## Rhetorical Peaks: A Design For Teaching Rhetoric In A Gaming Environment

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*Abstract*: *Rhetorical Peaks* is a video game designed for use in a freshman-level rhetoric and writing class.  The game puts its player in the role of an undergraduate student whose rhetoric professor has died mysteriously.  The player's tasks are to explore the town of Rhetorical Peaks, interact with a variety of characters, and gather evidence to be used in a causal argument about the death of the professor.  On the way to gathering evidence about the professor's death, the player will be presented with a number of challenges that will require the player to practice some of the basic rhetorical skills that the class has studied throughout the semester.  We hope that the student players of *Rhetorical Peaks* will see that there is not one absolutely certain solution to the problem that the game presents, but rather an intriguing variety of possible arguments that they can make about that problem.

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## Introduction

During the fall semester of 2006, the Game Design/Virtual Communities Workgroup in the CWRL began developing a video game called *Rhetorical Peaks*—a game intended to teach some basic rhetorical concepts. *Rhetorical Peaks* is intended for use in RHE 306 or a similar freshman-level rhetoric and writing class.  We began developing the game using the Aurora Toolset, which accompanies and enables modification of Bioware's role-playing game *Neverwinter Nights*.  The Toolset allows users to manipulate the terrain, characters, objects, and game-play of *Neverwinter Nights* in order to build their own virtual spaces and create interactive plots.  Our hope is that we are bringing the CWRL into a growing field of game designers who have used the Aurora Toolset for educational purposes.  Some similar existing projects include Henry Jenkins' Education Arcade at MIT, Susana Tosca's Quest Project at the University of Copenhagen, and projects at the University of Alberta. Our game makes a unique use of the Aurora Toolset as an interactive environment for students to develop rhetorical skills rather than as a medium for delivering content or as a toolset for students to design their

own games (though the latter possibility is being considered and/or implemented by some of our members in other projects). *Rhetorical Peaks* is a one-player murder-mystery game, which should take no longer than 75 minutes to play. We expect that it would be played either for homework or during, at most, one ninety-minute class period.

*Rhetorical Peaks* puts its player in the role of an undergraduate student whose rhetoric professor has died mysteriously. The player's tasks are to explore the town of Rhetorical Peaks, interact with a variety of characters, and gather evidence to be used in a causal argument about the death of the professor. On the way to gathering evidence about the professor's death, the player will be presented with a number of challenges (or quests) that will require the player to practice some of the basic rhetorical skills that the class has studied throughout the semester. After completing the game, students and players can engage in a class discussion or complete a short paper assignment based on the evidence gathered in the game.

The game as a whole, and each of the sub-quests that comprise it, involve the gaming activity that New Media theorists like Espen Aarseth and Susana Tosca call the "quest," in which players move through simulated space to overcome challenges and attain a goal. Our game also builds upon ideas from Jeff Howard's forthcoming articles "Designing Interpretative Quests in the Literature Classroom," "Interpretative Quests in Theory and Pedagogy," and his book in progress *Quests: Theory, History, and Pedagogy*. Although the games that Howard's students have designed are geared towards helping students to engage with literary texts, *Rhetorical Peaks* is specifically designed to allow students to enact rhetorical concepts instead of literary ones. Below, we will briefly discuss some features of the sub-quests and the variety of rhetorical skills that students can develop and practice during game play. Overall, we hope the game will help students understand that the cause of a complex phenomenon like a (possible) murder is more of an open-ended "mystery" than a "problem" with a single solution. That is, we have designed *Rhetorical Peaks* in such a way that there is no single correct explanation for the professor's death.

As the game progresses, students will uncover evidence that they can use to make a variety of plausible arguments. In a recent *Harper's* magazine article, "Grand Theft Education," Thomas Zengotita argued that video games are often too closely geared towards engaging their players in clearly solvable "problems," rather than the ambiguous and potentially insoluble "mysteries" of real life: "People are profoundly mysterious entities, I think, and understanding them in the real world involves understanding that you're never going to entirely understand them" (35). We hope that the student players of *Rhetorical Peaks* will see that there is not one absolutely certain solution to the problem that the game

presents, but rather an intriguing variety of possible arguments that they can make about that problem.

