

RMIT University

Leena van Deventer

Teaching writing for videogames

Abstract:

Though recent years have seen an increase in scholarship exploring the links between games and the classroom (such as gamification and game mechanics in education), far less research has engaged with the practical challenges involved in the pedagogy of games writing itself. In this article, I explore the unique challenges that arise when teaching creative writing for non-linear and ludic contexts. When our exposure to more traditional forms of storytelling structures such as those in film or literature is so much greater than our proficiency in creating branching story structures, the introduction of player or reader agency to a piece of fiction requires a massive shift in process within a practitioner. Students are still trained from a young age to understand stories as following certain rules based on linear and non-interactive media contexts. These rules are at times contradictory to what is required when writing games. Students of game writing often fall into familiar and observable patterns as they become proficient in the requirements of interactive practice for the first time. Throughout this article I reflect on these pedagogical issues through my observations teaching interactive storytelling, and examine the importance of exposure to peers from other creative disciplines for game design and game writing students.

Biographical note:

Leena van Deventer is a writer, game developer, and educator from Melbourne, Australia. She has taught interactive storytelling at RMIT and Swinburne Universities and in 2016 published her first book, 'Game Changers: From Minecraft to Misogyny, the fight for the future of videogames' with Dr. Dan Golding for Affirm Press. Leena is the Executive Director of not-for-profit organisation WiDGET, supporting the personal development and retention of women and non-binary game developers in their chosen fields within game development. Leena also sits on the Board of Directors of the Victorian Women's Trust.

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Introduction

Educators and students alike face many challenges developing interactive fiction within higher education contexts. I have observed common patterns in student practice over my four years teaching interactive storytelling at RMIT and Swinburne Universities. In this essay, I argue that the radical advancement of digital literacy within students' online lives necessitates the re-evaluation of our pedagogical approaches towards reading and writing in game design classrooms, and that a non-semiotic reliance solely on older pre-digital exigencies may prove unsatisfactory in this new context. Many factors such as the legitimization of games as an art form, cultural anxiety with mixing work and play, and the hostile social context inside games communities contribute to the difficulty of teaching interactive writing. Some of these factors are out of the educator's hands, and some can be lessened by an assertive teaching practice that aims to decolonise long-established and often Western-centred assumed-wisdoms.

Game design degrees have become a staple in most schools of media and design in universities around the world, with Australia itself offering thirty-two degrees or programs related to game design at both public and private institutions. Despite the expectation that games studies are to be offered as standard, and increased participation in games subjects by students from other disciplines and degrees through elective subjects, there is little research into best practices regarding games pedagogy and teaching practice.

Research related to the pedagogy of interactive storytelling is impeded in part by a general societal anxiety about games and their cultural value. A discomfort (even judgement) regarding the mixing of 'work' and 'play' is substantial, after the installation of capitalism has led to a 'crisis of leisure time' (Schor 1992: n.p.) where leisure, play, and work, are not only separated, but never held in the same esteem. Play has traditionally been separated from the classroom. It is what students do in the breaks between classes, or is something they can partake in only after they have finished their homework (Colby Shultz & Colby 2008). This can present a problem for educators trying to introduce games into a curriculum, and those who wish to engage in identifying best practices in their classroom, especially with an increasingly insecure, casualised workforce of sessional and adjunct part-time roles. Re-programming from habits learned in childhood – such as the reliance on a three-act structure – is itself an obstruction when attempting interactive fiction for the first time, let alone the introduction of player agency and the seemingly endless possibilities of an interactive heteroglossic text.

Students must also consider the community surrounding games as products and their consumption. The pressure to buy and play every game in order to prove their worth or pay their admission is reinforced by a hegemonic culture resistant to 'outsiders'. 'Consumption, the spending of resources (time, money, energy) on selected texts and objects, has long been described as a way of displaying identity or group belonging' and after the US game market crash, 'the content of both games and the construction of the audience were profoundly homogenized' (Shaw 2013: n.p.). This gatekeeping culture has proven hostile in the past, particularly to women and minority players and practitioners (Golding & van Deventer 2016), and may impair student engagement with

the cultural context of the text. Whether a help or a hindrance, students must also manoeuvre the social context they personally inhabit as ‘netizens’ through the changing literacy environments brought about through blogging, social networks, emailing, and text messaging, and how this blurs the lines between writer, player, and reader on a daily basis.

