

INTERACTIVE FICTION AS A GREAT BOOKS PEDAGOGY: A GAME DEVELOPER'S POSITION PIECE

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ABSTRACT

This position piece makes the case for introducing interactive fiction (IF) game development as a medium for delivering Great Books ideas and stories in a rich, nonlinear manner. The world-building involved in writing IF enables the student to immerse themselves into the source material and gain new understandings through creative exploration. This paper begins with an examination of the learning benefits of IF and its capabilities for transforming beloved literary works and attracting new readers along the way. Recent examples of classic literature game adaptations are described within the context of exposing students to the classics in new dynamic ways. This paper then explores the broad implications of IF game development and play in the manner of bringing history instruction to life while promoting enthusiasm for reading. A recommendation is then offered to stakeholders involved in advancing Great Books of the Western World to consider hosting online game jam competitions themed "Great Books" to attract new readers, contributing to an ever-growing catalogue of game reimaginings. As a distinct literacy, IF reveals opportunities for the "scholar as developer" to build proximity with their chosen book's source material by its transformation while refining their written, creative, and technical abilities.

KEYWORDS

Great Books, classic literature, interactive fiction, game development, reading literacy, game jam

1. INTRODUCTION

Interactive fiction (IF) (think *Choose Your Own Adventure*) is often championed for its appeal as a rich, multidisciplinary approach to instruction. A student might demonstrate their understanding of an idea through writing in the nonlinear tradition, whether by analyzing an historical period or savoring a piece of classic literature. Through game-building, one picks apart and analyzes an original text, making mental connections that they otherwise would have missed, discovering new nuances, tonalities, and conceptual layers to the work. As for the player of IF, working through a branching narrative game provides an immersive experience that places the player within the driver's seat of a beloved text. As an avid reader of classic imaginative literature and the *Great Books of the Western World*, I propose that stakeholders interested in seeing that these timeless works reach new audiences do pay considerable attention to IF as a possible medium for delivering content and awakening the creative spirit within.

Firstly, there is the notion of game adaptations to enrich one's understanding of the original work. Some of the cherished books of the past tend to be favorable source material for developing computerized games as they often promote a reader's sense of curiosity and suspense [1]. One study examined a class of middle-school girls tasked with developing roleplaying games that extend the King Arthur myth; and it was met with great enthusiasm and a desire to continue with their game making aspirations [2]. Another example is a game jam competition themed *Alice's*

Adventures in Wonderland, ending on a high note with survey results pointing to a strong resonance with the theme, irrespective of gender [3]. There is promise in game design and development projects as a learning intervention aimed at gaining familiarity with classic literature, particularly with the younger generations who turn to videogames both recreationally and as a vessel for more creative exploits.

2. LEARNING BENEFITS OF INTERACTIVE FICTION

There are some documented learning benefits of IF as a history (or adjacent discipline) pedagogy, whether the learner acts as the architect or as the player. In one study, six teams of geography pupils were tasked with developing a text adventure game centered on their local geography of Myanmar, resulting in a revived interest in their home country and immediate locale [4]. There are also documented uses of teachers and professors bundling targeted instruction into playable IF game formats, with rich topics that include: philosophy [5], Medieval history [6], American slavery [7], Roman history [8], and religious studies [9]. *The Great Books* canon touches a broad range of historical periods, locations, and themes, making them particularly suitable candidates for IF. Instead of writing an essay, a creative student with the desire or knack for nonlinear storytelling may excel with a game engine suited to their level of technical proficiency (out with the pen and in with the drag-and-drop mouse).

There is also a draw to IF games for their documented ability to build a student's enthusiasm in reading as well as improving rates of reading literacy overall. Evans [10] quotes American psychologist B. F. Skinner in the following: "We shouldn't teach great books; we should teach a love of reading. Knowing the contents of a few works of literature is a trivial achievement. Being inclined to go on reading is a great achievement" (p. 73). This is not to diminish the value of a *Great Books* or classical education (I am as much a voracious reader as anyone), however Skinner does bring up a good point in his emphasis of fostering lifelong reading *first*. We see IF for its ability to promote a healthy appetite of reading in one study where students, seemingly enthralled in their work, were observed drawing maps of game settings by their own volition [11]. In another study, a new IF rendition of the Achilles paradox breathed new life into the ancient parable [5], keeping it fresh and acting as a sort of gateway into the classics. This approach has the potential to welcome new readers to the classics in its way of remixing and refreshing our corpus of great books, and all without losing the core message intended by their original authors. When consulting the idea of IF as pedagogy, a recurrent theme emerged in the immersive qualities of a game and what it means in terms of the player's deep internalization of information. Ensslin and Bell [12] provide a suitable backdrop to the induced immersion experienced with IF: "Using present-tense verbs and imperatives, IF creates the illusion of being present in storyworld that is constructed by the reader in creative interaction with the programmed text" (p. 57). When the player experiences a connection with their avatar through in-game, fictional interactions, they achieve a sense of immersion which enhances their ability to assimilate to the message and intent behind the work [13]. This immersive quality of IF allows the player to experience a greater personal tie into a classic text transformed.

