REMEDIATING ENGLISH PEDAGOGY: NURTURING IMMERSIVE, COMPLEX AND CREATIVE LITERARY EXPERIENCES FOR STUDENTS IN CONTEMPORARY TIMES

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Introduction

In the past decade there has been a significant uptake of new forms of storytelling in a multimedia digital communication culture (Alexander 2011, Page 2010, Wardrip-Fruin & Harrigan 2004, 2009, 2010). The examples reported in this paper both provide new opportunities for schooling to offer children opportunities for critical understanding and participatory capacity development in this shift in the cultures of the new media age. A number of studies have recognised that schooling has some way to go to offer students the kinds of practices with new media which they are frequently engaged in during their out of school activities (Chandler-Olcott & Mahar 2003, Lankshear & Knobel 2004, 2006, Thomas 2007). Both examples are discussed in light of demonstrating how a technology enhanced, new media infused, reconceptualisation of English teaching can prepare children for their roles as both creators and consumers in participatory interactive fictional narratives for the future.

Background

The theoretical underpinning of this paper is drawn from theories of multimodal authoring and practices and principles of alternate reality gaming, within the context of an understanding of sound pedagogical practice for young children (aged 10-12) and contemporary literary theories. Typically teachers of young children encourage the authoring of stories using written text as well as illustrations. As children have moved up through the years of schooling, illustrations have tended to take a secondary role (if any) and authoring is primarily concentrated upon the use of written text. But with the emergence of new media in an increasingly technological world, a revaluing of all modes of signification has impacted the ways in which teachers conceptualise literacy. There has been an increasing focus on visual texts, and texts of new media (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996), leading into a conception of textuality as multimodal. Over the past decade, theories of multimodality (Unsworth 2001, Quin 2004) have persistently urged teachers to move away from the privileging of linguistic modes to a view of semiotics that accounts for all meaning-making resources (Thomas 2011b). Theorists and practitioners experiencing this shift have begun to speak in terms of multiplicities: multiple forms as texts, and texts can be multimodal – a concept the New London Group termed 'Multiliteracies' (New London Group 1997, Cope & Kalantzis 2009a, 2009b).

Both *Inanimate Alice* and *iFiction* embody the traditions of narrative storytelling, yet use the affordances of new technologies (such as that of multimodality and multi-literacies) to create very new kinds of contemporary narrative forms which provide readers with a completely new kind of reading (and authoring) experience. Both also represent digital works which are layered across time and space. When considering the way that 'pieces' of information are layered across space, I have drawn from literary theorists who discuss the impact of hypertext on the authoring and reading process. Discussing Jackson's (1995) notable digital fiction *Patchwork Girl*, Hayles argues that:

> like many hypertexts, chronology is inherently tenuous because linking structures leap across time as well as

space. As if recapitulating the processes of fragmentation and recombination made possible by digital technologies, *Patchwork Girl* locates its performance of subjectivity in the individual lexia…Sequence is constructed by accumulating a string of present moments when the reader clicks on links… This situation reverses our usual sense that time is passing as we watch. Instead, time becomes a river that always already exists in its entirety, and we create sequence and chronology by choosing which portions of the river to sample. (Hayles 2000 online).

Allen (2003) argues that hypertext as a concept is not necessarily new or innovative but it is the reader's role that is extended in dramatically different ways to traditional print based texts. He terms this new agent the 'wreader' – both the producer and consumer of textual, hypertextual practices.' He states:

> In this new reader, both production and consumption of texts is combined into one process that is self-contained. The new reader navigates through lexias to find threads of connected meaning where no author placed them…. This new reader is reminiscent of the old reader who has always decoded texts and made new meanings with them, prowling them for paths that go toward new textual centers and make new experiences. These readers are … 'radial' readers, which means that they read texts in an open-ended search for meaning. (Allen 2003 online).

