

## **Playable Fictions**

### **A Playable Media project group proposal for UCSC/DANM (2011)**

**Noah Wardrip-Fruin <nwf@ucsc.edu>**

**The possibilities of digital media have enabled a blossoming of new models of character, story, and language. From computer games with epic structures to experimental interactive films, digital fictions are providing diverse experiences for a wide range of audiences. From ambitious AI experiments to straightforward uses of weblogs and email, authors are creating digital fictions at a wide range of technical complexity.**

**Within this wide range, some projects focus on the potential of *play*. This is a powerful technique for engaging audiences – but it is also something more. Play can change the audience’s relationship to a fiction, as when they are invited to play the roles of one or more characters. Play is also a powerful method of developing audience understanding of a computational system, which is perhaps the most promising future territory for the development of digital fictions.**

**Such computational models make play possible with fiction’s materials, and along fiction’s themes. This offers more potential for fiction than the current approach of most computer games: embedding snippets of fiction between segments of play focused entirely on movement, combat, and economics. Play that integrates more fully with fiction can take a variety of forms. For example, the virtual reality game *Screen*, created by Noah Wardrip-Fruin and collaborators, uses traditional spatial gameplay to involve the audience in the act of trying to keep a memory fiction’s language in place – using familiar game mechanics to enact play that connects to the fiction’s themes. On the other hand, UCSC faculty member Michael Mateas is one of two creators of the interactive drama *Façade*, which required the development of novel**

**conversational game mechanics to give players the role of one of three characters in a computationally-driven one-act play.**

**This project group will explore the potential of playable experiences that combine the concerns of fiction (language, character, story), the techniques and research methods of media making and computer science, and the insights of game design. Students with significant background in several of these areas are ideal, though those with strong qualifications in one area (combined with interest in the others) are also encouraged to apply.**

**During the project group's first term (Winter 2011) students in the group will take part in Wardrip-Fruin's *Playable Media* graduate course, cross-listed between DANM and the Computer Science department. This course will bring DANM MFA students together with CS graduate students who are working on research projects to enable new genres of fiction and gaming. All students in the course will design a series of prototypes, critique each other's work, and discuss a series of readings, digital fictions, and games.**

**Students in the project group will also become members of Wardrip-Fruin and Mateas's lab, the interdisciplinary Expressive Intelligence Studio. They will take part in weekly group meetings and join one of the weekly research "pod" meetings (drawn along a variety of themes). This will continue through the Spring, Summer, and Fall of 2011 – though Summer term participation is optional (as some students may wish to leave Santa Cruz for the summer).**

**Students will continue their own creative practice and research, with feedback from the faculty and other lab members. At the same time, students will also participate in one or more group projects designed to produce complete media experiences that can be publicly released, exhibited, demonstrated, and result in**

**conference and journal publications. These projects, which will vary in duration from one to three quarters, select an emerging new technology from the lab and use it as the basis for a playable model – both producing previously-impossible play experiences and “pushing back” on technology development with insights acquired through creative practice. In addition to UCSC faculty and students, projects may also involve collaborators at other universities, in the wider field of the arts, and/or in industry.**

**In addition to standard DANM student support, this project group will have access to interdisciplinary funding sources which may provide support for students during their degree program and/or support for projects to continue development after student MFA work is complete.**