

The Game Narrative Renaissance: A Call for a Dedicated Game Writing Pedagogy

Louise Persson

University of Skövde
Högskolevägen, Box 408
541 28 Skövde, Sweden
+46 (0) 500 448000
Louise.Persson@his.se

Rebecca Rouse

University of Skövde
Högskolevägen, Box 408
541 28 Skövde, Sweden
+46 (0) 500 448000
Rebecca.Rouse@his.se

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INTRODUCTION

As game narratives enter a renaissance, evidenced by an interdisciplinary flowering of narrative across genres, technologies and disciplines (Hyvärinen2010), industry and research have responded with increased focus on the importance of storytelling in games. Game development pedagogy, however, has yet to embrace the importance of game writing. One of the few dedicated game writing curricula is at University of Skövde, Sweden, which has a twenty-years long history in game development curriculum. As the Game Writing program has grown since its establishment in 2012, it has become one of the most popular programs at the university, attracting roughly four times the applicants for available slots. Now the curriculum is entering its first revision. In this paper we share details of curriculum design and make a case for game writing curricula within game development programs.

PROGRAM BACKGROUND

The idea of starting a game writing program at University of Skövde was born out of a previous media program in Documentary Film, and the two courses that persist from this legacy are a film history overview and a creative writing course. Another impetus to establish the program was the contemporary rise in commercial games with interesting narratives. This increased attention to narrative is reflected across the field, including the BAFTA Games Awards, which first introduced an award focused solely on Story in 2010. In addition, new scholarly associations such as ARDIN (Association for Research in Interactive Narrative) and established conferences such as ICIDS (International Conference on Interactive Digital Narrative) include many scholars working at the intersection of narrative and games. In this interesting cultural moment established genre conventions regarding story and interactivity are breaking down and cross-pollinating in myriad ways. In this newly complex landscape, what makes a good

playable narrative, and how do we teach potential authors to create such narratives successfully?

In addition to the legacy courses mentioned above, Game Writing students at Skövde are taught classical dramaturgy, dialogue systems, pre-production, and writing for *interactable* as opposed to only *interactive* media (Wilhelmsson 2001). Despite this game writing specific curriculum, students often mention a feeling of redundancy, or outsider status, as though a game narrative is somehow “extra” but not integral to the core of game design. Just as those outside the writing discipline may assume that anyone can write an interesting story, students in the other games education programs sometimes assume writing an interesting game story is a trivial task.

Related to this, one of the greatest struggles in designing a game writing curriculum is maintaining a focus on what separates a game narrative from a traditional narrative. While these differences have been researched for many years (Ryan 2008; Koenitz 2015; Cardona-Rivera, Sullivan & Young 2019) this scholarship has yet to materialize in game writing curricula. Many textbooks continue to reify the old ludo-narrative debate, which is not supportive of innovation in game writing. The perspectives presented are largely Hollywood-influenced, and thus provide a very limited set of narrative structures to work from (Sheldon 2004; Despain 2009; Lebowitz & Klug 2011; Skolnick 2014). So while there is a growing research interest in more interactive narrative complexity (Grishakova & Poulaki 2019) traditional Western structures like *The Hero’s Journey* maintain a hold over students’ imaginations. Instead, the core of good game writing should lie with the *representation of* and the *connection to* the player within that story, as well as with concepts such as structure and the dramaturgical relationships between mechanics, interaction experience, storytelling, and aesthetics.

CURRICULUM REVISION

To provide a game writing curriculum that sharpens its focus on these issues specific to the discipline, we have completed our first major revision of the program. The revision includes more engagement with theory and practice from interactive performance. Instead of relying entirely on literature and film, narrative forms that are often not interactive, performance does have a long tradition of interactive, immersive storytelling (Hageböling 2004). The connections between performance, play, and games are rich and far reaching, from tabletop role-playing games and LARPs (live action role-playing), to immersive theatre and happenings. These forms have the potential to allow players a high degree of creative agency and sense of self integrated into the play experience. There is, however, a lack of discussion when it comes to the moral issues of inviting an audience (as in players) to participate in and even enact a narrative rather than to observe. Recent scholarship from Nassim Parvin and Kaisa Kangas present important contributions (Kangas 2017; Parvin 2019), but this is an area of research that should be extended further.

It may be the case that the long history of moralizing arguments applied to other storytelling mediums, such as the antitheatrical prejudice against theatre (Quinsland 2015) or morality ‘codes’ in Hollywood (Black 1989) have been so stifling of creative expression that the field has reacted by turning away from the issue of ethics and storytelling almost entirely. Commonplace arguments about the triviality and artifice of gaming are employed to continue the lack of examination of these issues, and the discussion that has emerged is overly determined by anxieties around violence and transference to non-game environments (Susi, Johannesson & Backlund 2007; Tobias & Fletcher 2011; Poels, Ijsselsteijn & de Kort 2015). This discourse is extremely limited in terms of narrative, because very few game narratives are actually centered in violence. Although violent mechanics may dominate, even that is becoming less

widespread as games innovate as an artistic medium (Schrank 2013). To address this gap, we are also developing a new course in moral philosophy for game writing, that will focus on the particular moral challenges writers must consider when authoring systems, roles, and environments for players to inhabit.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, as the game narrative renaissance unfolds across the field, we call to game educators to consider the centrality of game writing as a component in games pedagogy and continue to innovate the methods and materials for teaching in this subject area. In addition, as the field develops, opportunities to create accompanying graduate programs will emerge, to deepen the research focus on core issues of game writing as a discipline.

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