Phenomenological Research Approaches to Game Pedagogy

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ABSTRACT
This paper discusses the importance of, and presents a possible framework for, phenomenological research of game industry practice to enhance pedagogy in computer game design (CGD) education. Built around examples from one such study on the practices of game industry writers, the author provides background for the study in question, outlines the theoretical framework of the research design, and presents an overview of the findings. A discussion of possible impacts and further applications in other subdisciplines of game development follows.

Keywords
game writing, rhetorical genre studies, activity theory, phenomenology, pedagogy, writing studies

INTRODUCTION
Collaboration between the game industry and CGD programs in the past has focused on workforce development (Ashton 2010). It can be difficult to develop pedagogies in creative fields, but, as Mayers (2005) suggests, engaging existing frameworks to theorize practice can help fields learn from each other. CGD programs' faculty, as educator-researchers investigating the phenomenon of game development in context, can leverage the lived experiences of practitioners to construct more effective course design and instruction. In doing so, researchers can build rich data that may be applied to future work, thus driving further sophistication of CGD as a field of study in higher education.

The following paper addresses the potential of this approach to research-enhanced pedagogy by outlining and discussing one such study focused on the pedagogy of game writing. The paper starts by providing background on the research problem, outlining the issues with developing a pedagogy of game writing. Next, the author presents an overview of a two-year phenomenological study of industry game writers to identify possible applications of this pedagogy-focused research approach. The discussion that follows highlights important questions and opportunities resulting from the study data and other scholarship.

Problem Statement / Background
The primacy of industry skills in CGD programs should be reconsidered, recognizing a need for entry-level skills to enhance student employability, while also acknowledging the faculty's desire to enhance their students' capacity for creativity and innovation later in their careers (Ashton 2010). In the subdiscipline of game writing, this reconsideration is fraught with complications.

Harry Brown stated, "Game development studios still struggle to define the role of the videogame writer and, more broadly, to reconcile the tasks of game design and storytelling" (2008 3). While the roles and tasks of game writing and game writers are poorly defined, hundreds of established professionals thrive as game writers and narrative designers in the field. A common sentiment surfaces throughout the literature and pervades the industry: there is nothing else like game writing (Bateman 2007; Chandler 2007; Dansky 2007; DeMarle 2007; Heussner et al. 2015; Sheldon 2013). In terms of scholarship, the game writing community's attempts to define their own practices is somewhat limited.

According to Peery (2016), video game writing is a hybridization of screenwriting, creative writing, and technical writing that is evolving into a new area of expertise and study. Traditional writing genres, ranging from composition to poetry, can be found in game writing, but rather than communicating a single author's vision to the audience, game writing serves to enhance the other elements of the player's experience (DeMarle 2007; Sheldon 2013).

Extant texts meant for instructive use (Bateman 2007; Chandler 2007; Despain 2009; Dille & Zuur Platten 2008; Heussner et al. 2015; Lebowitz & Klug 2012; Sheldon, 2013; Skolnick 2014) are based primarily on professional anecdotes. Wendy Despain's (2009) collection on writing for video game genres is humorously prefaced as the industry-veteran authors' alternative to "drowning our sorrows and crying in our beer" (p. xiv). Statements like this signify the limitations of relying on these trade press publications as a scholarly assessment of the field. Lacking relevant theoretical underpinnings in pedagogy or writing research, these texts are of limited use to researchers or educators looking to develop and enhance pedagogy.

APPROACHING A PEDAGOGY OF GAME WRITING

The search for a more effective pedagogy for game writing courses in higher education became the focus of my doctoral thesis, *Approaching a Pedagogy of Game Writing* (Hudson 2018), collecting data via semi-structured interviews with AAA game developers over the course of two years. Following Maxwell's (2013) interactive approach to qualitative research design, interview data were collected for critical use to test ideas and develop theory rather than to seek observable, measurable data for making inferences and drawing conclusions.

After reviewing relevant literature and trying out different theoretical frameworks, the ultimate design of the study was built on two deceptively simple research questions:

- What functional competencies are required of professional game writers?

- To what educational experiences do game writers attribute the development of these competencies?

Theoretical Framework

Given the role of game writing within AAA game production, constantly changing from one project to the next and working under constraints dictated by technology and organizational structure (Bateman 2007; Chandler 2007; Dansky 2007; Despain 2009; Dille & Zuur Platten 2008; Heussner et al. 2015; Sheldon 2013; Skolnick 2014), the game writers' experiences are most effectively analyzed as part of the complex systems of game development. A synthesis of rhetorical genre studies (RGS) and cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) ultimately drove my research design, as both approaches look at writing in the context of production.

