

1. THE GAME WEAVERS

A FEMINIST APPROACH TO GAME WRITING

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ABSTRACT

In this paper faculty members from the Game Writing undergraduate program at the University of Skövde offer a new lens for understanding the act of game writing as weaving, and game story as tapestry. We share recent curricular innovations from our Game Writing program that reflect this perspective, which is inspired by core concepts from feminist narratology. We approach the concept of the weaver through reflection on narratological traditions and practices of collaborative authorship, and invite all game education disciplines to consider the weaving way of thinking, in contrast with design thinking.

KEYWORDS

pedagogy, curricular design, game writing, feminist narratology

INTRODUCTION

Once upon a time, when the Fates steered the lives of men, they wove the first stories for the first civilization. As the years went by, more stories were

woven together in a never-ending tapestry of heroic deeds and thrilling conquest. The Hero's Journey from boyhood to manhood echoed in the seams, through the eons, to weave the perfect pattern for stories to emerge...

Storytelling is one of our oldest sources of entertainment. Since ancient times, storytelling has been a way for people to come together, to decompress, and to understand the world. The stories told in ancient societies doubtless had multiple objectives—to entertain, to explain, to teach, to warn—and were surely held to the same standard for audiences of stories today. These stories had to be interesting. But how do you tell an interesting story? Does the story need a certain structure to work?

The Hero's Journey, as described through Joseph Campbell's theory of the monomyth (Campbell, 2008), is a well-known Western structure that puts the individual Hero and his (or sometimes her) singular deeds and challenges at the center. The inciting incident, the conflict, and the resolution are all elements that creators, mythologists, and dramaturgs have been working with for years, and some claim that these elements need to exist for a story to be considered a story. This hero-centric perspective, however, excludes stories told by unconventional Heroes—or those who might not be Heroes at all.

The monomyth is not the only structure known to put conflict and an exceptional individual at the center of storytelling, with one single Hero to wield the fate of the world on his shoulders. Not all stories with the focus on a central Hero are violent or conflict-oriented, but many traditional Western stories across many different media do carry this common structure, especially in the media storytelling industry which has dominated popular culture over the past forty years (Vogler, 2017). Indeed, many commonly used game writing textbooks emphasize the Hero's Journey as a key storytelling structure that is necessary for success (Sheldon, 2022; Suckling & Walton, 2016; Skolnik, 2014; Despain, 2009). While there is nothing intrinsically wrong with the Hero's Journey as one structural possibility, when this structure alone dominates storytelling, we see that stories of the everyday, the collective, and the more subtle or nuanced sources of wonder are left out. Hero's Journey stories may offer some-

thing important to audiences in terms of escapism from the everyday, but they are sometimes so far from ordinary life that they become unreachable and unrelatable, perhaps most notably for people at the margins of society. And the dominance of Hero's Journey stories can mean we miss out on attuning to the extraordinary in the everyday, meaning we may miss much of what is special right in our own lived experience, leaving us disconnected from appreciating the wonder in our own lives.

Feminist narratologist and science fiction novelist Ursula Le Guin points out this lack of more nuanced perspectives in storytelling, thanks to the dominance of the Hero. Imagining the experience of hearing a prehistoric hunter recount the tale of his conquest around the fire, Le Guin references Elizabeth Fisher's feminist evolutionary research (1979), noting that hunting was not the primary mode of prehistoric subsistence, but instead the gathering of edible vegetation by the collective was the main source of food. Le Guin imagines the collective gatherers to listen to the hunter's tale, noting that his story "not only has Action, it has a Hero... Heroes are powerful. Before you know it, the men and women in the wild-oat patch and their kids and the skills of the makers and the thoughts of the thoughtful and the songs of the singers are all part of it, have all been pressed into service in the tale of the Hero. But it isn't their story. It's his" (Le Guin, 2019, 27-28). The Hero's tale is one of conquest, separating narration from life—as the extraordinary, stories have left out parts of human life and experience that carries just as much weight as the heroic deeds. The gatherers, notes Le Guin, had just as many stories to tell as the hunters; the only difference is that their stories were not of the extraordinary, but of the everyday. They were the stories we most often tell—the stories that we find all around us and which carry their own sense of the extraordinary, when told well.

