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Neverwinter Nights in Alberta:
Conceptions of Narrativity through Fantasy Role-Playing Games in a Graduate Classroom
by Sean Gouglas, Stefan Sinclair, Olaf Ellefson, and Scott Sharplin

Computer role-playing games offer a unique opportunity to aid graduate-level analysis of hypermedia narratives. In this paper, we discuss the application of complex game authoring tools in HUCO-616: Multimedia in the Humanities, a graduate multimedia course in humanities computing (Huco) at the University of Alberta. Offered annually, this course is intended for students in the second year of their program. Much of the content for this article relates to experiences in the academic years 2003-05. The Huco program embraces a pedagogical imperative to marry theoretical and practical elements (Sinclair and Gouglas 2002; Gouglas, Sinclair, and Morrison, forthcoming). We believe that only those learners who have facility with a particular technology can effectively understand how that technology alters and informs interactions with source material. To paraphrase George Grant (1976), the computer does indeed impose on us the way it will be used; only through informed use can we understand this impact. For many students, the practical component of HUCO-616 was an unprecedented educational experience that required them to reflect on concepts of narrative and interactivity through active engagement with hypermedia environments and the creation of personal digital narratives (Exhibit 1). This approach contrasts common pedagogical practice in various social science and humanities programs where students are rarely asked to try their hands at creating the types of work they are being trained to study.

Briefly, the course consisted of three technical assignments in constructing digital narratives: a 10-minute unedited digital video, a Web-based Flash assignment, and a *Neverwinter Nights* (*NWN*) game module (mod). With each assignment, students provided a four-page comment paper that reflected on the ways in which the medium constrained and liberated their efforts to construct a narrative. These papers, which provided much of the source material for this article, were not meant to be step-by-step metadocuments of the task; instead, they provided an opportunity for students to place their practical applications of new media forms within the theoretical framework discussed in seminar. Additionally, students produced a final term paper that required them to explore these issues in more detail as well as supplementary in-class presentations where students instructed their peers on specific elements of the various technologies behind the narrative assignments (dialogue trees, for example). The objective of the class was to equip students with a range of technical and theoretical skills that would allow them to engage productively and critically with the digital narratives they created. It should be emphasized that the objective of the course was not to conduct an examination of digital media that might be appropriate for a graduate course in a more specialized program, nor was it to provide an uncritical experience of these media for its own sake. Our aim was to provide a broad intellectual framework within which learners might examine first-hand digital narratives through a variety of forms (Exhibit 2). For the purposes of this paper, our focus will be on the outcomes of the third assignment, the *NWN* role-playing game.

As one might expect, the construction of a game module (and the narrative experimentation that this assignment required) left none of the students indifferent, regardless of their experience with or predilection for digital games. Students were able to contrast the specificities of computer gaming with some of the other manifestations of digital expression and new media that were investigated in the course and are of interest to us in the humanities computing program (e.g., hypertext fiction and Flash-based animation). Moreover, their understanding of narration in various means of cultural production was enriched by their gaming experience. We believe that some of the insights achieved by the students would have been unlikely, if not impossible, in the absence of hands-on engagement with games. To support this claim, we will first give a brief introduction to the game and the role-playing genre, followed by examples of the narratives (or anti-narratives) created by the students, and conclude with an interpretation and discussion of our experiences.

Introduction to the Game

Created by the Edmonton-based company [Bioware](#), *Neverwinter Nights* is certainly the most interesting and in-depth implementation of the *Dungeons & Dragons* (*D&D*) rules on the computer ([Exhibit 3](#)). Generally, the game begins with the creation of a character or avatar that will serve as the player's surrogate during the game. The player defines the avatar's sex, race, and class (fighter, wizard, thief, etc.) and determines its physical features. Players, through their avatars, are then thrown into a world of high fantasy where they may have to save a town from a plague or participate in other such adventures. As each avatar may possess significantly different abilities in strength or intelligence or fundamentally different life skills such as healing or fighting, the options presented to the character and therefore the player can differ quite dramatically. For example, one path to circumventing a locked door may require correctly answering a riddle. The person playing the game may know the answer, but if the avatar is not sufficiently intelligent, the correct option will not appear as an option on the dialogue tree. The avatar must then find an alternate solution, perhaps based on brute force. This series of cascading options is complemented by a changing series of camera angles to the action that allows for no correct point of view—an aspect of newer gaming systems that, according to Lev Manovich (2002), marks an important historical event through the merging of cinematic and computer technologies. Because of these variables, the user's experience of the game can never be exactly duplicated.