According to Bazerman and Prior (2009, 2), to view writing through the lens of RGS, "we need to explore the practices that people engage in to produce texts as well as the ways that writing practices gain their meanings and functions as dynamic elements of specific cultural settings." CHAT is equally useful when considering writing in game industry contexts, as it incorporates the complex relationships of power, money, culture, and technology (Foot 2014).

Research Design

Throughout the course of the study, I allowed my knowledge and experience as an educator to inform my efforts. While open to any theoretical direction the data suggests, my approach was pragmatic, seeking results conducive to applicability and action (Brinkmann & Kvale 2014), rather than a purely phenomenological approach solely focused on representing experience. An approach of this kind attempts a deeper understanding of the meanings behind everyday experiences, while also offering plausible insights that allow others to understand those experiences more completely (van Manen 1990).

Following Prior's (2009) suggestion, these semi-structured interviews shifted between questions grounded in specific knowledge and scholarship and questions that surfaced naturally during the conversation. Direct questions regarding the knowledge, skills, abilities, and characteristics of game writers fell into this category (e.g., "Tell me about your favorite writer to work with."). I also asked more open-ended questions regarding the day-to-day activities of game writers (e.g., "Describe what it looks like when you sit down to write," eventually followed by, "How is your writing process different in the studio?").

OVERVIEW OF SIGNIFICANT FINDINGS

Rather than identifying finite abilities, skills, and knowledge, data analysis revealed more malleable categories, termed 'areas of competence' necessary for game writing; these included: writing and storytelling, communication and collaboration, understanding systems and dynamics, tool proficiency, and understanding play. Beyond these areas of competence, the study also identified three essential roles of the game writer—*wordsmith*, *sensemaker*, and *advocate*—that may serve as a structure for examining how various areas of competence are engaged, alone or in combination, across the array of tasks performed by industry game writers.

Essential Roles of the Game Writer

This study identified three essential roles that game writers play, in some capacity, across contexts. Although little uniformity exists across titles and roles in the industry (Bates 2004; Newman 2013), these roles encompass the array of tasks the game writer may perform in any given setting. Summarized, they include:

- Wordsmith—the game writer's focus is on execution rather than creativity. Completing the assigned tasks of game writing requires flexibility when crafting with text.

- Sensemaker—the game writer seeks to understand the creative views of individuals in other subdisciplines to build a sense of ownership for the game's story from all those involved in the production.

- Advocate—the game writer champions the story vertically to the decisionmakers and horizontally across the subdiscipline teams, relying on emotional intelligence and careful observation.

Areas of Competence

Listed below, each area of competence encompasses a group of competencies required to support a productive career in game writing:

- Writing and storytelling—required to produce written text and generate engaging story content efficiently;

- Communication and collaboration—required to work effectively with other individuals in the studio environment;

- Understanding systems and dynamics—required to perform functions at a high level within the limitations of production and technology;

- Tool proficiency—required to demonstrate the transfer of writing and storytelling skills to the tools, both technological and conceptual, of the industry; and

- Understanding play—required to create content for games by producing writing conducive to interactivity and allowing for player freedom.

Learning outcomes that promote the areas of competence outlined in this study are enhanced when framed in the three essential roles of wordsmith, sensemaker, and advocate. Students can conceive of any given task in terms of hypothetical industry contexts—the rhetorical situation and its situation within the activity system—while relating them to a combination of these essential roles.

Researcher Reflections

The steps taken to ensure anonymity—giving pseudonyms to participants, removing references to specific studios and game titles, and limiting specifics in demographic reporting given the close relationships within the game writing community—allowed participants to be honest and open in their responses. In cases where the interviewee responses began with, "Since this is off the record," it was apparent that providing participants anonymity allowed them to be more forthcoming, likely offering richer data.

The data collected in this study, much like extant texts on the subject, still focused on debunking the perceived myths about a writer's work in preparation for the practical realities of the field. According to Peery (2016), if there are rules for writing in the industry, they are largely developed in-house for specific projects. In university composition programs, however, the concept of writing as a loosely-defined set of interrelated tasks and processes is now common. Teaching writing with a focus on process, rather than product, is so widely accepted that "it may be difficult to imagine alternative instructional approaches" (De La Paz & McCutchen 2011, 32).

Borrowing concepts from RGS—focused on the real-world contexts where texts are created (Bazerman & Prior 2009; Devitt 2000; Miller 1984; Russell 2010; Swales 1990)—this research design allowed for meaningful investigation of game writers in their respective professional settings. Due to the necessary collaboration between game writers, other subdisciplines (e.g., art, audio, programming), and player expectations of interactivity, the essential roles and areas of competence that emerged represent the differences between writing for games and writing in other mediums.

Participants in the study shared some interesting thoughts on the present state, and possible future, of CGD programs in higher education. While the current goal of CGD programs is training students to get a job in the industry, students would be better served by a shift in focus that prepares them for the day-to-day work they are likely to encounter.

