

Deakin University

Brooke Maggs

The Writer Between: Thieving Literary Plot to Design Game Narrative

Abstract:

This paper will trace my creative process as I move from writer of literature to games. This poses a number of challenges for the traditional writer: they must understand the reader is a player with motivations related to gameplay (solving puzzles, achievement, progression). Narrative can provide a context (a game world) and incentive (reward) for gameplay, but the challenge is to communicate the motivations of the characters within the story to the player. These challenges are tied to the ability of the writer to communicate the story to the development team and work with them to articulate it in the game. Facing these challenges meant shifting to a design approach to storytelling as a narrative designer. An approach with a revisionist methodology: thieving the Voyage and Return plot structure and retelling it with a game development team. This analysis of my writing practice shows that literary theft was crucial for considering the wider possibilities of interactivity that moves beyond reader-response theoretical understandings (Iser 1976) of how the reader constructs their understanding of the text. Given a game is an ergodic text, the player will construct the meaning of the narrative in this way and also construct their game experience. I argue writing for games requires the author to also imagine the reader's and the player's interactions, and this paper investigates the implications of this on the creative writing process.

Biographical note:

Brooke is a co-director of Burning Glass Creative where she uses her skills in writing, narrative design and production to support a variety of projects in games, book publishing and other creative industries. She helps others tell stories and chart the course for their creative work, drawing on over seven years of experience teaching games studies, user experience design, cultural studies, and project management at a tertiary level. A PhD candidate at Deakin University, Brooke researches the links between digital and traditional literature with a focus on creative practice.

Keywords:

Writing as narrative design – literary revisionism – practice-led research – game development

Introduction

Two years ago, I moved from teaching and writing in my spare time to being a freelance writer. I was recommended to The Voxel Agents as a writer (on the merit of one of my short stories which was a revisionist fairy tale) for their newest project, *The Gardens Between*, an adventure puzzle game on iOS that has no text or speech. The levels in the game are small, island-like environments or gardens that turn in 3D space when the player swipes left and right. This swiping also has the effect of moving Arina and Frendt forwards and backwards on a path that starts at the bottom of a garden and leads to the top. The goal for the player is to help Arina and Frendt take a lantern to the top of each garden and light a navigational beacon that will show them the way to the next garden. The player must solve puzzles to unlock the path to the top and in doing so, they move through a world that has strange, modern objects within these natural, surreal gardens (see fig 1). The challenge of *The Gardens Between* is to communicate the narrative (character and plot) and the gameplay (the goal of the puzzles and how to solve them) to the player without using text or speech. Communication of the story and the gameplay is largely dependent on art direction and animation and therefore the team must be highly collaborative.



(fig 1. *The Gardens Between* level design with a cassette tape in the mountain)

The Voyage and Return plot, as outlined by Christopher Booker in *The Seven Basic Plots*, gave me a common language to communicate the story to the development team, to communicate character motivations in the narrative while also considering the player's motivations in relation to puzzle solving. I will discuss how I deployed a revisionist methodology—the retelling of a conventional narrative to ‘revise’ the political or cultural views within the text—that steals the Voyage and Return plot and account for my shift in practice to work with a team to retell it with game storytelling methods.

Context

Being a writer for video games involves a shift in thinking from the traditional writer because the first thing the ‘reader’ asks when they begin is: what do I do? The answer might be explore, survive, observe, solve, form a strategy, make decisions. The fundamental difference between traditional literature and games is that games are ergodic, meaning they require ‘more than trivial effort to read’ and traverse, and the narrative is not a ‘presentation of a world but rather as that world itself’ (Aarseth 1997: 4). A world where the reader is also a player who has influence over the text. There are rules around their interactions that allow the player to achieve results (for example, solve puzzles) through their own efforts within the narrative world. These results may then allow for the progression of the game and the narrative. The player has motivations relating to gameplay and is therefore a reader of the story and a participating creator of a gameplay experience.

Player motivations are not always in line with character motivations. In an interview on telling story in games, renowned game designer and storyteller, Tim Schafer, has stated:

I think you have to do two things at once. You have to provide the character with motivation and you have to provide the player with motivation. Because the character will care about things that the player will not necessarily care about (Schafer in Pearce 2003).

Storytelling in games requires the writer to consider how player goals and motivations are being conveyed and how character motivations are being communicated in the context of the narrative.

