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PERCEPTIONS OF GAME WRITING

Exploring Inspiration and Conceptions of Writing from Creative Exercises

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ABSTRACT

Oskari Kuusela: Perceptions of Game Writing: Exploring inspiration and conceptions of writing from creative exercises
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This thesis explores the perceptions of game writing as a practice among a group of aspiring game writers. This topic is approached by introducing the concept of inspiration as the object of study and conducting a creative writing workshop with six novice game writers using the mixed methods of a workshop as a research methodology and a set of unstructured interview techniques for data gathering. The background for this thesis combines both academic literature on the topic of game writing as well as professional handbooks for further insight.

The purpose of this thesis is to provide perspective into how game writing is perceived to better understand the discipline and bring attention to the scarcely addressed topic of inspiration in game studies research. Based on the workshop's results, the analysis provides four distinct themes that represent the perceptions of game writing which are identified for their ludic and narrative elements respectively. The study concludes by proposing new potential avenues for research and development for future iterations of similar approaches, as well as recognizes the potential of implementing inspiration into future studies.

Keywords: game writing, perception, inspiration, workshop, unstructured interview

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1 INTRODUCTION

The subject of game writing has, from one perspective to another, been a wildly debated issue and a source of intrigue among game studies scholars for decades. It is a muddled field of expertise and a practice that even a professional practitioner may struggle to formalize into easily transmittable terms. Among those perspectives we discover a wealth of interdisciplinary research into how narratives, stories, interactive novels, whatever the term is most fitting at the time for the genre they intend on investigating. The ways in which they are conceptualized and perceived in the wide world of game cultures are what this thesis explores.

This exploratory study examines the issue of how game writing practices are perceived in the eyes of aspiring game writers. This was achieved by conducting a writing exercise workshop for six self-described novices. The study contributes to the on-going discussion and desire by scholars to better understand and contextualize what is a fascinating and innovative professional discipline in contemporary game development. In addition this brings attention to an insufficiently discussed point of interest in contemporary game studies academia. This thesis introduces the phenomenon and concept of *inspiration*, drawn from the works of Todd M. Thrash, Emil G. Moldovan, Victoria C. Oleynick and Laura A. Maruskin (2014), as the main object of interest and as the basis for the study's inquiries . Using the mixed methods of workshops as a research methodology, derived from the work of Rikke Ørngreen and Karin Levinsen (2017), and a set of unstructured interview methods derived and inspired from the works of Yan Zhang and Barbara M. Wildemuth (2007), further supplemented by the more exhaustive interview techniques proposed by Claire Petitmengin (2006). This thesis investigates the sources for inspiration and deduce what are some of the more pervasive perceptions of game writing as a practice among an aspiring group of future practitioners.

The primary source of inspiration and theoretical reference is the recent exploratory work of Jackson et al. (2022) which examines the opportunities and challenges of writing narrative-driven digital games to foster narrative immersion by interviewing four expert game writers for their proficiency in their field and their understanding of the practice. To reinforce the accounts of these experts, and for additional insight and perspectives, this study also utilizes multiple professional game writing handbooks, such as Hannah Nicklin's *Writing for Games: Theory and Practice* (2022) and Wendy Despain's *Professional techniques for video game writing* (2020), for comparison and for constructing a better understanding of how game writing as a practice is perceived in the eyes of the expert.

Two main research questions are therefore proposed:

Question 1: What kinds of perceptions do aspiring game writers have of game writing?

Question 2: How does the concept of inspiration contribute to the perceptions of game writing?

That is, this exploratory study analyses game writing as a practice and observes the *kinds* of perceptions aspiring game writers adhere to in order to uncover potentially unexpected insight or revelations about game writing. In addition, the objective is to introduce an as of yet unexplored topic of interest into the wider of field game studies by analysing the potential of *inspiration* as the object of interest and point of inquiry in the methodology of this work.

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Principally, this thesis explores two main topics: *game writing* in theory and its perceived practices, and the somewhat elusive concept and fluctuating phenomenon of *inspiration*. The first part briefly addresses the subject of game writing: how it has been discussed and addressed from perspectives of academia, game industry professionals, and education, and, lastly, how these previous discussions are reflected in the results and dialogue of this study as well. The second part of this section proceeds from the rather broad topic of game writing to the subject of inspiration. This part examines ways in which inspiration can be approached and defined in the game writing interests of this thesis. Namely, it illustrates how this thesis employs the concept both as its main component for examination as well as the *reasoning* behind the desire and need to examine it in this kind of setting.

2.1 Game Writing and Narratives in Academia

Not only in the margins of this thesis but also in the general discourse, the exact nature and definition of game writing needs to be addressed, the depth and complexity of it examined, as it is not universally clear-cut. Topics, such as characters, worldbuilding, plot structures, story devices, immersion – the list could go on into a narrative's most miniscule details which are, nevertheless, deeply woven and written into it as essential - in as such are not the focus of this thesis. Instead, this thesis chiefly examines several professional game writing handbooks and guides, such as *Game Development Essentials* by Jeannie Novak (2012), *Video Game Writing: From Macro to Micro* by Maurice Suckling & Marek Walton (2017) and *Writing For Games: Theory and Practice* by Hannah Nicklin (2022) that explore the practices of writing a game. Through these, "game writing" appears more as an umbrella to all the aforementioned elements that are in one way or another, to lesser or greater extent, pieces that form game writing as an all-

inclusive creative *process* – an amalgam of several intricate and inter-woven practices, yet as separately distinct and unique in their elements.

One of the primary academic sources for background along with professional handbooks in this thesis is the work of Jackson et al. (2022) of interviewing professional game writers about narrative immersion and described best practices in game writing. It best describes and connects with the ideas and observations of the aforementioned professional handbooks and also provides a detailed account and the proper vocabulary for discussing game writing in a research setting. Additional academic work is then used to better understand and describe the issues that were discovered and what this thesis strives to address in the field of game writing and contemporary academic research.

As mentioned previously, the topic of writing – the practice of writing games – is infrequently initiated as most of the attention goes to what was written instead, in the 'what' instead of 'how'. Following the many examples set by both academia, education researchers involved in creative writing, and the several previously discussed professional handbooks, education of creative writing appears as a standout point of view among academics when it comes to discussing creative writing in games as a practice. It is, then, through their work that this thesis and this section intends to further supplement the referenced professional literature and non-academic works like Nicklin (2022) and Jeannie Novak (2012) to build a theoretical foundation as well as establish a shared vocabulary already illustrated in the aforementioned works. To properly understand writing as a practice, it is, thus, beneficial to explore both outstanding voices involved in the topic of game writing, the professional point of view as well as the academics more involved in investigating writing as a practice and connect their thoughts. Comparing the two provides this thesis and the later sections with a clear vocabulary shared by all parties on the depth of the many different layers that are expected to emerge as a result of this thesis' own experiment. Indeed, finding shared sentiments between professionals and

researchers and connecting these shared sentiments with the results and analysis of the study described later in this thesis, legitimizes the findings and provides not only the later sections but the common field with a collective vocabulary and solid points of reference.

What is quite fascinating in exploring this topic with the concept of "game writing", there is seemingly little focus on game writing as a process, as a profession and as an activity, in comparison to how much literature you can find on what writing, stories and narratives are *for* games. The discussion on how stories and narratives can be and *are* meaningful in games can be dated back to some of the earliest discussions about digital games with some of it becoming bogged down over controversy of whether stories were even necessary for games – some even calling them "gift-wrapping" and arguing that a story is not *necessary* for a game to function (Eskelinen, 2001). Often dubbed the "Ludology vs. Narrativism" -debate (Ryan, 2006, p. 181), the popularly cited discourse is not predominantly relevant for this thesis but nonetheless shows how game writing has been indirectly treated in academia in the past – at times even disregarded and separated from the game in which it is embedded as if as an afterthought, rather than part of the creative process. A very chicken and egg -debate of whether the game structure or narrative came first, when, as this thesis strives to illustrate, both are vital and conjoined in the construction of a game.

Thus, resonating with the ideas of today's professionals discussing game writing like Novak (2012) and Nicklin (2022), even earlier arguments made by academics, such as that of Espen Aarseth (2014), state that games are a new form of media that contain not only the game but pieces of other media as well (cinema, animation, storytelling etc.) – a combination of elements which borrows inspiration and practices from a multitude of different fields. Interestingly, this aligns with some of the earliest discussions of games and narratives. For example, the widely referenced *Hamlet on the Holodeck* by Janet Murray (1997) would suggest that digital media is the new stage in which old narratives

will be re-played in new dimensions, meaning that games serve as the new platform or medium in which previously established narratives will be re-told and experienced in new ways unique to the new medium. Murray proposes in her work that what distinguishes game writing or game narratives from traditional forms of narrative like cinema are the concepts of “immersion” and “agency”, both of which have later been quoted and expanded on in the field of game studies and reciprocated by researchers (Browne & Cairns, 2004; Ermi & Mäyrä, 2005; Domsch, 2013.). Because many of these academic works focus on the broadband of game writing as a more universal phenomenon, of what it is, it is useful for this thesis to combine the more practical approaches of the game industry professionals in finding what exactly drives the practices of writing a game. This is precisely why more hands-on studies, like the workshop conducted for this thesis, are needed to fully scrutinize and understand the nuances behind the writing of a game.

