Transcript

[00:00] [background music]

Derek Bruff: [00:04] Welcome to "Leading Lines," a podcast from Vanderbilt University. I'm your host, Derek Bruff, Director of the Vanderbilt Center for Teaching.

[00:11] In this podcast, we explore creative, intentional and effective uses of technology to enhance student learning. Uses that point the way to the future of educational technology in college and university settings.

[00:23] I have with me today, Gayathri Narasimham, who is the Associate Director of the Vanderbilt Institute for Digital Learning. She has a really interesting interview for us. The interview follows up on our last episode, which featured three grad students at Vanderbilt, who have a podcast on gaming studies, particularly video gaming studies.

[00:43] Today's interview also fits a theme that we've been exploring here on the podcast. A faculty who are bringing in technology into their course, because of the content of what they're teaching. They are teaching new media, they are teaching digital media, and our guest in this episode does exactly that.

[00:59] Gayathri?

Gayathri Narasimham: [01:01] Thank you, Derek. It was a fun interview to talk with Professor Jay Clayton, who is the William R. Kenan, Jr. Professor of English and Director of the Curb Center for Art, Enterprise, and Public Policy at Vanderbilt University.

[01:14] Professor Clayton has published many works, one of which, which is very famous is his book on "Charles Dickens in Cyberspace -- The Afterlife of the Nineteenth Century in Postmodern Culture," published by Oxford University Press in 2003. In my interview with him,

I talked to Jay about his experiences teaching his game studies class.

Derek: [01:39] I have to say, I've actually had Jay guest in my cryptography seminar, and it was because of that work around Charles Dickens in 19th century. We look at Charles Babbage and Ada Lovelace, who were instrumental in not only the birth of computing but in some interesting ways in cryptography.

[01:56] I had a really fantastic guest lecture by Jay in my course a couple of years ago where he looked at the role of disciplined specialty versus interdisciplinary work and how that's changed over time. He's a really fascinating guy and I'm happy to share this interview here on the podcast today.

[02:12] [background music]

Gayathri: [02:12] Today, we are talking with Professor Jay Clayton, Professor in the English Department and the Director of the Curb Center at Vanderbilt. Jay uses gaming in his classes. I first met Professor Jay Clayton when I started my job at the Vanderbilt Institute for Digital Learning.

[02:32] When Jay was instructor, he produced a course on online games, a massive open online course that we are offering through Coursera.

[02:43] Hi, Jay. Thank you for talking with me today. Our listeners will be very excited to hear about your experience with using games. Before I even get into your class with the games, tell us how you became interested in video games and online games.

Jay Clayton: [03:02] Hello, it's great to see you again. I started becoming interested in gaming in the late 1990s. I was teaching a class that I called "The Culture of Cyberspace."

[03:19] It was a course, in those days, about how to use the Web, and how digital experience was changing our understanding of textuality in literature classes.

[03:36] Eventually, I realized that a big part of digital culture and the culture of cyberspace were games. I first started teaching a game called Myst. A classic game, that was a very mysterious and beautiful platform. That was in the late 1990s.

Gayathri: [04:04] Awesome. I have actually played Myst. The only few games that I have played. I was fascinated by how intuitive it is. How did you use Myst? It is such an intuitive game. There are no instructions, except what you discover. You have to really try to click on things to actually discover.

Jay: [04:25] That's right. One of the ways I used Myst was that I had my 11-year-old son help me navigate it because I was new to gaming in the 1990s. It was a great personal experience. I had a group of non-gamers, English majors at Vanderbilt, all of whom were raising their eyebrow about, "What does gaming have to do with literature?"

[05:01] They were just as bad at Myst as I was. I had a great seminar one day, when my 11-year-old came in and went around from laptop to laptop helping the undergraduates navigate through Myst. It was such a delight.

[05:22] Of course, we quickly got to very interesting questions about how does the medium of the game change our experience of narrative, how does discovering something for yourself, working your way through the mystery in a very interactive way influence questions about story and character point of view and setting and even the nature of time?

[05:57] That eventually became one of the major themes of my investigations with games in the classroom, is, "What is the narrative time of the games that you have to play at your own pace?"

