Reading as enactment: transforming Beowulf through drama, film and computer game

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we offer an account of a two-day workshop conducted with a group of postgraduate English and Drama student teachers, part of a larger AHRC-funded research project. Our focus is on reading and the reception of a canonical text, in this case *Beowulf*. We argue that taking a transmedia approach helps learners to think about the literary text in new ways. Using Louise Rosenblatt's transactional theory of reading as our starting point, we develop Myra Barrs' understanding of reading as a form of enactment or performance and writing as a form of role-play. We specifically consider the meaning and function of "role" across different media platforms, including written text, digital film and computer games.

Introduction

The focus of this article is on reading and the reception of a canonical text using a transmedia approach, paying particular attention to the ways in which the adoption of roles facilitates learning when articulated as written text, drama, digital film and computer games. We report on a two-day *Beowulf* workshop conducted with a group of PGCE (Postgraduate Certificate of Education) English and English with Drama students in 2015–2016. The workshop formed part of a larger Digital Transformations project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council which involved a number of research partners including university departments of English and Education, the British Library and five London schools (for a fuller account of the research project as a whole see http://darecollaborative.net/2015/03/11/playing-be-owulf-gaming-the-library/). Across the two days the PGCE students were primarily positioned as readers and learners, encouraged to enter into a dialogic relationship with a largely unfamiliar literary text. Although the participants of our workshop were pre-service teachers, our interest lies less in the specifics of teacher education, and more in broader questions about our understandings of the reading process and, consequently, what kinds of literacy practices might be appropriate for twenty-first century classrooms.

As a piece of literature *Beowulf* raises interesting questions for English teachers about textual authority, audience and cultural practice. It is a profoundly unstable text of unknown origins and precarious existence. The earliest known version of the poem is one of a small number of Anglo-Saxon texts contained within a fire-damaged eleventh century manuscript ("Cotton MS Vitellius A. xv"), now preserved in the British Library. Copied out by two different scribes, this *Beowulf* text is already an adaptation of a pre-existing version (or versions) belonging to an earlier century. As *Beowulf* scholar Chris Jones (2010, 13) suggests, we should therefore "see the work not as an object, fixed in a web of written text …, but rather as a process through time". Indeed, *Beowulf* continues to be extraordinarily culturally productive even in the twenty-first century, part of the international resurgence of interest in popular archaic-heroic fantasy narratives as exemplified by the *Lord of the Rings* franchise and recent television series *Game of Thrones* (Benioff and Weiss 2011–2017). The last twenty years, for example, have produced not only Seamus Heaney's scholarly, award-winning verse translation of *Beowulf* (2000), but also the release of at least four film versions, a television series, a rock opera and multiple computer games, all breathing new life into a thousand year old poem.[1] Jones celebrates what he terms "the long conversation which *Beowulf* has been having with us now during three millennia" (2010, 28), suggesting that we should regard the various readings, re-readings and creative adaptations as integral to the *Beowulf* narrative itself. Consequently, with its history of material and cultural adaptations and appropriations, its relation to popular fantasy genre and its heroic subject-matter, *Beowulf* presents us with an ideal literary text for exploring the transformative relationship between literature, drama, filmmaking and digital games.

Reading as enactment

The current version of the English National Curriculum (DfE 2014) explicitly demands that pupils should be "taught" to "appreciate" canonical literature at Key Stages 3 and 4 (ages 11–16 years). Reader-response theory, of course, rejects this notion of the reader as a passive recipient of meaning from the text (or as mediated by the teacher), and instead emphasises the active role of the reader as a key agent of meaning-making. Louise Rosenblatt's "transactional" theory (1978) suggests a dynamic, two-way relationship between the reader and the text. Crucially, Rosenblatt conceives of an aesthetic literary text as "an event in time" (11) activated in the moment of reading; reflecting upon the literary experience becomes a "re-enactment of the text" (13). What makes Rosenblatt's theories of particular interest to teachers is that she pays some attention to the social and cultural contexts of readers. She says readers draw on their own reading experiences, personal histories and cultural assumptions triggered by the "verbal cues" in the text and the invitations to fill textual gaps (1978, 88), and it is precisely this socio-cultural aspect of reading that we want to highlight through our students' playful interactions with the *Beowulf* poem. Our work as educators is underpinned by a belief that learners bring multiple repertoires of cultural knowledge to the business of reading a text in any classroom, and, furthermore, that meanings of texts are constructed dialogically, not only in the moment of the classroom (Turvey and Yandell 2011), but also historically (Jones 2010).

