DIGITAL GAMES AS COLLABORATIVE STORY-WRITING PLATFORMS

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Declaration

No part of the material in this thesis has been submitted in any other application for a degree or qualification at another university.

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Abstract

Can a game help you write a meaningful story with others? Academic discussion of collaborative story-writing games usually contains reference to Surrealist game *Exquisite Corpse,* known to many as *Consequences*. In it, a game rule prohibits players, writing in turn, from reading most of the story written before their contribution. This rule promotes a fragmented form of narrative which, although often inventive and entertaining, does not often fulfil the normal requirements of a story. Is it possible to design a writing game with different rules that instead promote the production of a cohesive and meaningful story?

In order to explore the possibilities of game-based story writing, the researcher developed two web-based games that formed the online platform Storyjacker (www.storyjacker.net). These were produced via an iterative design methodology which involved cyclical phases of software development and user testing. Design was also informed by a multi-disciplinary literature review and analysis of four other online writing platforms.

Following the design phase, a selection of the stories that had been produced during Storyjacker testing were then rated and commented on by an expert reading panel, made up of creative writing academics and literary industry professionals. The panel's ratings and comments informed a final analysis of the Storyjacker games as methods for creating meaningful stories.

The research found that bespoke creative writing games do produce relatively meaningful stories. Plotlines in emerging stories motivate and entertain players through a joint sense of purpose. Writing games are also effective as a collaborative framework because they allow participants to work creatively together without feeling vulnerable in front of other players.

However, the research finds that there are limits to the meaningfulness of stories written through games. By aligning gameplay with linear plot development, a feature of both Storyjacker games, there is no opportunity or motivation for players to go back and redraft stories. This, ultimately, has the most negative effect on story meaningfulness as this is the normal way that writers make sense of their stories. Entertaining game features, such as turn-based writing challenges, can also negatively impact story quality by distracting the writer from the overall storytelling task.

Complicating the debate on meaningfulness, the thesis also finds that texts written by games typically contain two discernable narratives: the story narrative and a description of the event of playing the game. This both enriches the text and makes it more difficult readers to decode as a meaningful story.

Further practice-led research is needed to explore ways in which story games could incorporate a drafting process. This could significantly improve the meaningfulness of stories produced in this way. In the broader context of design, successful features in the Storyjacker games should be trialled in other digital interfaces to see if they help users perform other creative or subjective tasks. Finally, more research should be conducted on the effects of these collaborative games in broader educational, creative and organisational contexts.

Chapter 1: *Introduction*

Aims and objectives

Central aim

To investigate whether or not digital games can help small groups write meaningful stories

Could games be created that make it easier to write meaningful stories with others? Works of fiction are complex narrative structures (Brandt 2004; Brewer and Lichtenstein 1982; Gerrig 2013) that require motivation and creative unity to produce in collaboration. Multiplayer games could offer a productive structure by both motivating through fun and providing groups with a shared purpose. After all, games have come to form an important part of creative writing pedagogy (Morley 2007), suggesting their suitability as an engaging writing framework. However, very little research exists on the specific efficacy of using games in this way.

Designing these story-writing games for a digital context seems increasingly relevant. Trends in digital networking are encouraging alternative forms of literature (Horne 2010) and are changing writing behaviours (Lee 2011). New web-based creative writing platforms are allowing writers to collaborate and share writing in different ways (Chapter 3.2). Could writing games provide an effective alternative for collaborating on stories over a network? The research uses the development and testing of special writing games to explore these questions and assess the effectiveness of digital games as collaborative story-writing tools.

Objectives

The central aim of the thesis has been achieved through the completion of three overarching objectives:

1: Define key terms and relevant contexts for story-writing games to provide a critical framework for practice-based investigation. These terms and contexts are articulated in the literature review (Chapter 2).

2: Produce and test two original games designed to help people in small groups write meaningful stories together. The two games were produced to form the Storyjacker (www.storyjacker.net), a web-based writing game platform and a collection of stories written by test participants using it. Storyjacker represents the most significant contribution of the research work and is detailed extensively in the methodology section. The components of this objective are:

- A review of four other contemporary writing platforms which inspired my own design practice (see Chapter 3.1)
- The design and development of two original games (see Chapter 3.2)
- An iterative user-focused design process which involved testing software with groups at numerous points during development (see Chapter 3.3)

3: Analyse the meaningfulness of stories written by Storyjacker. An expert critical panel has assessed a selection of stories produced by the Storyjacker games (Chapter 4). The panel provided evidence that games:

- help small groups write meaningful stories together to a limited extent;
- produce stories that contain particular characteristics. These are of potential value to both literary and pedagogic contexts.

The conclusion presents the findings of the research, taking into consideration feedback from both writers and readers of the platform. It compares the effectiveness of each game and abstracts game elements for easier consideration in other design contexts.

Introduction to Storyjacker

Storyjacker was developed as a website to help users write meaningful stories in small groups. Over the course of its development, it was tested with over 60 participants who produced more than 50 stories. During the project, anyone who went to the *About* section on the Storyjacker website would be offered this simple explanation:

Figure 1.1 – the About Storyjacker page

The paragraph in Figure 1.1 outlines Storyjacker's main benefits: it offers unique writing games designed to make writing together more entertaining and effective; and it is also freely available to play over a network. The platform currently comprises two games called Bamboo and Twisted. These games represent the major contribution by practice of this research.

A brief description of each game is offered to help clarify the nature of the games for the reader:

- **Twisted game (Game 1)** initially offers Player 1 a narrative outline and other cues designed to inspire them to write a story. Player 1 then types out the start of the story based on these cues. At the end of their turn they are instructed to add a complication (a *twist*) for the next player, such as *switch perspective*. The next player (Player 2) must continue the story and respond to the twist (i.e. they must switch perspective within the narrative), before finally setting their own twist (e.g. Figure 1.2). The game continues until one of the players elects for the next turn to finish the story.

- **Bamboo (Game 2)** starts in a similar way: the first player is offered inspirational prompts to begin a story. Then, following Player One's turn, Players Two and Three offer *alternative* continuations of the plot. Player One then chooses one plotline and discards the other (see Figure 1.3). Player One must continue the plotline they have chosen and Player Two writes their alternative, the winner of this second round is chosen by Player Three. Player Three and Player One will write next, with Player Two choosing, and so on. The game continues for ten turns.

Figure 1.2 - Game 1 player writes new chapter in response to challenge
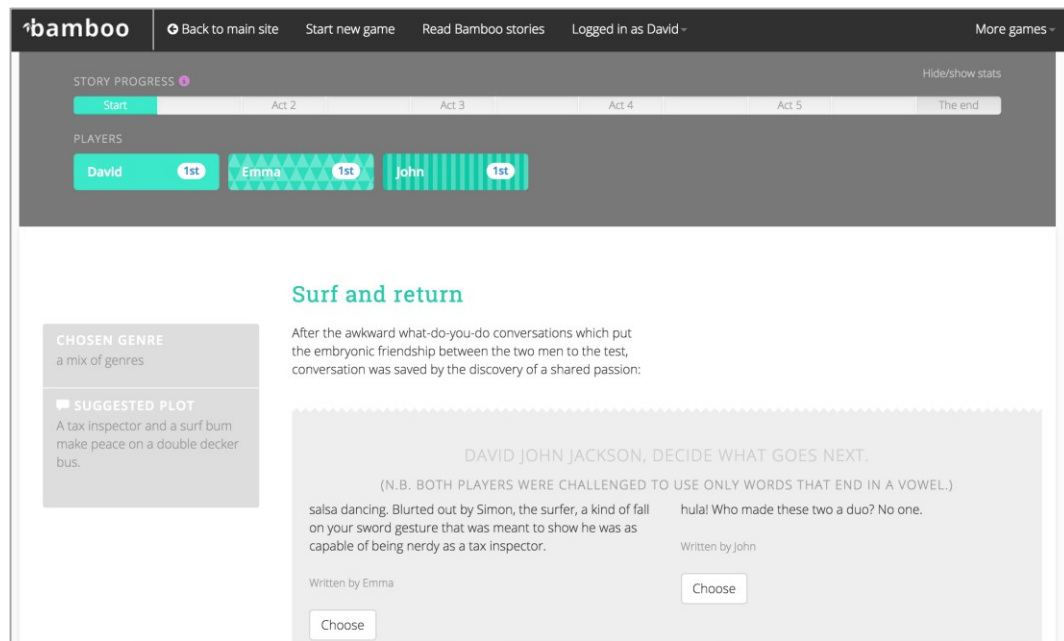
Figure 1.3 - Game 2 offers the player two alternative story segment to choose from.

As the games had various working titles and went through a series of permutations during their development, Twisted is referred to throughout as Game 1 and the game now called Bamboo is referred to as Game 2.

Making Storyjacker

Both games were produced through an iterative design process. Game prototypes were produced, then tested and finally changed in response to user feedback before being tested again. Whilst iterative prototyping is a straightforward methodology on paper, in practice it requires considerable flexibility in order to effectively interpret the feedback it produces.

The process of developing Storyjacker began in December 2011, following the creation of initial design concepts for Game 1. To begin with, development was slow: much of my time was spent learning how to code Game 1 designs. This was more difficult than anticipated and by September 2012, this relatively lengthy process had not yet produced a prototype game suitable for testing. I realised that I needed an alternative prototype to test core elements of the game's design before developing it further as software.

I produced paper-based versions of Game 1 and Game 2 (Figure 1.4) and tested them in a classroom with a small group of adult writers in September 2012. Participant feedback allowed me to finalise the set of features that became the first digital prototype. However, initial testing of this prototype in both January and summer 2013, failed to produce any clear or significant results. Participants, it appeared, did not to want to play early Storyjacker prototypes over a network.

Figure 1.4 - paper testers 2012

In response, I decided to run a series of summer 2013 workshops with the games and these were attended by a small group of writing students. Workshops immediately offered more instructive feedback. In addition to the informal conversations I could have with participants, I could see the problems that users were having and even experience them myself by playing the games together with students. This signalled a major change in the way the platform was tested.

After this, most tests took place in classrooms where player comments and reactions could be captured and observed directly. In October 2013, I began a series of sessions with various student cohorts at Manchester Metropolitan University, testing both Game 1 and Game 2. As described above, after testing games with students, I would make changes based on feedback and then test again. As well as improving gameplay generally, tests often exposed technical errors or *bugs,* some of which could only be found when a number of participants played concurrently. These could be fixed and tested in subsequent sessions.

In the final phase of development, a decision was made to launch the site to the public within the window of the research. This launch occurred in tandem with a series of games featuring well-known authors. The series, called the Storyjacker Summer Games, was designed to offer an alternative insight into Storyjacker outside of an educational context. Commencing with the first group of authors in June 2014, these games formed the final story-writing events within the research window.

Following this, a selection of the stories was sent to a panel of creative writing experts to be judged via questionnaire. These story judgements formed the basis for a summative assessment of the work.

Guide to the structure of this thesis

The following chapters present the findings of the design-led process described in the previous section. In **Chapter 2**, a brief literature review offers an insight into the ideas and cultural environment that inspired the design of each game. Chapter 3, the methodology chapter, is split into three sections. It begins with **Chapter 3.1,** a review of selected creative

writing platforms contemporary to Storyjacker. This offers further detail of the platform's context and explains its significance and originality to the field. **Chapter 3.2** provides a justification of the methodologies and methods used during development of Storyjacker. Finally, **Chapter 3.3** is a summary of the workshops that informed development of Storyjacker. It provides further detail of the effect of iterative development on the final outcome. It also highlights the three categories of audience that the platform was tested with (creative writing students, non-specialist creative writers and published authors). **Chapter 4** provides analysis of the scoring and comments of an expert panel on Storyjacker stories. The analysis considers the meaningfulness of the stories in general, by game, and summarises feedback per story so that readers can gain a more granular sense of the nature of feedback.

Chapter 5 concludes the thesis by considering the outcomes of the Storyjacker research in the context of the central aim of the thesis: *to investigate whether or not digital games can help small groups write meaningful stories.* It finds that Storyjacker games do help people write stories with meaning, and that the games encourage an easy form of creative collaboration which is unthreatening and entertaining. Game 2, it concludes, was more effective than Game 1 and outlines how by isolating successful game mechanics. As well as noting the benefits of Storyjacker games, the conclusion also recognises problems with them. The games do not encourage redrafting for example and game rules that make playing fun can disrupt good story-writing practice. The thesis finishes by recommending that future research considers ways in which the process of redrafting could be included in a writing game. It also makes recommendation for applying design findings from the Storyjacker project in other projects designed to aid creative and subjective decision making.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Key terms

To produce and test collaborative games through the Storyjacker platform it was important to have practitioner knowledge of a number of core concepts. The following definitions summarise the key research that informed my thinking and actions as a designer-researcher.

Meaningful stories

Robert McKee, writing about narrative, states that the 'archetypal story unearths a universally human experience, then wraps itself inside a unique, culture-specific expression' (McKee 1999; 9). The idea that within any story is an archetypal one was initially pioneered by Vladimir Propp in 1928 (Pirkova-Jacobson in Propp 1968:xxi) in his book *Morphology of the Folktale*. In his study of the forms of folktales, he outlines a number of consistent elements of both plot and character. Similarly, Joseph Campbell, in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949:1-37) describes the 'monomyth', a set of consistent characteristics that can be found in all important myths from around the world. He reduces these tales to a three-stage structure: 'the standard path of a mythological hero is a magnification of the rites of passage: *separation – initiation – return:* which might be named the nuclear unit of the monomyth' (1949:23). Propp, Campbell and McKee seek to find these inherent structures in stories in order to provide robust frameworks for criticism and creation.

Although discoveries of consistency in story structure across a number of cultures might seem to point necessarily towards a concept of the narrative form that is intrinsically structuralist, this is not necessarily the case. Brandt (2004) effectively questions the apparent universalism of these structures through his description of genre. Genres are 'equipped with functional performative determinations … correlated with certain content-based semantic designs'. In other words, genres take particular forms and consistently contain similar content because they are expected to perform a similar social function in various cultures. He gives the example of the joke, a type of narrative expected to be funny in order to relieve social tension. If it is the case that the functions of narrative are arbitrarily designated according to the needs of a society, it could be argued that narrative structures are not fixed to archetypes, other than by a historical consistency of social requirement.

Exploring this notion of social purpose through the field of psychology, Brewer and Lichtenstein in their paper *Stories are to entertain* (1982) designate the overall purpose of a given narrative to be its *discourse force*. They state that 'popular stories and novels are primarily designed to entertain' (1982:8). They do not consider this definition to be entirely inclusive: '[m]any current works of "serious literature" do not have entertainment as their primary discourse force and would not be considered stories by this definition' (1982:9). More importantly, they also note that whilst some forms of stories are designed primarily only to entertain others are 'deliberately designed to have several forces' (for example, fables are designed to entertain and persuade). However, their studies go some way to prove through reader testing, that a story's likeability and the extent to which it is seen as a story (1982:17) are linked.

However, whilst entertainment is the story's purpose and the reader's motivation, it is its meaningfulness that has a lasting effect. Richard Gerrig in *A Participatory Perspective on the Experience of Narrative Worlds* (2013:1-2) describes research that shows that when a reader experiences a story 'they often behave as if they are participants in the narrative world' treating the story outcomes as experiences. Afterwards, these 'narrative experiences change their beliefs, attitudes and behaviours'. In their review of the 2009 *Computational Models of Narrative* MIT Workshop, Richards, Finlayson & Winston comment on the societal implications of this effect, describing it as 'the most effective way to convey to new generations the traditions, knowledge and morals of a culture' (2009:1). Susan Sontag describes the role of the storywriter (particularly the novelist) as that of 'moral agent' whose stories 'enlarge and complicate – and therefore improve – our sympathies' (Sontag 2007:213). To Martha Nussbaum it is through stories that readers discover a more complete sense of morality, 'through all the contingent complexities of a tangled human life' (1983:41), a sense that is cohesive with 'the lived deliberative situation' where each challenge presents itself 'without its morally salient features stamped on its face' (1983:44). Expanding what is meant by morality in fiction, J. Hillis Miller suggests that 'we need fictions in order to experiment with possible selves and to learn to take our places in the real world, to play our parts there... we investigate, perhaps invent, the meaning of human life' (1995:69).

In order to improve the likelihood of producing a meaningful story via game design, it has been important to consider more closely the anatomy of this concept-made-concrete-by-narrative. For this purpose, McKee's *controlling idea* is influential:

> The controlling idea has two components: Value plus Cause. It identifies the positive or negative charge of the story's critical value at the last act's climax, and it identifies the chief reason that this value has changed to its final state. (McKee 1999:115)

McKee's concept introduces a more rigorous formula for examining and creating meaningful stories by introducing fundamental elements: firstly, there must be a value that changes its emotional charge from negative to positive or from positive to negative. For example, in *The Count of Monte Cristo,* the protagonist goes from naïve, young merchant sailor thrown in prison for a crime he did not commit to cynical but cunning old aristocrat who is able to deliver his vengeance upon those who all but destroyed his younger self. In McKee's definition he also necessitates a causal link between chief reason and final state; *in this story,* x *will lead to* y *because of* z. In the example given it could be said that *those who punish a man's goodwill and honesty with ruthless cunning will eventually be punished because he will learn to be more ruthless and cunning*. It is ultimately a positive charge that argues that injustice is rebalanced when a just person seeks revenge at all costs.

The simplicity of this McKee's definition is useful to the Storyjacker project because it clearly articulates the notion of a meaningful story. In this way, I can assess the extent to which a story created by the platform is meaningful and make changes to design informed by these decisions. However, the formula has no way of preserving consistency: the findings from this thesis (in Chapters 3.3 and 5) suggest that summary descriptions only reveal that readers differ drastically from one another in their interpretation and representation of individual stories.

Game motivation and creative motivation

Having defined a purpose for story-writing the next stage of investigation is to explore games and how they can motivate writers to achieve this creative goal.

Games: a short definition

Salen and Zimmerman in their book *Rules of Play* (2004) summarise a number of influential definitions of the term *game* including those made by game historian David Parlett, anthropologist and major influence on game studies Johann Huizinga and influential sociologist Roger Caillois. The authors summarise and synthesise their findings (Figure 2.1) finding themes in the definitions before proposing their definition of the core characteristics of a game.

Elements of a game definition	Parlett	Abt	Huizinga	Caillois	Suits	Crawford	Costikyan	Avedon | Sutton-Smith
Proceeds according to rules that limit players	√	√	√	√	√	√		√
Conflict or contest	√					√		√
Goal-oriented/outcome-oriented	√	√			√		√	√
Activity, process, or event		√			√			√
Involves decision-making		√				√	√	
Not serious and absorbing				√				
Never associated with material gain				√	√			
Artificial/Safe/Outside ordinary life				√	√	√		
Creates special social groups				√				
Voluntary				√	√			√
Uncertain				√				
Make-believe/Representational				√		√		
Inefficient					√			
System of parts/Resources and tokens						√	√	
A form of art							√	

Figure 2.1 - Elements of a game definition (Source: Salen & Zimmerman 2004:79)

From this list of features they assemble a definition that attempts to contain the most consistently agreed upon elements:

> A *game* is a system in which the players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome. (2004:80)

Within these terms I would only seek to further clarify *conflict*, especially in the context of this review, a survey into collaborative works achieved through playing games. The authors comment that in-game conflict may take on many forms, 'from cooperation to competition, from solo conflict with a game system to multiplayer social conflict'.

Another definition that uses synthesis of previous definitions to reach a conclusion is Jesse Schell's from his influential book *The Art of Game Design* (2008). His working definition is that *'a game is a problem-solving activity, approached with a playful attitude'* (2008:37). The definitions are complementary to one another and do not appear to contain contradictions. Both contain a problem or quantifiable objective to solve or achieve, but the former specifies more features of a game whilst the latter is simpler and retrieves the concept of playfulness. While Schell defines play as 'manipulation that indulges curiosity' he considers playfulness as conceptually more problematic, a 'special, hard-to-define attitude that we consider essential to the nature of play'. Intuitively, however, he feels it has something to do with the idea of entering into a contest willingly. In this sense, it seems that this additional ingredient – *a playful attitude* – portends to the motivation behind playing games.

But what characterises this playful attitude? Game design theorists such as Schell (2008:26, 37) think that we play games to have fun. Although there are sometimes instances when we do not experience fun while playing a game, it might still be said that we started playing that game in the hope of having it. The answer seems universal. Even designers of more general types of human-computer interaction use the term fun 'to put enjoyment into focus' as a key motivator (Blythe & Hassenzahl 2004:91). Recently however *fun* has found narrower usage in game design epistemology. In searching for typologies of pleasure that motivate players to engage in games, Salen and Zimmerman suggest that *fun* is a broad term that describes 'a balance of factors, a particular ratio of ingredients that adds up to the unique flavour of an individual game experience' (2004:334). As a counterpoint, Ralph Koster's text *A Theory of Fun* (2005) has been influential in game design and game theory circles for postulating a concept of the term that is clear and unambiguous. Fun, he suggests, especially as it relates to games, is 'the act of mastering a problem mentally' (2005:90). This realisation came about when he noticed that his children stopped enjoying playing the game tic-tac-toe (noughts-and-crosses) once all matches became draws. This was because this game was 'a limited game with optimal strategy' (2005:4). The power of games with lasting appeal is perhaps that they allow a sense of developing mastery without the discovery of an *optimal strategy*. In Alan Aycock's studies of chess he notes that mastery is impossible: '"Mastery" here becomes an irony to which everyone subscribes' (Aycock 1993:29): players must imagine it is possible to perfect their gameplay in order to continue to have fun trying master it. In reality, mastery is unobtainable because masterful play is constantly at risk of disruption by an opponent's unexpected move. In Storyjacker, the unexpected emanated from plot twists of other players or via the random prompts that I had set. Such elements were a source of both fun and frustration for players. As with chess, mastery could only consist of 'aligning themselves with many alternative directions of play that may emerge' in a game (Aycock 1993:62). Even after winning chess players can still be subject to 'equivocation about the best play' (1993:63);

readers of Game 2 can still wonder whether the un-chosen plot line would have been better (Chapter 3.3). This equivocation is almost certainly a way to extend the enjoyment of play.

In the Storyjacker tests, some of the participants (including some published authors!) admitted to usually not enjoying story writing but enjoying it via the games. Koster gives us a clue as to why: the enjoyment that writers get from writing, he says, is not in the 'autonomic' act of typing itself but in using typing to gain an objective: 'You don't just get high from typing, you get it from typing while pondering what to say, or from typing during a typing game' (2005:92). It is in the provision of clearer or more modular objectives that writing games such as Storyjacker can increase fun.

When considering story-writing games, what complicates this notion of fun as a productive motivational strategy is the addition of a difficult-to-define literary product and a collaborative-creative process. Any game that excites players to write meaningful fiction must surely combine *two* motivational elements: motivation to play the game as well as the motivation to create meaningful stories. Story game designer James Wallis suggests motivation to create stories emanates from a natural desire for resolution; 'your imagination sees a pattern of events and resolves it into a story' (2007:69). The balancing of this story-making motivation with normal game motivation requires a game which is 'both fun and creates a satisfying story' (2007:70); it requires what he terms *'story/game balance'* (2007:73).

If, as Wallis comments, this balance is 'not easy to achieve', it may well be to do with the effect that competition has on our ability to be creative. A study by Teresa M. Amabile (1983) concluded that the nature of what motivates writers has a direct effect on their creativity. The test used individuals who identified themselves as 'actively involved in creative writing' (1983:393). Writers were asked to write a poem before and after a task asking them to rank reasons for writing from a predetermined list. The study found that if a writer in the test was given a list and asked to rank *extrinsic* reasons for writing, for example 'you know that many of the best jobs available require good writing skills' (1983:396), then they were more likely to write a lower quality second poem, compared to a control group. Those who were told to focus on and order intrinsic reasons, 'you feel relaxed when writing' or 'you like to play with words' (1985:396), had slightly better results than the control group, who had unaffected motivations. It might be inferred by this that the role of a game that aims to get the best out of a creative writer is to heighten this intrinsic motivation for writing and reading, rather than attempting to reward output or closely tie performance to outcome.

These studies tend to suggest that in situations where people are attempting to be creative their output is very sensitive to the feedback of peers and the design of their environment. As the Storyjacker tests indicate, surroundings and the social configuration of play can have as much effect on writers as the game itself. Whilst fun can be heightened by creating a satisfying challenge or an objective it is important that that objective is not extrinsic to the creative writer's core reasons for writing, or it will inhibit and negatively affect the quality of their output.

Collaboration

An important theme that develops throughout the case studies, both through observation of the output from the games and the way in which writers play them is the idea of creative collaboration. The following ideas have helped me to build a framework of discourse around the behaviours observed and reported by participants in tests.

If we accept the definition put forward by Moran and John-Steiner in *Collaborative Creativity* (2004) creative collaboration is the highest standard of working together in a creative context, involving an intricate balance of collaborator qualities to 'realise a shared vision of something new and useful' (Moran and John-Steiner 2004:12). It is such a shared vision, they say, that differentiates it from *cooperation,* which simply implies 'the constraint of a shared purpose'; or *working together,* which only implies 'coordination of effort'. Whilst Moran and John-Steiner are simply attempting to improve the specificity and therefore utility of these terms, the definition of collaboration is problematic and impractical. It suggests that proof of collaboration is either a product that is *new and useful*, or a *vision of something new and useful* was a shared intention in working together. This suggests that creative interactions that start out speculatively or playfully and end variously with useful and original, or silly and derivative works are only creative collaborations in the case of the former. In the case studies that follow, writers describe a sense of collaboration in writing together regardless of outcome (Chapter 3.3). Gabrielle Ivinson, by contrast to this more restrictive vision, believes that the art student 'sitting silently drawing in a life drawing class' is involved in collaboration with the artistic community that invented life drawing, her art school and even her family (Ivinson 2004:96). This generous conceptualisation of practice may be argued to be true, but if so, what is it we talk about when we talk about collaboration *within* this arrangement, as is the case in many of the case studies that follow; where does collaboration start and finish when three art students collaborating on a creative writing task together?

In fact, certain contexts of practice such as art school and other learning spaces, may be particularly encouraging of collaboration or based on collaborative tenants. Heather Leach in *The Road to Somewhere* (2014) outlines the collaborative creative culture that creative writing pedagogy relies on. Whilst engaged on a creative writing course one is reliant on others for 'ideas, feedback, time to write and motivation, but above all... *permission* to be a writer' (2014:90). All those in a given group share these dependencies: writers offer their practical support 'in exchange for the same' from peers (2014:92). Whilst it is not necessarily the case that every glib comment on a student's work by another constitutes active collaboration, it is still clear that students studying and working within a creative writing group share the 'joint passionate interest in a new problem, art form or societal challenge' that John-Steiner considers 'crucial to collaborative success' (John-Steiner 2000:189).

Certainly when testing Storyjacker, collaborative games played in university classrooms and other learning spaces succeeded in fostering productive collaboration with creative writing students after games played or convened online had failed (see Chapter 3.3). In addition to the collaborative contract described by Leach, players enjoyed communicating with each other. In fact, Maarten De Laat and Vic Lally (2004) use a model of gradual group development over the lifetime of a collaboration that begins with dialogue and familiarisation and finishes with a complicated synthesis of viewpoints. During the Storyjacker tests, in cases where writers were already more familiar with working with each other, serious debate was easier

and where writers were less familiar, casual and humorous group conversation on broad topics where there was common ground prevailed (see the instant-messenger conversations in Appendix 12). This all supports the notion that elements outside of collaborative intent should be considered influential when defining the extent to which it is collaboration.

Outcomes of collaboration

Previous research pinpoints many of the important characteristics that can be consistently observed in the work of collaborators. For example, Amanda Ravetz, Alice Kettle and Helen Felcey, in their book *Collaboration through Craft* (2014:5-6) describe the actions of any craft (such as, arguably, creative writing) as a balance of certainty and risk. Collaboration, state the authors, is often an undermining force in the balance between these two, and can cause a work to fail either by precipitating 'an entropic restriction of ideas and forms' through a tendency towards too much certitude, or poor-quality work through an indulgence in too much uncertainty. Evidence of the former can be seen in the story review chapter (Chapter 4) of this project where there were complaints from panellists about overreliance on clichéd imagery in some stories; and the latter can be found in the form of a breakdown of coherence in stories. In collaboration, makers must transpose their normal considerations of risk and care into new contexts, 'involving friction that may go beyond the maker's existing skill set' (2014:6). In other words, the maker who goes into collaboration with a skillset related to the task must learn to adapt their creative knowledge and extend it.

The requirements of collaboration, for it to occur successfully, are not trivial. Much of the work of collaboration is around developing a shared lexicon, especially if practitioners are from different backgrounds, professionally or otherwise. This language is distinct from the language that may be used to engage the audience in the work. As Helen Storey a fashion designer who worked in collaboration with her sister a biologist and other scientists explained of her work, 'We had to create a new language for the audience, but we also keep on creating a unique new language to facilitate cross-disciplinary collaboration… We ended up developing a middle language somewhere between the different disciplines' (Storey and Joubert 2004:45). Whilst there is no significantly interdisciplinary collaboration in the Storyjacker cases, the necessity to discover a common language grounded in shared values and aims is something which was observed to some degree in all case studies. The emphasis on communication with online participants during the Storyjacker Summer Games (Chapter 3.3) exemplifies the extent to which I had come to realise its importance since the failure of early tests where less one-to-one communication was attempted.

The importance of this one-to-one communication helped at least one writer to negate feelings of vulnerability inherent in creative collaboration. This sense of trust is cited, by Storey, as an important element of her collaboration with her sister because '[o]nce you have both decided to trust, you both have a vested interest in it coming out well' (2004:46). Trust in this sense seems to infer trusting in each other's seriousness of ambition. For Storey this trust allows the collaborator to engage in 'a high level of mutual intimacy', 'to be mutually vulnerable' (2004:47). In the case studies that follow, to what extent a trust develops in productive groups is hard to ascertain. Certainly, intimacy is not often achieved and when it does it is probably as a result of existing bonds or commitments to the art form. Where

intimacy is required but not yielded it is possible that humour or 'silliness' (Chapter 3.3 and Appendix 9) is offered to fill its place. This study finds that whilst such humour has the potential to lessen the extent of collaboration it can still be a constructive approach.

In some contexts, such as forms of copywriting, soap scriptwriting and journalism, collaboration is often the norm. However, as Ravetz et al point out, for other writing practitioners 'collaboration is a temporary excursion and the learning that results from collaboration is something to be used back within their established practice' (Ravetz et al 2014:13). Indeed, it may be in part the temporality of collaborative partnerships that imbues them with a sense of exploration and examination. Its differences also inform what we learn: collaboration 'impinges on' notions of individuality that we usually take for granted. The writer-as-maker 'who is dependent on possession [ownership of work]' but 'paradoxically also dependent on others for their self-constitution' through collaboration becomes open to her own inherent 'fluidity and relationality' (2014:9). In other words, the collaboration that is at work in every act of learning that the individual undertakes, the mediation by others of everything from our first word to the acquisition of advanced techniques for storytelling, is made more explicit during collaboration.

Contexts for development

During the development of Storyjacker, two usage contexts have been given particular focus: creative arts pedagogy in higher education with particular focus on creative writing; and the digital fiction landscape.

Creative Writing Pedagogy

The idea of using games in higher education will not be considered exhaustively in this study. For this, *Learning with Digital Games* by Nicola Whitton (2009) is recommended. However, it is important to credit and consider the influence of existing techniques used in higher education creative writing classes on the types of word games and challenges often present in Storyjacker. As a past student of a creative writing course, it is important to reflect on the extent to which my own collaborative experiences influence my creative thinking in this area.

In my experience, on a Creative and Life Writing MA at Goldsmiths College London in the early 2000s, there was much support for writing games and exercises within creative writing pedagogy. Short writing games formed common elements of workshop activity either as warm-up activities or to practice some element of creative writing that we had been discussing. In *The Cambridge Introduction to Creative Writing*, David Morley explains the reason why writing games are so important to creative writing as a learning method: they are a way to develop and maintain writing skills by simulating normal creative writing processes in a focused and concise manner.

> 'Writing creatively can feel a little like working out logistical, even mathematical, challenges. Writing games provide this elegant calculus in taut form.' (Morley 2007, p xiv)

In Morley's definition games are a way of simulating 'the real thing', a way of practising for an important piece. The complexity of creating an extended work of creative writing requires that it be produced 'in stages, as passages, scenes and stanzas and each stage requires several drafts. Writing games clone this process, and are often true to the natural rhythm of literary production' (2007); the form of writing games, often short and focused, is not at odds with the process of writing longer work because these longer works are often produced through a series of short and focused bursts too. Morley positions the games in the place that they were situated in my own creative writing education: as a practice for the real piece of work to come.

