Gaming, World Building, and Narrative: Using Role-playing Games to Teach Fiction Writing

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Abstract

This paper reports on the findings from an experimental creative writing course entitled "Gaming, World Building, and Narrative" that incorporated digital and tabletop role-playing game principles to teach fiction writing. Students studied the narrative unit operations (Bogost 2006) present in short fiction, films, and the videogame *Fallout 3* before collaboratively creating an immersive fictional world by populating a wiki with items, locations, and characters. Students explored their newly created world through tabletop role-playing campaigns and wrote vignette-length stories from their characters' perspectives. Students strongly preferred this approach to the traditional workshop method commonly used in creative writing classes, citing stronger understanding of character and motivations as well as the significant benefits derived from collaborative writing. Role-playing also fostered a strong and supportive community for student writers. Despite institutional challenges, role-playing games offer a compelling way to improve current fiction writing pedagogical practices and encourage new modes of collaborative writing.

In *Reforming Creative Writing Pedagogy*, Joe Amato and Kassia Fleischer (2002) offer several alternative approaches to teaching creative writing, moving away from the traditional workshop method most commonly used in universities nationwide. Instead, they promote innovative approaches that make use of computer technology and digital networks to inspire a different kind of student writing, one that encourages experimentation, collaboration, and play. I developed an experimental introductory creative writing course entitled "Gaming, World Building, and Narrative" to put several of Amato and Fleischer's ideas into action and: to emphasize collaborative writing; to incorporate varieties of media, such as images and video; to make the work publicly available on the Internet; and to allow students to determine the shape of the project, since they would be the primary contributors. Additionally, I wanted to attend to some creative writing craft concerns, most notably to shift emphasis away from trying to imbue a story with some deep philosophical meaning. Too often in creative writing classes I see work where students abandon technique in order to deliver a grand pronouncement about the meaning of life. For this course, I wanted to keep a tight focus by limiting stories to vignette-length of one thousands words or less, and to have writers concentrate deeply on both their characters and the fictional world they inhabit.

To accomplish this, I built the course around role-playing games. I have two older brothers and growing up we played role-playing games obsessively, buying every new genre TSR published. I adored creating new characters and having them explore new worlds. As a speculative fiction writer—I generally write fantasy, science fiction, and horror—I have no doubt that role-playing deeply influenced my imagination and writing habits. Tabletop role-playing

games are inherently a collaborative storytelling experience. As these excerpts from the role-playing game *Vampire: The Masquerade* (1998) state, the player-characters and game master (GM) work together to create a compelling fiction:

> You [the GM] plan the twists and turns the story will take, and I [the player] will tell you how the [character] navigates them. Only you know how the story ultimately ends, but only I know how the [character] will arrive there. Along the way, the work you put into the story gives my [character] the chance to grow and develop, and her actions breathe life into the world you have created. (p. 254)

The GM's world building helps the players develop their characters through decision-making, and those decisions add detail and nuance into the fictional world. The uniqueness of each character and the decisions he or she takes is fundamental to a successful and satisfying role-playing campaign.

This description of role-playing is very similar to traditional creative writing advice. As Flannery O'Connor (1969) wrote in her book on fiction writing:

> In most good stories it is the character's personality that creates the action of the story. In most [workshop stories], I feel that the writer has thought up some action and then scrounged up a character to perform it. You will usually be more successful if you start the other way around. If you start with a real personality, a real character, then something is bound to happen; and you don't have to know what before you begin. In fact, it may be better if you don't know what before you begin. You ought to be able to discover something from your stories. If you don't probably nobody else will. (p. 105-6)

O'Connor emphasizes the importance of discovery in good fiction; the author learns about the character just as the character learns about herself, with the implication that this sense of discovery carries through to the reader as well. In John Gardner's (1984) canonical creative writing text *Art of Fiction* he speaks to the connection between characters and their environment. The writer must create convincing human beings, Gardner says, who come to know themselves and reveal themselves to the reader (p. 14-15). This happens in what he calls an "expanding creative moment" (p. 29) reminiscent of the earlier role-playing description, where both the world and character become fuller and deeper through a constant interplay.

Gardner describes shaping a story from three distinct yet related components: character, plot, and setting. Analyzing fiction this way reminds me of what videogame critic Ian Bogost (2006) calls unit operations, which he describes as, "modes of meaning-making that privilege discrete, disconnected actions over deterministic, progressive systems" (p. 3) as opposed to system operations, which are "totalizing structures that seek to explicate a phenomenon, behavior, or state in its entirety" (p. 6). To apply this to fiction writing, one could say that students who search for a fixed immutable "meaning" in a text could be said to be examining systems operations, looking for clues that would reveal the totalizing structure that serves to inform a correct interpretation of the work. To counter this tendency in creative writing, I wanted

to start my course not with the analysis of theme or plot in narrative, but rather have students look the discrete narrative units of characters and settings.

In the first part of the course we read nine short stories from a post-apocalyptic fiction anthology, watched the films *The Road* and *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome* and played the digital role-playing game *Fallout 3*. For the stories and games, we cataloged both the primary and secondary characters, listing their dispositions and physical traits as well as their personal inventories; we repeated the process with the various locations, noting not only their physical descriptions, but also what social and political institutions had not survived the apocalypse and which had been rebuilt.

