

Playing Beowulf

Bringing Literature, Drama, Media and Computing together in English for the new curriculum

Andrew Burn, Theo Bryer and Jane Coles describe a major research project which takes *Beowulf* as a starting point for multimodal work on literature, drama, media and computing in the English classroom

The manuscript of *Beowulf* at the British Library. Photo by Ken Eckert (Wikimedia Commons).

This article is dedicated to the memory of Morlette Lindsay (1958-2016): an inspiring, creative and ground-breaking teacher and teacher educator and very dear colleague, who will be sorely missed by all those who collaborated with her on this extraordinary project.

Beowulf remains a popular text in English classrooms, with opportunities for work at different levels. It can be a robust fantasy adventure, a complex and sophisticated heroic narrative, an exemplar of alliterative Anglo-Saxon poetry, a treasure trove of Old English language. Its history is equally fascinating – its mysterious journey from oral performance to written manuscript; its precious status as a unique version; its near-destruction in the 1731 fire in the Cotton library; its value as one of the great treasures of the British Library. These physical changes are accompanied by a myriad of textual transformations and adaptations: film versions, stage plays, puppet theatre, comic strip, and more recently, motion capture animation in Robert Zemeckis's film of 2007, with an accompanying videogame adaptation; and a blockbuster ITV television series. Its presence is also felt in the vast media franchises rooted in mediaevalist fantasy, much of it descended more or less from the fiction of JRR Tolkien, itself drawing heavily on *Beowulf*.

Our project aimed to explore the nature and value of these transformations, especially in film, drama and videogame. We weren't so interested in how existing adaptations might support the reading of *Beowulf* for today's students, useful though these are. Rather, we wanted to see what would happen if students adapted the text themselves, in their own storytelling, drama, film-making and videogame design. These kinds of active transformations seemed interesting to us for three reasons. Firstly, we were interested in the kinds of literacy that would be developed, a question of interest to primary and secondary English teachers – and also media and drama educators, albeit with different emphases. Secondly, what might such transformations bring to literary studies, especially in university English courses? Thirdly, specifically in relation to videogame-making, how might adaptation of *Beowulf* into a videogame connect with the current explosion in coding activities for young people, and the revision of the computing curriculum? What might it mean to 'code' *Beowulf*?

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To explore these questions, we worked with digital curator Stella Wisdom at the British Library, software company Moviestorm, and five different user groups, each with its own focus and set of interests. The five groups worked on their own projects, each with a different focus depending on the context in which they found themselves. They were:

- a group of PGCE English and Drama students;
- teachers and students in five London schools;
- a young people’s drama group in Sydney, working with giant puppets;
- a holiday workshop at the National Videogame Arcade in Nottingham;
- a group of UCL English students working with our Anglo-Saxon specialist colleagues Vicky Symons and Richard North.

This article will focus on the work of the PGCE group and the London schools. More information, along with pictures, videos and video-captures of the computer games, can be seen at the project blog on the DARE website at www.darecollaborative.net, under the Projects tab.

Using Missionmaker

A common asset used by all the groups was a game-authoring software tool developed by the project, based on the software Missionmaker, now owned by UCL, originally developed by Immersive Education. The *Beowulf* Missionmaker was developed in the Unity engine by project developer Abel Drew, and contains environments and characters appropriate for *Beowulf*. Figure 1 shows its tile editor, where users can build their world with simple 2-D icons, which then render as a 3-D environment. Here, the user has built the cave of Grendel’s Mother, by joining together various chambers containing rocky walls and watery floors.

Figure 2 shows the rule-maker, where conditions and actions can be created by the user. This example shows a rule made by a user to allow the player of the game to open a door. The two conditions required for the door to open are that the player enters a trigger volume (a delimited space in the game world visible to the designer as a transparent cube, but invisible in play mode); and that the player’s health is at least at 100 points.