Gayathri: [06:14] What do you mean by that? What do you mean by the narrative time of the game?

Jay: [06:18] Think about...a novel. The novel has a time scheme. You're reading, the characters are moving through life at a certain pace, and language of a written narrative is able to do all kinds of things with time.

[06:37] You can skip 10 years in a single sentence, you can zoom in and spin a massive 800-page book like Joyce's "Ulysses" focusing on one-day. Written narrative is enormously flexible in the way it connects, represents time, and the passage of time.

[07:02] Movies have a much harder task. They have approximately two hours and if they want to have time past, they have fewer of ways to handle that than language.

[07:15] Gaming has all kinds of additional dimensions. You might have the story time of the character whose story you're uncovering but you also might have months of playtime of your own. There's layers of handling of time that just aren't present in some other media.

Gayathri: [07:45] That's a great point. Just thinking about Myst, I'm reminded of the way it was set up, was multiple walls, and you move between walls. It's not just physical spaces that you're moving, but also time that you're moving through.

Jay: [08:02] I agree.

Gayathri: [08:02] That reminds me, that's fascinating.

[08:04] From there, how did we come to online games? Obviously, the gaming itself has evolved and you have multiplayer online games now, but tell us about that?

Jay: [08:16] That's right. Around about 2000, we began collaborating with the head of IT, a great man here at Vanderbilt named Matt Hall. He and I started co-teaching a course on online gaming. We chose The Lord of the Rings Online as our game.

[08:39] At this time, there were several online multiplayer, massive multiplayer games like EverQuest and World of Warcraft.

[08:53] We chose The Lord of the Rings Online because it enabled me, as an English teacher, to talk about the differences that a book, a movie and a game made and how the narrative was experienced because of course, The Lord of the Rings has a great novel, a great movie, and so a great online game.

[09:17] It's now over 10 years old and my characters have been in that world, that persistent world for 10 years now.

Gayathri: [09:27] What do you think the gaming helps you...I'm thinking like the technology and how a lot of your students may not be gamers and how are you able to get them to do this?

[09:41] What are some of the benefits that they get out of doing this work in these...I mean the mediation having these three different media for talking about the same themes is

definitely a very informative. It gives a lot of different perspectives. My question is, "What do the non-gamers get out of doing this...?"

Jay: [10:09] That's right. First of all, the comparative method of juxtaposing different media allowed you to see things in each medium that you might not have seen otherwise.

[10:24] It enables you to see new features of a novel because suddenly you realize that these things that you've always taken for granted always processed almost automatically, because you've had many years of reading novels, had to be developed as techniques and conventions in prose, and that they don't necessarily transfer exactly to film or to gaming.

[10:59] Really by defamiliarizing things you've always taken for granted, comparing media can really help students focus in on those aspects of a narrative. In the classroom, it becomes a really interesting challenge for how to get non-gamers to have this experience. I have developed a couple of techniques for helping students play games in the classroom.

[11:31] First of all, I almost always get them to pair up so that two students will play the game together, in case one student is not very good at it, doesn't have the manual dexterity. For the two of you to sit there together...it's not always an experienced gamer with a neophyte, but you're sharing the experience of struggling through the game.

[12:01] The other thing is you can't complete a game in a single assignment, or for preparation for a seminar the next day. I say things like, "Play it a minimum of two hours just so you get the experience. Then we'll come in and talk it through. Some will have gotten further than you, some perhaps not as far."

[12:30] A third way that I handle this difficulty is I gamify gameplay. Have you heard of that, the movement of gamification, which is to turn activities that aren't usually games into games? I almost always have a contest going for which team gets the furthest in the game. I usually have a little prize. It's a surprise. That seems to be really fun for the students, they get into that.

[13:12] We just played Braid in my seminar this semester. Braid is a really difficult experimental game. It's an indie game, an independent game, that both relies on a platforming or side-scrolling game mechanic, which you're familiar with from a multitude of games like Donkey Kong, for example. It relies on that mechanics, but it is a metagame.

