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This article was originally published in *The Proceedings of the Annual Computers and Writing Conference* in 2018.

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Possibility and Play: Ludonarratology as Liberating Praxis

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Studying and composing ergodic media like interactive fiction can be one way of liberating students from the constraints of linear textual composition, encouraging them to explore and experiment with multimodality and remediation. A pedagogy that incorporates narratology and ludology teaches awareness of the remediation of narrative into digital, ludic media, and creates opportunities for the transfer of nonlinear, interactive writing practices back into more conventional writing. This paper describes an example of this pedagogical approach in a Writing for Video Games course, and the preliminary steps toward understanding how such praxis might transfer to writing in new contexts.

By now, it should be a given that our students' curricular and extracurricular lives are intertwined with multimodal, nonlinear, digital reading and composing practices, priming them to positively respond to pedagogies that "de-naturalize the established order" of linear and static textual studies (Strasma, 2001, p. 270). Multimodal composition and remediation (Alexander and Rhodes, 2014; DePalma and Alexander, 2015; Murray, 2009; Selfe, 2007; Shipka, 2005 and 2011), for example, has become a common feature in rhetoric and composition courses, helping students attempt to connect the composing they do outside the classroom with what they practice in it. In her 2017 contribution to the *Computers and Writing Conference* proceedings, Wendi Sierra provides an overview of the field of scholarship focused on incorporating video games into the writing classroom, from James Paul Gee's (2003) *What Video Games Have to Teach Us about Learning and Literacy* to Eric Klopfer, Scott Osterweil, and Katie Salen's (2009) twelve models, to Douglas Eyman and Andrea D. Davis's edited collection (2016) *Play-Write: Digital Rhetoric, Writing, Games*. Sierra emphasizes the opportunity to move from a play-based pedagogy to a maker-based pedagogy, where we not only use games as texts to study through play, but also develop effective pedagogies in the design of a games as *composition*. This essay will describe how a former student in my Writing for Video Games class, inspired by the discourse and practice of both narratology and ludology, composed a non-linear, dynamic senior thesis in literary criticism using Twine, which in turn inspired me to begin preliminary steps toward better understanding how the praxis of

studying and composing interactive narratives can transfer to other writing contexts. The results of this inquiry may offer helpful insights for others incorporating interactive mediums into their pedagogy.

The Question of Transfer

General education writing programs are built upon the outdated banking model of education, or the assumption that the “skills” learned in an introductory writing requirement will transfer to all other writing situations in a students’ academic career. Countering this assumption, scholarship in learning transfer (DePalma and Ringer, 2014; ; Nowacek, 2011; Robertson, Taczak and Yancey, 2012; Wardle, 2009), though diverse in approach and terminology, agrees with the view of “transfer as a dynamic activity in which writers have the agency to both draw from and reshape writing knowledge to suit and influence writing contexts” (DePalma, 2015, p. 616). Through purposeful metacognition, students are able to “[make] the learning in one context more available in the other” (Shepherd, 2018, p. 109). In a composition course utilizing multimodal composing and remediation, and in my specific case interactive narratives, with an eye to transfer into composing contexts beyond that classroom, the instructor can facilitate active metacognition, and Shepherd and DePalma suggest two intriguing approaches: the construction of a “theory of writing” (Shepherd, 2018), and a “tracing” heuristic (DePalma, 2015).

Shepherd stresses that when students construct their own theory of writing from past experiences, contextualized by current and projected composing practices, they are better able to “*perceive* learning contexts as being connected” (2018, p. 110, emphasis in original). To facilitate this connection-making, DePalma (2015) designs a heuristic he calls “tracing,” specifically for the process of remediation in his course, where students articulate the various moves their text makes as it traverses media, reflecting “on the full range of rhetorical resources that they might use” (2015, p. 635). My Writing for Video Games students informally engaged in both approaches as they studied and practiced narratology and ludology, remediating past knowledge and contexts of narrative into multimodal, digital platforms for composing interactive narratives. This remediation of narratology by ludology became a theory of writing that my students, to the great chagrin of narratologists and ludologists alike, lovingly called *ludonarratology*.