I also draw attention to common patterns in student praxis I have observed over years of teaching interactive storytelling, from the ‘penny drop’ moment through attempts to encourage critical analysis of their work and that of their peers. I then highlight the real-world impact of the presence of extra-disciplinary students on the diversity of the stories told and strongly advocate for exposing game design students to students of creative writing, journalism, and the fine arts.

Challenges faced by teachers

Cultural anxieties around games

A great deal of the obstruction educators face when teaching writing for videogames is the generalised cultural anxiety around games themselves. When there is trepidation, or even outright hostility, towards a medium, the epistemic journey is far more difficult; there are fewer research grants available with which to determine best practices, less space and opportunity to develop syllabi heuristically, and a stagnation in the cultural discourse surrounding the finished product, impacting the students’ ability to critically reflect on their own work. It is harder to champion a discipline in the classroom when outside it is acknowledged as low-brow trash, murder simulations, or merely digitised children’s toys.

Are games art?

Legitimation is a quest long travelled by some in the games industry, not helped by an over-arching debate over whether games can ‘be art’. Famously, noted film critic and cinephile Roger Ebert claimed that games cannot be art, as ‘art seeks to lead you to an inevitable conclusion, not a smorgasbord of choices’ (Ebert 2007). The ripple through arts discourses were felt for years afterwards (Jayemanne 2012), and the question ‘Are games art?’ has ceased to become a useful one, more likely to garner an eye-roll than a robust discussion from game developers and critics (Stuart 2012).

This is a confrontation experienced by most art forms at their genesis, including the so-called ‘Ten Cent Plague’ in the world of comic books (Hajdu 2009), and to Ebert’s possible dismay, even film was not immune from this kind of hand-wringing and ‘this is not art’-ing as silent films first entered the fray. Writing in *The English Review* in 1922, Gordon Craig catastrophised silent films as signalling the start of a gradual slide into oppression, claiming ‘It appeals to the vulgarity of most, and idleness of many... Still it pretends to be for the people! The mind enslaved, the mind drugged is the best mind to go downhill in comfort’ (Craig 1922: n.p.). This baptism of fire soon dies out and we learn to navigate the language, expectations, norms, and rules of these risky

ventures, but while we learn to do so, the spectre of games as having low cultural status impacts on teaching.

Extending the concept of games as art out of the abstract and into the practical is the question of whether they are entitled to the same legal protections as art. Despite videogames being a medium over four decades old, they are only recently becoming acknowledged as culturally important in some countries. It was as late as 2006 when the French Minister for Culture first characterised games as a ‘form of artistic expression’ (Renaud Donnedieu de Vabres 2006: n.p.) and legally designated them as cultural goods. In the United States, videogames were granted legal protection as ‘creative works’ by the United States Supreme Court in 2011, affording the work protections under the right to free speech. Videogames found a surprising champion in ultra-conservative Justice Antonin Scalia, saying:

[the claims] that videogames present special problems because they are ‘interactive’... is nothing new. Since... 1969, young readers of choose-your-own-adventure stories have been able to make decisions that determine the plot (Scalia 2011: n.p.).

He then went on to add during the ruling regarding the sale of violent videogames in California (Brown, Governor of California vs the Entertainment Merchants Association 2011) that:

like the protected books, plays, and movies that preceded them, videogames communicate ideas – and even social messages – through many familiar literary devices (such as characters, dialogue, plot, and music) and through features distinctive to the medium (such as the player’s interaction with the virtual world). That suffices to confer First Amendment protection (Scalia 2011: n.p.).

This verdict was celebrated by game developers (Cifaldi 2011). By contrast, a nationwide telephone poll conducted by Fairleigh Dickinson University gauged public opinion, finding that 57% of Americans polled believed ‘states should have the right to regulate the sale of violent videogames to minors’ (Public Mind Poll, Fairleigh Dickinson University 2011: n.p.).

Another positive step towards the legitimization of games is the acknowledgment by archivists, curators, and collectors around the world (Reed 2017). Major arts institutions and museums are showcasing videogames as artefacts, including but not limited to the Game Masters exhibition, which has toured internationally since 2012 (ACMI 2012). Putting games in the context of works worthy of public exhibition and celebration is a helpful step toward the generalised legitimization of games as art form.