In Hazel Smith's *The Writing Experiment* she explains her higher education teaching of creative writing as 'systematic and based on step-by-step strategies'. The premise is similar to that of the Storyjacker games: 'you do not have to have an idea to start writing, but you can generate ideas by manipulating words' (Smith 2005:3). Playing writing games is rearticulated here as 'engaging with language-based strategies' which when absorbed deeply enough can render all words 'triggers for writing'. This power of creative generation she notes, stems from the fact that words are *polysemic*: they can conjure up many associations at once. Smith offers a number of word association activities that can help the writer produce new and interesting combinations and as a result new ideas and directions of travel in writing.

Smith also offers creative writing strategies focused around breaking up the momentum of the narrative; compositions she terms 'f(r)ictions' (2005:125). These *frictions*, she says, find inspiration in structural and cultural tension of postmodernism and its themes of discontinuity, disunity and notions of illusory or constructed identity. (2005:126-27). In postmodern terms, discontinuity is equally as valid as creative strategy as continuity, simply because it 'is as true, if not more true, to the way we perceive the world… addressing the gaps and fractures within memory and history' (2005:178). Many parallels can be found between these observations made by Smith about the cultural roots of her approach and those of the Storyjacker games, which typically encourage some level of discontinuity and friction at each turn. The unity of the narrative is constantly challenged, the reader rightly or wrongly is made aware of the writer identity challenging the constructed identities in the game stories. More pertinently, in both my design approach and Smith's pedagogy there is an attempt to link such games to what Morley would term *the real thing.*

The digital fiction landscape

What is the context for works produced by story writing games in the current landscape of digital fiction? Much of the academic interest in fiction in a digital context over the past two decades has been in what Espen Aarseth defines as 'ergodic'. This refers to works where there is a 'non-trivial effort required to allow the reader to traverse the text' (specifically differentiated from the reader-response theory notion of reader effort that 'takes place all in his [the reader's] head' (Aarseth 1997:1)). However, its opposite, *non-ergodic* digital fiction (exemplified by any standard eBook fiction) is increasingly the predominant form of text-based narrative in digital formats.

Much of this category of fiction, such as a recently digitised copy of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* first published in print in 1918 (Figure 2.2), could be said to be largely unaffected by its transition from analogue to digital. Certain contextual elements differ: there are reviews, adverts for print editions. And as Eskelinen comments, whilst the reader reads books online, the books in turn can 'read their readers' (Eskelinen 2012:72): many popular providers such as Google Books allow readers to view a certain number of pages for free before withholding the remaining in-copyright content until a book is bought. However, beyond these marginal differences, the story format is read in approximately the same non-ergodic way as it was when it was first published using an ink press. Its meaning, as summarised by the controlling idea, can be said to have been unaffected.
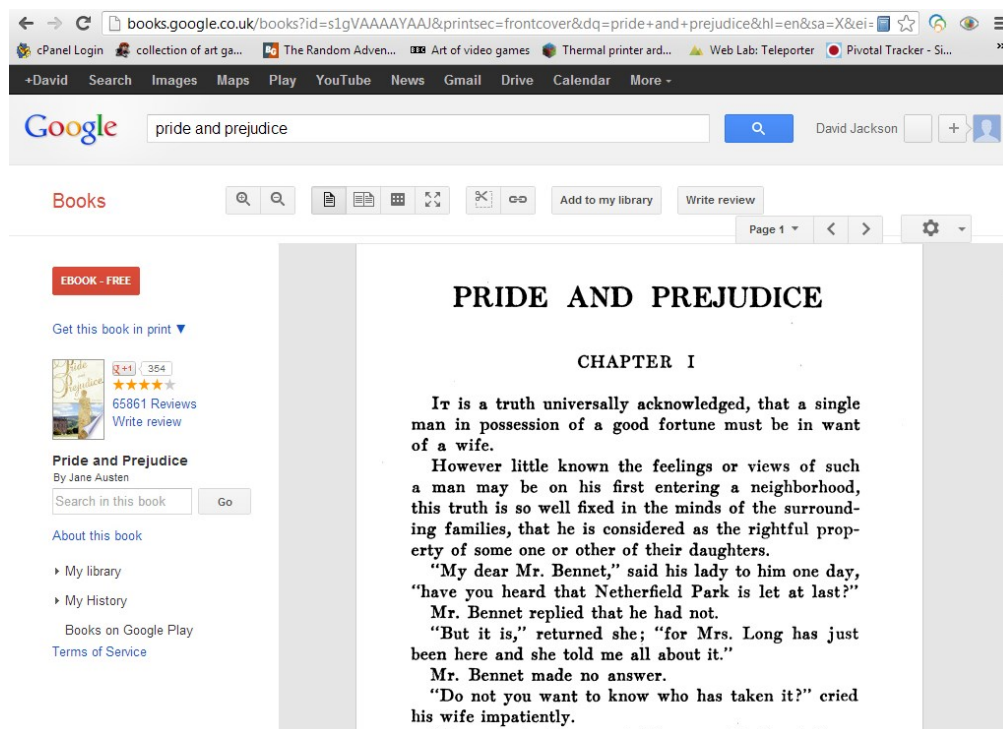

Fig. 2.2 – Google Books digitisation of 1918 copy of Pride and Prejudice by Jane Austen

In addition to non-ergodic digital forms that contain no essential reference to their digital context are forms that interpret their context. These include Twitter fiction: a form of fiction that uses the restraints of the short form (tweets must be written in 140 characters or less) and its allowances (the ability to link to other media and the ability to easily tag and distribute tweets under a collaboration-friendly theme using #*hashtags* (Parr 2009)). The 2012 Twitter Fiction Festival featured experiments such as 'a Twitter feed as evidence' to 'tell the story of a crime' by author Elliott Holt (@elliottholt) (Twitter 2012:online). And it is here that the collaborative works produced by platforms such as *Folding Story* and *Sleep is Death* detailed in Chapter 3.1 find their context: when a project is finished it can be read as a piece of flash fiction. These stories however are not simply flash fiction but distinct forms that retain the elements within them which are specific to the games and networked contexts that have produced them. They are specific genres with their own tropes and values.

As Dee Horne points out in her article on the impacts of digital technology on creative writing, '[m]uch like paperbacks facilitated the rise of pulp fiction... literature will adapt to new media.

New technologies make possible the advent of new genres' (Horne 2010:162). A review of Jessica Anthony and graphic designer Rodrigo Corral's 2012 image-and-text collaboration *chopsticks* allows readers to amongst other things 'listen to the characters' favorite songs and read their instant messages' and 'change the order of the story by shuffling the pages, re-creating it as a custom version' (Alter 2012:online). However, there is as much scepticism as evangelism surrounding these forms as new commercial opportunities. As early as 2011, just under two years after they started featuring in publisher catalogues, enhanced e-books were pronounced dead by Bloomsbury executive Evan Schnittman (Jones 2011) and in 2014 digital publishing journalist and commentator Philip Jones suggested that this pronouncement was 'still to be proved wrong' (Jones 2014:online).

Kate Pullinger comments that the nature of trade publishing's relationship to new networked and digital forms will be more likely to be 'about sales' and 'social media marketing campaigns' than 'on collaboration and contributing' (Pullinger 2012:online); a point well illustrated by a game-like literary experience entitled *Angelworm* used to promote 2014 Peter Carey novel *Amnesia* (Penguin Random House 2014). The game uses user input requests and apparently user-determined responses to entertain the reader as they navigate through what is effectively a novel summary followed by a link to buy the book itself. Pullinger and her own publishers showed however that there could be some crossover, by producing an innovative API that would allow creative technologists to work with content from her novel *Landing Gear* as part of the publicity for its launch in 2013 (Pullinger 2013:online).

There is also a growing space for less book sales-based literary projects such as David Varella's *Live Writing Series* and the *100 Hours of Solitude* project that preceded it, as discussed at greater length in Chapter 3.1. Varella's support on these projects came from the Arvon Foundation and the Arts Council, with the Arts Council providing funding. This exemplifies the Arts Council's claim that there is support for alternative forms of digital literary activity where it is 'technologically innovative' and can also demonstrate 'literary quality' (Arts Council England 2013:7). In addition to these bodies, alternative digital industries are making other forms of experimental literary work feasible to produce: projects are finding funding using game-based commercial models. This includes the upcoming *PLUTO* (Campbell and Breeze 2014) by Andy Campbell and Mez Breeze and, previously, *Dear Esther* (Pinchbeck 2012): both experimental literary experiences that use 3D gaming technologies as the basis for user activity with reading at its core. All of these projects involve collaboration either to produce the work (PLUTO, Dear Esther) or to both produce the platform and perform on it (Live Writing Series). In this respect, and in relation to the trends in more commercial areas of digital publishing, prospects are well summarised by hypertext writer Michael Joyce in his 2014 interview with digital literature publication The Literary Platform:

> The main opportunities… are collaborative; the main challenges are, as always, finding an audience in the midst of the maelstrom of seemingly ubiquitous, often ridiculous, work spewed forth by media conglomerates, would-be prospects for media conglomerate buy-outs, and such. The question is to find the living tissue, the live wires, and connect them. (TLP 2014: online)

Joyce's final *question* emphasises the collaborative opportunities of digital fiction; we identify the things that are alive and true to us and use the system to network them to each other to discover new, serendipitous connections.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Comprising:

3.1: *review of selected creative-writing platforms*

3.2: *justification of methodology and methods*

3.3: *summary of Storyjacker workshops*

3.1: review of selected creative-writing platforms

Introduction

My analysis of other creative-writing platforms informed the creative methodologies used to produce the Storyjacker platform. By considering the designs and outcomes of four other story-writing digital platforms, I could contextualise my practice and provide a clear case for original game development. The summary of this section explains how Storyjacker is both informed by and differs from these games: it adheres to existing best practice within the field whilst offering its own unique contribution to practitioner knowledge.

The case studies inform the work as follows:

- *Folding Story* (FoldingStory 2010-2015) represents a social-network-based game where a large number of players collaborate in the act of short story-writing. The study will determine the motivations of players both as writers and readers considering player distribution.

- *Sleep is Death* (Rohrer 2010) explores the notion of collaborative story-writing in games where one player takes the lead. It also considers the effect on output of limiting player numbers in the game to two. Influential to my interpretation of this piece is an interview conducted with Rohrer in June 2012.

- *The Never Ending Quest* (Weston 1999-2015) considers the changing behaviours of players on a user-driven choose your own adventure game. Early in the project, the notion of the reader drove play. But over fifteen years later it seems that stories are primarily written for other writers to read and continue.

- *Live Writing Series* (Seltzer and Varela 2013) focuses on David Varela's performance in this series of events and explores the performance possibilities of live writing not fully covered in other case studies, such as writing in front of an audience and live appreciation of texts versus post-event appreciation.

Folding Story: online short story writing game

Folding Story (FoldingStory 2010-2015) is an example of how mass web-based collaboration can be achieved to produce thousands of short stories using a game, (e.g. Figure 3.1).
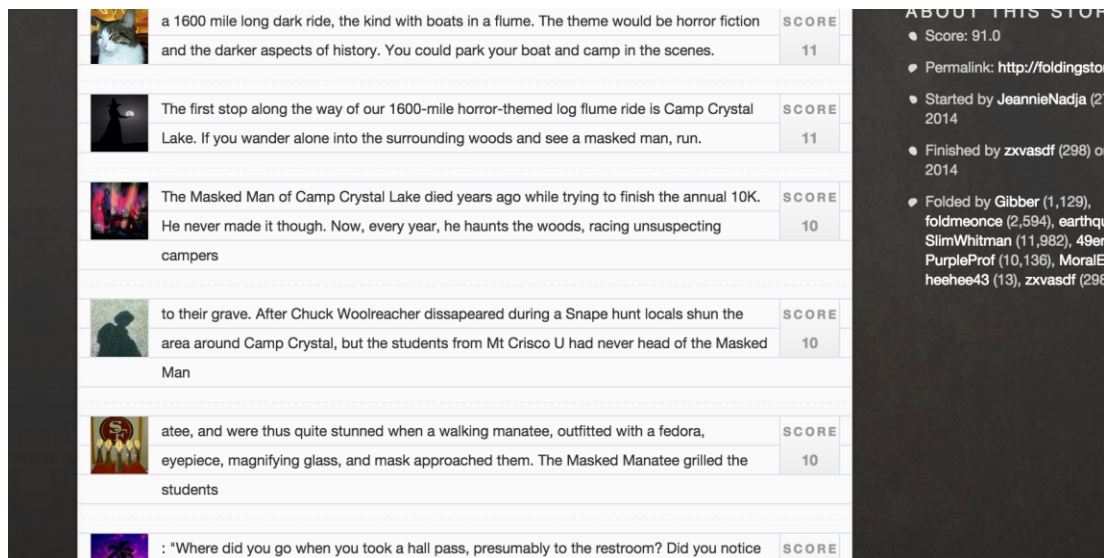
Figure 3.1 – a typical piece from foldingstory.com (Source: FoldingStory 2014)

The platform takes on a form of the well-known surrealist game *Exquisite Corpse* (Jean 1980, p220). The reader is able to read the lines of the writer just before them. The writer is not required to expend a significant amount of time contributing to each story and partly because of this the game has a fun aspect to it that informs the concept of story/game balance (Wallis 2007) – short writing tasks allow the game element to resurface regularly. An additional time limit of four minutes (which resets if necessary to allow the writer to continue) adds a sense of urgency. It also effectively instructs the writer not to think too seriously or for too long about what they are writing. Absurdist plotlines are commonplace, not only due to the lack of coherence, but also due to a style of writing that assumes that it is throwaway. A counterforce to this is the points system, which allows users to share positive feedback and also encourages writers to check their accounts to see if their contributions have been liked. From a user perspective it is a well-designed experience. Much of the design for the early iterations of Game 1 were influenced by the simplicity of the writing interface, feedback elements (the points system), player avatar images, and use of paper as a visual metaphor. Whilst these were and are present in other forms of social network platform design, Folding Story offered a compelling feasibility case specifically for story game design. Where the aims and aesthetics of Storyjacker games diverge is in guiding players to write more conventional stories where Folding Story succeeds in producing absurdist ones.

Participation and motivation

Despite having a fairly large user base, the platform seems to currently be frequented by a small core group of writers who are very prolific. The last recorded survey by the site's

creators announced 1,927 members (Kravitz 2012).

RANK	MEMBER	SCORE	STORIES	FOLDS	AVG. SCORE
1	MoralEnd	7,109	303	2,472	2.9
2	SlimWhitman	5,249	82	1,535	3.4
3	Chaz	4,448	62	1,129	3.9
4	49erFaithful	4,099	80	1,154	3.6
5	buddyboy4711	2,841	36	733	3.9
6	GreenBanana	2,589	13	952	2.7
7	NixonBlack	2,393	362	1,021	2.3
8	jaw2ek	2,177	45	771	2.8
9	Davodd	1,740	84	736	2.4
10	OldestLiving	1,614	60	599	2.7
11	AugustWest	1,262	40	440	2.9
12	sundancer	1,158	12	296	3.9
13	RhettOracle	1,154	48	462	2.5
14	DanMars	1,046	20	287	3.6
15	Bad.	1,020	39	341	3.0
16	BlastedHeath	976	29	229	4.3

Figure 3.2 – the Folding Story leaderboard (Source: Folding Story 2012)

However, when playing occasionally over the period of a year, I found the same contributors involved in nearly all stories I wrote on. A brief survey of ten recently completed stories on the 29th December 2012 confirmed this: 71% of posts (71 posts) had been written by contributors that feature on the leader board (Figure 3.2 and 3.3). Of the 25 leaders only 13 were active in the sample. By checking the profile pages of the other 12 leaders, 8 were apparently inactive with no 'active' stories (indicating that they had not written in significant amount of time). This would suggest that of the 25 only 18 were currently active, representing less than 1% of the overall population of the site. Two players, MoralEnd and PurpleProf had contributed to every story in the list. It was possible to corroborate some of the findings with other available statistics. For example, MoralEnd, the most frequent contributor according to the leader board, had contributed to 2,472 finished and unfinished stories and in May 2012 (when the previous site-wide survey had been published) 4,194 stories had been started. Therefore, whilst acknowledging a seven-month gap in data between that survey and the one above, we may draw tentative conclusions that MoralEnd has contributed to a significant percentage (perhaps over 50%) of all stories written on the site and that sample data to some extent represents a trend.

Inactive (no active stories) =

Rank	Username	Contributions (/100)
1	MoralEnd	10
2	SlimWhitman	6
3	Chaz	7
4	49erFaithful	8
5	buddyboy4711	5
6	GreenBanana	5
7	NixonBlack	0
8	jaw2ek	3
9	Davodd	0
10	OldestLiving	0
11	AugustWest	0
12	Sundancer	2
13	RhettOracle	0
14	DanMars	4
15	Bad.	0
16	BlastedHeath	6
17	Trylobot	0
18	ChucksterAce	0
19	m80	0
20	PurpleProf	10
21	Kyerinn	0
22	Murielschipp	1
23	Tristan79	0
24	Sensedatum	0
25	CrazyBananas	4
	Other	29

Figure 3.3 – survey of the previous ten high scoring stories on foldingstory.com – 29th December 2012

Current research supports the view that a small and enthusiastic minority power most online communities. Jacob Nielsen's research (Nielsen 2006) into participation concludes a '90-9-1 rule' (Figure 3.4) that describes online 'participation inequality' in communities where 90 per cent are 'lurkers' who read or observe but don't contribute, 9 per cent contribute 'from time to time' and 1 per cent 'participate a lot and account for most contributions'.
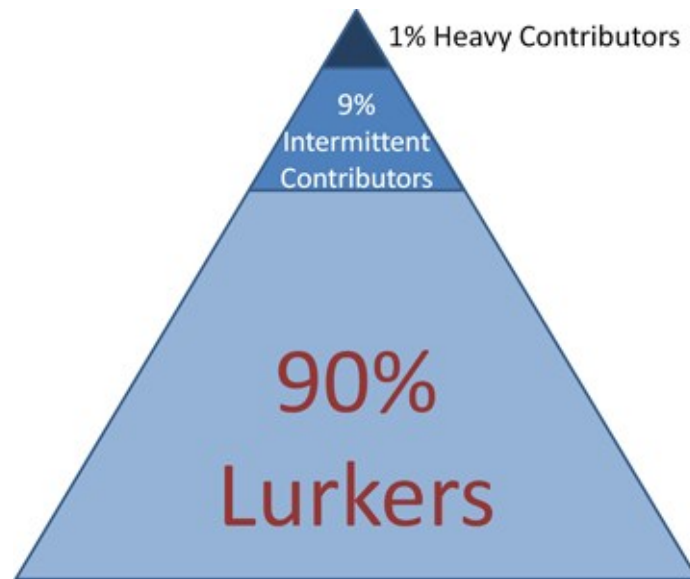
Figure 3.4 - Participation Inequality (Source: Nielsen 2006)

This research is relatively old by Internet terms and may not necessarily represent recent user trends, especially given the changing nature of internet use. For example, the research was completed before Facebook became a predominant feature in the social media landscape.

Fig. 3.5 – The Participation Choice (Source: Goodier 2012a)

More recent research published by the BBC (Goodier 2012a) suggests a different picture of distribution of behaviour (Figure 3.5) with occasional users (effectively redefined as those engaging in easy participation, i.e. participation made easier by better social media tools) representing the average user (60 per cent of all users). Intense users, previously identified with the 1 per cent, represent a significantly larger but still marginal 17 per cent in this research. The BBC research helps to inform the issues of games as social storytelling spaces

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because it relates web usage to user character and 'how they want to engage with the world' (Goodier 2012b:10:45 mins): intense users have similar 'fundamental needs' that lead them to be more proactive and become involved in activities that require 'an awful lot more effort and skill and time' (2012b:11:25 mins) and 'greater expression' enjoying the sharing of views and skills, also preferring a wider level of exposure for their expression. These intense users, according to these attributes, are by their nature those most likely to participate in a game like *Folding Story*. However, the data available suggests that the number of intense users on the site falls into a far smaller group.

Sleep is Death

Sleep is Death (Rohrer 2010) is a two-player network game that allows one player to create and animate a story world and the other to play in that world. First the author of the world creates the visual assets and sets up a series of ready-made scenarios complete with characters and objects, using the platform's in-built pixel art editor (Figure 3.6). Then players take turns over the network: the author (player 1) invites player 2 to play in the world. Player 2 can interact with the world by: moving around their designated avatar, the protagonist in the story; indicating actions, for example going to a sink and writing 'drink water'; or speaking to other characters in the scene. Play is not continuous but turn based: each player has thirty seconds to make their move before the other player's turn recommences.

Figure 3.6 – view of in-built pixel art editor and asset store as seen by player 1

Sleep is Death has been vaunted for its innovation with regard to game design (McElroy 2010; Boyer 2010; Thomsen 2010) because of the way it seems to sidestep issues of Artificial Intelligence to allow a game designer to create a world that can tell real human stories. To do this Rohrer has effectively cloaked one game format in another – it acts like an interactive

fiction (IF) or adventure game, where the computer parses the actions and utterances of the user to formulate a response but is in fact a digital reinterpretation of the live action roleplaying game (LARP). In a LARP a human 'game master' (Tresca 2010:10) leads player-characters through a fiction responding to their input with responses appropriate to the storyworld that has been planned. As Michael Tresca summarises, there is 'only so much *diegesis* [plot] a game universe can realistically convey… It is up to the game master… to fill in the blanks.'

An aspect that is unique about Rohrer's game is the context it places the story-writing game in: that of videogames and interactive narrative. Its 8-bit graphics make it look like a game from a bygone era of computer games but the richness and diversity of interactivity it provides out-resources even the latest AAA commercial videogames thanks to the human intelligence driving it.

It taps into a long history of theory on interactive narrative and artificial intelligence: Janet Murray for example identifies artificial intelligence as being at the core of an interactive digital storytelling environment. The computer she states 'was designed not to carry static information but to embody complex, contingent behaviours' (Murray 1999:72), contingent most pertinently on human input. She cites Eliza, a computer program devised by Joseph Weizenbaum (1966) as an early example of rule-based interaction via a computer. The program responded to the keyboard input of users as if it were a Rogerian therapist. Weizenbaum's work was to some extent an attempt to fulfil the so-called Turing test set out by Alan Turing in his article *Computing Machinery and Intelligence* (Turing 1950) In the test, called the *Imitation Game*, a digital computer takes the place of a man in a guessing game where a human interrogator must guess whether the person they are asking questions of via text is really human.

Rohrer's game is effectively a refutation of AI-assisted narrative solutions, or more specifically of the lack of innovation in the digital storytelling space, while practitioners apparently wait for technology to provide an AI solution. In *Sleep is Death* all complex, contingent interactions are performed by human beings. And instead of a computer programme mimicking a human, a human mimics a programme. In interview in June 2012 (Appendix 1) he explained:

> I was thinking about […] this Holy Grail problem and how so many people seemed to be waiting for us to solve that problem before we can finally make great interactive, meaningful works [games] that mean something to everyday people[…] It seemed so silly. I was like, 'is this it? Are we just up against this wall? Is there no way around it?' Then I poked my finger in something that looked like a soft spot and my finger went all the way through – 'why do we want this to be a single player game?' Is that a requirement? That's sort of like part of the definition of the problem and it's what's boxing us in.

Source: Rohrer interview 2012 - Appendix 1

Much of the excitement around *Sleep is Death* is its conceptual design and its creative use of the two-player network format. The game itself is relatively difficult to play, especially for the game master player. Without a lot of practice by this player stories are stilted and slow moving

as my player account indicates (Appendix 2). In fact, a similar issue was raised in Storyjacker Game 2, which is also based on an interactive narrative structure except with more democratic control. In Game 2, players complained that they enjoy the writing and interacting so much that they resented having to wait for other players to write (Chapter 3.3 and Appendix 12). In Chapter 5, we briefly consider methods of play that could circumvent this issue.

The Never Ending Quest

The Never Ending Quest (Weston 1999-2015) is a long-running branching-tree story-writing game running on the Extend-A-Story platform. Like other branching-tree platforms it finds its origins in the choose-your-own-adventure stories or gamebooks (Wikipedia contributors 2015). This format was first popularised by authors Packard and Montgomery with their Choose Your Own Adventure series (Bantam Books 1979-1999). The stories introduced the concept of reader choice affecting plot outcomes to books. In 1986, programmers began to create collaborative gamebook platforms where participants could both play and write in the stories (Phelps 1998). An early example of this is Allen S. Firstenberg's Addventure, initially created for use on Nyack High School BBS in 1987-8 and subsequently released online in 1994 (Firstenberg 1996). The web opened up the potential audience for collaboration for such projects allowing for far greater participation than had previously been possible (*Addventure Classic* ran for under a year between June 1994 and March 1995 and 'over 10,000' contributions or unique story segments were recorded (1996).)

Jeff Weston who designed Extend-A-Story: Never Ending Quest (Weston 1999) cites Firstenberg's creations as 'inspiration for the design of the story software' (Weston no date). His platform, Extend-A-Story is built on PHP and MySQL and has run continuously since 1999 (Weston 1999). At the time of writing, it was still accepting new episodes. I recorded its progress in January 2012 and October 2014. During the interim period, the game's episode count had risen from 29,470 to 30,970 in October 2014: exactly 1,500 entries in 21 months. This equates to approximately 860 episodes per year (71 per month) compared to an all-time average of approximately 1,966 episodes a year (164 per month). It is clear that participation had dropped off by the 2012-2014 period. However, this count still represents an active writing community.

A change in gameplay

A notable change of behaviour is evidenced in the writing community from the Never Ending Quest's inception to its current permutation: whilst the early storywriters aimed to create the type of CYOA story described by Weston in which 'the reader gets to decide which path to take' (no date), choice soon falls away as the game gets ever more diffuse in terms of its narrative structure: as a player, I came across an unwritten episode after only six choices.
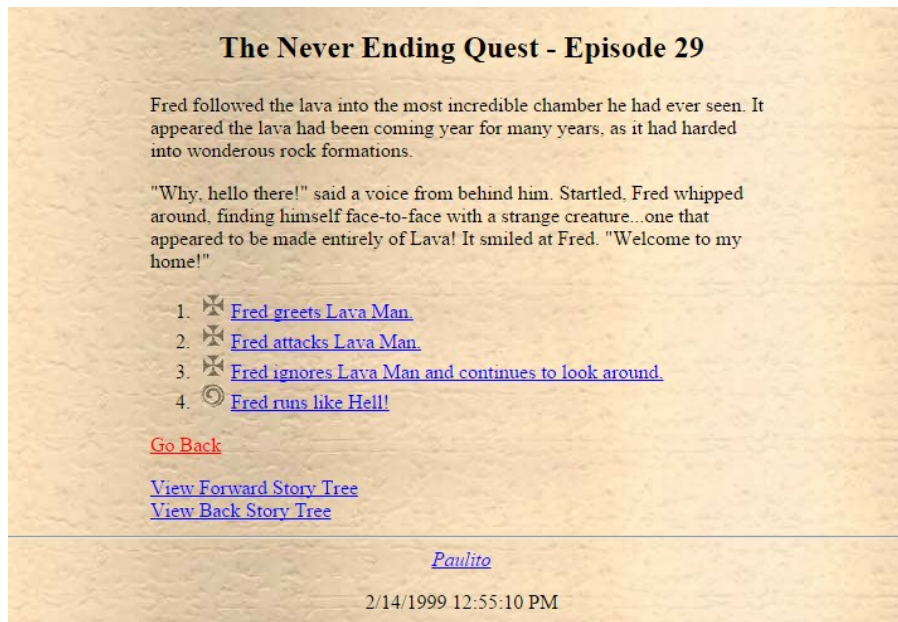
Figure 3.7 – 'Fred runs like Hell!' is unwritten in this example

In fact, one of the known issues with this type of story format is the inability of the community to service a serially expanding list of options. As game designer Chris Crawford (2004) notes, the problem with all branching tree narrative structures is that they grow exponentially: if we offer the reader two new episode choices after each episode, in just ten choice points we go from 2 to over 1,000 episodes.

Figure 3.8 – this later episode represents a hybrid method of playing the game

As the writers move away from the beginning of the story, in effect its core, the number of options progressively reduces and writers become increasingly economical, until the point at

which it is impractical to follow more than one version of events along any one strand; what persists is a series of unconnected branches, entirely unrelated in terms of plot and event structure.

It is notable however that the writers, whilst eschewing multiple choice for the reader, do not eschew it for the writer. The game of providing the next writer with interesting next steps remains (e.g. Figure 3.8). In this way the branching tree story-writing game reaches a kind of maturity as a tool for writerly collaboration first and as a reading experience second. Figure 3.9 describes how this change alters the nature of the expanding narrative.
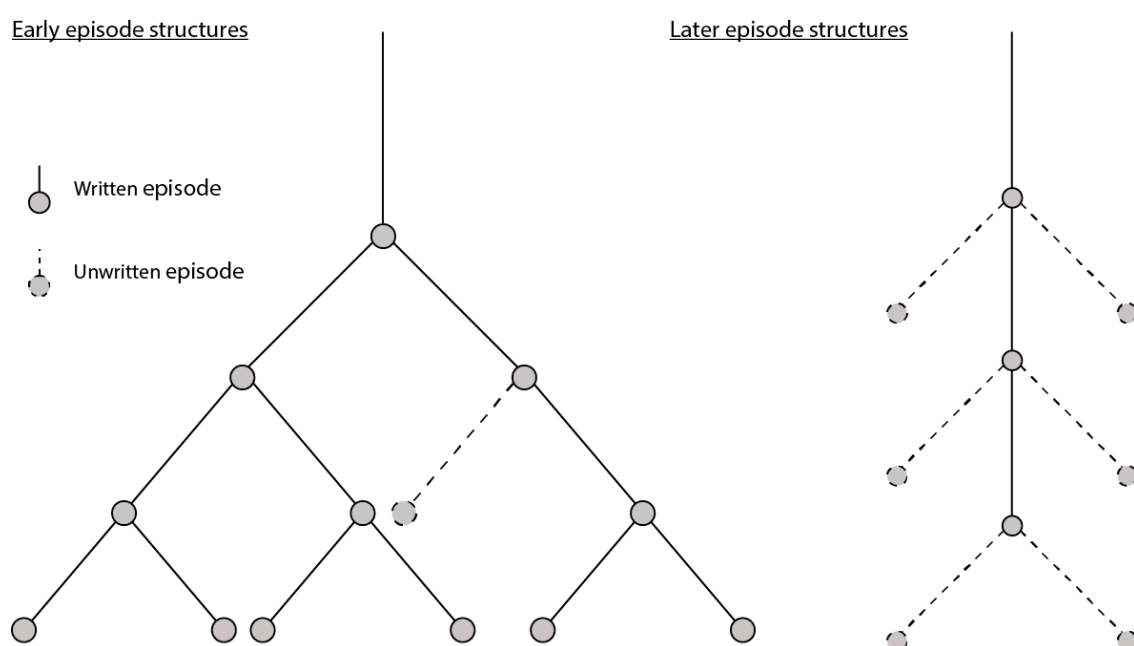

Figure 3.9 – a simplified model of early and later models of episode structures

Existing analysis of this type of story platform seems flawed or incomplete in respect of this element of the writer-player, their behavioural nuances and how these behaviours affect aesthetics. Two critics who consider it, Aarseth and Eskelinen seem to misrepresent this type of fiction in their analysis – Aarseth erroneously describes *The Unending Addventure* as 'a forking text on the World Wide Web that users can add notes to at the ends of the branches' (1997:67). Whilst Aarseth might be aware that these *notes* are a continuation of a process of story writing that the whole text has been written by, his description does not explain this complication to the reader. Story writing as an interactive method within his cybertextual universe is hidden. Similarly, Eskelinen in reviewing Aarseth's analysis for his own *Cybertext Poetics* (2012) considers this form of writer/reader fiction no more complicated to explain conceptually than a story generation script. He suggests that the writing process is merely a method of text production for the reader, and not an on-going series of events in the text's lifespan, intrinsic to the text's reading. The integrated role of writing in the reading process (the writer/reader – never both, always one after the other) is not dealt with in an obvious form in either taxonomy. The complex role of the writer/reader is further explored through Game 2. Game 2 represents a more deliberate development of this configuration, where

writers are formally given control of the branching narrative and no other adventure can be had except the one that the writer/readers chose whilst playing; the notion of a story-reader game, played without writing, is effectively jettisoned from Game 2.

Live writing series

Many of the differences between online writing forms that now exist and the more traditional forms of writing often seem to stem from the extent to which they are subject to reader scrutiny without any drafting process necessarily in place. Carmen K. M. Lee's qualitative analyses of platforms such as Facebook and Twitter suggests that these platforms do encourage a different kind of writing or literacy that is 'increasingly interactive and dialogic': standards and etiquettes seem designed to encourage a profusion of *ad hoc* updates (Lee 2011:112), a sense of social immediacy (Lee includes an example of a woman posting status updates to get encouragement from friends during a prolonged labour) rather than literary exactitude. Writing is understood in these contexts as a practice 'situated in everyday social contexts' (2011:123). As transformations occur in the way the public perceive and practice writing, the role of the writer as a creative entity seems to be changing in response.

