

TRANSFORMING ONLINE EDUCATION THROUGH ALTERNATE REALITY GAMES: INTRODUCTION

David Seelow, PhD

Revolution Learning Consultants, Albany, New York

The College of Saint Rose, 432 Western Ave, Albany, New York 12203

DAVID SEELOW. Online education came to my attention in the late '90s. I was teaching Humanities at the State University of New York at Old Westbury on Long Island. One of the faculty perks was free tuition at any SUNY branch. So, I enrolled in a post graduate diploma program in Educational Computing at my alma mater Stony Brook. A doctorate in Comparative Literature does not demand too much technology, but I intuitively knew technology, for better or worse, would become increasingly important to all levels of education. Why not learn as much as I could? One of my courses with Professor Joanne Daly used the new Learning Management System, Blackboard. I quickly adopted Bb as a supplement for my own courses, and I would eventually design and teach fully online courses.

The program in educational computing helped me learn other useful skills like writing the original version of HTML and learning key software programs like Dreamweaver and Photoshop. In fact, these skills allowed me to design and publish an e-zine for an alternative high school program in Suffolk County where students authored the content. As a kind of early Do It Yourself (DIY) proponent, word had it that the website that I designed was more engaging than the official school district website. I am in no way an expert in these technological skills, but they have enhanced my teaching in my chosen disciplines, and more important, provided affordances for helping more students.

Cumulatively, the technology skills and my innovative spirit brought me to Excelsior College's School of Liberal Arts and the vision for an Online Writing Lab designed to serve nontraditional students who obtained most of their credits online. I produced a blue print for the OWL, obtained over a million dollars in grants, hired talented writers and designers and in the intervening years the OWL has now won numerous awards for innovation and student support (<http://owl.excelsior.edu/>.)

I first talked about the Excelsior College OWL in 2012 at a Sloan-C (Sloan Consortium) conference in Orlando, Florida. Sloan-C, now the [Online Learning Consortium](#), is the premiere organization dedicated to distance education. It was led by online education pioneer Dr. A. Frank Mayadas, who has retired from the Sloan Foundation, the year that I presented there. That conference experience led me to believe more innovation was

waiting for online learning, and that innovation would come, probably, from unexpected sources.

That source I believe to be games and game-based learning. I became interested in game-based learning after I had created and implemented the vision for the aforementioned [Online Writing Lab](#). The OWL's distinction was its multimedia foundation, which stressed interactivity between student and online content. Realizing the potential for learning through increased interactivity between students and content in an online environment, I felt a game around writing instruction would bring the OWL to the next level, and, potentially, help serve as a model for the kind of interactive engagement most online courses, including many I supervised, lacked.

Fortuitously, I was teaching various literature courses on a part time basis at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, New York where Lee Sheldon was co-director of the Game and Simulation Arts and Science program. Lee's classes at RPI had a platinum reputation as fun, engaging, dynamic and immersive experiences that RPI's high achieving students loved and learned from. His work put him in the forefront of game-based learning so when seeking out talent and direction for my next project I had to look no further than the Media and Communication department where we both taught.

After some more research and thinking I decided my next step was gaining acceptance and an audience for game-based learning at the not-for-profit online college where I was serving as Director of Writing. I organized a college-wide symposium on Games and the Curriculum that the college webcasted to a large online audience. The symposium brought together noted game designers and top-notch educators. Lee's credentials and experience represented him equally well as educator and designer. The symposium's tremendous success proved the tipping point for the college to explore the value of game-based learning on a pilot basis.

The college's School of Liberal Arts leadership agreed to use a new course on cyberculture to experiment with games in learning. I asked Lee to serve first as consultant and then, almost immediately, as the full-fledged designer for the course working with me as the Subject Matter Expert.

Our natural affinities for games, tennis, science fiction, and education made the partnership exemplary. Lee brought to the proposed course *Secrets: A Cyberculture Mystery Game* many ideas and skills that contributed to its success. As for me, Lee's most significant contribution to the course was his ability to tell a compelling story and seamlessly weave that story around the course's content so students played and learned in tandem, like two dancers in perfect synchrony.

The course has been tremendously popular and better received than any other online course I have been involved with or aware of. The student comments will be available later. They say a lot.

Lee, and a few others, helped me think through and plan my modest effort at a conference, Revolutionary Learning 2016, held in New York City. I am happy to say Dr. A. Frank Mayadas was in attendance. I hardly think Revolutionary Learning will achieve the lofty heights of Sloan- C now OLC, but I do think game-based learning is here to stay and that it can genuinely catapult online education over its current obstacles (lack of traditional universities committed to online learning, uninspiring formulaic courses, unimaginative curriculum, ineffective use of talented faculty etc.).

Siobhan O'Flynn is a comparatively recent colleague for me. I came upon Siobhan in a rather circuitous fashion by way of Australia, but I am happy to have found her. We share both a love of Ireland and a belief in game-based learning, Alternate Reality Games being a type of game perfectly suited for online education.

