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## Can Real Academics Do Flash? Teaching and the Costs and Benefits of Technology

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I suspect that anyone who might be interested enough in reading this article has appreciated the advent of PowerPoint as a teaching tool. PowerPoint can be horribly misused, but it does not necessarily do any more harm and does offer many more possibilities than mimeographed handouts, flipcharts, chalk- and whiteboards, overheads, and the like. For myself, I have found that I am able to broaden my teaching effectiveness with various learner types by offering visual reinforcement (cf. Cases 1-3 above). PowerPoint is a tool that helps me outline my presentations while at the same time allowing for a great degree of freedom. I usually share my PowerPoints as PDF handouts which I also post online, so that my students are not buried in their notebooks (paper or computer) taking notes. Instead, we tend to be looking at each other and are able to engage in higher levels of interaction and conversation. Sometimes I even function as class note-taker and edit the PowerPoint as we are working through it, adding pertinent observations or responses to questions, and then later reposting it online. PowerPoint can also work well as a way of sharing a presentation in an online learning environment. One could even deliver the PowerPoint with an accompanying audio or video online using Producer, a free program from Microsoft designed to accompany PowerPoint ([www.microsoft.com/office/powerpoint/producer/prodinfo](http://www.microsoft.com/office/powerpoint/producer/prodinfo)).

A series on the parables of Jesus was one of the first projects for which I used PowerPoint. I understand the parables to be a pedagogical device, and, like a PowerPoint show, they are a way of presenting a concept with visual and memorable aspects. For any particular parable, I could display the text, lay out parallel versions, highlight key elements, and provide some visuals that would serve to support or to challenge conceptions one might hold about that parable. As the teacher, I organized the slides and guided the way we worked through the presentation. Such a procedure was a definite improvement over my former treatment with paper handout and overheads, but the parables have interested me not so much for their *content* but for the *experience* they create. That is, I would argue that the parables are intended to engage the hearer, offer moments of surprise and discovery, and ultimately effect a transformation in the hearer's perception. It is an outstanding, learner-oriented pedagogical model, but it stands in contrast to the teacher-directed PowerPoint approach. It should be noted, then, that technology can provide some enhancements to our teaching, but we must still consider the underlying pedagogical goals. Does technology simply provide some glitter to the old methods or does it open up new possibilities?

It occurred to me that an experiential approach to the parables might be achieved through technological emulation. I had two models in mind, the computer game "Myst" and the musical experience "All This Time" by the musician Sting (1995). Both of these created rich, interactive environments with very little explicit directions given to the player. By clicking around, discovering clues, and using reason, the player eventually

discerned what was happening and how one was supposed to realize the eventual goal. In the process, the player could learn a number of things, be challenged by puzzles, and be entertained while exploring the environment. Both programs were enhanced by outstanding production values, and they certainly were popular, especially in the case of “Myst” which has sold over 11 million units ([Source](#)). One may ask, however, “Are these *educational* games?” Without question, the player does learn something: what is going on with all the levers on the Myst island or the background and motivation for Sting’s musical pieces. One also learns logic and strategy: how to accumulate clues in one place that are needed elsewhere or how to discern and replicate certain patterns. The better question, then, is not whether digital game-based learning is educational (it certainly is), but whether it is *appropriate* for the study of Jesus’ parables. There has been a proliferation of educational games for a wide variety of the academic spectrum, and many of them have intentional agendas about how learning is experienced (cf. [www.socialimpactgames.com](http://www.socialimpactgames.com)). Marc Prensky (2001) has most forcefully argued that digital game-based learning is essential, especially for a younger generation that desires to be engaged in the learning process. Though the parables of Jesus are of a more serious nature than most computer games, and the goal is more profound than discerning the secrets of a constructed environment, I believe it is possible that the dynamics of such simulations could be imitated in a way to engage learners in discovering the parables of Jesus.

I attempted, therefore, to create a learning event designed to recreate the experience of a parable. First, I needed to provide an awareness of a first-century Palestinian perspective on such things as mustard, Samaritans, tax collectors, social customs, and the like. This is a matter of *providing information*, but it can be accomplished more engagingly and inductively in a digital environment. Second, I wanted to *duplicate the experience of the parable*. This is a more daunting task, and I am discovering that a variety of approaches may be most effective for the variety of parables. What a digital environment allows, however, is a way to get past some of the traditional understandings of a parable that tend to inhibit any creative interaction with it. One might say that a digital setting allows the teacher to manipulate the learner more easily, but it is also a form of learning based on a clear pedagogical goal that will, in the end, be evaluated on its own merits.

