Available online at www.sciencedirect.com

ScienceDirect

Computers and Composition 37 (2015) 31–43

Computers and Composition

www.elsevier.com/locate/compcom

Textual Adventures: Writing and Game Development in the Undergraduate Classroom

Brian D. Ballentine *

Coordinator, Professional Writing & Editing, Department of English, 1503 University Ave. West Virginia University, Morgantown, WV 26506

Abstract

Building on scholarship in video game studies, this article argues that rather than writing about games as textual artifacts or playing games to reveal what they can teach us about writing, we should design curricula that introduce students to all of the writing that supports a successful game. The broader claim is that good writing leads to good software. In this case the software in question just happens to be a video game. The software and information technology industries value skilled writers, and those involved with writing pedagogy should continue to explore new methods for preparing students for these opportunities. Building on existing narratological approaches to teaching games is recommended as a place to begin. This article documents a specific endeavor to teach writing through software and game development. The article demonstrates how students experience the entire software development life cycle and its many writing challenges while developing their own text-based adventure games from the ground up.

Keywords: Video games; Writing pedagogy; Development; Software; Narrative; Professional writing; Technical writing

Prior to completing his Ph.D. at Case Western Reserve University, Brian Ballentine was a senior software engineer for Marconi Medical and then Philips Medical Systems designing user-interfaces for web-based radiology applications and specializing in human computer interaction. This past work experience ties to his current research interests that include open source software, technical and professional writing, digital humanities, and intellectual property. Ballentine is currently an associate professor and coordinator for the Professional Writing and Editing program at West Virginia University.

For researchers who pursue video games, 2008 was a banner year. The journals *Computers and Composition* and *Computers and Composition Online* published special issues dedicated to "Reading Games: Composition, Literacy, and Video Gaming." Likewise, the journal *Technical Communication* released a special issue on "3D Virtual Worlds and Technical Communication." Most of the authors in those pieces noted milestones in the broadening field of game studies including work tying games to learning and literacy (Gee, 2003), work demonstrating the rhetorical aspects of games and how they construct arguments (Bogost, 2007), work exploring ludology and the study of gameplay (Juul, 2005), and work positioning games in a larger complex of transmedia storytelling (Jenkins, 2006). And, scholars in the humanities continued with important research theorizing video games (Perron & Wolf, 2009) as well as why they "matter" culturally (Bissell, 2011) and how they can continue helping us learn (Squire, 2011). Humanities scholars, in

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +304 293 9704.
E-mail address: brian.ballentine@mail.wvu.edu

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.compcom.2015.06.003
8755-4615/

particular, have mined games and game play for what they reveal about race, class, gender, identity, and the body (Burn, 2006; Carr, 2006; Gregersen & Torben, 2009). Conferences such as the Association of Teachers of Technical Writing, the Conference on College Composition and Communication, and Computers and Writing have seen a consistent number of panels dedicated to games each year. Indeed, scholarly work on games and game theory continues to be published in collections and major journals related to rhetoric and composition as well as professional and technical communication.

As for the future trajectory of games, in a 2011 piece in *Computers and Composition* titled, "Computers and Composition 20/20: A Conversation Piece, or What Some Very Smart People Have to Say about the Future," Douglas Eyman wrote:

> Two locations of writing that I think will become more prevalent and more important to our development of writing pedagogies are on mobile devices and within virtual environments (including digital games). Indeed, these two locations may well intersect, as the practices and literacies of gaming move fluidly from the virtual space of the game to the physical realm. (Walker et al., p. 329)

I, too, believe that more can be done with games in terms of pedagogical advancements for writing curricula, and the remainder of this article discusses the design, implementation, and the outcomes from teaching an undergraduate writing course dedicated to video game development. The course was designed to specifically target connections between writing, video games, and software development broadly defined. Teaching video game development at the undergraduate level was at least partially inspired (and justified) by an observation Eyman made in the 2008 special issue of *Technical Communication* dedicated to virtual worlds:

> games are all constructed systems that go through the same development cycles and business processes that any computer application requires; and as such, they provide the same opportunities for technical communicators to provide the skills and expertise that they bring to any systems development project. (p. 243)

While the bulk of Eyman's article was dedicated to fleshing out a "theoretical model that links multiplayer game ecologies to the work and concerns of technical communicators" (2008, p. 246), my focus is explicating a course that capitalized on Eyman's systems observation and exposed students to the entire software development cycle as well as all of the writing activities that are tied to that cycle. In this case, the software in question just happened to be a video game. The connection between the development cycle and writing is important not just because the software industry employs a great number of technical communicators (Lanier, 2009) but because I wanted students to leave the course with the larger understanding that good writing leads to good software. That is, I was less concerned about the possibility that technical communicators "can write themselves into the game industry" and more interested in using games to model development broadly defined (Eyman, 2008, p. 246).

The qualifier "broadly defined" appended to the software development life cycle is necessary because there is not one single approach to the development process, and as I remind my students, no two development environments and their resources will be the same. Development processes may be driven by a particular workplace or corporate culture, but how teams of developers approach building software is influenced heavily by a team's project manager and his or her development philosophy. Borrowing from Alice Robison's (2008) ethnographic scholarship and her findings revealing how "the principles of video game design are surprisingly similar to the principles of creating any successful curriculum" (p. 362), this article demonstrates how a writing instructor may position him or herself as both "a teacher and a manager" (p. 364) in a course dedicated to writing and game development. This article will proceed by providing an overview of the course, a discussion of the development cycle, and an examination of the text-based adventure development software selected for the course, as well as offer details on how student writing and presentation requirements were tied to game development. The article concludes with observations on the course outcomes.

1. The undergraduate gaming course

The formal title for the gaming course was "Narrative and Video Game Design." The course was offered for the first time in the spring 2012 semester as part of my Department of English's Professional Writing and Editing program. As I discussed with my 22 person class, I am not at all suggesting that by exploring narratological features at play in video games that the course was doing anything new. There is a long history of scholarly debate on connections and influences