[13:45] It's continually posing questions about the form of the game. Its theme happens to be the passage of time. Many of the levels allow you to reverse time. It's also incredibly hard, just mechanically hard. Beginners have trouble getting through any but the first two or three levels. Two different teams just became obsessed with it.

[14:20] Two out of the five teams I had played essentially all weekend long. It was like 72 hours of gaming.

Gayathri: [14:30] Is there a better class on campus there? This is so much fun, it sounds to me.

[14:34] [laughter]

Jay: [14:34] It's a lot of fun. I'll tell you, it's a lot of fun to teach not just because it's fun material and intellectually challenging material, but also because it attracts a really diverse classroom.

[14:50] I have a wonderful mixture of English majors, other humanity students, but also computer science students, science students, gamer engineering students, gamers and people who are interested in gaming come from all over campus. They're talking to one another in settings that they don't always experience. English majors see a lot of other English majors.

Gayathri: [15:20] That's such a wide range of expertise and perspectives, this is awesome. How have you been keeping up with the changes in the gaming field? You just talked about a game that has been very challenging. Do you also avidly play games and do you keep up with the new and the fun stuff that's out there.

Jay: [15:43] I continue to play different games. However, I'm an English professor with an active research life, and director of a center, so I don't have time to play a ton of games. What I do is I read the reviews of games and try to see which new games will present something different to me and to my class intellectually.

[16:12] This semester, we're going to be playing Journey, Braid, Gone Home, The Lord of the Rings Online, and a — new to me — dystopian game called Papers Please, which models a problem of immigration in a dystopian society. These are all renowned games from different

genres of gaming.

[16:49] I don't tend to play first-person shooters, I have played them. I don't tend to jump on the latest game unless I've read things that make me think that it would present a new facet of the gaming experience or a new way to think about narrative in relation to gaming.

Gayathri: [17:11] When you use these games, you have to think about what benefit it brings to the students and you have to help them get into the games and play these things. This independent versus multiplayer online games, how do they make those bridges?

[17:31] It's one thing to do where you are sitting by yourself or with another partner at a computer and playing the games versus going online where you're suddenly thrown into an arena where there's people from all over the world who are playing, especially with The Lord of the Rings Online.

[17:47] I know, I come from your book where you have had these online platforms, having a curator or a person who is helping them guide your students.

Jay: [18:00] The students are playing The Lord of the Rings Online right now. That's a persistent threat through the first half of the class. They play it for several months, but they don't have to play it really intensively. I want them to see exactly what you've described.

[18:19] That persistent world, massive online game has a community that brings you into relationships with people all over the world. It allows us to talk about some of the social aspects of gaming. Some of the ways in which online gaming, at least, creates intermediate experience between the virtual and the face-to-face.

[18:50] You have deep relationships with people, some of them I've known now for 10 years. I'm the guild leader of the oldest and one of the largest guilds on our server in The Lord of the Rings Online. We've had members of our guild…The Lord of the Rings calls it Kinship, so I'll start calling it Kinship.

[19:19] We've had some die, we've had some go to war and military service, and have children. I've sometimes met them in person.

[19:30] It's a different relationship to sociality from anything that one has experienced before.

It's not simply this opposition between the real world and this virtual world. It's something in between.

[19:53] That's a very interesting experience, but it also provides students with a very interesting relationship to narrative because The Lord of the Rings Online has its own narrative that is different from Tolkien's world.

Gayathri: [20:09] That's very interesting.

Jay: [20:08] It's set totally in Middle-earth, it's set in Tolkien's world, but you have a role, which is defending the rear guard of the fellowship. The fellowship has gone off on the story that Tolkien's telling.

[20:32] You have your own story and your own role in that world. From time-to-time, if you progress far enough, you'll cross paths with the fellowship.

Gayathri: [20:43] That must be rewarding.

Jay: [20:44] It's a big reward. You said rewarding, but because games always use a reward structure and a leveling-up structure, meaning one of the members of the fellowship at a certain place on their journey is a reward for your achievement inside the game.

Gayathri: [21:06] You as a person in this game are creating your own character and the way you're engaging with the game is also educational because you are learning about the settings, the people, the social life, everything.