As I started work on this project, I quickly encountered conceptual and technological challenges. The conceptual challenge was posed by the desire to create an environment where the learner had the freedom to choose how to proceed and yet also one that provided a linear presentation required by the sequence of the events within the parable and that ends up with a conclusion I think the learner should reach. That is, I was faced with the inherent tension between interactivity and narrativity. I discovered that this is a problematic issue that is frequently discussed in the recently emerged field of ludology, the study of games—computer and video games in particular (see such sites as [ludology.org](http://ludology.org), [gamestudies.org](http://gamestudies.org), or [game-research.com](http://game-research.com)). Negotiating between non-linear, learner-directed interactivity and linear, author-directed narrativity is partially a matter of a game’s openness. Consider the difference between chess and the board game “Game of Life.” Both have an ultimate goal, but chess is rules-based, and an openness of play with a variety of outcomes emerges as players apply those rules. In the “Game of Life,” on the other hand, the player follows a set path and the progress is controlled by a limited set of

alternative choices. J. C. Herz has categorized the former as an “Old Testament approach to game design” where basic rules get played out and the latter as a “Pirates of the Caribbean’ syndrome” where, like a theme park ride, the player basically is led through orchestrated experiences (these distinctions are outlined in Jonas Heide Smith’s “Does Gameplay Have Politics?” at [www.game-research.com/art\\_gameplay\\_politics.asp](http://www.game-research.com/art_gameplay_politics.asp)).

While dealing with this conceptual challenge, I also encountered a technological one. Since I was familiar with Microsoft FrontPage and the HTML coding it simplifies, my first attempt at a parable environment using HTML was like an enhanced web page. It was difficult, however, to provide any sort of sequencing or dependencies between events. So, in order to at least organize the interactivity, I determined that I would need to use Macromedia Flash. Even as I am learning the possibilities and the complexities of this program, I am realizing that I will probably need to move to the even more sophisticated Macromedia Director program in order to achieve the levels of interactivity, contingency, and progression that I am envisioning.

I do not yet have a finished product, but let us now consider, from an educator’s perspective, the technological assumptions that have already been made. In particular, I am reflecting on what is required for a typical academician to employ the technologies I have outlined. It is probably safe to assume that the vast majority of educational institutions have provided competent computer equipment and have equipped it with Microsoft Office or a similar suite of programs for word processing and presentations. Part of the attraction of PowerPoint is that it is fairly well integrated with Microsoft Word, and the learning curve for using either of these programs at a minimal level is not very steep. Many educators are probably quite competent at this level of practice. To use PowerPoint in the classroom, however, assumes that a projector and screen are available. To share presentations online assumes that there is a high-speed Internet connection and a web host and that some other program such as Blackboard or FrontPage is available to upload it. The Producer program is not particularly difficult to use, but to incorporate audio or video requires additional equipment that can be both expensive and challenging to employ. To develop a sophisticated web site (as I first attempted) requires learning the intricacies of HTML. Incorporating graphics and digital images requires diligence to copyright restrictions unless one becomes proficient at acquiring and manipulating their own visuals. My experience so far with Flash has been another steep learning curve that is quite like learning another language, and if I end up moving to Director, it will be yet another step. What this all represents is more equipment, more software, more money, and especially, more time.

At this point, then, it is worthwhile to consider some of the “76 Reasonable Questions to Ask about Any Technology” posed by Jacques Ellul (online at [www.thewords.com/articles/ellul76quest.htm](http://www.thewords.com/articles/ellul76quest.htm)), especially the issues of what is being sacrificed and what effect these technological pursuits are having on my vocation as a teacher. It is clear to me that the time I have spent trying to master the technology is time I have not spent in primary research in my field of study. Initially, it was my research that generated my project, and it was my familiarity with some of the technological possibilities that allowed me to envision its form as a digital experience. I can confirm what the reader has probably already surmised, namely, that attempting a project of this magnitude is probably only possible for those educators who are already technologically comfortable and committed. The question remains, however, whether it is worthwhile or

sustainable. Spending ten hours developing a two minute Flash piece is simply not reasonable for a full-time teacher. Perhaps I can enlist a technologically-savvy student to assist in my project. Perhaps, if the concept proves to be satisfactorily workable, I might be able to persuade a publisher to put their greater resources into the project. In the meantime, however, I continue to work on my parables project as best as I can. I am also learning, as in Jesus' parable of the sower and the seed, that some of the seeds I am planting may be more productive in yielding transformation than others!