Building further on Fisher's feminist carrier bag theory of evolution (Fisher 1979, 60), Le Guin pictures the bag in which the story of the Hero is carried, but that the Hero "does not look well in this bag. He needs a stage or a pedestal or a pinnacle" (Le Guin 2019, 35). Instead, Le Guin's feminist carrier bag is far more expansive, and

makes room for all our imagination, wishes, experiences, and dreams. When we look at the weave of game storytelling in Western culture, we find the Hero's Journey at the center. The call to adventure, the refusal of it, the crossing of the threshold, the innermost cave, and the return are all familiar steps, ones we have seen time and again in the stories we tell and hear, so much so that this Hero's story feels natural or perhaps even necessary for game storytelling. But we argue here that the Fates weaved a much larger tapestry, and games storytellers seem to have forgotten to take a step back and observe other parts of it.

The tapestry of game storytelling, in the spirit of Le Guin, is capacious like the carrier bag and can hold all manner of interesting story materials. Le Guin describes her own storytelling carrier bag as filled with: "wimps and klutzes, and tiny grains of things smaller than a mustard seed and intricately woven nets which when laboriously unknotted are seen to contain one blue pebble, and imperturbably functioning chronometer telling the time on another world and a mouse's skull; full of beginnings without ends, of initiations, of losses, of transformations and translations, and far more tricks than conflicts, far fewer triumphs than snares and delusions; full of space ships that get stuck, missions that fail, and people who don't understand" (Le Guin 2019, 35-36.)

Right away we see that even in the absence of a Hero, Le Guin's carrier bag has qualities that resonate well with the affordances of games. For example, imagining the diverse array of objects Le Guin describes positioned in a world awaiting the player's discovery, we can imagine an environmental storytelling strategy. Le Guin's associative storytelling aesthetic in the carrier bag can be imagined as a hypertextual or networked structure, as indeed she even explicitly references "intricately woven nets." And finally, Le Guin's discussion of beginnings without ends can be linked to game structures like game-over and respawn. When game storytelling is seen through the lens of the carrier bag and reconceptualized as un-ending tapestry, the oft-cited conflict between story and mechanics becomes less urgent, since the infinite tapestry invites us into more

flexible story forms that may leverage game affordances more readily.

GAME WRITING REIMAGINED

In 2012, the University of Skövde established a new undergraduate program in game writing within a larger Computer Game Development division. Stemming from the already established Game Design program, Game Writing came to fruition because of the increased interest in games with strong narratives (Persson & Rouse 2020). The university realized that the storytelling aspect was different from other game development processes like programming, design, and art, and necessitated its own training and education program.

Because of the Game Writing program's roots in game design, a problem arose in the early creation of the program: game writing became more of an appendix to game design, and not its own discipline, lending the new program a lesser status. Because of this, the already narrow definition of storytelling became even narrower—a game Hero created only in a secondary way by a game writer, after the work of a game designer has led the process. Instead of training game designers and game writers as equal collaborators, designers were positioned as superior. This played out in different ways, for example in group project courses, game writing students often felt marginalized by other disciplines, and in game writing courses themselves student work lacked a depth of engagement with broader narrative forms and techniques beyond those found in popular games, such as the game Hero story.

Eight years later, in 2020, the Game Writing program went through its first major revision, broadening the definitions of game narrative and storytelling, and changing the way we look upon game writing as an activity—and *game writer* as a role. Some separate the roles of game writer and narrative designer, claiming that the former handles the scripts and the story as a whole, and the latter takes the story to fruition. A game writer ought to focus on the story and worldbuilding, whereas a narrative designer ought to focus on how

the story should fit into the gameplay, with a particular focus on mechanics and design. Our program fuses these two roles into a singular role, and perhaps falls somewhere in between, developing the game writer as a uniquely flexible member of the game development team. Our students are able to create storytelling experiences across a wide range of mediums and applications, from computer games to board games, to role playing games, LARP (live-action role playing), and even in more theatrical, interactive installations, and film, or themed environments. Due to this flexible approach, our game writers are not only people who write games; they are more like *game weavers*, like the Fates, and the game itself is the tapestry. Sometimes other industries weave a thread into the game tapestry—for example, when our students work with game techniques for the performing arts or film. We believe this weaving of forms and traditions enriches the game storytelling tapestry, and even culture at large.