The player engages with the text on a level that goes beyond interactivity proposed in reader-response theories for literature. Iser’s (1974) notion of interactivity between the reader and the text where the reader must ‘construct his own conception of the reality and hence the meaning of the text’ (Iser 1974: 40) remains, however, the player’s interactivity is broader. The player will construct the meaning of the narrative in this way and also construct their game experience or session ‘through his physical actions and game-choices’ (Mortensen 2002). From this, I argue writing for games requires the author to also imagine the reader’s and the player’s interactions. Booth (1983) proposed the concept implied reader, an ideal recipient imagined by the author, as a function of the work (Schmid 2013). The implied reader is an ideal because they can decode all stylistic, ideological and textual signs in the work. Following Mortensen (2002), I argue a game text’s implied reader is an aspect of the implied player who also has gameplay motivations that require similar decoding of textual signs that indicate how they should interact with the game world.

With this in mind, a game writer has different methods to tell story to their implied player, than the traditional literary writer. For example, the writer may script a cut-scene that plays a small narrative animation clip: here, the player may be passively observing the story. All of these storytelling tools require other members of the development team (the animator to move the characters in cutscenes, the programmer to code the camera movement, the game designer to dictate the mechanics and pacing of the gameplay) and therefore, the writer’s creative practice requires team-wide communication.

What follows is an investigation into my creative writing practice using my experience in a game development studio writing *The Gardens Between* as a case study. Smith (2009) talks of practice-led research as two overlapping positions. The first is that the creative work is research in itself and generates a form of research. Candy (2006) uses the term practice-based research for this. The second position is that creative practice itself (the practitioner's training, knowledge and processes) can be reflected on and discussed in research papers. This research 'highlights the insights, conceptualization and theorization which can arise when artists reflect on and document their own creative practice' (Smith 2009: 5) and is what Candy (2006) calls practice-led research. I will be using this definition of practice-led research while acknowledging 'practice-led' and 'practice-based' are shifting terms as more ground is explored in the area of practice research. I will reflect on how my change from writer to narrative design led to a form of literary revisionism that involved thieving *The Voyage and Return* structure and articulating it with game storytelling methods.

The voyage and return: thieving literary plot

In his book, *The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories*, Christopher Booker (2004) presents a Jungian-based analysis of seven patterns of storytelling in Western culture. Booker has shown that upon analysis, there can be common themes throughout narrative works that resonate on a subconscious level and therefore, have an enduring 'language' that can translate and operate in many narratives in slightly different ways.

The Voyage and Return is one such pattern where the main characters are '... abruptly transported out of their "normal" world and into an abnormal world, and eventually back to where they began' (Booker 2004:105). Booker cites the Epic of Gilgamesh as one of the earliest stories to use this plot and follows up with a variety of works such as *Alice in Wonderland*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *Peter Pan* and *Gulliver's Travels*. *The Voyage and Return* has five stages that culminate in an adventure where protagonists are placed in a strange world in order to 'take away some crucial defining point for their sense of reality and identity' (Booker 2004: 97) and therefore they learn something they can use in the real world.

The Voyage and Return is broken up into five stages that Booker maps onto many narratives in his book. The first stage, the anticipation and 'fall', is where the protagonists are transported 'out of their familiar, limited existence, into a strange world' (Booker 2004:105). We get an idea of normality for these protagonists, such as Dorothy's life on the farm in Kansas or Alice being bored on the river bank with her sister. After falling into the strange world, down the rabbit hole or whisked away in a tornado, the story moves into the fascination stage. The protagonist goes through a period of exploration of the world that is 'exhilarating, puzzling yet never a place they can be at home' (Booker 2004: 105). We see this in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1998) where Alice quite literally is puzzled over the riddles and events, like the caucus race, early on in her story.

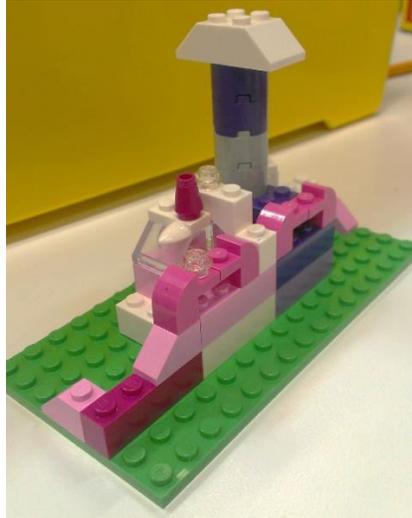
After the fascination stage comes the frustration stage where 'the mood of the adventure changes to one of [...] difficulty and oppression' and a shadow begins to intrude. This can be seen in the

Hollywood adaptation of *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), Dorothy and her group are caught in a field of deadly poppies, demonstrating a turn in their journey through Oz has become a dangerous one. As they draw closer to the Wicked Witch, the narrative enters the nightmare stage. It becomes dark and the colour treatment of the film turns considerably darker. By this point of the narrative the strange world has lost all charm, it is no longer luring and enticing. The shadow, the Wicked Witch, looms over the world and she has become so dominating that she threatens the protagonists' survival. Finally, just as the shadow in the nightmare stage closes in, the protagonist makes one final push to escape the fantasy world. Booker calls this 'the thrilling escape and return' where protagonists fulfil their 'purpose' and tumble, fall or disappear from the other world and return safely to the familiar world.