One writing platform-based project that has explored issues surrounding the live-ness of writing in a specifically creative context is the *Live Writing Series* (LWS) (Seltzer and Varela 2013). The series was conceived and developed by writer-producers David Varela and Gemma Seltzer, used technology developed by Alex Heeton and Riccardo Cambiassi, was funded by the National Lottery and was supported by Arts Council England. It ran from October to December 2013 and took place as seven events held at different locations around London including the National Portrait Gallery and the Jewish Museum. The writers would sit in these various locations and receive suggestions from the public both online and via live requests in the space. What they wrote would be simultaneously featured online and on a screen seen by members of the public in the vicinity. Research will focus on Varela's own LWS writing event at the National Portrait Gallery (NPG) informed by an interview conducted with Varela in 2014 (Appendix 3).
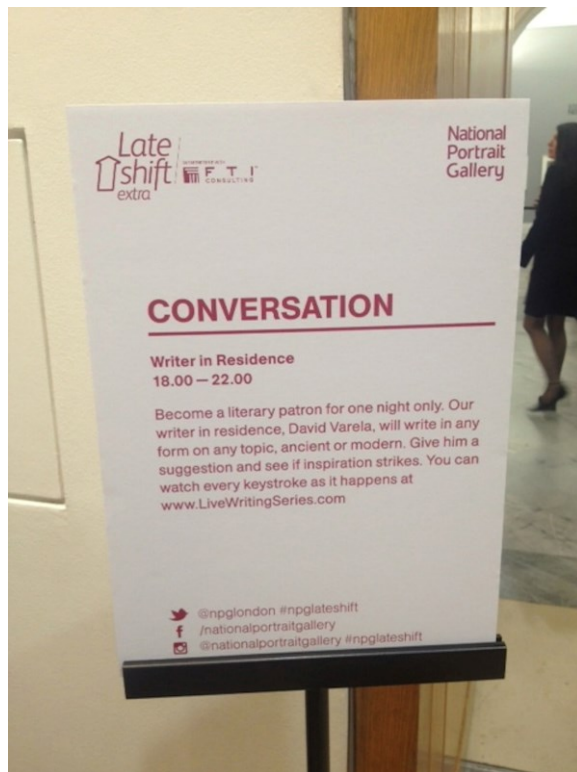
Figure 3.10 – notices inviting the audience to participate at the NPG (source: Seltzer and Varela 2013b:online)

Varella's type of live writing - writing whilst simultaneously, or almost immediately, being read by an audience – cannot be understood simply as a reaction to the new immediacy of digital writing as it has a lengthy tradition; writing-as-performance as a subject for consideration and study spans back at least as far as the early 1950s and the notion gained considerable academic traction during the 1990s when international symposia were held to review performance writing in its many forms (Allsop 1998). Also the LWS is not entirely unique in its use of technology: in the same year that the first of Varela's performances took place, the fantasy author Silvia Hartmann allowed readers to view and comment live on the drafting of her new novel using Google Docs (Flood 2012). However, the uniqueness of the LWS platform developed by Heeton and Cambiassi is in its focus on in-situ live aesthetics. Varela's explicit intention when collaborating with his technologist partners was 'that sense of live-ness to make the performance, the process, a large part of the value of the work of art and not just the static text at the end of it'.

David Varela's LWS event was performed in front of an extremely large audience, in part because it took place where gallery-goers were queuing to enter a major new exhibition. (Figure 3.11 only documents the hall after much of the audience has entered the exhibition). '[T]here were thousands of people close up, literally jostling the desk…and I was pretty face to face with a very large projection screen on the wall showing what I was writing. And there was a real sense of a crowd focusing their attention on me and wanting to be entertained'. This awareness was acknowledged by Varela as a disruption of his normal writing process. Tamarin Norwood in her short essay, *The Writing of Performance* notes that this hyper awareness, a sort of self-consciousness, is what writes a performance into being:

'A thing, a moment, an action might be interrupted by or imbued with a feeling of self-consciousness that is simultaneous to the thing itself, and which writes it into performance in real time. This slip of self-consciousness is sufficient to write the performance into being, and precedes the performance not by coming before it in time but by standing outside it, containing it and circumscribing its form.' (Norwood 2010:7)
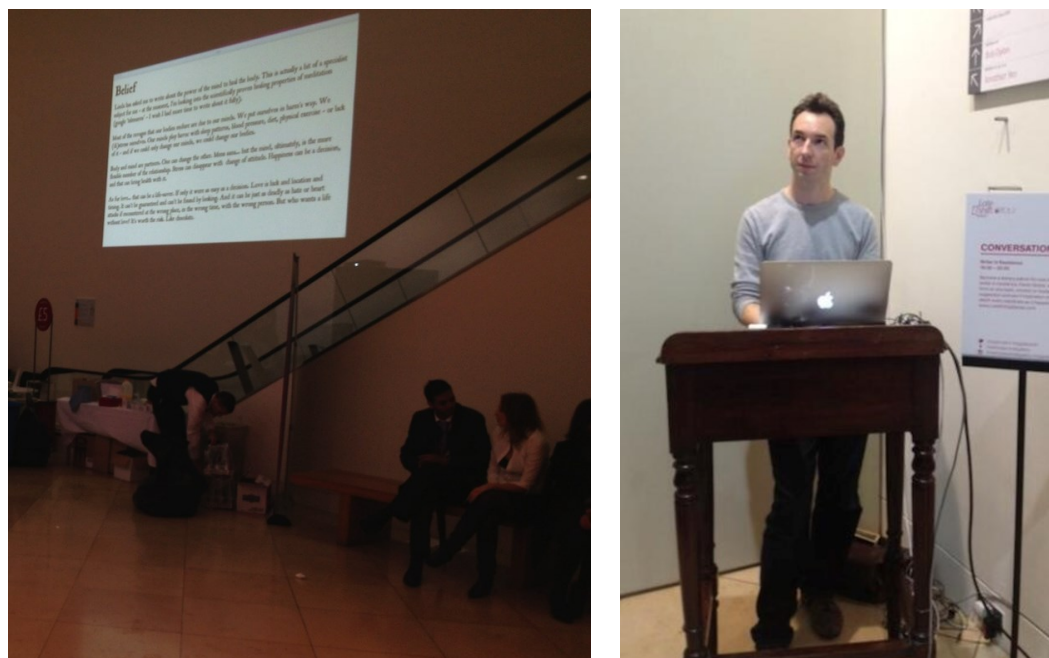

Figure 3.11 – Varela writing at the NPG and the placement of the projection close by (source: Seltzer and Varela 2013b:online)

The writing is *imbued* with an awareness of the immediate circumstances of its creation and this quality gives the text an externality that precedes the intended message of the performance, in this case substantiated in the text on the projected screen or later on a networked computer. For the audience in the room with the writer, this is a shared experience. A reflection of what they are experiencing is permeating the writer's text; the constant need for entertainment is felt as a pressure on the writer to perform well:

> [As an audience member] a lot of the power comes from the immediacy; the sense that that you are watching somebody who is demonstrating a certain amount of speed and skill, and the fact that you can watch the process happening.

> [As a writer] you kind of have this compulsive force pushing you forward whether you like it or not and it does force you to do automatic writing and forces you to keep making decisions… [W]ith an audience watching they tended to want to know just what happened at the end. They weren't so concerned about the elegance or the perfection of the craft.

> *Varela in interview 2014 – Appendix 3*

For Varela then the value of writing is in satisfying the need for performance he feels from the audience: the process of 'trying to get something out quickly and not necessarily for a final polished thing'. Therefore, the writing is not necessarily a *final thing.*

Storyjacker has attempted to harness a similar sense of live performance to motivate writers through a playful sense of fun. Where writers are aware of their fellow writers awaiting their contributions it has been reported as being compelling. It's opposite, private reflection and time to consider the text was felt to produce better writing but with less fun involved. In the Summer Games summary of Chapter 3.3 (and Appendix 12), this is explored when authors write together over a network at the same time and then asynchronously via email over a period of a week or more.

What is left behind

In fact, the stories from the LWS, all by well-known and highly capable writers, would usually have a high cultural value and form a literary treasure trove at the heart of the project. However, the decision was made for it to be an online-only collection. This was, Varela explained, because printing and binding what was created would feel too much like 'taxidermy… trying to give life to something that had life in the past.' When asked how he would describe the texts that were created by live writing he suggested that rather than being manuscripts the product of a live writing session was something more akin to 'a transcript':

> 'It's not a script of a performance, or a prewritten event. And at the same time it's not a kind of completed text… it's a recording of a live event.'

In Danae Theodoridou's reflexive piece *Towards a re-enactment of the experience of performative writing* she reports hearing the comment, 'The bad thing with experience is that it can't be transferred' (2010:11). She recalibrates the sentiment: 'Performative words. Their experience. It can't be transferred.' Theodoridou suggests here that there is a difference between normal words and performative ones. If there is a difference it is perhaps this emptiness they exhibit after their performance (filled with sawdust to stop them falling in on themselves). What makes them full is the experiencing of their *now*-ness when they are being written, that self-conscious *I-am-writing* quality that precedes its written meaning and that the audience experiences during the writer's performance. In contrast, when reviewing works after the event the audience without experience of the performance will approach the work as if it were a normal literary textual piece, its conventions described by Eskelinen:

> 'Structurally speaking, the prevalent convention related to the textual whole is that the text maintains its structure both in presentation and between presentations.' (Eskelinen 2012:72)

And yet, Varela infers that with live writing, there is a time when the writing is alive and its presentation reflects this in some way, and there is a time when it dies and any presentation of it cannot help but reflect its new condition.

Summary

Much can be learned about digital creative writing platforms from these five reviews that in turn inform a game-based approach. The case for digital network platforms as effective story-writing motivators is clearly made with the first review. *Folding Story* proves that large groups of writers can be motivated to work together online. It appears to achieve this through a low commitment to contribute and a sense that the individual submission is as valuable as the overall composition. This is achieved through individualistic marking schemes and the *absurdist* rules of the familiar Exquisite Corpse game it mechanises. However due to this joyful disregard for story structure; it does not create a meaningful overall work for the story reader. And whilst contributions are frequent, there appears to be a participation inequality operating in both cases that reduces thousands of initial contributors to a far smaller network of highly motivated writers. During the research period, Storyjacker has found it difficult to replicate any widespread online participation similar to this platform. Instead, it has identified game mechanics that encourage participants to write relatively meaningful short stories in mainly real-world workshop scenarios.

 Sleep is Death offers readers more meaningful stories through a collaborative story writing game that relies on prior planning and practice. Stories can be created that appear to respond to the questions and actions of the player-reader. The game limits play to two-player turn taking to facilitate synchronous play. However, the experience differs greatly from a typical story-writing experience because to work effectively it requires one player to develop a story plot and world and the other player to be guided through a pre-planned series of scenarios and events. The second player has little control and much of the story writing takes place prior to the main game, on individual terms. Storyjacker attempts to provide a context for egalitarian collaboration that does not depend on individualistic control in this way.

This review questions the normal role of the story reader in relation to digital writing platforms, especially in the case of the last two platforms. The review of *The Never Ending Quest*, a writer-led story game on a CYOA platform, documents an evolution. Early in its development there is a sense that writers were aiming to produce a multi-faceted tale as rich in its breadth as its depth for readers to enjoy. After many years of play, what remains is the writer game in essential form: read the previous chapter or chapters, then choose from a fun list of options set by the last writer to progress. What is jettisoned here is the primacy of the story reader. More important in this system is the next player; the *writer/reader* who only reads the story in order to write it. The relationship between the writer and reader is further complicated in the final review: The Live Writing Series platform has been specifically designed to accentuate the sense of writing-as-performance for readers. Specifically, it is for the reader present during the performance. The reader and writer here are connected by the physical speed and unedited inventiveness of the writer's process. They are also bound by self-conscious elements in the text that reflect the writer's relationship to them and their shared situation. This performance reader is different to the one who reads from the archive of written works later; by then the same text is diminished. Storyjacker further explores this notion of performance in digital writing platforms as pertains to writers reading other writers.

3.2: explanation of methodology and methods

Introduction to practice based methodologies

Despite the steady increase in practice-based research in the areas of art and design and creative writing, it is still important to define the justification for this methodology and its fundamental merits. In comparison to traditional positivist methods, there has been some prejudice towards practice based research from practitioners in other research fields (Kock et al 1997:3). Putting creative practice at the centre of research has required what Leavy (2009:16) describes as 'a renegotiation of the qualitative paradigm with respect to fundamental assumptions about scientific standards of evaluation' because of a lack of a standard approach to attaining trustworthiness, as apparently exists in positivist science. This is a general hurdle for all forms of qualitative research, but Gray and Malins (2004:19) note what sets it apart from positivistic research is its decoupling from a questionable 'objectivistic epistemology' where the researcher is detached from the world and able to observe it from a distance. In its place is a constructivist paradigm, which puts all things in relation to each other; including the researcher. The set of methodological tools it uses are characteristically 'subjective' and 'interpretive' (2004:19), 'holistic and engaged' (Leavy 2009:3). In this sense, practice-based research takes place in and contributes to what Jacques Lacan refers to as the *conjectural sciences* or sciences of subjectivity (Evans 1996:173) as distinct from the exact sciences. Practice-based research is emergent and serves to expand this 'qualitative paradigm' (Leavy 2009:4) with new methods: Gray and Malins document a 1978 PhD as the pioneer of 'inquiry through practice' (2004:26) signifying the relative infancy of this method of enquiry in academic terms. My research makes use of methodologies such as design prototyping that are necessary in practice-based research. Kock, McQueen and Scott describe this iterative element as the key benefit of practice-based research (here termed more generally 'action research'); it allows 'the researcher to gradually broaden the research scope and in consequence add generality to the research findings' (1997:3). This differentiates the research from a project that tests the meaningfulness of stories written on an existing platform. Storyjacker changes based on test outcomes and then test outcomes change based on Storyjacker changes. In this way it is heavily engaged with the context within which it operates: 'the researcher generates new social knowledge about a social system, while at the same time attempt[ing] to change it' (Kock 2007:98).

Storyjacker as research process and tool

The research purpose of Storyjacker games has been twofold: to provide a summative artefact of my own practice as designer-researcher in response to the research questions; and as a bespoke and reactive methodology for use in workshops and other contexts to investigate the effects of these types of game. The following outline describes the game site's essential elements providing an important framework for understanding the specific challenges of design and development and game testing that took place.

Outline of site and games

The platform currently showcases two games that represent the major contribution by practice to this work. Game 1 is the first game that was prototyped and Game 2 the second. Versions of each game are numbered chronologically where it is necessary differentiate one iteration from another (for example, G2V2 is the second digital prototype of Game 2). Each game forms an important part of the methodology as its rules and aesthetics inform group behaviour in the form of gameplay and participant feedback in case studies reflects on these structures.

Figure 3.13 – complete a writing challenge and then set your own

Game 1 employs a simple turn-taking structure: one player writes a contribution and then the next player writes what happens next. Many participants during testing recognise this as being similar to the classic *Exquisite Corpse* games mentioned in Chapter 3.1. In Game 1, the significant complication or game-like feature is that the turn-taker sets a challenge for the next writer at the end of each turn. They choose from a list of options (e.g. *Change tense*) or to set their own.

Other features have been present, or not, depending on the iteration. Also included in one or more of the design iterations were the following features:

- Character limits

- Suggested plot or starting point, provided at the start of a story and persisting throughout

- Additional props that provide optional imagery to include in the stories (e.g. *cheese, anger, pilot*)

- Points for good chapters, bestowed by one player on another

- Time limits per chapter
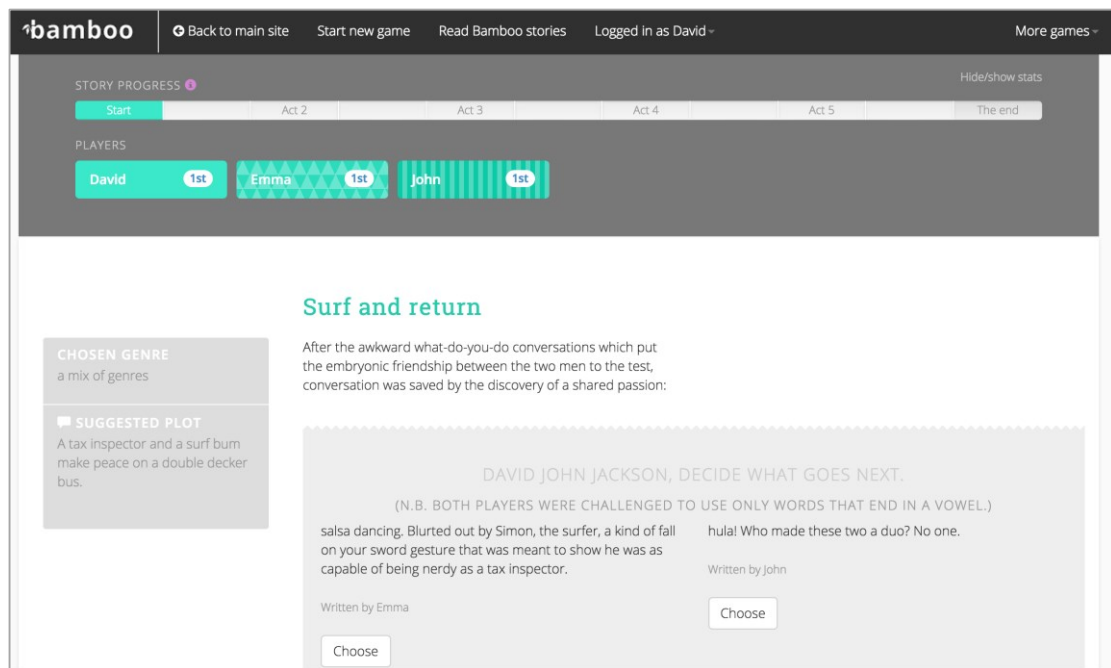
Figure 3.14 – choose which story segment to carry on to the next round

Game 2 is based on a three-player turn taking structure that takes the form of a series of rounds. After an initial set-up contribution by the first player, the other two players write versions of what happens next. The player not involved in writing one of the two versions (in this case the first player) chooses the one they prefer (Figure 3.14) and then writes the first of the two versions to follow in the next round. Another player, in this case the third will choose from the next two and repeat the process of writing. In this way, players take turns at being the player who chooses.

Also included in one or more of the design iterations:

- Character limits

- Automatic challenges that span a round (e.g. *write in the style of a well known author*)

- Writer ranking features that relayed the current position of each writer in terms of first, second, third

- Genre selection option

- Suggested plot or starting point, provided at the start of a story and persisting throughout

During this practice-led approach, co-development of the two games for a period of the research allowed for essential comparison judgements between the games providing greater clarity in the feedback. I was only able to test both games with the same group during two documented workshops (see examples in Appendix 9 and 10) due to time restrictions and development requirements. At the start of the testing, when the G2 had not been built, development was focused on G1. There was another period of mono-development near the end of the testing phase, when development began to focus on G2 as the more successful and easy-to-manage workshop game.
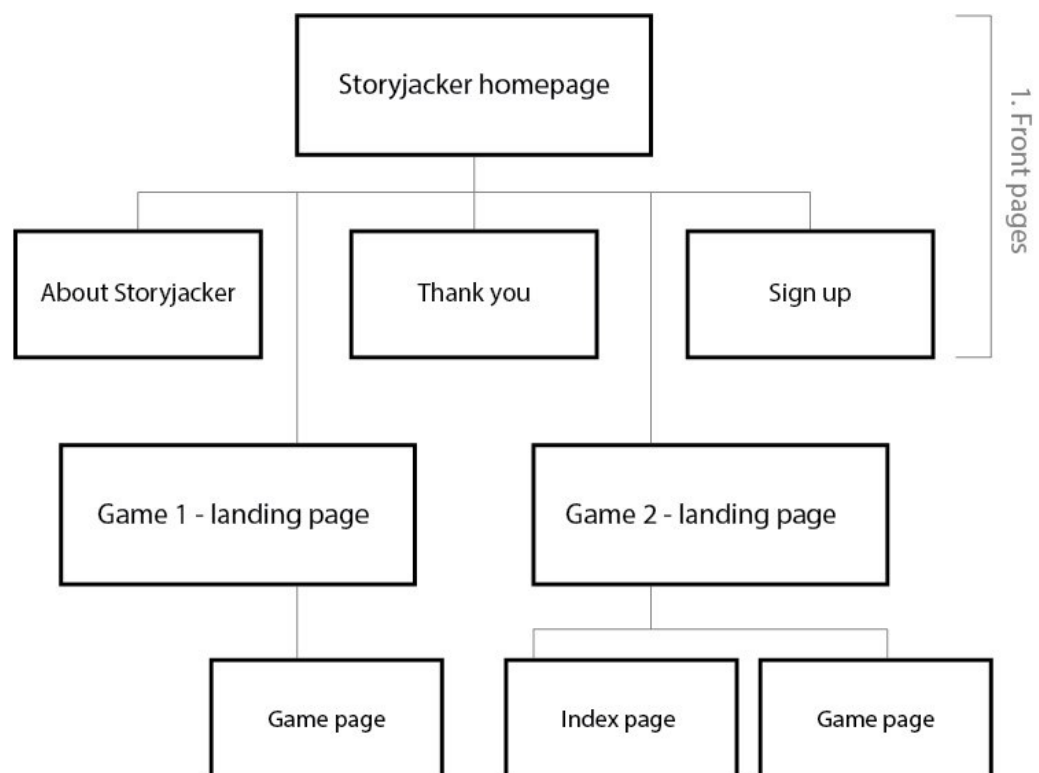
Figure 3.15 – Storyjacker site: structural outline

The pages can be seen in Figure 3.15 as three distinct areas:

1. **Front pages** - these are designed to provide a path towards playing the two available games. There is an invitation to either register or sign in to play. Other elements, such as pages about the site are designed to offer the uninitiated user more information about the project and games with a view to giving them the information they need to become players. Two links at the bottom of the page offer access to the games: Bamboo (Game 2) and Twisted (Game 1).

2. **Game pages (Game 1)** – the landing page for Game 1 shows the user an index of Game 1 games/stories which can be read by clicking on a story title, as well as options to

Start a new story or *Add to unfinished stories*. A user can play by choosing an active challenge.

3. **Game pages (Game 2)** – these are designed to act as a mini site for players of Game 2. The landing page offers instructions and an instructional video and players can choose to start a game with three other players. Alternatively, they can go to the index for existing Game 2 stories and read stories written by previous players.

A player walkthrough of Game 1

1. Read stories that have already been written or choose a story to add to.
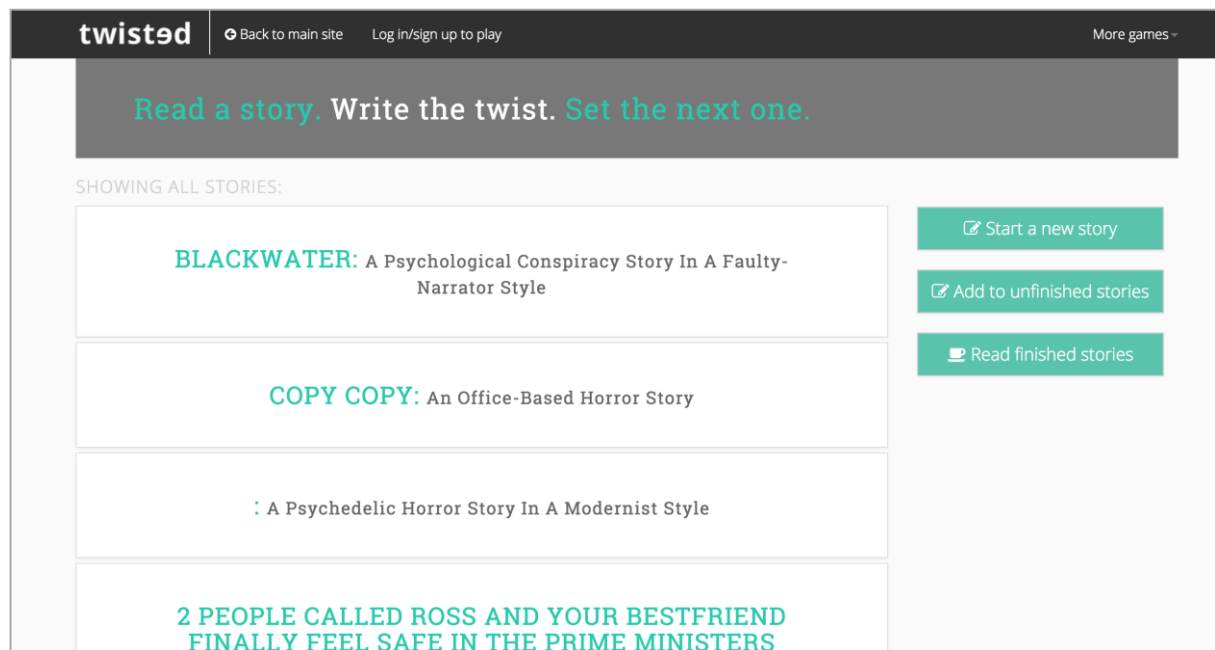
2. Read the challenge attached to an open story.

3. Take the challenge and continue the story, then choose a challenge for the next writer.

4. The next person to write on the story must take your challenge.

NEXT CHAPTER: LOSE THE PROTAGONIST

2.

Suggested props: sausage, juggler and bigotry.

So I disappear. Carefully constructed as I was from well-known neuroses. My performance sprang from my contempt for all weakness, a sort of bigotry that despised all forms of humanity except my own. Everyone could juggle sausages in a bear pit for all I cared. All I want is to be let out of the room. So I act like a normal person for two weeks. My physician treats me with suspicion, but when I meet the board, they decide I am ready to be integrated with the other patients again.

Written by David John Jackson

👍 0

NEXT CHAPTER: WRITE ONLY USING DIALOGUE

✏ Write the next chapter

A player walkthrough of Game 2

1. One player (P1) logs on to set up the game

START A NEW GAME ✕

👥 Name your three team members

David John Jackson

Player 2

Player 3

≣ Choose story style

Genre No genre / literary ⇕

Tip: If you're not sure, choose a mixture.

Play now

This is a three-player gam

1. Player 1 selects a s
2. Players 2 and 3 eac
   (As well as continui
   the perspective of a
3. Player 1 chooses the one they like best - taking into account the challenge.
4. Player 1 then continues the story from here. Continue in order, following name prompts.

2. P1 uses an automatically generated prompt to start the story

3. Players 2 and 3 are then challenge to write what happens next

4. Player 1 must choose which option to carry on in the next round
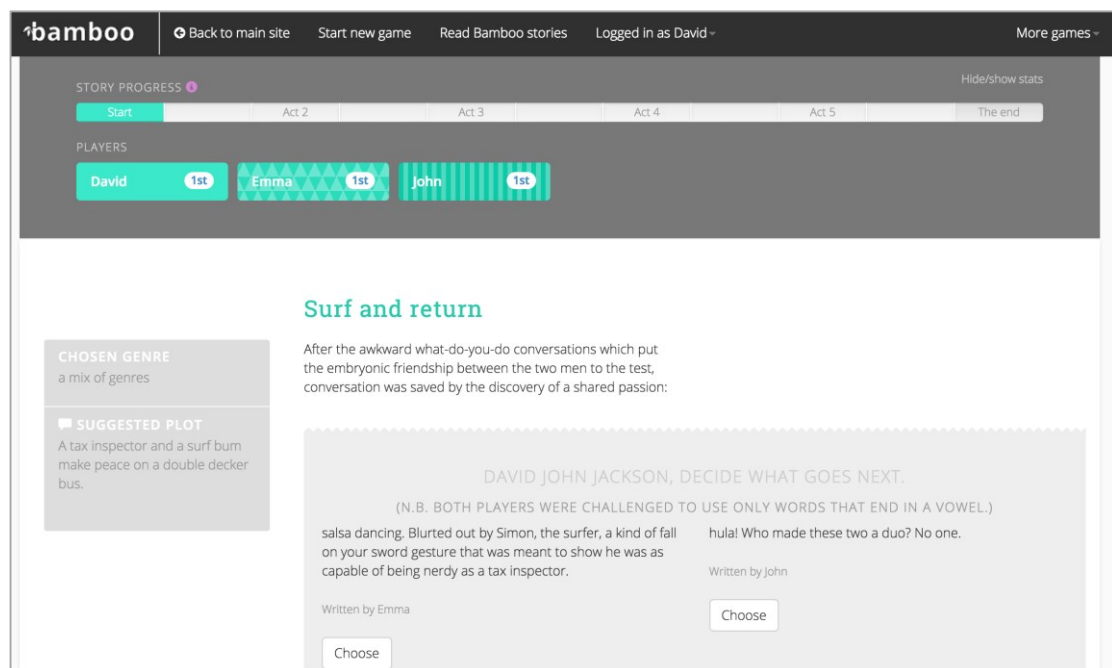
5. Player 1 must put forward one of the two next options. Player 3 choose this time...
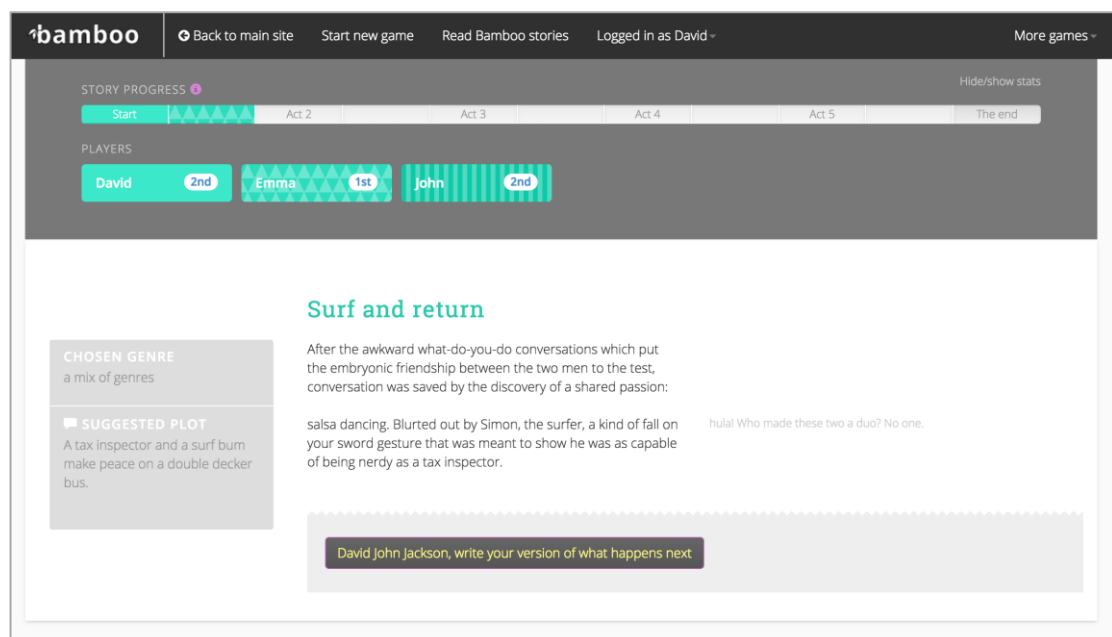
Design and development practice

What defines my creative practice is not easily articulated because it seems nebulous or intuitive, driven partly from the margins of the mind as well as the centre. However, if we

consider the idea postulated by Christopher Crouch and Jane Pearce that design practice is not a *common-sense* activity but a 'body of knowledge that is in constant flux, responding to new material conditions and ways of thinking' (Crouch and Pearce 2012:36) then we can begin to clarify what elements make up the body of knowledge that pertains to Storyjacker. These *ways of thinking* can be considered as those laid out in this section. Processes such as wireframing, once chosen, defined the parameters within which games would be rendered: archetypally as webpages, formatively represented as blocks of text, text fields, buttons and other easy-to-represent web page elements. The use of particular types of web code (PHP-MySQL, HTML-CSS) and design frameworks (Twitter Bootstrap) gave me tools to help me think about those problems. These technologies represent particular approaches to common problems, such as user input and content storage. They are ways of thinking that defined my notion of what was possible to produce. *Ways of thinking* also encompassed the effect of theory and the work of practitioners from the fields of literature, creative writing, game design and psychology on Storyjacker and its development (see Chapter 2 and Chapter 3.1). The restrictions and small failures of testing often reflected *new material conditions* as described by Crouch and Pearce. For example, the failure of online testing and the success of workshops, as detailed in Section 3.3, led to a different set of methods and ultimately a different type of game.

Game design

Whilst the core themes of game design have been covered in Chapter 2, it is important to emphasise the practical role of game design as the starting point for my practice-based enquiry: both via game design theory (e.g. Schell 2008, Koster 2005 and Salen and Zimmerman 2004) and via analysis of the designs of existing games.