Ludonarratology and the Writing for Video Games Course

Writing for Video Games is a junior-level advanced creative writing course, where students work in groups of three to design and compose an interactive

narrative: a text-adventure, a side-scrolling or platformer RPG, or even a mod adventure for an existing game such as *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda, 2011) or *Fallout 3* (Bethesda, 2008). The course was originally designed to provide a taste of composing in platforms outside of the conventional forms and genres, while still remaining firmly entrenched in the narrative tradition. Thus, students played narrative-based video games like *What Remains of Edith Finch* (2017) and text-adventures like *Zork I* (1980), and studied narrative concepts like time, plot, and verisimilitude via theorists like Chatman (1978) and Genette (1996) within the contexts of these interactive mediums. The course also used portions of Salen and Zimmerman's (2004) *Rules of Play* to layer ludic concepts into the theory and practice of narrative, with a strong emphasis on narrative play. But the text chosen in the initial design of the course as the key entry point into thinking of the potential of narrative in digital mediums was Janet Horowitz Murray's (1997) *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, with an emphasis on her "aesthetics of the medium" (97), specifically *immersion* and *agency*.

When I took over the class, I stayed relatively true to the original syllabus, despite the limitations of Murray's approach. Markku Eskelinen (2012), for example, points out that Murray's singular focus on narrative in "only one unified digital medium" ignores the wide array of digital media currently exploring the possibilities of form and genre in favor of a "speculative development of virtual worlds" (p. 17). Gordon Calleja (2011) acknowledges Murray's contributions to the concepts of immersion and agency but demonstrates that such concepts are far more complex than she, or Salen and Zimmerman (2004), present them. To address these limitations, I complimented Murray with her contemporary Espen J. Aarseth (1997), using portions of *Cybertext* that explored the differences between ergodic and nonergodic media. In addition, I brought in Ian Bogost's (2008) "The Rhetoric of Video Games" to provide another angle into the potential of ludology in writing studies.

The class interrogated theories of narrative, narrative play, and game play to better understand how ludology can help remediate narrative practice and construct new roles and reading/interacting practices from which reader-players to make meaning (Frasca, 1999). They struggled with what could and could not be an ergodic text, for although Aarseth (1997) defines it as a text that requires "nontrivial effort...required to allow the reader to traverse the text" (p. 1), the students argued—as Aarseth claims traditional literary theorists argue—about what "nontrivial effort" might mean. Is the traversing of a text always material, or can it still be considered interactive if it is a mental process? Is linear but branching narrative based on reader-player choice truly ergodic? Is the process of play in the navigation of that text meaningful (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004)? Does it "make claims about the cultural, social, or

material aspects of human experience” (Bogost, 2008, p. 123)? In this praxis there emerged a shift in students’ perception of narrative, moving away from a linear story for passive consumption and into the idea of a space of possibility, where they construct the rules of play that enable “free movement within a more rigid structure” (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004, p. 304), turning the control of meaning-making over to their reader-players. Our metacognitive discussions framed their writing as part of a complex system, where choice becomes the affective behavior that determines meaning: choices made by the writer are influenced by the material elements of the platform, by narrative and social and cultural conventions, and by the anticipated behaviors of their imagined reader-players; similarly, once the text leaves the writer’s control, choices made by the reader-player in interpretation and use of the text are influenced by the other elements of the system, and in turn affect those elements.

By the third year of teaching the course (2017), I had not yet encountered Shepherd (2018), so my conception of the possibility of learning transfer was influenced mostly by James Paul Gee (2003) and an intriguing chapter by David Williamson Shaffer (2012) that outlined a sophisticated model of tracking the epistemic frame—the grammar of discourse that informs practice—from one situational context to another. While I was not prepared to design a study at the level of Shaffer’s, I was trying to facilitate the students’ own entrance into the community of practice of writers of ergodic texts, where the grammar of discourse—the ways of “talking, listening, writing, reading, acting, interacting” with the theories, texts, tools, and platforms of digital authoring (Gee, 2003, p. 719)—would become Shepherd’s (2018) “theory of writing” (p. 110). This theory of writing, as mentioned earlier, collectively came to be called *ludonarratology*, as the students maintained their loyalty to narratology, but understood how it could be complicated and remediated by ludology. Their favorite theorists, in no small part because of the emphasis in the syllabus, but also because of the accessibility of the writing, were Salen and Zimmerman (2004) and Murray (1997), from which came the terms that they defined their praxis: *immersion* and *agency*.