While our module is based upon the narrative structure of mystery stories, we seek to engage students through the addictive game play (successful in adventure games and role-playing games) of conversing with non-player characters (NPC's) and gathering evidence. We have selected the genre of detective stories as our model because they are widely regarded as having game and puzzle elements by both classic authors like Edgar Allan Poe and theorists of interactive narrative like Janet Murray in *Hamlet on the Holodeck*. As aspiring rhetoricians, our students will not passively read a narrative, but rather bring one into being through game play that involves the collection of clues and interrogation of suspects. Our argument thus builds upon Salen and Zimmerman argument in *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* that the goal of successful game design is the creation of "meaningful play," indicated by pleasurable interactions with a rule-based system that generates discernable outcomes in response to players' choices (32-37).

Because our game is for rhetorical purposes rather than literary or strictly entertainment ends, our game play primarily involves seeking out clues and conversing with NPC's. These two forms of rule-based action are most directly related to rhetoric and argumentation. Nevertheless, we also plan on using scripting, an event-based programming language, to create action that will allow students to understand rhetoric as a performative use of language to affect change. Hence, the selection of a particularly effective rhetorical argument in a dialogue might destroy a ghost in a fiery exorcism.

## Playing The Game

### Starting Room: The Professor's Office
This introductory environment provides the player with some expository information about the "backstory" to the game, and allows our player to get used to the game environment's NPC's, dialogue trees, and techniques for gathering evidence. Here, the player will encounter a character that will provide information about causal arguments, and will direct the player to the next room of the game. It is in this next room that they will begin to practice rhetorical techniques.

When the game begins, the player is in Professor Gorgias's home office, in order to drop off the final paper for the semester. The player is greeted at Gorgias's home by his housekeeper and personal assistant Cleanth, a tall elderly man. Cleanth explains that he had arrived just a few moments earlier to find that Gorgias had mysteriously died overnight. The player, who was intrigued by Gorgias's class and has been considering changing majors to rhetoric because of it, is shocked by the

news and asks Cleanth what happened.  Cleanth explains that he had been with the professor the previous evening.  The professor returned home from the library with a stack of new books at about 6PM.  Cleanth had his dinner ready as usual.  When he left around 8PM, the professor was at his desk reading as he did almost every night.  Cleanth seems distraught.  He has called the authorities, who are on their way.

Cleanth also explains that a visiting scholar, Professor Ramus, has been in town for the past few days to give a series of presentations.  He explains that Ramus and Gorgias were graduate students together and have had a strained relationship ever since.  Both competed for the same award—The Burke Prize for Best Rhetoric Ever—and Gorgias won. Ramus came into town two days ago.  Today, he and Gorgias were scheduled to speak together at a roundtable about the ongoing development of the woods north of Rhetorical Peaks.

Cleanth suggests that the player investigate the murder, and try to find out who committed the crime: "If you want to bring your professor's killer to justice, you will have to find that killer yourself."  He suggests that the player examine the professor's body and the papers scattered throughout the room, and then seek out Ramus, who is staying at the Cave Inn, on the west end of Rhetorical Peaks.  Cleanth offers some final advice: "In order to find out who caused the murder, you will have to assemble clues from many different sources.  You can't figure out the cause of a problem until you've assembled all the pieces, and seen how they fit together to form the best solution."  Cleanth then leaves the room.  Upon examining the Professor Gorgias's body, the player will find that it looks a little green, suggesting that the professor may have been poisoned.  There is also a rather gruesome, but not necessarily fatal-looking gash on the professor's forehead.  In Gorgias's desk, the player will find an open day planner that says has "Ramus visit—plan discussion 7 PM??" written in the block for yesterday evening.

