Classic Literature Springs to Life in the Digital Classroom

The Department of English and Information Technology Services join forces to guide students through an educational journey of epic proportions.

By Kim Steffens

The Journey Begins

Freshman Matt Shelton had no idea what to expect. He headed across the Vanderbilt University campus, laptop in tow, for the first class meeting of English 115F. "Vanderbilt University requires that all freshmen take a writing seminar," Shelton explains. "They offer classes on a wide array of topics, but I was looking for something unique, something that was going to engage and hold my attention. I came across a class titled *Worlds of Wordcraft,* and I thought, 'Wow, I've never seen anything like this before.' The name of the class is a reference to the social online gaming revo-lution *World of Warcraft*. I was really drawn in by that, and had a strong feeling that this class would be a unique opportunity for me."

Shelton's cross-campus trek finally came to an end at the Hill Center, Vanderbilt University's state-of-the-art Information Technology complex. "Walking into the classroom on the first day was an experience," says Shelton. "I was amazed by the abundance of technology.

I looked to my left, and there was an interactive whiteboard. There were projectors on the ceiling and several monitors around the classroom, all displaying different information. Everyone was plugging in their laptops. The professor pressed three buttons and two lights turned off, the shades came down, and everything in the room was enveloped in darkness. Stepping into such a theatrical classroom really captured my attention."

As a drama major, Shelton was used to experiencing this kind of anticipation and excitement in the theater, but not in the classroom. "I have a short attention span, so I need teachers who can really engage me in the learning process," Shelton says. "I'm not the most self-motivated learner, but if you give me a spark, give me some reason to do the work, I'll be the most self-motivated person you've ever met. I was totally hooked by the ways the professors used technology in *Worlds of Wordcraft*.

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"For example," Shelton continues, "Professor Clayton was lecturing about the tapestries in the Castle Joyeous from Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*. At the same moment, Professor Hall pulled an image from the Internet that *exactly* illustrated what Professor Clayton was describing and pushed it up onto one of the monitors. That was just incredible! We all learn in different ways, so it was really powerful to have material presented to us in formats that engaged different parts of our brains. The professors showed us three or four different representations of the same information, so we really understood what we were learning. I've never experienced such seamless integration of subject matter and technology in a classroom."

Narrative Forms in the Digital Classroom

Professor Jay Clayton, Chairman of the Department of English at Vanderbilt University, and Professor Matthew Jett Hall, Assistant Vice Chancellor for Information Technology Services and Faculty Fellow in the Department of English at Vanderbilt University, co-teach *Worlds of Wordcraft*.

The two professors have a mutual interest in technology, narrative, and online gaming, so decided to build a class around these elements. They drew inspiration from books, films, and massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPG) to explore how narratives are transformed when interpreted in the context of different kinds of media. The syllabus included reading J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, watching *The Lord of the Rings* movies, and playing *The Lord of the Rings* MMORPG. Students then compared and contrasted the ways the author, filmmakers, and game designers delivered the narrative through these different formats.

Clayton explains, "In a typical seminar meeting, we'd have a scene from the movie up on the DVD screen, all seventeen of our characters in *Lord of the Rings Online* exploring the same scene in the online game, and supplementary materials ranging from printed texts and images to Web sites on the SMART Board–all of these active at once. We used digital technology to compare the characteristics of narrative across media in a very fine-grained way. This kind of active learning enabled the students themselves to generate concepts about how different media handle temporality, setting, and spatial orientation. It brought excitement to the class and helped a group of non-English majors engage with complex texts."

Clayton and Hall were determined to design a digital classroom that used technology in dynamic, yet appropriate, ways. "Knowing how and when to apply technology to the teaching and learning moment yields great pedagogical benefit," says Hall. "The technology should neither overshadow nor interfere with the subject at hand. Rather, it should enhance, augment, and aid in the creation of new experiences and learning moments."