For the purposes and goals of this thesis these are more groundwork than legwork, as it is less interested in examining any particular quality of the writing but more on the patterns of perception and predispositions towards game writing as a practice. The focus of this thesis is to simply recognize and understand what kind of perceptions an interested party of people holds for game writing through the examination of a given creative task and their inspiration for those tasks. This topic specifically deserves more attention in academia, as it was observed that the practices of writing for games and the profession in general seems somewhat incoherent and mixed with several other professional titles. Much of the attention in academia seems to put the writing, the product of the writer, in a much greater light as opposed to the person and the process they went through in writing it. There is a wide variety of research and methods on what is written – what sort of writing can be discovered in games and analyses of what impacts and meanings they have had on the world - but lesser effort is conducted in the exploration of the practices of writing – who game writers are and what it is that they do. This thesis aims to approach

and supplement that gap in research and provide new avenues for research that were found lacking in exploring the appropriate background for this thesis.

2.2 Game Writing as a Practice Among Professionals

Much of what was discovered in the background research was more aligned with educational research and professional handbooks that are more based on lifelong learning, expertise and experience rather than scientific research and data. As the referenced professionals describe (Novak, 2012. Suckling & Walton, 2012. Nicklin, 2022. Despain, 2020.), game writing is still an artform, and therefore very difficult to formalize. This is partly the reason why they share the same sentiment on those who often seem to boil writing down into simple, easy-to-follow steps and recipes for success hoping for immediate success: there is no *right* way of writing for games. Much like any artform, what writing *does* have is a great abundance of techniques, forms and, perhaps most importantly for this thesis, layers or elements that make up a story and the different stages that often go into writing one. In discovering this broad topic, exploring those different layers and elements of writing is perhaps more fruitful from a research standpoint than trying to approach it with the umbrella term of "game writing". As the many professional handbooks would suggest, games could be constructed from a sum of its major components, and the same applies to game writing, which, more often than not, is composed from a sum of characters, plots and sub-plots, the storyworld, form, setting, and so on. The list of elements that can be found and utilized in game writing is no shorter than it is for any other writer in any other medium. While professionals may use more personalized and varied analogies in describing this view, researchers as well would undoubtedly admit that game writing is, clearly, not that simple. As the results of this thesis would later suggest, game writing is perceived as a vast set of different elements

with their own individual practices and techniques rather than a singular skill, which aligns with many of the previously discussed views of the professionals.

Indeed, this sentiment shared by all these authors becomes quickly apparent in their telling of how they consider game writing: writing is an artform, and anyone telling someone that there is a recipe to writing games, is someone to steer clear from, with Nicklin going as far as dubbing that someone a “snake-oil merchant” (Nicklin, 2022, p. 42.). While the researcher of this thesis may be inclined to agreeing with that sentiment based on personal experience, the root cause for such a sentiment still warrants exploration, as it ties into the motivations for this study and provides us with an explanation as to why game writing is such a fascinating topic for discussion and research as a whole. After all, this thesis is particularly interested in how the practice of game writing is perceived.

Game writing borrows many of the well-established and known literary techniques and knowledge in creating a story from the commonly used three-act structure often employed by screenwriters in Hollywood. Just as often, they may very well use more traditional means for telling a story, as Nicklin (2022) exemplifies, works such as the Monomyth by Joseph Campbell (2008) that would, in a similar fashion to the aforementioned “snake-oil merchants”, boil the basics of a compelling story to seventeen components that could be found in just about any fictional tale, or later on the Hero’s Journey by Christopher Vogler (2020) who, inspired by the Monomyth, summarizes them into “just” twelve. The extent to which any professional or academic can truly summarize a story and agree with, is what is taught as early as elementary school: a story comprises of three things, which are the beginning, the middle, and the end. Admittedly, this, in its extreme simplicity, hardly helps aspiring writers in becoming better at their practice. Authors like Nicklin (2022), Suckling & Walton (2012) and Novak (2012) would all in their own words support this thesis' claim in exhibiting that while knowing and understanding the

multitude of writing techniques from the very macro-level theories one can apply in analysing just about any story, fictional or otherwise, to the most micro-level applications and considerations in crafting the smaller layers of one's story are profoundly beneficial for writers, they are not necessarily something to completely *adhere* to. This sentiment of understanding that there is no particular cookie cutter way to creating stories is shared by researchers as well. As Nicklin (2022) would put it: *"treat them as choices and not orthodoxies"* (p. 46), to which this thesis whole-heartedly agrees with. While one technique or structure might work for one, it may not work for several others. It is, then, worth noting that, for example, Nicklin as the author writing these handbooks, refers to their work as "toolboxes" (Nicklin, 2022; Dixon, 2017) and the practice of writing as cobbling together different approaches, diagnostic tools and *possible* solutions – collecting tools to make up a whole toolbox with which you craft your story (Nicklin, 2022). Game writing is not a technique but a crafting process.

Connecting this sentiment and moving on to discussing the differences between game writing and traditional writing, it is worth looking at Craig A. Lindley's (2005) examination of story and narrative structures in computer games, in which he would also agree that traditional narrative models cannot be straightforwardly applied to games, as games are fundamentally different from those traditional narrative forms for several different reasons. One of the most relevant ones Lindley points out is the player as being a joint reader and author at some levels of the narrative, meaning they are simultaneously constructing the story as well as experiencing it. This connects with previous discussions of what makes game writing so unique. Further expanding on this idea, Ian Dixon (2017) for example, considers writing for games as being "axiomatically unconventional" and "calls for radical reinventions of storytelling within the new media", meaning that scholars recognize a fundamental difference between writing for games compared to other mediums, from which it still borrows much of its practices and conventions. There

seems to be a suggestion embedded in research that the practice of game writing, despite its long history today, is not yet formalized or well established enough and to this day needs more discussion among researchers – a sentiment with which this thesis agrees.

2.3 Game Writing in Education

While this thesis' focus is not to educate or study methods for education per se, the works of those involved in creative writing education nevertheless illustrate the same issues brought up by Nicklin and Novak as well as their peers in the professional game writing field that deserve to be discussed (Ballentine, 2015). This thesis argues that the ones educating game writing act as a kind of an authority on what game writing is and thus are the ones contributing to how it is then perceived. As Leena van Deventer (2018) would testify in her own work and discussions, teaching game writing is marred by the same issues of being overly reliant on more traditional writing practices, as expressed by, for example, Nicklin (2022). Supplementing these issues, Brian Ballentine (2015) shares van Deventer's concerns in his own work as an educator of game writing but goes on to highlight game writing as a possibility for expanding our understanding of the medium and narrative theory in general. With games being considered as a rather fresh medium, some unfamiliar with them may still consider them subpar in comparison to other mediums, especially among educators (van Deventer, 2018). While there have been significant leaps towards a cultural shift that considers games as equal to its peer mediums with which they share many characteristics, considering what was addressed previously with writing practices, both educators and students still face some cultural anxieties, such as games being made "for children" and them being somehow not well enough established, resonating with the expressions of the aforementioned researchers like Dixon (2017) and Lindley (2005).

Coming back to the discussion on game writing being an artform of its own and recognizing it as one, van Deventer also broaches this topic in her own discussion. While professionals seem to consider their craft an artform rather unilaterally, scholars are forced to defend this position when they share the same sentiment, as it seems like something to be debated over. Much like many other forms of media in the past, games are certainly no stranger to public pushback when they are suggested as being an artform of their own, let alone an educational one. Much of this outcry is rooted in media panic and anxiety over the unfamiliar (van Deventer, 2018). This discussion and debate feels reminiscent of the rather expired "ludology vs narratology" debacle (see Ryan, 2006) on whether stories are an integral part of games – game narratives being "unimportant gift-wrappings" (Eskelinen, 2001), which *today*, more often than not, evokes a discontented eye-roll among both professionals and scholars when even mentioning the debate. This shared response from all those advocating for game writing further illustrates that educators of game writing share the same frustrations and ponderings as professionals in the field.

To connect these thoughts together, the discussion over traditional storytelling structures and devices inevitably comes up in the van Deventer's arguments as one of the main points of frustration. As she categorizes them as "the hangover of traditional storytelling pedagogies", her experience and observations, in addition to ones like Thomas Apperley (2006), recognize that traditional means such as the Monomyth by Campbell, Hero's Journey by Vogler, or for added example, Vladimir Propp's (1994) thirty-one narrative functions or his categorization of character archetypes, many of which are mentioned in several of the professional literatures, may not be quite up to par with the evolving and unique forms in which stories are written and told in games. This sentiment connects further in van Deventer's discussion about player agency, which is also addressed by Nicklin and other professionals that have been thus far referenced as well as approached

by researchers like Lindley (2005) and Murray (1997), which, as this thesis' results suggest, is an integral part of the game writing practice. Something that even the more novice and inspiring writers take into consideration in describing their perception of game writing.