**Room I: The Cave Of Pathos**
Professor Ramus, a scholarly rival of Professor Gorgias, is staying at the Cave Inn.  When the student approaches her, they discover that she is afraid that she may be accused of the murder and because she is resentful that Gorgias plagiarized from one of her articles.  In this part of the game, the player will undertake a brief "fetch quest" to find the two articles and bring them back to Ramus.  The player will then have to complete a dialogue tree with Ramus successfully. This dialogue will demonstrate both the players' understanding of what constitutes plagiarism and their knowledge of what makes for a successful pathos appeal.  These two rhetorical concepts are closely related, since an appeal to pathos involves drawing upon emotions associated with a value shared by the rhetor and his or her audience.  In the academy, plagiarism is a heavily emotionally charged issue because it is a violation of scholars' respect for creative integrity and truth. Finding and comparing the two

articles will allow students to practice recognizing plagiarism, and to learn how they can distinguish plagiarized from original work.

This episode provides a good visual tool to teach students about plagiarism. By comparing the two articles side-by-side the student can be made to understand what constitutes and does not constitute plagiarism and how plagiarism can be avoided.  By looking at the similarities between the two articles the student can be made to understand that copying an entire paper or article from another source, copying large sections of text from a source without quotation marks or proper citations, using the words of a source too closely when paraphrasing, or building on someone else's ideas without citing them (i.e. making ideas of others appear to be one's own) can all be considered plagiarism. Through the interaction with the very indignant Professor Ramus, students will learn that Gorgias's act not only showed a profound lack of integrity on his part, but it also constituted a theft from his colleague, an unjust denial of recognition.  This episode illustrates the damage that an unscrupulous scholar can do to a colleague through the decision to plagiarize, and asks students to recognize that academic dishonesty can have serious consequences (even murder!).

In addition to recognizing plagiarism, students must also demonstrate their ability to appeal to pathos by choosing dialogue options that will persuade Professor Ramus to tell everything she knows about the murder in the form of a clue.  Of the three available dialogue options, two are ineffective appeals to pathos that involve either attempting to manipulate Ramus by evoking feelings of sentimentality or making veiled threats. Both of these incorrect dialogue options also involve failing to recognize plagiarism, since the player has the opportunity to dismiss uncited paraphrase as acceptable or to fail to recognize the earlier publication date on Ramus' article, which indicates that it was written first and therefore must have been the article from which Gorgias' material was stolen.  The effective dialogue option involves a simultaneous correct recognition that uncited paraphrase is plagiarism as well as an emotionally stirring appeal to a shared value of truth, reinforced by pathos-heavy metaphorical language about not allowing the "white peaks of truth" to be "soiled by deception."  An appeal to pathos causes an audience not just to respond emotionally, but also to identify with the writer's point of view—to feel what the writer feels. In this episode, the player is made to understand how appealing to an audience's emotions can be used as a persuasion tool.

Once the player has given the correct response, Ramus will offer a clue: Gorgias had not only angered Ramus by stealing his ideas.  He had also angered some of the animals that inhabit the Woods north of Rhetorical Peaks.  These animals are not just any animals, either—they seek revenge on those who disturb their environment.  The player is instructed to seek

out a falcon, in a clearing to the North of the cave, who might have "blood on his talons."

**Room II: The Woods of Ethos**
To the North of the town of Rhetorical Peaks lies a clearing surrounded by a grove of trees. When the player enters this area, they will find some of the trees are burning, and there are scattered papers lying on the grass—important indicators of the information that the player will soon be given access to here. In this area, the player will encounter a talking falcon that will provide important information regarding the murder of the Professor as well as a clue as to who committed the murder. As the player works through this area of the game, the "story" that underlies the game itself starts to become clearer: the Professor had been involved in some kind of environmental damage to the Rhetorical Peaks landscape, damage which the falcon and his animal friends have been harmed by. In addition, other non-player characters are either implicated in this destruction or had knowledge of it. After engaging in a series of dialogue trees and one "fetch-quest," the player will leave the room better informed of the back-story to the murder, but also better able to understand the concept of ethos and how important it is as a rhetorical appeal.

