Reflective Essay on Researching “Wanderer”

The inevitable condition in the premise of my English Honors Thesis, “Wanderer Above the Sea of Desolation: The Romantic Ruin in Contemporary Dark Fantasy,” is that it is an inherently interdisciplinary project. It is an evaluation of the practice and expression of literary worldbuilding as a form of narrative storytelling in a contemporary dark fantasy video game; furthermore, its particular analysis of the effectiveness of such worldbuilding in creating an organic narrative is supplemented by the presence of the Romantic ruin and fragmentation in dark fantasy worlds. It draws upon two seemingly distinct and unrelated disciplines: The long-standing history of 19th century Romanticism and contemporary video game studies. These two fields, on their own, presented a multitude of challenges regarding the vast depth of research and comprehension needed to achieve this project. In addition, my topic centralized in worldbuilding presented the added challenge of comprehensively explaining an extremely niche component of fiction writing.

Given the nature of this project, my committee was deliberately hand-picked to cover its bases. My Director, Kir Kuiken, is a Romantic scholar, while my Second Reader, Laura Tetreault, is a contemporary multimedia specialist. The guidance from my committee -- particularly regarding which scholars and journals to consult -- allowed me to craft a unique critical text balancing two temporally distinct fields.

The Romantic component of this project, easily containing the greatest depth and quantity of scholarly sources, necessitated multiple approaches. I utilized a combination of texts written by: The original Romantic scholars, Edmund Burke and Uvedale Price; the 20th century’s foremost literary critic on the Romantic ruin, Thomas McFarland; numerous contemporary writers, whose works tailored to specific applications of Romantic theory such as
ecocriticism and melancholia; even members of the Romantic poetic canon-- namely Wordsworth and Coleridge. While the older texts are readily available as a part of the public domain, McFarland’s *Romanticism and the Forms of Ruin* along with the other Romantic-centered scholarly essays were accessed through UAlbany’s library databases.

Scholarly texts from video game studies, being such a novel field of study, were difficult to procure-- especially video game studies focused specifically on narrative storytelling. General searches in the university’s databases very rarely retrieved relevant results. However, the library’s depth of advanced search tools, such as subject-filtering, allowed me to find texts that cover this extremely specific topic: Namely, Sebastian Domsch’s *Storyplaying: Agency and Narrative in Video Games*, supplied by UAlbany’s databases, served as one of the few instances of a project similar to my own, a literary study within the video game medium. Most of the other video game-centric sources were retrieved from the online-available *Game Studies* journal.

Due to the scarcity of scholarly resources in the field of worldbuilding studies, texts dedicated to wide-sweeping overviews of the practice are hard to obtain. One of the foremost texts in this niche field -- as well as the central referential text for worldbuilding utilized in this project -- is worldbuilding scholar Mark J. P. Wolf’s *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation*. This particular text is a textbook-like collection of Wolf's own theories and essays on the practice; in addition to its more theoretical contents, it also contains a vast glossary of common worldbuilding terms. While the entire text assisted in my evaluation of the effectiveness of my case study’s fictional worldbuilding, the glossary specifically assisted in keeping the actual contents of my project concise. By referencing the key worldbuilding terms detailed by the text’s glossary in the footnotes of my project, I was able to maintain the clarity of my thesis, while providing readers with substantial resources for the more niche terms utilized in
this unique field. The Inter-Library Loan system allowed me to obtain this rare text, delivered to me physically from SUNY Binghamton's collection.

Although numerous challenges were prompted by this project as a result of its interdisciplinary nature, it is its very quality of interdisciplinary study that allowed me to conduct a unique and original research-driven contribution to multiple fields. This project contained many motivations: Most significant was the contribution of serious scholarly research to the emerging field of video game studies, and a reinvigoration of the old Romantic literary tradition still relevant in the modern day. Furthermore, it is through the university library’s extensive collections that I was even able to procure the deep and varied sources needed to conduct such a large-scale interdisciplinary project.