Immersion

Students understood immersion best as the ability to transport the audience into a constructed reality, and “in a participatory medium, immersion implies learning to swim, to do the things that the new environment makes possible” (Murray, 1997, p. 99). Salen and Zimmerman’s (2004) assert that such immersion is not the result of sensual transportation, but “an engagement that occurs *through play itself*” (p. 451, emphasis in original). In ergodic, in-

teractive narratives, the materiality of the form—links, buttons, 360-degree view spaces—is an intricate part of the constructed “world,” and reader-player interaction with it through meaningful play becomes the very element that makes immersion possible. This sort of immersion is quite different from immersion in nonergodic media, where awareness of the materiality of the form can actually act as an inhibitor (Murray, 1997). Yet students began to think of instances of writing in nonergodic forms where interaction with the medium may *not* be an obstacle to immersion, an example of forward-reaching learning transfer, reflecting “on future contexts where new knowledge can be used” (Shepherd, 2018, p. 109). Specifically, students pointed to agency as a means of this meaning-making possibility.

Agency

The pleasure of play, or the reward experienced as a result of participatory engagement, is a “combination of acting and interpreting responses to those actions” (Calleja, 2011, p. 56). Agency, then, is the “satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices (Murray, 1997) which comes from Aarseth’s (1997) nontrivial effort. This is often achieved through the participatory pleasure reader-players experience in re-assembling the nonlinear structure of the narrative, making meaning out of the process of navigation, but even linear-based journeys, including branching narratives, can still produce this pleasure. Whether a journey through a labyrinth, like the text-adventure *Zork I* (1980), a problem-solving “puzzle”—logical, spatial, psychological, social—or even the hypertextual rhizomatic system, where navigation occurs through the traversing of linked points with no center, students recognized the effects of constructing a space of possibility where participation, interpretation, and reassembly is necessary for meaning-making (Murray, 1997; Calleja, 2011; Bogost, 2008). Students also began to articulate connections between what they already knew of narrative, such as Chatman’s (1978) theories of suspense and surprise, in these new ludological terms, demonstrating backward-reaching learning transfer, or thinking “back on past learning when [they] encounter a new learning challenge” (Shepherd, 2018, p. 109). When asked if agency of this kind is possible in nonergodic media, one student brought up the HBO television series *Westworld* (2016), where pleasure comes from the reassembly of the nonlinear narrative in the week between episodes. Though such mental interaction is not new in literature, film, and other nonergodic art forms, and though it does not come from an interaction with the material nature of the medium itself, still students argued for the power of such interaction, where interpretations would be validated in the next week’s episode. Here they were making active connections

between what they were studying and practicing in the class, and possible writing contexts in the future, ergodic or nonergodic.

The Transfer of Ludonarrative Practice

I've already traced some of the practices observed in the course that Shephard (2018), DePalma (2015), and Shaffer (2016) have described as necessary for making transfer possible, but what made this nebulous possibility far more concrete for me was the English B.A. thesis of one of my former gaming students, Jimmy Evans (2017)¹. The thesis itself falls into a standard genre of literary criticism, in this case that "an analysis of Bakhtin's chronotopes in *The Witcher 3* reveals how the procedurality of video games suggest a refined heteroglossic form" (Evans, 2017). In fact, early drafts of the thesis followed a standard paper-essay form: linear, nonergodic, conventional. But in an argument about branching narrative, about choice and consequence, about participation and process, Jimmy felt compelled to make the form of his essay match the content. As he writes, "*The Witcher* wants to make sure you understand that choices have consequences," and so he leverages the ludonarrative elements of immersion and agency that he studied and practiced in the game writing class.

