable me to explain how “You’re an Austen Heroine!” engages students in different ways. My example, inspired by my students and a Peaches & Herb classic, is “Shake Your Groove Thing: An Updated Evening at

Uppercross.” The class before we started *Persuasion*, I asked students to select a character from *Persuasion* (I brought name tags) and to take a handout with instructions for preparing. As they read the first part of the novel, they were to think about their characters and to focus on three issues that we would discuss: the significance of conversation in Austen’s novel, what informal dance means and reveals, and how Austen’s text remains timeless yet also reflects historically specific circumstances. I asked students to focus especially on Chapter VIII, which we would stage as an impromptu disco party. I also invited them to send me song requests (they did, favoring the Village People and K.C. and the Sunshine Band). In class, students were then ready to discuss Austen’s novel within her contexts, and we analyzed Chapter VIII while drawing upon Linda Bree’s analysis of conversation and Nancy M. Lee-Riffe’s explanation of dance in Austen’s time. Then I whipped out my disco ball and students assumed their updated roles. Anne Elliot, for instance, was no longer playing the pianoforte for others: she seated herself at a computer as a DJ, taking song requests (played using YouTube). The Musgrove sisters shimmied around Wentworth. Afterwards, we discussed what seemed timeless (romantic frustration) and really different (the female students, for instance, wanted to be bolder in conversation and dance than their early nineteenth-century counterparts). The class helped students to reflect on part of one novel in relation to its time as well as ours; it also enabled each of them to connect with one character, whose motivations and situation became clearer.

At the end of the semester, though, I wanted students to go beyond discussing particular characters, contexts, or scenes to synthesize what they had learned in relation to Austen’s novels as a whole. Austen’s novels are not, after all, a series of loosely connected scenes like the evening at Uppercross: they trace the protagonists’ progress toward personal happiness while negotiating the complex social expectations that my class had been discussing all semester. Indeed, as Michael Chwe suggests in *Jane Austen, Game Theorist*, Austen’s novels can be read “as chronicles of how a young woman learns strategic thinking skills . . .” (49). Chwe argues,

Austen starts with the basic concepts of choice (a person does what she does because she chooses to) and preferences (a person chooses according to her preferences). Strategic thinking, what Austen calls ‘penetration,’ is game theory’s central concept: when choosing an action, a person thinks about how others will act Austen then considers how strategic thinking relates to other explanations of human action, such as those involving emotions, habits, rules, social factors, and ideology. (1)

My goal, then, was to design an activity that would simultaneously reflect that larger process and situate my students within it. They needed to experience the social limitations and choices available to Austen’s characters as they work toward their happy endings; at the same time, I wanted students to reflect on how their modern positions affected their preferences in navigating those choices.

For this purpose, I therefore turned to another form of engaged learning involving more high-tech games. Games can be pedagogically powerful because, as Michele D. Dickey has demonstrated, the elements of game design and engaged learning are very similar. Those elements include:

- focused goals

- challenging tasks
- clear and compelling standards
- protection from adverse consequences for initial failures
- affirmation of performance
- affiliation with others
- novelty and variety
- choice
- authenticity. (Dickey 79)

For instance, in a computer game, the goals must be clear, whether retrieving an object from a distant land or conquering an enemy. The tasks must be challenging enough to retain the player's interest, and there must be standards for accomplishing those tasks. At the same time, the player is protected from adverse consequences for initial failures: role-playing enables gamers to risk new strategies for solving problems without serious consequences. There are rewards for success, and players may be affiliated with others, such as in online games. Finally, games present a variety of narrative arcs that engage players creatively and require them to make choices (Dickey 79).

Game design, as Dickey argues, provides a model for engaged learning activities (78), and I have found some of its strategies helpful in designing my PowerPoint activity. For instance, many computer games use a first-person point of view, making the player part of the gaming environment. Dickey compares this element to the way that engaged learning requires students to move through a series of tasks that prompt them to learn new information, to synthesize information, and to solve problems (72). Likewise, in my game students immerse themselves in the world of early nineteenth-century England, a world materially and socially different from our own. Students are not merely observing Fanny Price's isolation at Portsmouth; they are temporarily experiencing the limitations imposed on young ladies in relation to their physical and social spaces. Like game players, they also succeed by navigating their way through branching stories, in which they control the story by making choices informed by the rules of that world. In addition, they get a sense of the way in which Austen's heroines work toward their endings, learning good strategies and avoiding bad ones in the way that Chwe maps. For instance, they must avoid the trap into which Catherine Morland falls: trusting blindly in the judgment of those around her. She must learn to evaluate the motives of others and act according to her own values, not comply with the Thorpes's schemes. And like Catherine and Austen's other heroines, my students find their choices tied to clear rewards (points). The difference is in the stakes: if our class loses, we (unlike Austen's characters) can simply play again.

