My Work on Decision Points: Reflections on Archival Research

My doctoral degree is in the discipline of rhetoric and composition. This means that I teach the theories and practices of writing persuasively in a variety of forms, and it also means that I publish research to help build knowledge of what those theories and practices actually look like in public spaces or the classroom. People in my profession do research across an enormous range of research sites and involving some really unexpected objects of analysis. I have colleagues who write about critical theories of race as they are represented in monuments of the Civil Rights Movement. I have other colleagues who write about assessment practices in the teaching of writing, about identity formation in sororities, or how cultural attitudes appear in or are even shaped by writing genres most people wouldn’t pay that close of attention to, like cookbooks or instruction manuals for software applications.

My own research area is in what we call digital rhetorics, which you can loosely think of as a study of persuasive appeals and communicative strategies unique to computable media. This includes anything from websites, to digital video, to software applications, and—my personal favorite—videogames. People from a wide range of scholarly disciplines—rhetoric and composition, philosophy, computer science, sociology, psychology, and creative writing, to name a few—now do research on videogames from their various perspectives. This loose collection of scholars can be thought of as comprising the field of “game studies.” As a scholar of rhetoric, I bring to the study of games questions about the range of ways games might be persuasive in a wide variety of situations. In fact, many games are designed today for specifically rhetorical purposes, often by overly political organizations, such as PETA. Examples include The McDonald’s Game (Figure 1), a game about the politics of profit in the fast food industry, or Cooking Mama (Figure 2), a game about the ethics of vegetarianism.

![Figure 1 The McDonald's Videogame](image1)

![Figure 2 Cooking Mama: Mama Kills Animals](image2)

My own archival research project involves Decision Points, which is a videogame-based exhibit at the George W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas. Presidential libraries serve as archival sites for particular political administrations in the United States, documenting major global and domestic events and important policies a particular president helped become law, as well as general background information about presidential families. Decision Points is a game about specific crises faced by the George W. Bush administration, such as Hurricane Katrina or the financial crisis of 2007 and 2008. I first heard about the exhibit just a few days before the library opened in April 2014. At
the time, I was in the final stages of writing my dissertation and I did not have time to take on a
new research project, but I planned to come back to it as soon as I was able.

Thanks to a grant I received at Oklahoma State University, I have had the opportunity to
do some research on Decision Points over the past year or so, and in this short essay I want to
share with you some of the things I have learned about researching, asking questions, and writing
about archives. Specifically, this chapter is about two lessons I learned from working with
archives and how I came to learn them: how archives 1) require the researcher to remain open
minded about their questions and possible findings, and how archives 2) challenge the
researcher’s deeply-held beliefs about their research subjects.

**Lesson 1: Archival Researchers Must Remain Open Minded about Questions and Conclusions**

One thing you will almost certainly learn from working with digital archives this
semester is that archival research projects tend to appear much more simple and straightforward
on the surface than they ultimately become. This capacity for archives to complicate your
research questions and generate interesting conclusions is one among the great benefits and joys
of working with archival material. Often with archives, collections of material are sort of sitting
around, either waiting to be discovered or having not been looked at in a particular way. When
working with your archive, you have a real chance of asking questions no one has asked about
those materials before, and arriving at answers no one has yet considered. It is research invested
with tremendous amounts of creative and inventive possibilities.

Take my own project, for instance. By the time I actually began working on Decision
Points, I had been doing analysis and scholarship of computer games and software for about five
years. As such, I had a pretty good handle on most of the existing theories in the field of game
studies. At the time, I was working a lot with the theory of *procedural rhetoric*, described by
philosopher and game designer Ian Bogost as the ways videogames mount claims and make
arguments through the use of models and computer code. That might sound a little complicated,
but it really is not. What it means is that when a designer makes a game, they have to to build a
model of some system from the real world. Take, as a basic example, the way a basketball player
takes a shot in a sports simulator. For the game to work, designers represent how it looks when a
player like Steph Curry shoots, and they do this by building mathematical models that are then
described and executed through computer code. Such a model is by definition rhetorical, because
it makes a claim about how that thing form the real world (Steph Curry’s jumpshot, in this
instance) does, could, or should work.

