Taking Teachers Through the Portal
Creating tools to help teachers use Digital Writing within the curriculum

A report of the Writers for the Future in the Classroom project
carried out for NESTA by the trAce Online Writing Centre
April 2003-March 2005

by Helen Whitehead

1 Executive Summary

2 What is Digital Writing?

3 Introduction

4 Writers for the Future in the Classroom

Following the pilot project, the Writers for the Future project, again funded by NESTA, took place over two years from April 2003 to March 2005. It explored innovative ways of writing using the internet and provided criteria for best practice in the emerging genre of new media or Digital Writing.

This challenging action research project included:

- A Digital Writer-in-Residence (Tim Wright) creating innovative literature online[1].
- A Residential Workshop introducing writers to technique and appreciation.
- An Online Workshop providing resources, training, support and inspiration.
- An Archive of new media writing developed at trAce since 1996.

Writers for the Future in the Classroom was the education side of the project, which explored the use of Digital Writing in schools. It included:

- A Digital Teacher-in-Residence (Simon Widdowson) developing new media writing/Digital Writing in the classroom.
- A Teachers' Portal providing curriculum resources and support.

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[1] *In Search of Oldton*, http://www.oldton.com/ accessed 13th April 2005

Writers for the Future

□ Home □ About □ News □ View □ **Participate** □ **Teachers** □ **Archive**

http://www.writersforthefuture.com/

Teachers

eTeachers' Portal

Simon Widdowson's Weblog

Teachers

Developing new media based tools for teachers

The eTeachers' Portal on Kids on the Net has been expanded to provide information and resources for teachers about new forms of writing, including hypertext, collaborative online writing and other forms of new media. We have provided tools for making new kinds of interactive hypermedia texts with children in the classroom.

Simon Widdowson, our Digital Teacher-in-Residence from September 2004-August 2005, worked in schools all over the country (online and offline) on practical ICT literacy projects. He developed tools and projects that have an obvious place in the current curriculum yet challenge both teachers and pupils and introduce new forms of writing.

The projects include: Adventure Island

Without needing to understand any computer language, this online tool enables teachers to lead their class in creating an online island that other people can visit and explore. It involves imaginative and descriptive writing, diary or poetry writing. Pupils create challenges and puzzles for the visitor to solve. As the visitor travels around a created Island, descriptive writing for each area encourages them to explore further. Will they be able to survive, and leave the Island, or will they remain trapped there forever... ?

http://kotn.ntu.ac.uk/adventureisland

The eTeachers Portal aims to provide an interactive access ramp for teachers new to digital writing, whilst at the same time providing a range of challenging opportunities for the more sophisticated user.

We aim to continue to support young people in the creation of hypertexts and other digital writings.

4.1 Aims and objectives of the project

4.1.1 Aims

We aimed to create a Teachers' Portal for the Kids on the Net website, specifically providing resources for teachers about new forms of electronic/Digital Writing, including hypertext, collaborative online writing and other forms of new media.

Our aims were:

- To promote new learning models using ICT for writing and literacy, most specifically with regard to new forms of interactive, hypertextual and visual writing.
- To challenge the focus of the conventional curriculum on print media and to draw attention instead to online, programmable, audio and animated texts.
- To generate an interest in reader development in online writing.
- To develop the skills of children and teachers in online citizenship and collaboration.

4.1.2 Objectives

We aimed to inform teachers of the benefits of using new forms of writing in the classroom and to support their adoption and development:

- To offer an envoy, in the form of a digital teacher-in-residence, to work directly in schools on practical online projects. The teacher's role included conducting a series of small

experimental online writing projects, creating material for addition to a Teacher's Portal for Kids on the Net, and supporting teachers wishing to develop their skills.

- To initiate the creation of tools for making new kinds of interactive hypermedia texts using a range of applications including Flash.
- To develop an audience model leading to a simple system for badging tools and content according to technical competence and time commitment
- To develop a support and information point for teachers wishing to develop skills and raise standards in using ICT for literacy
- To generate a body of exemplar hypermedia created by children

The resources we piloted in schools have an obvious place in the current curriculum yet attempt to challenge both teachers and pupils to be more creative in using ICT skills, and to introduce them to Digital Writing. We concentrated on a small number of projects that were designed to act as an attractive access ramp for teachers new to the field whilst at the same time providing a range of challenging opportunities for the more sophisticated user. These projects are displayed on the Kids on the Net website but are fully documented and resourced within the eTeachers' Portal (the revamped Teachers' Portal: see section 4.4). The projects remain available for use in schools beyond the timescale of the NESTA project as part of Kids on the Net.

eTeachers' Portal resource page screenshot
www.eteachersportal.com/r05302.htm

4.2 Methods and practice

The core team comprised Helen Whitehead, Project Manager, and Simon Widdowson, Digital Teacher-in-Residence. They were supported by the Writers for the Future team at trAce, Sue Thomas, Simon Mills and Catherine Gillam, and advised by Joe Elliot, our NESTA-appointed advisor, and a Teacher Tools Advisory Group (TTAG), which met six-monthly, either in person or virtually, to advise on the direction of the project and trouble-shoot any problems and issues. The TTAG included teachers, education experts and consultants. (For full membership see end of Appendix 1).

In line with the "access ramp" model described above (section 3.5.1), we decided at the start, on the advice of the Teacher Tools Advisory Group, that

> "one of the key issues is to encourage teachers to want to use the web as a tool. The general opinion is that teachers are apprehensive as they assume that children are more computer literate than they. ... At the same time it is not desirable to spend a great deal of time and resources on developing basic IT skills in teachers. *In short, the emphasis is not on how to use IT, but rather how IT can be used.*"[2]

4.3 Teacher in residence: Simon Widdowson

Simon Widdowson was employed as Digital Teacher-in-Residence, part-time only from September to December 2003, then full-time from January to the end of August 2004. He was supported by Helen Whitehead and, for Adventure Island, by Simon Mills. Simon Widdowson revamped the eTeachers' Portal resources, planned, created and piloted the online projects in schools, coordinated the evaluations, and liaised with TTAG, teachers, consultants and other organisations, including giving talks to various groups of teachers at conferences and training days. He maintained a blog of his activities (see screenshot below).