3. INTEGRATIONS INTO GREAT BOOKS CURRICULA

It is possible at this point in our dialogue that the reader has justifiable reservations about IF given the steep technical demands that have traditionally plagued the amateur or beginner game developer. Of what use is IF *if* the reader of the *Great Books of the Western World* has yet to write a single line of code? The good news is that the game developer market offers several simplified and free-to-use game engines such as *Twine*, *inklewriter*, and *Quest* [14], making this genre no longer the thing of computer programming languages or physical gamebooks. These

innovations have resulted in a recent renaissance of self-published games authored by passionate, independent game developers [15]. The integration of IF in the classroom is quite viable now with developer solutions that support an entire spectrum of expertise from the beginner to the more seasoned ranks of practitioners.

I am left considering possible angles that schools and institutions might take to bridge a *Great Books* education into the realm of game development. Easy-to-use game engines such as Game Maker have been fantastic assets to casual hobbyists and students that are interested in trying their hand at game jam competitions [16]. I find that the best way to get started with game development is to simply jump in! A *Great Books of the Western World* or humanities curriculum / institution could organize and facilitate periodic online game jam competitions via games sharing platforms such as itch.io. The benefits are multi-fold: a) new generations are exposed to timeless classics in a context that they enjoy or are already familiar with; b) the institution gains greater clarity into the motivations, preferences, and interests of demographics who largely reside outside of academia; c) the institution gains further visibility outside of their typical network; and d) the past regains a foothold in the hearts of new readers.

Our societal destiny is likely to experience an entropic degradation of cultural heritage should we fail to inspire the youngest among us to consult key texts of great authors. We must therefore rethink our approach to delivering instruction on textually dense written works. To further elaborate on this last point, I offer the study by Tanjung & Sitompul [17] who describes an effort to preserve the Indonesian tale of *Prince Kian Santang* by reworking it into an IF adaptation, responding with some success to a steady loss of connection by the nation's younger generations to this ancient parable (pp. 5379-5388). This phenomenon appears to rear its head without any specificity to a target nation—enthusiasm for reading is likely of universal concern.

There is something about this idea of a game development competition that brings in the old with the new by incentivizing participants to truly wade into classical literature and come up with something fresh and innovative. A *Great Books* game jam competition presents a blank canvas for the aspiring game developer to engage in creative world-building, map-drawing, systems-thinking, and artistic design. Their resulting game is the culmination of their creative flurry of activity within a span of time. With hope, the *scholar as developer* would have also acquired a new level of appreciation for their source material and its author during this process.

4. CONCLUSION

Game jam competitions organized in the IF tradition benefit three parties. First, there are the developers of IF who expose themselves to a piece of classic literature in a very intimate, cerebral way. There are also the players of these newly generated works who find themselves immersed in old ideas from a bygone era now renewed through the game medium. A familiar Greek tragedy perhaps has new twists and turns to explore! Finally, the game jam host benefits through community-building by establishing a sort of enthusiast guild of gamers turned scholars. This opportunity is a low-stakes solution to bringing technology disciplines and the humanities together in a manner that enhances both—in true *digital humanities* form and fashion. Those individuals who find themselves standing at the intersection of this movement are the recipients of new revelations through the act of play and are, in a very real sense, tasked with pioneering novel methods for interfacing with centuries-old living ideas in the digital age.

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AUTHOR

Tyler Wright holds a Doctor of Educational Technology (DET) with Central Michigan University, blending scholarly research into game development pursuits. His research interests include digital interactive fiction and game design and development pedagogies, which are at the centre of his dissertation entitled *Digital inroads into nonlinear storytelling*. Dr. Wright's longstanding interest in reviving and exploring classic literature through the game medium resulted in new game adaptations of beloved works from the likes of: Lewis Carroll, H. G. Wells, L. Frank Baum, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and John Ruskin. His guiding philosophy relates to the idea of the *scholar as developer*—that through world-building immersion one is drawn closer to the original text now reimagined.

