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Women's & Gender Studies 192: Masculinities in Post-Apocalyptic Fiction

Digital Humanities Tools and Approaches

Twine, Microsoft OneNote, Choose-Your-Own-Adventure

Description of Assignment

Women's & Gender Studies (WGS) 192 is a First-Year Seminar with a topical focus on "Masculinities in Post-Apocalyptic Fiction." In this course, students study American post-apocalyptic fiction through the lens of gender and identity. Much of the course is centered around the social construction of gender and analyzing the varying ways that gender, particularly masculinity, has been imaged historically in post-apocalyptic fiction.

For their final project, students developed in groups Choose-Your-Own-Adventure (CYOA) stories using the Digital Humanities tool Twine. The primary purpose of this project was for students to both invoke and resist the conventions of traditional post-apocalyptic fiction, specifically in its constructions of gender. Students worked together in small groups of 3-4 on a scaffolded assignment that took place over several weeks of the semester. Students composed second-person point-of-view stories with branching logic that provided readers with a variety of choices that aligned with the choices faced by the many characters and situations we had read about in the genre. In their groups, students constructed the identities of the protagonists; the nature of the apocalyptic event; the social, cultural, and economic landscape of the post-holocaust world; and the ways that gender was re-imagined in their newly-defined cultural space. For this project, students had to produce at least 3000 total words throughout the story, at least 10 meaningful choices in the story, and at least 3 possible endings for the story. Students initially wrote their stories in Microsoft OneNote to facilitate the collaborative writing process and then eventually published their material using Twine.

In addition, students were required to present their final projects at a public venue, the First-Year Seminar Symposium, on December 9, 2019. At this event, students in several First-Year Seminar courses presented their course projects using printed posters and digital slides or presentations. Students in my course used laptops to invite attendees to play through their Twine CYOA stories; this provided students with a chance to engage in deep discussions about the subject and their choices for the project.

Outcomes

The learning outcomes expected from this assignment were centered on the group collaborative experience as well as on applying the main themes and ideas of the course in creative ways. In order to be successful on this project, students needed to demonstrate a clear understanding of key concepts in Women's & Gender Studies, considering specifically how constructions of masculinity vary historically and culturally. Their projects needed to reflect the complex dynamics of identity and intersectionality in the development of their second-person POV characters. By performing a public demonstration of their learning at the First-Year Seminar Symposium, students also engaged in what is considered a High-Impact Practice by the AAC&U.

Students did an outstanding job of meeting the learning outcomes of this assignment. While some groups gelled more than others, every group was able to successfully manage their projects, make decisions together, and distribute the various tasks to complete the workload. In addition, all groups

incorporated to varying degrees the key ideas from the field of study. For example, one group explored the gendered tension between a sister and her brother as they navigated a hellish, post-apocalyptic landscape; another group used humor to thwart beauty conventions associated with femininity; and a third group examined hegemonic masculinity via a thinly-veiled representation of the protagonist from one of the published novels we read. In short, students successfully used the CYOA format to perform meaningful examinations of gender. Furthermore, students were able to discuss their projects with attendees at the First-Year Seminar Symposium; while many students were understandably nervous about presenting at the event, all groups performed very well and expressed their participation in a positive light.

Instructor Reflection

If I were to assign this group project in the future, I would make a few changes to the process. First, I would better prepare students to write creative fiction. While WGS 192 is not a creative writing course and my background is not in creative writing, students would benefit from more fundamental writing strategies to help them make better choices related to character and plot. Second, I would provide additional examples that specifically address the intersections of the CYOA style and the genre of post-apocalyptic fiction. Although many examples of CYOA stories are available, students would benefit from seeing what the CYOA format in particular might reveal about post-apocalyptic texts. Third, I would help students sort out some of the technical challenges associated with using Twine. Since Twine is not effective for collaborative writing, and because the browser and desktop versions vary slightly in terms of functionality, I would spend more time in class demonstrating the tool and giving them opportunities to explore it. These projects only used Twine's base functionality for creating branching stories; however, Twine is intensely feature-rich and could provide a means for students to be more creative in their approaches. Finally, I would require additional reflective writing that invites students to discuss their choices in a more transparent way. One of the challenges of assessing this project is the non-linear nature of CYOA fiction; with additional context from students, I could better identify their rationale for constructing the stories as they did.