Taking reader response theory a step further, Myra Barrs (1987) proposes an account of the reading process closely connected to role-play and performance. Influenced by the work of Dorothy Heathcote, Barrs emphasises the everyday nature of role-playing in our society (see also Goffman 1959; Rosen [1980] 2017; Williams 1983). Barrs argues that, each time we become lost in a book, we bring characters alive in our heads, enact dialogue and "assume

the voice of the text, tuning our own voice to its demands" (1987, 9), even when reading silently. Barrs suggests that the most productive reading is that which "allows the text to come alive most fully. And when a text does live, it lives *through us*" (8). She recognises that writing also involves sustaining a role – a form of "drama on paper" (9). Drawing on Vygotsky's proposition that make-believe play represents a significant stage in the development of children's imagination (see Vygotsky 1978, 1933), Barrs suggests that reading, writing, play, drama and games should be regarded as closely related systems of representation embedded in social practice, all involving the creation of fictional worlds and the assumption of roles.

Changing media, shifting roles

An important feature of this research was a focus on the process of "moving meaning-material from one mode to another" (Kress 2010, 125), referred to as "transduction (125) by Kress or as 'transmediation' by Suhor (1984, 247) and Mills (2016, 67). Mills regards transmediation as a significant feature of multimodal literacy practices, facilitated by the malleability of digital technology. It is, as Kress notes, both "profound" and "absolutely common, constant, ordinary" (2010, 125) possibly explaining why the creative potential and complex critical challenges posed by commonplace classroom activities such as storyboarding or dramatisation of text are often over-looked. Mills' research with school students leads her to conclude that transmediation not only "invites creativity" but also promotes "generative and evaluative thinking" (2016, 68) because of the significant ways that students have to adapt their purposes to the cultural conventions, limitations and semiotic potential of the particular medium they are working in. In this article, we argue that the way our students moved from drama to writing, from filmmaking to computer gamemaking lent a sharper focus and a more critical emphasis to the work because it was framed by the roles that we and they assumed through the creative process.

The workshop

Across the two days we chose to focus on a manageable section of the *Beowulf* narrative dealing with Grendel's mother (the second of three monsters encountered by Beowulf), partly born out of our fascination with an explicitly female monster. Prior to the workshop, our group of 25 volunteer student teachers were asked to familiarise themselves with a version of *Beowulf*, preferably Heaney's verse translation (2000) or Morpurgo's simplified prose retelling (2007). The first day's workshop explored ways of story-telling through drama, filmmaking, Old English language-based activities and analyses of visual representations. The second day involved students creating computer games based on *Beowulf*, playing with possibilities offered by game-authoring software. The main activities across the two days were filmed, including the recording of on-going conversations between students and researchers which were subsequently transcribed and analysed; the students' own writing, films and computer game "walkthoughs" were also reviewed and analysed.

Writing in role

An intriguing aspect of *Beowulf* as a narrative is the Anglo-Saxon poet's apparent invitation for readers or listeners to view the action from a number of different perspectives. For

example, after Beowulf has plunged fully-armed into the mere to seek out and kill Grendel's mother, the poet switches perspective from Beowulf's adventures below the surface to that of Beowulf's *ceorlas* ("followers", line 1591) left waiting for many hours by the lake's edge. Noticing a sudden "heave-up and surge of waves/And blood in the backwash" (Heaney 2000, lines 1593–94), the men assume Beowulf has perished. Therefore, following a sequence of whole class and small group drama work that involved students assuming the roles of both the Danes (the people of Heorot) and the visiting Geats (Beowulf and his men), we chose this moment in the story as a prompt for writing in role. Our colleague, Morlette, carefully set the scene through her dramatic narration, positioning herself as if she were one of Beowulf's men standing at the edge of the mere. Inviting our students to write spontaneously in role as the *ceorlas*, she asked what thoughts they wanted to share at this point in the poet's narrative. Our pedagogy is informed by classroom-based research which suggests that spontaneous writing in role is particularly successful in enabling learners to inhabit the imagined world of the text, to extend linguistic range and to assume strong voices through adopting a point of view in their writing (Barrs 1987; Cremin et al. 2006; O'Neill and Rogers 1994).