2.4 Game Writing in this Thesis

Considering the vast field of game writing and discussions of narratives and writing in games, based on what has been discussed in this section and the vocabulary and descriptions of game writing as a practice in these works, it is necessary for the purposes of this thesis to summarize and contextualize how this paper considers game writing, as it is essential for the analysis later on for a place of comparison. While the vast and rich history of narratives *in* games in popular game studies research are certainly useful for understanding the history and background of game writing, this thesis is primarily focused on understanding the practice and profession rather than the state of writing in contemporary game cultures. It is interested in how the practice and profession is perceived by those interested in it, but who so far are somewhat unfamiliar with it. It is for this reason that this thesis is primarily interested in comparing the results of this thesis' analysis and results with those of the experts and professionals in the field of game writing. They are, in addition to the previously discussed educators, the ones who shape its practices and act as the source for our perception and as the inspiration for what game writing is as a practice and a profession. Therefore, the researcher of this thesis adopts a combination of descriptions and vocabulary used by Jackson et al. (2022) in their interviews of expert game writers and the key themes and discoveries from the aforementioned professional authors such as Nicklin (2022), Novak (2016), Suckling & Walton (2012) and Wendy Despain (2020) for their explorations of key themes in game writing and their considerations and understanding of the practice in general.

While Jackson et al. (2022) do not explicitly define the practice of game writing, they instead approach the practice by stating some of the concepts a game writer should *understand* to properly apply themselves. They divide this understanding into two categories: the narrative and ludic standpoint.

The Narrative Standpoint, which states that among the writer's tasks is to understand, and properly apply the following:

- Ensure that events are logical and meaningful.
- Characters are relatable and the decisions they must take are complex.
- Settings add to the sense of tangibility and tone.
- Structure is manipulated to create interest and keep the player guessing.
- Point of view is clear and engaging, offering the player insight into the experience of one or more essential characters.
- Time is used to heighten the sense of drama.

And *the ludic standpoint*, which states that the writer:

- Must be prepared to balance what the player can do within the game world with what they are meant to understand in terms of the narrative.
- Is able to find the right blend of guided and unguided play.
- Understands and finds a balance for player agency (offering too much or too little, and too much control or too little).

(Jackson et al., 2022, p. 235.)

It is then with Jackson's et al. work as the foothold and checkpoint that this thesis intends to explore the results of its own and compare whether these different elements are reflected in the described perceptions and sources of inspiration among the participants in the workshop who did *not* identify themselves as professional game writers, and attempt to discover whether the views and understanding of professionals align with the perceptions of the novice.

2.5 Inspiration

This thesis regards inspiration as a fundamental source in creative writing and in constructing our perceptions of creative practices. For the concept of inspiration, this thesis relies on the works of Thrash et al. (2014) for the conceptualization, definition and the application of the concept in the workshop and interview portion of this thesis, and as a reference point in the following analysis portion of this study.

In what Thrash et al. have dubbed as the *tripartite conceptualization*, they conclude that to sufficiently define *inspiration*, three characteristics need to be addressed and included in the definition.

> "First, inspiration is characterized by what Thrash et al. call *epistemic transcendence*, which means that the individual has gained an awareness of new or better possibilities. Described as a vivid experience with metaphors like "illumination", "revelation", "insight" and seeing possibilities one had not seen before.
>
> Secondly, inspiration is characterized by *evocation* or receptivity, which refers to a person being inspired by something *in particular.* That person therefore does not attribute *oneself* the responsibility for becoming inspired – at least not fully or directly. "One cannot awaken oneself to better possibilities, one must be awoken."
>
> Thirdly, inspiration involves *approach motivation*, which refers to the feeling of being compelled to bring one's idea or vision into fruition."
>
> (Thrash et al., 2014, p. 496-497)

Additionally, and perhaps more importantly for this thesis, Thrash et al. describe what composes an episode of inspiration, dubbing them the *component processes*: being inspired *by*, and being inspired *to.* The first refers to being awoken to the intrinsic value of an elicitor object, referring to the object of inspiration – whatever that may be. In the context of this thesis, when a participant of the study is described as being inspired *by*, it

refers to the object that inspired them like, for example, the memory of a scene inside a game or a particular character that they credited as their foremost source for inspiration. In contrast, being inspired *to* refers to the motivation to actualize or extend the inspiring qualities exemplified in the evocative object (Thrash et al., 2014). To set this into context for this thesis, being inspired *to* refers to, for example, the action that was taken as the result of being inspired *by* a character in a game from the participant's memories – the action of creating an exercise. In layman's terms, being inspired *by*, refers more to the internal processes of inspiration, while being inspired *to* refers to the external processes that come from being inspired.

The component processes and the definitions provide this thesis with a framework and a clear vocabulary for when in the analysis later on inspiration becomes an integral part of the discussion. As to *why* inspiration is considered relevant for this thesis, Thrash et al. conveniently provide further insight into the motivation of this thesis as well in their discussion about the relation of *creativity* and *efficiency* and *productivity*. When discussing creativity, inspiration is theorized to *motivate* the actualization of creative insight. Inspiration is, therefore, said to predict the creativity of a resulting product – that is, in the context of this thesis, the exercises and discussions made and had during the workshop. Additionally, in their consideration of efficiency and productivity, Thrash et al. propose that *inspired* action has been observed to involve high levels of efficiency and productivity. This observation supports both the goals of this thesis, as well as the goals of the workshop, which proposes to its participants to come up with as much data, or as it was expressed to them, as many exercises and open discussion about their inspiration as they are inspired *to* make. To quote Thrash et al.: "Because the inspired individual 'sees' possibilities concretely, ideas may be implemented quickly and directly, with relatively little trial and error" (p. 501). This expected characteristic of inspiration perfectly aligns with the goals of this thesis and lends credence to choosing inspiration as

the primary object of interest in this study. Moving forward, the work of Thrash et al. (2014) will act as the source for the definition of inspiration, and the concepts and descriptions outlined above are the point of reference in the later discussions of the analysis.

3 METHODS

This section will discuss the combination of methods chosen for this study. The first chapter will discuss the general outline of the study and the proposed methods. To properly provide context for the following analysis and its accompanying discussion, it is necessary to address not only what the methods are but also the reasoning for choosing them as the appropriate options out of many similar approaches found in similar kind of research. The first chapter will then provide, first, a general outline of the process moving forward and also addresses the motivation and the desired outcome of using the described combination of methods.

The second chapter will then discuss the first step in the outlined study process: workshops as a setting for research and as an appropriate method for approaching this kind of study. The chapter will briefly address previous research utilizing a similar approach to ascertain the greatest benefits of creating and organizing a workshop for research, as well as discuss their obvious drawbacks compared to other methods. Understanding both the benefits and drawbacks of conducting a workshop beforehand, during, and after the study ensures a thorough analysis and sets a precedent for how this thesis and its study is organized.

The third chapter in this section will then move on to discuss the design of the workshop and its formal components. In this discussion the workshop will be described step-by-step, as the style will mimic the way in which the results are also presented in this thesis. This chapter of this section also addresses the expected and desired outcomes of this study, as well as the expected drawbacks and limitations of such a design.

The fourth and final chapter briefly addresses the inclusion of unstructured interview methods in the workshop and their expected and desired benefits for this thesis. These described methods are inspired and derived from the works of Claire Petitmengin (2006)

on phenomenology in interviews, Zhang & Wildemuth's (2009) inspection and guidance of unstructured interviews, and finally the considerations of Jan Fook (2014) on reflexivity in a research setting. This thesis recognizes that some of the methods described may be somewhat excessive for this study in the level of scrutiny that may be applied, especially comparing Petitmengin's approach with the depth of inquiry that can be undertaken with their method, but the literature and considerations are nonetheless determined to be the ones that best serve the goals and desired outcomes of this study.

3.1 Outline and Motivation

Before delving into much more specific details of the study, it is beneficial to outline the basic structure of the entire study to organize it into its core components and provide a timeline of the steps and effort taken in developing this study. As was briefly mentioned in the beginning of this section, two primary methods were utilized in creating and conducting this study as two separate phases: firstly, designing and conducting a co-creative workshop with a pre-determined task set for the participants and, then, secondly, conducting a brief but by no means cursory group interview with the participants right *after* their successful and unsuccessful attempts at producing results in the workshop.

In order to better express the efforts that went into choosing to do a workshop, perhaps the best place to begin would be to ascertain the inception of this thesis – by explaining the primary motivation for desiring this kind of an approach. With an extremely keen personal interest and outstanding efforts in applying themselves as a writer in traditional fields and in games, the researcher is a firm believer and advocate for the age-old idiom: "Practice what you preach". Hoping to understand writing, and in this case *game* writing specifically, applying oneself in a creative task and analysing the result of that task seemed like a compelling option. However, as an avid writer who has already become somewhat aware of their own creative process and sources of inspiration, and to apply

this interest into research, asking other aspiring and interested writers to apply themselves in a creative task seems like a more fruitful endeavour. In agreement with the primary sources for the methodology of this thesis, Rikke Ørngreen & Karin Levinsen (2017) characterize that workshops "can be an opportunity to identify new factors at play and the relationships between them, which neither the participants nor the researchers may not have been aware of prior to the workshop" (p. 79).

It was anticipated that conducting a workshop would incentivize creative thinking with it being a rather unique setting accompanied by equally interested peers and for some, peers with exceptionally unique outlook, approaches, and input in the field of game writing. The participants, along with the researcher, stand to gain unique insight into game writing skills, practices, and experiences that may otherwise go unnoticed or unspoken. The methods applied in this study are designed to delve much deeper than surface level knowledge. With such an ambition, designing and applying a workshop stands out as the first major component and the step in this thesis.