(Critical Inventory)(References)

"What is The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt?"

**A remediation of Slavic folklore as an open-world action
Role-playing game?**

**The third installment in the video game adaptation of Polish
fantasy author Andrzej Sapkowski's fiction?**

**A contract between game developer CD Projekt Red and the
player for the possibility of Witcher-like play?**

**A lucrative commercial product tie-in packaged and sold at
retail stores and for digital download?**

A million-plus lines of code?

Figure 1. Launch page for "Forms of Time in The Witcher 3"

Using Twine, an open-source platform for nonlinear storytelling, Jimmy immediately structured his essay as a series of open-ended choices for the reader, a labyrinthine system where "the possibility of getting lost or not succeeding heightens players' spatial involvement" (Calleja, 2011, p. 76). At the

¹ All citations of student work and survey responses used with student consent and IRB approval

launch page, we are introduced to a title and two links to “Critical Inventory” and “References,” with no direction on how to proceed. We must explore and interpret the consequences of our nontrivial navigation in relation to the content of his argument.

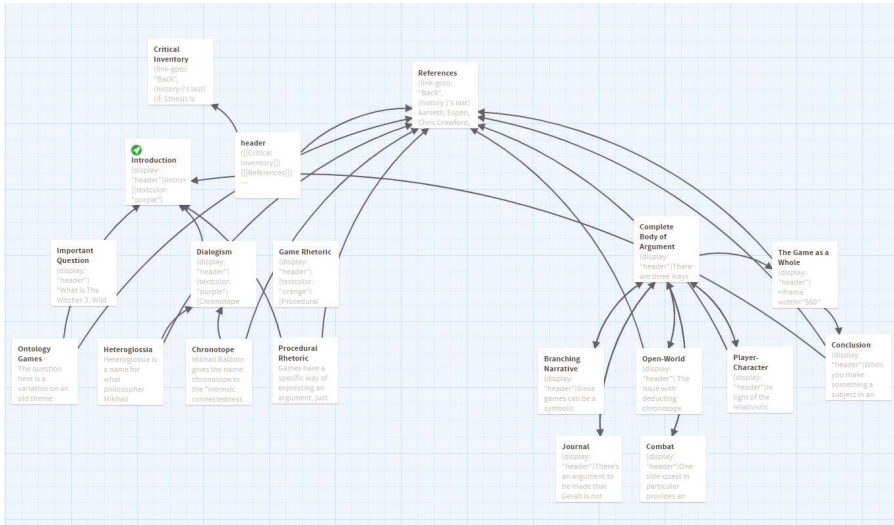


Figure 2. The “labyrinth” of “Forms of Time in *The Witcher 3*”

The “Critical Inventory” grows in length as we navigate through his thesis, adding specific definitions (“procedurality” and “hypertext,” for example) and his thesis statement. The link remains at the top of our page throughout, enabling us to return to those critical concepts (our inventory) or the “References” as we need to. Choice determines where the reader-player begins, and how the thesis will be assembled, so even as the essay explores the procedurality of *The Witcher 3* (2015), it utilizes procedurality itself, calling attention to the subversion of the thesis genre.

Reader-player choices have immediate outcomes, making the *play* of interacting with this essay *meaningful* as new “inventory items” and content are unlocked. New options appear, and the reader-player becomes immersed in the structural elements of the essay itself, where those elements directly represent the theoretical concepts that frame the analysis. Agency develops in the discovery of the pattern of this labyrinth. Though the argument itself remains within the conventions of discourse for an English thesis—heavy paragraphs, integrated references, examinations of multimodal artifacts from the game of study—the ludic activity turns the typically nonergodic form into an ergodic one.

