

All Work, No Play: A Constructivist Alternative to Teaching Complex Skills in the Humanities

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A Thesis presented to the Graduate Faculty
of the University of Virginia in Candidacy for the Degree of Master of Arts

Department of English

University of Virginia

April, 2021

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1. Introduction: The Difficulty, the Discovery, and the Dilemma

“Hamlet’s soliloquies, like Jane Eyre’s rush away from Thornfield, epitomize what a new narrative format can offer us. What similarly revealing constructions of the world might we expect from a fully realized cyberdrama? What aspects of our inner and outer lives await the expression of a future cyberbard?”
Janet H. Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (2017), p. 259

“The window’s metaphoric boundary is no longer the singular frame of perspective—as beholders of multiple-screen ‘windows,’ we now see the world in spatially and temporally fractured frames, through ‘virtual windows’ that rely more on the multiple and simultaneous than on the singular and sequential.”
Anne Friedberg, *The Virtual Window* (2009), p. 243

My younger brother and I, like many children of our generation born in the early half of the 1990s, grew up playing video games. At first, the purely recreational aspects of this relatively young medium comprised our earliest fascinations; the fundamentally interactive nature of the medium conveniently allowed us to occupy a central role in telling some of the most memorable fictions of our youths. Regardless of the particular game or its mechanics, these memorable fictions were often unique extraludic narratives, or narratives designed around in-game elements by an interactant rather than the game’s authors. The specific peculiarities and complexities of each extraludic narrative were known only to us, resulting in a private and protected experience sheltered from public scrutiny.¹ These often circumstantial narratives grew to become a shared space of solace throughout our childhood together, itself rife with frequent hardships and personal or familial turmoils.

Although I had yet to develop any substantive terminology with which I might have described my engagement with video games, this enterprising creative safety that my brother and I had established eventually led me to the discovery of one of my earliest pedagogical tenets: equity. The long process toward recognizing the edifying value of video games, however, was not divorced from my experiences in academia, but motivated by the urgency of my intellectual

¹ “Extraludic narrative” is a term recently popularized by Sky L. Anderson, a professor of digital media arts at the University of St. Thomas, to describe interactant-created narratives. For further specification: Sky LaReil Anderson. “Extraludic Narratives: Online Communities and Video Games” (*Transformative Works and Cultures*, 2018).

stagnation in ordinary education. Cherry and James Banks define equity pedagogy as “teaching strategies and classroom environments that help students from diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural groups attain the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to function effectively within and help create and perpetuate a just, humane, and democratic society.”² More specifically, Banks and Banks implore educators to reframe and reestablish the classroom environment around students’ desire and ability to challenge canonized thinkers and their ideas and, in the process, generate new meanings.

In this thesis, I will illustrate my own discovery of video games as a tool for inclusive learning and demonstrate a new constructivist approach to teaching English literary studies in an attempt to ameliorate several long-standing concerns in the discipline and its subfields. I will begin by identifying the relevant administrative and pedagogical shortcomings and my experience as a student under and frustrations related to these policies. I will then introduce my experimentations as a young educator and explain the instructional choices concerning video games that I have tried and that have yielded promising results. Lastly, I will elaborate on a series of complementary instructional materials designed for a prospective future class on medieval manuscript studies.

On the subject of equity and culturally diverse pedagogy, while my own experience as a financially-struggling White student was not made particularly challenging by my race or ethnicity, as Banks and Banks’ research broadly concerns, the emerging exclusionary transformations in education related to the newly-passed No Child Left Behind Act (often abbreviated as NCLB) of 2001, rendered already existing pedagogical inadequacies

² Cherry A. McGee Banks and James A. Banks. “Equity Pedagogy: An Essential Component of Multicultural Education” (*Theory Into Practice*, 1995) pp. 152.

overbearingly present.³ NCLB was, of course, a piece of legislation that woefully prioritized high-stakes standardized testing scores over the socioemotional well-being of students in K-12 education. As a young student preparing for the transition from elementary to middle school, I felt isolated and ironically left behind in my academic activities for perhaps the first time in my life. The focus of daily instruction in my classrooms abruptly shifted from individual student needs and intellectual growth to a mass-oriented lecture, during which students were treated as if they were products on an assembly line without room for individual difference or struggle.

Although NCLB was discontinued in 2015 and replaced with the only marginally more tolerable Every Student Succeeds Act, it is important to acknowledge that these regressive pieces of legislation came over half of a decade after the call for a more culturally diverse pedagogy in the 1990s.⁴ As a student who attended middle and high school during the early half of this fourteen year period, I give testimony to both the immediate and long-term socioemotional damage that these policies and their legacies have left. This era of primary and secondary education, which now constitutes the majority of my most embarrassing and frustrating moments and failures in academia, serves as a vital reminder that without vigilant labor and care, we, as educators, are at risk of backsliding into a systematic and complacent neglect of our students' needs.

Sufficiently jaded and increasingly desperate for alternative outlets for learning, I gradually began to reconstitute the role that video games, which had been a consistent source of carefree expression and recreation through my childhood, occupied in my life. When I was twelve years old, I rented and eventually purchased *Romance of the Three Kingdoms VII* (2000)

³ Camille Whitney & Christopher Candelaria. "The Effects of No Child Left Behind on Children's Socioemotional Outcomes," (*AERA Open*, Vol. 3, No. 3, 2017).

⁴ For reference: Banks and Banks (1995), Ladson-Billings (1994), Hollins (1996), Foster (1993), among many others.

by Koei Tecmo Games from the now scarce video rental franchise, Blockbuster. The gameplay of the title was for the most part quite simple. Players are first required to choose a date from 220 to 280 AD to begin their campaign. Players are then allowed to either select a historical figure from the tripartite division of China or create their own character to represent within the game world. Each playthrough generally demands twenty to thirty hours of game time, and a game has been concluded when China is unified under the rule of one kingdom. There are, of course, a multitude of ways to accomplish this, including military dominance, inheritance, subterfuge, and others. My brother and I were familiar with and regularly enjoyed historically-centered strategy games such as the *Age of Empires* and *Civilization* franchises, but for reasons unclear to me at the time, the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms VII* incited a frenzy of historical and literary curiosity within me.

I sought out a well-used, inexpensive English translation of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, the fourteenth-century historical novel on which the video game series was based, by Luo Guanzhong, a Chinese author active through the late Yuan and early Ming dynasties.⁵ The parcel arrived a number of weeks later, and within it I found four dense volumes, the paperback bindings of which had been distressed by frequent use and environmental damage. The pages of each volume were ornamented throughout with graphite and ink notes and markings from the previous owner(s). For the next several months, I would come home from school and, nearly every day, either proceed to read the novel wherever I had left off or revisit my favorite sections. As I became more familiar with the text, the video game remediation began to fulfill a purpose beyond recreational enjoyment; the game served as a way for me to more intimately engage with the history and characters, simulate alternative decisions and directions, and more clearly

⁵ To clarify, the Yuan Dynasty (1279-1368) and the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644). Regarding the text, the date of the manuscript's original composition has been conjectured based on anecdotes from several other fourteenth-century Chinese authors. Earlier versions of the story were regularly performed in the *pinghua*, or oral, tradition.

distinguish my role and responsibilities as a modern reader of an old story. Retrospectively, the charm of the discovery—this reappropriated purpose of such a familiar medium to me—was the surprise itself; the medium that had generally operated as an escape from practical frustrations suddenly served as a newfound playground for experimentation and safe, unstandardized learning. For students of my generation, video games were afforded no clear place in academia, but that is now beginning to change.

Over the past twenty years, new interactive media has gradually emerged at the forefront of contemporary artistic discourses and has begun to appear more regularly in academia as a generative educational resource. In a 2019 study, Dr. Julie A. Evans writes that nearly 35% of K-12 classes now implement some kind of game-based learning experience, although a significant majority of the nearly 350,000 surveyed teachers suggest that the primary purpose for the implementation of this new media is for the benefit of student engagement.⁶ On a related note, the Entertainment Software Association indicates that 64% of adults (ages eighteen and over) and 70% of children (ages seventeen and under) play video games to some extent in their daily lives.⁷ This suggests that the incoming younger generations of students will begin their postsecondary academic careers already quite comfortable with the medium as a recreational outlet, much like my own early relationship with games, and a minority of students among this group will even enter with prior experience using these materials in academic settings. Administering video games in educational environments should be and often is straightforward. However, despite the increasingly distinguished status of video games as a vehicle for expression, storytelling, and simulation in the twenty-first century, there is very little data to

⁶ Julie A. Evans. "Digital Learning: Peril or Promise for Our K-12 Students," (Project Tomorrow, 2019) pp. 3, 6.

⁷ Stanley Pierre-Louis. "2020 Essential Facts About the Video Game Industry," (Entertainment Software Association, 2020) pp. 5.

suggest that the medium has been meaningfully incorporated into postsecondary humanities curricula.