While the game itself offers an interesting experience, the real strength of *NWN*—and its essential teaching element—stems from the constructor kit, *Aurora Toolset*. This authoring software allows individuals to employ a powerful scripting language to create their own immersive three-dimensional worlds, including interactive plots, sound and special effect triggers, and random and plot-driven encounters. For example, one very useful tool is the Script Wizard ([Figure 1](#)), which allows students not only to create specific encounters depending on the type and skills of the character playing the game but also to direct the narrative down different paths depending on, for example, whether the player has previously acted in a humble or proud manner. The Item Wizard ([Figure 2](#)), on the other hand, allows students to create unique items, such as Excalibur or the One Ring, which can prove integral to advancing the plot of their respective stories. A complete description of the toolset, with screenshots, instructions, and help files, can be found at the [Bioware Web site](#) and the associated [tutorial pages](#). In a nutshell, the toolset provides students with an opportunity to create, implement, and execute a complex narrative that, in its very nature, must be flexible enough to allow pathways of completion that change from player to player and session to session.

Essentially, the assignment required students to conceive, design, and construct a *NWN* module using the toolset. Although technical assistance was offered in a variety of forms (instructor assistance, student presentations, and online reference material), no creative advice was offered for completing the assignment. This restriction prompted students to consider the suitability of their ideas to the constraints offered by this particular media form. During the first year in which the course was taught, students played each others' modules with each student-creator serving as guide. Increased enrollment in the subsequent three years of the program has made this activity impractical. This change is an unfortunate side effect of the course's increasing popularity, since both students and the instructor benefitted from seeing how different creators worked their way through constructing the modules.

Examples

Although *NWN* makes the process of scripting interactive narratives straightforward, that does not mean that the process is easy. The creation of narrative is not simple, and working within the genre of high fantasy provides constraints that can be either limiting or inspiring. Certainly, an understanding of narrative form based on Joseph Campbell's [Hero's Journey](#) (1988) or even Northrop Frye's discussion of [archetypes](#) (1957) (both of which were discussed in class but were not part of the required reading) can assist in the formation of plausible story development. Perhaps a more directly relevant synopsis of form is Samsel and Wimberley's *Writing for Interactive Media: A Complete Guide* (1998), which provides an outline of 10 design structures for interactive narratives ([Exhibit 4](#)).

Thematically, students' explorations of this new media form followed one of three distinct patterns. Many students adapted existing story, myth, or pop culture plot lines, including stories from the Harry Potter series or Robin Hood tales. Perhaps the best of these adaptations was a recreation of the first act of *Macbeth* with the player assuming the title role and then being given the option to follow the play's traditional plot line or to shift allegiances and rewrite the story's outcome ([Figure 3](#)). The student who created the *Macbeth* module likened this narrative approach to Jerome McGann's (2001) technique of deformative criticism, in which random distortions of a recognized work of literature may yield a deeper understanding of the original text. Other students created worlds that embodied or reflected some of the theoretical positions outlined in the course, such as a mod called "The Rural Town of Forking Paths," which references Jorge Luis Borges's "[The Garden of Forking Paths](#)," a short story that remains a staple reference for hypertext and New Media theorists and one that students had read in a previous course. Like Borges, the student successfully interwove conceptions of hypertextuality within the narrative of the mod—choices within the game served as a metanarrative for theoretical positions within the classroom ([Figure 4](#)). Finally, students constructed new storylines that quite often featured the humanities computing professors and new media theorists in dodgy and improbable settings. The Huco torture chamber module, for example, portrayed two of the authors of this article as leather-bound sadists beating up critical theorists; this is probably all the description required to understand the general tenor of these (wonderful) submissions.

But creating narrative is difficult, and creating good narrative suitable for the medium of the *NWN* game is very difficult. Many students were surprised at how quickly they fell into conventions they acknowledged as unsatisfyingly predictable and stolid, such as rescuing a princess from evil. In a required comment paper, one student reiterated Janet Murray's point that there might be a limited number of plots in the world because human experience is constant (Murray 1997). Others were frustrated that the grand vision they had imagined was much more difficult to bring to reality and that even an involved storyline would still miss the finer qualities of narratives in traditional media such as books and films. While the toolset offers significant opportunities for interaction and agency, the complexity of the process severely limits what may be done within the time frame of the course, as some students noted in their comments. For these students, gaming tools hindered narrative, especially considering that some of the readily available tools for professional game designers are not available to hobbyists using the toolset, including "cut scenes"—fully animated, non-interactive interstitial sequences used to impel a game's narrative. Two students commented in their response papers that a significant amount of time was required for simply creating a narrative structure suitable to the medium—a point frequently echoed in classroom discussion. Most students conceded that the story told in the Flash assignment was simply not possible or remarkably inappropriate for the digital video and *NWN* assignments.

