

# Steampunk Rochester

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**Abstract:** Steampunk Rochester is an interdisciplinary project at the Rochester Institute of Technology that is slated to span over three years with the end goal of creating a crowd contributor-based interactive narrative game. The first iteration involved approximately 75 students from two colleges (Liberal Arts and Computing and Information Sciences) and three departments (English, Visual Culture, Interactive Games and Media) across an academic year. Students recreated the world of Rochester in the 1920s, first in text and then in a prototype “point-and-click adventure” video game accounting for social forces at play that time, including labor struggles, women’s suffrage, racism against immigrants, prohibition, and wealth stratification.

## Seed

### Tell us about your idea or project. What’s your vision?

The Steampunk Rochester project is intended to be an interdisciplinary project that brings students together to work on a large-scale narrative that is rooted in local history and spans the disciplines of creative writing, visual culture, history, and game design.

In the first semester, students in liberal arts classes used a wiki to collaboratively construct a fictional version of Rochester in 1921, historically accurate in terms of its politics and social pressures, yet infused with the speculative element of retro-futurism in the form of steampunk technology. Using the structural principles of role-playing games (RPG), each wiki entry has a combination of quantitative and qualitative information that creates both internal consistency and a rich possibility for storytelling. Just as RPG sourcebooks provide players a wealth of information to draw upon in their campaigns, students populate their fictions with people, places, and things drawn from the wiki, all of which were created by their peers.

In the second semester, the game design and development students mined the wiki entries and fiction to inspire a “point-and-click adventure” game. They spent several weeks in high-level design discussions, additional historical research and brainstorming to springboard into a design. After working in several small groups, the teams came up with a game in which the player selects a playable character of either a White Russian of ducal-descended or “Nellie Bly”-inspired journalist, or a “wrong side of the tracks” Irish descended photographer with a Steam-Driven prosthetic arm. These characters navigate Mafia, Suffragette, and “Church of Light” factions to determine the source, and effects, of Rochester’s mysterious glowing water. A few of the first semester students enrolled in the second semester class as well.

### What problem are you trying to solve and why does it matter?

In the first semester class, the two main educational problems we are tackling with this project are (a) raising students critical sensibilities when it comes to representing fictional worlds and (b) helping them see the storytelling potential in their local histories. These classes foreground critical questions about how worlds operate, paying particular attention to the power imbalances along the lines of gender, race, class, and sexual orientation, and how these social forces influence the decisions made by individuals living in that society at that specific time. The local history element serves as a reminder that such decisions helped shape the world we currently inhabit.

In the second semester production studio class, students also learn that local history can be a rich foundation for the creation of game worlds. They are also learning aspects of transmedia production and its challenges. The new twist here is that they are working with media created by other students, external to their class rather than working with their own original intellectual property or adapting established genre fiction as they so often do.

### Tell us about the team you have assembled or hope to assemble.

The currently faculty at RIT involved include:

- Trent Hergenrader, Assistant Professor of English specializing in creative writing, digital writing, and game-based learning.
- Stephen Jacobs, Associate Director of the MAGIC Center, Professor in Interactive Games and Media,

Visiting Scholar for the National Center for the History of Electronic Games.

- Jessica Lieberman, Associate Professor, Department of Performing Arts and Visual Culture, specializing in traumatic images and cities as texts.

In addition to the core teaching faculty, Michael Brown, Visiting Professor in the Department of History, delivered a lecture on the history of Rochester during the period 1915-1921, and RIT Archivist Becky Simmons provided students with an interactive display of rich collection institute documents and artifacts from that era.

## Sprout

### **Tell us about your process and how your idea is evolving throughout the project.**

During the first semester, the Visual Culture students were enrolled in a course entitled Imag(in)ing Rochester, where they considered the city as a visual text that can be interrogated and studied. The two sections of this course were distinct, as one was upper-level undergraduates and the second was primarily first-year honors students. The upper-level students never really fully latched onto the idea, whereas the first-year students became interested quickly. The archival and historical work they did on the wiki, however, never seemed to fully mesh with historical/speculative work being done in the creative writing course. Connections, when they happened, were interesting and inspiring, but the quantity of wiki entries diluted the quality, making it difficult for the creative writing students to find those connections.

The Creative Writing students started somewhat slowly, not entirely understanding this radically different approach to fiction. They were used to reading stories and writing their own, not doing historical research and talking about social forces at play during this era. Some resisted the notion of creating wiki entries as “creative writing,” but the majority came around as the wiki grew and they developed the metanarrative for the world. By the time they were to the point of creating protagonists for their stories who would be interacting with this world, the majority were very excited to see where the course was going to take them. Engagement remained high throughout the role-playing game sessions, and by the final week, most students reported that the course had been a transformational experience in terms of how they view the fiction writing process.

