

Dirty Pretty Romans: Teaching Catullus as Interactive Fiction using Twine and StoryMaps

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ABSTRACT

For decades (if not centuries) the majority of instructional time in Classics has been spent on the nuts and bolts of two ancient languages no longer in active use. Rather than exploiting Greek and Latin texts as a way into lived experience in ancient Greece or Rome, mastery of grammar has seemed the primary point. *What was it like to be them?* has consistently taken a back seat to painstaking translation and questions like, *what use of the subjunctive is this?* In the face of sharply declining enrollments, our Classics program has reoriented language teaching toward that first question. Asked of literary evidence, *what was it like to be them?* opened the door to a pedagogical approach that foregrounded active engagement through Discursive Game Design (DGD; Glas et al. 2021, Werning 2019). Using a constructivist approach, “with game design as a game itself,” this did not mean pouring the chocolate sauce of edutainment on the broccoli of Latin grammar (Laurel 2001, Glas and van Vught 2022). Rather, the chocolate was poured on the tangy mascarpone of what students wanted to learn in the first place (*what was it like to be Roman?*), through co-creative game making based, in our example, on the poetry of Catullus.

Video games have become a significant way for people to learn about the past, outside and within academic contexts (Antley et al. n.d., Barnard 2023, Champion 2011, Hageneuer 2020, Kapell and Elliot 2013, Kingsland n.d.). However, most Rome-focused games emphasize warfare and politics, and the positions offered for player identification are correspondingly masculine and elite (McCall 2018). At the same time, the use of games for learning in classical history and archaeology has focused on game play, rather than game creation. Ancient Rome, on the other hand, was incredibly diverse, and a surprising range of Roman texts touch upon the lives, identities, and emotions of everyday people. These texts offer a rich way into the question (*what was it like to be them?*), allowing students, through DGD, to be imaginative and creative while also expecting them to be historically critical in the process of fictional worldbuilding.

Active in the 50s BCE, Catullus was contemporary with Caesar, Cicero, and Pompey the Great, and a witness to the intense, often violent transformation of Rome in the late republic. Catullus was not, however, from the Roman elite, and their poems address situations and people across Rome’s social spectrum, exploring identities that are “Other” in terms of wealth and ethnicity, and non-binary in relation to the penetration ethos of elite masculinity. In spring 2023, the authors reinvented the Catullus class through a series of steps that seem coherent now, though several emerged on the fly: 1) students with backgrounds in

Latin, English, and Creative Writing were combined in the same class; 2) translations of Catullus were combined with fictional responses from the many Romans addressed by Catullus; 3) translations and responses were modeled in style after examples of contemporary spoken word accessible through [Button Poetry](#); 4) students created a fictional Roman *cena* (dinner party) as the setting for the performance of these poems, with a guest list based on figures in Catullus; 5) students used Figma to arrange the poems in thematic threads and map out interactive paths through these threads; 6) the Figma roadmap was transferred to Twine and coded; 7) male and female personae were created for the player; 8) conversational response options were developed so that the combination of player choices would incrementally construct a “Roman” with political alignments, ethnicity, class, and sex/gender identity; 9) this results in a poem of friendship or hostility composed by Catullus for the player character (“win” and “lose” conditions); 10) ArcGIS StoryMaps were created for significant characters and locations and linked within the Twine.

The presentation will illustrate how these pieces came together to form *Dirty Pretty Romans*, a window into lived Roman experiences that was necessarily provisional and incomplete. Nonetheless, as supported by a post-class questionnaire, DGD engaged students with Catullus’ poetry in a way that was far more active, holistic, politically aware, and critical than a traditional translation and grammar class. This is partly because this approach, through its co-creative nature, consistently invited a comparative reversal of the question: *what was it like to be them?* into *what is like to be me?*

Keywords

Playing the past, interactive fiction, discursive game design

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