Some universities have organized nascent extracurricular groups, perhaps most notably at the University of Michigan, American University, University of Toronto, and CUNY, in order to support and give evidence to the pedagogical premise of game-based learning and simulation. The research published by the organizers of these groups tends to focus on the historical and contemporary uses of games as a simulated lab space in the sciences, engineering, and related fields.⁸ In the context of my own renegotiated relationship with games, literature and interactive media complement and elucidate one another; the malleability of *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* as a game is made more provocative by the rigid contexts of the literature, while the authoritative nature of the text as both a historical document and culturally important narrative is constructively questioned by the open, collaborative nature of the game.⁹

The narrative and experiential flexibility of interactive mediums allows students, as Banks and Banks advocate, to challenge, reshape, and personalize class materials in ways beyond the capabilities of the instructional choices alone. This is not meant to suggest that the means by which class content is administered do not matter, but that the rigidity of typical, solitary instructional materials in the humanities, such as literature and film, create an unnecessary obstacle to or limit genuinely inclusive design. As early as the mid-1990s, Gloria Ladson-Billings anticipated this point of concern in her publications related to equity pedagogy. She writes: "... educators traditionally have attempted to insert culture into the education, instead

⁸ Lisa McCoy, Joy H. Lewis, and David Dalton's "Gamification and Multimedia for Medical Education: A Landscape Review," Toccara D. Porter's "Games and Activities: An Alternative Foundation for Library Instructional Learning," Peter Armbruster, Maya Patel, Erika Johnson, and Martha Weiss' "Active Learning and Student-Centered Pedagogy Improve Student Attitudes and Performance in Introductory Biology," and Dylan A. Arena & Daniel L. Schwartz' "Experience and Explanation: Using Video Games to Prepare Students for Formal Instruction in Statistics."

⁹ In sinology, the text is included as one of the Four Great Classic Novels (*Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, *Journey to the West*, *Water Margin*, and *Dream of the Red Chamber*).

of inserting education into the culture. This notion is, in all probability, true for many students who are not a part of the White, middle-class mainstream.”¹⁰ As if in response to this observation, Amy Earhart, an English professor at Texas A&M University, argues that the digital humanities presently offers an opportunity for young scholars to both challenge the established canon and invest themselves in the intellectual capital of the open, free-flowing ecosystem of knowledge made possible via the internet.¹¹ While these developments in digital humanities have, of course, helped in efforts to accommodate multiculturalism and include a larger range of voices in academic scholarship, there is still work to be done. Recent data suggests that many university instructors remain relatively reluctant to even allow the broad use of technology in their classes to “deepen learning” and “engage [students] in the learning process.”¹²

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, 79% of public school instructors were White during the 2017-18 academic year.¹³ By comparison, the nationally surveyed student populations conformed more closely to expected levels of representation, with 48% of students identifying as White, 15% Black, 27% Hispanic, 5% Asian, and so on.¹⁴ This statistical disparity between educators and their students invariably results in a lower quality of overall instruction and emotional support, which eventuates a strained dynamic between students and their instructors.¹⁵ There is, for fairly clear reasons, a particular sensitivity related to White educators teaching a predominantly White canon. The diversification of the canon has been—to

¹⁰ Gloria Ladson-Billings. “But That’s Just Good Teaching! The Case for Culturally Relevant Pedagogy,” (*Theory Into Practice*, Vol. 34, No. 3, 2009) pp. 159.

¹¹ Amy Earhart. “Can Information Be Unfettered? Race and the New Digital Humanities Canon,” (*Debates in the Humanities*, University of Minnesota Press, 2012) p. 309.

¹² Joseph D. Galanek, Dana C. Gierdowski, D. Christopher Brooks. “ECAR Study of Undergraduate Students and Information Technology, 2018,” (EDUCAUSE, 2018) pp. 21.

¹³ *The Condition of Education 2020*, (National Center for Education Statistics at IES, May 2020) pp. 58.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 32.

¹⁵ Olivia Osei-Twumasi & Bernadette J. Pinetta. “Quality of Classroom Interactions and the Demographic Divide: Evidence from the Measures of Effective Teaching Study,” (*Urban Education*, 2019) pp. 8, 10.

little surprise—met with significant objections by what Anthony Platt refers to as “the old white boys’ club.”¹⁶

For the purposes of this paper, however, I will focus my argument around the postsecondary level of education due to the more complex, flexible nature of its curricula. On that note, the racial and cultural demographics of faculty members in higher education are, according to a national survey conducted by the American Council on Education in 2020, not much better. The study indicates that 72.6% of full-time faculty members and 71% of part-time faculty members are White.¹⁷ The student populations of university communities nationwide remain incredibly diverse—and, in recent years, increasingly so.¹⁸ This should be cause for concern and serious administrative scrutiny. Given that postsecondary education often comes with enormous financial risk, students can literally not afford to matriculate into an educational system that treats them as if they are merely customers purchasing the passive service of laboring instructors, rather than intellectual contributors to and collaborators in the process of knowledge-making.

According to a longitudinal study conducted by the Pell Institute, the most diverse group of students in attendance at the postsecondary level belongs to the First (or Lowest) SES Quintile, a shorthand designation for families with the lowest socioeconomic status among the surveyed group, whose enrollment in higher education reached all-time highs during the early 2010s likely due to the socioeconomic urgency of the then-ongoing financial crisis.¹⁹ Since then, this group’s enrollment in university or two-year college programs has either regressed or entirely stagnated depending on the surveyed state population. Additionally, representation from

¹⁶ Anthony M. Platt. “Beyond the Canon, With Great Difficulty,” (*Social Justice*, Vol. 20, No. ½, 1993) p. 77.

¹⁷ Morgan Taylor, Jonathan Turk, Hollie Chessman, & Lorelle Espinosa. “Race and Ethnicity in Higher Education: 2020 Supplement,” (American Council on Education, 2020) pp. 222

¹⁸ Kevin McElrath and Michael Martin. “Bachelor’s Degree Attainment in the United States: 2005 to 2019,” (*American Community Survey Briefs*, U.S. Census Bureau, February 2021) pp. 3.

¹⁹ *Indicators of Higher Education Equity in the United States*, (The Pell Institute, 2020) pp. 48, 64.

this demographic becomes incredibly scarce in more competitive university communities, wherein about seventy to eighty percent of enrolled students belong to the Fourth and Fifth (or Highest) SES Quintiles.²⁰ The expected financial burden of attendance is, for obvious reasons, a present factor to consider for the most impoverished groups, but university-wide enrollment patterns since 2007—and even more since the financial collapse of 2008—suggest that students favor programs whose trajectory of professional and/or academic development is made explicit.²¹ It is here that I suggest an intervention for the humanities in order to more clearly articulate its disciplinary goals and leave students with a skillset developed in the osmosis of experimentation and practical application.

The present dilemma is by no means simple, and the suggestion of this thesis is not meant to be a universal solution; each discipline and, in many cases, subdisciplines will demand a resolution that accommodates their field of study. Due to my own background as a student and educator of English literary studies, my assertions are best considered in the contexts of my field. While many traditional mediums such as film, photography, and even literature have adopted various experimental interactive models and modules, video games have distinguished themselves as a fundamentally interactive medium and an exemplar of new media. I challenge educators in the humanities to help establish an alternative constructivist pedagogy that might consider, intersect with, and reform the available paths through academia and its associated labor. I champion the use of video games in English curricula as a peripheral, inclusive lab space complementary to literary materials, wherein students will build their contextual knowledge of class texts and skills, immerse themselves in thematically-relevant fictions adaptive to their interactions, and expedite students' access to and development of advanced disciplinary skills.

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 86.

²¹ “Bachelor's degrees conferred by postsecondary institutions, by field of study: Selected years, 1970-71 through 2017-18,” (*Digest of Education Statistics 2019*, National Center for Education Statistics, 2020) Table 322.10.

2. Awkward First Attempts: Reflections on My Experience as an Instructor

“The world had changed: I couldn’t recognize the mountain any more, or the rivers, or the trees. The first time I glimpsed some living beings, I hid: it was a flock of the New Ones, small specimens, but strong.”
Italo Calvino, *Cosmicomics* (1976), p. 41

Despite having taught high school classes and supervised after school programs in the past, my first incorporation of interactive media—particularly video games—into a formal curriculum occurred during my time as a writing and rhetoric instructor at the University of Virginia. As I began to establish the primary learning objectives of my prospective class in the several months prior to the first day of instruction, it became fairly clear that the ideological and instructional components most formative during my earliest years as a student would constitute the core expectations of the course. Very early on during this design period, I found myself committed to the idea of using interactive media as a generative material for the composition course on the basis that many of the works lack a substantive body of scholarship. Intuiting that many of my students would likely not have read or written about much beyond the canonical works within secondary education, such as Shakespeare, Twain, and others, I intended to frame this deficiency in scholarship to my students as an opportunity to contribute genuinely original analysis and criticism with their writing. Before committing to the content decision, I wanted to confirm whether or not games and other interactive contents have a generalized educational efficacy beyond my own anecdotes.