Iterative design process

The project initially followed a design method informed by my previous professional experience as a designer and writer on commercial creative projects. The method can be described in the following terms:

> *In response to question/brief develop a number of concept designs (e.g. Figure 3.17 and 3.18) => Choose a design that is both achievable and has a high likelihood of solving the problem => Create a visual and technical plan => Build prototype => Test/review => Prototype => Test/review => continue cycle of iterating prototype* (Chapter 3.3) *and testing until ready /project deadline*

After the initial concept designs, feasibility and planning work I moved into a process of iterative prototyping. This was broadly similar to iterative processes described by Braude (Braude 2004, p3) as the spiral process and by Salen and Zimmerman as iterative design (Salen and Zimmerman 2004, p11). However, I found some problems with these processes. By focusing on the aims of the project rather than identifiable risks my projections for project completion proved to be consistently inaccurate – an announcement of the imminent release of Game 1 featured on my own blog in April 2012; the game was finally released for one-on-one testing in November 2012 and an improved iteration was released to pilot testers in January 2013.

An alternative model, can be found in Schell who builds upon Barry Boehm's model of software development (Schell 2008, p83-86) to link prototyping to risk analysis. In the model, prototypes test specific risks at every stage of development, moving onto the next stage when initial risks have been investigated. This approach is exemplified in the paper-based tests, which rapidly tested the risk of developing Game 2 (see next section). However, the spiral model, my original cycle, has been the most effective overall. The reason for this is that whilst the risk-based model for development has clear benefits, it has some problems *in the wild*. One problem in a one-person production is efficacy. The focus on risks means that much effort goes into producing specific iterations, which test a risk but are not of any material use towards the final production of the game (just as the paper-based models could not be used towards the digital models). Also, the majority of test participants in Storyjacker tests had a holistic set of requirements: students without any affiliation to the project had learning outcomes and expectations that would be difficult to meet whilst pursuing compartmentalised risk tests. This was especially the case given that test session timeframes were often short and that story writing is a time consuming task.

Defining game prototyping

Game prototypes take on various forms. They may be, amongst other things, 'paper versions of a digital game, a single-player version of a networked experience [or a] hand-scrawled board and pieces for a strategy game' (Salen & Zimmerman 2004, p12). Their main function is to test how people play the game and whether the game answers the original justification for the game.

I have learned the hard way what a successful early game prototype is not: an unpolished version of the final outcome. Alberto Savoia refers critically to 'premature perfectionism' and succumbing to the desire to 'add more features, or content, before releasing the first version' (Savoia 2011:2). He comments that a sense of embarrassment when releasing a first prototype is a sign that it is being released at the right point. Salen and Zimmerman concur: 'Early prototypes are not pretty' (Salen and Zimmerman 2004:12). In order to counterbalance the tendency to overwork prototypes, they offer a rule of thumb: 'a game prototype should be created and playtested, at the absolute latest, 20 per cent of the way into a project schedule' (ibid). Between Game 1 and Game 2 development there was a marked improvement in this respect: the first prototype for Game 1, finally released for general testing in January 2013 was first tested using paper prototypes on 5th September 2012 9 months after the first designs were developed, approximately 75% of the way through early development. The digital version initially conceived as the first prototype was released in early December over 90% in to the initial development cycle. In comparison, Game 2 was prototyped almost immediately in the design process during the first tests. The positive response that this initial prototype garnered was the justification for its development. The more user-led approach represented a more valid and authentic route for development, which led ultimately to it being the better of the two games.

Figure 3.16 - example of paper-based writing prototype from early tests

Wireframes

Website wireframes are used by designers to 'show the structure of a page' as opposed to screen designs 'which communicate its look and feel' (Brown 2006). I used wireframes as the first practical stage of designing for Storyjacker. Game ideas were loosely designed as wireframes and then prototyped in code, from the first game designs to the final site mock-ups (figures 3.17 and 3.18). Latterly, I used purpose-built development tools (for example, Balsamiq (Balsamiq Studios, LLC 2014)) because they offered libraries of standard web page elements, but initially I used standard graphics packages to mock up frame-based sketches to develop visual and layout elements of the project quickly and intuitively.

Figure 3.17 - early wireframe to conceptualise Game 1
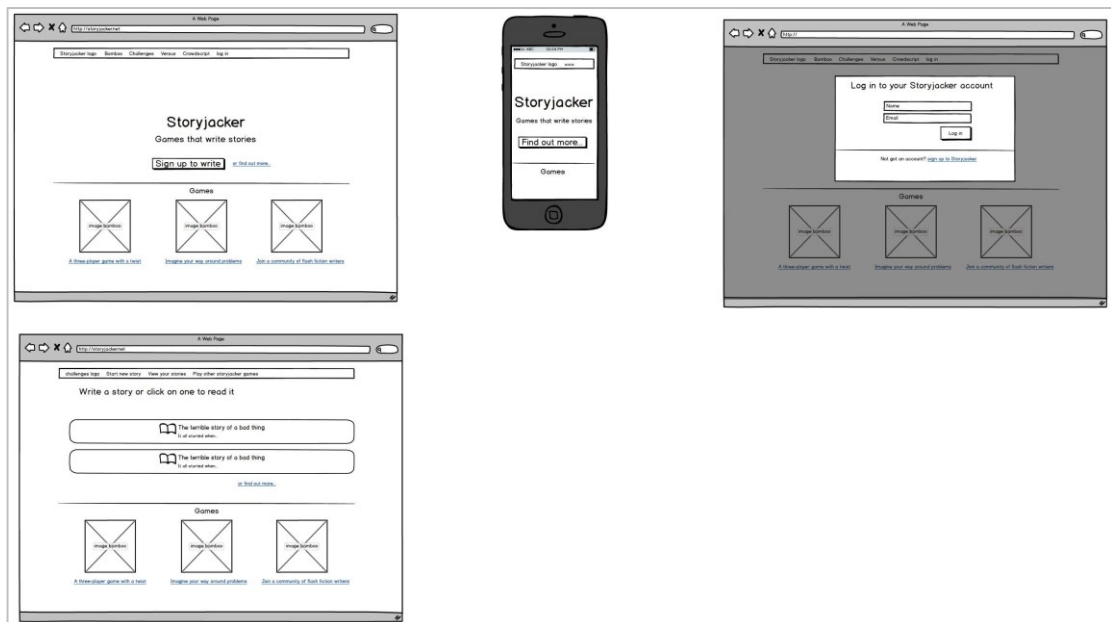
Figure 3.18 - wireframe layout plans for final iteration of the Storyjacker beta site

Coding and development

Following the development of a wireframe design, which specified the functional requirements of the page, web development would take place implementing the designs. Initial development took place using standard database-driven web technologies (PHP-SQL, HTML-CSS). Some elements of this collection were familiar to me but others (particularly PHP) required me to study and learn these languages. This meant that programming relatively simple database-driven features early in the development process was slow paced. By contrast, in the latter stages of Game 2, development was expedited through the use of the Twitter Bootstrap framework. This framework offered me a library of complementarily designed elements to use in my games (e.g. progress and menu bars). In addition to the affordances of Bootstrap, my own library of specialised code snippets was maturing so that code I had developed for one game could be reused in the other. This gradual increase in both the frameworks and libraries of pre-existing material that I used and my general competence at producing games in this manner meant that the speed of iterative development slowly increased throughout the two years of development.

Volunteer coders

In latter stages of development, I received help from two undergraduate student coders each of who volunteered to work on the games to gain additional experience working on a research project. Jordan Harman developed secure encryption of the Storyjacker sign-up and log-in systems that were required prior to public release in early summer 2014. This was a substantial piece of work, which represented many hours of coding. In addition, prior to the Summer Games, student Cullen Rhodes connected the Bamboo game to a third-party technology that allowed onscreen updates from other players without them being required to refresh their browser window. This came about during a testing day I organised with Harman and Rhodes before the first Summer Games session. The day was designed to spot and fix any bugs that arose prior to the session, another way in which both coders helped in the development of the final iteration. Working with other coders on aspects of the platform was another method that allowed me more time to focus on the elements of practice central to this thesis: game design and user testing.

Game testing

Case studies

As Crouch and Pearce point out 'in case study research, the primary focus is the particular case that is the object of interest' (2012:124). In this written thesis, the three case study summaries bring into focus Storyjacker development as it relates to three different categories of player: Creative Writing Students (CWS), Published Authors and Non-specialist Creative Writer (NSCW). (The NSCW group represents all participants not represented by CWS or author groups.) The choice to delineate along these lines allows a number of smaller workshop case studies to be understood as part of three broader narratives. Effort has been made using this collective case study method not to lose sight of the individual cases themselves. As

Crouch and Pearce point out, there is a risk that with collective case studies that 'detail will be lost in the complexity of the whole' (2012:125); the idiosyncrasies of one group of writers should not become fused with those of another except by comparison. The risk of doing so is that the resultant fusion is neither an average of both, or a representative reflection of either. Clear differentiation between tests has been maintained where relevant to avoid this.

Workshops

The majority of writing on the Storyjacker website came from university workshop groups consisting typically of undergraduate creative subject students. These took place in Manchester Metropolitan classrooms set in a variety of different styles but most commonly using a *horse-shoe* desk layout with chairs along the three walls facing a speaker. In sessions where the tests were in place of a regular workshop, there were also teaching staff in the room; usually only observing but occasionally providing extra support to participants.
The general format of workshop sessions was:
1. A slideshow-based presentation to offer students some insight and value around the broader critical issues surrounding the work, especially around collaboration and the importance of tools in writing, (see Appendix 04 for example).

2. Distribution of laptops and log in details where necessary. Alternatively, participants brought their own equipment.

3. 1-2 hour session where participants write stories.

4. Discussion and questionnaire session to finish.

As detailed in the approach to iterative design above, it is important to note that the workshop format was required to perform a dual role. It provided a novel learning experience for the students, generally involved at their lecturer's behest, as well as gathering research evidence to develop the Storyjacker platform. This requires consideration at the point of analysis and is accounted for in the interpretive methodologies by using case study rather than positivistic experimentation as the primary method. Summaries of a selection of sessions are presented as short case studies (Chapter 3.3).

Storyjacker Summer Games

By spring 2014, testing had successfully captured feedback from a selection of participants from creative writing and other backgrounds. However, the research felt to some extent delimited by a higher education (HE) setting, due in a large part to the relocation of writing from an online context to HE classroom and course settings. This had the effect of unintentionally restricting the relevance of the findings to the educational sphere. At the same time there seemed to be an opportunity to demonstrate how writing games might be applied to the wider creative writing and publishing sector. The inclusion of published authors through two Game 2 games was designed to extend the context of Storyjacker findings. Named the Storyjacker Summer Games this extension of the initial goals involved a number of new stages of development: the platform was made secure and open to the public to play; it was simplified and redesigned; and authors were contacted to request their involvement. Once

authors agreed to play, they were scheduled with two other writers in a three-player game. The findings of this extension are summarised in Chapter 3.3.3.

Interviews and questionnaires

Developing a method for capturing user feedback that does not negatively affect or disrupt player engagement with the Storyjacker project has been one of developmental elements of practice during these workshops. Also, designing questionnaires that provide the kind of feedback required to make confident decisions about the development of the platform has involved gradual iteration (from Appendix 05 to Appendix 06). Where it has been possible to interview subjects open-ended interviews have been used alongside structured questionnaires with both closed and open-ended questions. Where it has not been possible to conduct an interview I have used online and paper based questionnaires to record participant responses to games and aid the iterative process of design development.

Critical analysis of stories

Reliably assessing the outcomes of creative work is not easily achieved as a review of the literature on exam marking by Meadows and Billington (Meadows and Billington 2005) concludes. Factors that can complicate assessment include the tendency by assessors to interpret a series of essays as 'one long discourse' (2005:24) where the inherent value of one is quantified relatively in relation to the essay that happened to come before. Other factors that can bias assessors and their interpretation of written work include spelling and grammar and text length (2005:26). One of the ways in which the bias of particular assessors can be mitigated is through assessment by multiple assessors (2005:68) ensuring a more rounded view of the candidate's work.

The purpose of critically analysing the stories from Storyjacker is different to an examination assessment because individuals and groups in the study were not themselves being marked. Instead the purpose of the assessment was:

- to analyse and assess the general qualities of the stories that are produced by Storyjacker;

- to provide assessment data to compare stories produced by the different groups using Storyjacker (e.g. a particular workshop group, all groups using Bamboo.)

The technique of using a board of practitioners to assess creative writing in research finds some precedent in another study. Teresa M. Amabile for example used the marks from twelve practicing poets to assess poems from 72 test subjects and found relatively high degrees of reliability (Amabile 1983:5) in terms of consistency.

In this study the critical board of six practitioners was made up of four creative writing lecturers from four separate HEIs and two individuals from the media and publishing sector. The panellists offer strategically different qualitative perspectives, from both creative writing (pedagogic/writer) and publishing (industry/reader) contexts. Via an online questionnaire, each panellist was asked to read six stories. Three selections of six stories (A, B and C) were sent out to the board. Two members of the board received selection A, two received selection

B and two received selection C. Each one contained two initial stories that were the same across all selections and these were intended to act as a comparison key between all assessors. The other four stories in each selection were different, meaning that the six assessors reviewed 14 stories in total. This overlapping of reviews meant that each piece reviewed was assessed more than once in order to offer a greater depth of analysis and a check on bias.

Method of story assessment

The questionnaire (Appendix 8) asked respondents to mark each story out of ten for each of seven characteristics of the story (see Figure 3.19). This was followed by a free text section, requesting a story review of sixty to one-hundred words. The aggregated marking system was preferred over a summary score because it could allow the assessor to more delicately differentiate the aspects of the work that were effective from those that were not. Its complexity was also designed to inhibit glib comparison between one piece and another. Meadows and Billington in their review of studies into marking reliability call these comparative biases 'contrast effects' (2005:23) and later notes that 'more closely defined questions' are associated with higher reliability (2005:35).

Clarifying terms used

To try to avoid ambiguity, terms below should be interpreted with these points in mind:

- **Meaningfulness**: to what extent does the story succeeded in progressing a particular set of ideas or world view in the story?
- **Coherence**: how logical is the fictional world that the story invites you into?
- **Originality**: to what extent is the story new and different from other stories?
- **Entertainment**: how enjoyable was the story to read?
- **Prose**: to what extent were the sentences and paragraphs well composed?
- **Character development**: How well does the story create characters you can empathise with?
- **Plot development**: How well does the story develop a compelling plot?

Figure 3.19 – excerpt from questionnaire: section detailing terms used

Method of platform assessment

On two of the six stories, one for each Game 1 and Game 2, the assessor was additionally asked to describe the effect of the digital reading environment on the story. A multiple choice set of questions offered some structure to the assessor partly because game elements might not be part of a critical discourse familiar to the board.

The selection was chosen to be representative of stories in a number of categories:

- Game types (G1 and G2)

- Version types (e.g. G1V1, G1V2 etc.)

- Test groups (e.g. Test 1, Test 2)

- Writer groups (e.g. authors)

Interpreting panelist scores

In order to get a sense of the relative qualities that each story possessed, the mean average of scores for the story (*story average*) was used as a base line and relative scores derived to give some indication of scores after individual marker biases were taken into account, alongside actual score averages. Using this formula, we derive the total average difference for all stories by combining scores from all stories together (*total stories average*) and all story scores from a particular characteristic (*total characteristic average*) to get the relative characteristics of all stories.

$$\frac{(100/\ total\ story\ average)\quad x\ (total\ characteristic\ average - total\ story\ average)}{characteristic\ total\ as\ relative\ percentage}$$

3.3: summary of Storyjacker workshops

The following summaries, provide an insight into the workshops that informed the development of Storyjacker, structured across three distinct groups. The groups were designed to ensure that a range of feedback was being considered and allowed significant differences between groups to be more easily observed and recorded. Each of these summaries represents a longer collective case study that can be found in the appendices for further reference.

3.3.1 non-specialist creative writers workshops

By its nature, the non-specialist creative writers group (NSCWs), consisting of participants who are neither creative writing students nor published fiction authors, was the most diverse in its background. The most diverse characteristic of the group from the point of view of the tests was the extent to which the group contained different degrees of writing experience, in general and creatively; it contained both first year BA students who self-identified in tests as 'not usually liking English' and experienced research writers widely published in the academic sphere who also identified themselves as amateur creative writers. This group was the largest of the three, making up nearly two thirds of the participants. Its spread was also widest across all phases of design, being present at both the first and penultimate tests. Despite differences, there were also some very consistent characteristics within the group: all writers had a direct association to higher education in England – mostly in the arts – either as students or as members of staff.

The significance of this group is that individuals in it can be considered to be altering or extending their normal practice to write creatively in a classroom setting. As established in both our definitions of collaboration and creative writing pedagogy (Chapter 2), this is not the case with creative writing students (CWS) whose established culture embodies many of the elements of workshop-based collaboration in creative writing that the games seek to encourage further. Therefore the group acts as a counterpoint to the CWS group and helps to define a base level of game efficacy in terms of motivation to write creatively. This is complicated by the fact that many of the participants are creative practitioners in other fields (particularly the visual arts), therefore collaboration on a story writing task may represent an extension of their creative practice in the way that Ravetz et al (2013) have observed (see Chapter 2).

If there was an expectation that participants not normally engaged with creative writing would not enjoy the Storyjacker games this was not the case, even across a diverse range of groups. In fact, those for whom the task of creative writing was usually boring or difficult often reported enjoying themselves when using Storyjacker. For these writers what was most clearly supporting their enjoyment was the combined impact of collaboration and the use of game rules to structure the task and make light of it.

Participant feedback in the early paper-based testing group identified issues with time limits and feedback mechanisms that could inhibit experimentation and creativity if continued. The implementation of these findings, (removing disliked elements), was well received by creative

writing student (CWS) groups in subsequent testing, suggesting that many of the fundamental creative motivators in Storyjacker games were similar across the different groups.

As expected, there was evidence that the games necessitated a transfer of alternative creative practices to story writing in NSCW groups. For example, drawing was documented in a first year creative arts group (Figure 3.20) as an *ad hoc* way of providing visual tools for the group to articulate a shared vision for the story. This was not observed with the CWS groups.
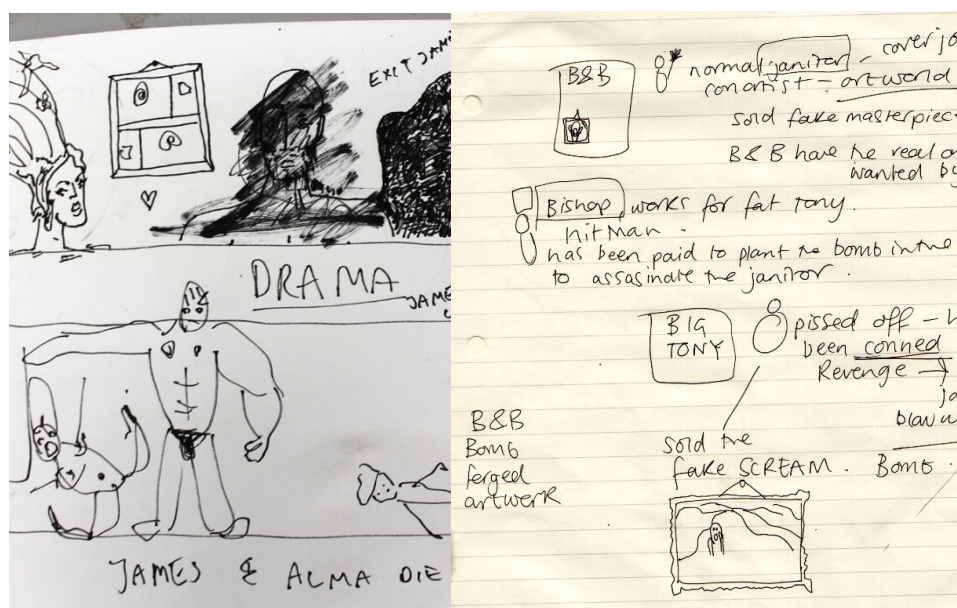
Figure 3.20 – two examples of drawing in ad hoc *story planning by visual arts students*

In the final NSCW test, more experienced writers identified props as a way to overcome problems with their lack of confidence in creative writing, despite significant writing experience in the field of academia.

Humour was also an evident strategy to game players in the final NSCW test: two groups played the game but there was an unplanned bug with the game played by the first group which limited the game's functionality. For the first group, the process was 'laborious' as a result. When they read out their story to the class, they felt it sounded 'quite laboured'. This contrasted with the second group that was often overcome with laughter as their narrator read their story out to the class (Figure 3.21).

Figure 3.21 – players laughing as they read back their story

NSCW groups in general used jokes as a way of sidestepping the awkward intimacy usually required in collaboration, as described by Storey and Joubert (2004). Intimacy is rejected in favour of a writing style that avoids engaging with the writer's inner world and instead meets the social experience of performance head on, offering to play the fool to entertain instead. This means the participant can avoid the personal investment in characters' emotions and motivations. This seems counterproductive to the aims of Storyjacker: to create meaningful stories. However, in other studies of creativity in related fields (Cade 1982, Holmes 2007) it is suggested that the subversive role of humour does not usually distract from tasks. Rather, as Janet Holmes summarises, it has the effect of 'relieving tension, counteracting boredom and fatigue, energizing a discussion, and provoking creative solutions and lateral thinking' (2007:519). Whilst humour in this case indicated a fundamentally ironic and guarded relationship to the text, it nevertheless fostered an easy relationship and allowed the group to develop a process that players enjoyed.

Appendix 9 presents the NSCW case study in more detail.

3.3.2 Creative writing student workshops

A sample of higher education creative writing students from various different cohorts used and fed back on Storyjacker. This sample represented students from both post-graduate and undergraduate courses and two separate university campuses. It also documents the journey from online to class based testing necessitated by online participants' rejection of the games.

Creative Writing Students (CWS) were particularly important to this research because they represented the voice of a large writing community in the development of the work. Their experience in writing stories and their knowledge of the creative practices and cultures of the creative writing pedagogy in general have made them educated and informed participants to feedback on Storyjacker. In addition, the most obvious use of Storyjacker and similar story-game platforms would be by creative writing groups.

To begin with it proved very difficult to engage creative writing students. It was in this group that I attempted to test early prototypes online with remote players. On the two occasions where it failed, it was challenging to gain any insight into the motivations of non-participants. I eventually put this problem down to a fundamental flaw in my testing methodology: I had begun with remote participants at a stage when Tracy Fullerton in her book A *Playcentric Approach to Creating Innovative Games* (2014:250) recommends playing with 'confidants' whilst present so that you can 'explain the game to them to begin with… because the prototype will likely be incomplete'. Playing with a diverse and remote target audience is reserved by Fullerton for the fourth and final refinement stage (2014:252). Jeremy Gibson is similar in his description of an expanding circle of playtesters, from yourself, to trusted friends outwards. The outermost ring of this playtesting group is online testing. He advises that the game 'should be in beta phase before you attempt this' (2014:150) because 'there is little or no accountability for actions or statements' online (2014:147).

Eventually, the adoption of classroom-based workshops gave some insight of what could be causing problems for remote testers. Those who attended the first sessions were motivated in part by meeting up and socialising with other writers. This notion is reinforced both by studies of collaboration and creative writing pedagogy (Chapter 2). The first workshops with this group also highlighted specific design problems, such as the need for better instructions; game design in earlier prototypes was probably at the root of online test failures.

There was an expectation that the creative writing classroom and cultures surrounding it would offer effective support for the kind of experimental creative writing practices Storyjacker exhibited. This appeared to be the case: students responded well to the platform and understood and appreciated the game as a process for making stories. However, this also meant that creative writing students generally understood the games as a creative exercise that was not as prevalent in the NCWS case studies. These students of creative writing saw the application of the *polysemic* and random response methods as a way to practise their writing in the manner of Morley's writing games description described in Chapter 2. It was to them a simulation, not a draft of the real thing (2007).

What is at stake here is the potential value of the stories produced by an exercise. Does this

attitude to the task affect lasting value or meaning? According to Bateson's notion of play, games instantly promote a sense of distance from the real thing through the message '"This is play" or "This is ritual"' (Bateson 2006:318). This has the function of reducing the sense of threat posed by each situation through gestures of play. To accept Bateson's thesis on play is to accept that playful writing always has the effect of distancing the writer from the threats of their process. Consider the use of humour, described in the NSCW section and evident with CWS groups, as a manifestation of this distancing. What is unclear then is the relationship of this low-risk type of writing to what it produces. In one of Bateson's examples, he cites Andaman Islands rituals of peace-making, which involve a form of play or ritual: reconciling parties are permitted to strike one another. Whilst the blows are meant to be playful, the potential peace at stake is real. Similarly, the game-based methodology of Storyjacker, as in Hazel Smith's alternative pedagogy of creative writing games (2005), aims to produce real fiction. Yet, for these participants it seems that play is culturally encoded; the ritual of play in Creative Writing learning for these students potentially puts its output beyond use in a serious context.

Finally, differences relating to how the CWS group responded to Game 1 and Game 2 showed there are a range of insights to be gleaned from collaboration. CWS participants found that Game 2 promoted a sense of creative teamwork they had often not encountered in their creative writing practice before.

> *Good fun to collaborate with others.*

> *Working collaboratively meant our ideas bounced off one another, which sparked inspiration.*

> *Working with like-minded people helped to create an enjoyable experience.*

In contrast, Game 1 seemed to encourage a more introspective effect on participants, reflecting on discoveries about their own working practices in feedback.

> *[R]eally interesting to help see what people think of my characters.*

> *It was fun to see all the ways that people respond to and expand on your ideas.*

> *I enjoyed being challenged as a writer and also seeing my own piece evolve.*

Emphasis on individual gains and interests is not in this case symptomatic of an individualistic process as each was reporting on the effect of collaborators on their writing, nor is it in the case studies of Vera John-Steiner (2000). She noted that a 'long-term creative collaboration can act as a mirror...: a chance to understand one's habits, styles, working methods and beliefs through comparison and contrast with one's collaborator' (2000:189). It appears that even in these short-term collaborations, similar self-reflection can be achieved: not in spite of collaboration but because of it. More generally this reflection-on-practice phenomenon reflected the fact that this CWS group had an existing creative writing practice to reflect on, in comparison to most participants in the NSCW group who did not. Existing practice might also explain feedback which suggested that writers in CWS classes preferred the idea of a regular on-campus session with other writers to play the games rather than an online session.

Appendix 10 presents the CWS case study in more detail.

3.3.3 published authors and the Storyjacker Summer Games

The purposes of working with published authors on what became the Storyjacker Summer Games, were thee-fold:

1. To test Storyjacker outside of an education context
2. To record two stories written by six qualified experts as a benchmark of quality
3. To gain the insights of experienced creative writers on the process of Storyjacker

All participants in the Games were award-winning authors, having won national and international prizes for their story writing.

- *Ross Raisin* – novelist; author of *Waterline* (2011) and *God's Own Country* (2008)
- *Ed Hogan* – novelist; author of *Hunger Trace* (2014), *The Messengers* (2013), *Daylight Saving* (2012), *Blackmoor* (2009)
- *Tiffany Murray* – novelist; author of *Sugar Hill* (2014), *Diamond Star Halo* (2011), *Happy Accidents* (2005)
- *David Whitehouse* – novelist; author of *Mobile Library* (2015), *Bed* (2012)
- *Jenn Ashworth* – novelist; author of *A Kind of Intimacy* (2013), *The Friday Gospels* (2013), *Cold Light* (2011)
- *Mez Breeze* – poet, story-teller and artist; a collection of her work can be found in *human readable messages: Mezangelle 2003-2011* (2012)

More detailed biographies can be found in the appendices (Appendix 11).

Focusing on the author group above allowed the Storyjacker project to expand its reach outside of the world of academia and HEI pedagogies and consider the themes and issues with the platform in a fresh context. The introduction of a live uninitiated external audience added an extra element to the game. However, this had little reported effect on the behaviours or attitudes of the writers, nearly all of whom were much more acutely aware of other authors as readers than an online reader-only audience; it was the other players that mattered most to them.

Whilst feedback from authors was overwhelmingly positive in nature, it offered very diverse perspectives on the Storyjacker games. Authors brought their own highly personalised practice of story writing to compare against it. As such there was not a standard response from the group on the games. For example, Tiffany Murray found playing fun as a reflective exercise:

> It was a fun process… A good way of flagging up/examining your own creative process and its pitfalls, I think.

David Whitehouse was highly engaged by Storyjacker as a form of collaboration and reported finding the in-game feedback from other players on his writing *addictive.* This was something often aloof to him during the lengthy novelistic process of drafting and redrafting:

> In any collaboration, I'm much happier with the writing I do… But what the game can give you is pretty addictive, instant peer approval which made all your ideas and indeed better ideas feel better.

Other participants such as Ed Hogan noticed that certain types of challenge in the game made crafting a coherent plot more difficult:

> [T]he bits where I didn't do so well in making it coherent… [were] when the task that we were doing wasn't to do with the plot… With those tasks where it said, *write in the style of a particular writer*… the more difficult the task was the more distracted I got from actually making it coherent.

The fact that this game was played over a network rather than in a classroom brought about new perspectives also. Some writers saw the use of in-game communication between players as an intrusion. Ross Raisin saw the social and administrative use of email communication between players as *extraneous* and liked the idea of 'not being connected socially' whilst playing. Jenn Ashworth felt that perhaps instant messenger (IM) discussions shared by the players in her game were a form of cheating; and described seeking to playfully atone for this by drawing anecdotes shared by the players on IM into the game's story. Both Raisin and Ashworth seemed to be responding to the idea of a proper way to play the game that would ideally exclude conversation or social contact. For Ashworth especially this would represent a higher aesthetic ideal. In the proper version, the game above all was the organising force and nothing beyond it rules was considered during play. This relates to Alan Aycock's notion that game mastery is an irony everyone subscribes to, an impossible ideal that is nevertheless necessary for play (1993). Mastery requires a comprehensive game system to substantiate and validate it. But this system does not exist comprehensively in more complex games so it is 'summoned by its lack of presence: there is no final answer to any particular game, or to any of its phases, no matter who is involved' (1993:29). In place of its presence, *the idea* of a proper game to master exists for Ashworth and Raisin but is never substantiated by their play. Ashworth's probing of rules through the shared anecdote in the game story yields no conclusive resistance because, despite its rules, the game is constantly re-evaluated and or reimagined by each player in turn. In this case, opponent Ed Hogan perceived another rule: *no in-jokes* and rejected Ashworth's contribution in the game. Afterwards, he wondered whether its exact opposite would have been the correct law to follow:

> Why wouldn't that [shared anecdote] be valid when we were in touch with each other right then while we were doing it? That makes sense that we would write to entertain each other.

This sense that the ideal game was not the same as the game that was played, was also felt by players in the choosing of winning contributions. For example, Hogan noticed that his contributions had not been picked in the first session and that then he was picked twice in the second. He wondered whether 'people were trying to make up for it'. He also reported choosing authors who had not been picked recently during his own goes. This etiquette is accounted for by Salen and Zimmerman who in turn refer to Gregory Bateson's *metacommunication* (Salen and Zimmerman 2004). In Bateman's words it is that '[t]he playful nip denotes the bite, but it does not denote what would be denoted by the bite' (Bateson

2006:317). As with humour in the NSCW group, this *metacommunication* allows game players to communicate something playfully that without the notion of play would be threatening. The consistent exclusion of one author from the rounds by the others would be the fulfilment of the game's latent threat: namely the loss of esteem of an esteemed author. In order for the players to continue to communicate the message *this is play* they must mitigate the possibility of this threat for all. Otherwise the game shifts and is reconstructed 'around the question "Is this play?"' (2006: 318), a less comfortable strategy for dealing with threat. Bateson's observations of the way play actually works, further challenges notions players have about the ideal game and the proper way to play. The players perceive an authoritarian set of rules and ethics, but this is constantly at odds with inherent social rules of playfulness.

How writers responded critically to the elements of vagueness and inconsistency in their game stories depended to some extent on their preconceptions of what gameplay would produce. Jenn Ashworth's reported conceptualisation of live writing as an honest artistic process before starting the game contributed to her satisfaction with the story as a finished piece of live writing. Tiffany Murray did not find it so easy to silence her redrafting twitch and wished they had not left, for example, a dead dog in their story to fester in the garden without better explanation.

> I felt we hadn't got there yet. Like even all three of us, as writers. We would shoehorn a bit in the middle.

What Murray describes as *not there yet* is a general failure to achieve final consensus on what the story means, as defined in Chapter 2 with particular reference to McKee's *controlling idea* (1999:115). The controlling idea is to some extent replicated in the game by the suggested plot element (Figure 3.14). And David Whitehouse noted that the biggest influence on the stories, in terms of tone of voice or style, appeared to be through the tendency for the group to adhere to the style that the first writer set in the story:

> I tell you the biggest effect on [my style] was because Ross opened the game... You don't write in your normal style I don't think. You adapt.