Mixing work and play

One major source of discomfort about videogames as an art-form is a sceptical anxiety about mixing work with play. A university context complicates this anxiety even further, as institutions are often expected to be training-spaces toward eventual employment. Binary categories of ‘productive’ versus ‘wasteful’ or ‘important’ versus ‘trivial’ emerge; the paradoxical concept of ‘purposiveness without purpose’ (Kant

1998). Historically, play and learning share similar histories. In ancient Greece, rhetoric was inexplicably linked to play. Attempting to sway opinion based on an interrogative form of inquiry where one can be ‘caught out’ in logic or argument, is itself a type of game. Huizinga (1955) wrote of sophistry’s affiliation with playfulness: ‘The sophism proper is closely related to the riddle... Games, or what we might call jeux d’esprit, designed to catch people out by trick-questions, held an important place in Greek conversation.’ Capitalism and the universalisation of education would go on to change this relationship entirely, as Shultz Colby and Colby (2008: n.p.) note, ‘School was considered ‘leisure’ only when the upper classes could engage in it... [once more working-class students were admitted] school became serious work’. We can point to this moment in history as to where our anxieties about mixing work and play began, and the undeniable impact on attitudes toward teaching play in the university context it has had.

Accordingly, cultural anxiety generally attaches to the *act of production* in these media, rather than the reception of it. We *play* videogames. In English, play as verb is common to other art forms – musicians *play* instruments, actors *play* characters – but this usually applies to the producers of artistic texts, not the text itself. While musicians may receive admiration for ‘playing’ for a living, less respect is shown to the practitioners who wish to craft ‘play’ for someone else to make theirs. ‘Composition instruction in fact functions at just this nexus between production and consumption, between creation and reception’ (Alberti 2008: n.p.). Games, by their very definition, challenge market capitalism in their concept of ‘the product’: they combine leisure and work, and they exist for no other reason than to achieve goals with no ends beyond themselves (Suits 2014).

Violent videogames and their moral panics

Another obstruction to the legitimation of videogames as craft and as art-form in the mainstream consciousness is the medium’s ubiquitous ties to the term ‘violent videogames’. This alliterative term was first bandied about in the 1990s, often as a scaremongering tool on American cable television, which, in desperation to fill the new 24-hour news cycle, relied heavily on moral panics for ratings. The first attempt at legislating against violent videogames was in 1993, following the release of *Night Trap* (Sega 1992) and *Mortal Kombat* (Midway Games 1992), two games that relied heavily on violence. Many suggested their gratuitous violence put the games on par with an R-18+ film, yet were easily accessible to a younger audience. This tension ultimately resulted in the construction of the American games classification board, known as the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB). In Australia, this tension would not be resolved for another twenty years, with the introduction of an R18+ rating for videogames in 2013 (Golding 2013).

However, a larger moral panic soon emerged in the mainstream social zeitgeist that would severely impact games practitioners: the Columbine High School Massacre in 1999. ‘While there had been contention surrounding violence in videogames prior to the late 1990s, the movement against screen violence in the form of this interactive medium began to gain momentum as a result of the Columbine shootings’ (Crawford

2012: n.p.). The fact that the young men played the games *Doom* (id Software 1993) and *Wolfenstein 3D* (id Software 1992) was linked as being casual to the shootings, despite evidence that psychological disturbances, bullying, and isolation were all factors relating to the decisions made that day. While a causal link between videogame and real-world violence has not been established, the assumption that games are somehow harming children is incredibly difficult to shake, as is the misconception that all games are suitable for children, or that all children are suitable for games. Henry Jenkins (2000: n.p.) makes this important distinction, writing ‘Some children, especially those who are antisocial and emotionally unbalanced, should be protected from exposure to the most extreme forms of media violence, but most children are not at risk from the media they consume.’ This perception that children must be a priority while making videogames presents broad challenges to the medium; indeed, to the detriment of the craft itself.

