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When You Play the Game of Thrones...Everyone Wins!

Fanfiction and Role-Playing Games for Fiction Writers

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Abstract

Fiction writing classes at the college level are often taught under the assumption that students should be learning to reproduce traditional literary works for print publication. This approach ignores the fact that many undergraduate students do not share this goal and instead take these classes to experiment with their own creative expression. Rather than focusing on print-based literary fiction, this paper argues that students can become more engaged and learn more deeply about narrative concepts and think critically about cultures and characters when they are writing stories in a preexisting world rather than trying to generate their own original settings. The familiarity of preexisting worlds combined with rules of role-playing games to help them feel at ease in the fiction writing classroom, increases engagement, builds a strong writing community. This approach also allows them greater range to explore multimedia compositions and collaborative storytelling techniques.

The Creative Writing Workshop: Literary Fiction or Creative Literacy?

Donnelly (2011) opens her book *Establishing Creative Writing Studies as an Academic Discipline* by stating that the field stands at a crossroads, with on one side a "'discipline' that is unaware of the histories and theories that inform its practice" and on the other "*creative writing studies*, an emerging field of scholarly inquiry and research. As an academic discipline, it explores and challenges the pedagogy of creative writing" (p. 1, emphasis in original). This includes interrogating and expanding creative writing's "signature pedagogy" of the workshop model (p. 1), which can be described as the practice of having an accomplished writer leading a group of students through a process where students 1) read a published literary work of the instructor's choosing, 2) discussing its craft elements, 3) write and share their own work with the group, 4) and then take turns critiquing it. Set on repeat until the end of semester.

Scholars in the field of creative writing studies have increasingly challenged this undertheorized approach to teaching creative writing by questioning the power dynamics at play in the workshop (Leahy, 2005), using the classroom space for critical discussions about the historical and material conditions of creative writing (Mayers, 2005), promoting alternatives to the traditional workshop (Donnelly, 2010), and using digital approaches to creative writing that include social media, computer programming, and games (Clark, Hergenrader, & Rein, 2015). Healey (2013) argues that, given the fact that so few students ever find success in a hypercompetitive literary publishing market, instructors

should consider switching their focus from literary writing to what he calls "creative literacies," which he defines as skills that include

> "the ability to use language (along with visual images and many other media) to produce complex affective states in an audience; the ability to think and communicate in associative, metaphorical, non-linear, non-hierarchical ways; the ability to craft evocative stories with fully realized characters, personas, voices; the ability to manipulate or destabilize received meanings and to produce new meanings." (p. 63)

Healey's creative literacy dovetails with the New London Group's concept of "multiliteracies" (1995) that include a range of verbal, visual, and auditory signs people use to make meaning and share ideas with others, a phenomenon accelerated in an age of digital technologies and global networks. Today's multiliteracies incorporate a range of practices that include reading and composing in different forms of media that contain visual or interactive elements, such as graphic novels or electronic literature, as well as analog and digital games. Gee (2007) uses the language of multiliteracies in discussing how videogames provide useful models for designing classroom opportunities for deep learning. Black (2008) extends this to the sophisticated range of writing strategies employed in online fanfiction communities, where writers add or adapt characters and settings from a previously published work of fiction and share them on discussion boards and chatrooms, noting the levels of engagement and support in this non-classroom writing environment. Curwood, Magnifico & Lammers (2013) have added to this line of research, examining literacy practices around fanfiction both inside and outside writing classes.

The time is ripe, then, to extend this research to the *creative writing* classroom. By doing so, instructors can provide a more robust and meaningful educational experience than merely teaching students how to reproduce received literary forms, and attend to the skills that Jenkins (2009) says will be required for citizens in the 21st century: play, performance, simulation, appropriation, multitasking, distributed cognition, collective intelligence, judgment, transmedia navigation, networking and negotiation. The question is how to accomplish this change, and what models can inspire a different kind of writing.

Role-playing Games: Providing Structure for Beginning Writers

Much of the pleasure of reading fiction derives from the reader forming an emotional bond with the story's protagonist, considering the choices that the character makes, and then reflecting on the outcome of those choices. Novice writers often struggle to give their protagonists compelling or difficult choices. Students often write stories where the story winds up being dull (if the character only has obvious choices to make) or absurd (if the character somehow refuses the obvious choices presented to them). Writing a nuanced work of short fiction is a complicated task and few undergraduates are voracious readers of the form. Thus crafting a balanced story that attends to the six primary elements of fiction—character, setting, plot, point of view, style, and theme—can seem like a monumental challenge, especially when the writer doesn't know where to start. Many students also feel that the expectation is that they must write something of deep literary importance, further paralyzing their creative process.