Three examples of each student's live delivery, transcribed from video recordings, serve to illustrate the potency of writing in role as a way of opening up the text for exploration. John, Zainab and Sophie[2] each undertake the short writing task in different ways and adopt markedly distinctive voices both in their written pieces and in their subsequent unrehearsed performances.

Zainab's response is infused with religious overtones, with its invocation to "almighty God" and repetition of the word "evil":

> Almighty God, help our brave leader Beowulf, son of Ecgtheow, overcome this evil creature. What are we to do without him? We have only ever set foot on this doomed land of roaming man-eating monsters and swamps that hold secrets of evil misfortunes. Every time the bubbles in the water increase, heavy sighs are heard as though we all share the fear I have in my mind: the limp body of courageous Beowulf rising to the surface of the murky water. Every second turns into an hour while we await what fate holds for Beowulf and for us.

Zainab captures an almost paralysing sense of collective fear and conveys the way time passes painfully slowly for those who wait in this alien land of monsters and swamps; however, she appears to grasp at reassurance in reminding herself of the heroic qualities of Beowulf, locating him in a noble ancestral line, perhaps finding comfort in the stability of history while placing her fate in God's hands.

In contrast, there is no room for uncertainty or fear in John's contribution:

> Our hero leaps to his promise. Our hero does not think to forsake his oath. His vow is solemn and binding. I know that he will make his doom wait until his labours of valour are consummated. He, our leader, is true. We, his men, are true to him. We wait by this abyss of corruption, the cursed mere, the hellish pool shunned by all in God's kingdom.

Listening to this blunt assertion of total loyalty, other students in the workshop were immediately reminded, they said, of *Game of Thrones*. In role, John deftly depicts a world of very specific beliefs and values, one where the world is divided into good and evil and where men are driven by strong adherence to an ancient warrior code.

Sophie chose to adopt the persona of Grendel's mother at this point in the story. As reported in earlier articles (Bryer 2017; Burn, Bryer, and Coles 2016), in this particular workshop our colleague Morlette set up the writing in role in a way that invited this additional change of perspective (something that is hinted at by the *Beowulf*-poet in fleeting references

to maternal grief, for example, at line 1280, but not fully realised in the Old English poem). Having reminded the assembled *ceorlas* what might lie in store for their hero Beowulf, Morlette then moved to the centre of the circle and crouched down in a position of vulnerability, offering through her posture and expression an indication of the submerged monster's perspective. Disrupting the narrative in this way had the effect of unsettling the identification proposed so far. This potential shift in perspective was then taken up by a small number of the student teachers. Here is Sophie in role as Grendel's mother:

> And he is coming to seek me out, even here – I sense him and I am afraid. Dark memories blacken the waters around me, stories that will never be sung in great halls and echo through time. When he takes my life I will fade into obscurity, a flicker in his memory, a footnote in his story. All these years I've had no one upon which to unburden my thoughts and so they linger here, polluting the mere that he now wades through. He is coming.

From this perspective, Beowulf becomes the monstrous intruder, the fear of the grieving mother contrasting sharply with the actions of the male aggressor. What is striking in Sophie's piece is the way she exploits gaps in the text, consciously giving sympathetic voice to an otherwise voiceless character. Whereas Beowulf's name and reputation afford him celebrity status both in the world of the poem and beyond, Sophie is sensitive to the fact that Grendel's mother has no name; Beowulf's deeds form the substantive narrative whilst she is reduced to a footnote – and, indeed, was famously ignored altogether by Tolkien in his seminal essay on the poem (Tolkien [1936] 2002).