Appeals to ethos convince audiences of a rhetor's trustworthiness by demonstrating that they have an appropriate "character" or persona. They form a connection between a rhetor and their audience by demonstrating that they are part of the same community, or share concerns, beliefs, and interests with that audience. In order for our players to make their necessary connection to the falcon, the player will be sent on a "fetch quest" to put on a suit of clothing, the wearing of which will demonstrate the player's solidarity with the falcon and his animal friends, and also the player's ability to understand how to present oneself to an audience in a way that brings about trust and cooperation.

After the player has entered the clearing and exchanged greetings with the falcon, the falcon gives a hint that the Professor may have been engaged in nefarious land-development enterprises. However, the falcon needs to be sure that the player is on his side, and requests that the player "clothe yourself in a way that shows that you are one of us." The player is directed to a wardrobe that is located on the edge of the clearing, where there are several different suits of clothing, many of them embroidered with different designs. Should the player choose the suit of clothing that seems to portray the player as a "developer," the falcon will indicate that this is inappropriate for a true "friend of the forest" to wear. One suit of clothes, though, has plants, animals, and forest scenes embroidered on it. It also appears to be made from environmentally-friendly materials. Once the player has chosen this (correct) suit of clothing, the falcon welcomes the player as "one of our own." The falcon then gives the player further information about the Professor, and

indicates that the Librarian in the Logos Room was somehow in "league" with the Professor to destroy the forest (he makes an oblique reference to the scattered pages lying within the field as having a connection to the burning and cutting down of the trees). He also says that "their alliance, as deadly as it was for us, may also have proved deadly for one of them." However, several things that the falcon says—among them his own anger over the environmental devastation that he blames the Professor for-- indicate to the player that the falcon might himself have had a role in the murder.

This room, then, performs several functions in the overall game. The player uses ethos appeals in order to convince an audience of his or her "trustworthiness" and in order to produce a given end. Specifically, the student will practice how to make an appeal to ethos visually. The player will see the important function that ethos has in helping one to obtain particular persuasive objectives—in this case, winning the Falcon to one's side as well as learning needed information about the Professor's murder. Finally, this room asks the player to consider the possible role that other NPC's might have had in the cause of the crime but doesn't let the Falcon off the hook as a possible suspect. As with the pathos and logos rooms, the clues don't necessarily lead to a "closed" resolution to the underlying crime, but instead ask the student player to think about causal arguments in an open-ended fashion.

**Room III: The Library of Logos**
In the eastern part of Rhetorical Peaks, there is a dark and spooky, yet clean and modern-looking, library. The owner and head librarian is a true lover of knowledge and is, in fact, made of pure logic. Platonic solid incarnate, the librarian is a perfect cube made out of translucent logical jelly. It demonstrates its commitment to pure logical inquiry by rejecting any of the player's appeals to its well-being or to their common interests. It is only responsive when the student demonstrates their logical thinking and interest in truth. In order to gather information and clues about Gorgias's death from the librarian, the student must convince the gelatinous cube that the player is a rational creature, committed to gaining knowledge and pursuing the truth. This room will test the student's knowledge of logical appeals in several ways.

The cube wants to know what has brought the player to the library, and the player explains, through responses to the cube's dialogue, that the player is investigating the professor's death. The cube will explain that it knows about his death, because all morning there has been a specter haunting the library. Every time the librarian approaches, the ghost begins to speak in logical fallacies, which are physically harmful to the logic-based cube. Thus, the cube is powerless to stop the specter from roaming around, frightening off library patrons. The cube says that it thought the ghost looked a lot like Gorgias, and that its illogic was very similar to what he had demonstrated in his last few publications. Now

that it knows the professor is dead, it deduces that this is the professor's ghost come back to haunt it and ruin its life by filling the library with illogic and inanity.