For this purpose, perhaps the most useful resource was a series of interrelated studies conducted by Matthew Barr, a researcher and lecturer at the University of Glasgow. In his initial study, Barr administered commercially successful video games from several genres—*Borderlands 2*, *Minecraft*, *Portal 2*, *Lara Croft and the Guardian of Light*, *Team Fortress 2*, *Warcraft III*, and *Gone Home*—to a game-playing intervention group and compared their pre-survey and post-survey responses measuring “graduate attributes” to that of a control

group.²² On all included measurable scales, the game-playing intervention group outperformed the control group in areas related to communication, adaptability, and resourcefulness.²³ While dramatic or even incremental changes did not occur for every participant, the vast majority of participants in the intervention group experienced significant positive changes over the testing period. A year later, Barr followed-up on his study in order to assess student attitudes towards game-based skill development, as qualitative interview data would better contextualize the quantitative evidence collected earlier. As Barr observes, “research-led educational interventions can only be effective if they are received positively by the students involved.”²⁴ This was and still remains a paramount consideration in this emerging (sub)field. Barr’s survey yielded broadly positive reflections and feedback from the game-based intervention group, and some respondents ordinarily resistant to “non-core activities” even indicated that the presence of games had encouraged them to take part.²⁵ Above all, respondents almost universally indicated that they *enjoyed* the learning experience, which, when compared to the results of a related study conducted by Amy Buckman, is not always the case. In contrast to the emphasis on commercial titles in Barr’s study, Buckman dedicated much more time and energy to educationally-focused games, which she facetiously refers to as “chocolate-covered broccoli.”²⁶ Buckman finds that “edutainment” games, or games designed for the explicit purpose of supplemental or primary instruction, routinely offer the worst of both education and entertainment, and ultimately succeed at neither.²⁷ At this point, I was fairly comfortable in my choice to build my class around these

²² The Scottish institution at which the study was conducted lists these as ten graduate attributes: Investigative, Effective Communication, Independent and Critical Thinkers, Adaptable, Resourceful and Responsible, Confident, Experienced Collaborators, Subject Specialists, Reflective Learners, and Ethically and Socially Aware.

²³ Matthew Barr, “Video Games Can Develop Graduate Skills in Higher Education Students: A Randomised Trial,” (*Computers & Education*, 2017) p. 94.

²⁴ Matthew Barr, “Student Attitudes to Games-Based Skills Development: Learning from Video Games in Higher Education,” (*Computers in Human Behavior*, 2018) p. 284.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 293.

²⁶ Amy Bruckman. *Can Educational Be Fun?*, (Game Developer’s Conference, 1999) p. 75.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

interactive materials. However, due to my inexperience drafting course schedules, lesson plans, and assignment sheets, I struggled to immediately navigate what I still believe are ideological and pedagogical imperatives, such as cultural equity, creative inquiry, and centralized student agency.

After a week or so of brainstorming, I conceived of a potential solution. Rather than restrict students to a predesignated, shared list of class materials to read, view, play, and analyze, I sought to design an assignment template that could be revisited and reused as part of a semester-long portfolio project that compartmentalized the processes of research and composition.²⁸ In a series of connected assignments, students were expected to explore interactive and critical materials of interest to them and rehearse the often-overlooked creative components of critical inquiry by associating generally understudied or disregarded interactive works with various critical lenses in order to generate new meanings.²⁹ The most natural way to accommodate the various fields of study, cultures, and learning habits regularly present in a first-year, general education course was, in my experience, to permit students to curate their own individual lists of games, interactive documentaries (or “i-docs”), interactive films, and other materials—anything that might fit within the larger umbrella category of “interactive media”—most relevant or accessible to them, and, built around their ongoing bodies of work, dedicate our shared instructional time together as a space within which we might model different approaches to critical inquiry, research, and composition. However, in my preparation for instruction, I spent the majority of my time learning *how* to teach in broad terms, and, with the exception of my individual research on the efficacy of semester-long portfolio assignments, not *what* to teach.

²⁸ Appendix 2.1: the assignment template

²⁹ Stephanie Foote, David Harrison, C. Michael Ritchie, Andrew Dyer. “Exploratory Learning Through Critical Inquiry: Survey of Critical Inquiry Programs at Mid-sized U.S. Universities,” (IADIS, 2012) pp. 155, 161.

Completely oblivious to much of the existing pedagogical theory regarding inclusive and constructivist learning, I made two crucial mistakes here. In honesty, I had not considered the possibility of framing the interactive works themselves as ways to introduce or rehearse complex skills in the initial version of my class. Instead, I opted to administer the few required class materials as “texts” to be plainly interpreted and understood without acknowledging their fundamentally participatory nature. Each of the interactive pieces that we discussed together in class were, to my fault, framed as simply the product of representational and artistic decisions made by the creator(s). While this is—more or less—exactly what they are, the very fact that these pieces of media characteristically demand the participation of an interactant in order to fulfill their designed purpose. It is the interactivity that constitutes a substantially different dynamic than more traditional, linear media. While my initial instructional choice to frame these works as pieces to be linearly interpreted is by no means an objectively inferior or even flawed instructional approach; during my own time as a student, I will admit that it is indeed the most common. My argument here, however, is not intended to assess the aesthetic or narrative triumphs or failures of video games, but to suggest their use as a nuanced tool for inclusive, complex learning alongside more comfortable, linear media such as, in the case of the English literary studies, literature and occasionally film. My second now fairly apparent mistake was my approach to a student-led curriculum. While every student was able to pursue their individual interests, become more confident and independent as researchers, and develop their expertise in their self-selected niche of study, I had found that students will often limit their engagement with interactive materials when bereft of the necessary framing by an instructor. The type of freedom here, however idealistically appealing it may be, resulted in numerous missed opportunities, which I will elaborate on shortly.

During Fall 2020, a semester situated in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, my eighteen-student class was a diverse group, whose disparate backgrounds and research interests produced a wonderfully varied, collaborative class dynamic. By design, students were given and acted upon numerous opportunities to work with one another and share their budding expertise in their chosen subfields of interactive media. Throughout the four entries of the semester-long portfolio assignment, my students successfully applied dozens of critical lenses and explored even more interactive works, ranging from expected media, such as video games and interactive films, to more unusual installments, such as art exhibitions and adaptive visual modules in performative arts. With regards to the initial version of the class, this is regrettably where the list of my praiseworthy accomplishments and designs ends.

Despite my frequent and fairly obvious inadequacies throughout the term, my students earnestly committed themselves to the core values and content of the class. In fact, it was the work and clairvoyance of my students that originally encouraged me to use games for a more ambitious purpose. For example, one such submission reframed one of our required video games, *Her Story* by Sam Barlow, as a gamified rehearsal of library and database research skills. The mechanics of the game itself are fairly simple. Players input various keywords and search queries into an in-game database search engine in order to locate new video clips related to the game's nonlinear narrative. The clips themselves generally range from a few seconds to several minutes long, and contain interview excerpts of a detained woman, whose responses and ramblings prompt the observant player with new keywords and phrases to query. A different student submitted a portfolio entry concerning the *Call of Duty* video game franchise and the ways in which the game mediates and narrativizes historical battles and related events for young, otherwise disinterested audiences. Much like my own early renegotiated relationship with

interactive works, these students and a few others in the class identified the unique edifying value of participatory media. Their work reminded me of something that I had forgotten—a lesson about this familiar medium that I had not considered in years because my own academic struggles had subsided.

Beyond the aforementioned few enterprising students, the rest of the class modelled their analysis of and approach to their self-selected interactive pieces after my own relatively limited treatment of class materials during lecture. As a result, the majority of students engaged these interactive works as static, authoritative projects, without considering their own role in the processes of meaning-making as an interactant or the discrete, specific actions that they took by the provocation of various prompts and rules within an interactive piece. As the semester continued, I began to realize that my original motivations for framing the class around interactive media—the relative scarcity of scholarship—could not remain as the medium’s only promising characteristic in an academic environment. The path towards centralized student agency and cultural inclusion was, for the moment, dependent almost entirely upon students' asynchronous, independent labor.

About three quarters of the way through the term, I encountered *The Beautiful Risk of Education* by Gert Biesta. The book goes to great lengths to illustrate the subjectivity of students—that they do not passively receive knowledge we, as instructors, afford them, but discover and form lessons individually and solipsistically within the boundaries of the designed class space—and the more nuanced exchange at work in teaching. Nearing the end of book, Biesta writes: “I have suggested that the experience of ‘being taught’ cannot be produced by the teacher so that, in this sense, teaching is the giving of a gift the teacher doesn’t possess.”³⁰ This beautifully expressed and simultaneously relieved much of my growing anxiety related to what I

³⁰ Gert J.J. Biesta. *The Beautiful Risk of Education*, (Routledge, 2013) p. 139.

could only perceive as my instructional and personal failures during the semester. While I had neither considered nor administered the more ambitious, interventionist approach to video games and other interactive media, my students were truly emancipated—a bit of vocabulary borrowed from Biesta—and permitted to explore the content of the class as they saw fit.