Reflecting this perspective, we welcome many relevant interdisciplinary practices into the game writing curriculum, including movable books, film dramaturgy, interactive performance, theater, and moral philosophy. This complexity of disciplinary influences fits well with the complexity of the game object: an entangled combination of mechanics, graphics, sound, music, design, and story that make up the overall experience. A game writer must understand the game experience, which is—as described—more than just the story. There are more threads than that. But the game writer must see not only the story-based threads, they must take a step back to see the weave as a whole. Of course, a game writer cannot be responsible for weaving the tapestry, which is the game itself, but by wielding the power of story they can pull the threads and arrange them in order to create a meaningful pattern for players to uncover or even co-create.

THE WEAVE OF PLAY

Telling and experiencing stories is often one and the same; is it possible for us to determine where listening ends and the creative act

begins, when one considers the creativity of interpretation? Who pulls the first string, and who brings the next? If we regard authorial control as absolute, we can clearly determine that there is a division. But storytelling is rarely absolute. A story is not created in a vacuum; every story is an ever-expanding web—or weave—of intertextuality and inspiration, a concoction of several influential sources, which lends itself as an inspiration in and of itself (Bazerman, 2003). The interpretation of the creation adds new threads to the weave, creating new patterns in fan creations and tributes. Before the role of the author and publication, stories evolved each time they were told; storytelling has always been transformative in its nature and leaves the tapestry open for new weaves on all sides.

The same could be said about developing and playing games. There is, naturally, a clear divide: the producers of the game versus the consumers of the game. It is in this way we often understand the gaming industry, because there is a clear capitalistic model in creating something for a consumer to buy. Designers develop a product that can later be distributed for consumers to purchase—and never shall the two meet.

But the role of a player is not entirely separate from the making of a game, and in this way, the player is also a weaver. Philosophically, a game would remain nothing but an object until someone interacts with it, and through that interaction becomes a player. This concept is known as performativity, as discussed by Judith Butler (1988) and later more specifically with respect to games by Sicart (2009). But a *player* is not only someone who plays the game as intended; the player is also an agent capable of free thinking and moral decision-making, expanding on the designed object to create a unique game experience. These player-authored expansions are not only confined to the minds of the players, but sometimes result in physical expansions of the game. Modding, for example, in which players creatively modify aspects of the game such as mechanics, objects, and objectives, muddles the distinction between producer and consumer of games.

Indeed, the discussion over what to call a person who works on

game storytelling is reflective of these tensions. What is this activity that blends the ludic with other arts, in service of storytelling? Perhaps writing is not the best term, after all the activity may not involve text or inscription in some cases (think, for example, of games that provide an evocative narrative experience without the aid of text, such as *Way to Go* (Morisset, 2015) or *Journey* (Chen, 2012)). In recognition of the separation from literary authoring, other theorists have put forward suggestions for renaming the role of game writer. Janet Murray's concept of *the Bard* (2017) draws on connections to the oral storytelling tradition, while Henry Jenkins' notion of *the Narrative Architect* (2004) focuses more on aspects of design and the spatial in the game writer's activities.

Considered from the player's perspective, this question becomes even more prominent since games often provide non-linear narratives that allow the players to weave their own paths through the game. Combined with the complex character creation options in many modern games, the possibilities for unique experiences are potentially endless. Even in completely linear games, the experiences vary. We might play the game in one sitting, or put it down for months on end; we could play the same game several times, or we could play it only once; we could play it alone, or together with friends in both physical and digital spaces. Every experience offers something new, and the story, although perhaps linear, is never fully the same because *we* are not the same. Through the act of play, the player is also a weaver of the game story.

Language itself creates dichotomies that strengthen the divide: narrators and narratees, producers and consumers, authors and readers. It is a dualism that helps us keep order, to separate what is what. Such labels are important for us to communicate, but while they do serve valuable practical purposes, they also force undefined and ambiguous activities into predefined boxes. A game developer develops games, while a player plays them, but a game developer can also play games, and a player might as well develop them. Instead of looking at developers and players, producers and consumers, and authors and readers as separate, we could look at all involved as

weavers, and we can regard game creation as a tapestry. Every experience, every screenshot that becomes a meme, every machinima reel, and every modification can be added to the tapestry to continue the pattern from whichever way the threads are open. It allows us to consider the collaborative nature of game storytelling as integral to the nature of games themselves.