The value of this explicit rule-making is that it is a simple kind of programming script, in which users can apply Boolean operators (if, then, or, and, not) to determine events in the game. Understanding of this kind of logic is a requirement of the new computing curriculum in England; but rather differently, the *Beowulf* project is an example of how the adaptation of a literary text as a videogame brings together the grammar of narrative and the grammar of programming, suggesting a way of relating these two areas of the curriculum.

Multimodal Beowulf in Secondary English

Led by Theo Bryer, Jane Coles and Morlette Lindsay (lecturers on the UCL IOE PGCE English and English with Drama programme), a group of volunteer students undertook workshops in storytelling, film-making and videogame design, all based around *Beowulf*.

We modelled the kinds of activity that could be undertaken in secondary classrooms. Playfulness and gaming in its broadest sense became overarching themes in these workshops. Together we read and performed sections of the poem in (Seamus Heaney’s) translation and in the original Old English, improvised our own kennings, narratives and physical drama, devised short films capturing ideas developed in the drama, and continued to rework these ideas through videogame design. Working multimodally also provided welcome opportunities to rebuild rich pedagogic connections between English, drama and media and served to challenge the notion for these student teachers that the emphasis placed on canonical texts in the latest National Curriculum inevitably results in a dry, transmission model of teaching.

Not only were we keen to exploit the textual ambiguities inherent in the *Beowulf* poem, we were also attracted by the opportunity to explore gender representation by focusing much of our workshop activity around the hero’s somewhat enigmatic encounter with an explicitly female monster, Grendel’s mother. Consequently, at the point where Beowulf plunges into the fiend-filled mere in his quest to find and kill Grendel’s mother, we took up the *Beowulf*-poet’s invitation to view the action from a new perspective, back at the surface of the lake where Beowulf’s followers are left waiting for at least a day and beginning to lose hope of ever seeing their leader again. We invited our student teachers to spontaneously write in role as one of these retainers, voicing their thoughts about Beowulf at this point in the narrative.

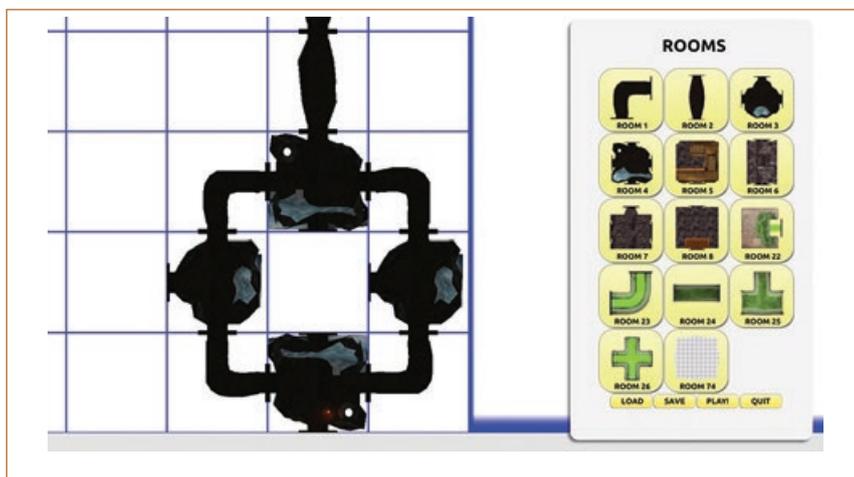


Figure 1: The map interface of Missionmaker Beowulf, showing the 2D design of the game-world.



Figure 2: The rule-making interface of Missionmaker Beowulf.

Writing in role

Writing in role is a remarkably powerful tool and it was clear from the rapidly composed, provisional drafts that each student produced and performed that they had entered the imagined world of the source text and done so in highly individualistic ways indicative of the active role of the reader in the interpretive process. For example, one student elected to remember Beowulf's public displays of heroism and leadership whilst another quietly reflected on small acts of personal friendship. Another student created an imagined childhood incident where Beowulf had taught her to swim and helped her overcome her fear of water.