This thesis argues that a workshop is able to appropriately fulfil the desired outcomes and expectations of this thesis. The workshop explores the creative output of aspiring game writers and their preconceptions of a profession that is often characterized by professional input and experiences that are inordinately personal and embodied. As the literature will tell us, expertise is progressively more difficult to convey and verbalize and moreover has been observed to being proportional to the level of expertise of the artist (Petitmengin, 2006). In other words, the more expertise an individual has in their field, the more difficult it is to articulate their experience.

That being said, this proposes us with a unique opportunity for study. While some scholars in the past have rejected the subjective experience as credible knowledge (Petitmengin, 2006), studying them is by no means a fruitless effort. Especially when

keeping one of the desired goals of this thesis in mind: exploring the many preconceptions that a group of aspiring writers may have about game writing, both as a profession and as a practice. Furthermore, based on a brief exploration in a pilot study for this thesis, it was discovered that even in a small group, aspiring writers can share relatively different views and expectations about what game writing is supposed to be, thus making this thesis a valuable addition to the discussion of how game writing is practiced.

3.2 Pilot Study

For additional basis, this thesis builds on top of a previous pilot study conducted by the researcher to better formulate, prepare and understand the sort of an undertaking conducting a workshop may be and what sort of insight can hopefully be discovered for potentially reiterating a similar study more extensively and with better instruction, discoveries, and background. Though elements, such as, including inspiration as one of the main points of interest for examination and adjustments to the research proposal as well as the desired outcomes and an adjustment of focus, were changed as a result of the pilot experiment, the work taken prior to this thesis deserves attention. This shift in course directly inspires the formulation of the methods and desired outcome of this thesis. In addition, this thesis at certain points references some of the outcomes of the pilot study for additional background and insight.

Briefly, this thesis mirrors the organization and approach of the pilot study in terms of methodology and points of interest. The pilot study, in comparison, was more interested in discovering insight into how game writing exercises could potentially be applied in professional environments. Upon discovering how disorganized the understanding of what game writing is as a practice, the focus and interest of this thesis was adjusted accordingly to better address the research questions. In summary, the pilot study discovered that its participants approached the creative tasks with the intention of creating

more narrative-minded exercises such as creating characters, worldbuilding and writing pieces of dialogue for a scene, but ludic elements such as game design were far less apparent and represented in their efforts. While the results were inconclusive on whether their exercises would be particularly useful in professional environments, the attitudes and perceptions observed during the study provide interesting insight for the follow-up study that is this thesis. The methods and approach, and the subsequent observations resonate with the approaches and results of this thesis as well. Additionally, the success of the pilot study gives further credence to adopting workshops as a methodology.

3.3 Workshops as a methodology

Briefly, this thesis lends inspiration from Ørngreen & Levinsen's (2017) exploration into workshops as a scientific methodology, as well as several of the previously described professional handbooks by Despain (2020), Nicklin (2022), Suckling & Walton (2012), and Novak (2012). All of them provide not only valuable insight into the immense significance of workshops in game writing but also provide exercises of their own that could be potentially utilized in educational settings or as the means for personally developing writing skills and understanding the practice.

While workshops as a methodology can be traced back to the early 19th century, they have not been as widely accepted and formalized in academia as other traditional methodologies (Ørngreen & Levinsen, 2017; Gabriel, 2008). However, as both academics and professionals will suggest, a workshop stands as a valuable setting for novice and intermediate level writers to further their craft and become familiar with writing as a practice (Norris, 2013). Generally speaking, a workshop can be described as "an arrangement whereby a group of people learn, acquire new knowledge, perform creative problem-solving, or innovate in relation to a domain-specific issue" (Ørngreen & Levinsen, 2017, p. 71). In this thesis, the workshop is therefore an arranged gathering of

aspiring game writers who are tasked with creating game writing exercises for research purposes. The workshop that was designed matches that of what Ørngreen & Levinsen describe as *workshops as research methodology*, in that it aims to fulfil participants' expectations to achieve something related to their own interests, while being specifically designed to fulfil a research purpose and produce reliable and valid data about the domain in question (Ørngreen & Levinsen, 2017). Aligning with the predisposition and expectations of the researcher of this thesis, Ørngreen & Levinsen describe *workshops as research methodology* as being a particularly useful approach in studies that are emerging and unpredictable, which characterizes the topics and approach of this thesis quite well. The subject of *inspiration* is expected to be something that is evoked rather spontaneously and circumstantially, and the improvised nature of both the expected creative efforts and the setting of the workshop itself, matches the characteristics described by Ørngreen & Levinsen. Furthermore, as Ørngreen & Levinsen describe, based on previous studies using workshops as a methodology, a workshop is also more beneficial in studies that are characterized by 'real-timeness', 'thrownness', interaction and prospects, all of which align the nature of the workshop used in this thesis.

The common issues that are recognized with using workshops as a methodology could be described from both perspectives of the workshop: issues with the hosting researcher, and issues with the participants. The common issue with the researchers themselves is that when conducting a workshop, there is a risk that the researcher can sometimes forget their more clinical role in the setting and begins treating their participants more consultatively, leaving them with less influence on the outcomes of the workshop. Simply put, the researcher starts taking a more active and participatory role in the workshop and starts guiding and influencing the participants more than is intended, eschewing the reliability and value of some of their data. On the participants' side, a common issue with workshops has been described as the difficulty in verbalizing their ideas and finding, first off, a

common vocabulary between the other participants, and, secondly, common ground in creative endeavours. While the workshop is intended to act as the common ground and a "safe space" for all participants, the language, especially in discussing more technical knowledge, can become and issue. Additionally, expressing the ideas that are formulated can suffer from issues in communicating those ideas or from altogether different views on the matter (Ørngreen & Levinsen, 2017).

3.4 Workshop Design

With that established, the next obvious step in this study process was to design the workshop itself. As stated previously, a pilot study was organized prior to this work. Although the motivation and objective of the study may have changed as its result, the design for the workshop between the pilot study and this thesis remains somewhat similar on a fundamental level. With this thesis being a more ambitious undertaking, more effort and thought must be put into detailing the design and establishing a properly defined role for the researcher. Briefly outlined, a workshop with six participants with varying levels of expertise and knowledge on game writing was arranged with a single given task: creating a set of game writing exercises as a group with simple instructions given by the researcher acting as "the host, a peer, and an observant to their creative process". They were told to discuss their process, outcomes and most importantly their inspiration and conceptions in their efforts in an open and unstructured group interview setting, or as it was described to them, "group discussions during each exercise, with a brief review at the end of the workshop". It is vital for this kind of setting to properly and clearly state the researcher's position and role in the study as well to establish trust and rapport with the subjects (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). For data gathering, the researcher initially intended on digitally recording the session and compiling personal notes during the workshop, but following a protest by one of the participants on the day of the workshop

expressing concerns for their privacy and fearing a breach of sensitive and protected information, it was decided on the day of the workshop that the audio recording would be discarded. This was done on the proposal by the researcher that they could review the results of the study later on with the participants for their approval and, as Zhang & Wildemuth (2009) propose, in the circumstances where audio recording is not an option, the researcher would be allowed pauses during the workshop to compile notes. For added transparency, the researcher gave the participants the option to examine those notes at any time should they feel the need for it.

As the topic of research and discussion of this thesis is inspiration, creative practices, and *perceptions*, it was deemed by the researcher as important to *not* provide too much background for the participants about the specifics and details of the study, especially in the form of suggestions or examples on what they would be asked to think about prior or at the beginning of the workshop. This is because, as the background literature would suggest (Petitmengin, 2006; Ørngreen & Levinsen, 2017; Fook, 2014), in exploring something as complex as inspiration and through that the perceptions of the participants, the researcher giving them specific examples, consultation or guidance with the issues and the task of the workshop could then have an effect on the process and more specifically on their described sources for inspiration. In layman's terms, the researcher intended to have a "clean slate" for the workshop. The pilot study for this thesis *strongly* suggested that a vast majority of information, consultation and examples that the researcher provided for the participants at their request and in the instructions for the task had a major impact on the described inspiration and creative efforts. Instead of creating and following new ideas and describing *their* perceptions on the issues, much of their inspiration and creative efforts were credited to the examples and guidance that the researcher provided instead of more original ideas. In short, the researcher wanted to avoid influencing the thoughts and efforts of the participants in this study as much as

possible to acquire as much *unprejudiced* data as possible, aligning with the ideas of Ørngreen & Levinsen in their discussion of researchers, perhaps unwarily, affecting the data.

With the participants gathered, the researcher would then provide the participants with their instructions for the session: to produce a set of game writing exercises that they would consider being useful for practicing game writing and discuss and describe their process while doing it. The final part of this instruction describes the added data gathering method of "thinking out loud" (Ericsson, 2003). Every so often, when the researcher would expect the participants drifting into silence, they would re-emphasize the instruction of trying to express what they were thinking out loud to them and to the group around them, as those thoughts, no matter how insignificant, simple or complex, could not only be a source of inquiry for the researcher but also a valuable source of data in exploring their inspiration and perceptions. After this, the participants were encouraged to ask for further questions if they had any and begin their work on the first exercise. As expected, the first step in drafting would involve questions about what *kind* of exercises they were expected to produce, to which the researcher would be prepared to elaborate without giving them too many examples or a template. The instruction for this could be described by the researcher asking the participants to put themselves in the shoes of a professional game writer and prompting them with the question: "if you were going to teach someone about game writing and had to come up with instructions for an exercise to do it, what would your instructions be in that exercise". This prompt positions the participants into thinking about game writers as practitioners and assumes that creating exercises or doing them could be a part of that practice. The prompt also provides them with an example that does not provide them with any specific examples on what an exercise would look like in particular or what kind of exercises they assumed the researcher would want to see them create. No strict limitations were given in terms of the

subject, form or detail for their exercises, as imposing limits could disrupt the flow of their thoughts and have the participants potentially abandon their endeavours for something that is not derived from *their* inspiration, but instead inspired or thought of with the specific limitation in mind.

