INTRODUCTION

Reflections on the Ivanhoe Game

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Ivanhoe is both a game and a project that is documenting a discussion around play and literary criticism.[1] This collection of papers presents our current thinking on the Ivanhoe project. Produced after three years of research conversations among the members of the Speculative Computing Lab (SpecLab), the papers provide a glimpse of the complex threads through which we have developed our thinking. Each of us contributes from our own area of expertise: textual studies (McGann), philosophy of ludic activity (Rockwell), visual theory (Drucker), critical insight into digital production (Nowviskie), experiments in visualization (Laue). In looking over the collection, we realize that for a first time reader, many questions would arise. What is Ivanhoe? How did we get to this point in the project? How is Ivanhoe actually played or used?

In our individual papers, none of us has chosen to describe the development of the project in its various iterations or what it is like to play the game. This introduction will therefore describe the history of the project and provide a description of one of the most "mature" games played to date, the Spring 2002 *The Turn of the Screw*.

The Story of Ivanhoe

The original impetus for Ivanhoe, as McGann points out in the opening section of his paper, was an exchange between Drucker and McGann in the spring of 2000 that posed a critical challenge: how might the rewriting of a literary text provide self-conscious insight into the literary work and into the processes of interpretation constituted by any and every act of reading. Might we, literally, make that reading into a writing, an act of explicit reinterpretation? From that original point of departure, the intertwined strands of Ivanhoe's activity have unfolded. The project aims to create a new approach to textual studies (to paraphrase McGann again) and to create an electronic instrument that calls attention to the processes of interpretation.

The "newness" comes in part from the use of digital instruments

to promote collaborative work, use of distributed resources in virtual spaces, and various tools of analysis (such as visualization) based in computational capabilities. Collaborative work is still novel in the Humanities, but will increase. Shared resources aggregated from geographically distributed collections create altered conditions for editing and study. Our aim is to concentrate the development of these features in a concerted effort towards increasing awareness of interpretation as a process. One might argue, in fact, that interpretation in its subjective and historical dimensions is the core activity of humanities.

With these goals in mind, and these convictions, we have "played" Ivanhoe several times with differently constituted groups using specific literary works. The first "game" involved only McGann and Drucker in a series of email exchanges to rewrite the outcome of Scott's *Ivanhoe*. As McGann and Drucker reflected on the project in the months following, they began to see the outlines of its hermeneutic significance. Their naïve game, played without rules or critical gloss, gave rise to a series of charged conversations. They began to create diagrams of the game's spaces as a way to conceptualize a theoretical model of interpretation.

That first game was followed in summer 2001, by a more elaborate email game involving Steve Ramsay and Bethany Nowviskie in play with *Wuthering Heights*. Between the first Ivanhoe game and the second, an explosive series of discussions expanded the project from its initial impetus into a full-blown research project. Worthy Martin and, occasionally John Unsworth, contributed their insights from computer science and from the experience of MOO and MUD worlds. From a game of rework and rewriting, executed as a lark and without any explicit research agenda, the project became infused with critical and theoretical investigations that proliferated on a burst of collective enthusiasm. By summer's end we had designed an interface, rule-sets, a theoretical and critical framework for the game as an investigation of literary studies and interpretation.

In the fall of 2001 our discussions expanded and a small group of us began to meet regularly to work on Ivanhoe. As we began to look for funding, we considered Ivanhoe's viability as a K-12 class`room tool for increasing reading and writing skills. Chad Sansing ran an on-paper Ivanhoe game with students in his middle school based on Madeline L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time*. Our working group expanded to include visitors Rune Dalgaard, Geoffrey Rockwell, and a gifted undergraduate working on game models from an economics background, David Patch. Patch and Nowviskie created explicit versions of game economy we

termed the "squishy" model and the "edgy" model – for collaborative and competative modes. Were we really intent on a game? Or were we inventing a toy? Was this a space for collaborative work or for competition? Or was it a classroom tool for improving specific skills? Were we trying to create an Internet space for high-level humanities research? Or were we focused on the project of creating Ivanhoe as a research task in itself? All of the above.