On this subject, Biesta writes: “It is why I have explored an understanding of emancipation that is not about a powerful intervention in which one person sets another person free so as to bring about equality, but about a process in which emancipation is ‘seized’ by those who start from the assumption of equality.”³¹ This refers back to the writings of Gloria Ladson-Billings and her observations of common instructional trappings related to cultural equity, but also invokes the newer conceptual distinction of effortful agency. Effortful agency is “achieved in Progressivism by providing constrained choices, open-ended activities, activation of prior knowledge, and connection to students’ existing goals and desires for learning to socially guide students towards the ends of the preset societal curricula.”³² As I exposed myself to more of the literature surrounding what I sought out to accomplish, I realized that I had approached the subjects of cultural equity and student agency all wrong. Rather than concertedly focusing my efforts on *learning*, I naively devoted all of my attention toward *lecturing*. While it was a bit late in the semester to meaningfully restructure my approach for the benefit of my current class, these were all lessons that I would carry over into my Spring reprisal.

My anxiety was further assuaged when student feedback from office hours, emails, and student response surveys accrued at the end of the term. To my great relief, many students indicated that not only had the exploration of interactive media proved constructive and engaging as a field of study, but that they grew increasingly comfortable with the—at first—slightly

³¹ Ibid., pp. 139-140.

³² Eugene Matusov, Katherine von Duyke, and Shakhnoza Kayumova. “Mapping Concepts of Agency in Educational Contexts,” (*Integrative Psychological and Behavioral Science*, Vol. 50, 2016) p. 429.

alarming, open-ended nature of the course and assignments. It became clear only in retrospect that the subjectification processes—a concept that I had been exposed to in preparatory pedagogical seminars—established during the class’ design heavily favored “the student” over “the text.” That is to say that the class was at its absolute best when the experience and needs of students drove discussion in lieu of framing class materials as passive receptacles of knowledge that students could either succeed or fail to interpret. Here, I am reminded of a passage by Pier Paolo Frassinelli, who writes:

Reimagining the humanities for the age of media convergence involves challenging the disciplinary divisions and subdivisions that have been associated with the study of different kinds of cultural products, texts, media, and expressive and representational forms, as well as divisions between the study of textual forms of expression and social analysis. [...] Ways of reading, seeing, and interpreting are shaped not only by the expressive forms, cultural objects and media texts that elicit them but also by the platforms and forms of circulation and reception responsible for making these forms, objects and texts available to their audiences.³³

While Frassinelli is more concerned with addressing the ongoing narrative of an imperiled humanities as an opportunity to reform what he perceives as a divided discipline, I believe this quote perfectly surmises an ideal teaching strategy for games. Games encourage us to read, see, and interpret media as the product of aesthetic, expressive, cultural, and design choices. It is more common with such a malleable medium for interactants to come away with drastically different experiences from one another, which in turn encourages us, as educators, to arrive at our classes prepared for the unexpected and unknown. The nature of the content itself demands that we acknowledge and accept the multiplicity of voices and experiences present in any classroom at the expense of our own perceptions of expertise and authority. These were all constructive lessons, and yet there was more to be done.

Immediately after the conclusion of my first class, I began altering the syllabus and assignment sheets in preparation for a reprisal of the course during the upcoming semester of

³³ Pier Paolo Frassinelli. “Crisis? What Crisis? The Humanities Reloaded,” (*Critical Arts*, Vol. 33, No. 3) p. 9.

Spring 2021. During the several weeks of preparation, I became quite fascinated with pedagogical techniques related to constructivism, particularly as a means to administer interactive materials and allow students to learn in the osmosis of their interactions. In order to accomplish this, the class-required media selections would have to constitute more than just a well-executed narrative or clever implementation of interactive design. The rules and mechanics of each interactive work would have to in some way prepare students for the complex, nuanced tasks of writing and research. While I could certainly think of a decently expansive list of potentially constructive games, i-docs, and other interactive materials for this purpose, I found myself lamenting the conditional loss of the more exploratory characteristics of the Fall 2020 counterpart and the discontinuation of allowing students to use the class space as a vehicle to pursue their interests in favor of a more rigid, pre-selected set of works. The more that I considered the ways in which I might use interactive media as a tool for constructivist learning, the more strain I felt on my standards to accommodate sensitivities related to equity, diversity, and inclusion due to both sidelining opportunities for student agency and the representational issues abundant in the video game and related industries.³⁴

In an extensive work related to methodologies and techniques relevant to the implementation of constructivist pedagogy in English literary studies, Oleg Tarnopolsky distinguishes three different types of class materials: genuine, adapted, and synthesized.³⁵ Genuine materials are those “taken from authentic contexts without any changes,” adapted materials are “based on authentic ones but have [often simplifying or reductive] changes made in them,” and finally synthesized materials are “one coherent and cohesive text... structured out of

³⁴ Ross Orlando. “Race and Gender: A Look at Modern Video Games,” (James J. Whalen Academic Symposium, 2014).

³⁵ Oleg Tarnopolsky. *Constructivist Blended Learning Approach to Teaching English for Specific Purposes*. (Versita, 2012).p. 170.

several authentic ones by using certain procedures [... that] help to preserve the authenticity of the compiled text [... and] make the material more suitable for teaching/learning conditions and purposes.”³⁶ It was here that I distinguished a potential solution to my course-planning woes. I opted to assign specific segments and pieces of whole works around which I would frame my lessons. The rules and mechanics within these assigned segments would replicate the one or several skills relevant to the lesson and more clearly model the desired approach to interactive works for students. In essence, I had combined the simplification of Tarnopolsky’s adapted materials and the instructional design of his synthetic materials in order to facilitate the desired lesson and establish some precedence for students’ future independent work.

As this semester has proceeded, my modified approach has worked wonderfully as the basis for future application in the humanities. Leveraging some of the more meaningful intellectual contributions from past students, I reframed many of the existing materials and incorporated additional, more suitable titles in order to afford students the opportunity to, in many cases, learn accidentally and circumstantially by rehearsing core competencies via the mechanics of largely commercial video games. The games themselves continue to serve as the core generative material for the writing assignments of the course, but have taken on and fulfilled a much more ambitious instructional purpose modelled after Tarnopolsky’s explanations and applications of constructivist pedagogies.

3. From Theory to Practice: Practical Applications in a Prospective Course

A video game is a built environment, something made by people for other people to use – and in some cases ‘inhabit’ if the game is really, really good. A video game is also an archaeological site.

Andrew Reinhard, *The Interactive Past* (2017), p. 99

³⁶ Ibid., pp. 170-171.

When I began the process of designing a prospective English class in order to demonstrate the future potential applications of this constructivist pedagogical theory, I knew that I wanted the class to pertain to Early English studies, my subfield of interest and relative expertise in the English discipline.³⁷ Beyond my personal interests and investments in the area of study, medieval studies is made more provocative for the prospective intervention of this thesis due to its systemic, ongoing problems related to racial and cultural inclusions. Mary Rambaran-Olm, the former vice-president of what was once known as the International Society of Anglo-Saxonists (or ISAS) and now independent researcher and activist,³⁸ conjectures that the modern issues of representation in the field largely stem from earlier methods of instruction. She writes: “Early English studies was perceived, taught and studied within an Empirical framework which most often created an implicit bias surrounding ‘British’ origins.”³⁹ Too often in this field, white and often masculine voices are presumed to be and privileged as “neutral and objective” in lieu of incoming and routinely marginalized scholars.⁴⁰ Even now, Early English studies struggles to, as Rambaran-Olm suggests, make its case for relevance and survival.

I do not dare to suggest that a simple substitution of instructional methods or class contents will remedy the present situation. The distant panacea will likely be the result of much more enduring, widespread alterations to medieval studies accomplished and enforced at the administrative level due to their responsibilities in the hiring process and creation of policy. However, systemic problems demand systemic change, and if the methods of traditional instruction are in part to blame for our modern disciplinary woes, then perhaps we might undo

³⁷ Appendix 3.1: the prospective class syllabus.

³⁸ Now known as the International Society for the Study of Early Medieval England (or ISSEME) in the effort to exclude “Anglo-Saxon” and related terms from the lexicon.

³⁹ Mary Rambaran-Olm. “Anglo-Saxon Studies [Early English Studies], Academia and White Supremacy,” (mrambaranolm.medium.com, 2018).

⁴⁰ Eduardo Ramos. “Confronting Whiteness: Antiracism in Medieval Studies,” (*postmedieval: journal of medieval cultural studies*, Vol. 11, 2020) p. 495.

some of that damage at the class or even university level first by creating a new culture of instruction more sensitive and responsive to where students are coming from (culturally, geographically, et cetera) and the ideas they carry with them. With appropriate conditions, games accomplished a great deal for me during my most desperate, frustrating moments in academia and, through my ENWR instruction, I have witnessed the effects of the medium—when framed properly—in my students.

I have designed my prospective course with two primary objectives in mind. First, I hope to use the interactive, immersive nature of games to afford students of all cultural and academic backgrounds the opportunity to challenge the established canon of Early English studies and develop a new, more inclusive canon and critical discourse. Second, I hope to employ principles related to constructivist pedagogy theory in order to expose more inexperienced students to the practices and contexts relevant to medieval manuscript studies. The central questions related to the first goal pertain to the ways in which games mediate and temper the authoritative nature of—especially old or ancient—texts. In the complementary syllabus, I have resisted the urge to include direct remediations of older textual works, but instead I have included games with the intent to build students' contextual and cultural knowledge of Early English societies and literary tropes. One broad, but simple primary inquiry shaped the pursuit of my second goal: for the purposes of administering a class on manuscript studies, what will students be missing if, for example, they enroll themselves in the course without any prior knowledge of medieval studies or literature? The games included in the course are intended to play a vital role in preparing inexperienced or skeptical students for the more practical aspects of study related to codicology and paleography. As the core learning objectives materialized, I sought to strike a balance between *learning about* as distinct from *learning how to*.