This found agreement with those creative writing students who saw the input of other writers on stories that they started as interpretations of *their own* story and style.

Yet it is clear from the stories' narrative progression that unity degraded in both stories as they progressed, to the extent that authors were silently at odds over what the story was about whilst playing. What indicates this divergence most is the difference between individual story summaries, submitted as part of a follow-up questionnaire after the games (in Appendix 12). Between the end of the game and the surveys and interviews there was no practical opportunity to develop a retrospective language of intent between the players, who were generally strangers to one another. Therefore, the differences in describing the story are not affected by any general agreements or disputes about the meaning of the text. Each author's summary was furnished with their differing personal ideas about the direction of the story. For example, the returning woman in *Arpège on the Landing* represents an absent mother for one author but is an elderly anthropologist to another. The game story's conflicted and draft-like final state led authors to compulsively redraft through their summarising of the plot in a

follow-up survey, each shaping the story so that it made more sense by using their own controlling idea. The game structure did little to control this.

Appendix 12 presents the CWS case study in more detail.

Chapter 4: *Storyjacker story analysis*

Introduction

As described in Chapter 3.2, a selection of the stories written using the Storyjacker platform were sent to a panel of experts in academic creative writing and the literary industries in order to gain qualitative and quantitative feedback on the work produced. Terms used to mark stories, such as meaningfulness and coherence, were described to members of the panel in order to give them shared concepts to approach the work with. However, the panel was chosen to provide a range of opinions, a conversation around the qualities of these stories to be analysed. This was appropriate: the variety of contexts in which they had been written required a panel that reflected this myriad.

Background of Panellists

In random order:

- **Joanna Ellis (JE)** is Chief Operating Officer of The Literary Platform, 'a specialist agency working at the heart of books and technology' (TLP Collective 2015) and previously Marketing Director at Faber publishing house.
- **Maura Dooley (MD)** is Reader in Creative Writing at Goldsmiths College London.
- **Angi Holden (AH)** is a lecturer in Creative Writing in the Department of Contemporary Arts at MMU Cheshire.
- **Homa Khaleeli (HK)** is a staff writer and columnist for the Guardian newspaper who frequently writes on authors and fiction (e.g. Khaleeli 2014, 2014b, 2011).
- **Dr Simon Heywood (SH)** is a lecturer in Creative Writing at the University of Derby.
- **Dr Scott Thurston (ST)** is Senior Lecturer at the University of Salford, leading the MA Creative Writing: Innovation and Experiment.

The respectful use of initials within the subsequent text (rather than surnames) is an attempt to focus primarily on diversity of viewpoints rather than the opinions of specific individuals. Where the background of a panellist is particularly relevant to a point it is specifically referenced.

Diversity of scoring
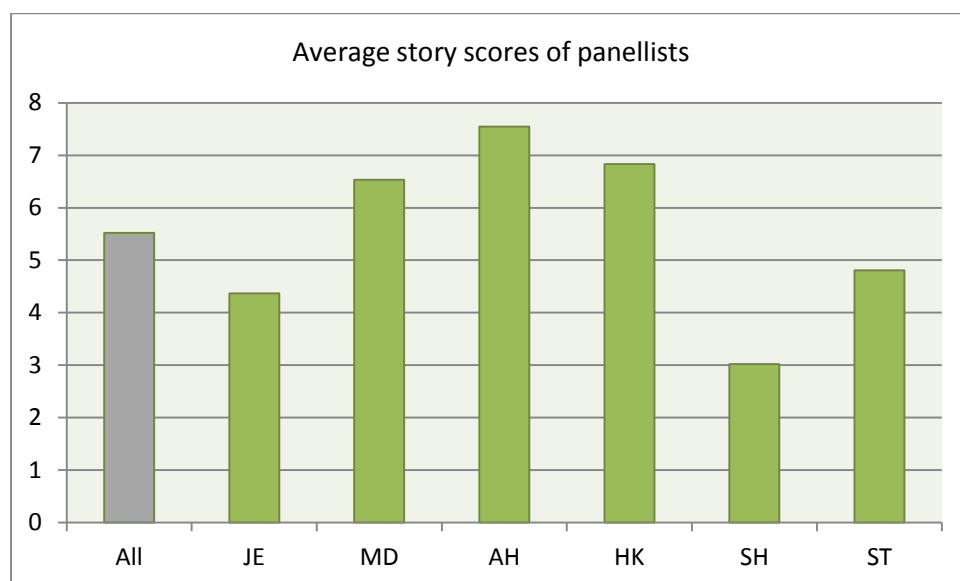
Figure 4.1

As Figure 4.1 makes clear, there was a significant level of disagreement about the general quality of stories being produced, especially as exhibited through marking feedback. Whilst the top average score of an individual marker was approximately 7.5 out of 10, the lowest was approximately 3. There are some consistent trends through the stories in terms of agreement about which characteristics are better or worse relatively (see Figure 4.3). There are also commonly cases of massive disagreement. For example, SH and JE both agreed that one of the stories below had the same low level of coherence: 3 out of 10. Yet JE thought that the same story had a high level of meaningfulness (8 out of 10) whilst SH thought it was not meaningful at all (1 out of 10).

In Barthes' *The Pleasure of the Text* he describes the problem of judging the text; he can only judge literature 'according to pleasure', which is to say beyond reason:

> I cannot go on to say: this one is good, that bad. No awards, no 'critique', for this always implies a tactical aim, a social usage, and frequently an extenuating image-reservoir. I cannot apportion, imagine that the text is perfectible, ready to enter into a play of normative predicates: it is too much this, not enough that; the text (the same is true of the singing voice) can wring from me only this judgment, in no way adjectival: that's it! And further still: that's it for me! (Barthes 1975:13)

This discreet view of critical reception finds resonance in the massive shifts in marking that occurred from one panellist to another; if there is no 'perfectible' text – no 10, then there are no precedents – no 1, 3 or 8; only *that's it!* As we will see later, by considering the open-ended questions that accompany the marks we can gain better insight.

However as mentioned above, there is generally a measure of consistency from text to text in the *overall* marking by panellists, and this is evident across the board (Figure 4.2). For

example, the two comparison stories achieved different scores but maintained a similar difference across all three marking pairs. Subsequent marks, regarding different stories seemed to continue to be marked roughly according to the comparison-story bias (Figure 4.2). This offers some assurances that by taking biases into account and using qualitative feedback to represent diversity of opinion hidden in the average, we can make valid comparisons across the board.

| | Comparison stories | | | | Different stories for each pair | |

	Neighbourhood Watch	Chives in Hot Water	Story 1	Story 2	Story 3	Story 4
HK + AH	8	7	8	7	7	6
JE + MD	6	5	6	5	5	5
SH + ST	6	5	6	1.5	4	4.5

Figure 4.2 - mean average of marks per scoring pair

Meaningfulness of stories

A key consideration of this thesis is the meaningfulness of stories that are produced by the games on Storyjacker. Referring to the terms of use in the questionnaire this referred specifically to how much the story *'succeeded in progressing a particular set of ideas or world view'* (see Appendix 8). Feedback showed that stories produced were relatively meaningful and meaningfulness was ranked most highly of all attributes (Figure 4.3). It seemed that conveying a general worldview was easier, using the games, than more detail-orientated tasks such as character and plot development. Whilst the marks were relatively differentiated, the actual range in average marks (out of ten) across all characteristics was only a half mark (5%). As well as being relatively similar, the average mark for meaningfulness was less than 60% (5.8 out of 10). The statistical evidence for the meaningfulness of Storyjacker stories therefore should not be overstated. More compelling evidence is provided by the qualitative feedback in the story summaries by panellists and reflects a more complex picture.

Figure 4.3 – average mark by characteristic as percentage of total average and as actual mark
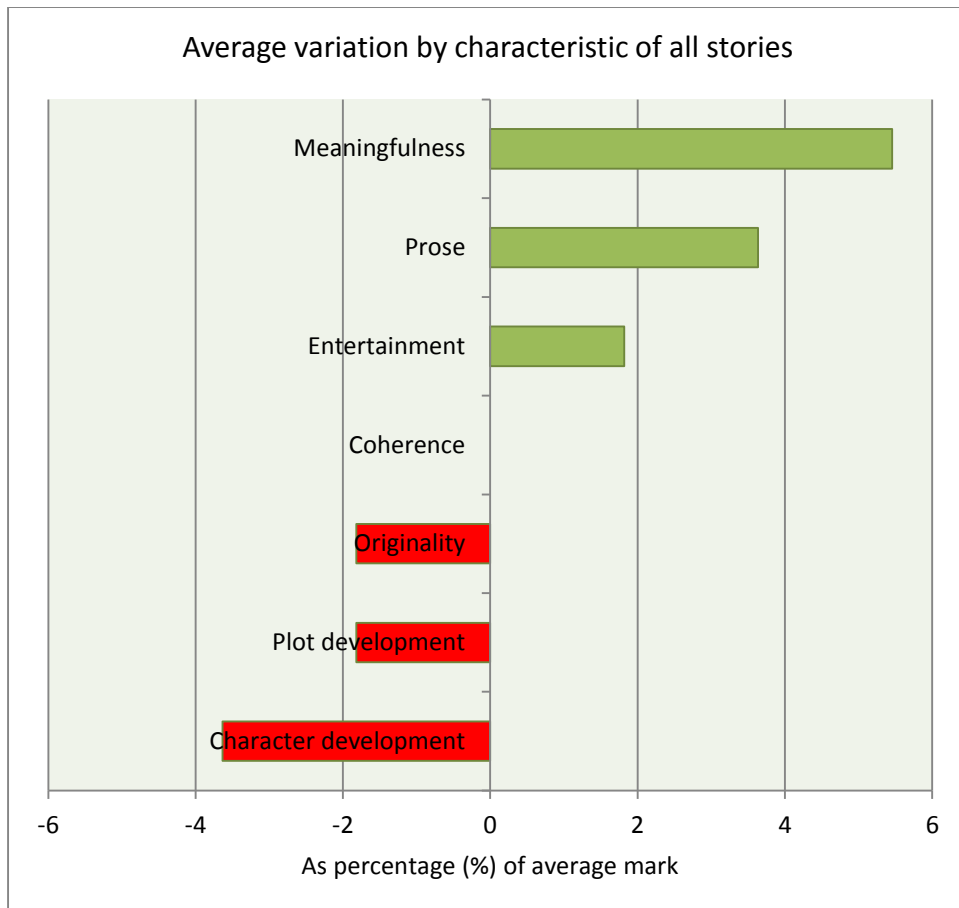
Average total mark (out of ten) by characteristic						
Meaning.	*Prose*	*Entertainment*	*Coherence*	*Originality*	*Plot development*	*Character development*
5.8	5.7	5.6	5.5	5.4	5.4	5.3

Game presentation and its effect on story reading

Panellists viewed the stories on the Storyjacker platform: the same interface their writers had used. Each was able to observe the same prompts and notes (e.g. discarded paragraphs, reminders of challenges) as the writers did. This created a reading experience that is relatively unique to the game layout the story was written in. The survey sought to capture reader impressions of these interfaces after reading their first stories on each of the platforms.

Answer choices	JE	MD	AH	HK	SH	ST
No elements affected my appreciation						
Presentation of writer challenges				X	X	X
Evidence of turn taking between players			X		X	X
Use of player/author names		X			X	X
Use of a ranking system						
Presentation of chosen and rejected sections of narrative.	X		X			X
Game-like design of platform						

Figure 4.4 - effect of Game 2 presentation

Game 2 was the first to be tested and had the most diverse range of elements for readers to choose from in the survey. This game interface had an effect with all panellists, each reporting that one or more elements had affected their appreciation of the text (Figure 4.4).
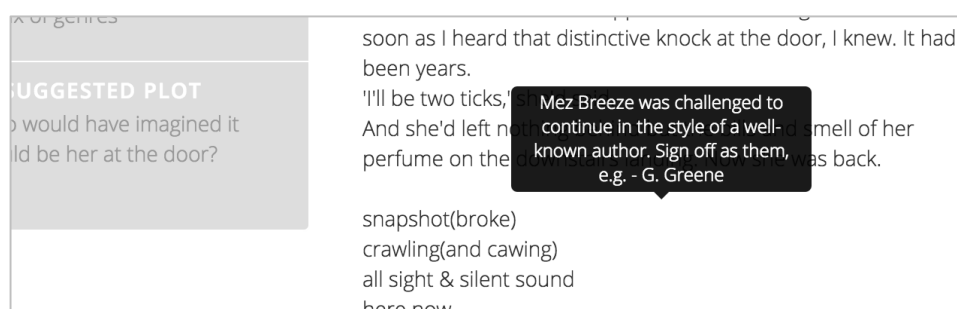
Figure 4.5 – Game 2 showed prompts as pop-up

In general, it seemed that elements necessary to gameplay often made story reading less enjoyable. For example the use of writer prompts in the text was generally viewed as problematic (e.g. Figure 4.5). Whilst ST thought that it was good to 'get a sense of the process of turn taking from different authors, stimulated by various prompts', he also noted that this disrupted his normal appreciation of the text as a story, causing him to 'respond to the story in more discrete modular terms' than he might otherwise. SH felt this disruption too:

> I thought the transparent, painstakingly accountable collaborative process mainly obstructed my engagement as a reader… I wouldn't normally even notice (or care) if a paragraph consists of dialogue or three-word sentences - I'll read with full attention if I care what happens to the characters.

MD found that names of writers distracted her from her reading enjoyment in a similar way:

> Because I recognise some of the names I immediately become interested in their style - which brings me up into 'critical mode' instead of just enjoying a good story.

-E.E. Cummings

It would be too easy for him to describe what she smelled like. But his sixth sense was telling him, even before he opened the door, that she was home. She was dirty sheets and cigarette ends on the bedside table. She was Findus Crispy Pancakes and Sunny Delight. He lifted the latch.
'Mother?'

'I'm not your mother,' she says. 'That's just what I let you call me.'
You're not sure how it is possible to feel this way and still live. But you do. You do.
'Why?'
She pushes past you into the house - her house - and eyes the new wallpaper.
'Isn't it obvious?' she asks, staring at the woodchip.

'Not really, no.'
'Social survival. People around here are not enlightened, kiddo. They're coarse. I am 78.'
'You don't look it. Anyway, we're just friends.'
She smiles at you, kindly. The raincoat is like photo paper.There's nothing to her, these days. Except everything.
'Where've you been, Nancy?'

'Working.'
She goes places you've never heard of. Lives there. Writes about it. Single mums in war zones; French police barracks.
'Thought you'd done, Nance. It's not safe.'
'You'd make me stay here, I'd catch something from your cat

He opened the door and immediately closed his eyes. She kissed him on the lips. In the summer, his allergies made it so he couldn't taste, couldn't smell, but now, on the first misty night, it all rushed in. He knew the taste straight away. Fox meat. Raw. 'You think you can -'
'Well, yes.'

The door swing blots her shape. Then suddenly it's crows-feet-twists and heartsmoke, her glass fogged face throwing tears onto the landing.
"Bubb...?".

My voice. My voice? It's gone, shifted and shed through time: back to when burbles and snot-filled-sadness filled her absence gap...

Timetwists & buttercups: yellow staining still seeping through these un-warm walls, still non-wallpaper-erased. You want to tell her: you know the paperwork was forged, the adoption a sham, the dna set full of swarming lies. You crave to see her mouth shock-hinge when she knows her blood is yours.

She doesn't answer immediately, but kisses him on the cheek and sweeps into the house.
'I'm not going to have to check your bean-bag for contraband again am I?'
'You said you weren't my mother,' he replies, darkly.
He wishes he'd had time to silence Vanilla Ice. Too late.
'Coffee?' he asks.

Figure 4.6 – Game 2 chosen and rejected columns

Panellists were generally more positive about the inclusion of both chosen and rejected story segments in its presentation (Figure 4.6), but mainly from a practitioner point of view. JE and AH both saw the presentation of this element as of interest, even a useful tool, for the practitioner-writer. This supported similar comments from published authors who are also creative writing teaching practitioners. However, they were not as sure of the benefit that could be gained by what JE termed *'lay' readers.* JE went as far as to suspect that it made the experience weaker:

> I found this interesting as someone who is interested in the craft of storytelling and writing, but think it might weaken the experience of the story for a 'lay' reader.

As a member of the panel involved in digital literary development, JE's comment helps to inform the wider context of Storyjacker, perhaps less as a literary experience and more as tool for writers. AH's comments as both a writer and a creative writing lecturer and practitioner give her a clear connection to the work through her practice. She, like a reader of David Varella's Live Writing Series work in the National Portrait Gallery, is 'interested in the "possibilities"':

The provision of alternative narratives displays the developing structure of the story in a way that is of particular interest to other writers. How much it might affect how a non-writer would respond is difficult to imagine. (AH)

In a slightly different way, ST also noted the power of these rejected possibilities on his appreciation of the story. More than offering pathways to what might have been, they began to blur into the main draft of the text. Both chosen and rejected events become potentially intermingled and undifferentiated in his aesthetic appreciation of the work:

The awareness of the rejected sections was powerful - after my first reading I had to check that I'd not incorporated them into my understanding of the story. (ST)

Whilst this has to do with the writerly presentation of the work, discussed above, it also seems to relate to what games do to normal patterns of linearity. Alan Aycock's observes the way in which bystanders after a chess tournament game engage in its post-mortem with the players. In post-mortem 'numerous previously silent lines of play… are spoken' (Aycock 1993: 21). In this way the audience plays out many possible other games from the one that occurred, exhausting it 'along several seams'. This is the surrounding 'talk of play': divergent, interrogatory and explorative; and it is reflected in the Game 2 narrative structure left in the text. But here it affects the reader's memory of the story. We remember fiction almost as if it had happened (Gerrig 2013), and are unaccustomed to remembering divergent outcomes, or distinguishing what happened next from what did not. For ST it seems the game's narrative and the fiction form a hybrid story with unclear boundaries.

Answer choices	JE	MD	AH	HK	SH	ST
No elements affected my appreciation	X				X	
Presentation of writer challenges		X	X	X		X
Evidence of turn taking between players						
Use of player/author names						
Game-like design of platform						

Figure 4.7 - effect of the Game 1 presentation layer

The presentational aesthetics of Game 1 were more consistently observed. Although two panellists did not notice any elements that affected their appreciation of the work, the others considered only the *presentation of writer challenges* as a particularly noticeable negative influence on appreciation. Panellists who did not report these elements in Game 2 (MD, AH) found them to be obstructive in Game 1. For readers the knowledge of the tasks, and particularly the *polysemic* prompts, directly changed her understanding of the writers' role in the text and obstructed their enjoyment, highlighting the text's arbitrariness rather than filling it with content appropriate to the story:

I knew to be on the lookout for 'sausages' or 'violence' and that gets in the way of a readerly experience. (MD)

[I] wonder if such abrupt changes can only result in a piecemeal approach to structure as the prompts seem only to relate to stylistic decisions rather than content. (ST)

Rather than providing additional possibilities these prompts were perceived as a prohibitive force in the writing process, causing the narrative to become 'constricted at points where the writers might otherwise have chosen to be more imaginative with language or concept' (AH).

Story reader versus writer/reader

Response as story reader	Response as writer-as-reader
'…for me as a reader it was a rather forced, derivative and introspective imitation of the kinds of collaborative/online authorship that are already occurring' (SH)	'…as a workshop exercise I could see it yielding real benefits to the writers' (SH)
'…it might weaken the experience of the story for a 'lay' reader (JE)	'…I found this interesting as someone who is interested in the craft of storytelling and writing…' (JE)
'How much it might affect how a non-writer would respond is difficult to imagine.' (AH)	'As a writer I'm interested in the "possibilities" and don't view this story as either a work in progress or a finished collaborative narrative - rather it inspires me to be more experimental with my own approach to story-building.' (AH)
'As a "reader" there is the success imperative - does the story make sense, is the viewpoint consistent, is the ending satisfying?' (AH)	'As a reader-writer, these tales enable us to glimpse fragments of worlds that we might write ourselves into, through, out of. Even if we never choose to develop any of these alternative approaches in any great detail, the fact of having experimented with them brings a new understanding to our own processes.' (AH)
'…from a reader's point of view, I find the stories mainly failed to hit the mark, and I thought the transparent, painstakingly accountable collaborative process mainly obstructed my engagement as a reader…' (SH)	'I think this struck me as a valuable workshop/craft/discipline exercise for the writers… as I say it has many other benefits which I could imagine making it well worth a writer's while to engage with.' (SH)

Figure 4.8 – response as story reader vs. writer/reader

There were two points of view, which polarised feedback and were explicitly referenced by three of the panellists, nearly always referenced in juxtaposition:

- *The writer-as-reader (referred to as the reader-writer (AH), or writer (SH) -* in all cases, the writer-as-reader could find something valuable either in the taking part in these games as exercises, as satisfying their interest in storytelling, or to inspire *more experimental* approaches to their own practice. Especially through the leftover *fragments* in the Game 2 presentation, AH sees the potentiality of *worlds that we might write ourselves into, through, out of.* This is not only reading, but thinking of writing whilst reading.

- *The story reader (referred to as 'the "lay" reader (JE), non-writer (AH) or reader (SH))* - the story reader takes a more absolute position: for them there was a *success imperative,* which dictated that the stories should succeed in making sense and in offering a satisfying ending. From this second reader's perspective it was felt that stories *mainly failed to hit the mark.* As well as the texts often failing to succeed as stories, those presentational elements that made reading the game stories interesting to the writer-as-reader, such as challenge labels and comparative texts (Figures 4.5 and 4.6) *weakened the experience of the story.*

For those panellists that used this terminology, the extent to which they took up these positions, either as a typical story reader or as writer-as-reader generally informed their scores and response to the text: the lowest scorer, SH, explicitly positioned himself as a story reader, ('for me as a reader' and 'from a reader's point of view, I find…'). The highest scorer, AH, explicitly positioned herself as a *writer* or *reader-writer,* ('As a writer I'm interested in…' and 'As a reader-writer, these tales enable us to…').

Both positions find ample agreement in Roland Barthes' *S/Z* (1990). In it, he identifies the readerly and the writerly as two types of text, as two ways of understanding text. The readerly experience is a product of the usual divorce 'between the producer of the text and its user' (1990:3). In the readerly model the reader is 'plunged into a kind of idleness –he is intransitive; he is, in short, serious: … instead of gaining access to… the pleasure of writing, he is left with no more than the poor freedom either to accept or reject the text' (1990:4); as noted above, for panellists as story-readers, stories either *hit the mark* or did not. In contrast the writerly text 'is ourselves writing, before the infinite play of the world… is traversed, intersected, stopped, plasticized by some singular system' (1990:5). Barthes notion of literary appreciation involves embodying the writer to bring the possibilities of the text to life: any 'typology of texts' can 'be linked only to a practice… of writing' (1990:6). Evidence of gameplay in the presentation of Storyjacker texts not only promotes a more game-like appreciation of the story, the ludic sense of plurality noted by Aycock (1993); it also seems to clarify the link to the practice of writing by documenting each stage of the written process.

However, for the story-reader there is clearly satisfaction in the *idleness* of the readerly experience described by Barthes. As Susan Sontag reflects: 'most readers… will be surprised to learn that structured storytelling… is a form of oppression, not a source of delight' (2007:220). The fiction reader wants to be entertained, we are told by Brewer and Lichtenstein (1988). They also note that the purposes of general fiction and literature are often different.

Comparison stories

All stories can be read via Appendix 13, or directly via the website.

It should be noted that the value in critiquing these stories individually is to provide evidence of Storyjacker's efficacy as a game story platform. For example, the following story has been written by three acclaimed authors who are each experts in their creative field. Therefore, the comments about ambiguity and a lack of originality speak about the idiosyncrasies of the game rather than the players.

Neighbourhood Watch

	Meaning.	Coherence	Prose	Entertainment	Originality	Plot	Character
JE	8	3	5	7	4	6	6
MD	7	6	8	7	6	6	6
AH	8	8	7	9	9	7	8
HK	7	7	8	8	8	8	7
SH	1	3	6	1	6	1	1
ST	8	7	9	9	8	8	9

Average mark: 6

Neighbourhood Watch was the first of the game stories that panellists marked and most enjoyed it overall. For JE, her 'curiosity was piqued about the protagonist, her relationship with the Big Man, and how it would end'. ST agreed that there was something intriguing about this 'ambiguous relationship', which left you wondering 'where the power lay between the characters'. Others perceived the central relationship as less ambiguous and thought the characters less original: the 'woman-victim who is overpowered/ trapped' which felt 'worn out by countless TV dramas' (JE), the man upstairs who 'remained fuzzy' and the neighbours who were 'stock suburban' characters (MD) and 'slightly clunky' (ST). For SH, alongside presentational issues with the work, this perceived lack of originality meant that he 'struggled to care about the characters or believe in the world'.

Panellists also noticed there were 'frustrating inconsistencies' distracting from the story (JE) such as 'the woman's ability to speak or not' and where she was in the garden (ST). More positively, HK thought 'the tension was ratcheted up' and 'a unified tone' was achieved throughout despite the interchange of authors. Also referred to by more than one were the 'memorable phrases' (MD) and imagery at work in the piece. As AH summarises, '[t]he subversion of language (buddleia is 'nasty', a wound is 'redcurrant') makes this tale feel quirky and original'.

Chives in Hot Water

	Meaning.	Coherence	Prose	Entertainment	Originality	Plot	Character
JE	3	2	3	5	2	3	2
MD	6	7	6	7	7	6	5
AH	8	9	6	7	7	8	8
HK	6	6	7	5	9	6	6
SH	7	7	2	1	1	4	1
ST	8	7	9	9	8	8	9

Average mark: 6

The second story viewed by all panellists, *Chives in Hot Water* drew some praise but was broadly criticised for reading 'slightly more like a competitive game than a story' (HK). It was the first time that much of the panel had seen the format offered by Game 1 and commentary of the story focused on the way this changed its nature: '"Devices" felt much more on the surface of Twisted vs Bamboo [Game 1 vs. Game 2] … the overall effect is to make the story less coherent and derail plot and character development' commented JE. 'A bit constrained by props… it feels like an exercise or set of tricks', thought MD; and AH added that 'the need to adhere to the "rules" provided for each section make the structure overly evident'.

However, there were things to like about the story: 'it did entertain' (MD); 'I most enjoyed the fast and furious feeling of this story – it felt breathless and that carried me along a little.' Tied into this pacing of the plot was a 'surprising level of coherence' (AH) that SH thought made the story 'pleasantly easy to follow, in terms of the basic cognitive aspects of reading a story - it was possible to envisage the world and follow the plot'. However, perhaps due to the device driven element of the game, SH found that a 'facetious lack of conviction … kind of rubbed off on me'. ST agreed that 'The characters did not feel real and there was no sense of structure'.

Author stories

Arpège on the Landing

	Meaning.	Coherence	Prose	Entertainment	Originality	Plot	Character

AH	9	9	9	9	9	9	9
HK	8	7	8	7	8	7	8

Average mark: 8

Arpège on the Landing the second author tale was reviewed by AH and HK. The distinctive game element in the story, as identified by both panellists, was the *in the style of a well-known author* challenge which came up twice in the game. AH found that the 'ever-changing style challenges the reader by tapping into their knowledge and experience of other texts' produced 'novel and entertaining results', injecting 'a layer of humour into a dark tale'; the challenges were interpreted ironically. HK, by comparison, was less convinced by the *style of…* element commenting that writing in the style of E.E Cummings 'was a step too far'. She did however find the story touching and satisfying in the way it 'turned a mystery into a domestic drama'.

Creative writing student stories

Genesis

	Meaning.	Coherence	Prose	Entertainment	Originality	Plot	Character
JE	5	6	6	6	5	6	5
MD	6	7	7	7	7	6	7

Average mark: 6

Genesis was positively received by both of its reviewers. JE and MD both described the story as fun. Despite the in-game challenges reportedly having 'a more obvious impact on the direction of the story' JE had the sense that the writers were 'rising to meet them'. It seems that the writers managed to perform their challenges in a way that improved the story with 'lots of different things in play quite quickly – the banter, the rhyming dialogue, the physical descriptions'. 'I thought this transparency might annoy me, but it didn't,' commented JE. In terms of its meaningfulness MD noted that it was 'not particularly a story of "ideas" although it does play with gender issues very nicely'.

Oats and Anthrax

	Meaning.	Coherence	Prose	Entertainment	Originality	Plot	Character
SH	2	5	2	1	1	2	1

ST	1	1	1	1	1	1	1

Overall mark: 1.5

As reflected by the marks, both panellists felt that this story was 'simply gratuitous play' (SH) initiated by an initial premise seen as implausible (ST): 'Why the character would put random powder in the flapjacks escapes me.'(SH) The more hackneyed imagery of the story, appreciated by the participants whilst playing perhaps for its *ad hoc* availability and familiarity as a shared language, is interpreted negatively by the panellists as 'defensive facetiousness' and 'a lack of conviction on the writers' part'. In such a romp-like narrative 'there is little sense of structure, character or development' (ST). In a similar way to *Chives in Hot Water* the readers react negatively to a sense of play when it becomes gratuitous.

You are melting

	Meaning.	Coherence	Prose	Entertainment	Originality	Plot	Character
SH	2	2	4	3	1	1	1
ST	8	8	7	7	7	6	6

Overall mark: 4.5

There was fairly significant disagreement on this narrative as reflected in the marking of the two panellists. SH dismissed the text as 'hard to follow. He suspected that 'the gothic violence' masked 'a lack of ideas'

ST however found more to enjoy in the 'three-parter'. Acknowledging a lack of plot and character development in the conventional sense, he described the writing as taking its cue more from 'surrealist or existential writing'.

'The hint of sexual politics in the middle (and final) section added depth and the poetic writing in the final section was effective - reminding me of the one-word sentence section in another story.' (ST)

What is interesting to the thesis within this commentary is that ST identifies parallels with 'the surrealist drawing game of the exquisite corpse, but where each section is fully visible.' This story perhaps contains that *drift* that Storyjacker seeks to challenge by encouraging a *conventional sense* of story. ST's working familiarity with experimental literature (see Background of Panellists) is perhaps a factor in his ability to deduce meaning from the piece by considering it as a part of the surrealist tradition.

Non-specialist creative writer stories

Nightmare in Subtopia

	Meaning.	Coherence	Prose	Entertainment	Originality	Plot	Character
JE	6	3	4	3	2	4	2
MD	7	7	7	7	7	6	6

Overall mark: 5

Nightmare in Subtopia starts well but 'doesn't (can't) resolve itself in such a short space of time' (JE). Whilst MD liked the '"It was a dark and stormy night...." kind of thing coupled with an idea which was immediately appealing and interesting - the "Subtopia"', JE thought the first paragraph jarred with the rest of the story which she described as 'SF [science fiction] vs. Crime/ Thriller'. The story ends mid-plot leading MD to wonder whether she was missing some text. Both reviewers comment that the story is really too short from both reader and writer perspectives: 'the story was not long enough to judge' commented MD, so it received lower marks. Thinking about the work from the point of view of the writers, JE commented that what is apparent 'is just how hard it is to develop both plot and character in such a short space of time, it's a real art'.

The inevitability of Joy

	Meaning.	Coherence	Prose	Entertainment	Originality	Plot	Character
JE	6	4	3	3	3	3	5
MD	7	7	6	7	7	7	7

Overall mark: 5

There were conflicting feelings around this piece. Both reviewers felt that it was repetitive. JE found frustrating the aspects of the story that were 'circular and repetitive, without the repetition being employed for stylistic effect'. MD agreed that 'there is repetition and some contradictory feelings about the character and the issue of violent relationships, specifically violence towards women'. However, both perceive some positive elements such as the 'writers' decision to introduce backstory which works well' and MD thinks that 'later edits might shape something strong and interesting' from a 'raw idea that is vivid'.

I wish I'd never met him

	Meaning.	Coherence	Prose	Entertainment	Originality	Plot	Character

SH	6	6	7	7	6	7	6
ST	5	4	5	6	6	5	2

Overall mark: 6

SH considered this to be the best of the stories that he had read describing it as 'clear, readable and engaging'. ST agreed that it had started 'promisingly with its minimal style'; the text is one of the few where players did not attempt to fill the word limit but offered short, economical submissions. However, ST is disappointed by finding out the protagonist is dead, a disappointment that extends the merits of the game-story method: 'one might have hoped that the game structure might mitigate against this lack of resolution, but here the story reproduces a common problem with structure in which killing the protagonist seems to be the only viable solution for a lack of better ideas.' Rather than improving the meaningfulness of the story, to ST the game simply replicates normal creative strategies and subsequent problems therein.