Some types of digital fiction, which exemplify a range of ways that the reader needs to piece together a narrative across some form of space, are those of distributed narratives. These are digital narratives which are divided into a number of components which are distributed both spatially and temporally, such as the email narrative *Daughters of Freya* (Betcherman & Diamond 2004-2005), and the web narrative, *Online Caroline* (Bevan & Wright 1999-2000). In *Daughters of Freya*, a sequence of approximately 100 emails is delivered to your email box over the period of several weeks. The emails are actual email conversations between the characters in the narrative, and the reader is required to piece together the narrative from these letters. In *Online Caroline*, the narrative is pieced together through a range of texts: email, webcam video episodes, Caroline's diary and photo album, her phone messages and more. What is particularly fascinating with *Online Caroline* is that the reader is required to fill out a personal facts form, and this information is then explicitly used throughout the emails and web text to develop intimacy with the fictional character. Caroline calls the reader her friend. This results in the reader becoming a part of the diegesis of the fictional world. The reader is given agency to traverse the spaces of the text, or to 'perform' Bolter (2001) and 'explore' (Saltz 1997) the text.

The notion of reader interactivity and control is one that Thomas (2004, 2005a, 2005b) has emphasised as a critical affordance of digital texts. In thinking about the nature of interactivity, Thomas proposes that interaction requires the reader to act upon the text in some way in order to access it, drawing from Aarseth's early work on ergodics, in which he proposed a difference between acting passively with a text, and *doing* something to activate a text.

> The performance of their reader takes place all in his head, while the user of cybertext also performs in an extranoematic sense. During the cybertextual process, the user will have effectuated a semiotic sequence, and this selective movement is a work of physical construction that the various concepts of 'reading' do not account for. [...] In ergodic literature, nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text. If ergodic literature is to make sense as

a concept, there must also be nonergodic literature, where the effort to traverse the text is trivial, with no extranoematic responsibilities placed on the reader except (for example) eye movement and the periodic or arbitrary turning of pages. (Aarseth 1997: 1).

As Douglas comments, 'the text draws us into it because it cannot exist without our participation' (Douglas 1996: 209). The element of interactivity and reader control is arguably at the heart of the 'radical change' (Dresang 2003) in the reading of digital fiction. Walker (2003: 11) argues that the relationship between the reader and the text is: 'central to the meaning of the work'. In cases where digital fiction includes hypertext and distribution across online spaces (though not all examples of digital fiction do this), we are finding, as Morgan (2004 online) argues, 'the distance between writing and reading is once again seriously reduced, only this time … the process of writing and reading nearly overlap'.

Technological affordances such as multimodality, hypertext, spatiality and interactivity can impact on the very nature of narrative. Specifically, there are two significant ways in which narrative is affected, and these include the notions of active reading and multivocality. Barthes (1971: 4) argued that: 'the goal of literary work is to make the reader no longer a consumer but a producer of text' and drawing from theories about hypertext (Landow 2006, Moulthrop 1971, Deleuze & Guattari 1987) as discussed above, it is clear that hypertext, hypermedia and the digital space challenge readers to assemble 'bits' of semantic meanings or 'lexia' to create their own journey through a text, and use a range of semiotic meaning making resources to construct a narrative. This in turn offers opportunities for the reader to become their own author as they navigate through a text, and insert themselves within it, as the boundaries between reader and author blur. Digital fiction *done well* can become what Bakhtin (1981) calls 'the dialogic polyphonic multivocal novel', leaving gaps for readers to reimagine the text in new ways, with voices other than the textual voice given space to have a presence.

Inanimate Alice

Inanimate Alice (www.inanimatealice.com) is an example of a 'born-digital' text, conceived of and produced in digital form, mapped out collaboratively by media producer Ian Harper, writer Kate Pullinger and digital artist Chris Joseph. It is the story of Alice, starting at 8 years old, and follows her journey across countries and time as she develops. Alice is home schooled until the age of 14, as she lives in a range of remote locations across the globe due to her father's profession. It is an example of a digital novel which utilises the multiple affordances of a piece of digital fiction: multimodality, hypertextuality, spatiality (the narrative is episodic as it unfolds over many years in time), and it requires various levels of user interactivity to progress the story forward. As explained on the *Inanimate Alice* website, the novel is both episodic and multimodal…

> Each a self-contained story, the chapters become more complex as the narrative unfolds reflecting Alice's age and competency as she develops towards her calling as a game animator and designer... [It] uses text, images, music, sound effects, puzzles and games to illustrate and enhance the narrative. (The BradField Company Ltd 2005-2011, http://www.inanimatealice.com/about.html)

What makes *Inanimate Alice* quite unique is the way in which it has used the affordance of spatiality. Not only has each episode

Fig. 1. Screenshot from *Inanimate Alice*.

been published some years apart (episode 5 of the 10 episode series is due to be published in 2012), but each episode jumps approximately two years in the life and timeline of its central character Alice. This gap in time both in 'real time' and in 'story time' has opened up a space for multivocality to occur – a space where teachers have encouraged children to fill in the gaps with their own voices, and their own reversionings of Alice's story.