After a handful of frustrating hours, I did what any scholar would do in times of distress and sought out guidance from a more experienced contemporary scholar. In an essay on his own reflections in teaching digital humanities, Ryan Cordell writes:

Many of our students honestly, truly, really choose literature or history or art history or religious studies because they wanted to read and think deeply rather than follow what they perceive as a more instrumentalist education in business or technical fields. To do so they often resist substantial pressure from family and friends pushing them toward “more practical” majors, which are often (though incorrectly) perceived to be more technical majors. Of course, DH can help students read and think deeply, but we would do well to try and see this exchange from our students’ perspective.⁴¹

Cordell helped me realize that there are many institutional and instructional expectations related to a course such as this, and that students would very likely enter the course with a particular vision about what constitutes medieval studies, even if they had never attended a course prior. The fact is they are enrolled in the humanities after likely having overcome or disregarded some skepticism in order to pursue and accomplish fairly specific goals related to the study of literature. This suggestion was incredibly helpful in curtailing some of my own excitement about the potential overlap between games and medieval studies, and guided me to more lucidly pursue the competencies and content goals most beneficial, anticipated, and/or satisfying for prospective students.

The final inspiration for this prospective course came from S.E. Kile, an Assistant Professor of Chinese Literature at the University of Michigan. During the Winter 2021 term, Kile taught “Three Kingdoms Lab: From History to Video Games,” an advanced undergraduate course designed to explore the literature by Luo Guanzhong and the more modern international, mixed media profusion of the story. On the department’s course listing, Kile writes: “How does a single story transform from one genre to another, and why is it still so influential and popular today? We will attempt to answer this question through our own reading of the novel and through

⁴¹ Ryan Cordell. “How Not to Teach DH,” (*ryancordell.org*, 2015) p. 8.

supplementary texts that include both academic (criticism, commentary, theory) and non-academic (fan websites, card games, collectibles) materials.”⁴² Kile interestingly frames the story in a provocative transnational perspective, a technique shared with and increasingly in medieval studies. For example, during my time at the University of Virginia, I had the opportunity to attend Bruce Holsinger’s “Global Chaucers, World Shakespeares” course, during which I completed the first of my own games related to medieval studies.⁴³

Much like the implementation of video games in Kile’s class, gameplay will largely occur outside of class as a complementary “lab” space dedicated to refining prerequisite cultural and contextual knowledge necessary to begin more specific, intensive activities. My experience administering my own games to students has been met with generally supportive responses. Students have become excited about and learned the basics of paleography through a video game that I built during Fall 2020.⁴⁴ Though paleography is regularly reserved for graduate or advanced study, it is incredibly reassuring to witness such enthusiasm in relatively young, first-year university students. Alfred Martin Wainwright, who has designed and instructed an undergraduate history course using video games, writes: “No theme demonstrates the power of video games for understanding history as much as determinism and contingency. [...] Students discuss the plausibility of counterfactual scenarios, as well as their own simulations of alternative historical outcomes through gaming. The potential of video games to enable students to explore alternate outcomes sets this medium apart from others, such as film.”⁴⁵

For the purposes of introducing the peculiarities of paleographical study, I have selected a variety of early documents written in relatively legible uncial and insular scripts, including *The*

⁴² S.E. Kile. “Asian 480 - Topics in Asian Studies - Three Kingdoms Lab: From History to Video Games,” (www.lsa.umich.edu, Winter 2021, Section 003).

⁴³ Appendix 1.2: “*The Physician’s Tale*” Remediation (Spring 2020).

⁴⁴ Appendix 1.1: *Paleography Simulator* (Fall 2020).

⁴⁵ Alfred Martin Wainwright. “Teaching Historical Theory through Video Games,” (*The History Teacher*, Vol. 47, No. 4, 2014) pp. 591-592.

Parker Chronicle (CCC MS 173), “The Grave” (Bodley 343 fol. 170r), and *The Nowell Codex* (Cotton MS Vitellius A XV). While these selections will surely pose more prolific problems on the textual level due to students’ presumed inexperience with Latin and Old English, I have found linguistic unfamiliarity to be surprisingly helpful in laboring through (semi-)diplomatic transcriptions via the playtesters—a mixed, universally unknowing group including chemists and visual artists here at UVA—for my paleography simulation video game. As the class proceeds, we will dedicate a unit, or about three weeks, to Icelandic literary traditions and, in particular, *Möðruvallabók* (AM 132 fol). The final unit of the course will be dedicated to large selections from *The Nowell Codex* (Cotton MS Vitellius A XV). Labor during this unit will be split between now hopefully more comfortable elements of manuscript studies and simply engaging with the stories, namely *Beowulf*, as literary accomplishments and products of a temporally distant culture.

The games, much like the complementary critical texts by Michelle P. Brown, Julian Brown, and Raymond Clemons and Timothy Graham, will be administered throughout the term in order to embellish students’ understanding of medieval literature. Despite the addition of games to the curriculum, the class maintains a very familiar structure and purpose. Beginning with *Crusader Kings III*, a historical grand strategy game, students will be afforded the option to play as various historical figures, such as Alfred the Great, Ælfric of Eynsham, Wulfstan, and many others, or create their own avatar and immerse themselves in the period and politics. *Heaven’s Vault*, a narrative-driven adventure game about an archaeologist who is tasked with assembling fragments of an ancient, conjectured language, is meant to frame the historically sensitive nature of our work and introduce students to some of the labor involved in paleography. Although the class only dedicates a week to the study of illuminations, *Inklunati*, a forthcoming

“ink-based” strategy game, brings some of the artistic imagination of medieval illustrations and paintings to life. Lastly, I have included *The Banner Saga*, a tactical role-playing game that leverages the literary tropes of the Icelandic Sagas, as a way for students to immersively explore this fabulous literary genre and culture.

The assignments of the class are fairly straightforward, especially with the supplied contexts of my ENWR 1510 reflections. The core labor of the course involves a semester-long portfolio project in which students will explore short manuscript fragments of their choosing. The assignment will encourage students to not only think about the literature itself as both a physical artifact and literary text, but the processes of modern interpretation, translation, and adaptation. Nearing the end of the semester, students will select one of their portfolio entries and present their work to their peers, momentarily allowing them to fully direct the class and, in some sense, feel as if they are an expert on their narrow topic. The final for the class is divided between two options: a critical paper, which will constitute the more comfortable, normal option for many students, or a media project, which will allow for quite a lot of creativity. The media project option is largely inspired by my own enormously rewarding, positive experiences with nearly identical designs in classes by Bruce Holsinger, Brad Pasanek, and Peter Baker at the University of Virginia. I am further encouraged to incorporate this option because it allows students to question and articulate their own knowledge at the conclusion of the course.⁴⁶

4. Speculations and Suggestions on Future Research and Conclusion

In the western world, we have given generally justified credence to the adage “knowledge is power,” but in a world with an increasing abundance of accessible knowledge, power begins to come from the ability to sift through information effectively and create something new.

⁴⁶ J.C. Huizenga, G.T.M. ten Dam, J.M. Voogt, W.F. Admiraal. “Teacher Perceptions of the Value of Game-Based Learning in Secondary Education,” (*Computers & Education*, 2017) p. 106..

Historically, people have found comfort in learning from others because there has always been too much information for any isolated individual to access and use. We have now developed the necessary tools to assist in building knowledge independently using adaptive, responsive technologies. More than ever, young learners are permitted to and often thrive in the free market of human choice. The cult of expertise becomes increasingly indistinct and trivial as projects themselves become participatory and dynamic. The space of education and learning is at its best when we, as educators, abandon the urge to produce a system that is “secure, predictable, and risk-free.”⁴⁷ As Ingrid Lindell writes: “In literature studies, this means using methods that make students part of their own education by allowing them to develop an understanding of how to read literature, aided and guided by a teacher when necessary.”⁴⁸

Looking forward to the future, it is vital to suggest ways in which scholarship related to this constructivist teaching methodology might be improved. Presently, far too many studies investigate the broad instructional efficacy of almost exclusively popular commercial video games. Very few studies have made a discrete distinction between commercial and non-commercial titles—or products of entertainment culture vs products of intellectual culture. While I have administered titles from both categories in my classes with some success, student responses were generally more positive towards commercial titles due to their typically more polished programming and aesthetic achievements. There are, however, exceptions to this anecdotal generalization. For example, *ARTé: Mecenas*, an educationally-focused role-playing simulation game depicting an art curator during the Italian Renaissance, has been implemented in art, archaeology, and history courses at Texas A&M University with impressive results.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Gert Biesta, *The Beautiful Risk of Education*, (Routledge, 2013) p. 43.

⁴⁸ Ingrid Lindell, “Embracing the Risk of Teaching Literature,” (*Educational Theory*, 2020) p. 53.