The way that Morlette subtly addressed the students, drawing on "the range of signs that come into play" through the practice of teacher in role (Heathcote 2015, 73), was key to the transformation from dramatic action into words on the page, opening up a space for experimentation. Our students' rapidly composed, provisional drafts indicate the ways in which engagement in role facilitates the adoption of critical positions. Whereas Sophie is surely moving towards a feminist reading of *Beowulf* at this point in the narrative, John steps into an alternative heroic world marked by an authentic sense of robust masculinity.

Filmmaking and role

Working in the medium of digital film initiated a shift in orientation. We framed the filmmaking activities with a brief analysis of images of Grendel's mother collated from a variety of media. We focused on questions of representation, particularly in relation to gender in diverse twentieth and twenty-first century adaptations of the poem. In English classrooms image annotation often serves as a prologue to more extended written analysis. Instead, we chose to follow the Media Studies tradition of creative production, underpinned by the belief that "the development of a critical grasp of the systems of meaning-making which operate in media texts is best achieved by making them" (Burn and Durran 2007, 169). Using tablet devices and a simple editing app, we asked students to capture the battle between Beowulf and Grendel's mother through a combination of still and moving images. In this instance of transduction, students had to adapt their ideas about the narrative into action suitable for the screen. Whereas Morlette's roleplay had been enough to sketch the context in dramatic terms for the purposes of creative writing, the assumption of particular roles in specific contexts becomes all the more salient once framed by the lens. This process of filmmaking, constructing a moment of violent action with limited dialogue, serves to privilege the

"semiotic potential of socially organised bodies" (Franks 2014, 7), a shift in emphasis in their roleplay.

One of the best known *Beowulf* adaptations, the Zemeckis animated film (2007), emphasises the female monster's predatory sexuality – she is played by a motion-captured Angelina Jolie, encased from head to stilettoed feet in liquid gold. In Heaney's translation, Grendel's mother's power derives from her physical strength, her "brutal grip" (line 1502), rather than magic or sexuality, although the Anglo-Saxon poet does depict the monster straddling Beowulf at one ambiguous moment in their struggle (lines 1541–1556). It is significant that, with this particular focus and an approach that draws on a montage form rather than continuity editing, the student teachers found ways to disrupt the "male-gaze" (Mulvey 1975) invited by the Zemeckis film. Groups made specific choices about how to show this unusually strong female monster in the act of almost overpowering the man with the strength of thirty in each of his hands. In the process, the focus shifted: how to enact the battle in a way that foregrounded aspects of the monster's strength and power now superceded questions of sympathy for "the monstrous-feminine" (Creed 1993) raised by Sophie's writing.

Figure 1 shows Grendel's mother as she awaits Beowulf's attack, the opening photograph from one group's 46 s sequence (entitled *Diving into the Deep*). Grendel's mother's open-mouthed expression and ambiguous fist-like gesture provide a central focus for their impending violent engagement.

This establishing shot emphasises the distance that Beowulf has to travel to make contact with the monster lurking in the shadows at the bottom of the mere. There is a hint of a potential reversal of fortune in the way that his passage downwards is delineated by the line of the concrete stairwell and the flowing blue cloth. The students could not have planned the bright autumn sunlight. The looming shadow at the bottom of the stairwell (with all its symbolic associations) was a chance occurrence, but their choice of location was very deliberate. The ways that they found to move through the location (Beowulf's journey down the
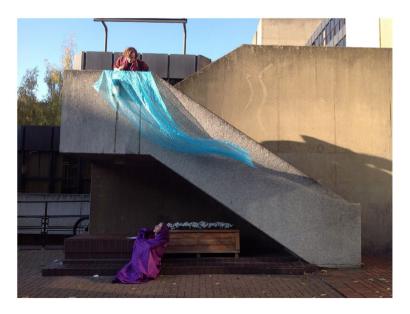

Figure 1. Diving into the deep.

stairs, moving his arms as if swimming, for example) were integral to this plan. Later in the sequence, a series of over-the-shoulder shots animate the action from two points of view, indicative of a shifting perspective that echoes the construction of the Old English text (Haydock 2013) and that underlines the way Grendel's mother's strength is at least a match for Beowulf's.