While I stress the playful aspects of the game, its primary purpose is educational, differentiating it from similar but more entertaining works. One example is Emma Campbell Webster's delightful *Lost in Austen: Create Your Own Jane Austen Adventure* (2007). Like this adventure book, my game requires students to enter this particular world and make choices. However, my activity situates players in the role of a heroine—not (as in Webster's book) Elizabeth Bennet specifically (Webster 1). I am less interested in students replicating the experience of a particular character than in prompting them to reflect on the contexts of Austen's world and how she interrogates its literary and social rules. In addition, my point system rewards decisions based on

mastery of those contexts—not simply things that happen to players.³ The goal is to deepen our understanding of what Austen’s texts mean, not to get lost in them.

The game begins by establishing the objective of engaging Jane Austen’s world by placing ourselves within it, specifically by examining (1) key scenarios in Austen’s novels that reflect the generic and social conventions that she uses and interrogates; (2) strategies for finding individual happiness within those contexts; and (3) the relationship between Austen’s world and our twenty-first century values and expectations. I then establish the scenario:

You are an intelligent young lady living in England in the early nineteenth century. Your family is respectable, and you possess a distinct sense of the proprieties. You are very aware of your obligations to your family and your community; in addition, you very much hope to find happiness. How you negotiate those responsibilities and desires in relation to your options is about to be tested. . . .

The goal of the game is to follow the ideals established in Jane Austen’s novel for fulfilling one’s moral and social obligations and reaching personal happiness. I briefly state that goal before explaining the method of play. The class plays together, discussing choices based on a range of scenarios. They begin with 500 points and must get to 1000 points by doing the following things:

- Act sensibly and maintain your virtue
- Contribute to your family’s stability, reputation, and happiness
- Marry prudently and for love
- Maintain or raise your social status
- Fulfill your social obligations

This list is reductive: I cannot include all of the complexities of Austen’s novels. Instead I identify many of Austen’s ideals and clarify that students cannot win simply by getting married. *Emma*, for instance, is not simply a romance novel.

The game consists of a series of scenarios (“hooks” in the language of game design) that prompt students to reflect on similar incidents in Austen’s novels and the contexts that give them significance. For instance, in one scenario you (the players) are home with your invalid aunt, and your cousin and his new friend visit. Your cousin expresses enthusiasm for novels generally and the Gothic novels of Mrs. Radcliffe in particular; his friend likes only *The Monk*. Students must consider what a Gothic novel is, what the two gentlemen’s preferences suggest about them, and how this scenario evokes *Northanger Abbey*. Students then face two choices: “You discuss Radcliffe with your cousin,” or “You accept the friend’s offer of a loan of *The Monk*.” On one hand, students know that *The Monk* had a reputation as a scandalous novel, so a lady of Austen’s time should refuse the offer. On the other hand, the raciness of *The Monk*, with its banditti and bleeding nun, appealed to my students. Class members discuss such options and their long-term consequences, and then tell me their choice. The choices are hyperlinked to different slides, enabling the narrative path to branch. For instance, if “you” accept the offer of *The Monk*, I click on that option to go to a new slide: “Scandalous! If your aunt were awake, she’d be shocked!”

The players also lose 50 points for inappropriate reading, and they immediately go to another slide with new choices. Specifically, “your” cousins return home and, seeing the book, want to stage a pantomime that it inspired: *Agnes and Raymond*. Readers of *Mansfield Park* know what *that* means. But if you discuss Radcliffe with your cousin, you’ll be invited to take a scenic walk and examine landscape design with him and his sisters. An earlier student presentation on eighteenth-century landscapes provided students with a context for making their decision.

The design can be simple or complicated, depending on how many paths are included. Each semester, I refine the game and add new elements that relate to the current class. In the fall of 2012 (when the class was all women) I took my students to our University’s Costume Shop, where the supervisor, Selina French, gave a lecture on the social contexts of fashion before letting students try on gowns. I took pictures and put the students visually into the game as heroines. For class in the fall of 2013, I added new branching paths to offer more choices and evoke more scenes from Austen’s novels. We typically go through the game multiple times so that students can experience different challenges. Last semester (fall 2013), the students played once to win, discussing each choice in relation to Austen’s contexts. Then they asked to play again, making choices that would lead to losing. They were interested in what would fail as well as succeed, particularly since some of the “wrong” options were ones that appealed to them as modern readers.

