Games/gaming/ simulation in a new media (literature) classroom

Scott Rettberg

The author

Scott Rettberg is Assistant Professor of New Media Studies, Richard Stockton College of New Jersey, Brigantine, New Jersey, USA.

Abstract

Discusses some practical issues involved in teaching new media studies in a literature classroom, focusing on the necessity of teaching literature students to consider the language of gaming in the study of new media literary forms, on teaching collaborative writing for the electronic media as a form of writing game, and on considering contemporary computer games in a cultural studies context.

I direct the undergraduate New Media Studies (http://loki.stockton.edu/~rettbers/nmsf03/) track in the Literature program at Richard Stockton College in southern New Jersey. My interest in and use of games, gaming, and simulation in the classroom is more marginal than that of most of the other teachers and developers contributing to this discussion. My students do not develop games, and games and gaming are on the periphery of the primary focus of our shared experience. My own background is as a creative writer, literary scholar and advocate of electronic literature (narrative and poetic reading experiences specifically designed for the computer and the network). I have written or collaborated on several narrative projects published on the network, including *The Unknown* (http://www. unknownhypertext.com), a hypertext novel, and *Kind of Blue* (http://trace.ntu.ac.uk/print_article/ index.cfm?article=77, a serial novel for e-mail. Most of my own work is text-centric. Nonetheless, games, gaming and simulation are playing an increasingly important role in the courses I teach and in my practice as a creative writer. In this essay, I will describe the New Media Studies track in which I teach and the students it serves, and outline some of the ways in which games intersect with the content of my courses. I feel that many of the ideas and practices involved in developing electronic games and in the academic study and analysis of games inform the practices of reading and writing electronic literature.

The New Media Studies track at Stockton

Richard Stockton College of New Jersey is a small public liberal arts college that primarily serves undergraduate students from New Jersey. The college does very little out-of-state or international recruitment. Although the college is highly selective, a high percentage of my students are first-generation college students, who come to college with specific pragmatic career goals in mind. The majority of the students enrolled in the Literature program intend to become elementary or high school English teachers upon completion of their undergraduate education. A lower percentage of our students pursue careers as technical writers, creative writers, or editors. A few of our graduates every year pursue graduate studies, typically in MFA creative writing or PhD literature programs.

Literature is a popular if understaffed major at Stockton. Five full-time faculty teaching 3/3 loads

serve 233 majors. The LITT program (http://caxton.stockton.edu/thelittprogram/) faculty had an interest utilizing technology to support traditional literary studies well before my arrival on campus last year, using Web logs, bulletin boards, online chats and a variety of collaborative online research and writing projects for years. The New Media Studies track and my line of Assistant Professor of New Media Studies were created in order to bring an additional text and technologies layer to the program. The New Media Studies track at Stockton focuses on:

- reading works of electronic literature;
- writing and creating for the network; and
- the study of the network and digital culture writ large.

The undergraduate track that we have designed is laid out as follows:

- NMS students are required to take three core courses: Literary Methodologies, Literary Research, and a Senior Seminar. NMS students are also required to take six other courses in Literature or a related field.
- NMS students also take two courses taught by Art faculty: The Computer as an Art Tool (a laboratory course familiarizing students with Photoshop, Flash and Illustrator and with design concepts); and Web Design (a laboratory course teaching students the basics of Web design).

The courses that I teach in the track include:

- Introduction to New Media Studies – a course that familiarizes students with some of the history of New Media theory and with some of the evolving genres of electronic literature (including hypertext fiction and poetry, kinetic poetry, interactive fiction, and Web logs).
- Hypertext – a course that describes connections between twentieth century print genres (modern and postmodern fiction) and hypertext poetry and fiction.
- Internet Writing and Society – a course in the study of networked culture, examining social networks, legal issues, identity concerns, etc. – essentially examining the ways that the Internet is affecting contemporary textuality.
- Multimedia Production – a course in collaborative writing for the Web (http://loki.stockton.edu/~rettbers/multimediasum03/overview.html).