Children and teachers all over the world are working with *Inanimate Alice* not just to explore new kinds of 'born digital' texts, but as a means for children to deconstruct the genre and learn how to create their own versions of the story for those intervening years. In another paper (Thomas, White & Lippis, 2012/in press) we have outlined a detailed pedagogy suitable for English and literacy educators to teach children the characteristics of multimodal digital storytelling.

iFiction

iFiction is a story-authoring mobile application designed by Angela Thomas and developed in partnership with Dr Winyu Chinthammit (HITLab Australia), as a research project funded by the University of Tasmania. It was designed to use Augmented Reality to enhance and transform children's interactive, participatory and innovative experiences with literature. Augmented Reality (AR) is defined as an interactive display system that is capable of overlaying and co-locating computer-generated images/content in the real world. This application uses the affordances of augmented reality, participatory culture, fan fiction, and alternate reality gaming to create a unique context for children to learn to be sophisticated content creators, and to engage in critical and reflective cultural practice. Children are able to author their own interactive versions of known stories using a range of media (such as video, animation, text, 2D images, virtual content, audio) and to then manipulate these media to develop an augmented reality layering of the story, placing it within a particular context of time and place, blending virtual and actual reality. Stories are developed over time in an episodic manner, to allow other children time to interact with and experience the stories and to offer critique and feedback on each episode.

In the *iFiction* application, children are encouraged to layer scenes using a multiplicity of modes, combining selections from: text, audio (music, dialogue, sound effects), photograph (of reality or of art they have created), video, virtual reality, or augmented 3D content. They then tag these *'pieces'* of information to a GPS location. This creates a multi-layered complexity which we hoped would become, as Campbell (2008) noted when speaking of emergent digital fiction pieces, both *'compulsive and immersive'* for children as they engaged in the authoring process. The children were responsible for weaving together combinations of the multimodal meaning-making resources to create narratives.

These concepts about new ways of composing, reading and participating within a text were also at the heart of the *iFiction* application. The narratives take the shape of an assemblage of lexia across both space and time. Lexia is in the form of a combination of media and virtual content. Space is in the form of a GPS tagged location in reality at which point the lexia are able to be accessed. Time is in the form of weekly episodes, each of which are shared, explored, critiqued and co-created by readers, thereby impacting on the progression of the narrative. In terms of this reader/writer dialectic, I have drawn on some of the practices of alternate reality gaming.

A helpful definition of alternate reality gaming (ARG) is found in Alexander (2011), who explains:

> An ARG is a combination of story and game. Its contents are distributed throughout the world, usually online, perhaps with physical locations as well. Users play the game by discovering bits of content and discerning the story to which those items belong, while comparing notes with other players. Collaboratively, collectively, players hunt for new pieces of the story, sometimes solving puzzles to do so. The pieces are usually not formally identified as part of a game… (Alexander 2011: 152).

ARGs have traditionally been used as marketing tools. The first known ARG was designed in 2001 to create buzz for the movie *AI*. As an emerging phenomenon they are only just beginning to be recognised for their potential within educational contexts.

In the *iFiction* research project, students in a year 6 class were divided into two groups – the authors and the readers. Authors worked with me to create one (or a part of one) episode each week. During the week, the teacher of the class would allow the readers to explore the episode, critique it, and respond to it with suggestions such as what they hoped or expected might come next. The following week, these suggestions were either included in the episode, or deliberately twisted to surprise the reader in the next episode. In this way, the authors and readers worked together to co-create the text. Unlike ARGs, which have an air of mystery to them with readers never knowing who the authors are, in the classroom context the more actively and consciously participating in the texts allowed the teacher to encourage lively collaboration and critique of texts. It also allowed more explicit episodes of teaching about the nature of story, the structure of a story, its genre, literary features and grammatical design. In the process of creating lexia in the video format for example, the teacher was able to discuss the use of camera angles and motion and teach the grammatical metalanguage associated with visual and film literacies to the whole class. Similarly, in the process of discussing how to immediately intrigue the reader with the story, the teacher was able to discuss the various ways good literature might begin.