Indeed, this response also reflects Ryan's (2002) sensible comment that different media "[afford] different narrative possibilities" (596) and her reasonable, corresponding claim that some genres are better suited to certain media than others ([Exhibit 5](#)). In this light, one student noted that few other modes of storytelling offer what the high-fantasy genre, as embodied in *D&D*, provides—an interactive and open-ended mode of storytelling that facilitates "the simultaneous and collaborative creation of worlds, characters, and plot." Another student added that he could not "think of a medium better suited to adventure/quest narratives." The *Aurora Toolset* has limitations, but within these constraints, many students found a chance to explore and experiment with conceptions of hypertexts, interactivity, and new media theory. Perhaps the most innovative example of this experimentation was a module that allowed the avatar to find detailed instructions that required the player to exit the game, open the toolset, add a premade item to the game, resave the module, and then replay it in order to find the last item and complete the quest. This student's conscious exploration of narrative agency effectively captured one aspect of new media's emphasis on player/reader as author of the text.

Discussion and Interpretation

Generally, graduate students were willing to accept the concept of a computer role-playing game as a teaching device. However, they raised a number of issues that we continue to address. Frustrations for some

students came from a number of predictable and less-than-predictable sources and generally fall into technical, practical, and theoretical issues.

Technically, any computer-assisted learning requires a computer, which not all students possess—particularly a computer with *NWN*'s system requirements. Also, the more complex elements of game design require a basic understanding of scripting, which is beyond the immediate experience of most humanities and social science students. Fortunately, both these issues are less troubling for the humanities computing program here at the University of Alberta since students have access to a high-end computing facility designed specifically for their needs, and in this second year course, they are able to put into practice some of the design and programming fundamentals acquired during the first year of the program.

Practically, some students found the assignment a little too "geeky," having little experience with or affinity for role-playing games, high fantasy worlds, or computer games. This response gave students with such experience and predilection an advantage in completing the assignment. Also, the game's roots in western mythology provided a challenge for students from other cultures. While dragons in Chinese culture are almost always good, for example, within the confines of the game, they are most often considered evil. One student noted that her first instincts were to choose a narrative structure that was not "congruent with *Neverwinter Nights* and the aesthetics that the toolset offered." This student correctly observed that the toolset's limitations do not provide an effective option for creating objects outside the setting of the game.

Theoretically, students actively debated the roles of game designers and players as well as the prevailing metaphor of game as text. One student found the metaphor of gamer as "author," even derivatively so, troubling. He suggested that an alternative metaphor would be one that envisions the gamer as athlete rather than author. In making this suggestion, the student recognized that configuring the players of games as proto-authors forces the critical apparatus of the academic onto the participants rather than applying a paradigm more suited to the manner in which the participants see themselves (e.g., as competitors or "cyber-athletes"). Only to the literary critic does every narrative appear a text and every player an author, whereas an athletic discourse respects the community in question by using the terminology of that community. However, it also challenges the very notion of game-based narrative that served as a template for the assignment.

Conclusion

In spite of—or perhaps because of—this theoretical challenge, we feel our students met our goals for the assignment. Their critical awareness—not just of the medium of computer games but of the ambivalent nature of digital narratives—was enhanced and engaged by the *NWN* module assignment. Students were able to contrast this experience to their prior assignments (the 10-minute video and the Flash animation), which afforded fewer or no opportunities for interactivity. In contrasting these assignments, students could recognize the narrative complexity presented by emerging technologies based upon examples that they had constructed themselves. Ultimately, students adopted diverse critical perspectives—some were uncomfortable with the need for narrative to be central in gaming, while others celebrated the narrative options available to them with new technologies—but none were left without a strong opinion about the experience. The range of opinion displayed by our students supports our view that without direct experience with the *NWN* module, many of the students would not have made the relevant and constructive observations and criticisms that they proposed. The creativity and thoughtfulness exhibited in the creation of their modules left us with little doubt that the *NWN* gaming assignment, in conjunction with the other assignments, was an effective tool to explore and examine the place of narratives and the concept of narrative within new media.

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