3.5 Interview Methods

With the subject of the study being inspiration and perception, two rather abstract and subjective experiences of the human consciousness, a set of specialized interview methods and guidelines were required to extract a set of answers that approach the core of the issue and the desired outcomes in this thesis in an appropriate level of detail. This aligns with Petitmengin's method literature (2006) and Ørngreen & Levinsen's considerations (2017) of making the most out of workshops, stating that appropriate mixed methods in studies that use workshops as a method are described as being more successful in terms of acquiring more valuable data. Petitmengin's exploration of phenomenology on the other hand provides this thesis with a set of guidelines and considerations to follow *during* the workshop. With the subjects of inspiration and perceptions being considered deeper levels of the human consciousness, they may easily remain undiscovered if not properly inquired.

Most concerningly for this thesis, the act of creativity and what inspires a person can often elude them, thereby making the topic of this study a far more complicated subject to properly investigate. For that reason, Petitmengin's described methods act as the primary inspiration for the interview portions of the workshop, as they are seen as being more specifically tailored to investigating a deeper level of thought. Though, in this thesis, the necessary level of detail and depth for the inquiry is much lower than how deep Petitmengin's method can potentially be. As such, observations, such as specific eye movements, bodily motions, and simply the level of depth into the individual thoughts of

inspiration are not as relevant as the guidelines in how the researcher of this thesis can prepare to steer the participants' attention to their descriptions and spoken thoughts, maintain their focus and attention while making inquiries and help them verbalize their thoughts. The expected issue in this thesis is that the task of creating exercises can become a deeply engrossing and enthralling experience where the person doing it is often absorbed by its objective. As Petitmengin describes it, people can "drift off" while they are engrossed in a creative activity. The researcher must then be aware of the ways to evoke the participants' thoughts of the process retrospectively.

In this thesis, as Petitmengin (2006) suggests, and following Zhang & Wildemuth's (2009) examples for conducting successful unstructured interviews with the participants, they were asked to re-enact their process at regular intervals. After they concluded creating their exercises, the researcher identified and described the main phases of their process until a necessary level of detail was achieved, focusing on one dimension at a time. By dimension, this thesis refers to the different sources of inspiration that the participants describe. The researcher proceeded going through them one at a time and asking them *why* that particular thought inspired them, and attempted to de-construct what it is in particular that inspires them in those thoughts. This line of inquiry would then end, after discerning the primary source of their inspiration, with the question of *how* they would connect that inspiration to game writing and describe their thinking.

Essentially, the method involves the researcher continuously asking the participants to recreate their thought process during and after the creation of the exercises with appropriate questions focusing on their described sources of inspiration and ending those lines of questioning by asking how they think they would apply or align their thinking with game writing. The conversation would begin with a broad question like "What is it that inspired you to make *this* kind of exercise?", and based on their responses and their re-enactment of their thought process, new questions were formulated to achieve the

necessary level of detail. As Petitmengin describes it, the more the interviewee is in contact with a *specific* and genuine thought or experience, the better they potentially are at verbalizing and describing that thought, reinforcing the idea that the researcher should therefore be receptive to the participants' descriptions and be able to re-enact and re-describe the process back for further and more detailed inquiry. What is critical for applying both Petitmengin's and Zhang & Wildemuth's methods of conducting unstructured interviews is the proper preparation by the researcher, the ability to respond and interact with the participants, the researcher understanding their position and role in the setting, the capability of generating lines of inquiry from the participants' responses, and establishing rapport and gaining trust.

4 RESULTS

This section of the thesis describes and outlines the main discoveries of the workshop and its accompanying group interviews. Additionally, as it was discussed and explored during the workshop, this section will dedicate a small portion to an unexpected occurrence with the briefing process of the participants that came about from a change of heart from a few of the participants regarding the methods of this study and its ethics. Certain freedoms were applied then as a result, and the discoveries and some of the details and specifics were changed accordingly to meet the needs and wishes of everyone involved.

The workshop and its accompanying group interview provides fruitful insight into how game writing is perceived by exploring and observing this small group's process for creating exercises that they considered being related to and useful for aspiring game writers. As outlined in the Methods portion of this thesis, the goal for this experiment was to gather a group of aspiring writers or otherwise interested in the field together and, through them, produce a set of exercises that would be analysed with the help of a group interview. They were, then, asked to describe their thinking and, most importantly, their inspiration for coming up with each exercise in order to determine and explore their perception of what game writing is. This iteration of the workshop produced a total of nine exercises, which the group attempted to title and verbalize to the best of their abilities, and, later on during the group interview and discussions, explored and provided further. As a result, the two and a half hour workshop provided rather valuable insight into their thinking and crucial data for the analysis portion of this thesis as to the perceptions of what game writing is in the general eye.

To best organize this section, the *issues* with the results and the process in general should be first addressed to establish some of the context for some of the exercises and the reasons for excluding some of the points that have been redacted in the notes and

summaries made by the researcher to make up for the loss of potentially valuable data. With the issues and changes made during the workshop with the previously established methods being addressed, this section will then describe each of the nine exercises as they turned out during the workshop, translated into English by the researcher, as the language used during the workshop was best kept native to avoid the already prominent issues of being able to verbalize their ideas. Each exercise will be presented with their own titles that the participants created which, in itself, turned out being a part of the creative process and a link to their described inspiration. Each prompt for an exercise will be presented as it was written down on blank page that was projected for all participants to see and contemplate and agree on. Lastly, after providing the prompt and the title for each exercise, a brief summary of the most prominent sources for their inspiration for each exercise will be outlined and expanded upon when necessary. As this section is primarily reserved for just the results of the workshop and main findings during the group interview, connections with this thesis' literature and detailed analysis will be reserved for the Analysis and Discussion sections of this thesis.

As the results of this study are rather extensive and detailed, the following outline of the nine exercises created during the workshop summarizes them with the main themes and topics of discussion that were identified from a brief exploration of the researcher's notes:

Table 1: Outline of the created game writing exercises.

Exercise 1: "The Interview Game" *Explored themes*: Character development, Imagined interviews, personal expertise.
Exercise 2: "The Camel Fart" *Explored themes*: Character development, plot structures, linear narratives, worldbuilding.
Exercise 3: "Bag It" *Explored themes*: Introducing limitations, narrative design, co-op games, role-playing.
Exercise 4: "The Autopsy" *Explored themes*: Post-mortems, game design, narrative design, educational.
Exercise 5: "Exposing the Story" *Explored themes*: Backstories, exposition, narrative design. Narrative systems.
Exercise 6: "Musical Chairs" *Explored themes*: Soundtracks, writer's responsibilities, cutscenes, collaboration.
Exercise 7: "Branching Out" *Explored themes*: Plot structure, branching narratives, plot twists, enticing players.
Exercise 8: "The Simpleton" *Explored themes*: Imposing limitations. Adaptation. Reimagining.
Exercise 9: "50 Shades of Evil" *Explored themes*: Empathy, good versus bad representations, redeeming qualities.

4.1 The Exercises

4.1.1 "The Interview Game"

> *Similar to fictional literature, interviewing a character creates a deep foundation to their morals and behaviour. Imagine a job interview of sorts. You are in charge of interviewing this character. What kind of questions would you pose for this character, and how would you expect they answer them?*

To "get the ball rolling" as it was expressed in the workshop by the researcher, after briefing the participants with the study, the topic, their role, the researcher's role and the

objective of the workshop, the researcher briefly proposed them to think what game writing is for them, and together to pick something they were most interested in what they considered being a part of a game writer's responsibilities or a product of their work. A vast majority of the participants quickly responded to one's keen interest in characters and character development and described them being the *"most memorable thing in stories with the games I've played"*. The first exercise, in a way, acted as a precursor to how the study would progress and as a launch to the workshop. It was natural to expect a round of questions, which were summarized and recorded on the same page that their exercise was being drafted on by the researcher as proposed by the participants.

The discussion and drafting process for the first exercise had a clear intention and approach of creating something more tied in with professional and academic expertise that the participants had with writing in general. With four out of the six people, five including the researcher participating in the workshop having a firm background in literary studies, the first exercise was almost entirely focused on individual expertise about writing, including their sources for inspiration. This was directly credited to literary studies, how in that specific field researchers and professionals study texts, and reading in general. Three of the participants credited their inspiration to what they dubbed the "imagined interview", which was directly applied to the first exercise in their own words. Whether or not this described method has an established background in literary studies, the participants were pleased with their line of thinking and expressed that such a method would be useful for *any* writer and an interesting thought exercise in general.