We analyzed *Fallout 3* in a similar way, but this time we were participants in the narrative. Like most digital role-playing games, *Fallout 3* begins with a robust character creation process where players customize their character's appearance, abilities, and skills, and we discussed how these decisions impacted gameplay. *Fallout 3* presents players with hundreds of choices to be good, evil, or neutral. We also discussed their characters' decision-making process in the context of a harsh and violent wasteland, where theft and even murder may be justified if survival was at stake. Such conversations forced them to expand their conception of world building to include things like the politics and economies of a specific time and place, and how that shapes social interactions—both in fictional worlds as well as in our own.

The videogame also provided valuable insight into the mental state of fictional characters through what Gee (2007) calls an "embodied story" (p. 79), where the player and character become fused into a single psychological space. I asked students to take notes on their emotional and physical responses as they played the game. For example, when exploring a creepy dark tunnel, a players' hands will become clammy and breathing turns shallow; they'll jump or scream in fright at a sudden ambush; they'll feel elated when they find a trusty canine companion. When you as the player are confused and irritated with how to proceed in the game, it means your character is confused and irritated too. These same small details need to be included for compelling fiction writing as well, but beginning writers often forget that their characters are supposed to be living, breathing, sweating, emotional human beings. Rather than asking hypothetical questions about how a character from a print story might feel in a given situation, videogames give writers the chance to experience it for themselves.

Examining narratives as discrete units served us well in the second part of the course, where students built a post-apocalyptic version of Milwaukee by populating a wiki with fictional items, locations, and characters. With a class of 25 students, each student only had to create a few entries in each category in order to build a diverse and deeply immersive world. We spent portions of each class period discussing the fictional world's history, its competing factions, its economy, and other details that became woven into the interlinked wiki entries. The site was explicitly modeled after the *Vault*, a wiki dedicated to the *Fallout* series of games. I placed the content they created on a Google map with placemarks, all linked back to appropriate pages on the wiki.