Aside from a standard audio/video (A/V) stack, an Aten VS-881 8 Port Video Switch that enables multiple CPUs to interface with the A/V system, and the SMART Board interactive whiteboard, the professors sought to use technologies that were freely available, low cost, or in the public domain. The class had access to Vanderbilt University's pervasive wireless network, which students used to connect with Vanderbilt University Library resources and online reference repositories such as www.wikipedia.org or the Oxford English Dictionary Online. Hall also relied heavily on www.sourceforge.net for access to Open Source software. "From a stand-alone

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perspective, it may not appear that we used anything terribly innovative," Hall says. "However, it's the way in which we utilized the tools in conjunction with our learning objectives that yielded learning innovations. We discuss this at length in our podcast, *Narrative Forms in the Digital Classroom*."

Students as Co-Creators of Knowledge

One such learning innovation stems from the core principle of pedagogy: that students are creators, not just recipients, of knowledge. "One of our main goals with the class was to help the students understand their roles as knowledge producers by disseminating their contributions through a variety of means," say Clayton.

Hall and Clayton used Windows Live™ Spaces and Windows Live SkyDrive™ storage technology to disseminate notes that were generated during class meetings. "There's a lot that happens in the classroom that we wanted to capture and preserve," Hall explains. "We wanted to make the classroom experience available to those students who weren't present so that they could access the information later. We decided to make a digital copy of every class meeting. We recorded audio of the lectures, captured all the lecture notes on a SMART Board, and uploaded everything to Windows Live Spaces using Windows Live SkyDrive. Microsoft includes 500 megabytes of free storage with Windows Live Spaces, so we could easily update the syllabus, create publications about the class, and share supplemental class materials."

In addition to organizing and sharing information with Windows Live Spaces, all of the class meetings were recorded onto

podcasts. "Not only were we able to download and listen to a class we may have missed, but so could anyone who came across the podcast on the Internet," Shelton explains. "They couldn't fully participate in the course, but they had free access to all of the valuable information that we generated during our class meetings."

Hall used two products–Movie Edit Pro and Music Maker from a company called Magix–to edit the raw material and create the podcasts. "These products are relatively low-cost and work seamlessly with Windows®-based operating systems," says Hall. "It used to take me 45 minutes to an hour to prepare the podcasts, and now I can produce seven 10-minute videos in about 20 minutes."

Not only did Clayton and Hall disseminate this co-created knowledge through podcasting, they also introduced blogging as one of the course requirements. Students produced 10 substantive blog entries using the WordPress 2.5.1 blog publishing system, freely available through the GNU General Public License. Through their blog entries, students actively learned about writing for a global audience– the *Worlds of Wordcraft* blog was viewed 5,687 times by people from across North America, Europe, Australia, and the United Kingdom. "The broader the audience, the more effort you want to put into writing these blogs," Shelton says. "If your teacher is the only person reading your writing, then you'll put a certain level of effort into it. But if you're writing for a global audience, you have to think differently about what you're communicating. You have to make sure it's globally acceptable. You have to let your own personality, your own unique style, shine through so that people will remember what you had to say."

Clayton and Hall also used the *Worlds of Wordcraft* blog to schedule class events, communicate major assignment deadlines, and engage the students in dialog. Clayton says, "We found that after the very first class meeting of this seminar, the students themselves had already begun posting about the course materials in the *Worlds of Wordcraft* blog." Hall adds, "The blog became the hub that directed the spokes of the other digital content. In fact, when you go to the blog and click on 'supplementary course materials,' you're redirected to Windows Live Spaces. You'll see how easily WordPress and Windows Live Spaces integrate with one another."

In addition to blogging, students wrote three formal essays and conducted peer review sessions in networked groups using freely available collaboration tools such as Microsoft® Office Live Workspace. "We used a portal to share documents for peer editing which helped improve our grades," says Shelton. "We were able to catch and correct errors before submitting our papers to be graded, which I'm sure also saved the professors a lot of time and aggravation."