2 People Called Ross and Your Best Friend Finally Feel Safe…

	Meaning.	Coherence	Prose	Entertainment	Originality	Plot	Character
JE	5	4	7	5	3	-	-
MD	5	5	7	6	6	-	-

Overall mark: 5

There were structural problems with this story that seemed to stem from the fact that it was a fragment, apparently designed to begin a longer story: '[t]his story didn't really get anywhere in the extract provided - or so far, it hasn't (MD). And there were problems with continuity 'this story reads like three separate stories to me'. Rather than blaming the ingenuity of the writers JE thought it was the fault of the game mechanics, which were again disrupting rather than enhancing the story: 'the challenge devices are pulling the story in different directions rather than propelling the plot along'. Despite these problems both panellists seemed to enjoy the quality of the prose, with JE enjoying it most of all the stories she read: 'the prose and writing style is the best of all the stories I've assessed, which made each individual story enjoyable enough to read.' MD agreed, drawing out the 'the scene inside the trailer with the older man' for special attention describing it as 'especially well observed and detailed'. She explained that the lower marks given to this story were as a result of its length, because there was 'not enough in place yet to build coherence or a deeper meaning'.

How I LOST MY MIND

	Meaning.	Coherence	Prose	Entertainment	Originality	Plot	Character
AH	7	7	8	6	7	6	6

HK	7	6	7	7	8	6	7

Overall mark: 7

To AH the story *How I LOST MY MIND* 'manages to suggest a level of coherence despite the abrupt beginnings and endings of passages'. However, the constant breaking of the narrative by 'different contributor voices' eventually becomes a 'barrier to reader engagement'; in the end the reader can address 'only the surface of the story'. HK comments the 'jump to aliens was too quick' from the more self-reflective style of the first few paragraphs.

Bishop and Bomb

	Meaning.	Coherence	Prose	Entertainment	Originality	Plot	Character
AH	8	8	8	8	6	7	8
HK	6	4	6	7	6	8	7

Overall mark: 7

Both panellists seem to enjoy *Bishop and Bomb* – 'a gangland story of betrayal and just desserts' (AH) that is '[f]ast paced'. HK comments that the challenges are nicely dealt with and AH thinks that the 'narrative expands with the introduction of additional prompts such as changes in perspective' . However, she also complains that many of the suggested props aren't utilised – indicating that observing the writers' adherence to the rules was part of her enjoyment of the work.

Whilst AH finds that 'the loose ends are drawn together' in an 'impressive' ending, HK is confused by the loss of a character – '[w]hat happened to the girl in the pool of blood?'

Teddy Bears' Picnic

	Meaning.	Coherence	Prose	Entertainment	Originality	Plot	Character

AH	7	8	5	7	6	6	6
HK	6	6	6	7	6	7	6

Overall mark: 6

AH notes that '[f]laws in syntax and punctuation make this less accessible to the reader, but the core storyline is well maintained and interesting'. Thematically it contains 'echoes of traditional fairy tales, horror films and dreamscapes'. HK does not comment on problems with prose but concurs that the authors have created a 'strong plot with some nice eerie touches'.

Ben, James and Alma

	Meaning.	Coherence	Prose	Entertainment	Originality	Plot	Character
SH	2	1	1	1	3	3	1
ST	7	4	6	7	6	6	6

Overall mark: 4

SH found little to engage him as a reader in this piece and gave up without finishing. In contrast, ST found it 'an unusual and quite entertaining piece.' As with other Game 1 works 'the nature of the game challenges structural coherence' however in this case the prompts seemed to enhance many aspects of the work. The use of rhyme suggested by the game 'gave the piece the feel of a surrealist play, and the one-word sentence prompt led to the strongest piece of writing in the whole piece for me'. A problem with prop repetition (generated randomly by the game) gave the appearance of something or someone having 'preoccupations with death and old people' although this was actually arbitrary.

However, the theme of death 'led to a really unpleasant composition…' in a particular section 'depicting extreme misogyny'. ST acknowledged that perhaps 'the game format - and its anonymity - allows writers to release this kind of material' but as in a workshop setting he 'might also discourage them from taking responsibility for it'. ST's comments raise pedagogic issues surrounding how to deal with problematic material produced when the game encourages glibness capable of extending to depictions of violence and other unsavoury fictional scenarios.

Chapter 5: *Conclusion*

Do digital games help small groups write meaningful stories together?

1. Gameplay and meaningful stories

1.1. Storyjacker games did help to create quite meaningful stories. However, specific game features conflicted with story-telling.

Storyjacker's collaborative digital writing games produced relatively meaningful stories, with consistent thematic elements surfacing within the narrative. During the game, the thematic and tonal qualities of each story were typically set by the output of the first writer. Then other writers would interpret a requirement to continue the thematic and tonal qualities set by the previous writer or writers (as observed by David Whitehouse on page 63). This supports literature that suggests that as a type of narrative, stories have very strict structural rules that readers intuitively recognise (Brewer and Lichtenstein 1982) which are further constricted by genre. Therefore, once a starting point has been created, the participants who read the completed segment of the story recognise these narrative rules and use them as a guide. As previous practice-based research into story-writing games has found, the unfinished narrative also creates a desire to finalise the structure that has been begun (Wallis 2007). The Storyjacker games were able to facilitate and encourage these behaviours, both by instigating the task of writing a story and by providing cues and challenges to enhance engagement with this task.

The main exceptions to Storyjacker games promoting meaningful story-writing were in circumstances where the automated or player-elected challenges were so obstructive to this inherent challenge, that the writers were distracted by the overarching task of story-writing because the game challenge was too demanding. In these instances, the games have been observed both by the reading panel and the players to inhibit meaningfulness. (For examples, see pages 62 and 73).

1.2. Out of the two games, Game 2 produced more meaningful stories.

There was little difference in terms of meaningfulness between one iteration of a particular game and the next (see Figure 5.3). The groupings show some consistent differences across all tests and groups. Published authors are unsurprisingly better at meeting the challenges of a story writing game than the other two groups. The predominance of NSCW groups compared to CWS groups might at first seem surprising until we consider that the NSCW group contained a larger sample of stories and broader section of participants with a wide variety of writing backgrounds (see Figure 5.1). In CWS, outliers such as the poorly marked contribution from G2V2 had a more significant effect on the group's overall scores due to the relatively small story sample size from the group.

By game and version

	Any	G1	G1V2	G1V3	G2	G2V1	G2V2	G2V3	V4
All	**5.8** *(14)*	**5.5** *(5)*	5.2 *(3)*	6 *(2)*	**6** *(9)*	6.5 *(2)*	1.5 *(1)*	6.8 *(2)*	6.2 *(4)*
CWS	**4.5** *(4)*	**5.5** *(2)*	5.5 *(2)*	-	**3.5** *(2)*	-	1.5 *(1)*	-	6.1 *(1)*
NSCW	**6.1** *(8)*	**5.5** *(3)*	4.5 *(1)*	6 *(2)*	**6.4** *(5)*	6.5 *(2)*	-	6.8 *(2)*	5.6 *(1)*
Published Authors	**7.5** *(2)*	-	-	-	**7.5** *(2)*	-	-	-	7.5 *(2)*

(left axis: score / group / Participant (no. of stories))

F*ig. 5.1 - average meaningfulness mark matrix by variant*

However, both the marking and the comments from panellists seemed to conclude that Game 2 produced and presented better stories than Game 1, in terms their meaningfulness and also more generally (see also Figure 5.2).

By game and version

	Any	G1	V2	V3	G2	V1	V2	V3	V4
All	5.5	**4.8**	4.6	5.3	**5.8**	6.3	3	5.8	6.4
CWS	5.2	**5.6**	5.6	-	**4.8**	-	3	-	6.5
NSCW	5.3	**4.3**	2.5	5.3	**6.1**	6.3	-	5.8	5
Published Authors	6.8	-	-	-	**6.8**	-	-	-	6.8

(left axis: By participant group)

Fig. 5.2 - average overall mark matrix by variants

1.3. The narrative of gameplay permeates the story narrative produced by the game. This additional gameplay narrative complicates and obscures story meaning.
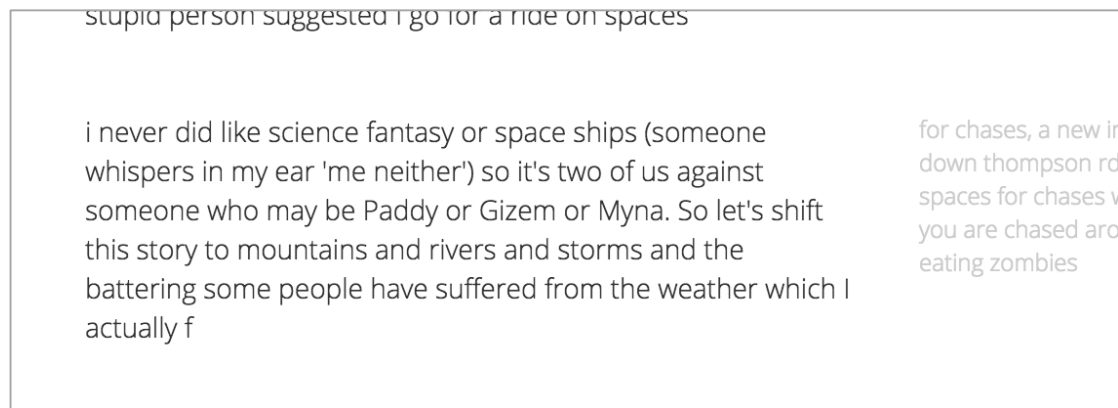
stupid person suggested i go for a ride on spaces

i never did like science fantasy or space ships (someone whispers in my ear 'me neither') so it's two of us against someone who may be Paddy or Gizem or Myna. So let's shift this story to mountains and rivers and storms and the battering some people have suffered from the weather which I actually f

for chases, a new i
down thompson ro
spaces for chases v
you are chased aro
eating zombies

Figure 5.3 – an example of both self-conscious prose and typographic errors

The research into meaningfulness, required a clear definition of the term *meaningful* to be used throughout. The literature provided this: a story was more or less meaningful depending on how successful it was at progressing a particular worldview or set of ideas. However, the findings from reader and writer feedback showed that there was a meaningfulness that was particular to game stories. These texts contained two overlapping narratives: a fiction story and the record of a game that was played whilst writing the story. This seemed to be why both writers and readers of Storyjacker games considered the texts to be different to those created by a normal story-writing process. For example, when the prospect of redrafting surfaced, individuals from both groups wondered whether to edit the piece would somehow diminish it in a way that they could not easily explain (for example, MD in Chapter 4). In Chapter 3.1, David Varela's analysis of the texts written for *The Live Writing Series* (LWS) gave a clue as to why, by describing LWS texts as *transcripts* of the writing events (page 35). In fact, three distinct elements characterised this narrative in game-based stories:

- Evidence of a performance. Part of what obstructs the game text's transition to becoming a draft of a story is the residue left by its own performance: that self-conscious element (Norwood 2010) that tells of its live origins. In Storyjacker games, this narrative element tended to describe the awkward performance of writing as gameplay. It can be witnessed in the overlapping of story events with the events involved in constructing the story (*someone whispers in my ear* in Figure 5.3 is an actual event during play). This is a relatively exclusive reference, which primarily targets its current audience: the other players. It relates to the passing narrative of the game, the experience of fun and shared humour of the players. Traditionally, fiction readers as an audience are separated from the writer by industrial process, fixing them as other, an external target for the readerly text (Barthes 1990). This is not the case in Storyjacker games. Writers are proximate to each other, usually physically (i.e. in workshops) although sometimes by time (i.e. in the Summer Games). In the former case, readers often read what is being written prior to publication, and what has been written after publication. They are by turn then its writers. Due to this ambivalence, they are not writers or readers but *writer/reader*s.

- <u>Evidence of the game.</u> Whilst this switching between roles occurs, no doubt, within any writing process, i.e. *I write for a moment and then read back what I have written*, the Storyjacker multiplayer game externalises and draws apart the normal read-write processes of composition as a series of marked events structured as play: separate moves by opposing players. This is denoted most obviously by challenge-text markers (Figure 5.4) that describe the type of play and players involved in producing the specific episode. The narrative of play that these text elements inform, in turn affects the story text. The *challenge to Mez Breeze* message in Figure 5.4 not only tells me about the event, it also provides a cipher to decode the story text that follows.

  As well as positioning the writer in the text, therefore allowing easier access to a writerly appreciation of the text (Barthes 1990), these records of the game also elicit in the reader a sense of debate and divergence more typical to games and their post-mortems, such as in Aycock's observations about tournament chess (1983). In the Game 2 evidence of story segments rejected in the game sometimes led to comments about preferred alternative plotlines (e.g. by ST).

- <u>Evidence of single-phase development</u>. The use of rules to construct a temporary creative practice left writers free to treat the work as bounded within the game: when the game finished the text was finished. During the tests only one cohort developed the stories further than the game, and this was as part of a compulsory course-based exercise. As far as was reported, all other contributors treated the stories produced as final pieces. There is also no interface in Storyjacker that allows writers to edit the work after submission. This means that games often feature typographic errors (e.g. the unfinished word 'f' in Figure 5.3). By the same degree, it offers unedited access to the first drafts of experienced and novice writers alike; something that both authors and panellists thought to be meaningful for creative writing students (JA and AH).

Arpège on the Landing.

I didn't even know I was supposed to be waiting for her. But as soon as I heard that distinctive knock at the door, I knew. It had been years.
'I'll be two ticks,'
And she'd left n̶o̶t̶   mell of her
perfume on the d̶   s back.

> Mez Breeze was challenged to continue in the style of a well-known author. Sign off as them, e.g. - G. Greene

snapshot(broke)
crawling(and cawing)
all sight & silent sound
here now
not then;those last fragment shots
of loss and crunched up hope
you loved the scent of my (wet)hair
and now
you (re)turn to dryness
-E.E. Cummings

In the nothing town of his childhood, he'd made his own scent, mixing daffodils with lime juice and rage. It's called 'Instincts', he'd told his friends, but they heard it as 'It Stinks'. It'd rotted the pits of his shirt. She smelled like money, but not the kind he had. Not coppers. (Lorrie Moore)

The meaningfulness of any story text is potentially expanded or changed by including the description of its creation: new meanings are found by a framing of the text with surrounding texts or *paratexts*, as well explained by Steven Jones in *The Meaning of Video Games* (2008:7-8). What makes these game-based story texts different, however, is the permeation of the game narrative *paratext* within the story text itself.

In response to this hybrid text, reading panellists traversed the work both as story readers, apportioning criticism with regards to how entertaining a story was, and as writers-as-readers who could understand the other potential meanings of the work (AH and SH most explicitly state these positions). Evidence of this traversal could be found in the use of contextual phrases such as 'as a reader, I think…' or 'as someone who is interested in story writing…' (page 73). This traversal typically indexed closely to the reception of the text: from a critical and more negative reception as a story reader to enthusiastic and positive as a writer-as-reader. It followed that the two panellists who most frequently stated their position as story reader or writer-as-reader were most negative and most positive respectively in their marking tendencies. Roland Barthes notions of the writerly typology of reading suggests that practice-based evaluation offers the most expansive appreciation of writing and that as a reader, one's appreciation is more absolute (i.e. I like it or I don't: 'a referendum' (1990:4)). The reactions of readers to the Storyjacker texts explicitly *via personae* seem to support this dialectic.

2. Gameplay and collaborative story-writing

Storyjacker helped people collaborate on story-writing tasks. Feedback about how much fun players had was consistently high across all groups and over the course of the testing certain conclusions could be drawn about the elements that made the games entertaining.

2.1 Plotlines motivated people with a joint sense of purpose.

As alluded to in the first section of this conclusion, plot-based writing made writers feel that they were working on challenges individually but also creating a story together (for example, page 59).The idea of a developing story provided a joint sense of purpose that redrafting-based gameplay did not seem to. This conclusion is based partly on the success of games that simply progressed the storyline in line with game progression, and partly on the failure of early redraft-based games. Stories that redraft rather than continue the last storywriter's creative input, do not compel writers to write with a common goal in mind. In the case of the paper-based redrafting game I trialled, the lack of a plot or other narrative schema to guide writing led to complaints about the pointlessness of the game (Appendix 9). Writers in the redrafting test exhibited anti-collaborative behaviours, such as not reading the previous work before writing their own piece. This was not as apparent in the tests with plot-structured games.

Further investigation is required to properly consider options around game-based redrafting tools. However, it seems that the normal preference of writers playing these games in groups is to write a story rather than to perfect one.

2.2. Storyjacker games allowed people to collaborate without being vulnerable or intimate with other players. Humour and playful inclusivity enabled this.

Humour was often present in both the stories that participants wrote in the form of jokes and farcical plot structures, and evident in their reporting of their own approach (for example, the working test group in Appendix 9). Participants saw this as a way of limiting their exposure to being judged. As in other creativity studies (Cade 1982, Holmes 2007), humour did not seem to distract from the task. Instead it fostered an easy relationship between players and allowed the groups to enjoy what they were doing together. Whilst team members with less experience or reported confidence in writing creatively tended to encourage this behaviour, the approach was noticeably absent from the author stories, where on the occasion that an in-joke was offered as an option it was rejected because of its lack of suitability to the plot.

On two reported occasions, humorous narrative strategies by players produced inappropriate stories, involving derogatory depictions of groups such as the elderly. What is a glib, sarcastic strategy for comedy in a relatively quick-fire game such as Game 2, where surprising and outrageous plot twists thrive, does not always translate well for story-readers. Readers are used to considered texts published only after authors have had the opportunity to consider their jokes and any offense they might cause. There was no clear relationship between humour and the marks of the panellists (there is some well-judged humour in all of the highest marked stories). However, texts they reported as displaying an unsavoury humour were marked punitively, with low scores in all categories.

When people played Game 2, there was a complementary strategy to humour that also helped to navigate collaborative vulnerabilities: the player whose go it was to choose would pick the player who had been overlooked one or more times before, even if they were not the best option. This was reported in a number of different tests and highlighted by authors in Chapter 3.3 and Appendix 12. The use of Bateson's concept of *metacommunication* goes some way to explain this phenomenon. Metacommunication in play denotes a sense of distance from any serious function to demonstrate that *this is play,* in order to mitigate threat (2006:318). A non-game collaboration might demand only the best option regardless of collaborator and every choice made by the players would be a negative assessment of the loser's writing ability. Instead players opted to foster a low-threat collaboration through their gestures of playfulness. The distanced attitude denoted by laughter could also be characterised as a way to communicate a sense of play, in the way that Bateson describes.

2.3. The games required researcher facilitation and oversight to work effectively as collaboration tools.

In tests, the Storyjacker games only worked well with relatively high levels of support provided by players and by a facilitator. In all facilitated classroom environments across both CWS and NSCW cohorts, participants worked happily in groups. Players preferred this supportive environment: when offered a choice for a follow-up session, participants expressed a preference for class- rather than web-based activities (Appendix 10). Facilitation was a similar factor in the successful online-based Summer Games played by authors. Groups were well supported with a call to each of the six authors prior to the event and interim communications by email and over the phone is some cases. In one case, these participants were playing in time zones twelve hours apart so my scheduling support was critical to the collaboration's success. Facilitated successes were in contrast to the two early attempts to develop an online test group which proved time consuming and fruitless. The approach: to develop a small, remote group of creative writing students from various HEIs who would test the game development were out of step with the testing stage according to recent playtesting manuals (Fullerton 2014; Gibson 2014) and ultimately supported the findings from studies that show that collaboration cannot occur where there is not the opportunity to establish a shared language and aims, to foster trust in an open and committed process (Storey 2004). In addition, trends of participation online show that it is always a minority that participate actively in creative activities online (Nielsen 2006; Goodier 2012), so that large numbers are required in order to guarantee enough self-motivated participation.

3. Game design features of Storyjacker

Particular elements within the games seemed to affect both collaboration and story quality. In some cases, the effect was complementary: better collaboration was related to better story production. In other cases, the motivation to work together and have fun as a group detracted from the quality of the story that was produced.

3.1. Aligning story progression with gameplay motivated players. However, this led to the lack of a redrafting process which ultimately limited story quality.

Lack of coherence was generally reported as being due to unresolved or forgotten fragments of story that accumulated through game stories. Characters, plot events and other details remained unresolved sometimes to the annoyance of readers (HK and SH in Chapter 4). The sensitivity of readers supports psychological studies that suggest that we interpret stories as a specific type of sub narrative form, by intuitively observing their successful execution of certain types of event structure (Brewer and Lichtenstein 1982). Those that failed to resolve the reader's sense of curiosity were considered less of a story and less entertaining. For example, when a mysterious element such as the dead dog in *Neighbourhood Watch* (see page 63) is added to a narrative its significance grows through the narrative, conforming to a curiosity event structure in which any pertinent mystery is eventually explained. When it is not well explained the structure fails and the reader considers this a failure in the story. That the stories produced by the games did not conform consistently enough to normal story

structures was often due to a lack of a redrafting facility, according to expert writers in the published authors group.

If normal writing games do not allow writers to draft, it might explain the problem with writing games (at least, as manifested in Storyjacker) as tools for creating meaningful stories. Drafting has been identified by both members of the critical panel and the published author group as the central sense-making element of story writing that transforms the story from a series of ideas and inventions. It allows writers to identify themes and tidy up mistakes in story-narrative coherence that occur, even with highly practiced and well-skilled writers. In fact, these apparent mistakes were only considered mistakes *per se* by the reading panel.

3.2 Power to choose winners and losers in Game 2 motivated players and created plot-driven stories.

Game 2's central choice dynamic was considered to be fun and compelling element of the game by all test writing groups. Other competitive features had been disliked in early paper tests: the threat of negative feedback was thought to be prohibitive to the creative process. However, this method of winning or losing reportedly encouraged players to be more creative.

Both writers and readers noticed effects of this feature on the meaning and quality of stories produced by Game 2. One effect was that it encouraged players to develop plot rather than dense description. This was thought to be due to the need for participants to write contributions with dramatic potential that would entice the next player to pick them. Another effect, as described above, was that players sometimes picked the least picked participant rather than the best option. Here the social requirement of play compromises the ability of the writer to produce the best story. A final effect of this element on players and readers was that having both options available on the same page, reportedly, distorted memories of the plot. Often players and readers would become confused with what had and what had not happened. This sometimes led to accidental or deliberate blending of plotlines as noted in the author group, reducing the coherence of the piece as a story.

3.3. Prompts and props motivated players with short writing tasks but sometimes distracted them from the core task of creating a meaningful story.

Most writers responded well to prompts and props, enjoying the *polysemic* meaning generation aspect of quasi-random words and phrases. Although experienced writers – both academic and creative – often expressed frustration at being told what to do by the game, later during play many admitted that the elements did add to a more enjoyable and interesting experience. Nevertheless, as mentioned in 5.1, these auto-generated elements sometimes distracted even experienced writers from the task of meaningful story writing, rather than inspiring them. This is the clearest example of a game element making the process of writing more enjoyable but less meaningful and coherent.

In Game 1, the notion of player-generated prompts (or challenges) persevered through all iterations of testing without complaint and with positive comments from early groups. By contrast, prompts were auto-generated in Game 2 to keep the gameplay focused on the popular decision-making at the heart of that game.

3.4. Short time limits did not motivate players or produce meaningful stories. Time lag between goes remains an unsolved issue.

Time limits were jettisoned after initial tests found they promoted a rushed approach to the story writing process, which made the stories written less meaningful. This approach seemed justified until later in the process of testing when comments about the waiting time involved in playing Game 2 started to suggest the need for a time limit. As this commentary developed into a more pronounced body of requests after the final iteration of Storyjacker had been released, this research has not found a viable solution. It remains a problem: time limits can positively effect waiting times. However, as was seen both in the paper tests and in the review of Jason Rohrer's *Sleep is Death* (Rohrer 2011) it seriously limits the coherence of storywriters. Also it is difficult to imagine a suitable time limit: in Rohrer's work, writers had thirty seconds to write and this was still perceived as lag by the off-turn player (Appendix 2). And authors such as David Whitehouse who were vocal about time lag, agreed that time limits could take enjoyment out of the process of story writing that he enjoyed in the game. This remains an area for experimentation, although alternative methods of managing asynchronous play such as play by email, championed by game design theorist Ian Bogost (2004) might be effective at dealing with this issue.

Further research

During the research, a number of game dynamics have been tested that might help to motivate story-writers and others work together in a more integrated fashion. Out of all of these methods the use of choice, well-documented in this summary seems particularly effective. Supporting evidence for the efficacy of comparison as a way to make decisions about quality intuitively can be found in Pollitt (2010). He has shown that comparison is a more reliable summative method for marking English papers, which suggests that other contexts might benefit from this design feature. Therefore, a question for further research following this study is:

> *In what other highly aesthetic and subjective contexts can the role of choice in games or game-like interfaces provide compelling and useful interactivity?*

Work has started on a new platform for Storyjacker.net called Versus which offers readers and writers a place to compare the qualities of the short stories they write against the stories of others. I have also used the concept of text comparison in an application idea that has recently received funding from Innovate UK (previously the Technology Strategy Board), a UK governmental agency, to be developed in partnership with fiction publishers as a story comparison/book discovery tool called DipIn (Appleby 2014).

During the final stages of the Storyjacker project it has become apparent how important the redrafting process is to the creation of a meaningful story even for highly experienced authors. It has also become apparent through the feedback of panellists that this tidying up of loose ends is critical to a story-reader's appreciation of a text. Therefore, another question for further research is:

> *Is it possible for games or game-like processes to incorporate drafting processes into collaborative story-writing games to improve their output?*

During the early stages of the Storyjacker project, I produced a prototype platform called Crowdscript (see Appendix 13) that used an accumulative rather than linear approach to story writing. Early testing ran into problems around writer behaviours regarding drafting in a group. More design research around game mechanics that encourage effective drafting in groups could solve this.

Finally, the research has proven that games can offer groups from various backgrounds effective ways to co-create on small projects. The ease with which all groups have been able to use the games to write stories suggests that there are other opportunities to encourage the learning of both collaborative and writing skills through games. Therefore, a final question that further research could attempt to answer is:

> *What are the wider audiences for game-based collaborative software in educational, creative and organisational contexts?*

During the tests I met with a number of individuals working variously with after school clubs, in dyslexia support classes, as well as teachers working in schools, and there was a general

consensus that Storyjacker would be an effective tool to use in these contexts (Appendix 14). Whilst this research has sought to define and contextualise the benefits of using an approach like Storyjacker in HE creative writing and literary environments, further research could be done to find out how such a platform could be applied in schools and wider educational settings.

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Appendices

Appendix 01 - Excerpt from interview with Jason Rohrer, 13th June 2012

Can we start by outlining the methodology you use when creating art games – artistic and technical, with specific reference to *Sleep is Death*.

With art games in general the idea was really about coming up with something that I wanted to explore that couldn't be put into words, because if it could be put into words I would just go ahead and write it or say it. Something that seemed like it could be expressed well through interactive game mechanics directly and then crafting mechanics that would express what I was trying to express through the systems I was building.

…

With *Sleep is Death* it was more like, what one of my friends described as, a judo-like move on the whole interactive storytelling debate. It's been going on for thirty years and people have been talking about how 'someday we're going to have these stories you sit down at. They're as well told as a story but completely interactive and you get to make your own choices!' and so on. And 'Wouldn't this be amazing. We're going to have these artificial intelligent characters that respond to you in realistic ways, and they can fall in love with you, or laugh at you, or hate you, or want to marry you.'

The Hamlet on the Holodeck fantasy?

Yeah, the Hamlet on the Holodeck fantasy, the Storytron fantasy from Chris Crawford. Every game designer I know has a sort of back burner or pet project, they haven't really worked on but they're dreaming of some way of cracking this, the Holy Grail. So many people seem to be waiting for this to happen before we can really make meaningful interactive works, about real characters.

I suppose the other realisation is about conversation. If I go out to make an art game or any other game I pick a topic, something in my life or my world that is meaningful to me and that I want to make work about. And I filter things out based on which things are potentially interactive. *Passage*, my game which is about the passage of life, involves the death of a loved one that occurs in the game, but it's not just a game about the death of a loved one, because hopefully for most people that's not an interactive experience! So if you're making a piece of work about a subject matter that's fundamentally not interactive, where there are no choices to make, in real life, then you're going to be struggling, because you're going to want these thing to happen that players have no control over, and you're going to be wrestling control away from the player. You're going to be fighting with the inherent interactive nature of the game. So in *Passage* it's about the choices that you make in life and the choices that you make along the way, and one of those choices is even whether to acquire the loved one in the first place. In which case, if you don't acquire her you won't experience the death of a loved one. And so it involves the death of a loved one but that's just one non-interactive moment in the game. It's not what the game's about…

And so if you think about interactivity and all the things that are interactive in our life, I came to the realisation that the very most interactive things in our lives are other people. There's nothing more interactive. And the primary interactive experience that we have is conversation, right? It's an extremely interactive thing. Yet here we are in this interactive medium where the primary strength is that we can interact and we're sort of cut off from the most interactive thing that we ever would want

to express things about and explore. … So this is extremely tragic and extremely frustrating and as a game designer I would keep thinking of all these things in my life that I wanted to express and explore with interactive works and when I would be working on my next game design and thinking of what I wanted to do, I'd constantly be thinking 'Oh, I want to make a game about those bullies that I knew in school and those cliques at my grade school, and the cool kids versus the not cool kids and who was allowed to sit at whose lunch table and name calling… but that would involve a lot of dialogue and how would I do that? Just script all this dialogue in there? Hard code it? *I want to do it justice and the nuances in their speech and everything. I can't just have it be generated dialogue because dialogue is everything in that situation.* Ah, I just can't do that game! So I just pushed it aside. Another situation with my wife when she was sick and I had to go to hospital, or whatever… Again, push that aside.

So I just had to keep pushing those ideas aside because I didn't just want to be like a Chris Crawford who launches off on a windmill quest. Even the *Façade* guys took five years making that, so I'm not going to spend five years making my next game and launching off on this probably impossible task even though I'm tempted to do it. But it still seemed so frustrating that all of this interactive stuff was off limits. So I was thinking about *Façade*, and Chris Crawford and this Holy Grail problem and how so many people seemed to be waiting for us to solve that problem before we can finally make great interactive, meaningful works that mean something to everyday people. That we're still twenty years away from AI that allows us to make works that allows us to express things about the human condition. And not being able to make those games. It seemed so silly. I was like, 'is this it? Are we just up against this wall? Is there no way around it?' Then I poked my finger in something that looked like a soft spot and my finger went all the way through – 'why do we want this to be a single player game?' Is that a requirement? That's sort of like part of the definition of the problem and it's what's boxing us in. When we sit down at the computer, we want to pop in a disc and we want all those interactive characters to be on that disc and ready to go. Full emotions of people who love us and hate us – it'll be there right on that disc. That's what we want.

…

And as I started to think about it deeper, it's part of our fantasy of having these robotic friends and things from sci-fi movies and the quest for robotic companions and modern hyper-realistic sex dolls and Stepford Wives and the mechanical Turk. The idea of this artificial person, somehow we really want that, and I think the game design community has been caught up with that quest. You know, if we do it inside a computer game we don't have to worry about gears and motors! So, once I pulled away from that and realised, *why is that necessary?* Because, if we really want to solve that problem and have these kinds of experiences, the virtual, computer-created characters aren't really a part of it. It's a separate issue, a separate fantasy. And if we want to have interactive stories where characters just react to you and so on, that's easy, we can do that right now! We don't have to wait twenty years! Just stick another person on the other end and it will work. And *Sleep is Death* does work. Of course everyone who's been working on this for thirty years sees it as a non-solution.

…

Full interview can currently be found at http://playablestories.org.uk/part-1-of-my-interview-with-jason-rohrer

Appendix 02 – Player account of *Sleep is Death* from the author's *Ghost* Drivers

blog: 'FRIDAY, MARCH 2, 2012: Playing my neighbour's neighbour'

…

I decide to ask my neighbour to help me out. He's not at all sure what he's in for but he's willing to try it out. I've decided to play a storyline that I've seen Rohrer play in one of his game previews with a reviewer: it's set in a time of water shortage. The player must go out and beg for water from his next-door neighbours. The assets are all preloaded so it's an easy one to prepare. I spend a bit of time practising pulling up scenes and characters quickly. I learn how to exchange one instance of a character in a scene for another - from Jon standing to Jon carrying a water bottle. I figure out how to release my cursor from the speech bubble after a few 30 second bouts of exasperation, and have a medium level of proficiency or at least confidence by the time my neighbour comes around.

We play. Straight away I am aware that things aren't going exactly to plan. He's reacting to things I throw at him differently to the way I had anticipated. Rather than building tension when I open the door to dramatic possibility, he seems to tend towards reconciliation. When the little girl suggests that he go out and get water he points out there is some left. When I goad him to action he ignores it or finds a different way to act to the way I want him to. Rather than give the story a new dimension as fans of interactive fiction might suggest, this all rather slows it down. I choose a dramatic tactic - the little girl disappears from the room. He finds the little girl in the corridor but instead of going out when she asks him, he asks her to show him where to go. Fine. But again this slows down the dynamic of the story - and makes it harder for me to control. Obviously these are all valid player choices. The

problem lies on my side - how do I create narratives that are compelling and persuasive enough to convince the character along a path? So that they experience agency but not at the expense of dramatic suspense?