I have experimented structuring fiction courses around role-playing games (RPGs) to alleviate several of these problems. As Gee (2007) states, RPGs allow players to explore a fictional world through a detailed avatar, which provides them a situated, embodied experience by which they probe a fictional world and draw conclusions from the outcome. RPGs also provide narrative structure for players through rules and varied sourcebooks (Hergenrader, 2014). Using RPGs in creative writing courses can also help writers focus on specific craft issues that pertain to character and setting (Hergenrader, 2013)

and it also transforms the class into a tightknit writing community (Hergenrader, 2011). Using RPGs as a model means students need to worry less about plot, as RPG plots are largely derived from the character interacting with the fictional world (Hergenrader, 2012), and the collaborative nature of the world building process makes them think critically about social forces present in a world (Hergenrader, 2014). The RPG-based approach allows the student writer to focus on their character's emotional states and to invest more time in their use of language to evoke tone or present a specific theme. Thus the RPG provides a sturdy framework that bears the weight of many of the elements of fiction, much like a backpack frame distributes weight more evenly to make a heavy load easier to carry.

The scholarly work in literacy studies and fanfiction inspired me to try a different technique and experiment with combining RPGs with fanfiction. While building fictional worlds using RPGs as a model has many benefits, it takes weeks for students to build an entire world from the ground up; many students are also wary of this foreign approach to fiction writing. My hypothesis was that I could use a popular preexisting world to accelerate the rate of student engagement and allow for different types of discussions about fictional worlds. Work in literacy studies that examined fanfiction communities (Black, 2008; Curwood, 2013; Curwood et al., 2013; Lammers, Curwood, & Magnifico, 2012) showed that engagement and writing motivation increased when writers work within *affinity groups*, which Gee (2007) defines as those people who operate comfortably within the same *semiotic domain*, defined as "an area or set of practices where people think, act, and value in certain ways" (p. 19). In short, novices feel more comfortable sharing writing and giving feedback in a community where participants possessed the same understanding about the world and the characters being written about. Their familiarity (and in many cases expertise) in the subject matter gives writers greater confidence to suggest ways others may strengthen their work. Given the amount of peer critique that happens in fiction writing classes, a fanfiction course seemed like an ideal ground for blending it with my RPG-driven fiction courses.

A Game of Thrones Fanfiction RPG Course: Rationale and Structure

George R.R. Martin's Song of Ice and Fire Series begins with *A Game of Thrones* (1996) and currently stands at five novels with *A Dance of Dragons* (2011) being the most recently published, with at least two more volumes on the way. A 2013 article estimated the total book sales across all media at 25 million (Grover & Richwine, 2013) and the show's season six finale set an HBO record with 8 million live viewers (Kissell & Kissell, 2015). Given the popularity of Martin's work on my campus, I expected students would begin class with knowledge of the world and its characters. A pre-semester survey for the course proved this assumption correct. Of 20 registered students, 14 took the survey. Of those 14 students, 57% had read the first book in the series, and 86% has seen the entirety of the first season of the show; 36% of the students had read all five novels in the series, and 71% (10 students) had watched all four seasons that had been aired by the start of the semester. There was only one student who had no experience with Martin's work, and on my suggestion he watched the first four episodes of the first season of *Game of Thrones* to give him some necessary grounding. All other students had a firm grasp on the geography and cultures of the world, and several were bona fide experts, knowing plenty of lore only accessible through semi-canonical texts. Thus even within the affinity group, there were different levels of expertise, which allowed students to share their knowledge and participate in co-teaching of their peers.

The course began with an overview and critical discussion of the world of Westeros. In the second phase,

students broke into small groups and created noble houses, and then perspective characters (PCs) within those noble houses. In the third and final phase, the class played modified role-playing sessions and wrote vignette-length fiction told from their PC's point of view, and critiqued each other's writing.

Myths, Legends, & Cultural Beliefs: Deconstructing Who We Are and Where We're From

The first two weeks of the 15 week course consisted of students reading about Westeros, the continent on which most of the action of Martin's series takes place. Rather than using the novel *Game of Thrones* as a primary text, students instead read selections on the history and culture of the continent and seven kingdoms within it from the role-playing rulebooks *The Song of Ice and Fire Role-Playing Game: A Game of Thrones Edition* (Schwalb, 2013), *The Song of Ice and Fire Role-Playing Game Campaign Guide* (Pramas et al, 2012), the encyclopedic *World of Ice and Fire: The Untold History of Westeros and the Game of Thrones* (Martin, Garcia & Antonsson, 2014), and the *A Wiki of Ice and Fire Wiki* <http://asoiaf.wiki.com> website. These readings and discussions helped the class come to a general consensus of the nature, cultures, and customs of each of the seven kingdoms.