In the studio class the conceptual design phase went really well. Teams independently came up with final game concepts that shared 85% of the same elements. Working as a class to refine the concept also went well.

Production had its challenges, as it always does. The biggest challenges in this case were coordination of development, especially the writing team. This had a trickledown effect as members of the design team ended up having to step in and do some of the writing team’s work, which in term hampered communication and cohesion across the board. And, without a team from the art school this time around, the game levels lacked polish. All that said, the class produced a multi-level demo that allowed all of the mechanics to be demonstrated, tested and refined, which met the professor’s goal for the class.

Course wiki: <http://steampunkrochester.wikispaces.com> (moving to <http://steampunkrochester2014.wikispaces.com> in August 2015 in preparation for the next iteration)

### **What interesting patterns or insights have you discovered?**

Several students in the creative writing class completed a post-class survey to discuss the benefits and challenges in the class, which will help in redesigning the class for the 2015-2016 iteration.

Representative positive comments include:

- One of the biggest benefits I found with this method was that it allowed more interaction and collaboration between my classmates and I. Whether we were playing together and our characters had to interact and collaborate to get through a situation, or we were writing about the game afterwards, we had to consider not only what goals our own characters wanted to achieve or what actions they would take, but what the other person’s character was trying to do as well. In some cases we ended up working around each other, but it was interesting when we managed to work with each other instead.
- It really made the project feel personal while still being part of a group. I have never done collaborative writing before and I found it very enjoyable to work my character in with another student’s character, making them all feel equally driving and interesting and clearly with different ways of thinking.

- Compared to other classes, this class was an entirely new experience in writing. There was a lot of world building, which I think will be very helpful in the future in regards to my writing. I think this methodology worked great for the class: it was very relaxed and free and allowed us to settle into this new way of writing fairly well.
- The class allows those who have a background in table-top gaming, particularly those brave few who GM regularly, to really flourish, and with its blend of historical and fictional elements, has something to offer most every student.

Some representative critical comments include:

- It was a bit too ambiguous in the description and in the beginning nature of the class. Having an example from a previous class should help with this, as well as walking through the steps that class went through (research, picking themes, making items, place, people, always adding to the wiki/whatever...).
- The wiki itself was a new technology to work with that took a bit of getting used to. Not really something that can be improved, but something to allow time for.
- I do wish we had managed more time for critiques and had time to edit previous stories. I know out of class time could be used for that, but I think spending some time in class for more critique follow up would be nice.
- One of the biggest downfalls of the class, unfortunately, was the game itself. While the concept was interesting the game sessions often fell flat. A combination of poor dice mechanics and overly forceful DM storytelling often took too much control from the players/writers and left us feeling cheated. For example, a character who managed several successes in a persuasion roll still had a gun pulled on him. Other times the player/writer would want their character to take a certain action and the DM [the instructor] would essentially forbid it, not due to a failed roll or physical obstacle but seemingly because he had a different outcome in mind. The game, and by the extension the stories, would have been more fun for the players/writers if they had more choice and invested interest in what was going on.

The production studio class' "final exam" was a final play-through and post-mortem discussion of the process and the game. All of the students said that despite the early stage roughness of the prototype that they would be showing it to peers and future colleagues as a conceptual design they worked on that had promise. Many of them also said that in future iterations of these classes a stronger and/or larger writing team would be key to moving things forward.

### **Have your initial concepts/designs changed? Why have they changed? Show us how they're being refined and iterated.**

The student comments revealed generally positive reactions to the creative writing course but also identified areas that need better refinement. Sometimes this means adjusting the course mechanics, and other times adjusting student expectations. As the instructor of the creative writing class, here is how I am interpreting the survey feedback and how I plan on adjusting the course for the fall 2015 iteration:

- Students clearly struggled with the open-endedness of the world building session. They were asked to develop some interesting narrative that dealt with major social issues that impacted life for people living in Rochester in the years 1915-1921. After weeks of discussion and negotiation, they finally settled on a few main narrative threads that coalesced around steampunk prosthetics, women's suffrage and labor struggles, and mafia bootlegging thanks to prohibition. It became a challenge to try and tie characters' stories together when they could be involved in such disparate activities. In the next iteration of the course, I will work with the other professors to develop a narrower narrative structure for students to latch onto. While we will still focus on wider societal forces, it should be less chaotic if we have the class concentrate their stories on a specific theme, such as emerging technologies of the time or labor struggles.
- We will have the Visual Culture students meet with the creative writing students at least two to three times during the semester and have them work more closely on developing wiki entries, going for fewer high quality entries than a quantity of mediocre ones. The creative writing students said that the signal to noise ratio from the Visual Culture students' wiki entries was poor, and the Visual Culture students didn't have a clear idea of how their wiki entries were going to be used. Bringing these students together in a face-to-face setting should help solve this.