The librarian says it cannot tell the player anything more about its relationship with the professor until the ghost is exorcized. The player offers to help. At the end of this conversation, the ghost of Gorgias appears once again in the library and a sub-quest is initiated in the game. In this sub-quest, the player must re-kill or exorcise Gorgias's ghost. The player accomplishes this by engaging the ghost in conversation and telling it that it must leave. The ghost responds by offering several arguments in favor of it remaining in the library for eternity. Each of these arguments is fallacious and the player will succeed in banishing the ghost by correctly identifying the logical fallacy in each case.

Upon successfully defeating the specter, the player returns to talk to the cube. The cube thanks the player, but it is still not forthcoming with information about the professor's death until the player further demonstrates their interest in scientific research and facts for their own sake. In order to proceed with the conversation and get information from the cube, the student will have to bring up an article in *Science* magazine about the health of gelatinous cubes. The dialogue tree presented to the student at this point will offer a number of ways for the student to discuss this issue with the librarian. The student will only be able to proceed and get information from the librarian if s/he highlights his or her interest in the article as piece of research. If the student approaches the topic by emphasizing their concern for the librarian's health and well being, or by emphasizing the fact that they share common interests because they both read the same magazine, the librarian will dismiss the student as illogical.

When the student has shown themselves to be logical and interested in truth, the cube will share its information because it wants the truth of the case to be revealed. The cube will explain that it had some interest in Professor Gorgias's work to promote logging and development in the North Woods. The wood being cut down is used to make paper for the books to fill the library with new knowledge. The librarian explains that Gorgias was heavily invested in both the logging company and a chemical company that mixed a certain putrid poison with wood in order to make durable paper for long-lasting scholarly writing. The cube was only too happy that the destruction of the woods would lead to the printing of new scholarly books. He also explains that the process of making the paper was quite dangerous because it involved such a deadly poison, and that, often, paper made in this way contained poisonous fumes long after it had been used to make books. As a purely logical gelatinous cube, it is harmed only by illogic and stupidity. It is immune to the fumes and so it always aired out new shipments of books before putting them into circulation. However, it hadn't had a chance to air out yesterday's

shipment before Gorgias came in yesterday evening, demanding to take home a copy of the newly printed second edition of his book, *The Platonic Dissoi Logoi.* The cube speculates that Gorgias died by accident, as a result of inhaling the fumes. "Perhaps you should look at his body again. He died under mysterious circumstances—but not necessarily unnatural ones."

**Ending Point: Return to the Office**
Once the student has visited all three rooms, talked with the NPC's there, completed all three sub-quests, and gathered the available clues, they must return to the quest giver, Gorgias's housekeeper. Upon returning, Cleanth will explain that the authorities eventually came and took away Gorgias's body. They found a mysterious substance in his bloodstream and a possibly fatal head trauma, but could not conclude definitively which was the cause of death.

He also suggests that the librarian-cube may not be as innocent as it seems. The librarian stood to gain a great deal by the development of the forest, but was growing increasingly sickened—indeed, it was made physically ill—by Gorgias's increasingly illogical and fallacious pro-development arguments. It needed the forest to continue to be cut down, but in fact could not live with Gorgias's illogic. After explaining this, Cleanth says that it is indeed a complex crime and many people are suspect. It is up to the student to make an argument as to who, or what, was the cause of the professor's death. To the rhetoric classroom!

## Conclusion

Multimedia interactive quest games offer instructors and students the opportunity to engage new forms of literacy and experience learning in innovative ways, and we think that the *Neverwinter Nights* environment lends itself particularly well to use in the rhetoric classroom. Perhaps the most valuable aspect of this game is that it allows for multiple possible outcomes, and allows the player to draw several different conclusions about a similar situation. In the rhetoric classroom, we want our students to recognize the value of making arguments that are successful in persuading particular audiences but that are not necessarily about offering indisputable, absolutely definitive solutions. With this game, we hope that the process of assembling evidence into the best possible argument will prove to be its own reward. It will be exciting to see how students actually respond to this game and how instructors use the game to practice a number of rhetorical skills.

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