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[2] Minutes, TTAG meeting, 30th June 2003

Simon reassessed and reframed (where necessary) all the resources from the original NESTA-funded pilot project (see Section 3.5), adding information on teacher skill levels required and hardware and software resources needed. The original resources were indexed only by National Literacy Framework objective so we added extra indexes to allow teachers to also search for resources by genre and project, etc. (See Appendix 5 for an example of a resource.)

Simon then produced a series of new teaching resources and tools using our "Access Ramp" model. These were associated with two major new themed projects (see page 19 for screenshot of the resources page for Dragonsville). He used Flash, Hot Potatoes, Javascript and HTML and Cold Fusion to produce online literacy activities that reinforced literacy skills relevant to Digital Writing. These include interactive cloze activities, Flash-based tools to design posters, crosswords, and quizzes on similes and metaphors with associated interactive stories[3]. For screenshots of some of these, see page 20.

Index of resources for Dragonsville screenshot
http://www.eteachersportal.com/dville.htm

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[3] see, e.g., Dragonsville Quiz section http://www.dragonsville.com/quiz.htm

e Teachers Portal.com

☐ Resources ☐ About ☐ News ☐ Join ☐ Contact ☐ Kids on the N

Index of resources for Dragonsville

NOTE: Some activities require a plugin program called Flash™ to be installed on your computer. Ask whoever is in charge of the computer to download it safely for FREE by clicking here.

The premise
Dragonsville is a community of dragons who live close to Kids' Castle (another project within the Kids on the Net website). The dragons of Dragonsville are friendly, yet shy dragons who have avoided contact with humans until now. Since learning that the knights of old had spread untruths about them, they have decided that they need to show children how friendly they really are and so have made the decision that it is time to allow children into Dragonsville.

Within Dragonsville there are several sections that encourage children to produce literacy work. Each has been designed to fulfil at least one curriculum objective to fit with teachers' termly planning.

Further info on curriculum links is available in our eTeachers' Portal

The Rock of Knowledge
This is an area where the dragons go to find out information. Children are encouraged to research and present information in this area. Example application: The NLS framework for Year 3 term 2 (Instructional writing), Year 4 term 2 (Explanation), Year 5 term 2 (Non Chronological Reports and Explanation) and Year 6 term 2 (Notices and Public Information Documents) can be linked into this area.

The Cave of Fame

Fiction

Year 3 Term 2
Fiction: Writing a character portrait
(Objective 8)

ICT skills / new media writing

Ongoing
Hyperlinking documents together

Non-fiction

Year 3 Term 3
Non-fiction: Writing letters
(Objective 20)

Year 4 Term 1
Non-fiction: Writing Instructions
(Objectives 25, 26)

The Adventure Island project gave teachers a tool to create various types of hyperlinked narratives on the theme of a desert island – without needing web skills.

Simon held workshops for children and teachers all over the country (plus – virtually - in 5 schools in USA and Israel over the Internet), including workshops in 8 schools in the Dragonsville pilot and 7 more in the Adventure Island pilot. He spoke to more than 200 teachers and emphasised the importance of cascading the knowledge to other teachers in the same schools and other schools.

From Dragonsville – Cloze activity – The Winter Dragon
www.dragonsville.com/winter.htm

From Dragonsville – Flash activity – Design a lost dragon poster
www.dragonsville.com/poster3.htm

Everywhere Simon (and myself) spoke, we challenged the focus of the conventional curriculum on print media and drew attention to the potential for writing with new technologies.

"It was so inspiring to see someone else working with ICT in the classroom: it was very helpful for informing my own practice. The visit from the Digital Teacher was mentioned in our OFSTED report."
Caroline Stamp-Dod, Millfield

"Simon's workshops added to the 'wow' factor with the children – they felt they were doing something really special (which, of course, they were)."
Laura Pearce, Folkestone

4.4   The eTeachers' Portal

4.4.1   The relationship between the eTeachers' Portal and Kids on the Net

Originally the Teachers' Portal was a sub-site of Kids on the Net, but as Writers for the Future project progressed, we realised that to serve teachers properly the Teachers' Portal needed its own identity and we created a domain – eTeachersPortal.com - with its own logo and identity. The reasons for this were:

- **Teachers' needs** - for resources that clearly address the skills that pupils need and the objectives of the existing curriculum - are separate from those of young writers at whom Kids on the Net is aimed – to whom we offer help and encouragement with writing, the opportunity to be published and feedback from peers and guides. Resources for teachers are not necessarily a subset of the Kids on the Net projects (primarily aimed at children themselves) but sit alongside.
- **Encouraging Digital Writing** involves also looking at projects beyond Kids on the Net. If future development is possible, the eTeachers' Portal should be a portal to Digital Writing in schools, not just to Kids on the Net itself.
- The **look of the site** should be different as it is aimed at teachers and consultants (adults) rather than children. Teachers who search the Web will get more from arriving at the eTeachers' Portal than arriving directly at Kids on the Net.
- The **two sites work alongside one another** with clear links but separate purposes.

The eTeachers' Portal developed throughout the project – starting as a portal to the resources in Kids on the Net and taking steps towards becoming an information point and network for teachers wishing to develop skills and raise standards in using ICT for literacy and writers and others involved in this kind of work.

The final version of the eTeachers' Portal website, the beta version of which launched in February 2005, aims to give it a professional look and focus it on teachers and consultants rather than children. It promotes new learning models using ICT for writing and literacy, by providing resources, linked to the curriculum, and with a focus particularly on new forms of interactive, hypertextual and visual writing, i.e. Digital Writing.

Final version of eTeachers' Portal website
www.eteachersportal.com

4.4.2   The structure of the eTeachers' Portal
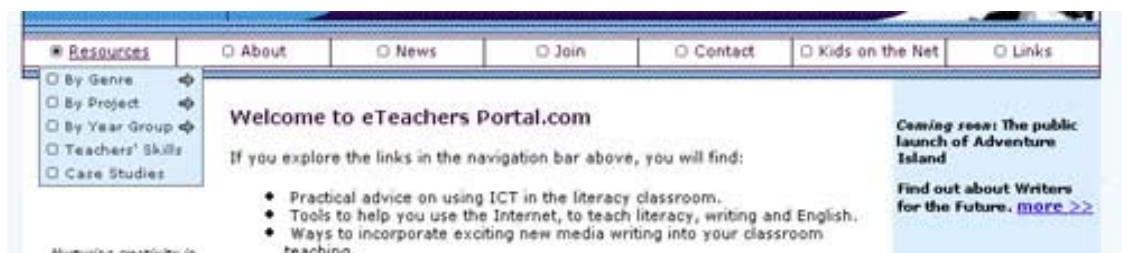
From the homepage, the eTeachers' Portal is divided into several areas.