Our work here is informed by classroom-based research by Cremin et al (2006) which suggests that writing in role not only helps learners compose with a renewed sense of commitment, but leads to them adopting a strong 'voice' particularly when the writing 'seizes the moment' within the immediate imaginative context.

It is worth adding that the second time we embarked on this project, our colleague Morlette Lindsay set up the writing in role in a subtly different way (Figure 3). After reminding the warriors what might lie in store for their hero Beowulf, currently donning his armour and about to hurl himself in to the mere, she suddenly moved to the centre of the circle and crouched down in a position of vulnerability. Very briefly she embodied the role of Grendel's mother – offering through her posture and expression an indication of the monster's perspective, waiting for an attack by a man with the strength of thirty in each of his hands. Disrupting the narrative through this brief moment of role-play had the effect of unsettling the identification proposed in what had come before.

The suggested shift in perspective was then taken up by some of the student teachers. For example, here is Lauren adopting the persona of 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.

What we found striking is the way that Lauren exploits gaps in the text, consciously giving sympathetic voice to a voiceless character. From her perspective, Beowulf is the monstrous intruder polluting her environment; her fear contrasts with his confident bravery. Whereas Beowulf's name and reputation afford him celebrity status both in the world of the poem and beyond, 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).

Film-making with tablets

We framed the subsequent filmmaking activities with some analysis of images of Grendel's Mother in different media, so that the student teachers explicitly addressed questions of representation and identity as they created short sequences of still and moving images about Beowulf's fight with the monster. Using tablets to shoot and edit, meant that they could evaluate the visual effects that they were creating after taking each shot.



Figure 3: Morlette Lindsay weaving the Beowulf narrative in October 2015.

The Zemeckis film (2007) emphasises the female monster's reproductive power, with a highly sexualised Angela Jolie motion-captured in the role. In the translation that we were drawing on (Heaney 2000), there are sexual overtones in the description of the battle but what emerges most strongly is Grendel's Mother's unusual physical strength. With an approach that drew on a spontaneous and messy form of montage rather than continuity editing, the student teachers found ways to disrupt a version of the 'male gaze' (Mulvey 1975) inscribed in the Zemeckis film. Through their unexpected embodiment of the roles and rendering of the battle sequence different groups were able to represent Grendel's Mother's experience and to give her as powerful a presence as Lauren had voiced in her writing.

The influence of Morlette's poignant role-play is in evidence in this photograph, the first in a short sequence made by three student teachers, that they called *Diving into the Deep* (Figure 4). It shows Grendel's Mother as she, 'sensed a human/Observing her outlandish lair from above' (Heaney 2000, lines 1,499–1,500).

Figure 4: Diving the Deep.



Although the photograph in Figure 4 is not obviously framed from Grendel's Mother's perspective (in the deliberate way that the over-the-shoulder shots later in the sequence were), the gaze of the two characters, her open-mouthed expression and ambiguous fist-like gesture provide a central focus for their impending engagement that is suggestive of a powerful determination alongside her obvious vulnerability. We were interested to see whether this spontaneous and quick way of developing interpretations of the violent action, using tablets, would work with school students as successfully.

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Taking it into schools

Working with these lecturers, with PGCE students who had undertaken the two-day workshop, and with Andrew Burn and Alison Gazzard at the UCL Knowledge Lab, five London schools developed projects focusing on selected activities, with a variety of age groups from Year 7 to Year 10. In three of the schools, teachers worked with different media to develop adaptations and interpretations of the *Beowulf* poem.

Year 8 – from film to manuscripts

Year 8 school students that had been studying *Beowulf* for a term at Chestnut Grove Academy came up with sequences of still and moving images (in one lesson) that captured both the context of the fight and the identity of the female monster in similar ways. This shot, from a sequence called *Evil*, hints at a comparable tension between Beowulf and his foe – the open mouth and bared teeth of Grendel's Mother (played by Nina) suggestive of both shock and aggression.



