

Interviewer: Have you ever completed a new media project for a graduate level course?

Consultant A1: Yes.

I: Okay. Um. How many times have you done new media projects for your graduate courses?

A2: Uh. Two and I'm working on the third right now.

I: Okay. Was it required?

A3: Yes.

I: Okay. So this is all for the, um, Rhetoric In Cyberspace/New Media Production course?

A4: Yes.

I: Okay.

A5: Except I'm working on a web site right now that is for my dissertation.

I: Okay.

A6: So that's something I totally cooked up on my own and making myself suffer through because I'm that interested in it.

I: Okay. Have you ever completed a new media project as an option for a class where it wasn't required?

A7: No.

I: Okay. Um. Have you had a class where that was an option?

A8: Yes. Last semester it was an option and I didn't do it because I didn't have the skills... yet. I wanted to but it would've been absolutely impossible at the time.

I: Why?

A9: Had no skills in Photoshop, sound editing, or web design... at the time.

I: Um. In the classes that you've taken so far at ODU, um, do your instructors generally offer this as an option, um, explicitly on the syllabus or course documents? Do they offer it as an option? As they describe it as something they go "Oh yeah, you could do this." Or, do they not offer it at all?

A10: It's been offered in several classes, um, mostly the rhetoric classes that have some sort of new media component or we're studying some new media theory such as Rhetoric in Cyberspace or Texts & Technologies. Um, Rhetoric of Cyberspace is a required course. Texts & Technologies is an option. But I took another course through the Humanities Institute last fall with Dr. Heller and she encouraged us to consider a new media project for our final project instead of writing a paper. Um, and she was specifically hoping that we could design a website related to a topic of interest in American popular culture.

I: Okay. Um, how... how comfortable do your instructors seem to be with regard to assigning or accepting new media projects?

A11: I'd say overall most of them are comfortable and I think it's because our program is situating itself as more of an English Studies program than, um... well, certainly not literature. And because of that openness to English Studies as, um, a way to situate our field. I feel as though, if I made an argument for why I wanted to do a new media project, even in a class where it's not on the syllabus, that I would probably be able to do that and some professors would probably ask for a written component in addition to the new media project. Like if it's... if writing isn't a major part of the project. Like, let's say, um, I did a website that was mostly image based, I... or, even if it wasn't mostly image based, I'd probably be asked to write a companion paper explaining design choices or theoretical background having to do with it.

I: Okay. Um....Do you, well, I'll come back to that question in just a second cause...

A12: Yeah, I guess it...

I: ...because it kinda relates to that.

A13: And I'm still thinking about it too because I don't necessarily agree with that, so...
[laughs]

I: So, go ahead and tell me... tell me how you feel about that.

A14: Well, it's again related to some work I'm doing right now. Um... I'm learning DreamWeaver totally from scratch and... I have to write an article-length paper in addition to all this work I'm doing... and I... it's started occurring to me over the last few days that I've already spent more time on this website... composing than I would for an article-length paper. I should be rewarded for this composition even though it's not a traditional class paper. And, for once, I feel like the traditional paper I'm going to do about this is an afterthought that is tacked on. And, I actually started feeling kind of angry about it [laughs]... because, literally, some days I'm spending like, you know, six to eight hours on this thing. Moving everything else off my academic calendar... things I need to be working on to build this site and thinking, "Why the hell do I have to write a paper on this too" because I'm going to do that anyway when I write my dissertation. So, [pause] it just doesn't seem quite fair.

I: So would that impact your decision to do a new media project the next time?

A15: No, because I've already totally bought into the idea that I'm doing this for my dissertation. It's more like, um, I've just taken on so much learning to do this project in such a short amount of time that I feel a little bit discouraged right now. And it wasn't necessarily that it was the professor asking me to do all this, but that I'm applying for some... uh, workshops that are tied to some grants and other institutions and I have to submit my work to get in. So, I wouldn't say it's the professor necessarily who just heaped all this work on me, like adding that paper. It was more like I kind of added some of this to myself by wanting to get extra training... and retroactively want to ask if I can't do the paper but I have a feeling that's not going to fly. [laughs]

I: Okay.

A16: I don't know how much of that you should include.

I: Yeah.

A17: [laughs] You probably know who I am talking about... But you could take some of this

I: [laughs] Um, so I'm going to skip around a little bit on the questions...

A18: Skip around. We're on a thread, yeah.

I: So, if you were looking at a syllabus or a course document where it kind of laid out the options of... you could write the paper, you could do a new media project. What goes through your head? What factors would dissuade you from trying to do the new media project?