***The Gardens Between* case study: game storytelling methods in a collaborative environment**

The Gardens Between is a series of firsts: it is the first narrative driven game title for The Voxel Agents, it is their first time with a writer in the studio and it is my first game writing project. I began by writing short stories, world documents and character biographies using the artist's concept artwork, that depicted two young adventurers, Arina and Frendt, in surreal landscapes, as a source of inspiration. In story brainstorm sessions with the team, I explained my reasoning for the stories by using words natural for a storyteller like 'drama', 'conflict' and 'tension'. These terms are fundamental to me given my study of texts such as *Story* by Robert McKee (1999) and *Hero With A Thousand Faces* by Joseph Campbell (1996), though I found they were seemingly at odds with the team, especially as the game design was to be slow, observational with no time pressures. When it came to writing, I had always been a solo operative. I struggled to advocate for my expertise in a team environment and explain why drama and conflict in the story do not have to equal high-octane gameplay. Whereas my place in a team making a game with no text or speech? My writing methods were not translating to an interactive medium and a collaborative environment. I was not giving context to the puzzles—why take the lantern to the top?—or considering how to tell the story with these small, 3D levels.

In an attempt to bridge the communication gap, I took a design approach to my writing. I needed to know if we could capture a story beat in each garden using the device of one modern object per garden level. I wrote a piece of fiction to set up Arina and Frendt's friendship by describing them playing in their treehouse together, then prototyped a garden using Lego blocks (see fig. 2). I assigned a mood board, playlist and ideas for puzzles (collaborative ones in this case) to convey the tone and theme of friendship. I showed them to the team and included their feedback in new interactions. I found that, while helpful, these design packages were still not answering fundamental questions about the gameplay (why am I solving these puzzles?) and the story (who are these characters, what is this world of gardens to them and what do they want?). These 'design packages' captured a mood but did not tell a story.