Figure 5: A Year 8 student plays Grendel's Mother.

In watching their sequence back, the 12- and 13-year-old students had much to say about Nina's expression – 'giving the feeling that you can't really run away from her, that you're like being sucked in to her embrace and that like she owns you.... she just wants to like eat you'. Their comments capture the power of Nina's visceral response to the text, complemented by the swirling cloths that enhance her physical presence and are suggestive of the murky waters in which the battle takes place. The students' words seem to echo Heaney's: 'So she lunged and clutched and managed to catch him/In her brutal grip' (2000, lines 1501–1502).

We were struck by how powerful working in this visual medium was. Tolkien compares the structure of *Beowulf* to a 'sculpture or painting' (1936/1968: 37). The *Beowulf* poet introduces different points of view in quick succession to conjure up the fight with Grendel's Mother – in a way that now seems filmic (as noted by Renoir, 1962 and Haydock, 2013). In our project, the fractured narrative lent itself to a remaking that seemed very contemporary, particularly in the rendering of fight sequences as experienced by those involved.

The pace at which we pressed the students to shoot and edit may have been a factor in the ways the expressive withhold and reveal of the action (blurry shots and suggestions of movement) indicate confusion and shifting perspectives. The sound effects and music that students added hint at horror, adding to a sense of a disjointed, subjective retelling of the story. Some students commented on their satisfaction at being able to evoke the action more powerfully than had it been live drama – because of the control that they had in framing and editing shots.

Joanne Smith, The Head of English at Chestnut Grove Academy who taught *Beowulf* to her Year 8 class reflected that:

Whilst initially finding Beowulf an intimidating prospect, the students responded incredibly positively to re-creating the text through various visual media (whether analysing film adaptations, creating their own mini-films, playing the video games or sculpting their own Anglo-Saxon pots). From there, the students created their own 'illuminated manuscripts', or an illustrated Beowulf-inspired story. What was particularly interesting to me as an English teacher was to trace how they drew on their multi-media lessons, beginning to experiment with the structural devices used in the films and including far more visual and tactile description in their own writing. Studying in this way seemed to allow the students to grasp hold of Beowulf as if it was a tactile thing and, as a result, rather than passively reading a 'dead text', they began to feel entitled to interrogate, twist and play with its language, conventions and ideas as they reinvented it in their own writing and art.

Years 7, 8 and 9 – English, drama, game design

Joel North, English teacher at London Nautical, taught *Beowulf* to his Year 7 class alongside one of the PGCE students:

Our approach to the Playing Beowulf project was to encourage our students to consider the different forms of storytelling and the evolution of narrative through different media. One activity that worked particularly well was the Mantle of the Expert approach, involving a group roleplay with the students in role as historians on a

dig where they ‘accidentally’ found various artefacts that helped tell the story of *Beowulf*. Another activity that helped develop students’ understanding of the text was to explore the different perspectives of the poem, at one point using a huge green papier-maché claw-like arm (courtesy of our talented PGCE student) to point the finger of blame at *Beowulf* and his men. This led to some students planning the computer game from the point-of-view of the ‘villains of the text’.

At Norbury Manor Business and Enterprise College, Head of Drama and English teacher, Michelle Sullivan, and her colleagues collaborated on a year-long research project, that involved research and development around cross curricular learning. A Year 8 class explored *Beowulf* through drama and video and developed music for a computer game featuring the fight sequences.

At Bishop Challoner’s School, English teacher Alison Croasdale organised an after-school game design club of Year 9 students. She introduced them to the story of *Beowulf*, and their designs gave a vivid impression of how the story connected with their wider cultural interests. In some cases, these were the range of fantasy media narratives which are in some ways the descendants of *Beowulf*: *The Lord of the Rings*, *Harry Potter*, and the videogame *Skyrim*, with its Nordic characters, narrative and setting. They chose music to accompany their games, equally diverse in its cultural reach: *Dr Who*, Icelandic and Swedish folk music, *Super Mario Bros*, Norwegian pirate music, Irish folksong, *The Hunger Games*. Figure 6 shows Charlotte and Aaron, members of the group, designing their games.



