

## Origin Stories and Making Writing Platforms

by Douglas M. Walls

published in *Kairos: A Journal of Rhetoric, Technology, Pedagogy*, 19(1),  
available at <http://kairos.technorhetoric.net/19.1/reviews/walls>

Hi, My name is Douglas Walls and I am an Assistant Professor of Writing and Rhetoric at the University of Central Florida.

Today I am going to talk to you about the book *Designing Web-Based Applications for 21st Century Writing Classrooms* by George Pullman and Baotong Gu. It's a compilation and I want to begin by talking about origin stories and the importance of origin stories to projects like this, and this particular project I think begins back in 1993, with Paul J. LeBlanc's *Writing Teachers Writing Software: Creating Our Place in the Electronic Age*, and um, a lot of book chapters in here talk about how important that text was in their ideas for developing not only their own writing platforms but for appropriating writing platforms. So the editors mention that there are a variety of reasons and a variety of writing stories for why writing teachers might choose to develop their own platforms or modify platforms that already exist in the commercial sphere. Some of that has to do with dissatisfaction with content management systems, some of it has to do with certain functionalities, like review functionalities and being able to reward that—and there's lots of variety of reasons.

So I think the ideas of origin stories are pretty important. With an origin story, you get a sense of who you are but also what your potential is for a field, and what does that potential look like manifested in a lot of places. And you get a lot of those with this book.

To begin with, the book is divided into three sections. The first one is called "Writing Environments," and pretty much anyone who has been to a conference in the last five years either at—interested in these issues—either at Computers & Writing or CCCC [Conference on College Composition and Communication] will recognize a lot of the platforms mentioned here.

The chapters include one on Eli from Michigan State, a chapter on <emma> from University of Georgia, there's a chapter on Raider Writer from Texas Tech, and the Writing@CSU portal and the importance of metaphor in that. And, finally, that section ends with a chapter by Michael Wojcik and Matt Penniman on the development of a writing platform in a community class and the importance of thinking about agile design in writing situations, so that chapter doesn't really fit, I think, with the rest of that section but that section is filled with getting the back story of a lot of large scale writing platforms that folks are familiar with in the field. And so there's some background either in terms of the organization or in terms of the theories that drive those chapters.

Part two is focused on individual and stand-alone applications so that is where you get to see more variety, maybe, because these are smaller projects. So there is a chapter by Brian

McNely and Paul Gestwicki about Google Wave, there's a chapter about what I thought was a fairly interesting chapter on gaming in writing platforms by David Fisher and Joe Williams. I thought that that chapter was particularly interesting because it was about designing games for writers and having people become writers through the design of a game to help people with literature reviews and some other great projects that are a little smaller so you might not have heard of many of those.

Finally, part three is about maybe some of the work that we might be familiar with in our own life in terms of modifying open source projects to get things done at maybe more of the classroom scale. There are two pieces on wikis, one by Karl Stolley and one by Steven Benninghoff, and then a piece on applying blogs instead of course management software by Steven Krause.

So what is this book good at? I think that origin stories are pretty important in terms of where you might be in your own department and thinking about proof of concept. So a lot of times we might think, I wish I had a writing platform that did this thing that I know how to do as a writing teacher, I wish I could get people to believe that we could manage resources and we could push concepts out, and we don't have to accept terrible commercial options, so I think a lot of the stories here kind of point to that. And it also kind of points to it in the way that I think are pretty interesting in terms of the variety of different ways of thinking about writing as an activity in terms of content production, in terms of review, in terms of community organizing, in terms of literature review and kind of helping other people to learn by creating things that help them to learn.

So I think at its best, this compilation is at its best when it is doing a wide variety of talking about different ways that different things come to be. And it's also nice to have large scale platforms like the Elis and the emmas of the world... stories about them located in one place. A lot of those have been around for a long time now and having them a place where you can hand them to grad students and say here, this is what people are doing in different places, for that reason it's a nice book to have.

There are some really nice discussions, I think, between the idea of writing and developing—the chapter with Penniman and Wojcik is particularly interesting to me about that. I think the difference is a lot of times people compare writing to coding, and I'm not sure those processes are as similar as writing and developing are, so there are some interesting ideas that we might take away there to different writing situations or different development situations.

And of course getting all these ideas of what writing is and different software that support different types of writing activity, kind of gives us, offers a complex notion of what writing is, just complicates that very act. When you're talking to people, it's not just [Microsoft] Word, or Google Docs, it's all these other kind of complicated delivery issues and review issues, and sustainability issues, so I think it's nice to have those in one place.

What could they have done better? Always the trickiest part of a review.

The organization seems a bit off, some of it, for the example the chapter on standalone writing platforms begins with a piece that was an add on to Google Wave, which is now

defunct of course, so it's not really as standalone as it might be, but certainly those big projects like Raider Writer and Writing@CSU belong together.

After that, I'm not sure about the organization. And it's a pricey book, I got it for free but it is a very expensive book. In softcover it's over \$60. This is the kind of book that with large scale programs—if you're not familiar with them—say you're at a smaller university or you're a grad student and you want to find out about those sorts of projects or you want to get up to speed, this might be the book that you go and get, but it's kind of harder for those people to obtain a more expensive book, but that's kind of always the problem with academic presses.

So I'm a big believer in having origin stories being able to tell you not only where you've been and what's around, but also where you want to go. I think there's enough potential here in these origin stories and enough levels that one could pursue writing one's own writing platforms and gathering resources to think about ways of doing that at different scales.

My name is Douglas Walls and this has been a review of *Designing Web-Based Applications for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Writing Classrooms* by George Pullman and Boatong Gu.

Thanks for listening.