In the academic year 2001-02 McGann's undergraduate class played a game with Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Our research notes from weekly meetings during that academic year chart the course of step-by-step development of the structure of the game. Nathan Piazza became the technical lead on the project in that year, bringing serious technical skills in software design into our discussions. We began to give papers about Ivanhoe. Papers were given at STS in Spring 2002, at the ACH in Summer 2002, and in a host of other individual sites where McGann and/or Drucker (or other SpecLab participants) were invited to speak. The many goals and aims of the project kept shifting, and this has in part made it difficult to communicate succinctly as a single clear entity, but the over-arching mission of the project as a tool for interpretation has come into sharp focus.

In late spring 2002, Bethany Nowviskie designed a modified weblog (blog) environment for us to use in playing the *Turn of the Screw* game. The advantage of her design was its organization of the different activities of the game into clear spaces for the activities we had come to see as essential: making moves in relation to a common source text, keeping a player journal, assessing each other's work. Nathan Piazza worked to create an interface to be used for McGann's fall graduate class, hoping to engage graduate students in the editing of William Blake's *The Four Zoas*. The design of the interface taught us a great deal about what doesn't work, and the conceptual difficulty of making Ivanhoe's intellectual issues clear through visual structures.

Our group meets weekly for an informal but vigorous threaded discussion. The Ivanhoe project described in the papers that follow is still more theoretical than practical, though our emphasis in SpecLab is on building the game. The documentation of Ivanhoe's progress towards realization in software traces visualization, information structure, design specifications, and other very particular attempts at getting the project from idea to usable and implementable reality. That material is posted on the <http://www.speculativecomputing.org> site and fills in many blanks left by these papers, written as they are at a more advanced moment. We've

seen the theoretical force of what we're working with, but the practical realization of the project is equally compelling. The two aspects of Ivanhoe move forward in tandem, intertwined. Poised as we are at this moment to undertake actual construction, we will no doubt look back on these papers too as interim documents at some not too distant point in the future.

When presenting the game we are often asked what it would take to try Ivanhoe and the answer is that Ivanhoe can be played without elaborate software. You can play it with paper and pencils if players are willing to keep track of each other's moves as the Sandling article below illustrates. Using a Web application like blogging software makes it easier for moves to be recorded and for players to concentrate on playing. Using a Web application also allows moves to be logged and play to take place over the network. The Ivanhoe project is developing specialized software for playing which it expects to release, but nothing stops you from trying to play now with those tools at hand.
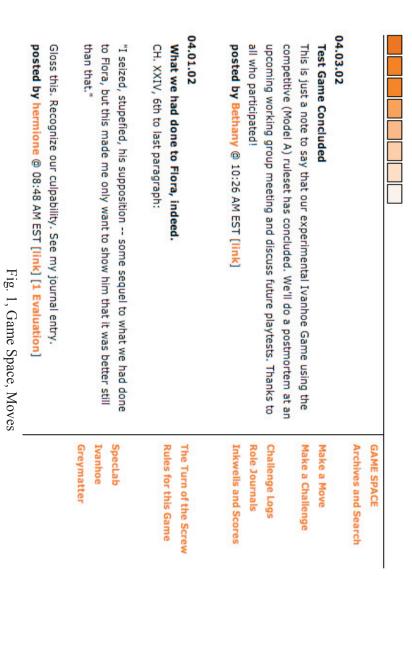
A Play of Ivanhoe

To help the reader make sense of the articles that follow we will describe a game played in the Spring of 2002. This playing is described from the point of view of Geoffrey Rockwell and his personal reflections are embedded in *italics* to give a sense of the experience of a new player.

The game played with Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw* is a good example of Ivanhoe game play as it involved seven active players and was documented by the software used to play it, in this case the blogging software GreyMatter[2] set up by Bethany Nowviskie.[3]

To start playing each player chose a role that they documented in their private role journal. We also chose an alias under which our role appeared to others.

The main game space (see Figure 1) included a menu on the right hand side of the window and all the moves in reverse chronological order on the left-hand side. What you see in Figure 1 is the short entry of the last couple of moves, including the move that closed the game. To make a move you would use the link "Make a Move" in the main menu on the right which would take you to a screen where you would enter a title, short entry, and (if you want) a longer entry. The blogging software automatically displays the date, title, short entry and information about the move in the main game space.