When the inspiration for their exercise was explored further, the ideas and thoughts seemed to be much more deeply ingrained in their own capabilities as writers, and to quote the summarizing expression to which all of them agreed on: "If *I* was a game writer, this would be something I would expect and *want* to do." When asked, they all positioned themselves in this imagined scenario, which in turn prompted them to ask themselves

what *they* would want in a position where someone was proposing them to do or come up with an exercise for game writing. Their reasoning was almost purely logical and rooted in a more professional opinion rather than personal tastes and preferences, which were the driving forces for inspiration for the later exercises and discussions that were observed to be *much* more vibrant and excited compared to the first one. By the end of the entire workshop, when asked if they had any thoughts they wanted to express or to have on record about the workshop itself or general feelings that were left unspoken, a quick response from one said that they were somewhat unsure about "what it was you (the researcher) wanted us to *exactly* do, so we started thinking about this from a very general perspective. We might have drifted off a bit too much by the end", to which the rest were inclined to agree. Initial anxiety of their capabilities for participating and the intentionally obscure and brief instructions given by the researcher contributed to the initial approach taken by the participants and resulted in the first exercise being something based more on universal knowledge and detached from personal tastes and preferences – a quality and approach that diminished as the workshop went on to its second exercise.

4.1.2 "The Camel Fart"

> *Draw or find a map of your choosing. Compose or draw a route for a story by adding "quest or story points" that you describe and summarize with a couple of sentences.*

With a rather colourful title for their exercise, the second one clearly had the participants becoming more comfortable with their discussions and their increasing openness about their own personal preferences and inspirations in games. The process, while somewhat chaotic, was a direct result of one of the participants observing a decorative painting across the room depicting a game map. This prompted the group to explore the picture in more detail while they, as they themselves expressed, "struggled to come up with *proper* exercises". With a small compass depicted on the map, the conversation drifted to them discussing about the "directions" and their significance to the story, with one of them

expressing how *"interesting it is when even compass points express and are so integral to stories and games. There's always, like, a direction where you need to go, and the direction always has some kind of meaning. West is always like a desert and North or up the map feels like it's where you need to go to progress".* This exclaim sparked a conversation on how things in games and stories are named and how simple things like compass directions can attribute and *are* attributed as being something meaningful for the story. With the mention of names and titles in games, one of the participants gave the rest an example of how he often names his characters in games something absurd or stupid like "Camel Fart", which makes for great entertainment in an otherwise "serious" story when a more narrative-heavy section takes that name and applies it to something like a text-based dialogue during an interaction. While being a silly bit of personal entertainment and a "confession" from him, in that he didn't care about naming in games as much as the rest when they challenged him on it, the group arrived at an agreement that, while entertaining, even a small thing like a character's name "done *wrong*", takes them as players out of the story rather quickly. This in turn had the rest of them describe their experiences where they had spent almost several hours trying to come up with one to *avoid* facing this described dissonance and disconnect from the story.

With the discussion from maps evolving into a free-for-all with all the participants wanting to share their experiences with occasions where small things like character names had them at odds with a game's story, the researcher proposed them to bring their attention back to the map and think whether they could come up with an exercise that could somehow involve the tangents in their discussion. This resulted in them regaining their focus and rather quickly coming up with the aforementioned mapping prompt. With this second exercise, conversation towards what inspired them became their primary focus over their objective of coming up with something tangible. It is interesting to note that compared to the first exercise, increase in conversation topics involving inspiration

and the participant's general excitement became significantly more apparent at the sacrifice of them coming up with what they merely moments ago described as "proper exercises". Being inspired *to*, was quickly overshadowed by discussions of what they were inspired *by*. In asking the group about their final thoughts about this exercise, two clear mentions and agreements were made. Firstly, many of the things they credited as being their inspiration were actually things that *bothered* them in existing game stories and their narrative design, such as the one made about game maps being *"too overloaded with points of interest that may or may not have something to do with the main story"*. This inspired them to think of how they could be better, and how a writer contributes to that process overall. Secondly, they remembered that on several occasions throughout their discussion, the idea of branching narratives, inspired by the mention of compass directions, seemed like a greater challenge for a writer than a linear one. This served as the final inspiration for the resulting exercise, which would, in their mind, put the writer's ability to understand games' narrative structures into question and perhaps challenge them to come up with something more akin to a game plot rather than a traditional, linear one. They, however, recognized and made it very clear that the first and most obvious issue with their exercise was that it was not particularly exclusive to *game* writing, as the same exercise could be applied to any field where writers are involved and desired to practice their writing through exercises. In their final thoughts, the discussion moved on to *limitations* in writing and especially in game writing, which prompted them to move on to their third exercise of the workshop.

4.1.3 "Bag it"

> *The character of your game is setting off on an adventure but is allowed to bring only three items in his limited inventory that are integral to his role in the game AND in the story. Describe what these three items are and how they are connected.*

With the discussion of limitations and naming things already taking place, the idea for the third exercise was directly inspired by the previous discussions, but with more focus on narrative design rather than story structures and designing plots. The inspiration for this exercise came about when several of the participants addressed the issue of games often having very specific limitations in how inventories are managed. This sparked a shared interest in strict character roles and their shared fascination with the survival genre of games, in which a player must survive with very limited resources. Crediting their very first idea and draft for this exercise to the game of Deserted Island, in which players are forced to think about the three most important things they would wish to have if they were stranded on an island, which can be approached from countless different perspectives. With the topic of their discussion being about "survival", this exercise seemed like the one the group was most excited about, as it allowed them to bring in their own experiences on what kind of gameplay they enjoyed the most. The discussion was quickly overwhelmed by mentions of *co-op (co-operative) games*, which all of them admitted to enjoying the most, but also saw as the type of game that, in their experience, also had the most issues in storytelling and compelling writing. To quote the participant driving this particular line of thinking: *"Co-op games are really underrepresented… There aren't any couch co-op games with a story anymore"*. Another participant vehemently agreed and added: *"The problem with single-player story games is that you can't really share the experience with anyone, because everyone plays differently and for different reasons… I'd much rather have this sort of shared experience where others can contribute and play THEIR role and I can play mine, but still have both be a part of the same story"*.

The participants themselves did not realize it during their drafting that they were broaching the territory of game design and narrative design rather than game writing with their suggestions. Not until the researcher made a note of the fact out loud, which elicited a brief silence of realization. Their conversation often drifted to talking more about

mechanical qualities in games, such as the much appreciated co-operative gameplay mechanic in their favourite games and character roles and their qualities. Role-playing stood as the common ground for the discussion, which they later on admitted wanting to somehow include in their exercise. They did so by creating a prompt that could just as well serve as something a game director could pose as a writing challenge for narrative designers working on roleplaying games in which each character had a very specific role to fill with their own role-specific items.

Interestingly, this third exercise was the first in which the participants made very specific references to their past experiences with games, and used those games as their inspiration and reference points. Clearly, discussing games by their titles and sharing their experiences helped fill the gaps of silence that were brought on by thinking back to their original objective of the workshop: to create an exercise. It should come as no wonder that having examples helped drive the discussion forward and inspired one participant after the other to talk about their experiences with games including a co-op mode and their shared interest in having specific roles in their games. In fact, most described how it is sometimes even beneficial for the experience that the game imposes limitations on the players and players can excel in their own tasks. When prompted about what inspired them, the limitations that are imposed on the writer as well as the player and, again, the things they found *lacking* in game stories and storytelling, were strong forces for inspiration for all participants.

With the inclusion of *Deserted Island*, board games that they credited as further inspiration were *Forbidden Desert* and *Pandemic*, both popular co-op games, which then sparked conversation on the participants' own personal favourites from the co-op perspective, such as *Towerfall*, *Overcooked*, *It Takes Two*, *Crash of the Titans*, *Warframe* and *Mass Effect 3's* multiplayer mode. All of these were admitted as to being extremely compelling to them as a genre but which, to them, showed a lack of compelling

storytelling which could be *shared* by all the players playing at the same time. Their inspiration, while it may not be directly reflected on this third exercise, was contributed in large parts to the faults in their past experiences with some of their favourite games, and all of them explicitly expressed a desire to one day have some of these 'improved' experiences and encouraged game writers to put more effort into those areas they found wanting. Namely, as said by one participant: “deeper and more enriched storytelling in games that have too often been found lacking". The primary issue that they recognized with this line of thinking, however, was that games are often extremely complex systems, and things are often easier said than done, especially with games of such complexity as the ones they described in their experiences.

Nevertheless, the group ended their drafting with one of them pointing out one of the looming questions that the researcher was inclined to pose as well as the dialogue continued. Having observed the tangents and the discussion drifting into territories that had less to do with game writing and more on game design, one participant, after a short break and the group returning to their session after a breather, posed the question: *“What is the difference between game writing and narrative design?”*. This was, indeed, a question the researcher was thinking of posing to spark conversation and get a better clue into their understanding of the two terms as they were quite freely used during the discourse, often synonymously. Rather surprisingly, this elicited a long silence as the group contemplated on it, with many of them either looking vacantly at nothing in particular or kept tilting their heads upwards indicating they were trying to form a mental image for an answer. The rather long and uninterrupted silence suggested they had no real answer to the question – at least one that they felt confident enough to express out loud for the whole group.