Finally he makes it to the next-door neighbours. They're an old couple and they have water left but aren't willing to share it, because they're down to their last. Things start to go better or at least more dramatically, I manage to get the old man to pull a gun and tell the protagonist to get packing:

(Smith and Wesson, I know. I was under pressure.)

Then the server connection goes down and the game is lost. We restart it where we finished, but some of the coherence and building impetus is lost with the connection. I struggle to keep the story coherent as the characters pass from scene to scene. Each new scene requires current characters to be re-placed in the scene again. The main character on a couple of occasions lost important items he was meant to be carrying - water, his daughter - and these errors became part of the narrative ('where's my daughter gone?'). In the end we finish the story without a meaningful resolution.

My neighbour made an interesting point after about the speed of the game saying that the intervals when I was taking a turn seemed to take forever, because he had nothing to do. I had noticed a similar thing. Yet when you're trying to make your next move it doesn't seem like enough time. Perhaps this acute perception of time has to do with our expectations of the a digital medium. But it might just as easily be to do with our expectations of the narrative form itself. From cinema to literature, narrative smoothly rolls out and pace is a finally nuanced component of narrative art. The arbitrary 30-second cycles are a hindrance to this.

A blog account of play from http://ghostdrivers.tumblr.com/

Appendix 03 – Abridged David Varela interview about the Live Writing Series (LWS), 29 October 2014

Why did you decide to run the LWS series?

It stemmed back to a previous project I did which was called 100 Hours of Solitude (100 Hours), which wasn't intended to be a prototype for this but I was raising money for the Arvon charity. I teach for them and they were starting a series of new courses centred on digital technologies for the first time… I happened to be around when they were talking about raising awareness and potentially raise money for these courses. This involved me writing for an extended period in return for donations and that developed into 100 Hours which was me writing for one hundred hours straight in total isolation in the Ted Hughes Writing Centre in North Yorkshire, one of Arvon's writing centres, just before Christmas when the whole place was deserted. And we streamed everything online, an online video of me working and also the text appearing keystroke-by-keystroke on the website, which was developed *pro bono* by Riccardo Cambiassi and Alex Heaton. So they built the platform for the charity event and it went quite well. It didn't just raise money but it got a fair amount of positive feedback and interest from people like the Literary Platform and it got a certain amount of praise as a literary performance. And Gemma was one of the people who noticed it and suggested that it could work as a more public type of performance. Gemma works part time at the Arts Council and had one eye on the fact that it was the kind of thing that the Arts Council had been trying to find and fund as a way of expanding the audience for literature. So she was quite keen to take on the organisational role and provided advice to apply for funding. So it came out of the *100 Hours* experience. It was a fascinating kind of stretch for me, but I found it polarised writers: some people thought it sounded like a fantastic thing to do, other writers thought it sounded like their idea of hell. And I wanted to explore that, to actually teach people and train other writers to flex those muscles and find out what it's like to write for performance and to improvise, partly just to expand this platform to more people, this idea of writing for performance and sort of a new type of performance art, and also to get other writers involved and to create great things that I would not be able to do on my own.

It's interesting this idea of writing as performance. With Storyjacker I've done some live writing with authors, partly I think inspired by the Live Writing Series. I wondered what you think are performance writing's qualities. First as a writer and then as a reader.

I think it varies slightly depending on what part of the audience you're in: whether you are live in the room with the writer, or watching online. I was actually talking about this last week. I was talking about how a lot of the power comes from its immediacy: the sense that you are watching somebody who is demonstrating a certain amount of speed and skill, and the fact that you can watch the process happening. I was giving a talk a couple of weeks ago where the conference organisers had a sketch artist at the side of the room sketching out a kind of visual impression of each talk as it was going on and it was creating this mural during the course of the event. I found that fascinating, watching that happening. And it wasn't just the finished mural that was the impressive part, it was watching that process of assimilation happening in real time and that I think is the power of this live writing as performance. You watch somebody taking a cue from the audience so you know that it's absolutely improvised, an act of live creation, it's a kind of fascination in the skill, in the process. So that's one thing. Some of the feedback from the 100 Hours experience was that people who were watching

online enjoyed the sense of it being like a magic book that was writing itself, just looking at the text on screen, being able to see it unfolding was magic especially when it was a story being told about them or a story that was being hewed by some kind of improvisational start they may have provided.

…

I noticed there was a transformation in the live writing piece which you pulled out [and edited]. There had been a process between what you'd written in the live event and then you had gone back in and then edited that and turned that into a, if you like, *finished piece* and I thought that was an interesting sense of separation. … Could you talk a little bit about what you did with that and how those two texts are different?

Yeah, I think the great positive and negative of writing under pressure like that is that you have the sense of a time limit. You are trying to get something out quickly and not necessarily for a final polished thing, which is liberating for a lot of writers and I'd include myself in that because I can sometimes get stuck in the whirlpool of self-analysis where you're just fixating over individual words. And it's actually limits your flow, limits your productivity and process. The great thing about writing live is that you kind of have this compulsive force pushing you forward whether you like it or not and it does force you to do automatic writing and forces you to keep making decisions, keeping you moving forward. It's only after the event, maybe long after the event that you might go back and go *Yeah, there's a kernel of an idea there…* or *Oh my god, I can believe I chose that word! What a terrible mistake!* And with the benefit of hindsight you can go in and fix things.

Also, I'm habitually quite a planner when it comes to writing of stories. I like to have, at least, my beginning, middle and end in mind before I put pen to paper on first draft. So, very often when I was writing this way, which minimises or wipes out planning all together, very often I'd get to the end and go *Oh what I really wanted to do was go back and alter the beginning so that there are stronger thematic echoes*, just tidy it up and make it more coherent. And often that requires going back and doing some revisions at the beginning. I didn't really do that kind of revision during the course of the live performance because with an audience watching they tended to want to know just what happened at the end. They weren't so concerned about the elegance or the perfection of the craft, which is more something that I would notice… more something you're concerned about. So generally when I got to the end of the piece and it got the laugh that I was waiting for or whatever then I would move onto the next thing. Rather than spending ten minutes going back and labouring over something, the phrasing of the opening sentence, because that's not going to be entertaining for anybody.

One thing that comes out of that is, if you're a planning sort of writer, is there a perverse pleasure…? what kind of pleasure is it and what did you learn as a writer with 100 Hours and the Live Writing Series?

There is a kind of liberating sense, a sort of lack of responsibility. You are throwing yourself into the unknown, kind of co-creating with other people, working with other people and expectations are relatively low. Nobody's expecting you to come up with a big piece of genius every time. And that can be quite fun. You can do things that are quite silly and for somebody who can be quite a planner there is a sense of exercising the other side of your brain allowing the impulses that aren't normally allowed to flourish to do stuff to see if it works. If it doesn't, it doesn't really matter that much because in ten

minutes you're going to be working on something else. So perhaps I enjoyed it because it was deliberately opposed to my normal working practice. But there were other writers on the series who really didn't feel that way, who were habitual planners and were very careful and stuck to that. And created beautiful work at a much more measured pace with less of a sense of obligation to entertain. Maybe the difference was my sense of obligation to entertain or my eagerness to please. Maybe that's it.

It sounds like you had quite a large audience as well, the kind of physicality of that…

Yes, I think that was a factor that affected it; it was a force of different strength at different events for different writers. So for me in the National Portrait Gallery there were thousands of people very close up, literally jostling the desk where I was writing and I was pretty face to face with a very large projection screen on the wall showing what I was writing so it was very immediate and the feedback was very in my face. And there was a real sense of a crowd focusing their attention on me and wanting to be entertained. Whereas, someone like Joe Dunthorne who was in the Jewish museum on the top floor was relatively undisturbed. It was a fairly quiet space; there was not a lot of passing traffic past his desk and he really was able to sit down and practically do a normal day's writing. He didn't have that immediate pressure of a very imminent audience.

How important was the technology in enabling what you produced?

I think it was vital for opening up that sense of performance and that sense of the process. The fact that people could watch on video, that people could see the text appearing on the screen as it was being written; it was relatively new technology that made that possible. I could have just been blogging this. Writing this as a single document that was then posted altogether at the end. That has a value but it's not what I was trying to get at, trying to achieve. I wanted that sense of live-ness to make the performance, the process, a large part of the value of the work of art and not just the static text at the end of it. So technology certainly enabled that: that sense of a live performance. And I don't think that other ways would have worked.

And did it enforce constraints on your writing. Can you describe the technicalities of the writing experience? Rather than the aesthetics, the kind of mechanics of it?

There was a small amount of redesign technically between 100 Hours and the LWS. For 100 Hours it was literally posting each keystroke as it was written, which actually created a huge amount of traffic and potentially lag for anyone who was watching. For LWS we slightly fudged it. It looked much more pleasant in that, instead of pinging the server each time a new character was added, it only pinged the server when the space bar was hit and it would then animate the typing of the previous word.

In terms of the actual writer interface did it feel very much like a normal word processor?

It's designed to be like a blogging platform, slightly more than a word processor. You start a new post, you have some formatting tools but relatively basic ones. And it is all happening live, so we had an indicator to let you know if you were online or whether you had lost connection… Very occasionally when we lost connection I would know that whatever I was writing would not be seen at that moment and it would suddenly update when we could be connected again. So unlike a normal word processing platform you did have a sense that you needed to be online for it to really work. And you'd complete a document and it would be automatically added to the online archive and then you'd open the next

document with a title which would appear on the front page of the website and on whatever screen we were using in the live space… we effectively had a page of the website that was not navigable to from the website which was the performance view.

Was there anything in the technicalities that would have changed the way you wrote? It sounds like that online thing was an indicator slightly changing things.

Yes, although it was less of a factor with the LWS when a document reached over a thousand words or so there was basically each update of the page would become a larger and larger file to be updated and so this created a larger lag that potentially led to complete corruption and failure of a file so, if I was writing a long story over an hour, I would split it over a series of documents. Otherwise the lag of typing you could see would become unbearable and you could also lose a lot of text.

So it was almost a physical weight, the weight of your words, starting to slow down the process?

Yes. And we tried to mitigate that in the LWS and also when I was writing live, I don't think anything I wrote got up to that length.

One last thing to finish on. I am still trying to work out what is left after the performance. Because in a way, what you have isn't what it was when you were writing it. Do you see it like that almost like a… a husk is too dramatic a word, but in a sense it's not quite a first draft and its not got the immediacy of the performance watching it happen. What is it?

I suppose it's closer to being a transcript. It's not a script of a performance, or a prewritten event. And at the same time it's not a kind of completed text, but it's a recording of a live event.

There was some discussion when we were setting up the LWS as to whether we should publish or print a book of the writing at the end of the series and it just felt like taxidermy. You were trying to give life to something that had life in the past. Yeah, I think transcript is probably the best term.

Slide 1

Slide 2
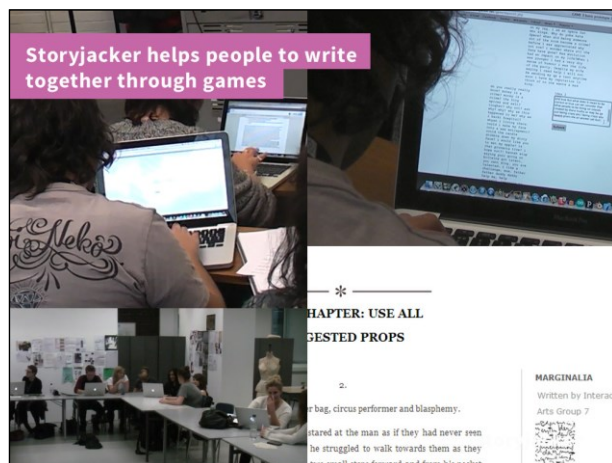
Slide 3

Slide 4

Slide 5

Appendix 05 – Example section of participant questionnaire

Name: _____   Date: [date]

[name of group]

By filling out this form you are offering valuable contributions to PhD research. Thank you!

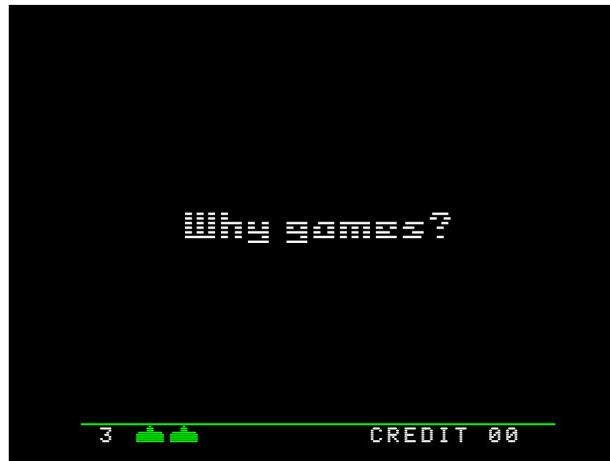1. Do you use writing in your practice? (Circle)   **Yes   /   No**

    If yes, please briefly describe how you use it (e.g. *I write scripts for my films…*):

    _____

    _____

2. Which writing process did you enjoy most? (Circle)

    a. Challenges game (morning)

    b. Bamboo   (afternoon)

3. Why do you think you preferred it?

    _____

    _____

4. Would you play this game again individually online? (Circle)   **No / Yes / Maybe**

    Comments?

    _____

    _____

5. Which of the following would most appeal to you? (Number in order of preference.)

    A regular game-based writing workshop in the Art and Design building.

    A regular timed online event supported via Twitter.

    A game that I could write in on my own to help me with my writing projects.

Appendix 06 – Example section of author online questionnaire

Storyjacker game follow up

These questions are about the game you played.

1. How would you rate the following elements of your game (out of ten)?

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	1
Overall enjoyment	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
The gameplay	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Collaborating with others	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Comments   *[Section   for   comments]*

2. Do you think writing stories using this game makes it...

○ More difficult than your normal writing process

○ Neither more nor less difficult than your normal writing process

○ Less difficult to write stories than your normal writing process

Comments *[Section for comments]*

3. Do you think writing stories this way is...

○ more fun than non-game based story writing

○ neither more nor less fun than non-game based story writing

○ less fun than non-game based story writing

Comments *[Section for comments]*

Appendix 07 – Storyjacker blog piece June 2013

First workshop from the second round of testing

Posted on June 18, 2013.

Well, it was more of a one-on-one session this time around with various people asking for alternative days and a few last minute apologies. However it was a great opportunity to get quality feedback from BA student, aspiring writer and playwright Matthew Adamson. It was also a good chance to play Storyjacker together. I envisioned that we'd probably spend thirty or forty minutes writing. In the end however we called a halt after an hour and a half. My creative brain was tiring (although Matt's showed no sign of stopping!)

The thing I found playing the game, (and it is surprising how little I get to play it) was that the interjection by the other writer hooks you in a way that feels quite like an interactive narrative. As in [Jason Rohrer](#)'s *Sleep is Death,* the fact that it is another person rather than the machinery responding to your creative decisions doesn't make it any less compelling.

Matthew had some great ideas for the platform, especially for making sure that the first time you get to the site you know what's happening – a strong suggestion to new users that they read the short set of rules before diving in. He also said he noticed how the constraints of the writing environment made him make decisions more quickly and efficiently and in ways he wouldn't usually think of.

I have a couple of bug fixes to make before going out to the online volunteers but I expect to make these in the next couple of days. I'll update when it's live.

(From www.storyjacker.net/blog)

Appendix 08 – Example of critical review questionnaire page

<div style="background-color:#34618a; color:white; padding:8px;">

Critical review of Storyjacker stories
</div>

<div style="background-color:#dddbc0; padding:8px;">

2. Story: Neighbourhood Watch
</div>

Before answering the following questions, please read and consider the following story: Neighbourhood Watch (Link opens in another tab).

Clarifying terms used

To try to avoid ambiguity, terms below should be interpreted with these points in mind:

- **Meaningfulness:** to what extent does the story succeeded in progressing a particular set of ideas or world view in the story?
- **Coherence:** how logical is the fictional world that the story invites you into?
- **Originality:** to what extent is the story new and different from other stories?
- **Entertainment:** how enjoyable was the story to read?
- **Prose:** to what extent were the sentences and paragraphs well composed?
- **Character development:** How well does the story create characters you can empathise with?
- **Plot development:** How well does the story develop a compelling plot?

3. How would you mark this story, in the following areas (where 1 is very low and 10 is very high)?

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	1
Meaningfulness	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Coherence	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Prose	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Entertainment	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Originality	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Plot development	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Please review the story (approx 60-100 words) *[space to write review]*

Appendix 09 - Non-specialist creative writers

5th September 2012: paper testers - arts post-graduate researchers

Background

The participants in this test group were the first in the study. They tested the first working iterations of my story games, having responded to a call out for volunteer testers within the art and design research institute. Test 1 was organised to test three prototypes: two alternative permutations of Game 1 and a third tested the first prototype of Game 2.

Findings

Time limits

One of the clearest points of feedback was about the use of restrictive time limits. In designing the game rules, I had neglected to consider the time that the writers would have to spend reading. During the tests the timings were recalibrated to give players more time – three minutes rather than two as well as time for other tasks. Asked afterwards if the group found the first game enjoyable, they described it instead as 'stressful'. Participant One (P1-01) explained, 'the time limit was quite stressful. It was really short.' More specifically Participant Three (P1-03) felt that the whole group's stories could have been 'better and 'more interesting' if allowed more time.

It was also to do with how the time limit was implemented as part of the game, said P1-01. She compared it to parlour games where one person had to draw something and the others guess:

> There's something about that that's really good fun in the way that this wasn't fun. I think partly it's because everyone's looking [during the drawing game] so it's one person. So it's one person being stressed and everyone else is watching and enjoying. Because we're all in our little bubble there actually wasn't any engagement with other people.

The problem in the participant's mind, was not the time limit but what the dynamic was doing to the players on a social level: it was closing each player off from the other.

The objectives of the two Game 1 iterations had different effects on the behaviours of players. The first game tested required the group to draft then continue to redraft (turn after turn) the story, using a challenging restriction set by the previous writer such as 'lose the protagonist'. This constraint exerted very little reported control over Participant Two (P1-02) who said that when presented with a previous narrative they 'didn't stick to the story' and this didn't seem to matter as there was no requirement in the rules that the redrafted story have any relationship to the previous one. This left writers unsure of what their objective was: if this was a game, it was assumed that there was some possibility that the task was structured by winning and losing.

In the second variation of Game 1, a win/lose element was introduced to play: before writing the next section, the next player was asked to rate the previous player's section as better or worse than the section before. This was an idea that was intended to build feedback into play and provide a scoring

mechanism. However, this competitive points system and the idea of winning was detrimental to what this group considered central to the games' enjoyment: the expression of their creativity and the fun of sharing unconsidered ideas.

> P1-02: I think, 'who's judging it, what criteria, and who has a right to judge someone else's creativity in that way?'

> P1-01: … I think that the worst thing you can ever do when anyone's ever exploring any kind of creative expression is to give them a mark for it.

> P1-03: … You're sort of judging different things. If I'm judging just ideas maybe it will be one and if I'm judging the prose it might be the other. And there are so many ways to judge.

Game 2: more fun and better interaction

Two of the three testers were able to test both games (Game 1 and Game 2) and the feedback, observed and reported was clear: Game 2 was 'more fun'. In particular, they said they enjoyed the interactive 'choose your own adventure' element of it. What was also evident from observing gameplay was that, compared to the Game 1 prototypes, there was significantly more discussion and reading aloud between players *during* gameplay compared to during the first two games.
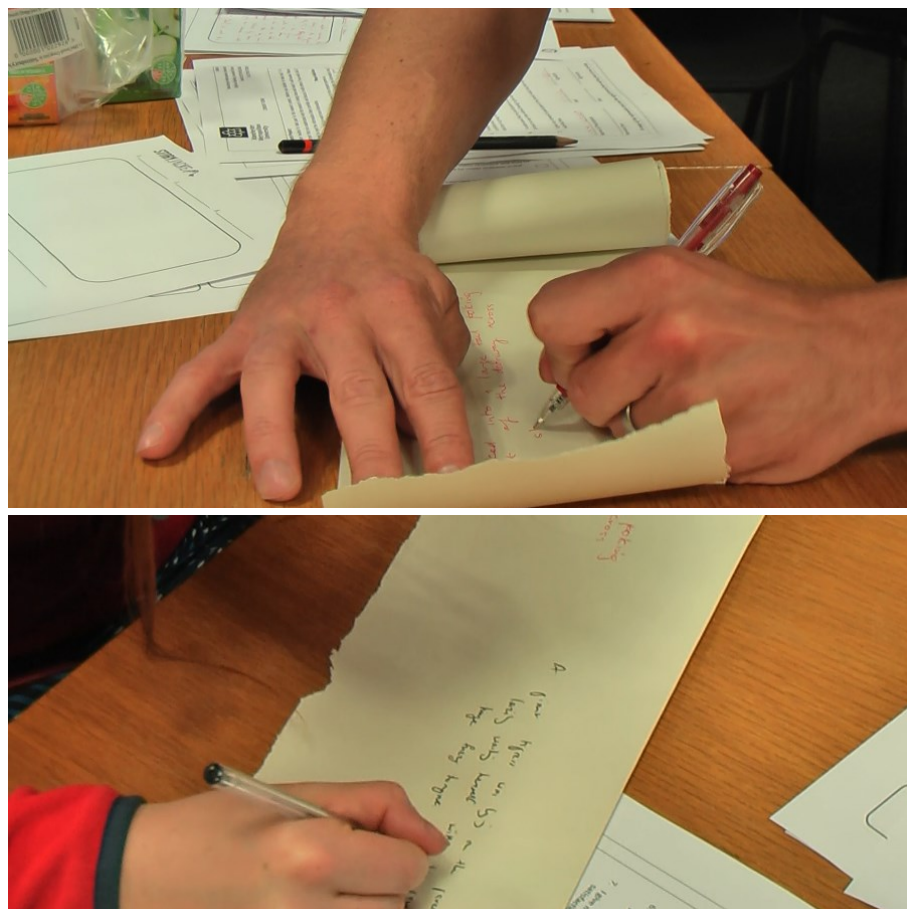
Playing Game 2V0 with participants

In the Game 2 prototype, the same player specifically requested that the previous entry and the competing entry (by P1-03) be read out first, when asked to do her task. This was due to task design: to continue the narrative, rather than alter it, made contributions less arbitrary. The fact that another player was going to make a choice afterwards, further clarified the writer's purpose.

4th October 2013: arts undergraduate students, digital workshop

Background

The class was a cohort of approximately 20 first year students two weeks into a new art course and being taught creative practice techniques by first year course leader Hazel. When asked as a group about their feelings surrounding creative writing, there was mixed enthusiasm: whilst many enjoyed it, three participants specifically stated during interviews that they generally had very negative perceptions of story writing or writing.

Findings

Collaboration: supportive, team based behaviour

As expected, the groups tended to collaborate quickly and easily, from the very beginning of games. Players seemed to work as a game team more than as set of individuals playing against each other. This different kind of collaboration involved suggesting ideas, occasionally helping each other with spelling and grammar and providing supportive encouragement when the writer had an idea.
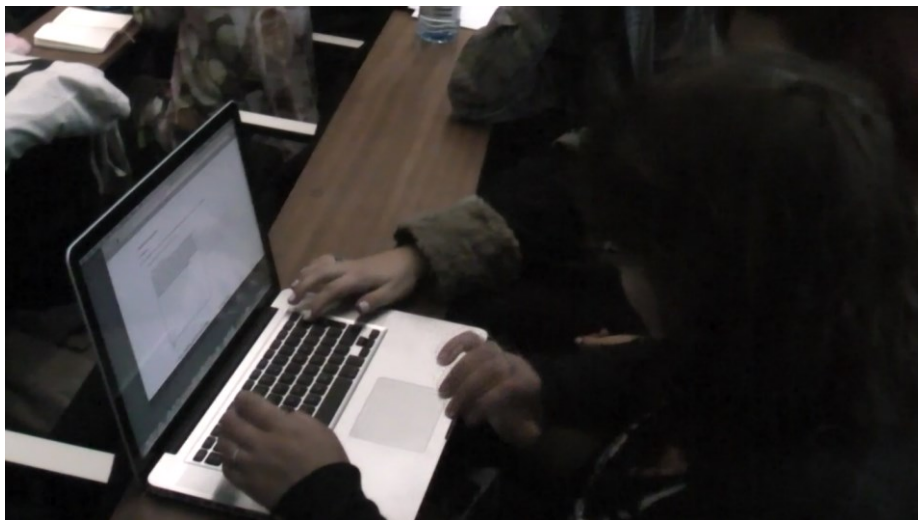
Team member makes correction to current player's submission as she writes

Further corroboration of this off-game activity could be found in notepads where players on at least two teams used the time away from the keypad to create corroborative material – one visualising characters for their story and another describing and plotting characters and events.

B&B

normal janitor - cover job
con artist - art world.

sold fake masterpiece to Tony.
B&B have the real one.
wanted by big Tony.

Bishop works for fat tony.
hitman.
has been paid to plant the bomb into the B&B
to assasinate the janitor.

BIG TONY — pissed off — he's been conned.
Revenge → kill janitor
blow up B&B.

B&B
Bomb
forged
artwork

sold the
fake SCREAM. Bomb.
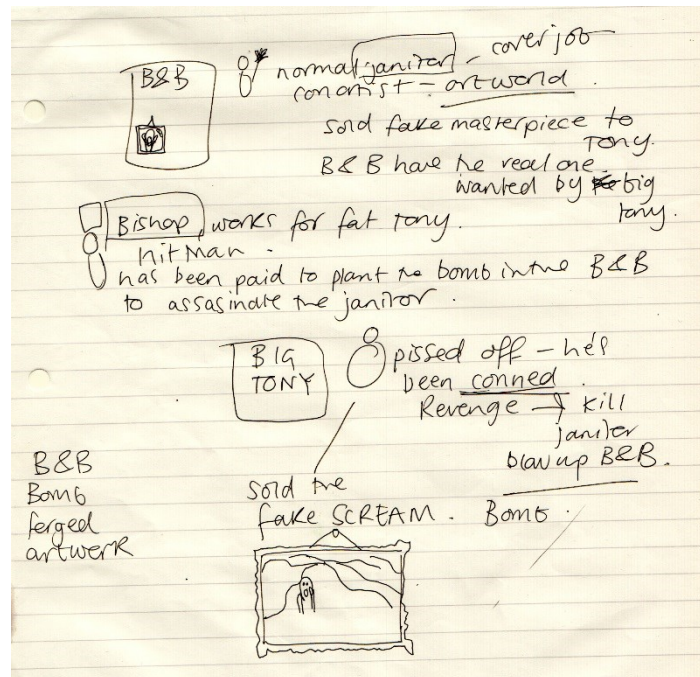
Example of character map and plot outline

The participant responsible for the plan explained their motives as team-orientated:

> P4-01: I had to map it out… just to kind of support us and support the ideas and to make sure we were all on the same line.

These team members were in effect finding solutions to the individual insecurities the game used to challenge them and in doing so mitigated the effect of game mechanics on the narrative. The ambient workshop noise and animation of this writing process was in stark contrast to the first test (Test 1) of Game 1, which had been non-communicative and tense.

Prompts and props: a changing relationship

Feedback on prompts and props changed throughout the day. To begin with, they were seen as supportive and constructive; one writer (P4-09) stated that challenges and props constructively disrupted their 'flow', offering 'new ways to approach a story'. Later in the day, the general consensus was that Game 2 was better without props: despite relying on these elements earlier, 'actually when there's nothing you can make something up'. Yet, when asked if they would add any of the Game 1 features to Game 2 most suggested adding prompts and props from the former to the latter to add challenge to the game:

> P4-08: I think it would be nice to combine the two games. … [I]f you had a way of writing it which suggested, like, one-word sentences that would be quite fun.

Fun and ease

Interviewees, in general, commented that Game 2 was more *fun* than Game 1 which was described as more serious. The comparative fun of Game 2 seemed be related to the flippancy of the writing element. The written part was seen as being more experimental and less considered.

> P4-01: It was funner [sic] and easier and we did a really fun story… whereas with the other one we ended up doing it seriously. I think it's just the nature of it because its quick and you're like, okay just do it and see where it goes.

Participants contrasted this less considered approach to the plots and prompts at the beginning of the Game 1 versions – 'The bit where you had to choose the plot, we found that a bit too serious.' (P4-12). In comparison, Game 2 was 'easier… I think because you can do anything' (P4-13). Another participant's comments concurred: the general lack of constraints meant 'you didn't have to think about the rules, you could just write' (P4-14).

Story: player viewpoint

Writers were unclear whilst writing if the work they were doing on the preferred second game was better or not. Interestingly the sense of meaningfulness seemed neither to enhance nor detract from their sense of enjoyment. Players did like their Game 2 stories better however, but many players seemed to consider these stories good because they were funny or fun:

> P4-01: We did a really fun story! [sic]

> P4-15: [laughs] It's really good!'

A lack of meaningfulness did not necessarily lead to a story being less entertaining.

Positive reactions of actively disengaged creative writers

During both sessions there were comments from writers spontaneously identifying themselves as actively disengaged from the process of creative writing who professed that the approach that one or both games offered was a more compelling way of writing for them.

> P4-04: I hate English … but this is something I could use, something you can keep yourself busy with.

Another participant (P4-18) who facilitated 'creative speaking' activities with dyslexic school children as a special educational needs support practitioner, and had difficulty with her own 'grammar and paragraphing and everything else' in written work outlined elements of Storyjacker games that worked for her:

> P4-18: [Y]ou've got a limit to how many words you can use which stops… my waffling. I also think that giving them prompts… can actually change a story from being something really sinister to something really happy.

These comments do suggest this as an area for further research: Storyjacker for reluctant writers.

19 September 2014: post-graduate researcher and research staff writing group

Background

The February 2014 workshop took place at Manchester Metropolitan University with the Writing Matters group, which consisted of art and design post-graduate research students and members of academic staff from the university's art and design post-graduate research institute, MIRIAD. Some were published writers in academic fields and others were successful creative practitioners in the field of art and design.

It was an important characteristic of the test that there was a technical problem during it. One group was able to play the game properly and the other was only able to perform the task of round-robin story writing. This led to interesting comparison effects that actually enriched the case study. Whilst the error was obviously unplanned, it provided serendipitous evidence on how the absence of certain game elements affected the collaborative creative process.

Findings

Collaboration

It seemed that the collaborative process of Storyjacker and subsequent reflection through interview helped experienced collaborators or collaboration theorists to further develop their relationship with the collaborative process. For example, one participant (P8-05) who was 'used to collaborating' on creative projects commented initially that 'the collaborative effort [in the game] comes in making sure that we've understood the rules, rather than anything to do with what's going to develop.' However she identified the feature, new to Game 2, that allowed a genre to be chosen by the group as a formative collaborative act. '[M]aybe there was a kind of collective decision making at the beginning that perhaps does correspond to ways that I have collaborated in the past'.

Fun and laughter

Another participant (P8-02) commented that humour was an important strategy in dealing with the pressure of constant peer appraisal through the win-lose system: a way of creating distance between herself and the work she was creating, in case it met with rejection:

> P8-02: I think one way of dealing with that… [prospect of decision making] is through humour and maybe making it silly. So I'm going to write something that's really a bit silly. So then it's just judged for its silliness rather than [as] a bit of serious writing.

As counterpoint, the group with the bug that had stopped the game element from working felt that the qualities of the process had imprinted themselves on the story produced negatively: 'It was all quite laborious and I think that's why our story sounds quite laboured, because it really was' (P8-04, *writer from faulty-game group).*

This comment was made in the context of the participant trying to explain the difference in entertainment that the two groups experienced reading aloud their story to share. Whilst the faulty-

game group read their story out without comment or particular reaction, the working-game group were often overcome with laughter as their narrator read (Fig 4.10): all group members found its whimsical points of departure humorous. One participant from the group wondered aloud – 'why was it so funny? I don't often laugh like that' (P8-02). To which a member of the non-game team wryly commented, 'I think you had more fun than us' (P8-05). There appeared to be a relationship between a fun game and humorous detachment in this respect.

Figure 4.10 – writers from the working group team laughing whilst reading out their story

The role of auto-generated prompt elements

The groups were similarly slightly at odds over the elements of the game that auto-generated tasks and prompts for the writers. P8-07 thought that the auto-generation of ideas helped her overcome issues surrounding a certain lack of confidence, (despite or because of significant experience in writing and collaboration):

> I have an idea about myself that I find it hard to come up with ideas, come up with kind of fun ideas. And so this seems to make me, or give me a formula in which I kind of stop some of the self-imposed beliefs.

As counterpoint to these points of view P8-02 who identified as being confident in their own creative writing ability ('I don't know why I'm here because I think I can write creatively').

> I didn't like the challenges because they limit you… I think that's the biggest challenge is because you get to continue other's ideas, instead of those statements you put as challenges. The real challenge is continuing someone else's ideas and imagination.