04.03.02

Test Game Concluded

This is just a note to say that our experimental Ivanhoe Game using the competitive (Model A) ruleset has concluded. We'll do a postmortem at an upcoming working group meeting and discuss future playtests. Thanks to all who participated!

posted by Bethany @ 10:26 AM EST [link]

04.01.02

What we had done to Flora, indeed.

CH. XXIV, 6th to last paragraph:

"I seized, stupefied, his supposition -- some sequel to what we had done to Flora, but this made me only want to show him that it was better still than that."

Gloss this. Recognize our culpability. See my journal entry.

posted by hermione @ 08:48 AM EST [link] [1 Evaluation]

GAME SPACE
Archives and Search

Make a Move
Make a Challenge

Challenge Logs
Role Journals
Inkwells and Scores

Rules for this Game
The Turn of the Screw

SpecLab
Ivanhoe
Greymatter

Fig. 1, Game Space, Moves

> *My (Rockwell) alias was "Tourdivoire" and the role I chose was that of Dr. W. C. Minor, the insane ex-American Civil War doctor whose role in the Oxford English Dictionary was described in "The Professor and the Madman: A Tale of Murder, Insanity, and the Making of The Oxford English Dictionary" by Simon Winchester (New York: HarperCollins, 1998.) I chose the role after reading "The Turn of the Screw" and deciding that I wanted to do something around textual technologies and the body. (Screws turning, torturing the body, text manipulation, and play.) To be honest I wasn't sure what my moves would be, but this role seemed to give me the space to develop.*

The source text was an electronic version of *The Turn of the Screw* that was available online through the University of Virginia Library Electronic Text Center. A link to the E-Text Center's version of the source was in the main menu. In this version we could not edit the e-text itself, which will be possible in the working version of the Ivanhoe software. Instead moves that change the text tended to provide a link to the original, and the new text with precise information on what it should be substituted for.

> *As with many games, much of the play is at the threshold when you enter. To play you have to reorient yourself to the spirit of the game. To play Ivanhoe I had to develop my role sufficiently at the beginning in order to have the space to make the sort of moves I anticipated wanting to make, when I wasn't sure what they would be.*
>
> *After reading the source text, I began to see some opening moves that would play with typos in the text. In particular one passage where the text had "carne" (Italian for meat) instead of "came," an error likely caused by the OCR technology used to create the source. This suggested a line of moves that would play on body and technology, both physical and textual body.*
>
> *One goal I had was to make distasteful moves that would push the issue of unwritten rules as to what constitutes appropriate or "fair" play in a game like Ivanhoe. I wanted to draw attention to the ethic of play and to provoke discussion on how to handle players who*

don't break the formal rules, but who, like Tourdivoire, become paranoid about playing. While I didn't carry this to its conclusion, I did make some moves along these lines including posting a picture of a mouth pear – a torture device that uses screws to silence.

[Fig. 2, Example Move]

Figure 2 is an example of a screen with the full move of a text. Move

screens can contain (and did in this game) images and links. The idea is to make moves that are consistent with the role you have chosen so it is common to enter information into the role journal justifying each move or sets of moves.

> *Playing Ivanhoe demands a combination of imagination and research akin to writing a historical romance. Moves in Ivanhoe are not only interpretative, they are also creative in that you begin weaving a new story through the existing discourse. Choices you make in the beginning encourage lines of research and creative writing. You begin to flesh out your role character and imagine what he or she would write. It is not enough to have an idea of an alternative interpretation of the text, you have the license to make it so.*
>
> *One creative challenge when making moves is to make moves that both stand alone as interesting moves, but also work as part of a sequence of moves without revealing the agenda of your role. Good moves should intrigue others while hiding the trajectory of the line until a later move reveals the logic.*

In this version of the game, we were playing an "edgy" competitive model with points and winning conditions. Every time your moves were evaluated you lost "Ink Well" points. To gain these points you had to evaluate the moves of others according to three categories, "Wit", "Bibliographics", and "Aesthetics." As you assigned points to others in evaluations you would recover "Ink Well" points that would allow you to make more moves for evaluation. In principle you could win by getting a certain number of points, though we stopped the game before getting close. Evaluations, once made, would appear appended to the moves so one could survey a move and the comments on that move by others.