⁴⁹ Andre Thomas. “Lab’s Video Game Could Change Lecture/Test Mode of Learning,” (*archone.com*, 2014).

Future research related to this topic might also consider the ways in which accessibility related to physical or mental disabilities is either supported or imperiled in adopting these interactive class materials. Common misconceptions about technological and financial accessibility, at least for students attending my two classes, proved to be entirely navigable with conscientious media selections. A teacher must ask: does the medium currently present appropriate accommodations for more diverse student bodies and necessities, such as, for example, deaf or otherwise disabled students? While games have certainly improved in recent years with regards to disability accommodations via different graphics and control settings, there is still much work to be done.⁵⁰

Once accessibility is accounted for and the market of games appropriate for academic integration develops or is otherwise distinguished, we must then consider the materials that best serve our instructional purposes. Though typically treated as simply another class “text” to be interpreted and analyzed, video games have the potential to serve as the practical lab space for the humanities. This is an instructional implementation of video games already familiar to the sciences, military academies, and trade schools, as the medium’s capacities for simulation and immersion remain relatively peerless in the arts. In my experience, games produce the desired instructional results most consistently when they are chosen and included via a fairly restrictive metric. It is my advice to future instructors to include games in the curriculum when the mechanics and/or design decisions enable students to accomplish or work toward a clear class learning objective.

Lastly, if I am arguing in favor of the latent learning potential of exogenous and endogenous video game mechanics, one might naturally inquire: “Why not gamify the

⁵⁰ Alexandre G. Szykman, Joao Paulo Gois, Andre Brandao. “A Perspective of Games for People with Physical Disabilities,” (presented at *OzCHI '15*, 2015) pp. 274-275.

curriculum itself?” A gamified curriculum often includes in-class features such as assignments modelled after questing mechanics in role-playing games, experience and leveling systems in lieu of traditional grading schemas, et cetera. The particular difference between administering games as a tool to facilitate learning and gamifying the organization of the classroom itself pertains to the objective of the mechanics. The gamified curriculum itself is perhaps premised—faultily or not—on the idea that game progression systems and related mechanics are designed with a more sophisticated understanding of human psychology than pedagogical alternatives.

Contrary to the surfeit of recent public criticism and skepticism, the humanities is not broken.⁵¹ As scholars of English literature, we are at a point where the austerity of our culture will demand that we justify why striving to understand other individuals and their stories is worth doing—why reconnecting and giving new life to distant histories is worth doing—why creating a space in which intercultural and interdisciplinary labor is common and encouraged is worth doing. I do not know what the future holds, but I do know that we are active participants—roleplayers, you might say—in how things will come to fruition. The freedom to either seize opportunity or passively allow things to continue along is what makes games so provocative as a young medium; whether a decisive decision or purposeful inaction, everything results in eventual consequences. As for myself, I believe that the most ironic or entertaining outcome is the most likely. After all, the universe loves an ironic ending.

⁵¹ Various Authors, *Endgame: Can Literary Studies Survive?*, (The Chronicle, 2020).

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Appendix

1.1:

Paleography Simulator (December, 2020) by Sean R. Marcolini: [Win](#) / [Mac](#)

Created in Unity/C#. This game was completed as a final project for Professor Peter Baker's Introduction to Paleography class in Fall 2020. The intention of the project was to essentially introduce paleographical principles to students with relatively little prerequisite knowledge. All of the tools—a diplomatic transcription of the text, a notes chart that anticipates and clarifies difficult characters relevant to the selection, and a space in which interactants are able to record their own transcription or translation—necessary to work through each manuscript in the game are available and easily adaptable to any prospective instructor's needs. Each "level" in the game is designed to maintain its primary mechanical functions, regardless of sprite (manuscript or notes) arrangements. This leaves the game space easy to adapt to any future instructional needs with a simple 2D sprite swap.

1.2:

"The Physician's Tale" Remediation (April, 2020) by Sean R. Marcolini (writing, environmental art, and programming) & Kapena Ornellas (character art): [Win](#) / [Mac](#)

Created in Ren'Py/Python. This game was put together as a final project in Professor Bruce Holsinger's medieval and renaissance literature class in Spring 2020. The class routinely emphasized the either direct or indirect literary heritage of modern and medieval authors. This project essentially attempts to enter the literary heritage shared by Livy, Geoffrey Chaucer, John Webster, and many contemporary authors who have told or retold the tale of Appius and Verginia through time.

1.3:

"The Eldritch Dark" (originally by Clark Ashton Smith) Remediation (December, 2019) by Sean R. Marcolini: [Win](#) / [Mac](#)

Created in Unity/C#. This was my first video game project. I completed the short piece as a final for Professor Brad Pasanek's A Poem is a Made Thing course in Fall 2019. The basic premise of the project was to recast the poem into an interactive space in order to activate some of its dense imagery and generate new meanings and interpretations. Much like the poem itself, the remediation is quite brief in expected playtime, but populated with small ludic and aesthetic details.

2.1:

Portfolio Entry Template

[ENWR 1510]/ [Spring 2021]/ [Sean Marcolini]/ Portfolio Entries

Student Name:

Class: M/W 5:00-6:15 pm

Research Profile #: x/4

Date/Time Submitted (approx.):

File Name:

*

I--Research Background

1. Date(s) Researching in the Library (i.e. browsing online):
2. Time Spent Researching (i.e. 20 min, 4 hours, etc.) + Specific Tasks Each Session:
3. Librarian Consulted (Full name and Phone Number/Email Address) + Nature of Inquiry + Specific Advice Given:
4. Websites/Archives/Indexes Consulted:
5. Key-Word Search Algorithms Used (method of searching):

**

II—Critical Text Data and Formal Reference

6. Critical Text Genre (i.e., literary history, genre analysis, thematic analysis, critical biography, cultural biography, conceptual analysis, linguistic/stylistic analysis, reader reception analysis, sociological analysis, psychological analysis.):
7. Critical Text Title (main and subtitle):
8. Critical Text Author(s):

9. Publisher/Text Source:
10. Year/Season/Date of Original and Most Recent Publication:
11. Place of Publication (city and country):
12. Library Call Number/ or Physical Location in Collection:
13. Length in Pages/Approximate Word Count:
14. Position in Source Volume (i.e., page range in source book, anthology, or periodical):
15. Full MLA Reference Listing:

III—Critical Text Content

16. General Subject of Critical Text (e.g., the theme and situation of the work):
17. Specific Focus of Critical Text (e.g., the particular ‘spin’ or ‘spotlight’ on a situation):
18. Primary Audience (the original audience for this critical text—culture, society, class):
19. Summary of Critical Text: (300-500 words):

20. Most Interesting Passage (single quotation of 100-300 words, plus page citation—or series of up to three shorter quotations, same aggregate word-count, plus page citation) plus a brief comment as to why this passage(s) is interesting/important to you:

IV—Source and Subject

21. Artist(s) (full name[s], dates, dominant level of society, and chief culture of the

artist[s]):

22. Medium and Genre (i.e., *literature* [fiction, belles letters, lyric, ode, elegy, meditation, narrative, epic, etc], *film* [noir, drama, romance, etc], *video games* [action, adventure, point-and-click, RPG, etc], *photography*, etc):

23. Specific Work (brief description of the specific work that you used in order to experience first-hand the artist discussed in the critical article you profile):

24. Interactive Element(s) (briefly describe how the specific work uses interactivity):

25. MLA Citation for Specific Work:

26. List of Other Significant/Major Works by the Artist(s) (in MLA-style alphabetical order):

V—Connections and Extensions

27. Related Works (works by same creator of the critical work that are similar; and/or works by another creator that are similar; and/or works in another knowledge domain that are similar—plus brief summary [25-50 words] for each similar work mentioned):

28. Personal Comments/Response/Connections to Other Study Topics (500-800 words or more):

29. What Other Resources Did You Use to Make Sense of your Primary and/or Critical Texts? (List other resources in MLA reference format, and offer a brief description of what such source(s) did to help your comprehension):

*

3.1

ENG 3xxx: Introduction to Medieval Manuscript Studies

[Class Days and Time] | [Semester + Year]

Instructor: Sean Marcolini

srm8uq@virginia.edu

Office Hours: By request/appointment (email me!)

calendly.com/sean-marcolini

Course Description:

In this course, we will survey a collection of medieval manuscripts and cultures across Scandinavia and Western Europe. We will spend the majority of our time at the beginning of the term exploring the processes and importance of manuscript production within their relevant reading cultures and the ways in which the recorded stories themselves are products of their historical contexts. As the semester progresses, we will spend time looking at various early scripts, as well as manuscript production techniques and, inevitably, errors. Alongside the expected medieval and contemporary literature, we will regularly revisit a collection of video games as a simulated “lab” environment, within which we will test (not the scary kind), rehearse, and discover new and necessary skills.