Appendix 10: Creative writing students

Background

The first test of Storyjacker with writers was designed to act as a pilot test: evaluating a potential model for further story game tests. The model was a network-based one informed by games such as Folding Story which appeared to work effectively with writers playing online. In fact the online-based test of this early Game 1 prototype encouraged very poor levels of participation from the remote group of writers and brought into question the suitability of this kind of testing with a prototype game.

Following communications with creative writing course leaders at two universities, Goldsmiths College London and De Montford University, two student cohorts were contacted: at one an undergraduate course was targeted and the other a postgraduate course. Nine student writers responded. Seven went as far as to log on and of those seven, only two participated. The tests ran for one month, after which all nine participants were asked to feedback. Only the two who submitted to the platform engaged in filling out a questionnaire. Web metrics provided data on three other participants who had stopped engaging with the platform just prior to playing the game. This provided an incomplete picture of the reasons why writers who failed to engage were put off. Did they not like the look of the game? Did they not know where to look for instructions? Were there not enough other writers playing?

Findings

The pair who did engage thought that it had an average-to-good design - 'It is simplistic which I like' said one respondent. It was also considered easy to sign up, log on and to play. However they described the game element as 'not entertaining at all'. This may have been related to the fact that neither writer seemed to be motivated by the game's core proposal – collaborative writing. P2-01 in this test stated that collaboration was neither important nor unimportant and yet it was central to gameplay.

Gaining a sense of collaboration was bound to be difficult with so few players: P2-02 specifically describes logging back on and seeing that no-one else had particated yet:

> I would have liked to have had another few games but when i [sic] went to log in the next time, I was worried that it would look like I was hogging it.

Both writers also cited lack of time and competing commitments as a factor in their lack of participation. P2-01 stated it as the main factor for not playing again and P2-02 stated that following the worry about hogging the platform above, they had 'too many uni deadlines'. As reading around the comparison writing platforms has shown, participation equality occurs with groups of participants on social network based sites, known as the participation inequality (Neilsen 2006). With the lack of tester control cited by Gibson, the tests became subject to these behavioural patterns and other unknown problems. Test 3 would take these issues into account.

July 2013: Manchester School of Writing Workshop Series

Background

The next group to feature in the case study is the Manchester School of Writing (MSoW) Workshops Series. In practice this involved three small but highly focused workshops conducted with MSoW post-graduate creative writing students playing Game 1, the only developed game at this time. Work with this group represented a second attempt to survey a large group of remote writers.

Of the sample that responded to an initial survey, respondents were overwhelmingly on university creative writing degree courses (55% undergraduate, 26% postgraduate). The other significant group were aspiring creative writers not currently in creative writing education (16%) who could be assumed to be alumni of MSoW. None of the respondents described themselves as professional or semi-professional creative writers. Whilst initial interest was good, it dwindled. 30 of the writers responded positively to the question, *Would you like to be contacted to test a new digital creative writing platform prototype?* Only the five who chose to attend workshops played the games.

These writers, all students, variously attended four small workshops. In fact, the small scale of these sessions was actually well suited to the platform's feedback requirements at this stage. It required well-informed qualitative feedback to develop and these intimate sessions were able to provide this. It also allowed me to participate in the sessions as an extra writer and reflect first hand on the experience.

Fig. 5.1 – postgraduate participants in the second Storyjacker workshop

Findings

Simplicity

Simple and clean

Participants thought that the platform's simple, uncluttered user interface that made writing central in the design was appropriate. P2-01 commented that '…once the "rules" of the games have been read it is very simple and easy to understand'. This caveat referred to his experience of forgoing instructions as a new user and being initially a little unsure of how to work the game. After he had been shown the rules he was able to navigate around the interface reportedly with ease. A small amendment was made to the platform so that the rules were offered to every player logging in for the first time. Possibly as a consequence P2-02 and P2-03 had no comments about this aspect:

P2-02 commented, 'I enjoy the simplicity of the layout' and P2-03 said 'I like the clean layout of the site. It's elegant in its design and gender-neutral.'

Use of restrictions to increase creativity

The participants in these tests commented on the effect of limits and restrictions as effective ways to stimulate their creativity in the game. P2-02 was typical of the collective viewpoint: 'restriction as a creative tool… pushed [me] into areas I seldom explore as a writer of fiction... Even if a story that I took part in was not "successful" as a piece at least it provided practice for writing'. The prompts and props of Game 1 were frequently cited as effective ways to experiment with different ways of writing. This marked a different kind of viewpoint to the NSCW group. For most writers in that group there was more generally a sense that simply writing stories was an experiment. Here the reflections were more nuanced; responding to the game by changing their *existing* story-writing style.

If one reason for the lack of serious interest in output from these writers appeared to be a sense of *what games are for* in creative writing pedagogy, another reason could have been to do with their observations as student writers in the quality of what the games produced. On the topic of meaningfulness, P2-01 suggested that the challenge of collaborating via the game 'did not have an impact on the quality of the individual chapters' but that 'the stories created' were, as a whole, 'less

meaningful and useful only as a piece of entertaining fiction'. It seemed that the player felt that the coherence of the work was suffering as a result of the game: the virtuosity of the individual contributions was not a problem – it was the way they were gelling together, or not. Lack of overall adherence to a controlling idea was in part due to the difficulty of organising any number of writers. In another survey the same participant commented that with more players (four compared to two), 'it was a challenge in itself to continue a story and attempt to work out where a story/character is going.'

Personal reflection as feedback

As numbers in these sessions were often low and required more players in order to facilitate the games, I the researcher, often became involved in the production of texts. This gave me the opportunity to experience the games first-hand, providing reflective insights which helped in the development of the game. The experience of playing the game was important not only in understanding the general phenomenon of playing the game; more specifically it was important to understand the difference between the reading of the text as a writer and the reading of the text after the game, either as a player or not. The sense of possibility in my own writing and suspense at the next players' writing decisions was indiscernible in the final output because each subsequent turn destroyed the possibility of interactivity that I had enjoyed. It was the first time I had experienced the sense of interactivity present in the reading of the text during its formation on Storyjacker, which then did not persist in its final composition.

Lack of clarity with point scoring

Although one participant (P2-02) commented that they liked the competitiveness of the point scoring system, the other participants suggested that the system, in which you earned the ability to like other writers by contributing chapters, was confusing. The system was designed to ensure that writers did not casually grant all players with approval. However P2-01 thought that 'writing a chapter in order to like another writer's chapter … was a little unclear.' P2-03 was also 'unsure about the point system' but thought it could perhaps work with more competitive players. The point system was later dropped entirely, partly due to this feedback but also due to general lack of use.

December 2013: Cheshire creative writers

Background

The 2013 workshop with writers from the Creative Writing course at Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) Creative Writing BA (Hons) students was important to the development of Storyjacker because it was the first time that Game 2 had been tested with writers. As Game 1 was also tested it was the first side-by-side comparison. The outcome was a number of new stories to represent the output of creative writers in the story analysis section and further evidence from the feedback of players that the games were both fun and produced stories with some degree of coherence. Again however, there was no sense from these writers that the stories were more than a fun process.

Following discussions with the group leader Dr Julie Armstrong about Storyjacker, a session was arranged that would take place during a normal workshop lesson of undergraduate students. This group represented the largest workshop sample of creative writing students as participants during testing. There were 19 participants and of those at least 17 of them reported being storywriters in some capacity, either writing short stories, scripts or novels, commonly alongside less generically story-based forms of creative writing such as poetry and music lyrics. As with other groups this identified the group as containing a large majority of people for whom the act of story writing in creative writing is generically appealing and something they are committed to pursuing through their studies.

Findings

Different reasons for enjoyment

When asked how enjoyable they found the experience, on either game they responded very positively (average enjoyment score: 35/40, where 40 was *very enjoyable* and 0 was very unenjoyable) to a similar degree on both games. Backing this up, nearly all members of both groups described it as more fun than their own writing process. However, reasons for ranking the process highly differed slightly between the games. The players on Game 2 mentioned the social elements of the game as contributing factors to their fun, with comments such as the following:

> Good fun to collaborate with others

> Working collaboratively meant our ideas bounced off one another, which sparked inspiration.

> Working with like-minded people helped to create an enjoyable experience.

Those playing Game 1 in comparison tended to talk more about their own process and ideas. They all typically tended to be most interested in seeing how people had interpreted the stories they had started than in the process of group forming:

> [R]eally interesting to help see what people think of my characters

> It was fun to see all the ways that people respond to and expand on your ideas

> I enjoyed being challenged as a writer and also seeing my own piece evolve.

The emphasis in the commentary of Game 2 players on the group seems to emphasise enjoyment of social interaction whilst writing. Although feedback is universally positive, this aspect apparently eclipses any mention of self-reflection of the type reported by the Game 1 writers.

In all, 12 of the 19 writers who took part in the trial were interested in playing the games again, with the remainder responding 'maybe'. None of the writers felt negatively enough to suggest that they would not like to play again. Of the possible uses they foresaw for Storyjacker games in future, a regular on-campus session for playing with other writers was the preferred option with 18 of the 19 writers putting it as choice one or two (out of three), This showed a significant preference for communal same-space play compared to the remote communal play option – chosen by only six writers.

Appendix 11 - Author extended biographies

All authors were highly regarded creative writers, mostly as fiction authors but also, in the case of Mez Breeze, as a digital poet and storyteller.

Ross Raisin - his first novel, *God's Own Country*, was published to great acclaim in 2008 and was shortlisted for nine awards including the Guardian First Book Award. His second novel, *Waterline*, was first published in 2011, was a Radio 4 Book at Bedtime. In 2009 Ross was named the Sunday Times Young Writer of the Year and in 2013 he was included in the Granta list of 20 best young writers.

Ed Hogan - a graduate of the MA creative writing course at UEA and a recipient of the David Higham Award. His first novel, Blackmoor, was shortlisted for the Sunday Times Young Writer of the Year Award, the Dylan Thomas Prize and won the Desmond Elliot Prize. Edward's first young adult novel was published in 2012 and his second novel Hunger Trace came out in March 2014.

Tiffany Murray - her first novel Happy Accidents and her second, Diamond Star Halo were both short-listed for the Bollinger Everyman Wodehouse Award. Tiffany's writing has appeared in The Times, The Telegraph, The Independent and The Guardian. She is Senior Lecturer at The University of Glamorgan.

David Whitehouse - his first novel Bed was the inaugural winner of the To Hell with Prizes award in 2010. His second, MOBILE LIBRARY was published in January 2015. David's journalism has appeared in the Guardian, the Sunday Times, the Independent, Esquire, Time Out, and the Observer Magazine. His first short film, 'The Archivist', produced by Warp Films and the BBC, opened the BBC Electric Proms in 2008 and screened at film festivals including Seattle and Munich.

Jenn Ashworth - her first novel, A Kind of Intimacy, was published in 2009 and won a 2010 Betty Trask Award. On the publication of her second novel, Cold Light, in 2011, she was featured on the BBC's Culture Show as one of the UK's 12 best new novelists. In 2013 her third novel, The Friday Gospels, was published by Sceptre.

Mez Breeze - a writer and artist whose works reside in Collections as diverse as The World Bank and the PANDORA Electronic Collection at the National Library of Australia. Mez is also an Advisor to The Mixed Augmented Reality Art Research Organisation and is currently Senior Research Affiliate with The Humanities and Critical Code Studies Lab.

Her awards include the 2001 VIF Prize (Germany), 2002 Newcastle New Media Poetry Prize (Australia) and the Burton Wonderland Gallery Winner 2010 (judged by director Tim Burton).

Appendix 12 - Published authors and the Summer Games

Background

In summer 2014, six acclaimed and published authors worked on two Game 2 story collaborations for the project. They were recruited in a number of ways: via my own creative networks and the networks of others in the industry, via a callout in digital creative writing site The Writing Platform (www.thewritingplatform.com) and via a page on the Storyjacker website.

How they collaborated

The participants produced two stories in two separate collaborations:

- *Neighbourhood Watch* written by David Whitehouse, Tiffany Murray and Ross Raisin
- *Arpège on the landing* written by Jenn Ashworth, Mez Breeze and Ed Hogan

Groups were formed according to the authors' availability to play on the game as determined via email correspondence with myself as coordinator. The first game started June 2014 and the second in July 2014. The games were played remotely, with each writer sitting in their own room in a geographical spread of locations in England and, in one case, Australia.

Findings

Game: restrictions and fun

All authors regarded the games as fun and enjoyable. Nearly all writers considered the game to be more fun than their writing process too. Murray suggested that this was for her a low benchmark. However, she suggested that the fun of the game came from the feedback it offered her on her creative process:

> It was a fun process, kept on my toes by the game's swerve… A good way of flagging up/examining your own creative process and its pitfalls, I think.

However, there were factors that inhibited enjoyment. Such as a sense of lag between goes. For players in both games, the problem of waiting between turns hindered their reported sense of enjoyment.:

> I wanted for it to be to be a constant flow of people's words and you having to write and then move onto the next thing… [T]o be forced out of it was the only negative element for me.' (David Whitehouse)

> I suppose I just felt energised and excited and then I had to wait.' (Murray)

But there were different solutions offered as to how to solve this problem. Tiffany Murray, during interview, indicated that she preferred a live solution, although one that did not rely on 'ridiculous time limit rules'. Ross Raisin and David Whitehouse, however, suggested that the experience of using email-based play allowed the fun of gameplay to occur without the waiting. The problem with this was that for some writers the lack of intensity made the process of playing more like normal writing.

Jenn Ashworth commented that playing over email 'became much more similar to my normal writing life again' and Tiffany Murray thought that the strenuousness of the live element was an essential part, missing in the email way of playing the game:

> I preferred the dynamic of playing all together at the same time and it was more stressful which was fun. Fun stressful. You were pinging off each other.

Prompts

For authors, some types of prompt were better at progressing a core story than others. Both Hogan and Ashworth noted that the prompts that encouraged changes relative to the plot were easier to assimilate into the story they were writing and were therefore less disruptive to coherence than those that demanded more formal changes. Ed Hogan explained:

> [T]he bits where I didn't do so well in making it coherent… [were] when the task that we were doing wasn't to do with the plot… With those tasks where it said, *write in the style of a particular writer*… the more difficult the task was the more distracted I got from actually making it coherent. (Ed Hogan)

So the problems created by formal challenges were more taxing to the process of meaning-making than challenges such as *ramp up the drama* that referred to the dramatic elements of the story.

Playing together

For *Arpège on the Landing*, timings were late evening/early in the morning, usually after 10pm (UK) and before 7am (AUS) to accommodate a time difference between UK authors and Australian digital writer and poet Mez Breeze. These writers chose to use Skype instant messenger (IM) to communicate during live sessions to chat socially as they played, sharing internet music videos from different eras, jokes and anecdotes, and staying awake.

… …

[21:04:06]   Ed Hogan: I need a 'drinks/writing montage' with whiskey and failed attempts going in the bin, and a completed section by the end of it.

[21:04:45]   mez breeze: …if i was more awake I'd storyboard that for you in stick figures;)

[21:04:57]   David Jackson: That should be a prompt: write the next section in the style of a montage.

[21:05:29]   mez breeze: Agreed, Code it in, boss. ;)

[21:05:34]   Jenn Ashworth: Whenever someone says montage I think of Rocky. Tell me I am not the only one?

[21:05:44]   Jenn Ashworth: Can you make it so the writer hears Eye of the Tiger as s/he types?

             …

Brief excerpt typical of the discussion on the IM

For Ed Hogan, this additional channel of communication was important because it reassured him about the people he would be writing with and established trust:

> I think it really helped in terms of *oh everyone's really nice, it's all going to be fine. Nobody is going to say anything bad about my work.*

In these discussions there was also a sense that to talk about the game itself was possibly against the spirit of the game and its rules. As Ashworth articulated;

> I did feel that there was a proper way to do it and that proper way would involve not speaking to each other at all and it would involve almost being quite anonymous, so that I might not even know who wrote whose piece when I was choosing and that we would stick to the prompt.

This led Ashworth to test the rules, adding an in-joke into the story text : 'I wanted to see, are you not allowed to talk about stuff like that?' In practice, opponent Ed Hogan's initial and prevailing instinct was not to allow an in-joke by Ashworth into the narrative. Usually this would be an appropriate decision as in-jokes rarely make good comedy for the uninitiated. However, this context was not a normal one. Perhaps, Ed reflected to me, it was exactly the right thing to include because it was entertaining to the writers, right then, during their conversations and their joint process:

> [B]ecause that's an interesting thing for us… why wouldn't that be valid when we were in touch with each other right then while we were doing it? That makes sense that we would write to entertain each other.

Ed Hogan's comments seem to speak of a different type of reader present in this kind of fiction, the writer as a reader (*writer/reader*).

Ross Raisin's notion of a proper way to play the game also reflected a purified process of co-authorship free from social niceties. He dismissed the email correspondence between himself and fellow players as 'extraneous… purely necessary because we were just getting on our feet and wanted to be sure that we were doing it all correctly'.

> Researcher: So you didn't feel a need to be socially connected with those other writers?

> Raisin: No, I didn't personally. I quite liked the nakedness of it, as it were: the idea of not being connected socially by the Internet while you were doing the game. I quite liked the idea of just doing the game. So the potential of doing it with some faceless entity or someone you don't know is quite exciting.

This *nakedness* of the game-based collaboration process for Ross Raisin seems to be another expression of the proper game, a more logical version, devoted to story-via-game mastery. It is possible that because these authors are more adept at their fiction-writing skills than participants in other groups that they are more aware of the disruption of their mastery by the game and seek to find an equivalent by reordering its play.

This asocial version of the game found its opposite in the perceived spoiling effects of player etiquette and politeness that lead to the general sentiment that there was a purer way to play the game. It was consistently reported in interview that a kind of politeness or inclusiveness often influenced the

decisions they made potentially, writers thought, to the detriment of story quality. Murray noted the effect was particularly in action near the beginning, picking an example where she 'preferred David's but Ross chose mine, where I thought, David's works cleaner and better'.

Another factor that influenced decision-making and therefore the direction of the stories was the extent to which the writing made composition easier for the next writer. Hogan admitted that if a piece was going to be easier to work with he would sometimes choose it over the piece he thought was best: 'Your first thought is *ah, that one is probably better* but really your decision usually goes with *that one's the one I can work with* because you've got to move it on.'

David Whitehouse thought that the biggest influence on the stories in terms of tone of voice or style appeared to be through the tendency for the group to adhere to the style that the first writer has set in the story (as noted by CWS participants).

> I tell you the biggest effect on [my style] was because Ross opened the game… You don't write in your normal style I don't think. You adapt.

It is clear in fact that in this sample of authors, all are experts at the process of story making, but some seem to enjoy the solitude of the typical novel writing environment and others, like Whitehouse, consider working with others generically more invigorating and therefore enjoy this kind of game more.

Differences in process

Jenn Ashworth expressed the view that the live writing element that gave the stories they wrote an imperfect but unaltered honesty. The technical problems in each story were *proof* of the text *having been live* and co-authored:

> I had this idea from this project, you were tweeting and we were all tweeting it a bit and on Facebook, the truthfulness of it actually being live, of it being unplanned and a bit messy and the fact of *is it going to run into a dead end;* that was really important: that it changes point of view and perspective and I think tense as well… My writing does that as well. It's just that I clean it up a bit before I show anybody!

I asked whether Jenn Ashworth thought it possible that such a story would be a good candidate for a proper manuscript through redrafting:

> [I]t would involve loads and loads of editing so that it wouldn't be so fragmented. But I don't know, maybe what it is would be completely lost if you tried to edit it all and clean it up.

Even so, for Ashworth this kind of writing was reportedly similar in some respects to her own first draft approach.

However, the language that Ross Raisin used to compare his own writing process to the Storyjacker process hints at two entirely different mindsets for writing. One is about conjuring up 'your own fictional dream… outside of anybody else' with 'complete autonomy' over it. And the other, the game method of writing, is to do with being 'nimble and thinking on your feet'. The second way seems to challenge the writer but in different way which is 'in no way akin' to Ross' normal approach but which is part of the game's appeal.

Writer responses to their stories

Some authors considered their story a relative triumph over adversity. Breeze was impressed by the consistency of the story when faced with such a 'mix of challenges and twists', and Ashworth described an entertainment arising from the 'humour of it, and the sheer desperation involved in responding to some of the prompts'. In interview, Raisin agreed: 'it seems part of the fun that the through line is quirky' in the stories. Murray reported her frustration at the draft that lacked a redraft. A dead dog that was discovered in the *Neighbourhood Watch* story and never satisfactorily explained, summed this up. Dealing with this and other small changes would improve the story's coherence:

> I felt we hadn't got there yet. Like even all three of us, as writers. We would shoehorn a bit in the middle.

What Murray describes as not there yet is the failure to achieve consensus on what the story means, as defined earlier with reference to McKee, Miller and others, coined by McKee's *controlling idea* (1999:115). Although the controlling idea is to some extent replicated in the game by the suggested plot element (Figure 6.4) it is clear that this element has been lost so that the authors silently at odds over what the story is about. What indicates this divergence most is the difference between writer summaries of their story's plotline in a subsequent survey received by all. Between the end of the game and the surveys and interviews there was no practical opportunity to develop a retrospective language of intent between the players, who were generally strangers to one another. Therefore the differences in describing the story are not affected by any general agreements or disputes about the meaning of the text. Rather, they are from assumptions the writer developed whilst writing the story.
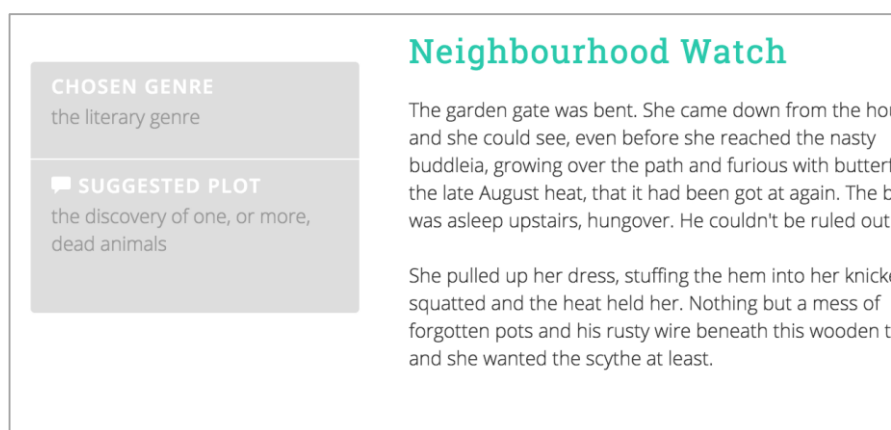

Neighbourhood Watch

CHOSEN GENRE
the literary genre

💬 SUGGESTED PLOT
the discovery of one, or more, dead animals

The garden gate was bent. She came down from the ho[...] and she could see, even before she reached the nasty buddleia, growing over the path and furious with butterf[...] the late August heat, that it had been got at again. The b[...] was asleep upstairs, hungover. He couldn't be ruled out [...]

She pulled up her dress, stuffing the hem into her knick[...] squatted and the heat held her. Nothing but a mess of [...] forgotten pots and his rusty wire beneath this wooden t[...] and she wanted the scythe at least.

Figure 6.4 – Suggested Plot element to some extent represents McKee's controlling idea

Murray's description of *Neighbourhood Watch*, '[o]ne woman hits breaking point on a hot summer's day', excludes any mention of the shadowy male character in the house and reflects her general feeling that the piece should have been more about the female protagonist: 'I wanted her to do more things without the big man…'. Her description gives the protagonist the space that was not present in the story.

Whitehouse's use of gothic imagery and 'dark as oil' internalised language about the same piece, '[a] tense, dark-as-oil glimpse into an unusual and dangerous household, where an uncertain, unhealthy relationship is about to end, much to the concern of the neighbours' reflects his own dark influence on the piece, and perhaps his focus on the man inside the house. Whitehouse imagines a drastic end

to the relationship, even though it is not actually on the page; such is his commitment to his own vision.

Likewise, in describing *Arpège on the landing*, Hogan inserts an elderly anthropologist (never described as such in the text) into the story summary that he reported in interview being thematically attached to:

> An elderly anthropologist returns to see the young man who is infatuated with her…

In contrast, Jenn is more disposed to thinking of the returning figure in the story as the someone's mother coming home.

> Strange, slightly incoherent tale about someone's mother coming home with an envelope of slides and a dodgy back-story...

When we review the story we can see that it was she who had characterised her as such.

What is interesting is how difficult it is for these writers to comprehend these stories as finite stories. Unlike finite stories that have tight arrangements of events and characters, these have ambiguities and non-sequiturs, inconsistencies that require the writer/reader to take the events and mould them to fit their own *dodgy back story*. Arguably the creative possibilities of the story are still at work in the authors' understandings about its meaning. As we will see, some of this sense of possibility is communicated to readers in the critical panel, enriching their own sense of each story's meaning. Other elements, such as the shared anecdote, are almost certainly lost after the game.

Appendix 13 - Links to critically reviewed stories

Story name	Link
Neighbourhood Watch	http://www.storyjacker.net/bambooGame.php?storyID=164
Chives in Hot Water	http://www.storyjacker.net/twistedGame.php?storyid=121&&order=1
Nightmare in Subtopia	http://www.storyjacker.net/bambooGame.php?storyID=112
The Inevitability of Joy	http://storyjacker.net/bambooGame.php?storyID=55
Genesis	http://storyjacker.net/bambooGame.php?storyID=135
2 People Called Ross and Your Best Friend..	http://www.storyjacker.net/twistedGame.php?storyid=116&&order=1
How I LOST MY MIND	http://www.storyjacker.net/bambooGame.php?storyID=111
Bishop and Bomb	http://www.storyjacker.net/twistedGame.php?storyid=108&&order=1
Arpège on the Landing	http://www.storyjacker.net/bambooGame.php?storyID=191
Teddy Bear's Picnic	http://www.storyjacker.net/bambooGame.php?storyID=57
I wish I'd never met him	http://storyjacker.net/bambooGame.php?storyID=165
Oats and Anthrax	http://www.storyjacker.net/bambooGame.php?storyID=95
Ben, James and Alma	http://www.storyjacker.net/twistedGame.php?storyid=109&&order=1
You are Melting	http://www.storyjacker.net/twistedGame.php?storyid=92&&order=1

Appendix 14 - Blog piece documenting Crowdscript prototype – April 2013

New scriptwriting platform prototype: Crowdscript

By DAVID JACKSON on THU 11 APRIL 2013 · LEAVE A COMMENT

The focus of my recent work has been on a gamified scriptwriting environment called Crowdscript. Here I outline the model of writing it promotes and how it develops points raised by the previous Storyjacker test.

One of the pieces of feedback that I receive from a valued tester of the first Storyjacker prototype was this:

> 'One of the things I like about writing is having an initial idea and then having a whole load of other ideas about where I can go with it, what will happen and how it will pay off… [S]tarting a story and then handing it over to someone else to complete or continue means… that I don't get to tell a story. And so the most important part of writing (for me, at least) is taken away.'

This was an important insight I thought, because it deals with why we write in the first place: to tell a (whole) story – because a story pays off. Brandt (2004) refers to this pay off as a 'functional performative determination'; different types or genres of narrative, he comments, have different determinations: a joke must be funny and a fable didactic. But each narrative has 'its finite extension, thereby allowing listeners and readers to know when to stop waiting for more input and to start interpreting'. It is this interpretation that pays off for the writer and reader – giving the satisfaction (or not) of new ideas, perspectives and, above all, meanings to consider.

That every writer should have access to the pay off was a leading principle as I developed the writing model for the Crowdscript scriptwriting platform. Here I offer its three guiding principles.

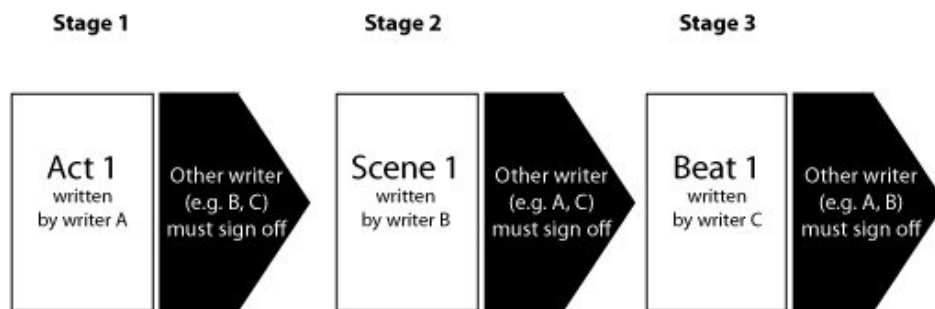**Crowdscript scriptwriting development model**

1. Grow the script from a story arc - small to big
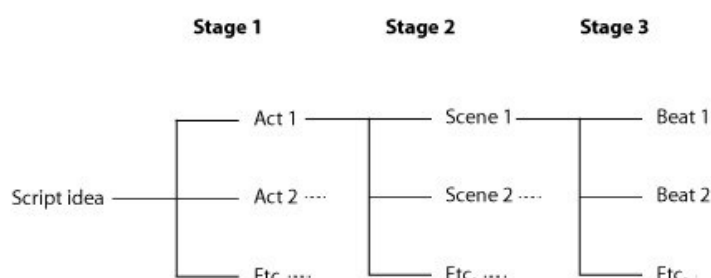
Whereas the first Storyjacker platform was episodic and encouraged disruption of narrative development, Crowdscript builds the narrative organically encouraging an overall view of the story to emerge before developing further.

Writers progress through the production of a script in stages starting with a plot before moving on to the scene structure and then the scriptwriting itself: the story is written in macro terms before more detail is added. All writers gain a sense of, and can develop, the story's overall meaning.
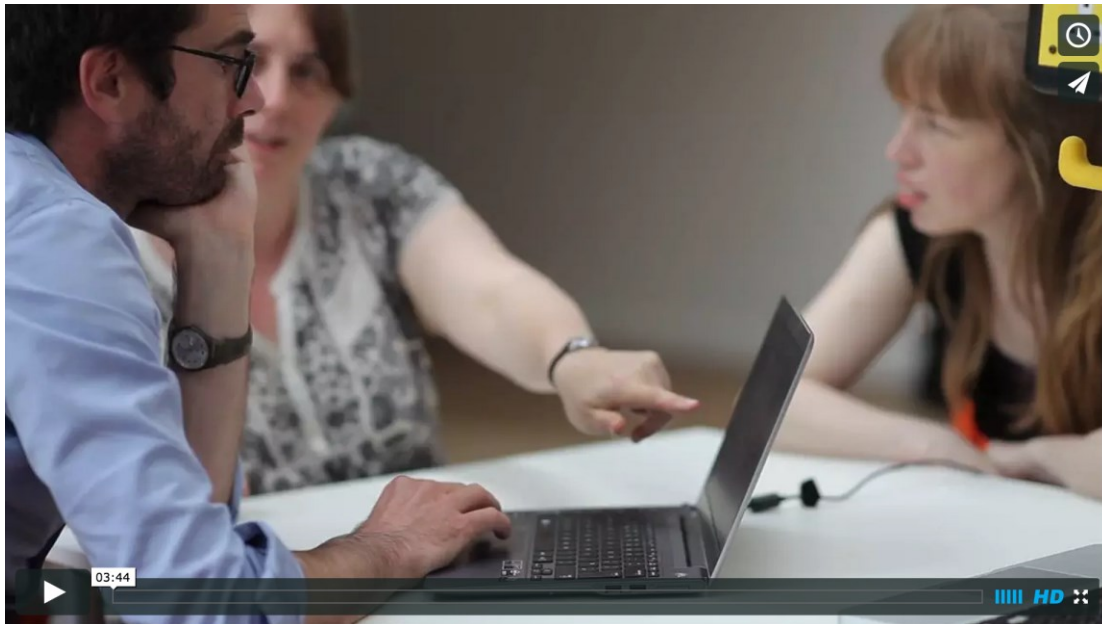
2. Work collaboratively to move from one stage to the next

Stage 1

Act 1
written
by writer A

Other writer
(e.g. B, C)
must sign off

Stage 2

Scene 1
written
by writer B

Other writer
(e.g. A, C)
must sign off

Stage 3

Beat 1
written
by writer C

Other writer
(e.g. A, B)
must sign off

The research purpose of the scriptwriting platform is to test the effect of game-like mechanisms on creative collaboration. A win-lose aspect to each contribution from the writer is that everything must be signed off by another writer to progress. Whilst this approach has potential shortcomings (development being hampered by bad judgement and bias) it gives the process a robust simplicity.

To heighten the effect of this win/lose mechanism, those with more signed-off contributions gain a higher level of credit within the script that accurately reflects their overall contribution to the final script in relation to other writers.

Appendix 15 – Manchester Metropolitan University academics discussing educational potential of Storyjacker

Link: https://vimeo.com/99773383