The most important is Resources, which can be accessed by Genre (fiction, nonfiction, poetry, etc.), by Project (Dragonsville, Kids' Castle etc.), or by Year Group, Term and National Literacy Strategy Objective. In this section there are also a few resources addressing teachers' skills, and some case studies of the use of Kids on the Net and its projects in school, as well as links to case studies of other Digital Writing projects.

The resources are all in the same format, giving information on the type of resource, a brief description, curriculum links, information on how to use the resources in the classroom and, if available, links to related downloadable teachers' notes and worksheets.

The resources section also includes case studies of the use of Kids on the Net and eTeachers' Portal projects in school: we expect that other case studies of digital writing will be added.

4.4.3   Content of a typical resource
_____

Year 3 Term 2
Fiction: Myths, legends, parables & fables
Objective: Whole Term

|	
Resource Title	Monster Motel
Type of Resource	Online Resource
Project	Monster Motel
Summary	Here is an imaginary house full of monsters created by children: there are descriptions of hundreds of monsters, which inhabit the various rooms. There is also a monster menu with recipes for the disgusting dishes on offer.
URL of project	http://kotn.ntu.ac.uk/motel/
Downloadables available	Yes
Downloadable teachers notes	Word file PDF file
Downloadable worksheets	Word file : Monster Portrait PDF file : Monster Portrait
In the Classroom	Write a portrait character of a monster to feature in a myth etc. Base a revamped traditional tale on a monster from the motel.
Online activities, instructions or forms	Send poems to the site using the form provided
URL of online activities	http://trace.ntu.ac.uk/kotn/motel/submit.html
Summary - extended information in notes or worksheets	Write an instant monster story online
Extension activities URL	http://trace.ntu.ac.uk/kotn/motel/interactive2.htm
Linked activities	Write traditional recipes in the Kids' Castle Kitchen Create character portraits for characters in Kids' Castle
Keywords for extensions: special needs Adaptations for different age groups and abilities	KS1 – Choose a monster out of a well known story or fairy tale and produce a group character portrait KS2 – Create detailed character descriptions of monsters in stories that have been read Art & Technology – Create pictures or 3D models of monsters
NLS framework objective (Year)	3
NLS framework objective (Term)	2
NLS framework objective (Number)	Whole Term
NLS framework objective (Name)	To generate ideas relevant to a topic by brainstorming, word association, etc To investigate and collect sentences / phrases / for story openings and endings: use some formal elements in retelling and story writing To collect suitable words and phrases, in order to write poems and short descriptions; design simple patterns with words, use repetitive phrases, write imaginative comparisons
Year group(s) UK - Starting Year group range	3
Ending year group range	6
Curriculum Links	English, Literacy, Technology, Art
ICT Skills	Word Processing Webforms
Teacher experience level	Basic
Length of time required	Several lessons

4.4.4   Other areas of the eTeachers' Portal

The other areas of the eTeachers' Portal are:

About
This gives information about the eTeachers' Portal, and about
the consultancy services we offer, such as workshops for
children or INSET for teachers.
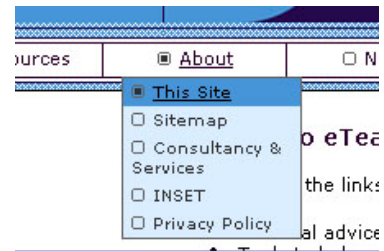
News
There are two aspects to the news – (1) a news feed from the NGfL (National Grid for Learning)
– in fact we were the first website to offer this new feature when the NGfL first offered it - and
(2) a blog, or weblog, of news about the eteachers' Portal and Kids on the Net and any other
news of relevance to digital writing in schools.

We chose to use a blog because it is easily updated and can be maintained after the project
finishes, giving the eTeachers' Portal an ongoing aspect that would otherwise be lacking
without further funding.

See page 25 for an example screenshot from the News blog.

Join
This provides a link to sign up for the newsletter, and information about volunteers.

Contact
Full address and contact details – limited to this one place so that the email address is not
spread over many pages, the advantages being that it is easier to change if necessary and less
likely to be picked up by email-harvesting spam bots.

Kids on the Net
A link to Kids on the Net and general information about that website and how to use it in the
classroom.
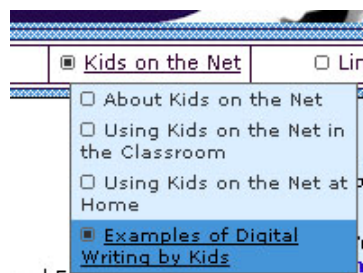
Links
A page of links to parts of the trAce website, the Kids on the Net website, and other websites
of relevance to digital writing with young people. This section has the potential to develop
into a reviewed sites section.

Example screenshot from the eTeacherblog
http://www.eteachersportal.com/blog/index.html

4.4.5 Evaluation of the eTeachers' Portal

Some of the advantages teachers reported of using the eTeachers' Portal resources include:

- **Real publication with a global readership:** The connection with Kids on the Net allows the children to publish their work on a website which has a global reach – this is real publication, unlike on schools' own websites or LEA intranets with limited reach.

> "The children took work home and their parents got involved. They could show their work to Auntie Vera, even if Auntie Vera lives in Australia."
> *Richard Clark, Dragonsville pilot, Porchester Junior School*

> "One thing that gives new media writing its strength is its audience. It can invite broader participation, in a global context. Also the competitive element of being published online encourages children to write as well as they can."
> *Keith Harrison, Porchester Junior School*

Privacy Policy

The eTeachers'Portal and Kids on the Net fully respects the privacy of all who visit our website, especially children.

All submissions to the the eTeachers'Portal, Kids on the Net, Kids' Castle, Monster Motel and its sister sites are carefully monitored by our editors. Contributions are not automatically posted to the website: every one passes through an editing stage before it is okayed. We may refuse to publish any work submitted, and we may edit submitted material.

- **The safety aspects** of both the resources and the publishing policies of Kids on the Net are appreciated (we edit all submissions before publishing them). We moderate all submissions and edit them:
  1. to ensure no personal details are published such as children's email addresses, or phone numbers: the rule of thumb is not to include include any information that might identify the child or anyone they write about in real life.
  2. to check for appropriate language – a lot of abusive messages are posted on the site by unsupervised young people
  3. to edit for spelling and grammar – capital letters seem to be a problem for young typists!