This is, for some, a difficult pill to swallow as it opens up the paradox: if everyone can be a game developer, then no one is. This is where the labels are important to determine who is who and who does what. It is certainly important on a practical level in a capitalistic model where someone is compensated for their work as they produce value. The role of a game *weaver* might not have a given place in the industry, but a game *writer* does. Therefore, the aim with our research here is not to impose a name change to our education program, but to present the weaving way of thinking as a philosophy that can guide curriculum design rather than a mode of professional designation.

A FEMINIST TAPESTRY OF GAME STORYTELLING

The Fates, as mentioned in previous sections, are figures that appear in Greek mythology; they were said to spin the threads of life, intertwining life and destiny for every living person. Likewise, the Norns in the Norse mythology spun the threads of destiny, deciding whether lives were going to be tragic or heroic, as described in works like the Prose Edda from the Middle Ages (Sturluson, 1987).

The idea of a weaver at the center of storytelling is hardly a new one; it is in the application to game storytelling where we offer innovation with the concept. Looking back to the mythological figures of the Fates and the Norns, we find the weaver as a female figure, a seer with the capacity to approach futurity, and shape it, as well as a creator who works in company—the Fates were three, after all.

Situating the work of the game story makers as tied to textile practices also emphasizes connections to the female, as practices of embroidery, quilting, and other more practical sewing practices have

all been leveraged by women throughout history to work towards liberation. For example, Rozsika Parker traces the long history of embroidery in relation to women's history, noting the many examples of women's use of embroidery in service of work to change society in subversive ways, such as during the Russian revolution, the suffrage movement in England, and in memorial stitching projects for the Holocaust and the AIDS epidemic (2010). The connections between these historical feminist stitching practices and digital potentials in games have already been posited by several researchers, including Wirman (2008) and Sullivan & Smith (2016), but here we extend this work to explicitly focus on games education. Wirman (2008), inspired by Plant (1995) on weaving as a techno-feminist practice, examines the practice of female players' development of "skins" for *The Sims* videogame. Sullivan and Smith (2016) engage women's practices of sewing within the larger frame of craft, and share lessons learned from their work designing three digital games that draw from quilting in different ways, the first using a quilt as a controller, the second a board game with quilted components, and the third designed to be played on quilting and embroidery machines themselves.

Inspired by this prior research, here we shift to focus on weaving and specifically game writing education. As opposed to the often-solitary act of stitching, be it by machine or hand-worked, the communal nature of weaving nicely mirrors the often-collaborative nature of creating game storytelling, and situates the game story creator as one of a group with power and foresight. The material the weaver activates is the thread, but never just a single thread (as in the hackneyed metaphor of the "red thread" as shorthand for plot). Instead, the weaver operates with both warp and weft, bringing multiple threads together to form a matrix. The figure of the weaver also holds an interesting place in the history of the computer, with the 19th century jacquard loom as a precursor to the modern computer, with programmable (albeit non-digital) components for creating decorative patterns in cloth (Hammerman & Russell, 2015).

Thus, with the figure of the weaver we highlight a female in a

field dominated by men (the recent games field workplace survey indicates that 30% of workers are women (Statista, 2021)); we highlight the collaborative nature of making game stories, as opposed to the idea of lone authorship; we emphasize the complexity of the materials at hand; and we foreground a female thread in computing history, also a history relevant to the games field. In weaving, we also see a “weaving way of thinking,” which we suggest as an alternative to the more dominant “design thinking.” Design thinking espouses an ethos of solutionism—designers seek or perceive problems, for which they then invent solutions. In practice, this process often operates conversely; with designers inventing problems to solve, with designed solutions manifesting as problems (Parvin and Pollock, 2020). Design thinking is also hierarchical in practice, situating the designer as an all-knowing or unbiased innovator who designs to help the user, who is incapable of fixing their own problems. The weaving way of thinking, in contrast, envisions an ever-expanding field of possibility (the tapestry) and is enacted in the community, with all participants in the weaving process operating from a place of agency.