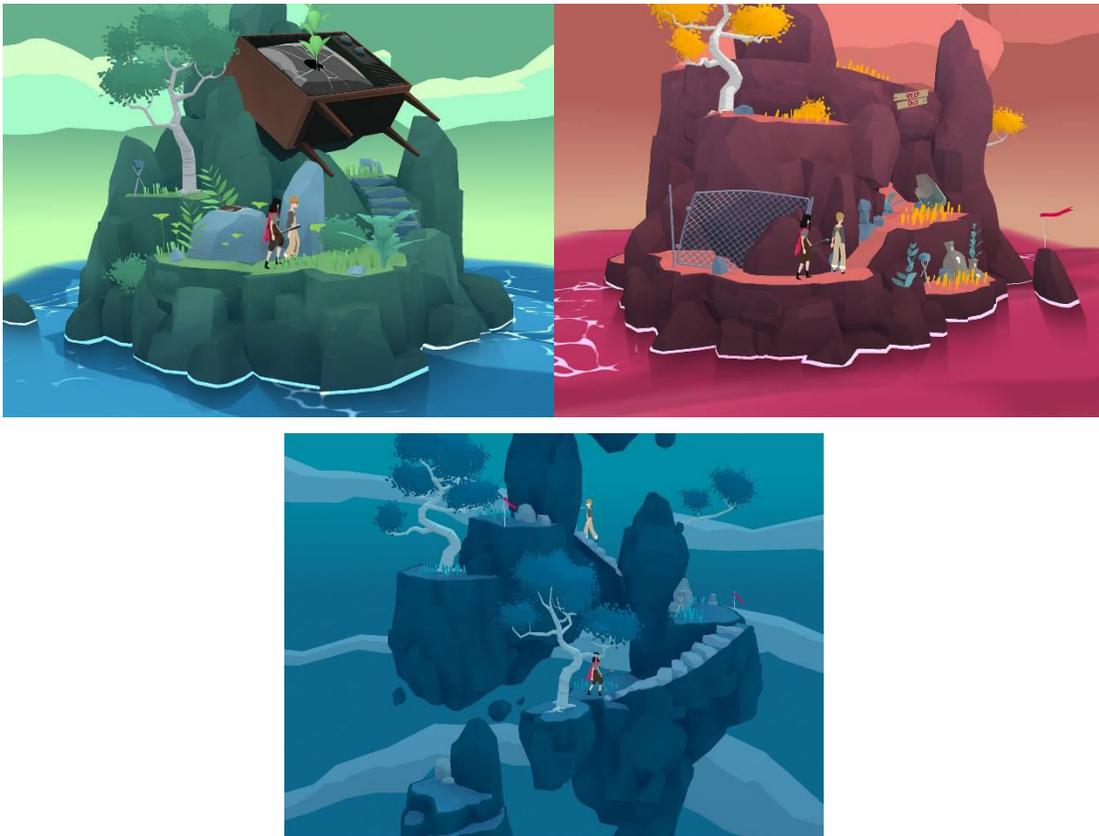


(fig. 2 An example of one of my Lego level design prototypes)

Meanwhile, the team was creating level prototypes and the artist had included a modern object in the level design as a way of attempting conveying some kind of story (see fig.3). When these prototypes were tested, we found players were rushing through levels rather than taking their time. Players wanted to know who the characters are and why their goal was to light a beacon at the top of a garden. There was no context for the players' motivations, the modern objects and no story that unfolded with causally linked events. These questions stem from the game play goal (to get the characters to the top of a garden to light a beacon) that implies a narrative quest. However, the nature of the Quest plot, another plot in Booker's (2004) book, was intensely difficult for me to identify and articulate in a game with no text or speech and that matched the slow pace of the gameplay. The quest sets a pace that drives the player forward and provides a means of progression (a string of quest items to collect, for example).

Despite these problems, further story discussions I had with the team revealed a desire to tell a story that was personal and that ends on a bittersweet note. Arriving at the story was a collaborative effort, one that happened as prototypes were built, in snippets of conversation in the studio and in our shared online chat. We decided that the general story would be about two best friends who are about to be separated. Arina's family is moving away and so she and Frenndt decide to run away. In our research, we found the Voyage and Return plot, and it was immediately appealing. In this plot, protagonists stumble onto an adventure rather than specifically setting out on a quest with an 'overwhelming sense of compulsion' (95). Their motivations are not always at the forefront of the narrative, much like Alice initially wanders through Wonderland. The 'drive' of the narrative isn't overwhelming, the structure has room for exploration. The protagonists in the Voyage and Return are puzzled by the new world (Booker 2004), just as the game design seeks to encourage players to take their time to solve puzzles.

With a structure that seemed to match player objectives to the journey of the characters, I now had to show how our story could map to it using methods specific to our game: art direction (colour, modern objects, surreal environments), gameplay (lighting a beacon), animation and no text or speech. Already, the artist had provided treatments for each stage of the Voyage and Return structure (see fig.3). He used times of day (dawn, sunset and night) for fascination, frustration and nightmare respectively. He suggested colour palettes for each stage: greens for fascination, to show growth, reds for frustration to show an impending threat, and blues for the nightmare stage, to show the surreal world had become unfriendly.



(fig 3. 'Fascination', 'frustration' and 'nightmare' art treatment and landscape design)

I used these images in a PowerPoint presentation with few dot points to propose that the gardens be a representation of Arina and Friend's friendship. It was a surreal world composed of significant memories between them that we could represent with modern objects in each environment. For example, we could now use the treehouse level we had prototyped (see fig. 4) because it had a context: it was a level with a 'fascination treatment', occurring at the start of the game, that matched the tone of friendship and play and showed a significant moment between them. In the fascination stage the gardens are lush, welcoming and inviting and have morning

lighting. They are also inviting for the player because they are small levels with simple puzzles. I listed ideas for modern objects suitable for these environments, like toys from childhood to evoke a sense of adventure and presented this to the team.



(fig. 4 ‘Treehouse’ prototype testing mood and portrayal of ‘fascination’)

My decision to actively present the story delineated a considerable shift in my role from writer to narrative designer. I was not writing prose, but lists of proposed art assets (modern objects) for the artist to pick from, story beats in the form of bullet points and I was visually charting the story (see fig.5). In *Professional Techniques for Video Game Writing*, writer and narrative designer Jay Posey (2008) explains that narrative design ‘encompasses not only the story itself but also how the story is communicated to players’ (55). A narrative designer works in a creative team and therefore requires the ability to champion their ideas and includes the work of others. Being able to use all ideas so far, including the treehouse level was a positive outcome: it meant all the work the team had done such as modeling, programming, puzzle design and animation, did not have to be thrown away. I had demonstrated how we could articulate Arina and Frendt’s story with the Voyage and Return structure with what was being built and tested and therefore was finally aligned with the game’s development.



