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The Building Blocks of History

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The Building Blocks of History

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With alarming regularity, historical narratives are seen as uncomplicated, linear operations of cause and effect. In fact, one of the primary challenges many professors face is teaching students how evidence-based critical analysis shapes historiographical practice. In this interview, Dr. Nicole Martin asked Dr. Steve Davis, an Assistant Professor of History at the University of Kentucky, to share how he uses digital technology and virtual world-building to teach students the necessary skill of historical thinking in his pre-colonial and modern South African history courses.

NM: What inspired you to turn to digital media as a teaching and learning tool for your course, and when did you first start incorporating it into your classroom?

SD: When I started building out new courses and revamping old ones, I was struck by the fact that historical imagination is generally not at the center of the skill sets offered by many history courses. By historical imagination, I mean the creative process by which historians use evidence to perceive the motivations, worldviews, and everyday lives of historical actors. This skill is a very important part of the historian's craft, but, for whatever reason, doesn't make it into many syllabi.

Typically, historians rely on the research paper and response essay as the primary vehicles students use to engage with sources and texts. I believe very strongly that acquired historical knowledge can be presented in a number of media. Research papers and response essays are important, but other media, like Minecraft, can offer students alternative ways to wrestle with historical questions. Many of these questions are germane to conventional forms of student research, but Minecraft and other platforms can prompt questions that these other forms of writing cannot.

Lastly, there are a number of history professors who are exploring teaching history with digital media. Historians like Mills Kelly and others are making a very persuasive case for our discipline to embrace digital media. In this regard, Minecraft seemed like a novel way to incorporate digital media into my classroom and be on the cutting edge of evolution in teaching history.

What is the relationship between the learning objectives and the software?

The history of pre-colonial Africa has always been multidisciplinary. The source material and the methodologies historians of pre-colonial Africa use to reconstruct this past and to debate its significance has always been varied. This technology allows my students to appreciate these unique qualities because it inspires them to draw from many sources and think laterally about the problems encountered in reconstructing sites of historical significance.

Right now a group is finishing up a Minecraft replica of Kwabulawayo, Shaka's royal place. Shaka was a military and political innovator who consolidated various chiefdoms and clans in the early 19th century into the Zulu Kingdom, the most powerful polity in southern Africa at that time. Kwabulawayo today only survives as fragmentary archaeological artifacts and relics. Consequently, historians of the Zulu rely on multiple forms of evidence coming from different disciplines to reconstruct what this site looked like and how it functioned.

So these students had to triangulate between a) the (sometimes unreliable) written accounts of white visitors who lived in Shaka's court; b) archaeology of the scant remains of the site and evidence of subsequent royal sites that were better preserved and documented; c) additional ethnographic studies of the social geography of Zulu domestic space as well as the semi-fictionalized account of Shaka written by one of Africa's earliest novelists.

These disparate strands of evidence required the group to think carefully about how we determine which source is more accurate and what to do with conflicting accounts of the site. They also had to tease out what was innovative about the layout of Shaka's royal place as opposed to what had been fairly typical Zulu homesteads at the time. The Minecraft project really challenged students to engage with the learning objectives that are central to this class: namely deciphering scholarly debates, establishing relative historical values of various genres of writing about the past, as well as tracing the origins of misconceptions about Shaka and the misconceptions about Africans that extend from his legacy.

What has shifted in your approach to using digital media to teach about African history and Apartheid since you first began using the Minecraft software?

I'm more attuned to better integrating the written component of my Minecraft assignments with the process of constructing the virtual site itself. Every time I use Minecraft, I require students to either write a research paper on a topic related to that site and/or provide a historically-informed guide of various features of the site; this time I included an annotation component to

the assignment using the "info block" feature of the software.

This technology inspires my students to draw from many sources and think laterally about the problems encountered in reconstructing sites of historical significance.

Essentially, each group is required to place 16 "info blocks" next to various features of their site that have some sort of broader significance. The group noted above wrote an annotation about the practice of cattle raiding, which

was an important way that Shaka consolidated wealth and power through wars of conquest. This allowed students to discuss the notion of cattle as movable wealth and highlight the way Shaka established his prestige among the Zulu.

The group also highlighted the importance of cattle as a medium of exchange in the all-important negotiations over bridewealth. It was thought that he who holds control over cattle can exert

enormous influence over basic social reproduction. These are all issues I expect the students to address in their research paper on the military origin and social functions of the Zulu state. So, what the annotations are is a sort of written bridge between features of the site and the conventional research they are doing on Zulu state and society.

How do you scaffold student learning and the course content through Minecraft?