The game’s design reinforces my course goals differently from my other engaged learning activities. First, unlike the role-playing activities I use, the students play together as a single character, so they constantly discuss alternatives facing their heroine. Those discussions reveal their conflicting impulses as readers of Austen and as twenty-first century individuals. On one hand, some students argue that they must avoid any risky behaviors: no riding in fast phaetons with boys! On the other hand, some students advocate for the activities that seem most fun now: they want to dance, not stay home parsing James Fordyce’s *Sermons*. The discussion is an essential component of the game that enhances the review process. Several students commented on that aspect when I invited anonymous feedback. One student wrote, “I particularly liked that we completed the game as a whole class because I felt it was both beneficial and interesting to weigh our options and have discussion about the pros and cons of each option . . . taking into consideration what might be appropriate vs. what Jane Austen would actually be likely to have her heroine do.” Students reflected their awareness of how Austen often challenges as well as reflects her society’s ideals. The difficulty is deciding which rules matter and how to balance them with the need for individual happiness.

Second, in making those choices, students faced the same dilemmas that Austen’s heroines did, and they were forced to think strategically about them. Deciding whether to perform in a racy play therefore assumed significance as one step toward their goals—not just a discrete episode in *Mansfield Park* that they might analyze or perform. And while we had discussed Michael Chwe’s theory about strategy, students realized that experiencing a heroine’s progress differs significantly from simply tracing it. After the game, several wrote that they now realized how difficult it is for Austen’s heroines to reach their happy ending. For instance, one student commented that the game prompted reflection about “The social constrictions and anxieties that ladies faced, how difficult it can be to be virtuous and happy.” Another added, “I think we learned how hard it is to choose between what is proper and what will make you happy. This is

very true of Austen's novels as her heroines must make these same difficult decisions." They might have reached the same conclusion from reading closely or reflecting on the historical contexts we had covered, particularly those in relation to female education, virtue, and career options, but experiencing those limitations was more compelling.

Another difference in the game is that it combines situations from Austen's novels and world, encouraging students to synthesize what they have already learned. Students liked the game for including "so many options encompassing all of Austen's works," and for "how it incorporated aspects from all of Austen's books." Others commented on "the variety, complexity, and option to win or fail," and one wrote, "The variety is *good* since there are so many pathways and it's pretty funny." For these students, the game, as one said, "confirmed what we learned about Austen. While her heroines were not completely ideal women for her time period, they cherished their own happiness and opinions more." Another student suggested that the game affirmed their understanding of Austen's novels differently: "It definitely confirmed a lot of what I have learned throughout this course, but I still think it was helpful in that it made me take on the role and responsibilities of an Austen heroine and helped me to better understand the strictures they faced in society. I understood this mentally before the game, but the activity made me also *feel* it emotionally." These comments suggest that the game works best as a review, helping students to think (or in this case feel) deeply, thereby achieving one goal of engaged learning.

Like other games, "You're an Austen Heroine!" is ready for a new, improved edition. My students smartly identified areas for revision, with one writing, "If one of the goals of the game is to connect it to today, maybe [have] discussion slides every so often to get players thinking and talking about how it connects?" My next revision will incorporate this suggestion in the form of occasional questions about their preferences. For instance, one slide in the game asks students to choose between a naval officer (evoking the rising Captain Wentworth) and the snobby gentleman (similar to Mr. Darcy); my next version will include a discussion slide inviting students to provide a rationale for their choice. Students will then have the opportunity to reflect on how their own positionality influences their responses to Austen. Last semester, my students preferred the naval officer. Did their class position or view of social mobility affect that choice? Did the naval officer fit their ideal of masculinity better than the category "gentleman"? Or was something else in play?

Other suggestions for improving the game were equally valuable. One student noted that I should include more branching paths to introduce greater variety. Other students wanted the game to be more challenging, as one student wrote: "not as obvious good/bad choices—more choosing between the good or bad options." These suggestions seem to me valuable, and my next revision will incorporate them. In the meantime, I offer my game to others teaching Austen's novels, particularly those whose students find Jane Austen either terribly alien or the creator of Australian women's #1 fantasy. I hope to see how others revise and use this game to help their students engage with Austen's novels and synthesize what they have learned. Above all, I hope that we can teach a new generation of readers that they can understand what it means to be an Austen heroine without getting lost in Austen.

Notes

¹ There is little consensus about what “engaged learning” means, though educators routinely stress its focus on students actively making meaning rather than passively listening to lectures. Stephen Bowen, tackling the question of *what* students are engaging, suggests that educators think of engagement in four ways: student engagement with the learning process, student engagement with the object of study, student engagement with contexts of the subject of study, and student engagement with the human condition, or issues that affect people generally (Bowen 4). The last form is “transformative learning—learning in which students grow in response to what they have learned. Here, engagement is more intense and more personal,” Bowen notes (5). These are certainly my goals for the course.

² Students in my Fall 2013 Austen seminar each gave me permission to quote them anonymously. This comment was said in class; the later comments that I include in this essay were written anonymously in response to invitations for feedback on class activities. They were extremely constructive, helping me to improve the activities I used in class.

³ In Webster’s game, for instance, the reader loses points when Darcy refuses to dance with her (6).

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