What You’ll Learn How to Do:

- Identify, describe, and apply key theories, concepts, and techniques relevant to medieval manuscript studies and reading cultures
- Analyze books and other textual technologies as material objects and within their social contexts
- Examine interplays, both thematic and material, between literary works and contemporaneous technological innovations
- Practice writing as a creative form of critical inquiry
- Establish a metacognitive understanding of yourself as a writer and learner
- Assume responsibility for and recognize yourself as a meaningful contributor to your field
- Develop your comfort with and skill using research databases and techniques

Course Material:

GAMES:

- Crusader Kings III* (2020 video game), available for Win/Mac on Steam
- Heaven’s Vault* (2019 video game), available for Win/Mac on Steam
- Inkulinati* (2021 video game), available for Win/Mac on Steam
- The Banner Saga* (2014 video game), available on Win/Mac on Steam
- Paleography Simulator*, available on Win/Mac/Linux via download link on Collab.

LITERATURE (Purchase):

- A Paleographer’s View: Selected Writings of Julian Brown* (1993) by Julian Brown
- Selected readings from *Introduction to Manuscript Studies* by Raymond Clemons and Timothy Graham

- Select readings from *Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts* by Michelle P. Brown
- Egil's Saga* (ModEnglish translation)
- Beowulf: A New Verse Translation* (2001 Bilingual Edition), translated by Seamus Heaney. There are, however, many digital bilingual alternatives to Heaney's published translation/interpretation.

LITERATURE (Free):

- The Parker Chronicle* (CCC MS 173)
- Chronicles of England to 1417* (MS 38-173)
- “The Grave” (Bodley 343 fol. 170r)
- The Lindisfarne Gospels* (Cotton MS Nero D IV)
- Farnese Hours* (MS M.69)
- The Sherborne Missal* (Add MS 74236)
- Möðruvallabók* (AM 132 fol)
- The Nowell Codex* (Cotton MS Vitellius A XV)
- Additional readings will be provided on our Collab throughout the semester

Learning Activities & Grades [guidelines for each assignment will be provided in class]:

A Contract	B Contract	C Contract
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Participation/asynchronous activities ● Portfolio Project ● Portfolio Annotations ● Presentation ● Final Essay (2000-2500 words) or Final Media Project 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Participation/asynchronous activities ● Portfolio Project ● Final Essay (2000-2500 words) or Final Media Project 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Participation/asynchronous activities ● Portfolio Project ● Final Essay (1250-1750 words) or Final Media Project

Participation/Asynchronous Activities:

This course provides you with the opportunity to exchange ideas, discuss readings and media, and assess your own and your peers' projects as they progress. Participating actively in this course during our meetings is crucial because doing so will allow you to develop and expand your capacities as a thinker and composer, and help to provide a lively, collaborative learning experience. However, as an extension of human dignity, if you need to take a day off here and there for any appropriate reason (mental wellness, fatigue, et cetera), then please notify me via email and take care of yourself. Any forum posts, unless otherwise specified, are **due by Sunday 11:59pm** of their respective weeks.

Portfolio Project:

For this assignment, you are meant to investigate and report on a series of broad topics over the course of the semester. This assignment's self-curated nature is meant to allow room for each of your individual interests, while also encouraging you to discover something new. This is an

exercise meant to inspire and facilitate growth, not regurgitation of what has been successful for you in the past. Consider this the playground for experimentation and risk-taking.

If you opt into the A contract, you will be asked to revisit your returned entries and annotate them. The purpose here is to reflect on the compositional and research moves you're making in each piece, as well as highlight some of your decision-making. Use this as an opportunity for growth and metacognitive reflection.

Presentation:

Using one of your portfolio entries, you will adapt your findings into a 7-10 minute presentation to share with the class. This assignment essentially asks you to consider how information might look in different formats and for different audiences. Collaborative work is acceptable and encouraged here, as well.

Final Option I - Final Essay:

For what constitutes the final for the course, you are asked to write an 8-10 page or 5-7 page (depending on your grade contract) critical essay in which you challenge a critical source or build upon an observation about a medieval manuscript of your choice. The primary objective of this assignment is to showcase your ability to make and defend a critical assertion—whether your own original observation or in contest with something that has been written by another scholar.

Final Option II - Final Media Project

For what constitutes the final for the course, you are asked to put together a media project that demonstrates substantive thinking about medieval manuscripts in some way. I am pretty open to creativity here, so talk to me about your ideas for approval before getting started. You can make a website, make a video game, create a light display of some sort using a Raspberry Pi, et cetera.

Course Schedule

Week 1 (Feb 1st & 3rd): Introduction

Tuesday, Feb 1st: Syllabus day. Anticipate questions and concerns related to both the grading policy and portfolio project.

Thursday, Feb 3rd: Begin exploring selections from the *Parker Chronicle* (CCC MS 173) in class. Introduce societal tensions and customs, as well as the importance of narrative and linguistic record.

Homework: Spend time playing through some of *Crusader Kings III* over the weekend. Pay particular attention to governmental systems, international relations, and personal and cultural movement over time. As you play through the game, keep a journal or record of your progress (important personal or societal events, major decisions you have made, etc).

Week 2 (Feb 8th & 10th): What Are We Studying? Why?

Tuesday, Feb 8th: Discuss experience with the game. In smaller groups, have students share their journals/records with one another and have a discussion during which they identify key similarities and differences between their experiences. Return to selections from the *Parker Chronicle* and use the text to embellish now (hopefully) somewhat familiar figures and events. Scrutinize any overlap with the game and ways in which it helps us better understand this period and its important figures.

Homework: Assign each student a figure from the text to play as in *Crusader Kings III* between Tuesday and Thursday's class. A sort of "ragman's roll," if you will. Come back together and continue our discussion and contextual framing.

Thursday, Feb 10th: Continue topical introduction and contextual framing. Allow time for students to share their experiences playing as various characters in the game. What were some difficulties? Did they travel anywhere? Who were their allies and enemies?

Homework: Play through *Heaven's Vault* with select readings from *A Paleographer's View* by Julian Brown.

Week 3 (Feb 15th & 17th): Experimental Archaeology

Tuesday, Feb 15th: In the early bit of class, spend time on Brown and his influence on modern paleography. As we get into his reflective essays assigned over the weekend, incorporate students' experiences playing *Heaven's Vault*, a game in which you discover, organize, and eventually decipher characters and words from an ancient, fictitious language. How are the contexts in which these words are placed throughout the game helpful in this interpretive process? Is it important to know what a word means in order to speculate on the discovery's value?

Homework: Between Tuesday and Thursday, work through a fairly straightforward transcription of "Charm Against Water-Elf Disease," a short Old English metrical charm written in insular minuscule. It is not important to understand the words, but get a clear transcription down to the best of your ability.

Thursday, Feb 17th: Using students' experience playing through *Heaven's Vault*, frame the basic premise and practice of paleography and codicology. Work through "Charm Against Water-Elf Disease" as a class. Dedicate some time toward the end of class to formally introduce the portfolio assignment in anticipation of our research/library resources day next week.

Homework: Explore the portfolio assignment template and prompt in order to prepare relevant questions you might ask our visiting librarians.

Week 4 (Feb 22nd & 24th): Library Resources & Research

Tuesday, Feb 22nd: Library and research week. Students will learn how to access research databases and library materials necessary to begin the more substantive work ahead. What is the Small Collections Library? How do we access materials there? What sort of medieval

manuscripts or related materials might we find?

Homework: Arrange a visit to the Small Collections Library and have a look at some of the materials there. Take some notes on both the experience and the text you reserve in order to share in class.

Thursday, Feb 24th: Discuss some of the stuff students found in the library. Work through sections of the *Chronicle of England to 1417*, a piece digitized by our library, as a class. Use as an example of various types of marginalia and damage in medieval texts, as well as introducing some of the peculiarities of the hand.

Homework: Work on first portfolio entry. Read selected chapters from *Introduction to Manuscript Studies* by Clemons and Graham.

Week 5 (Mar 1st & 3rd): Early Writing Systems and Methods of Preparation

Due March 7th by 11:59pm: first portfolio entry

Tuesday, Mar 1st: Show some examples in class that expand on topics mentioned in Clemons and Graham readings. Work through available/accessible transcriptions in class as a group. Take any questions on emerging difficulties or curiosities in regards to the portfolio assignment toward the end of class.

Homework: Continue work on first portfolio entry. Select readings from *Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts* by Michelle P. Brown.

Thursday, Mar 3rd: Continue survey of writing systems (hands/scripts/etc) and notable characteristics of manuscripts (page layout, binding, inks, etc). Have students transcribe smaller bits of “The Grave,” a short Old English poem written in an English vernacular minuscule, in smaller groups

Homework: Finish first portfolio entry by Sunday night. Spend some time over the weekend playing through a bit of *Inklunati*. Have a look at both *The Lindisfarne Gospels* (Cotton MS Nero D IV) and *Farnese Hours* (MS M.69). Pay particular attention to page layout, the placement of the artistic elements, and the major differences between the two selected pieces.

Week 6 (Mar 8th & 10th): Illuminations and Other Aesthetic Elements

Tuesday, Mar 8th: Discuss experience with the game and how that helps to inform, reframe, and rethink medieval illuminations. Spend time digging into key pages as a group. Speculate on design elements and artistic decisions in each manuscript.

Homework: Begin work on the second portfolio entry. Dedicate some time to *The Sherborne Missal* (Add MS 74236).