Many schools appreciate the anonymity of Adventure Island in particular: children's names need not be included at all and a pseudonym can even be used for the school itself on the website (although we insist on knowing which schools are involved for record keeping).

- **Interactivity** – In the pilot stage users appreciated getting replies back to some of the questions asked, taking part in the creation of a branching story with voting for the best next chapter, and entering the competition. Several teachers commented on the improvement in self-esteem and confidence in writing of individual children who took part in these activities.

  > "I just wanted to thank you for running the Dragonsville competition, which one of my pupils won. It has galvanised her writing and that of her friends. They're so much more enthusiastic now about writing."
  > *Drew Boddy, teacher, Royal Masonic School for Girls, London*

- **Support for developing teachers' skills**.

  > "I would definitely recommend this project because it is an excellent means of professional development without leaving school! A real advantage is that it is so well supported."   *Judy Johnson, West Twyford*

- The **focus on writing as a key skill** for visual and multimedia literacy.

  > "One of the temptations of flashy sites is that the quality of the writing is not the focus – the accoutrements of graphics and technology are. A particular advantage of Kids on the Net and its projects is that it foregrounds the text and the writing – if I'm teaching writing it's the text that's important."
  > *Keith Harrison, Headteacher*

4.4.6   Usage of Kids on the Net and the eTeachers' Portal

- The number of visits to Kids on the Net increased from 801,000 in 2003 to 1,150,000 in 2004 (a 43% increase). The eTeachers' Portal increased from virtually nothing to around 36,000 visitors. As the final version of the eTeachers' Portal has only recently been launched we can expect greater use still in 2005.
- Daily hits increased from 60,000 in 2003 to 103,000 in 2004 (70% increase).
- Average visit length also increased by 27%.
- The number of identified users from the UK almost trebled from 2003-2004.

4.4.7   School newspapers

It is worth reporting that there were 8500 downloads of Simon's helpsheet on writing a school newspaper. Judging by the number of search terms (used to find our site) that relate to school newspapers this is a popular search for teachers. It isn't Digital Writing, but it does:

- attract teachers to the site;
- encourage schools to develop online newspapers as well as the print format, thus creating awareness of alternative formats;
- invite contributions to Kids' Castle's online newspaper the Castle Times.

The popularity of this resource reinforces the need to provide resources at the most basic teacher IT skill level that lead on up the "access ramp".

4.5   Dragonsville

Dragonsville is an online collaborative writing project tied into the National Literacy Strategy objectives. This project is intended to be a stepping-stone for teachers who want to begin to use ICT within their literacy lessons, starting with the simple step of using a website to help children develop their writing.

The pilot project involved 11 UK schools who received support and workshops from the digital

Welcome to Dragonsville

© 2004 Kids on the Net Original dragon images © 2004 Malathar and used with permission. Explore the archway above. There may be hidden areas to discover. Acknowledgements

teacher in residence. A small pilot group of five non-UK schools were also involved, working with Simon only online. The pilot project ran from January-April 2004 and the public launch of the project was on St George's day 23rd April 2004.
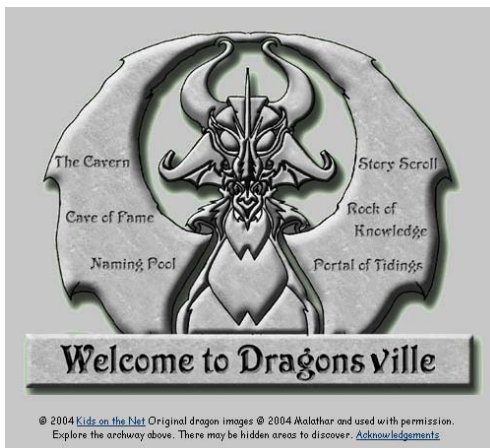
The premise is that Dragonsville is a community of dragons who live close to Kids' Castle (another project within the Kids on the Net website). The dragons of Dragonsville are friendly, yet shy dragons who have avoided contact with humans until now. Since learning that the knights of old had spread untruths about them, they have decided that they need to show children how friendly they really are and so have made the decision that it is time to allow children into Dragonsville.

Dragonsville
- has a compelling central theme (dragons) with a linking narrative to interest and inspire children to write;

- provides a series of writing activities each of which fits at least one specific objective in the Key Stage 2 literacy curriculum;
- supports collaborative writing;
- is designed to take the teacher from simple and familiar literacy activities (e.g., writing letters, persuasive writing, constructing arguments) towards more online-based activities such as interactive stories, and introduces a couple of hypertext projects (a simple branching story in the Story Scroll, and a footnote feature in the History) and so aims to introduce Digital Writing concepts in a "safe" way;
- is designed to bring teachers and students from Kids' Castle, the most popular area of the Kids on the Net website, onto our "Digital Writing access ramp";
- includes bright child-friendly graphics by dragon artist Malathar (Kevin Palivec);
- has been very popular with teachers and their classes in the UK and around the world during the pilot and since (see Section 4.5.2).

The project includes writing letters, stories, instructional and information writing, etc. It also introduces children and teachers to some forms of writing that can only be read and enjoyed as they were intended through the use of ICT, such as interactive stories and the hypertextual footnote features within the "further information" area of the History of Dragonsville. Within Dragonsville there are several sections that encourage children to produce literacy work. Each has been designed to fulfil at least one curriculum objective to fit with teachers' termly planning:

- o Biographical writing: e.g., Year 6, Term 1, National Literacy Framework Objective 14
- o Persuasive writing: e.g., Year 5
- o Informational writing: e.g., Year 5
- o Writing instructions: e.g., Year 4
- o Letter writing: e.g., Year 3
- o Character Portraits: e.g., Year 3

In addition there was a hyperlinking task.

Figure 1: Conrad (6) describing his dragon

These areas of the curriculum were chosen, as they were not already covered within the other projects or areas on the main Kids on the Net website. For each area of work teachers' notes and worksheets were produced.