[21:21] About Middle-earth and Tolkien's world also. What about those characters, the original characters that Tolkien created, the fellowship. The Hobbits and everybody else in the storyline itself. Are they real? Somebody who is role playing...

Jay: [21:40] No.

Gayathri: [21:40] or are they created as part of the...?

Jay: [21:42] They are called NPCs, Non-Player Characters. They are not real people. In fact, you are not allowed to take the name of any character in Tolkien.

Gayathri: [21:55] I could never be Frodo. [laughs]

Jay: [21:57] You can never be Frodo. That's a choice on their part.

Gayathri: [22:03] That makes sense. Your students are creating their character within the online game that they are playing. Do you have a similar exercise where they do something that they actually either create a game as part of the classwork or create characters and bring it together as part of the work you do?

Jay: [22:25] The current incarnation of this class is new media. The class is not solely devoted to gaming. Gaming is one example of new media. All the written assignments as opposed to the reading assignments -- reading, viewing or playing assignments -- involve creating new media works of their own. I scaffold those assignments.

[22:58] The very first is to take a screenshot of your character. What could be easier? It's so easy that we do it sort of the first day of class. Take a screenshot and then do some screen capture while you play the game. I have the students create a video essay. It's an essay where they do a voice-over commentary on activity in the game.

[23:33] The voice-over commentary is not a play-through. They are not talking about, "Oh, here's how you do it." It's rather, "What am I seeing about narrative point of view or setting?" and illustrate in their voice commentary with a montage of various scenes from the game. That's the first major project.

[24:00] The course culminates in the students creating a game of their own. Again, I use the teamwork method. Most of the people in the class are not adept with writing computer code. Generally, three or four are. We have teams, usually three-person teams.

[24:22] I try to sort them into someone with some graphic art skills, someone with some writing skills and someone with some coding skills. I introduce some to a number of free programs for game-making. They can range from very simple sketch games to more complex game-making platforms, all the way up to Unity.

Gayathri: [24:51] I was going to ask about Unity. OK, so you deal with it.

Jay: [24:54] This semester I have a student who I taught last semester in a university course

on virtual reality, a course co-taught by Ole Molvig and Bobby Bodenheimer in History and Computer Science, respectively.

[25:12] This student made a virtual reality environment based on the novel "Ready Player One," as part of the team for the virtual reality course last semester. She is now in my new media class. She is very eager to continue to build out that virtual reality environment.

Gayathri: [25:36] That's awesome. [laughs]

Jay: [25:37] It's going to be so much fun. She is going to be joined by two other students. We will of course go over to the Wondry and have the whole class experience the virtual reality that she's already created.

[25:57] We are reading the novel Ready Player One. As you probably know, Steven Spielberg has made a movie of it that's coming out later this semester.

[26:07] We are having a class field trip to the premier of the movie of Ready Player One. The team that will be continuing to construct this virtual reality environment will have read the novel, have seen the movie, and now will be continuing work on this room that she had begun last semester. The room as it exists is just a play room or a clubhouse.

[26:39] The team last semester managed to create the whole room and populate it with some terrific 1980s posters and furniture and made a wonderful environment that captures this important scene from the novel. This semester, they need to turn it into a game.

[27:03] That's what I've been calling it virtual reality environment. Now, I want it to be a VR game.

[27:10] We will develop a storyline inside the room that can only be unlocked by clicking on the right combination of objects, finding hidden keys, pulling out drawers to find parts of a message. There will be a creation of an independent new narrative to play through once we gamify the environment.

Gayathri: [27:40] This is almost bringing Myst back to the virtual environment.

Jay: [27:45] Of course, yes. Myst was a really influential game. It also links up with Gone

Home. Gone Home is an indie game about a young woman who comes back from a year away to her home and finds everyone gone.

[28:09] It's mysterious to what has happened. It involves...I don't want to give any spoilers for what has happened. It's complex narrative that she has to uncover some clues. For her to uncover those clues, the player has to solve mystery after mystery. That is more of an elaborate narrative than Myst, but it's the same set of game mechanics.

[28:50] It also is a much more socially and culturally rich narrative. The narrative takes place in a contemporary environment and involves contemporary problems of a marriage and of a family and of love relationships. That's very different from Myst, which is...