Discomfort with games used for commentary

We need only look to the reaction when practitioners *do* try to make videogames with specific commentaries to see the confines of the rigid box many are insistent videogames are constrained by. Games that attempt to engage in any nuanced socio-political or even personal commentary are often more controversial than the maligned ‘murder simulators’. When a game like *Super Columbine Massacre RPG!* (Ledonne 2005) mixes both, the reception is overwhelmingly negative. Upon his decision to exclude the game from the Guerilla Gamemaking Competition as part of the *Slamdance Film Festival* in 2007, director Peter Baxter acknowledged his discomfort with impeding on an artist’s work, but pointed out that due to his responsibilities presenting that work to the public complicated the situation (Chaplin 2007: n.p.). As John Alberti observed:

From Baxter’s perspective, a videogame based on or inspired by the Columbine shootings represents a fundamentally different kind of reading experience – and thus warrants more vigilant censure – than a novel or a movie. The fact that *SCMRPG* has generated greater controversy and more instances of outright condemnation in the mass media than Gus Van Sant’s (2003) critically acclaimed movie *Elephant*, likewise inspired by Columbine and a film that also invites viewers to consider a school massacre at least in part from the point of view of the two young gunmen, also suggests that Baxter has articulated concerns shared by many others (Alberti 2008).

The misconception games cannot explore sensitive topics with any kind of nuance is fed by the aforementioned over-simplistic categorisation that games are for children, and that games are for play, lacking any other value. The Australian Council for the Arts’ decision to fund the game *Escape From Woomera* (Neil 2004) courted national controversy even before it was developed. Intended to criticise the Australian Government’s policy for mandatory detention for asylum seekers, *Escape From Woomera* put the player in the position of an asylum seeker involuntarily confined within the detention centre, from which journalists, care volunteers, and citizens were barred from accessing. Despite the game’s empathic stance toward refugees, even

Margaret Piper, then-Director of the Refugee Council of Australia, slammed the game as ‘trivialising something that is enormously serious’ by virtue of it being a game – an unfinished one, at that. Developer Kate Wild recalls discussing the issue of trivialisation on the national broadcaster, the ABC:

If I was sitting here saying to you that I am making a documentary about detainees and their plight inside the detention centre, and the fact that no-one can get in there to talk about it, and that the government is keeping everyone out, you'd think I was a saint. The fact that I'm using a medium that you guys are not familiar with, and not comfortable with, is the only thing that is different, and is the only thing that is freaking you out (Wild cited in Golding 2013).

The cultural anxiety around games, both from the outside *and within*, is a huge obstacle for the teacher of interactive narrative. A game that received negative attention from within the games community was Zoe Quinn and Patrick Lindsay’s game *Depression Quest* (2013). The interactive fiction game featured a player mechanic that visibly removed choices from the player – what is known as a ‘forced failure’. This was no accident; Quinn has stated the game was made to express her personal experiences with depression to her loved ones (Golding & van Deventer 2016). The idea of taking something away from players, while simultaneously dealing with subject material some felt was ‘too political’ for games, while having the audacity to be a woman and coded as an ‘outsider’ was enough to have her life threatened over this work. We, as teachers, are faced with a rigid dilemma, encouraging students to tell personal stories may leave them open to harassment, but avoiding this to instead maintain the status quo only serves to perpetuate the stagnation of the discipline and delegitimises the field further.

The hangover of traditional storytelling pedagogies

Even before educators introduce interactivity or try and encourage our students to ‘re-learn’ anything, we must look at what and how we have learned thus far about telling stories. We also must consider how any form of craft in a university context is influenced by the need to contend with the institutional exigencies of assessment and marking. Researchers McKeough, Templeton, and Marini (1995) identified that most pedagogical instruction in childhood related to storytelling followed three separate structural strands of narrative: plot structure, literary structure, and social-affective structure.

More specifically, plot structure changes from a sequence of actions and events (I do A, and then I do B, and then I do C, to a differentiated structure in which actions are motivated by internal mental states (I do A and B because I feel, think, or believe X, Y, or Z); the earlier script-based literary structure is replaced by a framework that is similar to folktales told within the oral tradition; the social-affective structure of stories alters from single affect-link to one in which affects develop and change across situations (McKeough & Sanderson 1996: n.p.).

Research into pedagogical instruction has continued since, but these strands of narrative structure were built by following the more generalised developmental principles that ‘children are active constructors of knowledge’, that ‘instruction planning should be

guided by knowledge of children's domain-specific concepts and of the typical pattern of their development', and that 'maximum learning occurs when we build onto children's existing knowledge, offering material that is just slightly in advance of it'. McKeough & Sanderson's (1996: n.p.) approach comprised three stages: to 'make children aware of their current representation in a sequence of discrete but related events', to 'provide a mnemonic for bridging to the next level in the development hierarchy', and to then 'gradually remove the mnemonic cueing supports.' This transfer between propositional and predicate logic is crucial to the development of complexity in building story structures. It may not be possible to directly apply pedagogical methodologies for the child to those for the teen-or-twenty-something university student, but teachers can use them as a jumping off point, perhaps with more focus on the socio-affective aspects of story structure.