After the pilot period, Dragonsville was launched to the public with an event at Porchester Junior School Nottingham, on 23rd April 2004. The project is now available freely for any teacher to use with their class. The Dragonsville website itself which the children access and which includes all the activities is backed up by a variety of teachers' resources made available in the eTeachers' Portal, including downloadable teachers' notes and pupil worksheets.
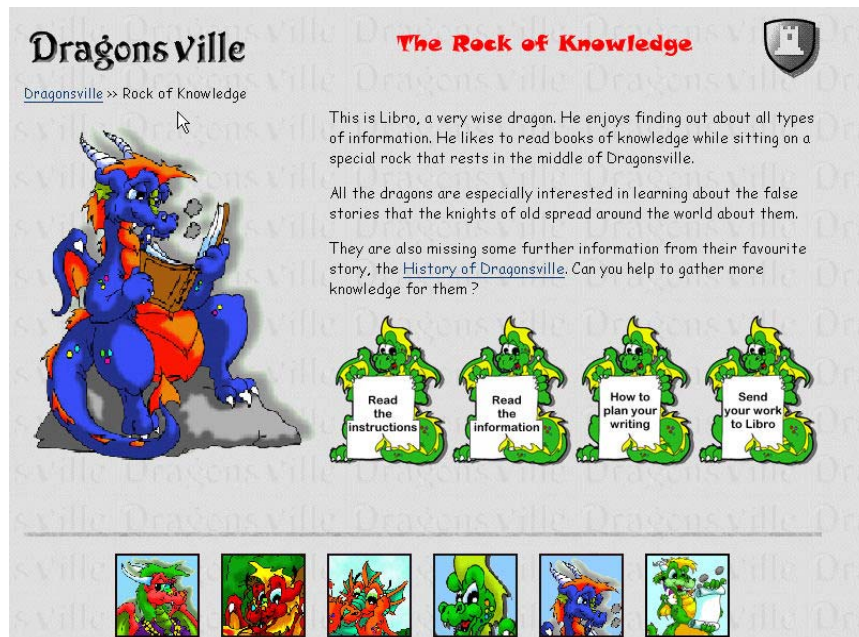
4.5.1 Dragonsville screenshots

Dragonsville comprises six main areas:

**The Rock of Knowledge   [www.dragonsville.com/rock.htm]**
This is an area where the dragons go to find out information. Children are encouraged to research and present information in this area. It involves writing of reports, instructions and information.

The Cave of Fame   [www.dragonsville.com/cave.htm]
Dragons are proud of their ancestors, and like to display images of them. In this area children are able to select a dragon from a gallery of images, and write a biography for it.
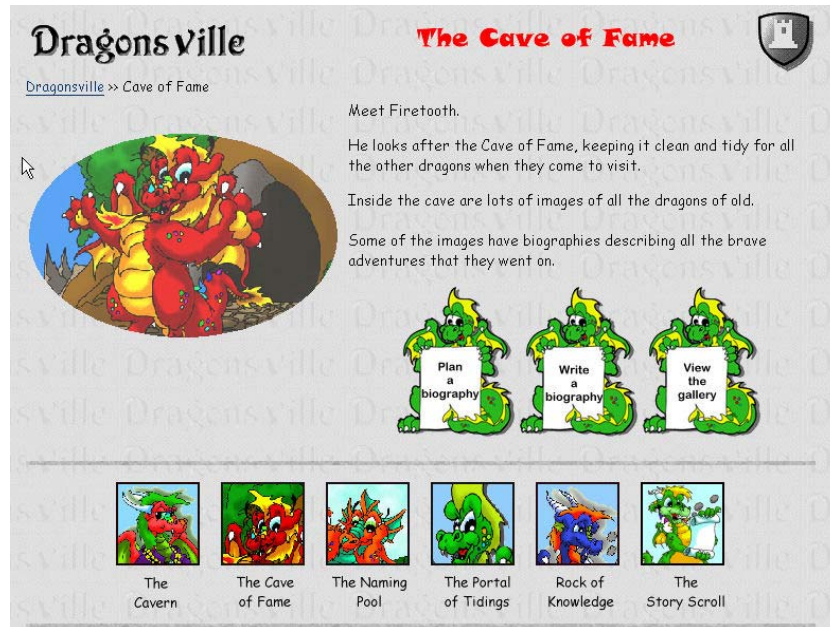
The Naming Pool   [www.dragonsville.com/pool.htm]
Particularly for younger children, this area encourages children to adopt a young dragon and write a character portrait of it. Once the character portrait is submitted, the child is able to see an animated dragon. There is also an interactive activity to design a "lost dragon" poster (requires Flash).
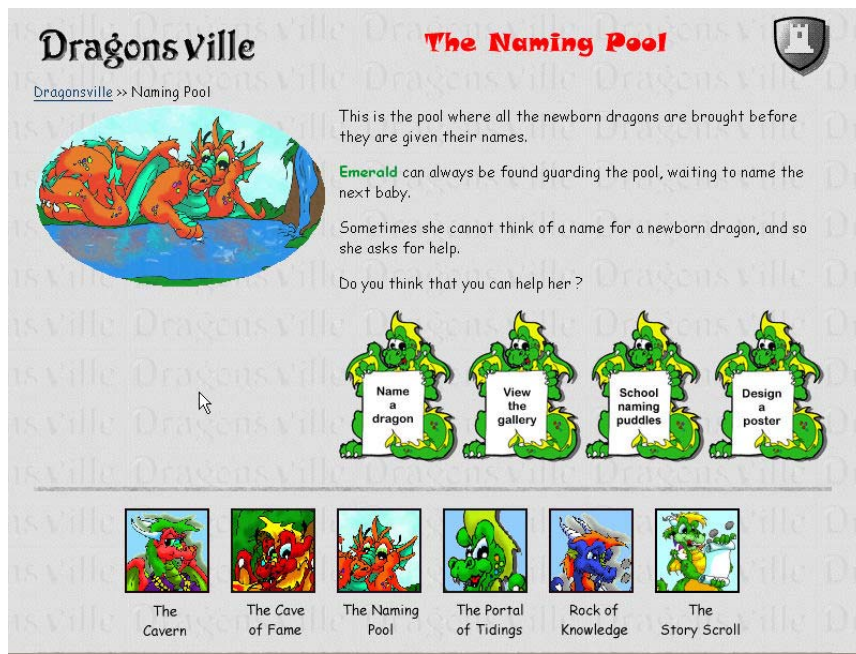
The Portal of Tidings [www.dragonsville.com/portal.htm]
In this area children can write dragonpal letters to the dragons of Dragonsville. During the pilot, the dragons (actually Simon Widdowson, as moderator) replied. There is also a 'D-card' section allowing children to send email postcards to their friends.
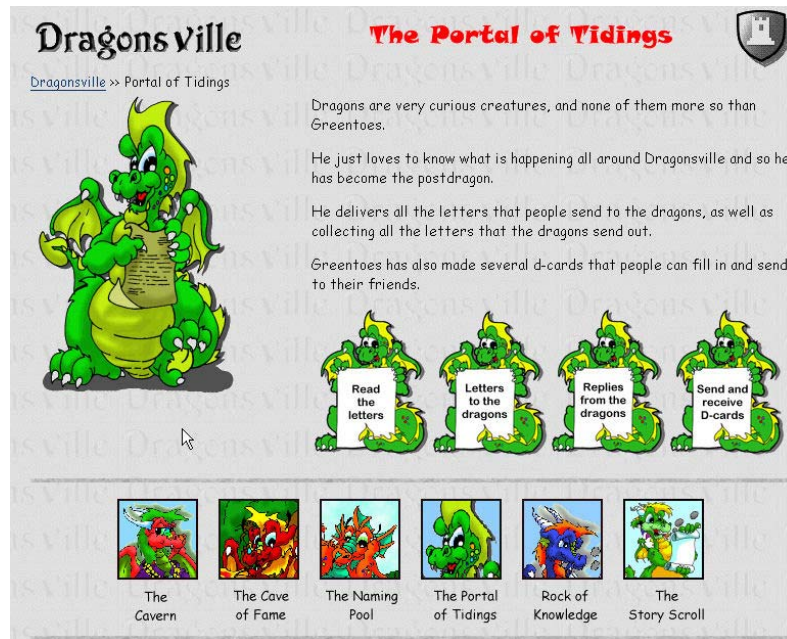
The Cavern [www.dragonsville.com/cavern.htm]
This area is Dragonsville's Town Hall. Serious debates based on moral issues take place here. Involves persuasive writing and debates. An interactive activity is included enabling pupils to design a persuasive poster (requires Flash).
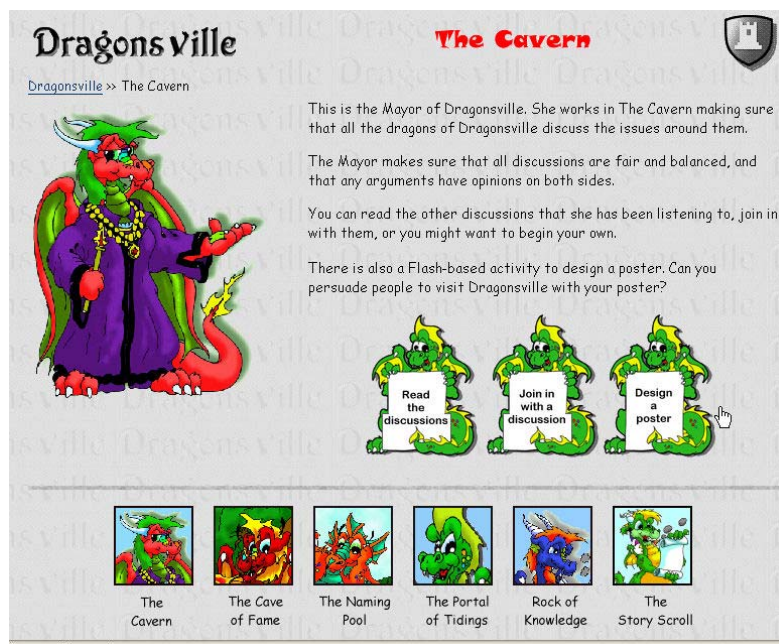
The Story Scroll [www.dragonsville.com/scroll.htm]
This area features personalised interactive stories that children can interact with. Children can enter data such as their first name, school, best friend, etc as well as being prompted to think about similes. They can then see this information integrated into a story presented just for them that they can print and keep. There is also an example here of a branching non-linear story in which different schools during the pilot wrote succeeding chapters of a story begun by children's author Karen King and children voted for their favourite. There's also a Metaphor and Simile Quiz.