Students completing the New Media Studies track might pursue several different careers after graduation, they might:

- become Web designers, writers, or editors;
- become high school teachers with a technical skill set;
- work in advertising; or
- pursue graduate studies in one of the New Media programs which are currently springing up in literature, art and communications programs at various universities.

Although the track I have described differs from the programs that most of the rest of the collaborators on this project work in or are forming, games, gaming and simulation play important roles in the majority of the New Media courses that I teach, in the following ways:

- teaching games as literature, and teaching literature as games;
- collaborative writing as gaming; and
- the cultural study of gaming and simulation.

Teaching games as literature, and teaching literature as games

Most of my students are goal-oriented learners. The first question they ask is how studying a particular subject will help them to get a better job after graduation. Electronic literature can be a tough sell to students trapped in this mindset, just as, for instance, philosophy would be. After my students have interacted with a particularly engaging work of hypertext fiction or poetry, I will inevitably hear the question "How do people make money doing this?" When I explain that most of the writers and artists creating work for the network are not, in fact, motivated by the promise of great fiscal rewards, but are creating engaging experiences for the sake of purely artistic motivations, an air of puzzlement settles over the room. Why would anyone (at least any grown-up) do anything for which they are not directly remunerated? Yet these same students will spend hours of life in the Sim-verse, building imaginary civilizations engaging in imaginary interactions with other people's avatars, or slaying simulated trolls or terrorists in their dorm rooms – activities, I point out to them, for which they are never likely to be paid. In addition to the "if it doesn't pay, it's a waste of time" objection, I also have to confront the objections of those students, my dedicated book-loving lit majors, who cannot get past the idea that the only proper interface for the contemplative act of reading is the codex book. These objections are not foolish or trivial – it is indeed difficult to explain why anyone would want to be an artist in a capitalist society that privileges Humvees over bicycles, and difficult to explain to a young book fetishist why anyone would want to

read or write in non-paper mediums. We are able to find a meeting place, however, in the logic of computer games.

At the start of the New Media Studies course, I explain that many of the works that we will encounter during the course of the semester will require work on our part as readers, and an additional type of work to that of close reading and interpretation, the usual focus of Stockton literature courses. When reading a work of electronic literature, before we get the task of interpretation, we first need to negotiate the process of how to get the text to deliver its contents (or some of its contents) to us. It is as if each time we were handed a book to read, we would first need to decode its rules of operation, to figure out how a book works. The codex book does not come with a manual because it would be unnecessary; we have been trained in the operation of the book since preschool, to the extent that its technology is transparent to us. Yet no gamer would expect to be able to leap into Everquest (http://everquest. station.sony.com/)[1] or Ultima (http://www. ultimaonline.com/) without facing a learning curve on the game's rules of operation, both in terms of the basic operations of the interface and in terms of the constraints and social compact that the player enters into when playing the game.

As Aarseth (1997) elucidates in *Cybertext*, any cybertext operates on an ergodic level, as well as at the level of traditional literary interpretation. Works of electronic literature are both reading experience and computer programs that the reader must "play." With this in mind, in my class we talk about reading with a strategy in mind. Even in the case of something as simple (in terms of its use of the computational properties of the computer) as an HTML web hypertext fiction, such as Arellano's (n.d.) *Sunshine '69*, it pays for students to develop a strategy for engaging with the text. In a nonlinear narrative, the arrangement of the text itself requires the reader to make choices that determine, to a certain extent, the content of the reading experience. Rather than simply wandering around the world of potential texts which the hypertext represents, I encourage students to develop particular goals (e.g. to become knowledgeable about one particular character or one particular cluster of plot events) and to think of their reading of the hypertext as a kind of game played between themselves, the text, and the author of the work.