THE WEAVING WAY OF THINKING IN CURRICULAR DESIGN

We now share examples of how the weaving way of thinking shows up in the design of our Game Writing curriculum. First, some background context: the Game Writing program is a three-year undergraduate degree within the subject area of Media, Aesthetics and Narration, which is classified as a technical subject (as opposed to a design or arts subject) within the Swedish system of higher education. In contrast with systems such as those in the US and UK, the three-year undergraduate degree in Computer Game Development is specialized in different disciplines, includes no larger core curriculum from across the university, and few or no electives. For the most part, each student cohort moves through every course in the curriculum together, in the same order, at the same time. The student course load is either 1 or 2, meaning they are either enrolled in a

single course at a time, or in two courses simultaneously. The school calendar is on a quarter system, (two fall and two spring), with each division called a “learning period,” with a fifth learning period during the summer. Some courses are taken in tandem with students from other disciplines. However, most courses are provided only for the students within their own discipline.

In the most recent version of the Game Writing curriculum, the weaving way of thinking is visible as an overarching strategy to draw fruitful connections with other fields relevant to games, as is often done with film and literature, but here we extend to theater, performance, philosophy and other interactive storytelling forms. Two new courses that nicely exemplify the weaving approach are Interactive Performance and Games, and Moral Philosophy in Game Narratives.

INTERACTIVE PERFORMANCE AND GAMES

Leveraging the flexible, interdisciplinary nature of theater as a laboratory (Rouse, 2023), and the particular strengths of LARP (Knutepunkt, 1997-; Westborg, 2016), this course, Interactive Performance and Games (IPG), invites game writers to work in one large team of 20-25 students to design and produce a LARP for and with the public as a capstone experience for the first year of their education. The course is a one-month full-time intensive experience, and functions as the practical component following a theoretically focused course in dramaturgy.

IPG begins with an introduction to the history of experimental theater and technology, and then shifts into production mode, informed by experiential learning. Following the thread of theater, but weaving back to games, students experience a series of interactive, immersive, dramatic game structures of varying types (*Calvinball*, *Barnqa*, and *SimCity*), with follow-on lectures and discussions that dissect these experiences and examine how they are designed and play out. *Calvinball* is the quixotically playful game derived from the *Calvin & Hobbes* comic strip, and illustrates the value of maximizing flexibility in play. *Barnqa* is a game about a culture clash played with

typical 52-card decks in a tournament style and illustrates the role of extreme stricture in rules and resulting player assumptions. *SimCity* is a social simulation LARP with a focus on class inequality, and illustrates the value of immersive physical play and the ability of LARP to tackle serious topics. In addition to these activities, students also read the playscript of a film adaptation they engaged with in the prior dramaturgy course. The selected play differs each year and is offered as a window into the form and structure of writing for live theater, and as a thread of inspiration in terms of topic or theme. In addition, the performance site varies each year, and is introduced to the students from the first week as an additional “actor” for them to consider as they create their work. Following this introductory material (theater as laboratory framing; experiential game learning activities; playscript; performance site), the students are guided through a structured brainstorming process to develop the concept for their original LARP and define and fill roles for their large team collaboration.

Weeks two through four of the course are then dedicated to iterative development of the LARP design and preparation for production. Weaving together game development iterative practices with the theater design and rehearsal process, this phase of the course is a negotiation across disciplinary practices and results in a blend that often lends students an uneasy feeling in the beginning, but, by the end, leads to high levels of ownership over the creative process. This phase is a period of transition in the course, as the students gradually become more self-directed and autonomous, taking over more direction of their work themselves. Initially, students are both excited and unnerved by the openness offered in the course and exposures to new threads; to different disciplinary practices. We have discussions around this duality, talking through and addressing anxieties the students often face due to the freedom they are given, and how learning happens at an “edge” or precipice between the known and the new.