Figure 6: Members of the Bishop Challoner group designing their games.



Year 9 – game design, gender issues, and coding

At Regent High School, a group of Year 9 students worked with the British Library’s Young Researchers programme. This programme works with young people at risk of exclusion in London. In this case, programme coordinator Abi Barber from the British Library organised eight after-school workshops, working with Head of ICT Rob Conway and English teacher Diana de Bortoli, and with UCL IOE researchers Andrew Burn and Bruno de Paula.

The group began by looking at extracts from *Beowulf* in translation, and by visiting the British Library to see the manuscript. They went on to design their own videogame versions of the poem, using Missionmaker. A challenge for all the school workshops was to forestall perceptions of the story as male-dominated sequences of combat, especially for boys. While this may seem a stereotypical consequence of gendered gaming cultures, it is more complex. Interpretations of *Beowulf* have always been dogged by the question of gender.

The commentary offered by Tolkien in his series of lectures on the poem, published alongside his translation (Tolkien, 2015) pays very little attention to important female figures such as Hrothgar’s queen, Wealhtheow. Our colleagues in UCL English, by contrast, had emphasised to us the significance of Wealhtheow in the politics of the court, and the question of Hrothgar’s successor. Accordingly, we suggested to the group that they consider the role of the queen, and her anxiety that *Beowulf* might supplant her son as heir to the throne. One pair of boys developed the ingenious story for their game that the queen was in fact also the dragon, and would lie in wait for *Beowulf* to kill him in her own interest.

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As this group was organised jointly by the ICT department and English department, it was also motivated by an interest in the relation between coding and literature. The Head of ICT’s position was expansive and cross-curricular – that coding should work across the curriculum, and had a place in the Arts in particular. The work of the students, while largely unconscious of this curricular aim, did integrate the narrative interests of English with the coding interests of the computing curriculum in practice, if not in explicit conceptual work.

However, it also introduced another element often unnoticed by the curriculum: the students’ experience of and engagement with popular culture. The boys making the game with the dragon queen, for example, drew explicitly on their experience of videogame culture, positioning themselves as game designers attending to the mechanics of the game as well as the story, by carefully constructing the balance of difficulty and challenge in the game, placing interactive objects which would trigger consequences required for progression, but not revealing their whereabouts too obviously (see Bruno de Paula’s essay on the project website for a full analysis of this game).

Figure 7: The dragon in one of the Young Researchers' games.



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Findings

1. Canon, curriculum and creativity

In all these schools, working in different media seemed to act as a conduit or portal between an Old English text of uncertain origins, the texts (creative writing, live drama, music, art, video, computer game) that those involved created, and the popular cultural experiences they drew on, in a surprisingly dynamic way. Our findings suggest that schools in this country where *Beowulf* has consistently been on the curriculum might recast the poem as a text that is firmly part of the canon yet offers unusual possibilities for creative work and learning across all areas of the English curriculum, seeking also to engage students’ knowledge and experience of popular culture, especially, in this context, mediaevalist fantasy in book, film and videogame.

2. Heroes and monsters

One theme which developed through these activities was the tension between hero and monster. The ambiguity of these terms is familiar in modern horror tropes, such as the sympathetic monsters in *Frankenstein* versions or in werewolf narratives; but our colleagues in Anglo-Saxon studies at UCL had alerted us to the equally complex ambiguities in the *Beowulf* text itself. Beowulf was a hero, for sure, to the beleaguered Danes; but also caught up in the politics of court and tribe, and motivated as much by gold as by glory (and more so by these than by the pious interjections of divine allegiance). Meanwhile, the monsters - Grendel, Grendel’s mother, the dragon - are all referred to in the poem by the mysterious word ‘aglæcca’, and so, puzzlingly, is Beowulf himself. The translations, including Heaney’s, render this word with variations on ‘monstrous’ in the case of the monsters; and with variations on ‘heroic’ in the case of Beowulf. Accordingly, the students’ images, retellings and reimaginings of the story explored such productive ambiguities.