Although the works that we discuss in the New Media Studies and Hypertext courses are primarily textual, we do spend a couple weeks each semester with works of interactive fiction, the genre that evolved from Adventure, Zork, and the text adventure games published by Infocom. A quite large community of enthusiasts has been developing and playing IF works for more than a decade since the commercial collapse of the genre. Because we have quite limited time to work with the IF, we discuss the experience of playing IF within the context of some of the early work in artificial intelligence, reading essays by Alan Turing and Joseph Wiezenbaum alongside the experience of playing some recent works of IF, and discuss the strengths and limitations of a "conversational" or "natural language" interface. Although we visit IF only for a short while in this course, the dynamics of these hybrid text games/ exploratory narratives could easily be the subject of a course in their own right. Electronic authors and IF advocate Montfort (2003) has just published the first book-length study of interactive fiction, *Twisty Little Passages*, in which he makes the case for studying IF in the context of literary studies, and in particular in their relationship to the history of riddles. I would recommend this work to anyone interested in the genre.

Collaborative writing as gaming

I have always been fond of writing games. With or without a computer (pen and notecards will do), I think that thinking of writing, particularly collaborative writing, as gameplay, is useful for creative writers to loosen some inhibitions and unlock some doors, to explore some narrative paths that they might not have otherwise chosen to pursue. My own entrée into new media, the experience of collaboratively writing *The Unknown*, a hypertext novel, was essentially a writing game that lasted several years. Before writing *The Unknown*, William Gillespie, Dirk Stratton and I worked collaboratively on several writing projects that are best characterized as play (improvisational radio and a variety of writing games, such as the simple 3×5 notecard game – one writer writes a title on a notecard, another writes a short text that in some way fits the given title). *The Unknown* was a prolonged writing game in which we accepted certain constraints (the setting was a book tour, the characters were in a sense avatars of each of the three of us, and we had free hand to write from each other's points of view). It was a kind of sophisticated game of the dozens, each of taking turns lambasting each other's characters, of writing each other's avatars into various corners and then challenging each other to write our eponymous characters out of the given situation. I do not think of the experience of writing *The Unknown* as "work" in the same way as

I do other things that I have written. Perhaps the fact that *The Unknown* was a comedy helped, but I remember nearly every moment of writing the hypertext as a form of intensive collaborative play.

The idea of writing as play, and specifically of writing games, stretches back very far in literary history – courtier poetry, for instance, was essentially a writing game of politics, seduction and power, with very formalized writing structures and rules of conduct. In more recent memory, the works of the surrealists, the Oulipo (see Mathews and Brotchie, 1998), and others such as William S. Burroughs have utilized ludic approaches in creating literary texts, writing under constraints and writing using random elements. The mathematicians and writers of the Oulipo pose writing assignments to each other in the form of mathematical and combinatory challenges. In my experience, writing games, or writing with agreed-upon constraints, is a useful in collaborative practice, in that the arbitrary boundaries established by the rules of the game free collaborators from having to negotiate story elements, allowing them to focus on the writing itself – transforming the work of collaboration into the play of collaboration

I use writing games in the Multimedia Production course that I teach. Although a great deal of the course content is simple practical writing, design, and editing for the Web, the course is not focused on teaching any particular piece of software, but on creative collaboration. I am more concerned that students have the experience of working with each other, of defining their own strengths and roles in a collaborative production environment, than in teaching them the Dreamweaver or Flash manual. One of the writing assignments for that class is a simple writing game. I pass around five hats, each containing a different element of a character (first name, last name, age, occupation, and hometown). Each student pulls a strip of paper from each hat, and the resulting combinations form each student's character. I then provide the students with a scenario, placing their characters within an established plot situation. The decisions involved in creating characters and plotlines are thus determined arbitrarily, and the process of writing the project becomes a kind of role-playing game. Along the way, we are learning about XHTML and CSS, but the acquisition of those skills is wrapped around the fun of collaborative play. My MMP students in spring 2003 wrote the Web fiction *Atlantic City Murder* (http://loki.stockton.edu/~newmedia/ multimedia03/acmurder/) using this game, and in the summer of 2003 created *Liberty Lockdown* (http://loki.stockton.edu/newmedia/mmpsum03/

lockdown/) in the same fashion. Many students who entered into the creative component of the course with trepidation, taking me aside to let me know that they were not creative writers, turned out to be quite good fiction writers when the activity of writing fiction was framed as a role-playing game.

