

It is often modest beginnings that lead to something important. It certainly seems like a little thing, a quest. Everybody has an idea of what a quest is. And yet going deeper into its meaning can serve to bridge some of the deeper gaps in the study of new media. As Howard is aware, quests are a way to “play” literature that can combine the interpretive and configurative functions (in Aarseth’s terms) and avoid exclusionist and often unproductive debates. Howard goes beyond the utilitarian and most common view of quests, dwelling instead on their symbolic and meaning-charged possibilities, thus offering a way to teach both literature and new media to those who move effortlessly between print and digital worlds.

This is one of those uncommon books that build bridges between alien disciplines. Howard is a true Renaissance man in these electronic times. He merges his knowledge and love of literature with his enthusiasm for computer games and the unexplored possibilities of the new medium. Human intellectual activity has a common base, be it expressed in the form of poems or computer games, and Howard shows us some of the most stunning connections between the old form of quest literature and the new challenges of games.

This is a book for humanists, who will find a refreshing new relevance to their field. It is also a book for digital theorists, who will be interested in how the old can tell us something about the new. Computer game designers will learn how to make better use of symbolism and allegory to improve the emotional impact of, and give a deeper meaning to, their quests. Other quest theorists have talked of “meaning” in general, but Howard analyzes just what “meaning” could be, what kinds of meaning there are, and how these kinds of meaning are valuable in different ways.

This book’s achievements include a history of quest computer games and quest narratives, as well as a summary of classic literary theories about quests; an analysis of newer games with more challenging structures than the ones studied up to now; a convincing discussion of the importance of space in relation to quests; and descriptions of the different kinds of quests. Especially valuable are the book’s practical applications, in which quest components are carefully described and then tested in the accompanying exercises. The book also reprints portions of old texts, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *The Faerie Queen*, which will help the reader understand the historical legacy of quest literature.

I am convinced that the study of the theories proposed and the completion of the exercises in this book (try to make your own Holy Grail!) will fulfil Howard’s goal of giving teachers and students “a set of strategies for designing

meaningful action,” a worthy aim in these times of bad design and drought of the imagination.

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