Each discussion period focused on how the information about the world would be relevant to their individual characters. For example, children born out of wedlock do not have a diminished social status in the southern kingdom of Dorne as they do in the other six kingdoms; or that the people of the North are the only kingdom who follow their own ancient faith of the Old Gods rather than the "new" Seven, which is the common religion everywhere else. Class is also a major factor in that nobles in Westeros have a more robust set of rights than do peasants, and that the reputation of a person's noble house directly impacts how others perceive, or even socially receive, them. All of these differences—along lines of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and more—are relevant during play during the role-playing sessions as encounters often featured characters hailing from other realms. Prior to playing, students had to know: does their character respect their cultural differences? Is she prejudiced? Does he feel superior? Inferior? We discussed how different characters would interpret events in the world in different ways based on their social position. A marriage proposal that unites two families might be a boon to the male lord who will increase his wealth and status, yet be a bane to his daughter who has no legal right to reject the match.

We also discussed how founding myths and legends shape individual perceptions of the world, as well as their place in the world. We covered the founding myths and legends for each of the seven kingdoms, and compared and contrasted them with the stories of the United States: of George Washington chopping down the cherry tree, the ride of Paul Revere, the causes and results of the Civil War, the settling of the American West, and more, including our nation's penchant for being involved in armed conflicts. We in turn discussed concepts such as "American exceptionalism," the cultural logic of Manifest Destiny, the Land of the Free and Home of the Brave, the American Dream, and more, relating them to our own personal identities and what brought us together in the space of a college classroom. We finished with thinking about different aspects of regional pride within our nation, using as one example my pride of being an Upper Midwesterner and a Wisconsinite from the land of the Green Bay Packers, beer, and cheese. Other students shared their identities as Western New Yorkers, Brooklynites, or hailing from the Deep South, and reflected on how they felt that had shaped their view of the world.

The students were randomly assigned two possible kingdoms that their character could hail from. Students could barter or trade their kingdoms with the limitation that each kingdom could have no more or no fewer than five students. We spent the next class period where the students took turns presenting

the history of their kingdom, describing the notable geographic features of the land as well as the major turning points in the realm's history. This deep knowledge would assist them in the next step, creating their noble houses and PCs.

Noble Houses and Perspective Characters

The groups of five students followed the RPG rules for constructing a noble house within their kingdom. This involves rolling a set of six-sided dice to randomly determine their house's resources, key points in the house's history, its major holdings (castles, towers, military units), as well as its motto and coat of arms. The rules provide both structure as well as a great deal of latitude in how to interpret the dice rolls and resolve them into a narrative. For example, the students of House Freitas of Dorne rolled four major events: madness, scandal, infrastructure, and again infrastructure. They wove these events into a narrative that described how the founder of their house had been driven insane by war crimes he'd witnessed (madness), how that culminated in an attempted bloody retaliation (scandal), and then economic expansion that included the founding of a major gambling den and port town (infrastructure) ("House Freitas"). The entire narrative must be agreed to by the entire group, and each student is urged to weigh in with his or her own ideas, or to add or alter other details suggested by their classmates. Thus each student becomes more invested in the history and identity of the house. The house is completed with an addition of a custom made coat of arms and "house words" that encapsulate the house's identity. The students then create a detailed wiki entry explaining their house's history and connecting it to the canonical world of *Game of Thrones* via outbound links to the *A Wiki of Ice and Fire* (Figure 1).

The next step was the creation of a PC, who would serve as the protagonist in each student's stories. The RPG rulebook also features detailed instructions on character creation, again determining some aspects by random dice rolls and others are chosen by the player. While each student has autonomy in creating their PC, each PC must also fit within the structure of the house. Some students assume the role of lord or heir to the house, while others serve as advisors, knights, and even attendants. PCs can be loyal to the house's goals, self-serving, or treacherous. Through an in-depth character creation exercise developed from a combination of RPGs and fiction exercises (Hergenrader, 2014) students determine their PCs motivations, skills, physical traits, beliefs, disposition, and backstories, and provide an image (Figure 2).

Figure 1. House of Coat of Arms and Motto.