The sequence of three photographs produced by Sophie's group (Figure 2) shows Beowulf being suffocated at the height of the battle. Grendel's mother's movement up the stairs emphasises her surge in power – with outstretched arms, a determined stance and a physical suggestion of the "grim embrace" (Heaney, line 1542), accentuated by the blood-red gauze in which both actors are wrapped. The high angle of the shot means that the audience is privy to Beowulf's anguish, proof of the monster's capacity to inflict pain, particularly as Grendel's mother bares her teeth.

Though these are stills, their juxtaposition on a timeline and the "Ken Burns" effect (a pan over the images that the iMovie software automatically adds in the edit), creates a sense of movement, a considered and effective animation of the battle. Interestingly, working in the field of process drama, Heathcote favoured approaches to role that, "Unlike television with its fast moving actions/images … function more like still photographs or photographic slides, causing infinitesimal decisions to be made by the children" (2015, 77). In this case, actually shooting and editing still images together to create an impression of animation facilitated the slowing down of time and provided the opportunity for a considered, close interrogation of the stages in this violent encounter. It enabled those making the film to render the battle in a way that felt convincing for the audience: stylised, yet emotionally powerful, largely because of their focus on Sophie's reactions.

Part of the success of the ironically named "Beowulf vs. Grendela" film lies in the spontaneity and playfulness of their roleplay captured in these digital freeze frames. The intricate, shifting narrative perspective of the *Beowulf* poem lent itself to a remaking that seems very contemporary in its rendering of a fight sequence as experienced by both protagonists (including blurry shots, expressive camerawork, the withhold and reveal of the action). The medium of film offers participants a particularly powerful tool with which to direct the gaze of the audience. We have noted elsewhere (Bryer, Lindsay, and Wilson 2014; Potter and Bryer 2017) the ways in which filmmaking with tablet devices supports learning, particularly because it involves a series of reflective pauses. These are points at which a small group might view the single photograph or shot, critique their "poses", assess the "arrest" (Barthes 2000, 78) of their fleeting embodiments of the roles, and plan their next photograph or shot. The technology facilitated the opening up of possibilities for criticality, reflection and

Figure 2. Beowulf vs. Grendela.

mastery, and the process enabled students to express unexpected insights through identification with a variety of roles. In these examples, what emerges most strongly is the power and agency of the female monster as rendered through the choices students made about representation through dramatic action.

Our student teachers recognised the critical potential that working in this medium offers through the process of embodying a moment of text from different perspectives and subject positions. For some, each transition involved further immersion, as Adam vividly expressed: "I was in Beowulf, I was seeing Grendel's Mother, then I was in her … every activity we've participated in, we've been reliving it".

Making computer games

On the second day, we gave the student teachers the challenge of building computer games, focusing on the same moment of action from the poem. MissionMaker is a game-authoring tool designed specifically to enable young people to make their own video games rather than merely playing and analysing commercial products. The software allows even inexperienced users to build their imagined world with simple 2-D icons, which then render on screen as a playable 3-D environment (for example, consisting of caves, tunnels, mead halls and so on).[3] The user can manipulate characters and objects and, following basic programming procedures, define rules that shape the way the game is played (for a more detailed account of the software, see Ferreira 2014, 2015).

Significantly for our focus on "role" across multiple modes, Burn and Durran (2013) conceptualise gaming, with its avatar-based narratives, as an essentially performative medium and draw a number of similarities with process drama. Games incorporate spoken and written language, visual representation and sound. The choices students make in creating their own games necessarily involve questions of interpretation: for example, how to visualise the characters, set the action in motion and dramatise events. Computer games, however, set specific challenges for the author and player. As Burn and Durran (2013, 33) argue, "the grammar" of the games medium is different from either filmmaking or drama, as exemplified, for instance, by the particular dynamic of the player's progress through the narrative. But, as with writing in role and filmmaking, participants must learn to work within the limits set by the technical demands of the medium, and to adapt to the cultural resources available. The majority of the student teachers made games that positioned the players as Beowulf, the obvious protagonist. However, one student made the bold choice of framing the action from the point of view of Grendel's mother. From the palette of "rooms" provided, Arthur chose a cave and then a river bed joined by a tunnel lit by torches as the context for the action. Nevertheless, he became frustrated in his attempts at signalling to putative players how they were being positioned as the monster at the bottom of the mere. In the end he compensated by providing a "live" commentary while a fellow student played his completed game. As researchers, we provided an audience as Arthur and Adam shifted in and out of role:

Adam: [*Trying to activate a rune to open a door on screen*] Now that doesn't like me, that door.

