

MLA 2012: Panelist Abstracts for “Transmedia Stories and Literary Games”

Panelists: Patrick LeMieux (Duke University)
Stephanie Boluk (Vassar College)
Patrick Jagoda (University of Chicago)

Respondent: Victoria Szabo (Duke University)

Papers

Hundred Thousand Billion Fingers: Oulipian Games and Serial Players (Patrick LeMieux, Duke University)

Italo Calvino once noted the similarities between Raymond Queneau’s *Hundred Thousand Billion Poems*, the game of chess, and the “electronic brain,” writing, “[j]ust as no chess player will ever live long enough to exhaust all the combinations of possible moves for the thirty-two pieces on the chessboard, so we know (given the fact that our minds are chessboards with hundreds of billions of pieces) that not even in a lifetime lasting as long as the universe would one ever manage to make all possible plays.” Despite the impossibility of encountering every poetic, programmatic, or neural combination, it is exactly those hidden patterns and unconscious repetitions that Calvino and the Oulipo explore in their writings—and those same patterns that most computer games seek to obfuscate in their software design. For example, over the past twenty-five years thousands of thumbs have piloted herds of Marios over goombas and green pipes until gameover inevitably erases the serial histories of player performances. The princesses are always in other castles, there are always second quests, and hundreds of thousands of fingers continue to direct parallel processes in digital landscapes. Like readers, computer game players engage in vast networks of patterns that make up the aggregate histories of virtual worlds. Following Mary Flanagan’s argument in her recent book *Critical Play: Radical Game Design* (2010), this essay will examine how two categories of meta-gaming practices “critically play” the serial logics intrinsic to games. I will discuss how to incorporate an analysis of the procedural rhetoric of games for both writing and game design. Further strategies for operating under constraints and generating recombinant games in the classroom include a model for “Ninety-Nine Exercises in Play” based on Queneau’s *Exercises in Style*.

Make Love Not Warcraft: Virtual Worlds and Utopia (Stephanie Boluk, Vassar College)

After twelve million monthly subscribers collectively logged over six million years in *World of Warcraft*, games researcher Jane McGonigal declared “reality is broken.” But if games have the possibility to change the world, is *World of Warcraft* the utopia we have been waiting for? Virtual worlds and utopia are conceptually linked in that they both offer models of alternative societies which are technically “no place” (following the etymology of the word *eutopos*). Both can serve as an intervention on the present which contains the possibility for political, economic, and social transformation. Yet the Deleuzean concept of the virtual as potential is often short-circuited by the logic of the

market place resulting in games like *World of Warcraft* which do little more than reify existing structures of capital and conspicuous consumption (to the extent that developing countries now have thriving labor forces producing virtual commodities). Working with utopian theories of literature, I will compare this commercial model of the massively-multiplayer game against the “not-so-massively multiplayer” game *Love* by Eskil Steenberg, basing my research on a virtual worlds and utopia course taught at Vassar College. The students learned to closely interpret the procedural rhetoric of different games and the arguments implicit in game mechanics in order to understand the radically different social models underlying gameplay. Following this, we worked with Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s theory of political love to experiment with collaboratively designing virtual spaces that operate under the logic of a collective commons. By attempting to imagine an emergent commonwealth, students engaged with both the possibilities and perils that arise from the navigation and construction of virtual utopias.

Oscillation: Transmedia Storytelling and Narrative Theory by Design (Patrick Jagoda, University of Chicago)

Alternate Reality Games (ARGs) are a rapidly growing genre of experimental game design. Most games in this fledgling category, including Microsoft’s *The Beast* and 42 Entertainment’s *I Love Bees*, function as collaborative storytelling experiences that use the real world as a platform. In ARGs, players interact directly with characters, solve plot-based puzzles, piece together fragmented narratives, and build a collaborative community to coordinate real-life and online activities. The stories that organize these games are conveyed through a variety of everyday media, including laptops and smart phones. This paper analyzes ARGs as both an emergent mode of collective storytelling and a pedagogical practice that teaches students about transmedia dynamics. I focus on a case study of *Oscillation*: a game designed and executed in a course that I taught in the English department at the University of Chicago. This game foregrounds the idea of nonlinear and collaborative narrative. Moreover, *Oscillation* prompts participants to think critically about storytelling as a community practice. By designing this game, students were able to engage with narrative theory not only through reading, discussion, and composition, but also by incorporating digital literacy and new media production skills. Drawing on a method that Walter Holland, Henry Jenkins, and Kurt Squire have called “theory by design,” I contend that ARG production can help students experiment with numerous narrative forms and more fully engage with narratology.

Bios

Stephanie Boluk is a postdoctoral fellow in the media studies program at Vassar College. She received a Ph.D. in English from the University of Florida. Located at the intersection of cultural studies, visual studies, and the digital humanities, her teaching and research incorporates digital-born modes of criticism with traditional literary hermeneutic approaches. She has worked as an editor at *ImageText* and is currently co-editing an anthology on the zombie in film, literature, and new media that will be published by McFarland Press in Fall 2011. For more information please visit <http://stephanie.boluk.com>

Patrick Jagoda is a Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow and recently appointed Assistant Professor in the Department of English at the University of Chicago. He received his Ph.D. in English from Duke University in 2010, along with a graduate certificate in Information Science and Information Studies. Patrick's scholarship explores the way that networks, as metaphors and material infrastructures, have influenced American literature, film, television, and videogames from the end of World War II through the ongoing new media era. He has taught courses on digital storytelling, virtual worlds, critical videogame studies, and science fiction. His articles and reviews have appeared in journals including *Social Text*, *American Literature*, and *Neo-Victorian Studies*. For more information, please visit <http://english.uchicago.edu/faculty/jagoda/>

Patrick LeMieux is an artist and Ph.D. student in the Department of Art, Art History, and Visual Studies at Duke University. His artwork, scholarship, and teaching focus on the ethics of viewership, alternative histories of art, and critical game design. Inspired by those puzzles, puns, riddles, and games employed by artists throughout the twentieth century, LeMieux builds "art games" featuring monochromatic mechanics, infinite inactivity, and simulated silence. He has exhibited artwork in the Tampa Museum of Art, Tallahassee Museum of Fine Arts, and the Samuel P. Harn Museum of Art and his publications are forthcoming in *Digital Humanities Quarterly*, *Electronic Book Review*, and the *Leonardo Electronic Almanac*. For more information please visit <http://patrick-lemieux.com/>

Victoria Szabo is an Assistant Research Professor of Visual Studies and New Media in the Department of Art, Art History, and Visual Studies at Duke University. She is also the director of the Information Science + Information Studies Program and Research Center. Her teaching and research interests focus on digital media authorship and its transformation of academic practice in the humanities, with special attention to spatial media such as annotated maps and virtual worlds, and how they operate as new sites of cultural formation and representation, in theory and in practice. She is a co-founder of the GreaterThanGames labs. Her major projects have focused on Muhuru Bay, Kenya and Durham, NC, with recent collaborations around Haiti and Bremen, Germany (see <http://www.duke.edu/~ves4/>). She is also working on a book project on the affordances of digital media tools for academic authorship.