A19: Fear. And it would specifically be a fear that I know exactly how I want to design something and just don't know how. Because, probably like most of us, I spend a lot of time online. I know what I like. Um, I love thinking about designing compositions because I do a lot of photography. And it feels very natural for me to design websites as far as... layout, knowing where I want things, color choices; things that I just consider instinctive. They're instinctive to me, but there's actually a lot of theory behind some of the choices I'm making. But, I just don't know how to do it all... yet. And that's what would stop me. It's not the desire. It's just time.

I: Okay. So, so it's not so much the fear that you absolutely couldn't get it done. It's that it just would take a tremendous amount of time.

A20: Well it's... it's both. And maybe some of that is just my nature of wanting it to be like so awesome, you know [laughs], um, that I realistically just couldn't learn but so much within the framework of the semester. So, it's both really. It's both.

I: Okay. Overall, if you were looking at the syllabus and you had the option to do a new media project. What would be the factors that would encourage you? What kinds of things would you need to know or what kinds of things would make you feel like “Alright, despite the time... despite the fear... I am going to bite the bullet and go ahead and do this project as a new media composition.

A21: I think at this point I would do it because I’ve been teaching myself. And, I’ve also learned that a lot of times something that takes me five hours to figure out I might be able to ask somebody I know and get an answer in five minutes. And, that this type of work... while there’s a lot of play involved and I love that play, that play is that five hours that I could get an answer in five minutes. So constructing it, it has to be a mix of the play and the asking for help, I think when you’re learning. Um, you have... you have to have that playing around. But, um, I think I’d be much more encouraged to do it now because I’ve learned a little bit. I have a little bit of the toolbox now that I could take. In Rhetoric and Cyberspace, I’ve been pushing myself to learn and my comfort level’s gone up enough that I think if I had a choice now.... if I could go take that pop culture class again, I would choose to do the website rather than a paper.... definitely.

I: Okay. Um, what could the instructor do to make you more comfortable...

[interview interrupted for a few moments by consultant’s family]

I: So, given that you’re kind of interested in new media that you feel like you’re learning the skills and... and kind of that you’re excited about the whole thing, what could an instructor do to make you more inclined to take that plunge and to do it?

A22: I feel very encouraged when an instructor says, “I know you’re learning. I know it’s really a draft form.” And part of the theory of the web anyway is that every website is an ongoing project anyhow. But to hear an instructor confirm that so that you don’t feel worried about a grade... which actually at this level seems ridiculous anyway to me... to even think... think about grades anymore seems silly. Um, but when you get that direct statement saying just do the work and it’s going to be okay. I know you’re learning. Then I’m willing to try something because I’m comfortable with that.

I: Do you find that when you get the option to do a new media project... I... I would... I would say at this point in your academic career, it’s safe to say you know what you need to do...

A23: Mmm hmm.

I: ... to complete a traditional paper or article...

A24: Right. Right.

I: ...you know what the requirements are. You know how to format it. You know what you need to do get the good grade even though that's not really the primary concern.

A25: Right.

I: Do you feel like when you get assignments from professors or have the option to do these as assignments... Do you think you are as clear on how it's going to be graded and what you need to do to meet the requirements of the assignment?

A26: You know, maybe not. And maybe that's... there are a couple reasons. One is my own inexperience and another is... the newness... maybe it's the newness of these kinds of assignments in the first place. But I also... I wonder if it's the nature of these assignments anyway. That they have to be more open-ended like... that it's tied to the genre. It's a question of genre that we don't want to be too restrictive. We don't want to have, um, specific design elements and rhetorical features that are just so locked in like a traditional journal article... you know, 20 to 25 pages... Your works cited has to be like this. It has to be set up like this. You have to have your introduction. You have to have your literature review... Et cetera, et cetera. Where it's just so, um, institutionally ingrained. I think we're so new that we don't have that and I don't know that we would want it in new media. It seems antithetical to the nature of new media itself to have that.

I: Does that factor into your decision making?

A27: I would say that that sort of [unintelligible] spirit... If I could call it that, cause there is sort of this, um, this quality to it... this, um, it's almost a... a spirit of the age type of thing where, uh, uh, this... this idea of, of play and trying these new things and the, the fact that our culture is a new media culture... or a multimedia culture or a mediated culture. I don't even remember what I was saying now. [laughs] What was I answering? [laughs] What was I saying?

I: [laughs] Does that factor into your decision making?

A28: Yes, because, um, on some level it makes it more fun.

I: Okay. [pause] Um, so a couple final questions for ya. Um, tell me about your process.