I select a very specific and intentional set of sites which are then assigned to student groups. These sites cut across the geographical, chronological and topical breadth of the course content.

For instance, one group is building the fortresses on Île de Gorée, a slaving entrepôt off the coast of Senegal, once the administrative center of France's West African colonies. This project allows students to incorporate knowledge gained from our readings on the transatlantic slave trade and the conquest and colonization of Africa by various European powers.

At the same time, another group was assigned the ruins of Great Zimbabwe, a stone complex built by the Kingdom of Zimbabwe, a polity that flourished during the late iron age. This site allowed students to tap into earlier readings about the technological innovations pioneered by early African political formations. This meant exploring the importance of the control of interior and exterior trade routes, as well as understanding the engineering prowess of a people capable of building stone structures several meters high without mortar. Other sites used for the assignment were intended to provide different groups with portals into other learned material presented throughout the semester.

Why did you decide to put students into groups for this project, and how do you assign the groups? How does the project support the learning objectives?

Although I strongly believe in the intrinsic value of learning history for its own sake, I also believe that educators have a duty to prepare their students for the practical realities they will face as members of a 21st century workforce.

Group work is specifically intended to mirror the sorts of projects and tasks that are fast becoming a standard feature of the workplaces they hope to join after graduation. The ability to collaborate with others, work effectively a team, and manage a project with a number of moving parts are central to the skillsets prospective employees must possess. So while the content of the class is critically important, I also believe that learning it should incorporate practical experiences that will prepare them for the real world.

I take the composition of groups very seriously. This year I composed a survey intended to gauge the innate skills of each student as well as allow students to describe their learning styles and preferences. Based on this data, I composed groups that would have members who could excel on various parts of the assignment.

For instance, I made sure that each group had someone who liked conventional research and writing, another who had an aesthetic sense and good spatial skills, another who enjoyed gaming and/or was already familiar with Minecraft, and someone who could tell a good story to effectively curate a site. The purpose of this selection process was to build teams that had the all-around strengths necessary to effectively complete each of the moving parts of this complicated assignment.

The final assignment is really the culmination of the concepts and content learned throughout the course. This is an opportunity for students to demonstrate that they've not only learned the material, but that they can synthesize it in both textual and three-dimensional formats.

What has surprised you about how students have responded to using Minecraft for historical analysis?

What has most surprised me has been the enthusiasm of students who were initially skeptical or reluctant to work with this software. I think it's fair to say that few, if any, students ever expected to use Minecraft in a history classroom. So there is an initial skepticism about its usefulness. But as students gain familiarity with what I'm looking for, they begin to see that there are alternative ways to learn about the past and express their knowledge of it.

I had one non-traditional student who stated at the beginning of the semester that she was not a "computer person." By the end of the semester she was our star Minecraft builder and logged far more hours on the server than anyone else.

Periodically, we have 'labs' in class where I can give personal assistance to groups and run tutorials on various features of the software. During the last lab, I observed this student's group engaged in a real debate over the various historical maps they had assembled to serve as a model for their Minecraft site. This level of engagement with primary sources was really heartening, and it was entirely spontaneous and self-directed by the group members themselves without my input. They found the historical maps and they identified the controversies and contradictions within them. As an historian and an educator that was really fun and interesting to observe.

As you reflect on this semester and semesters past, how are you planning to refine the course objectives (or final project) for future iterations of the class?

I've never held the in-class labs before, but by the end of the semester I believed that the time I invested in them was worthwhile. I hope to devote a bit more time to working with the students one-on-one as they develop their projects and learn the software. In previous classes, I was pretty cautious about diverting class time away from lectures and discussion.

I still think lectures and discussions are crucially important, and they will still occupy a majority of my classes, but this semester I developed a newfound confidence in active learning and observing and in steering groups in-person. The students appreciate the time to meet, discuss and plan in real life, I appreciate the ability to steer projects in real-time. Although I'm not crazy about this term, it is a win-win for everyone.

Steve Davis is an Assistant Professor of History at the University of Kentucky. He is currently revising a manuscript on the history of everyday life of rank-and-file soldiers in Umkhonto we Sizwe, which is an extension of his work on the politics of exile and international radio broadcasting during the anti-apartheid struggle. In addition to research, he spent three years learning Xhosa and intensive language training in Zulu at the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

MEDIA

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AUTHOR

Nicole L. Martin is a Faculty Instructional Consultant at the University of Kentucky's Center for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching. She holds an affiliate appointment with the African American and Africana Studies program at UK where she teaches courses on performance studies, Black feminisms, media studies, Black theatrical literature, theatre historiography, and critical performative pedagogy. She completed her PhD in Performance Studies from the University of Texas at Austin.