The cultural study of gaming and simulation

Computer games, having surpassed Hollywood movies as the highest-grossing entertainment medium, are clearly influential "texts" in contemporary culture writ large. The ideology of games, the sociology of gaming culture, and the narratology (alternatively ludology) of games are all rich subjects of study that should have a place in the new media curriculum. Many of the same types of theoretical approaches that critics in cultural studies have applied to literary texts, films, television and other popular media are now being applied to gaming. In the past couple of years in particular, many working in the game studies community have become more explicitly aware of the ideological and persuasive capacities of computer games. Gonzola Frasca's simulation "September 12th" (http://www.newsgaming.com/ games/index12.htm) is one example of a game that is an explicit form of political discourse, as (in another fashion) is the US Army's freely distributed "America's Army" (http://www. americasarmy.com/), a game that simulates basic training and battlefield action and is which is used as a recruiting tool in malls and in front of computer screens across the country. The various Shockwave games that were circulated on the Internet after 9/11, usually involving some variation of killing Osama Bin Laden, were also clearly ideological statements. Computer games, whether explicitly ideological or not, are now important texts in our culture, which can and should be read through the lens of critical theory. While Games Studies is evolving as a discipline in its own right, I would argue that computer games and simulation have a place in the literature classroom as well, in the same way that other texts from popular culture (film, television, and rock lyrics, for instance) are now studied alongside traditional literary texts. If film was the predominant popular art form of the twentieth century, all indications are that networked games will be the predominant popular art form of this century.

In my second year of teaching new media in a literature program, I am frankly still working out what role games should play in the curriculum, how my students should be "reading" games in the way that they read literature. While it is clear to me that the language of cybertext, the terminology of ludology, is quite useful for students of electronic literature, in that it provides us with a descriptive terminology to discuss these works as text-machines, I am still working out the logistics of how to integrate gaming experiences into the classroom. I am considering a project in which students in my Internet Writing and Society course will spend several weeks in avatar/gameworlds (such as There (http://www.there.com), Second Life (http://www.secondlife.com), Sims online (http://thesims.ea.com), etc.) and then write about the experience from a sociological perspective. I am also considering developing a general studies course that is more specifically focused on computer games and contemporary culture, but I am still working my own ideas of what the boundaries are between literature/narrative/games/simulation/art, and how permeable those boundaries should be. It is strange to say, but I feel like I am behind in my primary source research – that I have spent too much time reading books, and not enough time playing games. Like anyone teaching new media at this early stage, I am still moving slowly outward from my home discipline. While I have spent much of my life studying literature, most of my associations with games are of a different nature – they call to mind the sounds of quarters cling-clanging out of the change machine, and waiting in line at the arcade to play Missile Command, Centipede, Galaga or Pacman. I am still wrapping my head around this strange interzone between Hamlet and Galaga.

Note

1 An interesting article on using Everquest in the classroom can be found in Delwiche (n.d.)

References

Aarseth, E. (1997), *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*, Johns Hopkins UP, Baltimore, MD.

Arellano, R. (n.d.), "Sunshine 69", available at: www.sunshine69.com

Delwiche, A. (n.d.), "MMORPGS in the college classroom", available at: www.nyls.edu/docs/delwiche.pdf

Mathews, H. and Brotchie, A. (Eds) (1998), *Oulipo Compendium*, Atlas Press, London.

Montfort, N. (2003), *Twisty Little Passages: An Approach to Interactive Fiction*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.

Further reading

Electronic Literature Organization (2001-2002), "The electronic literature directory", available at: http://directory.eliterature.org

Mateas, M., Montfort, N., Rettburg, S., Stern, A. and Wardrip-Fruin, N. (n.d.), "Grandtextauto", available at: www.grandtextauto.org

Montfort, N. and Wardrip-Fruin, N. (Eds) (2002), *The New Media Reader*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.

Terra Nova (n.d.), available at: http://terranova.blogs.com/