4.5.2   Evaluation of Dragonsville

Most of the users came to Dragonsville via Kids on the Net or directly to Dragonsville.com rather than through the eTeachers' Portal.

- There were more than 12,000 downloads of the Dragonsville teachers' notes and worksheets (PDF versions)
- The most popular Dragonsville download was about writing letters.
- In the pilot group of schools, on average, teacher confidence in ICT rose by 30%
- In the pilot group of schools, on average, teacher confidence in using ICT within their literacy lessons increased by 40%. (See Appendix 2)

It is clear even from the small pilot group results (Appendix 2) that teachers who were new to using online resources felt much more comfortable with this mode of teaching after the project than before. Dragonsville is very accessible to both children and teachers. The design was intended to be straightforward, easy to use and attractive to children. Dragonsville very much succeeded as a stepping stone for teachers taking their first moves towards using ICT in literacy.

> "I was talking to a teacher the other day who hadn't visited Dragonsville before, and I explained to her about the letters and replies. Her eyes lit up and she was amazed that there was a website where (1) children could practice writing in the style of a letter; (2) have their work published for the world to see; (3) be safe in the knowledge that we edit all submissions before publishing them; and (4) even get replies back to some of the questions asked. ... When I see a teacher getting enthused about using the resources, I feel that we have achieved what we aimed for - using ICT to enhance literacy." *Simon Widdowson's blog, Wednesday, June 30, 2004*

"Both boys and girls found the topic of dragons exciting and enjoyed using the site. It got the kids excited about their learning and it improved the quality of their writing." *Richard Clark, Porchester Junior, Dragonsville Pilot*

"The project has been extremely positive - the major impact I feel it's had has been how motivated the children were to contribute ideas to the shared writing of the chapters for the story. Children who have real problems getting their ideas down on paper came out with loads of really inspirational material when that pencil and paper barrier had been removed."

Laura Manison, Teacher, UK

> "Because so many children who are weak in writing are confident in ICT, it can give less able children a real measure of success."

Judy Johnson, West Twyford

Teachers using the site and the resources increased their skill and familiarity with the use of ICT in literacy and writing lessons. As an introduction to Digital Writing success is less easy to quantify.