Gayathri: [29:21] Very abstract and it's...

Jay: [29:23] It's a fantasy science fiction world set on other planets and has a final act that is...I can't reveal it without spoiling Myst.

Gayathri: [29:38] [laughs] Don't give away any spoilers. What I love about what you're doing is you don't allow your students to get lost in the game because the game itself is a full time engagement. You can keep playing it.

[29:53] But you are bringing them back to the narrative and you are keeping that tension going. This world, the narrative and the gaming world which you have to bring the links back. Was that a challenge when you did your online course?

Jay: [30:13] You mean the Coursera class?

Gayathri: [30:15] The Coursera class, yeah.

Jay: [30:15] I don't think that was a challenge in terms of the content of the course. What was a challenge was that now 95,000 people have taken this course from 123 different countries, many of the students were non-native English speakers.

[30:37] I'd say the biggest challenge was teaching a college-level course with Vanderbilt-level ideas and content to a population of every possible age range and every possible nationality.

[31:04] The cultural references that I could use in my lectures had to be very carefully chosen. The language that I used, I tended to speak very slowly and carefully and I heavily edited [laughs] every one of those videos to try and achieve that.

[31:29] That was a great challenge, it was my first experience of teaching online.

Gayathri: [31:35] It came out to be a wonderful class.

Jay: [31:38] Well, thank you. It's really easy to bring out the narrative content of these games and to teach important concepts about literature and storytelling via gaming.

[31:54] Today, in this morning's class, we talked about the difference between realism and romance, and we'd been building toward that for several, several class periods, as we looked at "Lord of the Rings" as a romance novel, and a romance game, and contrasted that with realistic characters.

[32:18] We contrasted the hero versus villain, the good versus evil in a romance, versus more complex, interior characters in a realistic novel. It was able to bring out things that students, of course, understood about the novel, but perhaps had never thought of them. That's part of what education is.

Gayathri: [32:43] This is great. Thank you so much, Jay. Before we finish up this wonderful conversation, I can keep on asking you about gaming and the different games you've used, and so on, but my quick question for you is, what analogue technology do you like?

Jay: [33:01] I'm trying to think of what analogue technology I don't like. I have been an avid television-watcher since childhood. Television is now digital, not analogue, but once upon a time, it was really quite analogue.

[33:19] [laughter]

Jay: [33:19] I like radio, we go to symphony and the opera. We're subscribers to both here in Nashville. I go to the Country Music Hall of Fame and listen to blues and bluegrass and rock music. It's very hard for me to think of an art form, whether analogue or digital, that I don't have a passion for.

[33:46] [background music]

Gayathri: [33:46] [laughs] Thank you, Jay.

Jay: [33:48] [laughs] Thank you.

Derek: [33:48] Gayathri, that was a really fun interview.

Gayathri: [33:54] Thank you.

Derek: [33:55] I'm always impressed at all the different aspects of culture that Jay Clayton appreciates, [laughs] from opera to videogames, and everything in between.

Gayathri: [34:04] Derek, you've listened to the interview now and Jay's class sounds really fun. Why do you think it works so well?

Derek: [34:12] That's a really good question. I think it does sound like a lot of fun, and I think Jay makes some moves as an instructor actually that are really effective. He talked about a couple of them.

[34:24] For instance, when he has his students play a new video game in pairs, he talked about how that's helpful, because if one of them gets it a little faster than the other, they can help each other out. I think there's another layer there, actually.

[34:36] As students are encountering this new video game, this new text, so to speak, they have someone to talk with about what they're seeing and what they're encountering.

[34:45] Given what we know about active and collaborative learning, that's probably a much better environment to encounter this piece of new media than if students were just on their own doing it.

[34:56] Having to decide what to do in the game and what steps to take, they're having to talk that out as a pair, and that helps them start that first layer of analyzing what's happening and putting words to their own experience in the game. That collaborative work, I think, is really interesting.

Gayathri: [35:12] Making it explicit, right?

Derek: [35:13] Yes, exactly. It's like a think-aloud, actually. They have to articulate out loud internally what they're doing, what they're thinking in the game.