Challenges faced by students

New literacy environments

Today's students inhabit a completely different literacy environment than of previous generations, both inside and outside the university classroom. The creative writing classroom was once a place a student would arrive, learn an isolated set of cognitive activities embedded into the syllabus for the student's desired semiotic domain, demonstrate their requisite knowledge for a passing grade, and go on to find work in the field of literature. By contrast, the field of New Literacy Studies argues the discussion and reception around a work is also important, whether a provocative polarisation or a shared universality. 'The point' is not to attempt to get 'the point' across with cogently explained theses and traditional devices of rhetoric, but rather to create the environment for a richer and more refined discussion of the subject material, after the fact, that demands personal engagement with the reader and participants. New Literacy Studies argues that 'literacy' should be more accurately seen as a 'diverse array of socially embedded practices' (Alberti 2008). James Paul Gee's work in the field of videogame literacy has drawn attention to the many different ways of reading and writing that within is embedded 'a lived and historically changing set of discursive practices' (Gee 2004: n.p.). The job of the teacher of interactive writing is to find a way to keep up with these changes.

Trying to separate reading and writing in a literacy environment where students constantly blur the lines between author and audience in their own lives is folly. Indeed, John Alberti argues that 'If cultural anxieties about the power and impact of reading, writing and rhetoric are not new in the abstract, they do take on new resonance in moments of significant social and technological change' (2008: n.p.). We are currently in such a time. Writing is no longer confined to a trade.

We must think of new pedagogical approaches that are cognizant of this change, and they must be flexible enough to accommodate further change as necessary. While the prescriptivist teachings inflicted upon previous generations may seem far removed from the modern day, current students still must perform within the confines of the

institutionally mandated learning outcomes – a contract in which they are rarely afforded a chance to formally campaign for their needs. It is absolutely crucial that the learning outcomes of interactive storytelling courses remain tightly connected to our students' evolving needs in this new literacy environment; one more intimately intertwined within their lives than ever before. Current students of interactive storytelling are already living in the world as readers, writers, and players everywhere.

'Agency' and related hot potatoes

Teachers of interactive storytelling further complicate the new discursive environment by introducing concepts of player choice and interactivity to their creative work, making the lines between author and player even more ambiguous. A narrative-heavy game requires more space for a commitment to meaning than a more ludic piece, and a re-framing from 'making choices' to 'expressing intent' is required. Common associations with the term 'agency' are that of 'choice' and 'freedom'. If these associations are not problematic, they are at the very least insufficient. Salen and Zimmerman (2004) write 'Playing a game means making choices and taking actions. All of this activity occurs within a game-system designed to support meaningful kinds of choice-making' (2004: n.p.). Mateas and Stern's (2006: n.p.) strict definition also relies on an emphasis on player activity, on *making decisions*, and *taking actions*:

A player in an interactive drama becomes a kind of author, and... contributes both materially to the plot and formally to elements at the level of character on down. But these contributions are constrained by the material and formal causes (viewed as affordances by the author of the interactive drama). Hopefully, if these constraints are balanced, the constrained freedom of the player will be productive of agency.

Both these definitions allow the concept of agency to be connected to a type of capitulation to the consumer, feeding the God Complex of unlimited freedoms, where the world is open source and you can do whatever you want to it. This should not be uncritically assumed as being a fundamental good. The *Grand Theft Auto* series (Rockstar Games 1997) is often placed within the 'open-world' genre, with each instalment promising seemingly endless choices and player agency. But when the meaning of those choices is pared back, the player is left with only two: obey or break the law. Agency's supposed associations with 'freedom' and 'choice' and a focus on what we are 'allowed to do' are revealed as superficial; definitions of agency must instead acknowledge what is meaningful. Janet Murray's (1997) definition has an interesting lack of focus on constraints or freedoms and a greater interest in what constitutes meaningful choice: 'the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices'. The notion that the thrilling part lies not in the ability to mindlessly destroy anything we want, but rather to delight in the unveiling of the consequences of the player's choices, is a comprehensive theory, leaving space for narrative-heavy games to be included. Karen and Joshua Tanenbaum (2009: n.p.) argue:

Meaningful choices then, are the ones in which the illocutionary commitments entailed by the utterance/action are real: the player is held accountable for what they have

committed to. Simulational fidelity alone may afford unrestricted player actions, but is not sufficient for meaningful play.