4.1.4 "The Autopsy"

> *Find a post-mortem of a game of your choosing. With the help of a post-mortem or other similar game design document detailing the game's story and its inception, try and determine what role and contribution did the game's writer have during development.*

With the silence becoming somewhat tense, the fourth exercise was a moment where the researcher had to step in and provide the participants a lifeline, as they were seemingly unable to progress with a new line of thinking after one of them posed the question on what the differences between narrative designers and game writers are. The question quite literally stumped the group into silence, and looking at their expressions and the way some of the participants eyed the researcher. A very brief explanation was given, inspired by the human body analogy described in Mike Breault's book *Narrative Design: The Craft of Writing for Games* (2020), in speaking about the differences between a game's plot and a game's story with the first acting as a skeleton and the latter being the meat on the bones. A similar and very brief analogy was given to the group with the researcher telling them that, very crudely and generally speaking, the narrative designer is the one who creates the skeleton whereas the game writer is the one who applies that meat on the skeleton. As nearly every author that has been referred to in this thesis would agree in their works, this analogy may be a gross oversimplification of the two roles, as they are more often than not intertwined and more involved with responsibilities extending far beyond than just writer doing *just* writing and the narrative designer doing *just* designing.

Nevertheless, this analogy, or more importantly, the question that was previously posed, acted as the prime inspiration for the group's next exercise. More than any other exercise, this one involved the participants learning something new to be able to move forward with their discussion and evoked more self-reflective thinking and silence in the session as they pondered the exact words they were looking for to come with a prompt for an exercise. With the discussion moving to "how games could be dissected" and with the

roles and professional titles that had something to do with game writing becoming more muddled with every new piece of information and term they discovered, the researcher jumped in to propose the term “game post-mortem” as something that reminded them of “dissecting a game to find out who did what and how the game came to be”.

As this proposal was directly influenced by the researcher, and the participants immediate eagerness to apply all the researcher’s proposed terms into their exercise, the resulting exercise was less of a group effort than all the others and should not be considered a 'pure' original creation of the study group. However, what this exercise is perhaps more indicative of relates quite directly to the topic of this thesis: the perceptions of game writing. With the question “what is the difference between narrative design and game writing” posed during the workshop, and the resulting silence, confusion and questions for the researcher, the authority figure in the room, what was *not* discussed and *not* expressed by the participants is an important observation in terms of this thesis. The participants exerted a great deal of stress in trying to come up with an answer of their own only to come up short, or, as was observed, standing back in silence and hoping for someone else to fill the gaps in their lacking knowledge or perception. Several of them later on, after the conversation finally moved forward, admitted openly that they had “no clue” what the difference was, and felt some sense of inadequacy in the form of questioning once again whether they were *“suited to discuss the topic, if they didn’t even know the basics”*. Those feelings were diminished by the researcher reiterating the premise of the whole workshop, which stated that no prior experience of game writing or its intricacies were by any means required to participate – only their interest in stories, games, and game writing. As a spark of encouragement of this exercise, several of the participants expressed a keen interest in finding a real-life game post-mortem and reading it out of newfound curiosity and interest, a desire that is certainly reflected in the exercise that they created for that exact purpose. Of all the exercises, this one they considered as

the most valuable in terms of educating oneself, but also as the one that was observed to elicit the least excitement as none of them had an experience or story to compare it to.

4.1.5 "Exposing the Story"

> *Explain three different means for exposition in a game. If, for example, you need to provide a backstory for a character in a game, describe three ways in which you can expose that same backstory in a game.*

With the discussion and bemusement over the differences between designers and writers still looming, the participants created a much-needed distraction for themselves and moved on to a completely different topic referencing their own experiences in games where the implementation of a story was found in one way or another distracting or bothersome. In other words, the ideation and discussion turned to excessive and "boring" ways to tell an otherwise good story. As everyone with a literary studies background in the group would advocate to, the means by which a story unfolds or *how* it is told often matters as much or at times even more than the content of the story itself – a direct inspiration of the failures of the narrative designer creating a system for storytelling that is by no means compelling. With the mention of obscenely long dialogue in text boxes and collectible journals and "codex entries" that are often present in large-scale games with a rich background, worldbuilding, and lore, the participants griped over some of the worse examples from their experiences in games and even outside them as a comparison and to legitimize their claim that "everyone is guilty of bad exposition". Acting as inspiration, the aforementioned overtly long texts found in games as added bits of lore that could not be implemented otherwise by any interactive or more engaging means and flashback sequences were referred to as "lazy" and something they nearly *always* skipped, if possible, to spare them the "mental gymnastics", as they spoke with "Finglish" when finding no other word to describe the feeling. On multiple occasions during the discussion, they referred to "interactivity" and "indirectness" as the qualities that mattered and engaged them the most when it came to exposition.

Interestingly, in formulating this exercise, the participants referred to this particular exercise as being a “cookie cutter exercise”, as agreed upon in suggestion of the term by one of them. When asked to elaborate, the general consensus seemed to drift towards the opinion that this exercise seemed “too easy” and therefore not as valuable as the previous ones. Observing their discussion and how they expressed themselves during the drafting phase and in creating the prompt, the researcher came to the conclusion that most of the participants’ firm backgrounds in literary studies or related fields and as avid readers, players and storytellers themselves, ways in which a story can be told and, in their mind, *should* be told seemed more obvious than anything else previously discussed. It was observed at this point that the more examples from their own experiences the participants provided, not only did they become much more excited and more detailed in their descriptions in what inspired them, but also that their attitudes and confidence increased This suggests strongly that the more experiences and knowledge they felt they had the more legitimized they felt about their perception of what game writing could and should be.

This exercise struck as the one that evoked the most discussion, and, therefore, elicited the most tangents into territories far beyond game writing and stories in games. With some guidance and refocus from the researcher to think of things under the medium of games rather than cinema and books which the participants felt compelled to mention, one of the most prominent sources of inspiration for this exercise, apart from the numerous examples from other mediums, was the concept of a “silent protagonist”. This became a leading subject for discussion, with one referring to the game *Dragon Age: Origins* as one that by modern standards may feel more tedious as its dialogue relies heavily on fully written prompts of multiple choices when engaging with the game’s story, all the while a major part of the character development happened outside these rather tedious dialogue sequences in the form of banter between the protagonist’s

companions. This “indirect” storytelling and exposition inspired another participant to mention the game *Journey* as an outstanding example of a unique and memorable way to experience a story: one told without using a single word, similar to the game *Stray*, which relies more on the environment to tell the player about the world and its characters.

What the participants once again expressed were both the successes and the flaws they had experienced with storytelling in games, exchanging one bad example for a good one to balance the discussion. It was observed that the participants, while drafting their exercises, took part in indirectly and seemingly unknowingly testing their efficacy as well to perhaps prove to themselves that the exercises were legitimate and “proper” for the task. Through their discussions and during the group interview phase of the study, they had already indirectly provided their own answers for their own exercises, an observation that never came up during self-reflective expressions that were consistently present in every participant during every exercise. This merely added confirmation for the researcher that the participants positioned themselves as both educators in trying to come up with something useful for an exercise and possibly help *other* aspiring game writers as well as learners trying to figure out whether they would have an answer for their drafted exercise. In the cases when they were unsure of whether they did, an added effort was made to find the appropriate knowledge or at the very least an educated opinion that could in one way or another serve as an answer.

4.1.6 “Musical Chairs”

> *Choose a song. Write an original game cutscene or a game event from that song. Explain where in the game would your song play.*

As the workshop began to reach its natural mid-break with the participants becoming clearly fatigued based on how the volume and intensity of the conversation began to die down, several from the group were beginning to show interest in the researcher’s own opinions and *their* inspiration. To liven up the conversation the researcher gave a

somewhat vague answer that inspiration could be just about anything that elicits emotion – texts, pictures, cinema, a person, a feeling et cetera. With the final mention of music, several of the participants activated to share the times music inspired them during a gaming session. Allowing them to freely discuss music and its inspiration drove the conversation to a point where one of the participants, who had remained relatively silent compared to the rest of the group for a short while during the workshop, to tell about their story of how the song *Zeit* by the German industrial metal band *Rammstein* had just very recently inspired them to come up with an entirely new and original game idea of their own. They explained how the music stopped being merely a backdrop while they were playing, but, in fact, how the music itself perfectly adapted to the idea in his head and even visualized the idea. As the conversation then turned to "which pieces of music inspires us and what kind of stories do they remind us of?", the researcher took a step back and let the conversation flow, as it perfectly served the purposes of this thesis without even having asked them to think about the topic further. A natural conversation about music and inspiration was a fascinating conversation topic on its own, but having it be completely *natural* and not have it feel like there was any outside pressure to try and exert too much effort into thinking about the sources of inspiration was valuable.

Based on the sheer amount of examples the participants came up with and which connected them to stories and experiences from their past, and how *all* of them credited music as being one of their greatest sources of inspiration, there is no doubt that music and, more specifically music in *games*, is a vast pool for creative thinking and inspiration. Whether it acted as background noise during work or as an added dramatic effect for their gaming sessions, several songs were directly credited as having a memorable experience with games and stories. Even whole soundtracks or particular songs were connected to different scenes that have either been preserved in their memory for having a memorable soundscape and, therefore, carried over as inspiration in their own work as storytellers.