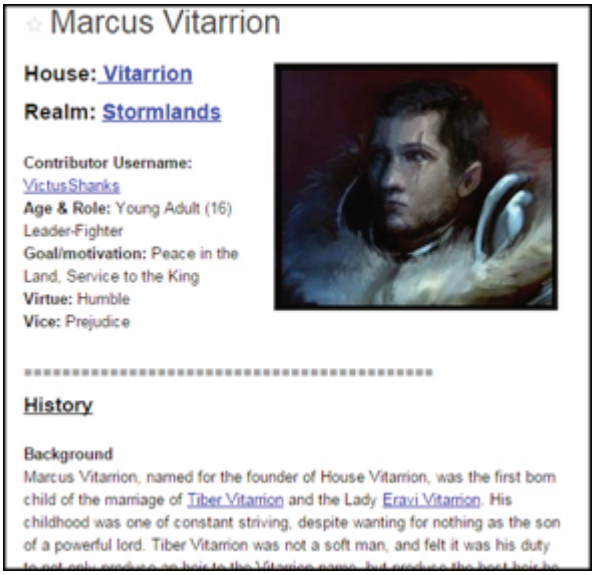

Figure 2. Perspective character.

RPG Narratives and Fiction Writing

The final unit of the course is a combination of heavily modified RPG sessions drawn from the group website ("Tales from King's Landing") and more traditional creative writing workshops. The complexity of running an RPG campaign in the classroom (Hergenrader, 2014) necessitates a different approach. For this course, two groups of students would sit with the instructor and role-play through a scenario in an abbreviated fashion, splitting their time evenly over one 75-minute class session. During the subsequent meeting time, the other two groups would roleplay. Groups alternated each week so the same group did not go first each week and gain an advantage in directing the larger narrative.

As instructor, I attempted to find the most challenging situations for every PC to negotiate. With 20 PCs all participating in a common, interconnected narrative, it became difficult to weave all the stories together. I steered the scenarios into morally gray areas, testing students' abilities to make decisions based on their PC's personalities rather than their own. Over the last unit (about six weeks) I adjusted the scenarios based on the decisions the students made in the previous session. Some examples of scenarios where a difficult decision had to be made included:

- For a servant to abandon her house to accept the courtship of a wealthy but very ugly suitor
- For an heir to a house to be commanded by his liege lord to whip his sister for her disobedience
- For soldiers to imprison a group of racially profiled citizens whom they knew to be innocent
- For a daughter to forsake her noble family to run off with a man of low social standing, who in turn needed to renege on his sworn loyalty to own noble house to make the match
- For a bookkeeper to embezzle enough money from an extravagant feast in order to break away from the family and set up shop for himself in the capital
- For an herbalist to accept the invitation of an eccentric spice merchant to travel around the world

- For a swordsman to accept his lord's order to participate in what seemed to be a suicidal mission

The decisions PCs made often required a dice roll to see if they succeeded. One PC managed to fast talk his way out of a seemingly impossible diplomatic situation with an improbably high dice roll, yet the bookkeeper's embezzlement plot was found out because his roll total was a single point short. His failure set up other tensions for his PC for the rest of the semester and it became the main theme in his stories.

Students were encouraged to take the most stressful, impactful, or interesting moment from their session for their 1000-word vignettes. These stories linked to relevant people, places, and things on the wiki, and were steeped in their PC's perspective. Students wrote a vignette each week, and for each one they wrote, they needed to provide two critiques to their classmates. Between their wiki entries, their PC's profile, the vignettes, and their critiques, students wrote approximately 10,000 words over the course of the semester and received 10 to 12 peer critiques of their writing. This amount of production and interaction with each other's work far exceeds the amount of writing in the traditional workshop format.

Conclusion

This experimental course was a success in that it achieved a number of specific learning objectives: students participated in collaborative writing project using digital tools; they were encouraged to incorporate images and other media into their work; the RPG sessions provided simulated scenarios for them to problem solve and perform in character, if they so wished; they negotiated the building of their houses and characters with their peers; and, through the vignettes and critiques, learned about craft aspects of fiction writing and received peer feedback on their work.

The RPG-based course offers many benefits in terms of student engagement, their sense of ownership in course content, and their role in transforming the classroom into a dynamic space. Significant challenges still remain, however, in that the burden for producing compelling scenarios is time consuming and resides solely with the instructor, and the RPG sessions don't lend themselves to the blocks of institutional space and time typically given for a semester-long course. Further research needs to be done to see how much of the narrative design could be transferred to the students. Ultimately however, using an RPG set in a preexisting world proved to be pedagogically

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