4.5.3   Usage of Dragonsville since the pilot

During 2004 Dragonsville received 138,000 visits (11,000 hits per day).
In the three months immediately after the launch of Dragonsville, it received 3429 submissions (over 260 per week). From Sep-Dec 04 there were 2627 submissions - still running at more than 150 per week. By April, a year after launch, it had received over 10,000 submissions – but the submissions were becoming less relevant.

Hundreds of schools have taken part, in the UK and overseas. Comparing submissions with those on the other parts of the Kids on the Net site it can be seen that more of the submissions come from classes rather than individual children, indicating that Dragonsville is well used in the classroom. One of the most successful uses of Dragonsville was in a school in New Zealand[4].

Analysis of the search terms used to find Dragonsville indicates that it is successful at attracting teachers looking for literacy resources.

Of 7700 searches, the top repeated search terms[5] are generally literacy-related :

examples of similes; similes; similes for kids; and similar terms (510 searches)	biography (and similar terms) (273)
writing letters, formal and informal; etc. (874 searches)	writing instructions (and similar searches) (128)
Dragonsville (138)	persuasive writing;;etc. (106)

This means that teachers looking for specific literacy resources are finding our site.

4.6 *Adventure Island*

Adventure Island is an online tool that enables teachers to create a collaborative hypertextual online story with their classes, without the teacher needing any web-building skills themselves.

In writing Adventure Island, pupils create challenges and puzzles for the visitor to solve. As the visitor travels around a created Island, descriptive writing for each area encourages them to explore further. Will they be able to survive, and leave the island, or will they remain forever ... trapped?

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[4] Pirongia School, Waikato, New Zealand: Case study by Tui Allen
http://kotn.ntu.ac.uk/teachers/pirongia.htm (accessed 26th March 2005)
[5] Site Analysis Report for 2004: http://kotn.ntu.ac.uk/log/dragonsville/2004/SearchTerms.htm

© 2004 Kids on the Net as part of Writers for the Future.
Original island images © 2004 Mark Burgess and used with permission.
Adventure Island was created by Simon Widdowson, the Digital Teacher in
Residence with Writers for the Future.

Adventure Island was piloted from May to July 2004 on Kids on the Net (http://kotn.ntu.ac.uk). It involves imaginative and descriptive writing, or could equally be used with diary writing or poetry. Curriculum-wise it was designed to fit into the UK Yr6/7 transition unit related to the book *Kensuke's Kingdom* by Michael Morpurgo, but during the pilot it became clear that it can also be used as a stand-alone project for other year groups and other Key Stages and in other countries and can incorporate graphics and/or digital video.

Adventure Island was designed specifically to fit in the Transition from Key Stage 2 (primary school) to Key Stage 3 (secondary school). It was built by Simon Widdowson with Simon Mills as web developer, with programming in Cold Fusion. The graphics were by children's illustrator Mark Burgess (who also did Kids' Castle and Monster Motel).

- Many schools and local education authorities use the book *Kensuke's Kingdom,* by Michael Morpurgo, at this stage. They interpret the theme of desert island in writing, drama and other ways. An online collaborative writing project adds to the possibilities.
- The element of the transition provided by secondary schools is often the use of their ICT labs. Also, "the project was useful in the transition from Primary to Secondary School because it gave the high schools a good way to see the children's ICT skills in action: a group project is evidence that's easy to see. They don't always have the time to look at individuals' portfolios." (*Caroline Stamp-Dod, Millfield*)
- The transition projects take place at a time when the youngsters have just finished their SATs for which they were trained in writing in quite prescriptive ways, and they are ready for a kind of writing that is new and exciting.

Adventure Island was well received by the pilot schools:

"The project showed us how Literacy can effectively be combined with ICT in a fun and innovative way, producing some excellent writing."
Emma d'Arcy Ryan (St Martin's, Caversham)

"The class was really engaged in the project – it moved their work on in both English and ICT, giving them further ideas for their ICT work."
*Caroline Stamp-Dod, Millfield*

Teacher feedback since the pilot (e.g., INSET day on Visual Literacy in County Durham, August 2004, Transition training in Lambeth LEA in May 2005, and a writing workshop at Foxford Secondary School, December 2004) has indicated that this project has in fact a much wider potential application in other key stages and other subjects: it could be used with simple language and pictures in Key Stage 1, with digital video to fulfill ICT objectives at Key Stage 2, and at Key Stages 3 and 4 in creative writing and ICT.

The results of the Adventure Island Pilot evaluation can be seen in detail in Appendix 3. It can be seen that while the project had little effect on teachers' own Internet skills (in other words the project was at the right level for them), they all gained more confidence in using the Internet in their teaching and/or their teaching of literacy. Pupils were generally seen to have improved in Internet skills and writing confidence.

Feedback from the pilot schools was also used to improve the interface and resource materials for the tool.
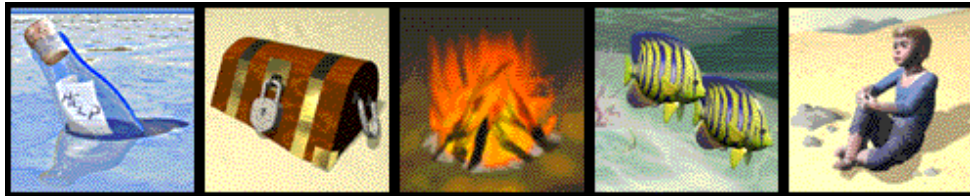
Screenshot runthrough of Adventure Island
www.kidsonthenet.com/adventureisland

[Explore an island or login to create one]

Welcome to Adventure Island

An online tool allowing schools and groups to create an island that you, and other people, can visit and explore. Either choose an island from the list on the right hand side and explore around it, or click on the link below and begin to build your own island.

Your island will need descriptions, diary entries, or a journal for each area. There is also the option to upload your own images for each area of the island.

Teachers' Login

Students' login

Latest Islands

Durham ICT Testbed - Volcano Island

Foxford School - Undiscovered

Example4 - Video Island

West Twyford - Mercurious Island

Holne - Island of Lost Hope

Millfield - Island of Lost Souls

Sandgate2 - Meerkat Island

Russells Hall2 - Treasure Island

Russells Hall - No mans Island

St Martins - Black Island

Example3 - Story Island

Example2 - Island of Adventure

Example1 - Diary Island

[Explore an island - Example of school island content page]

Island of Lost Hope from Holne

After crossing a grassy wasteland, he sees a stream nearby, it looks safe to drink but he can't be sure. Karl notices large mountains in the distance. The mountains are rugged and steep. To the West he can see a palm tree with strong purple coloured fruit. It looks very blurry in the distance. He feels hungry. Suddenly Karl wonders if he is hallucinating. He pulls his gaze away and wonders what to do next.