Making tacit professional knowledge explicit is valuable to advancing any field (Schön 1983) but is particularly useful when exploring new fields with few standard practices. The real value comes in the educator-researcher's interpretation and eventual implementation into pedagogy. Capturing the game industry professionals' perceptions is a first step in challenging the assumption that "there is nothing like game writing."

CGD instructors that conceive of game writing, or any subdiscipline, as a mere synthesis of relevant tasks common in the industry are not likely to produce anything more than a list of possible classroom activities. Those who are willing to experiment in the classroom and attempt new methods of instruction that challenge traditional notions of higher education can truly empower students (Hudson & Willis 2019). Instructors who frame pedagogy in more abstract ways, such as these essential roles, are better able to develop effective methods of instruction regardless of perceived constraints of time or resources.

DISSSUSION

The study presented above highlights the potential for collaboration between industry and academia that is driven by instructors—experienced professionals with a wealth of knowledge—and grounded in research. Rather than simply amending coursework per the views of the practitioners in the field, faculty that employ research on the industry in developing pedagogy can offer students more effective instruction.

Individual studios and professional organizations like the International Game Developers Association have demonstrated willingness to work with CGD programs, but "collaboration, dialogue and attempts to bridge industry and higher education gaps seem to be focused principally around workforce development" (Ashton 2010, 44). While logical, that goal is more elusive than it may seem. Preparing students with industry-specific skills is difficult given the lack of uniform practices in the industry and the rapid pace of change driving the industry's evolution.

Basing curriculum design and instruction on research, rather than on generalized assumptions regarding industry trends and practitioners' anecdotes, adds value to the students' CGD education, which is vital to programs competing with the unbundled alternatives of online self-instruction in the technological tools of the trade (Selingo 2010).

A Case for Game Narrative in CGD

In discussing innovation in game design education, I will now seize the opportunity to tout the power of narrative. Just as the medium "must move beyond computer science and art to simply code games and make them look good" (Salmond 2016, 24), CGD educators must seek more innovative approaches to training students—a greater focus on game storytelling is one way forward. Greater focus on narrative has the potential to speed the sophistication of the medium (Jacobs 2004; Norman 1999). Games with engaging stories and clever writing increase emotional impact (Isbister 2016) and players' sense of immersion during gameplay (Bissell 2010; Ermi & Mäyrä 2005). Game studios "who have indulged the writing process," have created some of the most innovative and socially- engaged work to date (Bissell 2010). Creating inclusive content should be a consideration for all CGD educators.

The authors of trade press books on game writing define their field by juxtaposing it with common ideas about creative writing likely driving the sentiment that "there is nothing like game writing." This sentiment is shared by some who teach creative writing in university. Kenneth Goldsmith (2011) asserted that the field of creative writing is stuck on perpetuating the incorrect notion of the original artist in writing. Goldsmith indicated that this attitude limits the potential of creative writing in the

digital age. Others, like Mayers (2005), highlighted university creative writing programs' common refusal to theorize about the ways creative work operates. As a result, potentially valuable qualitative studies of these practices remain non-existent.

Experimenting with Theoretical Approaches from Other Disciplines
Future researchers in CGD pedagogy would benefit from adopting Maxwell's (2013) interactive approach to qualitative research design. Remaining open to scholarship and methods in other, established disciplines that may not seem relevant at first glance offers a vital opportunity to explore more effective pedagogies of game design in higher education. CHAT, for instance, is conducive to defining the processes and the conditions for attaining concrete goals in a complex system, while also factoring in the ever-present dynamics of power, money, culture, and history (Foot 2014). Once discovered, this framework seems vital to any analysis of game industry practices.

RGS approaches to writing embrace the dynamic nature of any working situation. The game writing literature presents the lack of standard formatting as a limitation to learning the practices of game writing, but rhetorical genre researchers understand that all writing is situational. This means that the common notion of, "there is nothing like game writing" found in the literature is a null point. Were the same logic informing this sentiment applied to writing in other professional situations, it would be true to say, "there is nothing like any writing" in specific professional settings.

CONCLUSION
Given the complexity of game development, complicated by poorly-defined roles and a lack of standard practices (Newman 2013), innovative research on industry practices, with the ultimate purpose of pedagogical application, is the key to advancing computer game design as a field of study. Any existing gaps in communication between the game industry and higher education should not serve an as excuse to retreat to our respective bases of understanding. Rather, those gaps are indicative of an opportunity for researchers to engage with a new field that represents a convergence of technology, art, storytelling, and interactivity in the digital age. Deployed in pedagogy, those efforts will certainly benefit the students we seek to serve and our field of study; they may also innovate the medium itself.

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