(fig.5 Mapping the story of *The Gardens Between* to the Voyage and Return structure in the studio)

The story was accepted and this structure provided a common story language that acted as a shorthand, for example, more complex puzzles would be called the ‘nightmare stage puzzles’. It helped the team see what the story needed in order to be told. I could now communicate why ‘the real world’ at the beginning of our story needed to be flat, oppressive and unwelcoming in order to juxtapose the initial wonder that is crucial to the fascination stage of the story. In discussion with our animator, we decided to use cut-scenes to set-up the beginning and ending of the narrative using Booker’s ‘fall’ and ‘thrilling escape and return’ as narrative bookends for the game. This meant the entire telling of the story would not rely heavily on gameplay. Whereas the lantern and the beacons (critical to gameplay) reinforce the themes: they are about friendship and finding the way together through the strange world. This plot also provided flexibility: we can extend or shorten the number of gardens per narrative stage as needed. I continued to alter my practice and wrote the beginning sequence in dot points which I passed to the artist to storyboard. We would review the storyboard with the creative director and, in this way, everyone in the team had an investment in the story.

Revisionism in terms of game narrative: considering the implied narrative designer

Thieving and revising traditional plot structure was important for my creative practice as it provided a common language in the team, and also provided a way to communicate the story to the player. Where revisionism is often used to challenge or ‘thicken’ characterisation in a politicised context, as we see in Angela Carter’s *The Bloody Chamber*, this case study suggests thieving a traditional literary structure and deploying it in a digital storytelling context can extend long-standing practices of literary revisionism. While *The Bloody Chamber* extends from feminist motivations to challenge to flat characterisation, my motivations address game characters (who seemingly have no motivation) and designing story in a game context to convey character depth. What results is the revision and retelling of this plot in a new medium where the studio environment and gameplay motivations add a layer of complexity to the storytelling.

As mentioned previously, the reader is an aspect of the player who has influence over the text. Challenges I faced during the writing process allowed me to reconceptualise my role as writer to narrative designer. I argue this shift involved understanding that my implied or ideal player has agency, a ‘set of expectations that the player must fulfil for the game to “exercise its effect”’ (Aarseth 1997: 132). This means they have the ability to make meaningful action and see the results of decisions and actions in the game. To further understand this gaming revisionist methodology, it is helpful to consider that the shift from writer to narrative designer gives the work an implied narrative designer. The implied author of a work is explained as having an objective and a subjective component (Schmid 2013). The objective component is the process of encoding that involves the real author (RA) setting themselves out with ‘a different air depending on the needs of particular works’ (Booth 1961: 71). The subjective component is uncovered in the decoding aspect of the text where the implied narrative designer is ‘the textual image of [the RA] for the reader to infer’ (Shen 2011: 81), or in this case, the player to infer. Focussing on the objective component, I suggest the ‘air’ of the implied narrative designer is one of a traditional writer who is now creating a story in a collaborative team with a medium that has gameplay imperatives. A narrative designer who operates by stealing structure and making ‘all the textual choices’ (Shen 2011: 81) that comprise the work. Moving from writing for literature to games meant my textual choices or storytelling toolbox changed, and those textual choices articulated in my case study.

These textual choices appear to have a postmodern motivation as they rely on the player’s engagement with prior texts to recognise the intertextual structure of *The Gardens Between*. Players who are familiar with Dorothy being swept away by a hurricane may recognise this in the beginning of the game. In postmodern artwork, where everything quotes something else and the awareness of the text creates an ironic distance to the artwork, however, I argue that while my method revises storytelling patterns, the motivation is sincere. This is because the game asks the player to immerse themselves in the game world. To engage and read the narrative through cut-scenes, art direction and landscape design and to create their own unique experience of the game without distance.

As ‘any of the acts that produce a work can function as an indexical sign bearing this indirect form of self-expression’ (Schmid 2013), this gaming revisionist methodology does not use

textual choices to be ironic. They are a deliberate use of a familiar structure onto which a compelling story can be mapped. The Voyage and Return linked the game design imperatives (exploratory and observational) and player motivations as they relate to the puzzles and the story.

Conclusion

I have accounted for a practice that uses revisionist methodology that involves thieving plot structure and deploying it within the context of a game with no text or speech. My shift from writing traditional literature to games required me to consider readers with player motivations, to convey the motivations of characters in the story in-game, as well as be able to articulate the story to a creative team. This proposes a design approach to storytelling that thieves plot structure not for an ironic retelling but for a sincere deployment of a compelling story and immersive gameplay experience. While this practice falls within purview of the narrative designer, this paper complicates notions of the author in a game text and points to new roles and skills for writers in the digital sphere but also for those crossing disciplines to work in other creative and technology industries.

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