

Project Report

Digital Storytelling Project - English 205 - Creative Writing (Interactive) Multi-Genre, Spring 2019

Keith S. Wilson, Kenyon Review Fellow in Poetry
keithwilson13@gmail.com

I. Project Description

Traditionally, ENGL 205 is a multi-genre workshop that reads and teaches the craft and literary devices of fiction, non-fiction, and poetry. These courses have tended to use novels, books of poetry, anthologies, chapbooks, and other printed media, and a round-table style workshop methodology to critique one another's work.

This digital storytelling project reimagines that class by introducing digital "texts" (text-based games, analogue board and card games that include strong narrative elements, and other story-driven digital artifacts) alongside traditional texts. As in previously taught ENGL 205 courses, students wrote and workshopped fiction, nonfiction, and poetry with one another as well. Students also participated in periodic computer lab workshops to learn the use of Twine, a node-based "open-source tool for telling interactive nonlinear stories." Twine uses its own unique pseudocode and also accepts HTML tags: a small amount of each was taught to students to help familiarize them with the Twine platform and its digital storytelling capabilities, but ultimately no student was required to complete their final project in Twine.

The final project for each student consisted of 1. a formal statement summarizing the project and its digital elements and 2. a digital piece of creative writing in prose or poetry (nonfiction or fiction). These projects needed to be fundamentally digital—they should utilize interaction, audio or visual elements, or some digital process that is essentially incapable of reproduction in a traditional paper-based medium. Finally, these projects were compiled into a digital anthology of "texts" to be made available to the public.

II. Participants

The students who participated in this project are as follows:

- Chris Pelletier
- Eliot Hawkins
- Gus Reale
- Emily Pater
- Grant Holt
- Jack Mullen
- Jess Karan
- Kassie Rimel
- Kyle Bower
- Lena Alpern
- Michael Berghold
- Olivia Lopes
- Sarah Pazen

- Sonja Marx
- Virginia Kane
- Will(ow) Green

III. Digital Storytelling Project Grant

A non-technology class that utilizes large amounts of technology like this one introduces a number of hurdles, but one of the largest is access to the technology itself. While most schools, and certainly Kenyon College, have computer labs and/or a system for borrowing equipment, this class required students to play, read, or otherwise interact with a number of texts that are difficult to expect a student in an English class to purchase for themselves. First, digital literacy should not be an expectation for a literature class, and requiring a student to pay for a text to which much of their time might be spent learning to “read” it puts an undue burden on that student. Second, some of the required materials are expensive and require multiple students to use. Which student should cover the cost of one of these materials for the rest of their group, or if the cost is split among the group, who ultimately should get to own the material? These are some of the problems this grant circumvented. Finally, funds were used for research in teaching and presenting digital narratives.

The grant supplied funding for the following materials:

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| Elegy for a Dead World x 15 | Digital Game / Writing Prompt |
| The Yawhg | Digital Narrative |
| Betrayal at House on the Hill x 3 | Narrative Tabletop Game |
| Shindig Machine x3 | Card-based Writing Game / Exercise |
| Once Upon a Time x 3 | Card-based Narrative Game |
| Sherlock Holmes: The Thames Murders & Other Cases x 2 | Narrative Tabletop Game |
| Storymatic x 2 | Card-based Writing Game / Exercise |
| How to Do Things with Videogames | Textbook |
| Hamlet on the Holodeck | Textbook |
| Wonderbook | Textbook |

IV. Outcomes

I am extremely happy with the students’ final projects. A number of students presented work that did not use Twine, and therefore used technologies I never taught (nor required), including the use

of PowerPoint, video recording, audio recording, computer programming/coding, and the code required for advanced visual formatting. This is perhaps a result of students' comfort levels with using new technology (that which I introduced in the class) versus technology they may have more experience with from outside of this class. Additionally, the writing quality is high—while creative writing is highly subjective, the difficulties of teaching a course of this kind (see below) made it difficult to workshop, but the final anthology remains highly polished.

V. Challenges

As previously mentioned, the final projects from students were excellent. Additionally, students were enthusiastic and insightful in class discussions, and despite many of the students' lack of extensive history with video games (half or less-than-half of the students described themselves as “games” or having felt like they had played a lot of games before the class) discussions on the unique affordances of games was rich. However, a number of challenges presented themselves in this class which I would be better suited to address in future classes of this type. They include the following:

1. The amount of non-teaching work on the part of the instructor is great in a course of this kind, even with the support of outside technology experts such as those at The Center for Innovative Technology. Games often didn't work as expected or install correctly, so discussions had to be fluid or extend into other classes. In the future, one way to handle this is to have all games installed on the computer lab computers (rather than having students install them on many different devices). A second consideration is that trouble shooting in general is easier with a committed intern, assistant, or second teacher—the act of explaining a problem to someone outside the class often seemed like as much work as handling it myself (since they were often many minor problems, not large ones) so having someone who knew precisely what was happening and who could address technology issues would have been extremely helpful.
2. A lot of time was spent making sure technology worked or moving classes around because of this challenge, which slipped into time that might have been spent workshoping. Students were eager to workshop and receive feedback for their writing but it was difficult to find time for it. This is partially addressable as outlined above, but a secondary consideration is to revisit or brainstorm the best ways to workshop branching narratives (which are time consuming to play). Perhaps small groups of players taking turns each class playing one another's games instead of doing all workshops on a single day would work better, or printing scripts of games to read in class rather than playing them in early revisions would work better.
3. It is difficult to gauge how much time a game will require of a student. While there are many ways (and resources) to decide how long it may take to read a traditional text, a game's time requirement varies wildly between players, and the end result of a “finished” playthrough varies wildly as well. Some students might never have seen scenes others saw, even though everyone completed the narrative. Because of this, it might be useful in the future to consistently commit to a time-based approach to interacting with a digital text—students should spend 30-45 minutes, for instance, playing through a digital narrative rather than trying to complete it. Discussions of that text will still be difficult, but one approach to handling that is to address it with specific guidelines in the syllabus and in class directly. For instance, since everyone will have different experiences playing these games, discussions might need to focus on the “big picture” elements of the text: what are its themes, its game

mechanics, and its conventions for instance rather than focusing too much discussion on “what happened.”