3. Gender roles

Another theme was the gender politics of the poem. While this has its own history in the successive exegeses of *Beowulf* in the academic literature, it is clearly an appropriate topic for school level study too. As soon as we move beyond the heroic qualities of Beowulf, we begin to question his ambition, the suspicion of the queen towards him, his cruelty to Grendel; while the immediate folkloric monstrosity of Grendel’s mother becomes more complex as we consider her grief for her dead son. Resonances with images of monstrous motherhood in horror and science fiction films are hard to resist, especially that of the alien mother in James Cameron’s film *Aliens*.

4. From literary narrative to game

In terms of the relation between game culture and *Beowulf*, our initial hunches that this was a good fit seemed to be borne out. The various games demonstrated repeatedly that the *Beowulf* narrative makes the perfect three-level horror game, with end-of-level boss monsters of increasing power. The relationship is more complicated than this, of course, and would repay study in English, drama and media classrooms.

The segue from *Beowulf* to videogame is by no means arbitrary, but is bound up in the progression from Tolkien’s mediaevalist fantasy, especially in *The Lord of the Rings*, to the development of table-top *Dungeons and Dragons* games, to computer game role-playing games using the core set of character types and narrative patterns, as well as computerised versions of the dice used in tabletop games, and the role of the dungeonmaster replaced by the programmed rules of the game. More broadly, this history of textual transformations is situated in the growth of popularity in mediaeval-styled fantasy fiction, film and television, the latest and most spectacular example at the time of writing being *Game of Thrones*. The potency of these genres, and the abiding fascination they provoke in audiences, was evident in many of our participants, not only young people but also university students of English and their tutors.

5. Drama and dramatic narratives

Not only was it the case that *Beowulf* could be adapted successfully in drama, film and game; but the project revealed connections between these forms and the processes of adaptation they produced. The commonality of puppets as a mode of representation across theatre and videogame has been noted above. The importance of roleplay in both game and drama is another important connection, and the two art-forms are enriched by considering the meaning and function of role across and between them. Combat was another theme common to drama and game. It is a problematic topic in both modes: how to avoid a descent into chaotic fighting, but to choreograph it, consider its function, its meaning, its mechanics, its etiquette and aesthetics – these are questions which can be addressed both by drama, filmmaking and by game design. Another dramatic mode, vocal acting, played an important role across the two modes, from improvised dialogue in the PGCE students' drama and film, to bilingual voice-acting by a Year 9 student in Kurdish and English for his videogame, to performance of Old English dialogue for the UCL students' games. In games as in animation, film, puppetry and theatre, the human voice carries not only language and its meanings, but the timbre and affective charge of an aspect of embodiment.

6 Literature and computers

Finally, the combination of literature and computer science through game design produced some suggestive ideas for cross-curricular work in schools. To code *Beowulf* offers possibilities for both subject areas to reimagine themselves. What does it mean for computer science to be creating algorithms for narrative, for literary arts, for videogame aesthetics? What does it mean for the literature classroom to think of a prestigious literary text as formula, mechanics, numerical entities, Boolean operators, computational design? These are questions which tax academics, but school students will have their own answers to them, and the answers help schools out of the age-old arts-science divide famously observed by CP Snow in 1959 (Snow, 1959).

It's time we found some more convincing answers to this, and the history of *Beowulf*, Tolkien, mediaevalist fantasy and videogames, explored through the multiple lenses of English, media and drama with the added challenge of computer science, can provide ones adequate to the digital age.

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