As in an ARG, the content bits or *'lexia'* of the children's *iFiction* are created across space. An ARG is primarily online, with some content existing in the physical space. Contrary to this, *iFiction* is primarily located in the physical space (and as such is a *'locative story'* using the affordances of AR), and in this case, the physical space is primarily the school playground, which has been transformed in children's imaginations into the setting for their fictional universes. However some content is posted online on a class blog, which also allows readers to participate in writing as a commenter on the blog. Most of the collaboration however happens within the real space of the classroom and in the playground.

iFiction was designed to exemplify a range of features of digital fiction and ARGs appropriate for a year 6 teaching context. The project, as noted above, aimed specifically at the provision of a technology enhanced, new media infused, reconceptualisation of English teaching, through offering students an innovative and radical new way of thinking about writing and reading.

The trial of *iFiction* is taking place with a year 6 class in a primary school in Tasmania. The two teachers working with me to trial the app have considerable experience with multimodal authoring, however the children are quite new to it. In my visits I am focusing mainly on the authoring process with half of the class, whilst the teachers are working with the readers and the whole class teaching between my visits. To date a series of visits have occurred, and preliminary data gathered, and this will be explicated below.

Drawing on drama in education teaching strategies (Neelands & Goode 2000), I worked with the teachers involved to concentrate on developing content which would establish the context of the children's reversionings of the text. The two strategies we used included: a written diary entry which revealed the central character's feelings about the missing character, and a drawn *'photograph'* which revealed the relationship between those two characters. Children worked in pairs to construct their content. An example of a written diary entry is:

Fig. 2. A drawn *'photograph'* revealing character relationships.
Fig. 3. Central Character for iFiction quest.

She's gone. I don't know where. I don't know why. All I know is she's gone and I miss her. She's more than just a sister to me. She's my lifelong friend, and I'm going to find her. She needs me. And I need her.

An example of a *'photograph'* is seen in Fig. 2.

This content was placed on the class blog as well as within scene 1 on the *iFiction* app and served as the orientation for the reader for the beginning of the quest. In light of the fact that in quests the central character needs to have a character flaw which is to be overcome as a result of and by the end of the quest, children were next invited to write a script to rehearse a brief role-play which demonstrated that flaw, and this was then produced in video format with the *iFiction* app. One story for example, had as its central character a young girl who suffered anxiety, and took refuge with food as an avoidance of her issues. The images associated with this character, both drawn and then in costume within the roleplay are shown in Fig. 3.

In the early stages of the project, the teaching focus was on the nature of the narrative and in particular the quest genre. Content *'lexia'* combined print based media such as the drawings and the writing, with digital media such as video. As the children began developing their quests further this combination of print and digital media continued, though digital media was used increasingly as the quests progressed.

Students spent considerable time developing logical literary directions for transporting their characters in and out of *'fantasy'* worlds. In terms of the technical process involved, it drew upon mixed reality techniques such as overlaying virtual content onto the real world (see Fig. 4) and layering a real character into a virtual world (see Fig. 5).

Fig. 4. Experimenting with layering virtual content onto real world background.
Fig. 5. Experimenting with layering real character onto virtual world background.

Fig. 6. Reading using the navigation system.

Reading the text involves reading a navigation system, where the various multimodal *'lexia'* are represented as dots plotted out across the compass, and students used this to navigate through real space. This is best represented in Fig. 6.

Early work with children has demonstrated that all were quickly able to navigate through the stories created by others. The use of the navigation instrument as well as the inclusion of a vibration of the tablet when in range of new content offered all the cues they required to locate scenes and uncover story content. One child remarked that it was just like hunting for treasure, and it became both engaging and game-like in the quest to discover what came next. The target age was 10-12 year olds, and this also related to our choice of a novel suitable for that age. However early data suggests that the application has potential for use with a wide range of ages, allowing more or less complexity and sophistication as appropriate.

Discussion

There is no doubt that using the application as an authoring tool for stories during English and Literacy sessions was and is highly motivating for the students. Whilst I only ever planned to work with one small focus group, the enthusiasm of both teachers following their first workshop with the software, and the focus group following their introduction to *iFiction* has resulted in all children within the class becoming deeply immersed in the project. This resulted in a team approach between the two teachers and I to develop a carefully tailored pedagogy that extended beyond my weekly visits and into the normal classroom teaching sessions.