In the three essays that follow you will first learn about the history of ARGs- primarily- a viral marketing idea, then to Lee Sheldon's discussion of how the commercial success of ARGs can be harnessed for the classroom through the framework of his pioneering work on *The Multiplayer Classroom*. Finally, you will read my article, a case study that applies Lee's use of ARGs to a highly successful online course. These three articles can help you begin to experiment, innovate and, then, transform the world of online education. Enough about me, let me introduce the other members of this triumvirate.

You can find me at:

Twitter: @davidfreeplay

davidseelow@gmail.com; seelowd@strose.edu

SIOBHAN O'FLYNN. Dr. Siobhan O'Flynn consults on digital, interactive, participatory, transmedia storytelling via her company NarrativeNow, is the co-creator of the online site, TMCResourceKit.com, a resource for Canadian producers moving into the digital sphere. Her most recent course project is *Kensington Market: Hidden Histories*, an interactive map and augmented reality app that reveal the layered history of key locations in the market.

<https://kensingtonhiddenhistories.wordpress.com>

She teaches in the Canadian Studies, University College, University of Toronto, and was on Faculty with the CFC Media Lab (2001–2011). Her academic research and artistic practice in the digital humanities examines: the function, design, and experience of narrative in interactive environments; foresighting emergent trends in digital storytelling and entertainment in a Web 2.0/3.0 world; and the social benefit of interactive art for urban

planning, social and cultural capital in the context of arts festivals such as Toronto's Luminato and Nuit Blanche. She is currently writing *Mapping Digital Narrativity: Design, Practice, Theory*, for Routledge P, modelling a 2025 futures approach to integrating user experience design, game and virtual reality design into traditional media courses.

Recent projects include consulting on transmedia, social and experience design for an NFB interactive documentary, *The Space We Hold* (2017), and a plenary keynote on the impact of digital media on adaptation for the 2017 Adaptation Conference at Loyola University.

She has published numerous articles, given keynotes, workshops, and masterclasses around the globe on topics ranging from transmedia and crossmedia development and design, interactive/web documentaries, and disruptive innovations in Web 2.0 world. Dr. O'Flynn has presented at MIT, StoryWorld SF, the NFB French Program, the CBC and the Screen Edge Forum, Auckland New Zealand. In 2006/07 Dr O'Flynn was the narrative design consultant on *Late Fragment*, a (CFC/NFB) feature film that screened at Cannes as part of the Future of Cinema Salon.

<http://tmcresourcekit.com>

<http://siobhanoflynn.com>

@sioflynn on Twitter and Instagram

LEE SHELDON began his writing career in television as a writer-producer with over 200 produced shows ranging from *Charlie's Angels* (writer) to *Edge of Night* (head writer) to *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (writer-producer).

In 1994, tired of television, Lee turned to his new love: video games. Since then he has worked on over 40 games.

In 2006, he began teaching video game writing and design at Indiana University. While there he first started designing classes as games. He also wrote and designed an Alternate Reality Game that went through three iterations. The first two, *The Skeleton Chase* and *Skeleton Chase 2: The Psychic*, were funded by the Robert Wood Foundation and were designed to improve student fitness. The third, *Skeleton Chase: Warp Speed* was a redesign of the second game, shrinking playtime from 7 weeks to 3 days for a group of Coca Cola executives from North Africa.

In 2010, Lee moved to Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute where he was an Associate Professor in the Games and Simulation Arts and Sciences program. There he was co-director of the GSAS program for three years and created the first full writing for games program in the United States. He was lead writer and creative director on several

incarnations, both a class designed as a game and digital versions, of *The Lost Manuscript* a narrative-driven game teaching Chinese language and culture.

He joined the Interactive Media and Game Development (IMGD) program at Worcester Polytechnic Institute in 2015 where he is again designing classes as games and developing a writing for games curriculum.

Lee's book *Character Development and Storytelling for Games* (Second Edition, 2013) is the standard text in the field. He wrote the bestselling book *The Multiplayer Classroom: Designing Coursework as a Game* (2011). Over 1,500 people in 45 countries now follow the Facebook page for his method of teaching classes as multiplayer games.

His recent applied game projects include *The Janus Door*, a cybersecurity class designed as a game, funded by an NSF grant, and currently running at California Polytechnic State University. He wrote and designed *Secrets: A Cyberculture Mystery Game*, an online class designed as a game teaching culture and identity on the Internet for Excelsior College that went live Fall 2015; and wrote *Crimson Dilemma*, a business ethics video game for his old school, Indiana University, that debuted Fall 2014.

His most recent entertainment games are *The Lion's Song*, an episodic game following the creative and personal struggles of four characters in Vienna, Austria at the beginning of the 20th Century, now on PC, Mac, iOS and Android; *Suburbia 2* launched in fall 2016 on Facebook; and *Disney Fantasia: Music Evolved* for Harmonix in 2014.

You can learn more about the Multiplayer Classroom and join the growing community of educator's applying Lee's method on his Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/MultiplayerClassroom/>.