So when I began work on Decision Points, the project seemed pretty simple. My research
questions were something like these: “How does the Decision Points game use procedural
rhetoric to make claims about the Bush Administration? How does it model the various crises
faced by that administration?” Those are sort of fine as far as research question go, but if I had
stayed too focused on them, I would have missed much more interesting aspects of the project,
and paid almost no attention to other interesting materials in the archives. Decision Points itself
is fairly simple. Users select from a list of four crises faced by Bush. Then, using a touchscreen
device to access videos, they solicit advice from various advisors (Figure 3) on different sides of
the political aisle, all while “breaking news” interrupts to give updates on the crisis. In the end,
the user decide what action they would have taken, and Bush explains why he took the particular
action he did when in office. So the game essentially makes claims about the Bush
Administration by modeling decision making as a process where the president is inundated with
(usually conflicting) information, but ultimately has to make a decision.
As you will learn this semester, however, thinking rhetorically about archives requires you to remain open about alternative questions and possibilities for the direction your project takes. In my own project, for instance, I forced myself to get outside of Decision Points and I began to examine other types and kinds of materials housed in the museum. I not only began to take pictures and ask questions about other parts of the archive, such as the rather large display of twisted metal from Ground Zero (Figure 4), but also to the various pieces of music that play in the museum, or the placement of television monitors, or even which particular pieces of government policy were displayed and which were not. As a researcher, this led me to begin asking much more complex and difficult questions: “What kind of ambience is set up in the area surrounding Decision Points through the use of music? Who made the decisions about where particular displays were put, and for what purpose? How and why were particular pieces of video evidence selected for the game?” Archives really demand that researchers remain open about their questions and their possible answers, and they reward researchers who do the work of thinking rhetorically.
Lesson 2: Archives Challenge the Researcher’s Deeply-Held Beliefs

One of the enduring challenges of research in general is for the researcher to scrutinize their own beliefs. When we fail to do this, our research can easily suffer from what is often called confirmation bias. Simply put, confirmation bias is when we find evidence to support our own idea about something simply because it is the only thing we bothered to look for. For example, if you were of the belief that marijuana should be legalized as a recreational drug and decided to do a research project on it, you would suffer from confirmation bias if you only sought articles and positions that supported that belief. The ethical and responsible researcher is required to take seriously those points of view that not only differ from their own, but also those that directly challenge and call their beliefs into question.

I tend to be more liberal when it comes to politics, so this particular project presented some real challenges for me. I was no fan of the Bush Administration. I voted against him twice, and I opposed the vast majority of his political positions and decisions. Making the situation more problematic was how deeply unpopular the administration was in a general sense when the museum was opened. Media outlets almost universally slammed Decision Points as an exhibit. Rachel Maddow, for instance, referred to Decision Points as an “international scandal” and claimed that it existed for no other reason than to convince the public that the Iraq War was a good idea.

I was, and in many ways still am, inclined to agree with Maddow and other’s positions. I still view the Bush Administration as having been incredibly unsuccessful, and I believe Decision Points illustrates a lot of the problems in the way that administration handled many of the crises in our country between 2000 and 2008. Still though, rhetorical listening requires that researchers do the work of putting themselves in someone else’s shoes and considering the merits of other people’s positions. This is not easy. Engaging such work, however, will make your work considerably more complex, nuanced, and ethical.

Figure 4 Ground Zero Memorial at the George W. Bush Presidential Library
For my project, rhetorical listening required me to really seek aspects of the archives that provided information I did not know about the Bush Administration, or even that conflicted with what I thought I already knew. I talked to museum curators who had spent time with the Bush family (both Laura Bush and former President Bush apparently visit the museum often) and I took time to read about policies the museum archived that I had not known about. This meant that I learned about some unexpected ways the Bush Administration supported the Environmental Protection Agency (Figure 5) that I agreed with. I also learned that the same administration had helped passed legislation forgiving student loan debt for people who teach at public schools and universities (a program that helps me tremendously). Although I had known about the policy, I had no idea that it began with the Bush Administration. None of this means that you have to change or reverse your overall beliefs, but it does mean that you should open to the possibility of your beliefs changing, and that you should take real steps to complicate those beliefs even when they do not change.

Archival work is especially challenging, but it can also be some of the most rewarding work you do as a writer and researcher. Both academic and non-academic writers publish work including research from archives in a variety of formats today. As you work with the variety of digital archives available for your Comp II projects at Oklahoma State University this semester, I urge you to think about ways to pursue the types of questions and topics that interest you, and to search for ways those archives can complicate, challenge, and extend your existing knowledge.