Jimmy’s thesis is an example of the transfer of learning in the praxis of designing ergodic media from one composing context to another, both in

how he constructs the text in the new context, and his ability to articulate the grammar of discourse—or the theory of writing—that informs that practice. But Jimmy did not necessarily do this all on his own; he frequently consulted with me, and I would prompt him to consider the praxis of Writing for Video Games. The experience with Jimmy made me wonder if this sort of learning transfer was happening with other students from the class: the construction of texts in new contexts using ludonarrative knowledge, and/or the articulation of the knowledge, regardless of the success of practice. My decision to pursue this question of transfer occurred too late in the Fall 2017 course to have students engage in DePalma's (2015) tracing heuristic, but I adopted a simplified version of the concept in my own tracking of students' articulation and possible transfer in practice of the ludonarrative theory of writing. Since the tracing heuristic means to facilitate the development of "an awareness of what [students] might transfer" (DePalma, 2015, p. 635), I designed an IRB approved online survey with open-ended questions asking students to describe their writing after the course, the course knowledge they recalled, and how that knowledge possibly affected their conceptualization and practice of writing. I deliberately avoided using any specific theory in the questions, other than to ask how "writing interactive narratives" affected their post-course writing, avoiding leading respondents toward the answers I was hoping for, so that any transfer of the grammar of discourse might be more easily recognizable. All forty-five students who took Writing for Video Game since Fall of 2015 were surveyed; of those forty-five, ten responded as of the writing of this paper: five from Fall 2017, three from Fall 2016, and two from Fall 2015. Admittedly, those that responded likely did so *because* of their enculturation in the ludonarrative discourse and practice.

Six of the respondents reference the ludic concept "space of possibility" in how they now conceptualize any piece of writing in the design phase. All ten describe a new awareness of form and genre conventions, audience interaction with "rules" of the text as they read and interpret, and intertextual networks through references and allusions. As a result, respondents claim to spend more time in the design phase of their writing, including utilizing branching narrative mapping tools.

Immersion and *agency* consistently appear in the survey responses, sometimes directly referenced, and sometimes represented as "interaction" and "engagement." The respondents articulate a sophisticated awareness of the relationship between the reader-player and the text, specifically paying attention to the ways in which the reader-player might actively engage with elements of the text. Five of the respondents said they composed ergodic media, from actual video games to experimental narratives composed in webspaces, but even those that only composed nonergodic media framed their writing as

invitations for deeper, meaningful engagement. They expressed a conscious attention to the world constructed within their texts, always questioning the immersive quality. The references to engagement recall Murray's (1997) agency-through-reward description, the "satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results" (p. 126). Respondents reported taking approaches to narrative that release control of interpretation to the reader-player, so that satisfaction comes through discovery. A screenwriting major, for example, explained the necessity of designing a story structure that requires audience participation to draw conclusions about the characters and understand the deeper meaning of the plot.

The survey responses, then, indicated at least a transfer of ludonarrative praxis in the way that respondents conceptualize and approach subsequent writing situations.

Toward the Future

For my own pedagogy, these preliminary steps toward understanding the potential for the transfer of ludonarrative study and practice to other settings and writing situations have reaffirmed the importance of actively facilitating students' meta-awareness and reflective practices in how knowledge can be transferred between contexts—from past knowledge to current, and from current to future, specifically when praxis of one kind of composing appears quite dissimilar from another. In the Fall 2018 version of the course, I have taken to heart DePalma's (2015) suggestion that "students engage with writing scholarship that theorizes notions of literacy in expansive and varied ways" (p. 632), revisiting my course texts to include more recent scholarship on ludology, such as Calleja's (2011) *In-Game*, as well as providing opportunities for active reflection using an adapted form of the tracing heuristic. Future research will include pre- and post-test surveys measuring the extent of enculturation of the grammar of discourse, as well as interviews with students and analysis of texts they have composed after the course to evaluate how learning turns to practice in new writing contexts.

Finally, I want to stress that such an intense study of narratology and ludology is not necessary for learning transfer and is likely impossible in most composition courses. What matters is the sustained connection between theory and practice coupled with a meta-awareness of how such praxis can be utilized in new contexts. If students can articulate a theory of writing like *ludonarratology* in what they do in the creation of hypertexts, of games, of interactive narratives, and through that theory make connections to composing in both ergodic and nonergodic forms, then pedagogies incorporating multimodality, remediation, and video games can be quite liberating.

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