**CHAWLA — Ivanhoe**

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**Ivanhoe: A Platform for Textual Play**

Chawla, S., Ferguson, A. and Grayburn, J.

As members of the 2014–2015 Praxis Program cohort at the UVA Scholars’ Lab, we set ourselves the task this year of updating Ivanhoe—the digital platform for roleplaying and textual intervention first formulated by Jerome McGann, Johanna Drucker, and Bethany Nowviskie. In its initial conception, the idea of Ivanhoe as a space for creative interaction and intervention grew out of ‘dissatisfaction with the limitations inherent in received forms of interpretation’; the players ‘wanted to develop a more imaginative form of critical methodology, a form closer in spirit and method to original works of poetry and literature’ (McGann and Drucker, 2003).

This concretized thought experiment has seemed ideal for use in classroom curricula (McGann et al., 2004) that draw increasingly on notions of play and games for pedagogical outcomes (Willett et al., 2009). Play, generally, tends to be defined by what it is not: play is not work. Yet, over the past century, scholars and instructors have recognized and embraced play as a vital component of the learning process (Patton, 2014). As a result, games and play have been theorized and applied to curricula as a way to engage students in high school and college. While theory behind play education seems well-established, however, there is a strong disconnect between that theory—what we as educators believe we are doing—and what college students understand and internalize. In fact, by requiring such interactions, it seems that we eliminate the spontaneity and self-motivation so effective in play and ultimately induce student confusion, frustration, and anxiety (Ludewig and Ludewig-Rohwer, 2013). As we evaluated our goals for the purpose and design of Ivanhoe, we found ourselves wrestling with the classic question of digital classroom tools: How to make a program that students engage with by choice, rather than by force?

In response to this question, we find ourselves investigating how textual intervention plays out in communities with long-running histories of sustained roleplay: tabletop and paper gaming, alternate history-making, fan fiction sites, and others. This has moved us away from concentrating on designing for classroom use alone (with its implicit inequalities of available resources, educational opportunity, and so on), and towards a more flexible tool designed to allow for textual creativity by a wide range of interactive, interpretive communities. By focusing on accessibility and ease of use across platforms—improving the desktop version on which Ivanhoe presently resides, but also making better use of WordPress’s mobile functionality—we aim to produce an updated Ivanhoe capable of fostering textual play as something sought out as its own end, rather than for the purpose of earning badges or engaging in other methods of gamification.

At present, we envision such a resource as building on the presently available WordPress theme designed by the previous year’s Praxis group, keeping its emphasis on sustained roleplay and mutual commentary. However, we also look to draw on social media tools such as Yikyak and Snapchat that value anonymity, ephemerality, and asynchronous response time. This flexibility provides space for players to negotiate their roles and the conditions of their participation in a variety of emergent communities of play. As time allows, we hope also to incorporate improved functionality, with the capacity to incorporate not only a variety of media but also scripts, stylesheets, and other interactive elements—while maintaining a simple learning curve so that the platform can be used by players of any computing experience level.

At the DH 2015 conference, we propose to demonstrate Ivanhoe in both static and dynamic formats—the former as a demonstration of sessions already played within Ivanhoe, showing the capabilities of the platform; the latter as a interactive play session that will run for the duration of the conference. Through this new build, we aim to realize the playful spontaneity inherent in the early Ivanhoe sessions of McGann, Drucker, Nowviskie, et al., while opening up the possibility of participation beyond the small groups of the classroom to a vastly expanded base of users.

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