Thursday, Mar 10th: In smaller groups, have students work through transcriptions of small sections of Add MS 74236. Come together in the second half of class to share their work.

Homework: Continue second portfolio entry. Beginning playing through *The Banner Saga*.

Week 7 (Mar 15th & 17th): Scandinavian Literature

Due March 21st by 11:59pm: second portfolio entry

Tuesday, Mar 15th: Discuss *The Banner Saga*. Introduce the game as a modern take on the Icelandic sagas. Use the game's setting and characters to introduce popular archetypes found in Icelandic literature.

Homework: Continue second portfolio entry. Continue/finish *The Banner Saga*.

Thursday, Mar 17th: Continue discussion on *The Banner Saga*.

Homework: Finish second portfolio entry by Sunday night. Over the weekend, read the first part of *Egil's Saga*.

Week 8 (Mar 22nd & 24th): Scandinavian Literature, cont.

Tuesday, Mar 22nd: Explore *Möðruvallabók* (AM 132 fol) in class. Discuss similarities and differences between *The Banner Saga* as a modern take on an old tradition and the classic literature.

Homework: Begin work on third portfolio entry. Return to *Crusader Kings III* and have students play as some of the famous Icelandic characters in order to experience these new contexts.

Thursday, Mar 24th: Continue discussion on *Egil's Saga* and Scandinavian literary traditions. Frame discussion with their play experience. How is this different from or similar to the experiences related to Western European characters?

Homework: Continue work on third portfolio entry. Finish reading *Egil's Saga*.

Week 9 (Mar 29th & 31st): Break + Scandinavian Literature, cont.

Due April 4th by 11:59pm: third portfolio entry

Tuesday, Mar 29th: Break Day

Thursday, Mar 31st: Conclude discussions about *Egil's Saga*, paying particular attention to the way in which poetry and verse plays an important part in the hero's life. Why is this a valuable skill? Return to *Möðruvallabók* (AM 132 fol) for additional inspection.

Homework: Finish third portfolio entry. Begin reading *Beowulf*.

Week 10 (April 5th & 7th): Beowulf

Tuesday, April 5th: Contextualize with the *Nowell Codex* and surrounding material. Great opportunity to explore manuscript damage with students, given the abundance here. Focus on the manuscript and the interpretive work of translation over plot analysis.

Homework: Begin work on final portfolio entry. Continue reading *Beowulf*.

Thursday, April 7th: Continue discussion on *Beowulf* and *the Nowell Codex*. As we arrive at Heorot in the narrative, bring up relevant illustrations and photographs of Danish architecture. Continue to use class time to dig into the manuscript.

Homework: Continue work on final portfolio entry. Continue reading *Beowulf*.

Week 11 (April 12th & 14th): Beowulf, cont.

Due April 18th by 11:59pm: fourth (and final) portfolio entry

Tuesday, April 12th: Spend dedicated time with the class working through difficult sections of the manuscript (for example, MS 179r-179v). Dealing with purposeful erasures or accidental damage to the text as a modern reader and transcriber/translator.

Homework: Continue work on final portfolio entry. Continue reading *Beowulf*. Work out a transcription of MS 179r-179v in *Paleography Simulator* when you can and submit via Collab.

Thursday, April 14th: Dig into surrounding materials in *the Nowell Codex*, such as *Wonders of the East* and *Judith*. Bring up the “Finnesburg Fragment” if there is time.

Homework: Finish final portfolio entry.

Week 12 (April 19th & 21st): Wrap-up

Tuesday, April 19th: Use today to wrap-up any loose content. Summarize some of our most interesting findings and dedicate some time in class today for students to talk about their own independent research unrelated to their forthcoming presentations. There will certainly be a lot of accumulated research and disparate interests at this point, so it will be nice to give them the floor for a bit.

Thursday, April 21st: Break Day

Homework: Prepare a 7-10 minute presentation for next week.

Week 13 (April 26th & 28th): Presentations

Tuesday/Thursday, April 26th & 28th: Student presentations all week. With time this week permitting, students will have the opportunity to briefly lead a class discussion at the end of their presentation for a few minutes.

Homework: Prepare a draft of your final paper for peer-review and workshopping week. The more you have, the more useful your feedback will be.

Week 14 (May 3rd & 5th): Peer-review and Workshopping

Tuesday/Thursday, May 3rd & 5th: Peer-review final essay rough drafts all week in order to give time for additional revision and the incorporation of peer feedback. The goal here is to get as many eyes and as much feedback on your work as you can. Editing groups will be established the week prior. For those working on media projects, please write up an explanation of your project idea and attach screenshots of your progress and any other necessary or relevant appendix material.

Homework: Finish any additional work on your final essay.

Final Essay Due May 10th by 11:59am

Course Policies and Resources

Inclusive Teaching Philosophy

I recognize and value the many perspectives my students bring to the classroom. Many factors—social identities, visible and invisible disabilities, family circumstances, physical location, mental health, access to the internet—all influence the experiences that every individual can have in our course. I am committed to building an environment to support your learning, one in which you will be supported and rewarded for going out on a limb to communicate and defend your ideas.

Assistance

Your success in this class is important to me. If there are any circumstances that may affect your performance in this class, please let me know as soon as possible so we can work together to develop strategies that address your needs and enable you to meet the requirements of the course. I am always happy to assist you in any way I can. If you are in need of official university learning accommodations, please email the Student Disability Access Center at SDAC@virginia.edu.

Observance of Religious Holidays

This course will make every effort to accommodate all students who, because of religious obligations, have conflicts with scheduled exams, assignments, or other required attendance. Whenever possible, students should notify me at least two weeks in advance of the conflict to request special accommodation.

Disability Accommodations

If you qualify for accommodations because of a disability, please let me know so that your needs may be addressed.

Academic Integrity

If you are unsure about what constitutes academic fraud at UVA, see the Honor Committee's statement here: <http://www.virginia.edu/honor/what-is-academic-fraud-2/>.

Interpersonal Violence (cited from Green Dot)

I support a safe and violence-free campus. The Department of English is committed to a safe and violence-free campus. I am committed to a safe campus. I believe violence is not OK, and I will find a way to do or say something in any situation that feels like it could lead to violence. How can I support you to do the same? I am committed to supporting and encouraging students, staff and faculty to take responsibility for safety on our campus. I believe we can all play a role in preventing violence. We are all bystanders and we can make choices to contribute to a safer campus. Because I know that interpersonal violence will impact the lives of my students I am committed to violence prevention and campus safety. Please ask me how you can contribute. If you or someone you know experience stalking, partner violence or sexual assault, please know you are not alone. There are resources that can help: <http://www.virginia.edu/sexualviolence> and http://www.virginia.edu/justreportit/confidential_resources.pdf.

Additional Notes on Class Policy

In my course, flexibility means that I will understand if you have unforeseen problems or anything else outside your control and will be committed to helping you work out a way to complete the course. Flexibility also includes communication.

I am available for questions and discussion via email and during office hours. My office hours will be virtual and by appointment; the Zoom office hours link and signup are available on our UVACollab site's front page. I will try my best to reply to your email within 24 hours during the regular work week.

In our course, there will be many opportunities to discuss ideas in large and small groups. To support a productive, respectful, and learning-focused discussion, I ask that you participate with the following classroom norms, which we will review and add to together as a class:

1. Listen respectfully. Comments that you make (whether asking for clarification, sharing critiques, or expanding on a point) should reflect that you have paid attention to the previous speakers' comments.
2. Be open to changing your perspectives based on what you learn from others. Understand that we are bound to make mistakes in this space, as anyone does when approaching complex tasks or learning new skills. Strive to see your mistakes and others' as valuable elements of the learning process.

3. Understand that your words have effects on others. Speak with care.
4. Understand that others will come to these discussions with different experiences from yours. Be careful about assumptions and generalizations you make based only on your own experience.
5. Understand that there are different approaches to solving problems. If you are uncertain about someone else's approach, ask a question to explore areas of uncertainty.
6. Differentiate between opinion--which everyone has--and informed knowledge, which comes from sustained experience, study, and practice. Hold your opinions lightly and with humility.

Many of the relevant tools we use in the class will be linked in our course Collab site. Please log in and have a look around, to locate the syllabus and the weekly activity schedule. Collab has [help resources](#) and [assistance via email](#) during regular business hours. It is my goal to create a learning experience that is as accessible as possible. Please meet with me to explore your options if you anticipate any challenges meeting course requirements or interacting with the course materials.

If you are feeling overwhelmed, stressed, or isolated, there are many individuals here to help. The Student Health and Wellness Center offers [Counseling and Psychological Services \(CAPS\)](#) for its students; call 434-243-5150 to speak with an on-call counselor and/or schedule an appointment. If you prefer to speak anonymously, you can call Madison House's [HELP Line](#) at any hour of any day: 434-295-TALK. Alternatively, you can call or text the [Disaster Distress Helpline](#) (1-800-985-5990, or text TalkWithUs to 66746) to connect with a trained crisis counselor; this is toll free, multilingual, and confidential, available to all residents in the US and its territories.

Please let me know if you have questions or concerns about any aspect of the syllabus.