Chapter 6

Plays Well with Others: The Value of Developing Multiplayer Digital Gamespaces for Literary Education

Jon Saklofske
Acadia University, Canada

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss issues and solutions surrounding the incorporation of interactive video games into university-level literary education. A comparative use of participatory games alongside more traditional texts and critical ideas in the classroom will encourage engaged learning, promote multiple literacies, and facilitate awareness of the nature of reading and the operations of narrative across media forms. While obstacles and challenges to the use of digital games in the university classroom include technology, programming ability, time, budget and platform longevity, the author will demonstrate how, by heavily customising enCore Xpress, an open-source, web-based, multi-user database and constructing two interactive fictions based on Romantic period novels, he has been able to circumvent these difficulties, engage students as lucid players and builders, and support metacritical reflection.

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INTRODUCTION

The intersection between modern digital technologies and literary education is fertile ground for pedagogical innovations and evolutions. Digital Humanities, however, require more than just discussing the newest trends in critical theory and discourse. They necessarily involve technologies that alter perceptions and practices on the most fundamental levels. How we organize, sort, navigate through, relate to and locate meaning within textual information is no longer heavily influenced by the form and functions of book technology. This shift has generated opportunities for evolutions in research and teaching methodology. Teaching and research are not independent entities, but are co-dependent, operating as a feedback loop in which the systems and paradigms that inform each affect both. The effects of digital technologies are thus compounded by this reciprocity. The almost-instantaneous access to and retrieval of scholarly information, which faculty and students in most universities now take for granted, along with new tools for the organization and processing of such information (such as the tools available via TAPoR, the Collex interface for NINES and the ZOTERO addon for Firefox),1 have changed the nature and character of research, writing and scholarly exchange and dialogue. Temporal and spatial limitations have been largely transcended, resulting in increased research depth and breadth, an opportunity for much more immediate feedback and discussion, and new options for presentation, demonstration and communication. The comparatively cumbersome research practices of just 20 years ago seem archaic: faculty members and students relied on card catalogues, printed journal indexes, and restrictive interlibrary loan programs for secondary research material, and required a substantial budget for travel, time and assistance to locate primary textual material dispersed through the archival holdings or the special collections of many remote libraries. Some scholars might mourn the loss of the discipline and patience required to gather and process resources in this way. However, the opportunities for increased productivity associated with an improved access to information, and the refusal to treat these changing practices as mutually exclusive leads to a new ‘best practice’ model for embracing this unique historical moment of media in transition.

As a result, the nature and character of many higher-education classrooms are changing. At MIT’s Comparative Media Studies Program, students and faculty members work collaboratively and in multiple media technologies to explore and concretize their ideas. At Acadia University, several courses require students to bring their required laptops to each class in order to fully participate, and some science classrooms use survey software to collect immediate feedback from students relating to the current topic of study. Individual experts lecturing to (or performing in front of) silent groups of note-taking students, requiring students to produce assignments using the critical essay’s strict paradigms, and encouraging the regurgitation
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