- Several students reported disliking the “loss of control” and feeling constrained they felt when playing the role-playing game. Since I acted as the gamemaster, I would respond that the game veered strongly toward realism than sensationalism, which is what they’re more used to when playing tabletop or digital RPGs. To address the specific example in the last criticism above, no number of speech checks will convince a bank manager to hand over the keys to the vault; in the scenario described, the student did successfully roll that she’d passed a speech check; this did not automatically resolve the situation for her (which is what happens in a digital RPG, for example), but rather afforded them an opportunity to come up with a good reason why the assassin should not kill the character. My response as the GM was not “good roll but he pulls the gun anyway” but rather “he hesitates and seems willing to hear what you have to say.” When the student could not come up with anything to say, the killer advanced. It was less “I didn’t have any choices to make” but rather “I wasn’t allowed to make the unrealistic choices that would have made things easier.”
- Along these same lines regarding “lack of control,” beginning fiction writers often give their characters problems that they’re well-equipped to solve. I mentioned that in this course, I would be giving the characters problems that were going to be difficult, and that the character would often be choosing between “damned if you do, damned if you don’t.” Several students (particularly the ones majoring in game design) saw this as a no-win situation because they were conceptualizing the role-playing game as having a victory condition, when that was never the point--the RPG is an engine for generating interesting fiction based on character choices. Next semester I will make this more explicitly clear from the beginning, and reiterate it before and during the RPG sessions.

As my previous research in using RPGs in creative writing classes strongly suggests, the benefits of using RPG structures and mechanics far outweigh the drawbacks. The logistics of the game sessions however proves to be a sticking point, both from a logistical standpoint in terms of time and space (it was feasible because at the time of the game sessions the course only had 10 students) and that some students also slip into “game mode” and focus more on game mechanics and the desire for heroic storytelling rather than staying rooted in realism and the experiences of average, everyday people. The latter trouble particularly came from game design students, who arguably need to understand that games can provide a diversity of experiences.

I am also planning on using a different RPG system. The one I chose for this iteration, Uber Steampunk RPG, used a steampunk setting, but it heavily foregrounded non-realistic elements including magic. Even though we did not incorporate those aspects, I suspect that this might have influenced how students approached the game sessions in terms of their expectations. For the next iteration, I will use the Fate Core, a flexible system that can be adapted to any genre.

## **Bloom**

### **Looking forward, what kind of impact do you think your work will have? How might it continue to evolve?**

The project has garnered attention across the institute and in the local community as well. The project was featured in a chapter of a forthcoming book, *Digital Pedagogy in the Humanities*, and an editor of a local Rochester arts and culture magazine saw the course Twitter feed and has expressed interest in running a story on the project.

One longer-term goal is to provide educators at other institutions a framework that they can use for their own historically-based, interdisciplinary projects.

### **Reflecting back, what did you learn along the way? What would you do differently?**

In the next iteration we will be doing more in the fall semester to draw the Visual Culture and Creative Writing students into the same physical space for face-to-face discussions about the project in order to maintain greater coherence among the wiki entries during the world building phase. We will also be adding a new category for wiki entries that describe groups or factions to which characters, both PCs and NPCs, may belong. This is intended to give students a better handle on the different, and sometimes conflicting, motivations a character would have when making decisions. For example, a character affiliated with the suffragettes may be forced to choose between family, job, and political activism.

Other changes include switching from Uber Steampunk RPG to the Fate Core RPG system as a way to reduce some students’ fixation on rules over narrative, and to simplify gameplay. Another change I am mulling over is to incorporate a mechanic from the game *Fiasco*, whereby all the players need to establish relationships between their character and other PCs. Like with the addition of factions, this is an attempt to establish more lines of tension for

characters, to deepen immersion in the world, and to emphasize the social aspects of the classroom environment.

As far as the Liberal Arts classes go, our plan is to run through the project sequence twice more (being three full academic years) and then reassess what is working well and what needs improvement. The plan for the upcoming academic year is to refine polish and expand the existing narrative content.

As regards the production class, the plan is to move forward to an eventual on-line game with player created content. Year two of the project will focus primarily on picking/modifying and/or developing the right set of tools to move forward. Rather than having the entire class committed to one implementation of the content we will look at employing pieces of it in different ways as the next step in the design process. This will then pave the way for deploying a player-created content game around the content of the Wiki in our third year.