In the first visit, I introduced the nature of quests, and following this visit the teachers are teaching all children about the literary genre of quests, using the novel *A Wrinkle in Time*, as well as other novels, tv series and films familiar to the children. As they deconstruct the literary features of quests, the children consider how and when those features might be appropriate for their own stories. In addition, the teachers are teaching the grammatical metalanguage required for the meaningful selection of video shots, words, images and sounds. This includes simple metalanguage related to images such as *'social distance'* (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006), to more complex concepts such as *'intermodal parallelism'* (Thomas 2011a). That is, carefully selected layerings of content within several modes to create particular literary effects such as humour, irony or pathos (see also Thomas 2012/ in press).

Furthermore, to capture the sense of theatricality and performance involved in participating in new kinds of fiction, I drew heavily on drama teaching strategies. These strategies (such as drawing a 'photograph', writing in role, role-playing, soundtracking, flashbacks) provided children with an engaging and meaningful narrative authoring structure, one which gave them time to develop a strong context for the quest, time to develop rich and complex characters, time to create episodes of narrative action, poetic action, and reflective action (as described by Neelands & Goode 2000). This enabled the authoring process to be on the one hand controlled, purposeful and effective, yet on the other hand also highly engaging and somewhat chaotic. This created a pleasurable tension with the children as what felt like playing, performing and having a lot of fun with the *iFiction* application was clearly at the same time teaching them about English, about literature, and about literary and grammatical techniques to use to entertain, engage and emotionally affect their readers.

6 Conclusion

Inanimate Alice and *iFiction* both offer many opportunities for teachers to introduce the reading and authoring of digital fiction into their classrooms. In Australia, digital texts and multimodal authoring have been named as significant new inclusions in the national English curriculum. As curricula change to embrace the opportunities afforded by new media, teachers are searching for meaningful and relevant ways to incorporate and blend the new within existing classroom contexts. Both *Inanimate Alice* and *iFiction* reflect either born digital texts or remediated digital texts which draw from a long literary tradition, and both seem eminently suitable as ways to bridge the gap between what teachers are familiar with already, and the newer, more radical kinds of texts that new digital media artists are creating. What I have been working on with both of these new forms of storytel-ling in the classroom is developing sound pedagogical resources for teachers to assist them as they embrace the new curriculum.

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Friendship is [the] possibility of reading the other's messages. (Baldwin 2012).

Introduction

Digital reading is not the same as reading a book, for several reasons. The main focus of this short piece brings together two of them: varying and implicit but usually hidden technological relationship/s; and a new and more complex construction of the reading Subject/ivity. More of these in a moment – and they are mutually imbricated – but first some definitions and explanations to situate the work.

By 'eReading' I mean interpretive textual activity that requires the digital. That is, simply reading a book or a conventional poem on a screen does not constitute eReading. Examples of eRead-ing are surfing, reading anything streamed or, as here, reading text that is being created as you read by an electronic Reader. None is possible without digital media.

The practices through which these thoughts arose are complex, but they all stem from an initial historical question: how new is e-poetry? That question can be re-phrased to be, what is the rela-tion of e-poetry to the avant-garde of the 20th Century, including, visual poetry, caligrammes, Concrete poetry, Modernist painting that incorporates words (including, for example, Cubism and later art, such as the work of Rauschenberg or even pop artis-ts such as Lichtenstein) and the comic book. Underlying these questions, for me, is less an issue of history as chronology or facticity, but history as shifts in Subjectivity and sociality.

The practices just referred to include making e-poetry, transposi-tion between word and image and translation between langua-ges – and re-thinking the impact of all of these on critique. The existence of all these options seem to require a kind of rea-ding that crosses and re-crosses reading, critique, transposition/translation, and writing. But a key point is that it *is* reading. It is not just looking or watching.

I stress this because of the prominence of the following view:

One feature of these [e-poetry] creations is that the texts that constitute it are initially perceived as images, animated metaphors or visual texts. The texts and documents become images, they no longer read, they are to be seen: their lin-guistic dimension has been subsumed under their iconic function.[1] (Gervais 2011).

The relation between word and image is clearly in play, but once the iconic takes over, it ceases to be poetry in any meaningful sense. It can be poetic, but not poetry**.**

Examples: e-Readers

The first image below is a screen shot of an e-Reader in action – or, rather, of two in action at the same time. The blue and the yellow words are each produced by a different e-Reader.