A29: Mmm.

I: If you're gonna compose a new media project, what do you do and how is it similar or different to when you decide you're going to write a paper or an article or an essay.

A30: You know, a lot of the research is actually the same... because, if I'm writing about anything, I'm going to have to do a whole lot of reading beforehand about the topic. That's just the content part of it. Then there's the whole form part of it. And, right now, where I am in my skill level, I'm going to have to do just as much work on learning the program... whether it's DreamWeaver or sound editing or video editing... Well, those are

actually easier, but that's probably because the programs I've used are easier... not the more sophisticated ones... Um, wouldn't be. But, um, so the research side for the content is the same. Reading tons and tons of books... tons of articles sitting around with highlights all over 'em... sticky notes everywhere. Um, but then I do other things like bookmark sites that I like the look of so that I might say, "Okay, I like their color scheme or their design scheme." Or, I might... um, I have... I actually have kept a design journal that has a mix of... there's a few sketches in there and a lot of just random notes everywhere. Um, but yeah it's kind of that idea of storyboarding. Um, drawing... more drawing involved. So, planning it out is... it's kind of a two-pronged thing: One, the traditional kind of research that I would do. And, two, the research on design elements.

I: Do you think... Is your process different. Um, I mean, in how you construct the argument?

A31: Um, oh, the argument itself... Yes, because instead of an essay format where you have like your argument in a thesis statement at the beginning... or, sometimes, at the end... but either way, you're whole rest of your argument ties back to that. You don't have a centralized thesis. You have a decentralized argument. Um, I mean it kind of goes with post-modern theory there in that there's decentralization, fragmentation. Um, you're... the argument is still there, but it's not easy to locate a specific sentence or specific place where you could say, "This is my argument right here." It doesn't work that way with new media projects I don't think. Not good ones.

I: So how does that change your comfort level with them?

A32: I like it, actually. [laughs] Uh, I... that... um, because I'm thinking more metaphorically about how to get that argument across. You know, using visual tropes and traditional linear narrative. How do these things mix? How does a non-linear structure like with hypertext figure into that? And I... I like that. For me, it's fun.

I: Do you think as you're doing these kinds of new media projects... do you think that your argument suffers? Do you think that your argument is as good given the time constraints that you have as what you could do if you sat down and wrote. So...

A33: Well, a traditionalist might say it's not as clear. And, again it's going to get back to how much time I have. Because, to me, ultimately your argument can be way better if it's decentralized. I'm thinking about, um, the Prior articles in Kairos on remediating the canons. Um, I read one about Eliza and that particular article, to me, had a very clear thesis but it wasn't centralized. And it was better the way it was constructed than if it that had been an essay... a traditional article-type format. And I think it can strengthen an argument ultimately. But I think that's going to be a tough sell for the academy. But I really believe that.

I: You're talking about spending hours and hours on the form and on the, uh... you know, kind of on learning the software and that kind of thing.

A34: Right.

I: So do you think you get to give the same kind of... the same level of attention or the same amount of time to the actual development of the content and the argument?

A35: For a class, maybe not because the time constraints are different than if you were getting something ready to want to publish it in an article. For an article, I would say you definitely wanted to, to get that content down right. For a class, maybe it's not so realistic. You have to cut some corners because you just don't have time unless you never sleep.

I: Okay. Um, in completing these types of projects what have been the biggest obstacles and the biggest challenges?

A36: My own technical skills. [pause] That's, that's it right there. My own technical skills. Because it's inseparable from the problem of how much time it takes you.

I: So what do you like least about doing the new media projects?

A37: Knowing what I want to do very clearly and not being able to because I have no idea where to even begin with the interface or with the code. And yet, I know exactly what I want. Very clear vision on everything I want to do. No frigging clue, sometimes, how to do it. [laughs]

I: Um, in completing new media projects, what's the most rewarding about it? What do you... what did you enjoy most about the process of the project?

A38: There is absolutely nothing better than when you teach yourself something and then it actually works. And you, you, you just want to like explode because you're so happy. Like, "Oh my God. I actually did it? No... It works?" Like when I put my site online and I saw it, it was this huge moment for me because... you know, it's really out there. I've done it. I learned how to do it totally by myself and that is extremely rewarding. Those, those little moments all the time along the way, too, when you're, you're putting it together or you try something for the first time and it works. And you just can't believe you did it. That's exciting.

I: Cool. Okay, well that's all the questions that I have. Was there anything, you know, kind of in this discussion that you wanted me to ask you or you had some other comments that you wanted to add that we didn't get a chance to discuss?