EAST

LOOK

Start Again

[Create an Island - Example of teacher's interface]

[Create an Island - Example of student interface during editing]

[Create an Island - Example of teacher's final editing interface]

You have chosen grid 10

Entry for this grid:

You find yourself suddenly above a deep gully where waves crash through a narrow entrance from the sea and pund sheer cliffs. against. The rocks about you are slippery and just the right there's a sudden crumbling and parts of the cliff fall into the churning water. Be careful you don't fall!

LinkN ☑   LinkE ☐

LinkS ☐   LinkW ☐

Clues:
Clue 2 ▾

Update this grid

Return to Island Editor Home

Logout

Follow-up on use of Adventure Island

In the June 3rd 2005 issue of the Times Educational Supplement, Adventure Island featured in an article written by Harriet Swain "Write me an island", with several quotes from Cathy McCarthy, one of the pilot project teachers. In 2005, a year after the pilot, Adventure Island is being used in the Transition stage throughout Lambeth LEA and in dozens of schools across the UK.

4.7 Problems

4.7.1 Lack of best practice

>"English as a subject area isn't moving as fast as it could in ICT." *Ruth Hammond, BECTA, TTAG Member*

>"It is very difficult to find examples of best practice in literacy in ICT." *Keith Harrison, Headteacher, TTAG member*

>"As far as the research literature goes, there isn't a great deal I'm aware of on children's 'new media writing'." *Ben Williamson, Futurelab, TTAG Member*

As mentioned in section 3.3 above, it is not easy to find projects outside Kids on the Net that demonstrate good practice in new media literacy (see Section 5.2.1 for what constitutes good practice).


As an example, a speaker gave a talk on *Digital Literacy in Practice* at the Scottish Book Trust's March 2005 conference. "New challenges and opportunities await as we expand our definition of literacy to include far more than being able to read a book or write an essay. Computer literacy, media v literacy [sic] and information literacy are now essential skills for young people, and the rapid infusion of the Internet into the classroom calls for a fundamental change in the focus of schools and teachers. The session will highlight some of the issues associated with the changing literacies and review some of the leading software resources." However, from my research I cannot find any of his examples of what this "fundamental change" could look like.
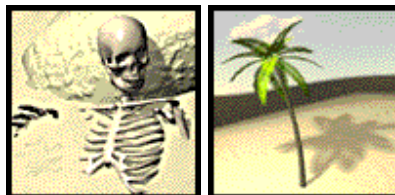
At an interview with an LEA literacy advisor, she showed me a book review site one of her schools had created, that they were rolling out across the authority's intranet. The design and concept of the project was, by the standards of Writers for the Future, eight years out of date. Without well-publicized examples of good practice, teachers are re-inventing the wheel. The

ICT strand of the teacher-training course includes how to create multimodal texts in Powerpoint, but this is taught by a Powerpoint expert, not a digital writer, and as ICT and not literacy.

> "It's so important that people like yourselves offer good creative opportunities, to encourage teachers not just to see ICT as special or unusual in itself but as a tool a teacher can use in their subject teaching." *Ruth Hammond, BECTA, TTAG Member*

All this means that innovative work such as Writers for the Future can seem isolated and unusual – and therefore appear difficult and even irrelevant to teachers.

4.7.2 Teachers' time constraints

When shown the kind of work that could be done in the classroom within the curriculum, teachers were quick to see the potential of our resources. They made suggestions about where in the curriculum the projects could be used.

It was more difficult to challenge the focus of their and their pupils' reading. Teachers were not inspired by Digital Writing in general, but by practical demonstrations of children's improvements in literacy skills using these methods. Their interest was entirely curriculum focused. Although it's true that "I don't know what my vision can be unless someone shows me what's possible" (*Keith Harrison*), our experience in workshops with teachers showed that teachers tended to be inspired only by practical and classroom-based successful projects, not by examples of digital or new media writing by practitioners.

> "Teachers have to look at things very quickly – even if you would like to look at things in more depth there usually isn't time – so if you can't grasp it fast you don't bother."
> *Richard Clark, teacher, Dragonsville pilot.*

This also means that relatively unsophisticated stand-alone projects like Dragonsville – which only touch on Digital Writing - are currently more popular with teachers than the more complex Adventure Island, which demonstrates more innovative ways to write. It has also implications for the future of this work (see section 6).

4.7.3 The slow pace of change

During the Writers for the Future project we have only just begun to fulfill our objective to generate a body of exemplar hypermedia created by children. We have certainly added to the examples of hypermedia to which children have collaborated. The branching and interactive stories in Dragonsville, the Adventure Islands already created, the collaborative discussions and writing projects, these are all important and inspiring examples to show teachers what can be done.

Tools such as Adventure Island allow a class to decide (in collaboration) what kind of story they want, from a linear story to a branching adventure, a first person narrative or an exploratory game. These tools are specifically designed for the creation of Digital Writing. But by providing the tools for teachers we have not yet started to address the question of how to encourage young people to create their own hypermedia.

Morwenna Griffiths of Nottingham Trent University has developed via research in schools an 'Apprenticeship Cycle' as the model of learning[6]. It is a model which enables the continuing

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[6] Paper given at Creative Partnerships' Nottingham conference on Creative Apprenticeships , October 2004

professional development of teachers and of the creative workers who come into school. In this model there are stages in the development of artistic practice

1. watching and learning (mostly the practitioner demonstrating)
2. participating (learning skills needed under the guidance of the practitioner: taking part in projects set up by the practitioner)
3. creating (working under the guidance of the practitioner to develop original work)
4. independent creation (completely original work)

It can be seen that this model applies as much to the development of an art form itself – or a literature form – such as Digital Writing – as it does to learning a new art form.

Writers for the Future did a lot of stage 2 work; developing Digital Writing skills in teachers and young people. Adventure Island where the young people have a real input into the form of the story begins to approach stage 3, but on the whole there are still in this country in the area of Digital Writing very few skilled practitioners to lead this work. I see this as an opportunity for us at Kids on the Net/eTeachers' Portal, and for the teachers that we have already trained.