Clayton and Hall experimented with different Web-based document sharing programs, but decided that students would derive the greatest benefit from the rich editing and commenting capabilities of Office Live Workspace. "We found that Microsoft Office Live Workspace is a more robust collaboration and peer review tool than some of the others we tried due to its ease of use, technical flexibility, and excellent user interface," Hall explains.

The Scholarly Application of Online Gaming

After studying narrative in theory for nine weeks, Clayton and Hall presented students with the opportunity to creatively apply their newly acquired knowledge. Using BioWare's Neverwinter Nights 2 online gaming client, students began designing a virtual world and third-person perspective online game based on Book Three of Edmund Spenser's epic poem, *The Faerie Queene*. The students used this exercise to bring the land of Faerie to life in ways that they simply could not accomplish through scholarly study alone.

"Professors Clayton and Hall are the first teachers that I've ever heard say, 'Video games are narrative, too,'" says Shelton. "As we got deeper into the class, a lot of the students who didn't necessarily have an interest in *The Faerie Queene* or in that type of literature became more and more engaged. Some of them said, 'This still isn't for me, but I really like what we're doing with it.' And some of them said, 'I really like the story and the story has changed me.' Regardless of how they felt about the text itself, everyone left the class knowing a lot more about *The Faerie Queene*."

Shelton adds that throughout the semester, class attendance was high because students were completely engaged in the learning experience. "Everyone wanted to see what was going to happen next," he says. "What new surprises did the professors have in their bag of tricks? We read the syllabus and knew what we'd be doing the rest of the semester, but we really had no idea what was going to happen when we walked into the classroom and they shut those blinds. That's when the magic happened."

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The Future of "Edutainment"

Shelton enrolled in *Worlds of Wordcraft* because he was looking for a class that would spark his interest, but in the process of completing the course he found something even more compelling: a new vision for how he wants to apply his education. Shelton changed his major from Theater to English, and is working with Professors Clayton and Hall as a teaching assistant for the next session of *Worlds of Wordcraft*.

"Being in this class helped me realize that the next revolution in teaching is integrating education and entertainment," Shelton says. "Putting legitimate stories such as *The Faerie Queene* into a video game format would have been unheard of just a few years ago. That's why I fell in love with the idea behind this class—it's creative rather than rigid, it breaks with tradition, and it incorporates a lot of the elements that you'd find in the theatre.

"Based on my experience with *Worlds of Wordcraft*, I'd like to go into the field of expanding communication," continues Shelton. "I want to help improve or invent new technology that will make communication between people more efficient and easier to use. For example, how do I teach my grandmother—who just learned how to check her own e-mail—to use the latest mobile device? I think there's a market for that, and it's what I'd like to do when I graduate. I'm still a freshman, so I guess I have a little more time to work out the details."

Clayton and Hall also continue to work out the details for the next session of *Worlds of Wordcraft*, which will be offered in the fall of 2008. Interest in the course has spread, and the professors expect that the class will be filled to capacity within minutes of open enrollment.

Not only has the word spread among students, but other educators see value in the digital classroom and methodologies that Clayton and Hall have developed. As a result of the class, the two professors were invited to participate in a panel discussion entitled *Teaching in a Digital Age* at The Center for Teaching, a resource center founded in 1986 to promote excellence in teaching at Vanderbilt University. "The Center for Teaching toured our class setting and is building a model classroom based on the one that Jay [Clayton] and I conceived," Hall says. "We're very excited about this because it's a way to transfer knowledge to other educators. In an academic setting, you don't tell someone what to do. You demonstrate it. Others will adopt what they perceive to be of value and make it their own.

"We're not evangelizing, because there is a place for a technology-free classroom," Hall concludes. "There are times when 'close your laptops, close your books, and look at me' is appropriate. But we want to offer examples of how we've applied technology—including the seamless integration of Microsoft products with other free and low-cost technologies—and share the learning outcomes that we've observed. Much like the class itself, this is an exemplary activity rather than an evangelical one. That's our approach, and students and educators alike are getting excited about what we're doing."

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