[35:21] There's moves like that that I think are good, and then in the podcast, we've talked about this idea of engaging students as producers of knowledge and not just consumers of information.

[35:31] That final project that he described where students are actually making video games, it's a really interesting pedagogical move because I think his goal is to help them become more critical consumers, to be able to apply a critical and analytical lens to video games and other new media.

[35:48] One way to help students do that is to give them an experience producing those media themselves, and there's this interesting interplay between the critical lens and the creative lens that Jay's tapping into with their final projects. This is really interesting from a teaching and learning perspective.

Gayathri: [36:04] It reminds me of your panel on using podcasts in the classroom, too.

Derek: [36:08] Yeah, absolutely.

Gayathri: [36:10] Did you hear things that Jay said that he's using in his class that might be applicable to other classes, on campus or elsewhere, other courses?

Derek: [36:18] Yeah, I was thinking about that, because there's only so many people who are going to be teaching games study courses, but the fact that some of the strategies he's using to help his students explore this new media could work in other courses that look at other media or other types of objects or texts.

[36:34] For instance, I was really struck by his strategy of having students play a video game for a certain number of hours, but not necessarily finish it. I was a little reminded of this giant novel I assigned in one of my courses, "Cryptonomicon" which was way too big, and no one finished it including me.

[36:53] It was a real mistake on my part, but I could have had my students read a portion of it or read it for five hours and see what they come up with.

[37:00] I'm also thinking of other things where if you want students to explore some social networks they're not familiar with, or maybe an online digital humanities database of some sort, you could, instead of saying...

[37:10] These are things that don't have starts and finishes, like video games, often, and so giving them a time limit to say, "I want you to spend two hours exploring this resource, and then come back with your observations and findings," I think that's an interesting move.

[37:23] I think also, the other assignment that caught my ear was the video with voice-over commentary. Students will play a game, and they'll screen-capture their experience playing it, and then they'll edit that into a video where they add their commentary.

[37:39] It's not so much the play-through commentary. It's different than the think-alouds that they might be doing as they're playing it. It's the analytical, critical lens that they're bringing to it. I can easily see other faculty using a tool like that.

[37:53] I actually talked with a faculty member recently, at Indiana University, Bloomington, Ashley Hasty. She's in very different field, merchandising, [laughs] and she teaches a course on window displays.

[38:05] She has a bunch of designers who are creating window displays for businesses, stores, things like that. Well she has her students take a photograph of what they've created, and they use this tool called VoiceThread, to add in their own audio commentary to that photo.

[38:23] This idea of having students create something or put something together, and then add their own commentary track to it, I think it's a really interesting way to get at some of the student learning that may not always be visible in the work that they do, to get at how they're thinking about the work that they're doing.

Gayathri: [38:44] That's really cool. It's also innovative uses of technology. We've used VoiceThread before, a few years ago, in showing how this can be done, where we can take a picture and add annotated comments to it. It's fascinating to hear people using it in different contexts.

Derek: [39:00] Well, thank you for sharing this interview, Gayathri. It was really interesting.

Gayathri: [39:05] Thank you.

Derek: [39:05] I know I got a few interesting ideas for courses I might teach. We're going to have some links to Jay Clayton and some of his work in our show notes.

[39:13] You can find those show notes, as well as past and future episodes of Leading Lines on our website, leadinglinespod.com. You can follow us on Twitter, @leadinglinespod. You can send us a voice memo with your thoughts on this episode at our email address, leadinglinespod@vanderbilt.edu.

[39:27] We'd love to hear from you. Oh, I almost forgot! We have a new Facebook group for the podcast, so you're welcome to find us on Facebook, Leading Lines Podcast there and follow us that way. If you do, please share. We're trying to grow that community now, as well.

[39:41] Leading Lines is produced by the Center for Teaching, at Vanderbilt University, also the Vanderbilt Institute for Digital Learning, the Office of Scholarly Communications at the Vanderbilt Library, and the Associate Provost for Digital Learning.

[39:51] This episode was edited by Rhett McDaniel. Look for new episodes the first and third Monday of each month. I'm your host, Derek Bruff. Thanks for listening.

[39:59] [music]

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