

The Failed Prototype: A Work in Progress

I suppose you might say that the primary method I used to develop my idea for this first media project was a process of elimination. My initial purpose was to create a hypertext version in a blog environment of T.S. Eliot's poem "The Wastelands" (1922). I intended to focus on the intertextual allusions in Eliot's work. However, as I soon came to realize, not only were there a considerable number of hypertext versions of this iconic poem already available online, but it also seemed as if this intertextual approach was the only way people engaged with Eliot's text.

In version after version, hypertext links trace the connection between a phrase in "The Wastelands" and a relevant passage or event in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, Dante's *Inferno*, the works of Shakespeare, or Aldous Huxley's contemporaneous novel *Chrome Yellow*, to name only a few. To my mind, the emphasis of such an approach explicitly portrays meaning as derived from a past relationship between a text and a select group of cultural antecedents rather than one characterized as a social relationship in the present between text and reader. I perceived that when literary meaning is thus represented as something forged and solidified in the past, access to this singular "truth" is only made possible through some form of passive literary/cultural apprenticeship. In these instances, education becomes the hollow privilege of reiterating and transmitting a single story – a tale that *tells* instead of one that is *told*. It occurred to me that this overdetermined explanatory model of literary (or literacy) engagement does not so much explain the meaning of a poem as try to explain away the possible meanings of a poem for a reader.

In "Rereading 'A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies': Bodies, Texts, and Emergence" (2013), Kevin Leander and Gail Boldt refreshingly offer an alternative method of textual engagement. Essentially, they ask educators to consider the possibilities that might emerge if we stop exclusively asking our students and ourselves "what does a text mean" and instead explore questions like how do they work, what can they do, and how can they be used? (25) Instead of charting or locating the effect/affect, purpose, or meaning *in* a particular work, I can experiment how cultivating a relationship *with* a textual object can influence my perception of narrative as well as my link with others.

In slightly more concrete terms, I envisaged my first media project as attempting to engage with Eliot's poem synesthetically. That is to say, my desire was to participate in and relate with the poem in some way rather than analyze, explain, or try to (re)present it. I maintain that a multiliteracies approach is ideal for this nonrepresentational participatory goal. For it seems to me that in an authentic multiliteracies approach the visual, auditory, digital, virtual, and textual do not so much combine and synthesize but instead synesthetically participate, interact, and "transform the sensory effects of one sensory mode into those of another" (Massumi 35). In a like manner, I imagined that my media project would produce some kind of synesthetic participation where the visual would take on the standard sequential characteristics of the text – an unfolding and shifting landscape of contrasts, associations, and allusions; and where text took on an image of solid form one moment before dissolving and dissipating in the next.

I ultimately failed in my endeavor for a number of reasons. On the one hand, I found myself unable to break away from a representational model as my selected images merely responded and reacted to the text instead of relating to and with it. On the other hand, time management was undoubtedly a factor as I spent more time theorizing what I wanted to achieve

than playing around with the technology that might have reshaped where I thought I wanted to go. If I am serious about nonrepresentational participation, I need to start participating and thinking with and through technology and not just arriving with a predetermined notion of what I want things to look like when I get there. As demonstrated above, this nonrepresentational and participatory approach with regard to literary and literacy education is a particularly difficult process to define much less assess. However, recent scholarship in the immersive world of digital gaming and design provides welcome insight that can help educators assess virtual, as opposed to representational, products and processes.

In *Digital Games for Education: When Meanings Play* (2007), Suzanne de Castell et.al. argues that production based approaches to education foregrounds “the relationships among educational theory, designed artifact, and practice” (Design-Based Research Collective, quoted in de Castell et. al. 591). That is to say, production-based approaches to education require students to participate in the “continuous cycles of design, enactment, analysis, and redesign” that comprise actual literary/media production (Cobb et. al, quoted in de Castell et. al 591). As such, I believe that the four categories that make up the production cycle – design, enactment, analysis, and redesign – are the elements that I would assess if I was to ask students to perform a similar activity in the classroom. In my opinion, by assessing these four elements I would be in a position to value the contribution of the major aspects of an educational task without privileging product over process, or vice versa.

Works Cited

de Castell, Suzanne, Jenson, Jennifer, and Taylor, Nicholas. “Digital Games for Education: When Meanings Play.” *Situated Play, Proceedings of DiGRA 2007 Conference*. (2007): 590-599. Print.

Leander, Kevin and Boldt, Gail. “Rereading ‘A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies’: Bodies, Texts, and Emergence.” *Journal of Literacy Research* 45.1 (2013): 22-46. Print.

Massumi, Brian. *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*. Durham: Duke UP, 2002. Print.