> *Thanks to the openness of the blogging system used, one of my moves was evaluated by someone not even in the game (though they didn't assign points). We discovered this months later on reviewing the logs and found the Mouth Pear move had been linked to by someone interested in torture instruments and armour. It is not clear*

what they thought about our game, but this external intervention paralleled the internal fiction of the Mary Margaret O'Malley (MOM) a character who joined the game just to "say hello" and "look at the game". I still don't know who was responsible for this fiction and in the game mistakenly assigned points for her moves to the wrong player.

Response: 1 Evaluation

Look at how M O M flatters the old professor. He is embarassed no doubt by all this attention, the old dog. But you have to hand it to Mary - she comes dressed in innocence.

wit 3

Tourdivoire's evaluation @ 03/19/2002 11:04 AM EST

Make Your Evaluation Here:

Name

E-Mail (optional)

Homepage (optional)

Evaluation:

[Preview] [Submit]
○ Remember Me ○ Forget Me

Fig. 3, Evaluation and Evaluation Entry Form]

The purpose of evaluations and points was to prevent solipsism. We were concerned, justifiably, that players would get so caught up in playing out their role that they would not bother to read the moves of others. The point system forced me to read and comment on the moves of others. Even so, I actually ran out of "Ink" because I found it hard to evaluate moves in character. I was constrained by my paranoid academic role and couldn't always praise moves that I personally liked. One pattern that emerged in Ivanhoe, as in online discussion environments, was that there were players that were active performers and lurkers who preferred to watch and evaluate those who perform.

GEOFFREY
Wit
ALTER THIS TALLY: add/subtract (current tally: 23)
[No Comments Yet]

GEOFFREY
Bibliographics
ALTER THIS TALLY: add/subtract (current tally: 18)
[No Comments Yet]

GEOFFREY
Aesthetics
ALTER THIS TALLY: add/subtract (current tally: 8)
[No Comments Yet]

[Fig. 4, Point Tally Example]

There is also, in the rules, provision for challenging moves to have them cancelled and the points reassigned.

Bethany made a linking move where she linked to moves the rest of us made and then assigned herself points rather than wait for others to assign her points. She did this to test the idea that linking moves that bring together the

moves of other players should be automatically rewarded. I, in turn, challenged the move to test our challenge mechanism. Challenges stop the play and force players to assess arguments for and against a move and vote. One of the problems we found was how to voice arguments for and against a challenge in terms of roles. Should the challenger and challenged be asked to argue from their roles, or can they step back and in their own voice argue on the move.

If caught in the game, you begin to invest too much time in planning moves and waiting to see if they are appreciated in evaluations. The sign of a successful game is that you begin to lose track of time and look forward to the response of others. Social games like Ivanhoe, when played seriously, create their own stage where players to perform for each other. I began the game asking if it really was fun to play and found myself lost in machinations of Tourdivoire.

All games come to an end. This game was both a game and an experiment, and once we had tested the game play through playing, it was time to reflect back on the game. Thus the game was concluded even if no one had won. Would the game have been played differently if we were not experimenting with the form? Is it still a game if there is no winning?

In my final move I switched role from Minor to James' philosophical brother, William, called in to consult on Minor's case. This was done partly to test the opportunities for role changing which we had agreed to allow in this version of the game. It was also done to raise questions about the game itself. In William's voice I tried to call the very game into question as ethical activity, a problem I believe many have with the idea of playing textual games like Ivanhoe. William sent Tourdivoire away to heal in the mountains (I was leaving for a ski vacation) and in so doing revealed the role behind the alias. In questioning the game itself he set the stage for the question in my article in this collection, "Is gaming serious research in the humanities?"

Notes

1 Extensive documentation is available at the Ivanhoe site at <http://eotpaci.clas. virginia.edu/speclab/ivanhoe>.

2 GreyMatter can be found at <http://www.noahgrey.com/greysoft>. (Accessed August, 2003.) Blog is short for Web Log and blogging software is software designed to let one or more people keep web journals.

3 The logs of the game can be found at <http://eotpaci.clas.virginia.edu/speclab/ greymatter/ivanhoe> Logs of other games played are also available for comparison. (Accessed August, 2003.)