Arthur: You don't want to go there.

Adam: It's not even a door, it's a window really …

Arthur: Exactly! Into yourself.

Adam: [*Giggles*] I wonder if Beowulf thought that, as he stared into the eyes of my child as he killed him.

Adam's significant gaming experience was a factor in his recognition of the possibilities that a rune and a door on screen might represent. The ironic and witty tone that both students assume is suggestive of how conscious they are of manipulating aspects of the medium, enabling them to simultaneously inhabit and narrate the story of the poem, relating the symbolic aspects of the game to the poem. It is noticeable in this transcript that Adam playfully assumes the voice of Grendel's mother as he moves closer to battle in the on-screen game – reminiscent of the way in which Morlette had deftly shifted her narrative perspective (in her case, partly through physical movement). Adam's identification with the role reaches a climax later on in the game play when a ghastly figure (representing Beowulf) suddenly appears out of the gloom on screen:

Adam: Oh god, oh No.. Jesus! …. Oh Mr. Beowulf, please, I don't want to hurt you, I'm really sorry about what my son … [*The figure appears to run out of the frame towards the player and the red bar icon representing Grendel's mother's strength suddenly drops to zero, so that it is clear she is finished.*]

Adam: [*He spreads his hands and drops his head*] Oooh.

On screen a text appears, signalling the end of the game:

Grendel's Mother suffered her inexorable fate at the hands of her tormenter … Beowulf went back to Heorot with tales of valour. Tales that he himself would tell.

This text is a reminder that in the poem it is Beowulf's account of the fight later in the mead hall that reasserts his heroic credentials (lines 2135–2141) and that Grendel's mother has no such audience. Immediately afterwards, Arthur spontaneously adopts the role of the contrite author: "How sad it was, in her own house, in her own story". Adam and Arthur's dynamic playing of the game, their ability to simultaneously narrate, enact and comment is reminiscent of the previous day's filmmaking experience, presenting a pause for critical reflection within the creative process. Adam's later comment that it not only 'gave your view on what had happened but also the game character's point of view' indicates his awareness of the potential for criticality offered by this process of authorship and enactment.

Richard, another confident and experienced gamer, subverted the conventional game genre yet further by creating what he described as an "immersive experience", where the player takes the role of Beowulf after he has died. In transposing *Beowulf* into videogame format, it was clear that Richard was borrowing from other media forms (including specific genres of film and game), popular psychology, history and fantasy fiction in a playful and knowing way, happy to blur the lines between what are often regarded as discrete domains of practice. Starting with a Viking-style funeral boat, Richard built his game environment out of a linear series of interconnected chambers, a concept Richard likened to "that scene in *The Matrix* where they just keep running through rooms". In his game, the player moves through rooms in turn filled with items such as ghostly weapons, armed yet strangely passive warriors, mysterious kingly figures and finally, mountains of gold treasure. Although shaped by the narrative of *Beowulf*, action in this game is replaced by a psychological journey, an evocation of an imagined pre-Christian after-life where Beowulf meets different versions of himself as he passes through the rooms. As the player alights from the Viking long-boat in the opening moments of the game, s/he is offered a scroll which reveals the opening lines

of *Beowulf* (in Old English), a reminder of Beowulf's "corporeal existence", according to Richard's later commentary. Describing his game as "an aesthetic experience rather than a rule-based system", Richard told us that he had modelled the concept on a sub-genre of commercial video games with which he was familiar, such as "Shadow of the Colossus" (2005, Sony Interactive Entertainment), where there is little emphasis on action-filled encounters. Fittingly, in respect of Arthur and Richard's game authorship, Julian McDougall (2017, 187) reminds us that gameplay should be understood as "a performative, often highly reflexive, sometimes frivolous, frequently ironic and usually social form of literacy".