The main outcomes of the course include team bonding for the cohort, as well as confidence in their abilities to navigate a large,

complex and fuzzily-defined task in a large group. These outcomes demonstrate the relevance to potential adaptation for other game education specialisms (i.e., programming, design, art, sound). In addition, the course has a particular relevance for game writers, demonstrating their ability to conceive of, plan, and execute a complete and finished game experience without collaboration outside of the game writing discipline. This is important due to the marginalization game writing students sometimes experience in their interdisciplinary game project courses, in which programming and design students commonly dominate teamwork. Facilitating a large-scale, independent, and comprehensive game creation experience for Game Writing students early in the curriculum helps to counter this power dynamic, and increase students' confidence.

MORAL PHILOSOPHY IN GAME NARRATIVES

Following a course on worldbuilding in the second year of the program, the students take the class, *Moral Philosophy in Game Narratives*. In the former course, the students learn how to build worlds from the ground up, including the social structures, religions, governmental structures, and geographical structure. At the core of most societal and political structures and traditions, we often find morality. The latter course is designed to help the students answer these questions, and continue the proverbial tapestry they have begun weaving

At first glance, perhaps not everyone would consider moral philosophy to have a place in the weave of game storytelling. The wide spectrum of morality is seldom truly handled when it comes to games; when people discuss computer games, morality, and the morality of computer games, the discussions have long tended to focus on game violence and the impact that violence has on people in the real world (Karlsen, 2015; Sicart, 2009). While those discussions might be important to have, it is equally important to look at the perceived morality in the diegetic world. A game writer must know and understand the moral framework that steers the society in which the story takes place, or what moral compasses help the characters

navigate the world, and a *game developer* ought to have a basic understanding of how that morality affects the *player*.

This understanding is the stitching in the weave that brings threads together and helps the player interact with the game world with agency and engagement. Moreover, the students are expected to be able to discuss matters of morality and ethics related to their disciplines, but discussing morality and knowing the philosophy of morality are two different things; the former can easily be crippled by not having the latter. Until the fall semester of 2021, there was a gap in the students' education regarding this understanding. The thread was missing.

Considering the lack of such teachings and the weight of morality in worldbuilding, not to mention the students' interest in computer game ethics, we decided to incorporate it into the Game Writing program. The first part of the course is an introduction to classical moral philosophy, and the second part focuses on moral philosophy in games. The core of the course is conversational seminars where the students create interactive moral problems, and discuss them from different philosophical perspectives. For the latest iteration of the course, we also included feminist philosophical toys as a unique approach to teaching feminist narratology, taking inspiration from Le Guin and the Carrier Bag Theory.

We argue that having a basic understanding of morality and the processes that are in action when a player sits down to experience something immersive is an important tool in a game developer's tool kit. Game stories and game action have a thought-provoking potential, and the medium offers us a unique way of exploring topics and behaviors that we would not be able to explore elsewhere (Mortensen, 2015). This thread must be handled with care and understanding, as it weaves into the larger tapestry of storytelling and experience.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have put forward the concept of the *weaving way of thinking*, especially in relation to the *game writer*, which we have conceptualized as the *weaver*. By discussing how two program courses in the Game Writing program at the University of Skövde channel the weaving way of thinking by incorporating different aspects of storytelling and worldbuilding, we propose to look at game narratives as a tapestry, where the threads are woven together to create patterns we perceive as games.

In the course *Interactive Performance and Games*, we borrow ideas and strategies for storytelling from the world of theater and performance to give the students more threads to work with as they explore the possibilities of game storytelling in a playful way. In the course *Moral Philosophy in Game Narratives*, we let the students discuss and reflect upon the moral plane created for moral agents to explore in games, and guide them in using the thread of morality to add to their tapestry.

The weaving way of thinking also allows us to expand our understanding of storytelling and story structures. There is not just one structure that works—there are as many structures as there are storytellers. The concept of the tapestry includes a perpetual openness where the ends are never fixed or fused, and the metaphor of the fabric that can be refashioned and reused to create something new adheres to the collaborative and transformative nature of storytelling, which is, as we argue in this paper, a very human and thus feminist activity.

Next steps for our curriculum include working to continually deepen the weaving way of thinking throughout all our courses. We also continue to evaluate and iterate our new courses, as well as the overall flow of the curriculum as the students move from one course to the next, and continue to gather and share our reflections with fellow games educators. We are continuing the weave, thread by thread, inviting all who are curious to join in this collaborative discussion on storytelling.

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