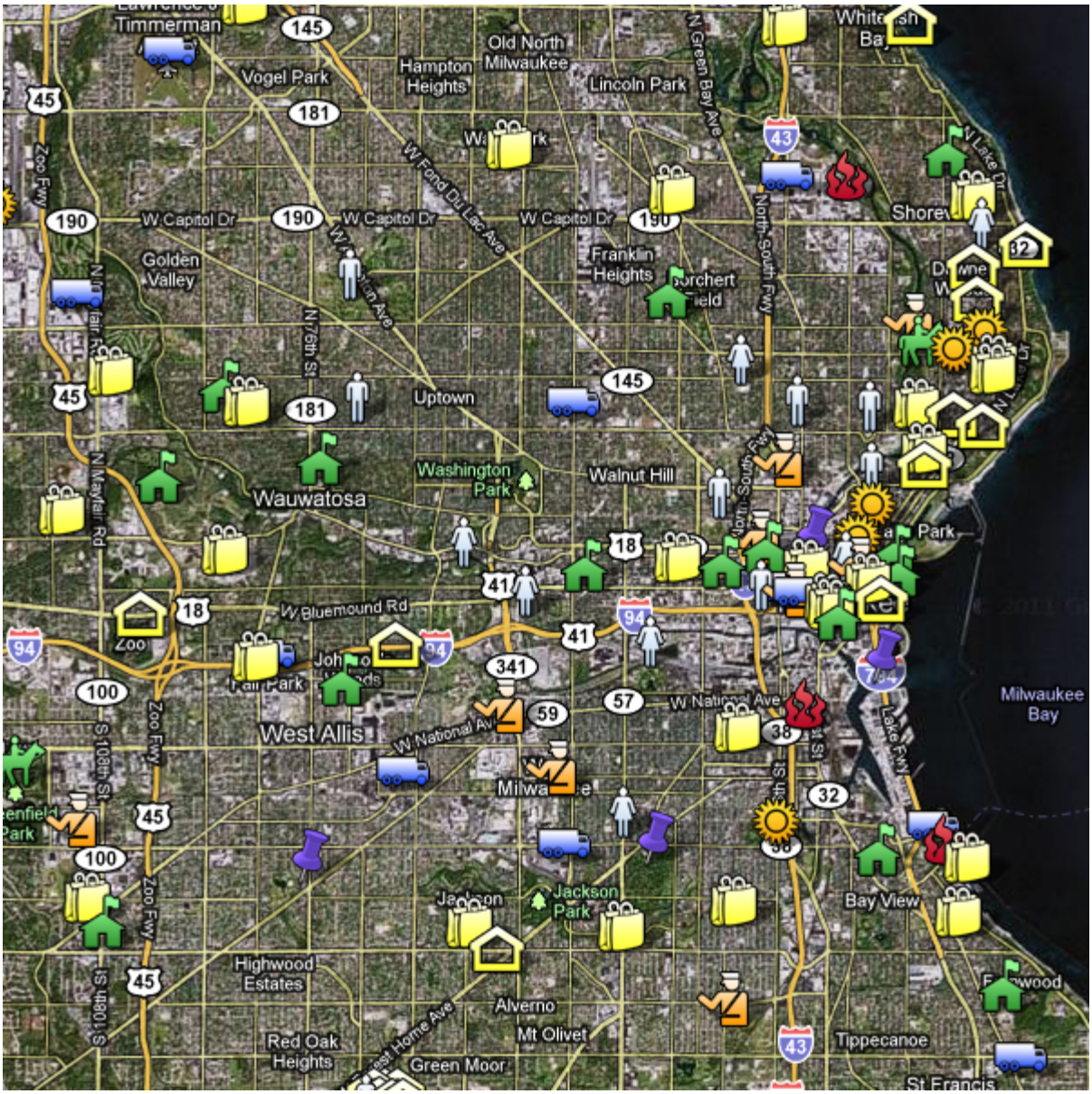

***Figure 1:*Google map with placemarks.**

We spent the final five weeks of the course creating player-characters and exploring this world via tabletop role-playing. We devoted an entire week developing the students' characters, using a mix of traditional role-playing character sheets and creative writing exercise. One class period, I distributed ninety unique questions mostly culled from a creative writing book, ranging from "Does your character have any siblings?" to "What does your character want to accomplish in life?" to "What Halloween costume would your character wear to a party?" The students first had to answer the questions for their own character, and then they circulated throughout the room asking their questions of other students' characters.

Students formed into gaming parties and four students with previous game master experience assisted me in running campaigns for their classmates. Each Monday for one month, the groups spent an hour and fifteen minutes together playing through their campaign. Only the

GMs had access to the Google Map, and in typical role-playing fashion, described what the characters saw and who they encountered. With the Google Map linked to the wiki, it was a seamless process for GMs to move between the source material and gameplay. After each session, students wrote vignettes based on their character's experiences and posted them to the wiki. This compressed format required them to focus on a very small moment of time, reflecting on events from the campaign would have mattered most to their character, and we often wound up with a description of a specific event told through the lens of multiple unique perspectives.

The class turned out to be far a greater success than I'd hoped to dream. The first two-thirds of the course focusing on narrative across media and the wiki building were well received, but they did not compare to the popularity of role-playing. Attendance was perfect and participation was never a problem, even for students usually reticent to speak in class. Experienced gamers helped newcomers with how to role-play, and we formed a Facebook group which sprang to life every night after ten PM, with chats and posts centering on the events of the role-playing campaigns. As the instructor, I could see that this energy carried over into the writing. I found myself eagerly waiting to read each week's new set of vignettes to see what the writers had come up with. It seemed as though this had stopped being a class and became a labor of love for all parties.

Because of the experimental nature of the course, I asked students to take part in a series of four voluntary, anonymous surveys to record their observations on this course compared to their previous experience with creative writing. The majority of the class completed the surveys and they were generous in their responses, writing over 20,000 words. The questions themselves were open-ended and allowed students to answer in accordance with their interests. I've summarized their thoughts on various aspects of the course below:

On developing a fictional character: Many students said they were better able to step into their characters' heads thanks to role-playing, which allowed them to form detailed, relevant personal histories that helped explain the character's decision-making processes.

On wiki world building: Students cited a more personal connection with the world and its contents due to the fact that each of them contributed a good portion to it. Others mentioned the amount of generative material the wiki provided for future creative production.

Compared to the traditional workshop method: While students' attitudes towards the traditional workshop method varied, all agreed that approaching creative writing from a role-playing angle constituted a refreshing change, giving them a great deal of enjoyment and allowing for more leeway in their own creative production.

On collaborative storytelling through role-playing: These writers appreciated the ability to focus on fewer elements when writing fiction, and how the author only has control of limited elements of the story, making it easier to judge how the character may react, change, and grow over the course of a narrative.

On the social aspects of the class: Many students mention the deep friendships they formed in this class, and how the social aspects contributed to an open and encouraging learning environment. More remarkably, several students intended not only to continue their friendships, but also to do so by continuing to play games and write fiction even after the semester had ended.

General comments and suggestions: The overwhelming consensus was for more role-playing. It was not only the most fun, but also the most helpful in terms of teaching them about fiction writing. And throughout these anonymous surveys came dozens of heartfelt sentiments about how much the class meant to them personally

As the designer of this course, I will admit that while I hoped this approach to fiction writing would work, never did I think it work quite so well. We ceased to be instructor and students and instead became collaborators as we pieced together our fictional world; we seemed to become conspirators as well because it seemed to all of us that it was somehow wrong to come to a class and have so much fun. Although the institutional constraints of space and time that do not facilitate role-playing, it should be clear that this experiment was an unqualified success and one that I am eager to repeat at the earliest opportunity. Not only do I feel that students learned more about the craft of fiction, but through role-playing games we dramatically reconfigured the educational space, swapping traditional institutional hierarchies for friendships and genuine human connections. Despite the hurdles and uncertainties inherent in this role-playing game pedagogy, the reward is well worth any challenge, and this new kind of learning is a world that instructors and students can explore together.

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