Conclusions

In our workshop, we were not simply engaging in the study of *Beowulf* as a literary text, but seeking to raise larger questions about the reading process itself and about literacy practices in the digital era. We believe that the model of reading we are proposing has pedagogical implications relevant to any secondary school classroom. It is a model which, unlike the current National Curriculum for English (DfE 2014), recognises students' own funds of social and cultural knowledge and constructs learners as culturally productive, adept at operating in a range of media. In entering an open, dialogic relationship with *Beowulf*, our students were able to remake it in a number of ways, by drawing on whatever cultural and social resources were available to them either individually or collectively. Indeed, the model of reading we are proposing is one which is not only transactional in Rosenblatt's sense but is, crucially, also collaborative. Even pieces of work apparently produced by individuals, such as the writing in role, arose out of joint activity and were then performed in a shared, social space. The framework of Arthur's computer game may have been shaped by individual decisions at the design stage, but surely what might be termed the end product only emerged through a dynamic interactive process involving Arthur and Adam "performing" together.

Furthermore, by taking on roles students were being asked to view the narrative from a range of perspectives and to experiment with how they might position themselves in relation to the text. Crucially, such activities go beyond a simple articulation of the reader's script-in-the-head by combining "critical and interpretive acts" with performance (O'Neill and Rogers 1994, 48). As Richard said at the end of the two days' workshop, "By the mere fact of working creatively with the text, taking on roles, moving parts of the text around, or chopping them or even creating your own poem about Beowulf, you are immediately deciding how you view the story". Likewise, Barrs (1987, 11) argues that adopting a role invariably involves "taking up an attitude to your material". In the context of a literary text this facilitates the development of critical interpretations. Richard's conscious choice to eschew the conventional player-action game dynamic when working with MissionMaker led him, we assume unconsciously, to a critical perspective that closely reflects Andy Orchard's (2012, 70) proposition that *Beowulf* is about "reaction rather than action", about the "aftermath of conflict rather than the conflict itself". Sophie's sympathetic enactment of Grendel's mother echoes Jane Chance's (2002) analysis of the role of women in the poem and the ambiguity afforded to hero and monster, as for example in the poet's use of the term *aglaeca* (translated variously as "monster" or "fierce combatant") ascribed to both Beowulf (line 2592) and to Grendel's mother (line 1259). Importantly, our experience from this workshop suggests that working across different media in the playful, creative way described here can serve to draw attention

to this critical, interpretive process, since learners must adapt their approaches according to the possibilities and limitations afforded by the specific semiotic modes at their disposal. This may be, for instance, through production of the written word, organisation of their physical bodies, or navigation of the procedural rules of MissionMaker.

Finally, working multimodally also offered the opportunity to expand our definition of "English", where literature, language, drama and media are fully integrated conceptually and pedagogically. Our exploratory, role-based approaches to *Beowulf* challenge the monomodal focus of the current National Curriculum (DfE 2014) on traditional forms of canonical literature by probing the relationship between reading, viewing, enactment and performance and by asking questions about the relationship between authorised forms of literature and the cultural lives of students outside of the formal school curriculum. In that sense, we are proposing a culturally inclusive pedagogy where transmedia remakings of a canonical text open up productive spaces that enable learners to make critical connections between the world of the text and that of their own lives.

Notes

1. Film versions include: *Beowulf* (1999) a science-fiction/fantasy film starring Christopher Lambert; *The 13th Warrior* (1999) an action movie directed by John McTiernan; *Grendel* (2007) a made-for television movie on the Sci Fi Channel (United States); *Beowulf* (2007) a computer animated film directed by Robert Zemeckis. The most recent UK television adaptation, *Beowulf: Return to the Shieldlands* was screened in 2016 on ITV, produced by James Dormer. In 2005, *Beowulf* the rock opera, composed by Lenny Picket, directed by Charlotte Moore was performed by the Irish Repertory Theatre in New York. Computer games include: *Beowulf: The Game*: an action adventure game based on the 2007 film, developed by Ubisoft; and *Grendel's Cave*: a MUD role playing fantasy game.
2. Names of students have been anonymised.
3. See the DARE website for further information about Missionmaker including screen-shots, examples of rule-making and video-captures of games: www.darecollaborative.net.

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