One challenge that games studies students face results from their entrenchment in the idea that agency is about selecting options, not the more meaningful alternative.

Pandering to the gamer

In current practice, learning to write for interactivity involves ‘[creating] story moments that allow players to travel from Scene A to Scene C and then back to Scene B again and still [getting] the same story – or at least the same value in the story – as if they had uncovered them in sequential order’ (DeMarle 2007: n.p.). Moreover, when designers have become concerned with games as a service and believe players demand the aforementioned God Complex to be satisfied with the game, we see an anxiety bubble up about daring to restrict player movement. A character failing in a film or novel is not automatically held up as a deficiency on behalf of the writer, but rather just a character that did not meet their goals. Some game designers feel increased anxiety around the concept of ‘forced failures’, ‘a situation where the player cannot accomplish a certain goal, no matter what he [sic] tries’ (Danksy 2007: n.p.). Rather than an accepted conceit that can draw an emotional response from the player, wariness around how ‘frustrating’ it might be dominates the discourse, with the ultimate ‘fail state’ being that the player dares to stop playing. Danksy (2007: n.p.) expands:

Gandalf is always going to fall off the bridge in the Mines of Moria, no matter what anyone does. The story demands it. Think, however, of how frustrating it would be to be playing Aragorn in that scenario. Imagine trying every possible way to save Gandalf and failing, time after time. Consider how frustrating that game would be, and whether you would really want to continue playing that particular game, right after your best asset (not to mention a character you hopefully cared about) was stripped away from you.

This aversion to allowing a player to feel frustration, a relatively normal emotion to experience in many other art forms, reiterates to students that their role is writer as a service, not as practitioner of their craft. Exposure to this kind of advice can halt a student of writing as it is of a prescriptivist nature that this new digital generation rejects, whose daily experience of the world is as author/audience hybrid. In my experience, this kind of prescriptivist thinking only serves to confuse and restrict students. Teachers of interactive storytelling should encourage students to pour themselves into their craft, with a focus on process and practice; further we must pedagogically immunise them from thinking they have to perform like a seal for a braying audience.

Failure to service the consumer as they see fit can result in hostility within the games community, even outside of some very public harassment cases. Students struggle under a social pressure by so-called ‘hardcore gamers’ to buy every game the moment of its release, devour it, participate in commentary of it, merely to ‘keep up’ with the followers of the ‘haute nouveauté’ (Adorno 1951). This is alienating to students without similar access, or those who choose not to maintain this level of engagement with

weekly releases. This has a chilling effect on the practitioners' relationship to their audience, and can damage students' relationship to their work's wider context, lacking knowledge of the social practices within which their texts are used.

Conflict and narrative structure

Students of interactive storytelling are at great risk of being taught a narrow view of Western-centric assumed-wisdoms related to literature, wherein every story has a three-act structure, or that 'conflict is king'. On the contrary, I believe students would benefit greatly from studying the concept of 'kishōtenketsu', the absence of plot conflict (Anonymous 2012; Ödlund 2014). This storytelling structure found mainly in Japan, China, and Korea relies instead on non-sequiturs to maintain interest instead of combat, imposition, and ultimately domination.

Akira Kurasawa's film *Rashomon* (1950) tells multiple stories at once, from many different perspectives and narrators, each identifying the events in a different way. The film hence rejects the notion of a central protagonist or narrative progression considered 'essential' in most Western storytelling. Another of Kurasawa's works, *Dreams* (1990), dispenses with notions of traditional narrative entirely and represents his own dreams in a series of vignettes, not unlike many present-day small indie and/or personal games using similar conventions. It is important that games studies students are not limited to a homogenised theoretical framework on which to build the foundations of their practice.

Common patterns observed in student process

Everything discussed in this essay has impacted my experience when teaching game narrative. I have keenly felt the frustrations outlined above as a teacher, and I have also observed some common patterns in student behaviour:

1. Visual cues help conceptualise interactive plots. Students often struggle to see how they can make an interactive plot until they have seen some visual cues to assist in their conceptualisation of the work. Much like the research of McKeough and Sanderson, the use of mnemonic devices and prompts for 'bridging to the next level in the development hierarchy' (2006: 167) has proven useful, but only *after* the student has participated in an 'audit' of sorts of their current level of understanding. Hesitation often ceases at the point in which the student realises they might know more about writing than they thought. If we were to take student confidence in approaching their work as a value metric, my most valuable syllabi would be those where I focused on the demystification of writing and encouraging the student to approach their work with greater confidence – that the page belonged to them, not them to the page. Once the students have gained the confidence to try this new form of writing and get their first hands-on approach using writing tools with a visual mnemonic, a cognitive shift occurs in the students' own belief in their abilities and a new confidence is found. Work rarely proceeds if this confidence is not reached.

2. Assessment criteria is necessarily restrictive. Newfound confidence is often accompanied by an Icarus moment. Given the restrictions of the assessment criteria (namely a word limit and fixed deadline), the project's scope must be small and manageable for a teacher to complete grading in a short space of time. In the students' personal practice this may not be a consideration, but the potential for this recent confidence to cause the student to overreach (or 'over-scope') the project is significant. The grand vision becomes unwieldy and the student must soon learn to struggle with focusing on one portion, or even one scene, of the story. Most students succeed in paring back the scope of their projects, and thankfully the enthusiasm for this new kind of writing remains. Some are even pre-emptively smitten with the projects yet to come.
3. Students feel their work is not 'high art'. Possibly due to the pressures related to the legitimization of games as an art form discussed previously in this essay, I have observed that many students succumb to a pressure toward flowery prose in an attempt perhaps to sound more 'literary', for their work to be considered 'more serious'. This is not always a negative, and I have had the pleasure of helping students attempting to write games in iambic pentameter, playing with poetic beats, or working in rhyming couplets. Formal language can be an advantage when approached deliberately, but is often used as a writing crutch against claims of cultural illegitimacy.
4. An environment where sharing is encouraged is mutually beneficial to students. Once students have reached a sufficient level of completion with their work, they are often more inclined to share with their peers than in more traditional creative writing contexts. Asking students to 'playtest' each other's games is much less intimidating than, say, proofreading or editing. This is actively encouraged in my classroom early on, even with small writing sprints and tutorial exercises. Encouraging playtesting from as early as possible often improves the students' writing, as 'The notion of students taking care in producing more polished writing when they know that their work will be read by others is a long-established principle upon which effective writing instruction is based' (Owston et al 2009: n.p.).
5. Students need to be around students of other disciplines. The quality of the students' work (and by that I suggest a metric of engaging, original, innovative pieces that develop their skills in an educational context, but do not necessarily result in products that are ready for commercial release or marketable to an audience) increased greatly when the interactive writing subject I was teaching became an elective and open to students from outside of the game design degree in which it originally resided. Being exposed to students of the fine arts, journalism, advertising, and more traditional creative writing degrees often meant

game design students were given an opportunity to see how different disciplines approach different problems, and a shared learning exchange began to occur between the various student cohorts.

Conclusion

Teaching writing for videogames presents unique challenges to the educator. Some of these are beyond the teacher's control, such as the cultural anxiety around games as frivolous time-wasters, 'murder simulators', or 'un-serious work'. Other challenges, however, can be alleviated by widening the scope of inquiry beyond just the Western-centric philosophies of storytelling true-isms, and embracing modes of storytelling from multiple cultures that may be more appropriate when constructing interactive worlds. It is also important for game design students to have access to students from other disciplines, as the level of conversation around games – once the pressure to have sufficient 'gamer cred' has been removed – is one of substance and presents challenge to the game design student. A strong foundation of confidence as a writer must be established within the student before their hesitancy toward the work subsides. The new literacy environment students currently inhabit within their online social networks empowers them to blur the lines between author, reader, and player in their day to day lives, and requires an overhaul of how we teach writing for videogames, one that is markedly further away from the traditional pedagogies of creative writing. Game design degrees are becoming a staple of tertiary institutions around the world, obliging us all to analyse and modify any cultural anxieties we may have about the mixing of work and play under late capitalism, and how we as teachers can best foster an environment for the student practitioner to thrive.

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