While it was fascinating to hear their excitement and have them naturally share their experiences and most memorable sequences from game stories through sound, the conversation hardly touched the topic of game writing. The researcher posed the question, *"what other role do you see game writers having with music?"*, which prompted them to backtrack with their line of thinking back to the actual drafting of the exercise. They expressed clear desire in having the subject of *music* being included in their exercise, seeing as how highly they regarded it as a source of inspiration, which quickly turned into the exercise presented in this chapter. However, the exercise left them with perhaps more questions than answers. In addition, this exercise stood out as the one that the group did not particularly practice on themselves in any shape or form, as it would have taken time out of the workshop, and the prompt in itself was considered as more vague and much more time-consuming. It did not impose any limitations on the one potentially doing the exercise, once again raising the repeated point of how the participants considered *time* as a resource for a game writer and how they were, seemingly more than writers of other mediums, more "constricted". The participants recognized game writers as having both very limited time as well as limited space for their work. This perception carried throughout *every* exercise but was only directly discussed during the drafting of this exercise in the group interview phase, suggesting to the researcher that the group was more carefully considering the role and realities of game writers as time went on and the idea of limitations was presented naturally. Their final thoughts on the exercise and on their brief summary of their inspiration was more loaded with questions, most important of which seemed to be *"how much influence does the writer have on composing the music for their stories?"*. The question they posed, when inquired and prompted, was ultimately more of a rhetorical one than anything else. They all expressed a *hope* that a writer would have a role in creating the soundscape or, in this case, the actual music in the form of an open question. This, of course, more directly exposes the shared uncertainty of a writer's

involvement and the uncertainty over the role of a game writer in general. A game writer's area of expertise seemed to be better understood than their involvement and roles in creating a game. In fact, one of the participants aptly asked: *"Aside from writing, what responsibilities and influence does a game writer have?"*.

4.1.7 "Branching Out"

> *Deconstruct an ending. Describe how a game could end with a sentence. Knowing the outcome, backtrack and come up with three different story paths that could lead to this ending.*

After a another pause in the workshop, the participants seemed more naturally invigorated to discuss about personal experiences once again. With an instant indication to their source of inspiration, the group expressed through examples in popular fiction and games of instances where *their* choices or a character's choices ended up *disappointing* them. Without the researcher bringing attention to it for the participants, their own immediate observation was that, once again, the group approached the task from the perspective that something about games and stories were found *lacking*. Additionally, they expressed a desire to possibly rectify these faults and bad experiences with suggestions of their own. A direct quote from one of the participants on this occasion was: *"I want to know how they designed the story, because even I could do better"*. The group was understandably and clearly passionate about their experiences, or, rather, their lived disappointments as the language and words used to describe some of their examples was much stronger, more confident, and their views more adamant.

With mentions of "failed" stories, starting from the character development perspective, from the redemption arc of *Jaime Lannister* until the final season of popular tv-series *Game of Thrones*, going all the way to their expressed disappointment over the controversial ending of the *Mass Effect* -trilogy, their express desire and theme of the exercise revolved around narrative structures, branching narratives and plots for games

and otherwise. As the exercise was rather quickly drafted, their expressed inspirations for it were traced down to one's idea about "plot twists". With a rather interesting take on possibilities of branching stories, the group agreed with the statement sparked by the credited original inspirations that plot twists, when done correctly, were a motivation for them to come and revisit a story, whereas a bad plot twist or a branch in a story left them with no desire to revisit or, in the worst cases, even continue on a story. As one of them would summarize: *"I don't mind knowing the outcome. It's actually more often that I enjoy the journey more than the ending. But if there's a bad plot twist in the middle of that journey, it takes me out of it* (the story)*"*. Several remarks were made about creating stories that felt satisfying and, above all, rewarding, which they conceded to having no ready-made "formula" for doing but nonetheless wanted to expressly desire in their exercise draft as well. Interestingly none made any mention of who would be, for them, the authority who would decide whether the potential outcome of their drafted exercise was "good", or whether it had the potential to show remarkable talent. When asked, their assumption was that the one doing any of their exercises, including this one, would be conducted for personal reasons, or by someone who *"knows what they're doing"*.

Finally, as a fascinating observation, during the same line of questioning to their inspiration, one of the participants stated that they specifically enjoyed what they dubbed, *"a sort of secret language"*, in stories. When asked to describe this concept, she described it as writing that feels personal and specific to the reader, a series of clues, descriptions, prompts, et cetera that are meaningful between the reader and the writer. For example, the main character is provided with a description that is clearly referencing an aspect (e.g. another character, event, place) of the storyworld which is, as of yet, obscure to the character but rather meaningful or even "spoiler-ready" for the reader through a previous encounter during or even outside the current story. This is a style in which the reader/player is given more information through these 'Easter eggs', as is often popularly

referenced in other media, than the character of the story they are experiencing it through, which makes specific interactions and events in a story far more interesting precisely through its undercover impact. She traced this “secret language” to their previous conversation topic of “knowing the outcome but experiencing the journey, described it as something particularly interesting for a story, and emphasized it being a skill of its own. These 'Easter eggs' were, then, agreed as another valuable source of the story's reusability, i.e. multiple play- or readthroughs, and a potential tool in guiding the different game story branches. What makes this observation particularly interesting for the results of this thesis, is that this was also the first instance in which one of the participants explicitly brought up the subject of *style* in writing into the conversation. Style, one could easily argue, is an integral part of a writer’s skillset – the voice of the author. Up to this point, the subject of *skill* in writing had not been definitively remarked on before the mention of a “secret language”.

4.1.8 “The Simpleton”

> *Think of a game that you would consider of NOT having a story (e.g., Chess, Solitaire, Tetris, Pac-Man). Create a narrative for that game or its elements.*

With the conversation once again revolving more around narrative design rather than writing, it was interesting to observe more self-awareness in the participants as they began drafting the second to last exercise of the workshop. With the topics they had already discussed, it was at this point that the participants began to actively state mental notes out loud for the group by posing more open questions about all of their previous discussions. They described noticing patterns in their discourse and in their sources of inspiration in particular, with several of them coming to the conclusion that their inspiration and their desire for stories most often stemmed from interesting characters rather than interesting stories as a whole. What many of them considered most memorable in game writing were not the events of the game but the characters that inhabited them, which, as spoken by

one, *"reflects on our exercise drafts"*. Admittedly, a vast majority of what they credited as their inspiration, was tied to their memories, opinions and preferences for good characters and characterization.

As one of them put it after this realization and observation, they exerted special effort into creating an exercise that was *not* related to creating characters but would specifically focus on something that was "already made, but reimagined in a different way". While this exact sentiment served as direct inspiration for their final exercise, the idea of having something already prepared piqued the group's interest, which turned the conversation into more of a brainstorming session on how they could "transform the game *Snake* into the *Human Centipede*". With some of the more morbid details left unexplained, this analogy was credited as the main source of inspiration for their exercise, as the core idea could be applied to any "simple" game that traditionally lacked a particular narrative, like the games they themselves listed in their prompt.

As the subject of *skill* in writing had so far been left relatively alone, this exercise became an opportunity for the participants to ponder on it, as one of them credited their inspiration being the expression: *"Reimagining things is a skill of its own"*. This sentiment sparked not only a resounding agreement with the sentiment, but made the others consider the statement in a better light during the group interview phase especially. One spoke about "repackaging" while another one referred it as "reimagining". Aside from the different terms they used in the discussion, they were of one mind in the group interview that how the writer reimagines or repackages an already familiar story is definitely a skill, and, when mastered, makes for compelling and engaging storytelling, as it is something already familiar to the player or readers. They referenced and credited their inspiration through examples, such as movies like *Avatar* and *John Wick* being simply retellings of old tried-and-true plots – *Avatar* being described as a reimagining of *Pocahontas*, while *John Wick* was described as a classic revenge tale repackaged into something more

compelling by writing memorable characters and an engaging world that they inhabited. What is interesting in their line of thinking, was when the researcher posed the question; *"can you think of similar examples from games rather than books and movies"*, it, again, elicited an uncomfortable silence. Based on the extensive field notes and observations, the participants willingly skipped answering this question, as they could not provide a similar example from the world of games to support their argument or exemplify it. Whether that spoke about their unfamiliarity of the genre, or a symptom of the mental fatigue that was at this point physically observable, is perhaps irrelevant to the results, as the inspiration did not *have* to come from games specifically, only that their thinking and their exercises would apply to game writing. Nevertheless, the resulting silence was unexpected and provides cause for further investigation.

Despite the participants' reluctance to answering further inquiries on game examples and their obvious mental fatigue at this point, the resulting exercise was in the end considered by them as *"an interesting thought exercise"* and *"I would really like to try this one sometime".* This same sentiment was not only audibly and excitedly agreed to by the others, but many of them went already beyond that and enthusiastically already proposed games and elements within them that they could turn into a story of their own, or how they could use as an example, such as creating names and backstories for chess pieces. When asked why they became so excited about doing this exercise in particular, their answers were vague, but one of them prompted: *"This is something useful. It's easy but fun. There's already a skeleton and that sort of creates limitations and makes the writing part easier"*. This was a description to which the rest agreed on, and a valuable observation for the results of this thesis as well, as it was the first direct acknowledgment from the participants that imposing limitations on the writer made, in their mind, writing a much easier process and, therefore, more enjoyable as an exercise as well. Intriguingly, observing the prompts and the entire process for their creation from their inception to

final approval by the group, there are rather few limitations expressed for the one potentially experimenting with them. Other than mentions of writing things "in a few sentences" or numbering some of the things they expect from the exercise, the exercises are quite freeform. As they often observed themselves, they address and approach writing with the assumption that they involve in some way a *branching* narrative. By this remark from both the researcher and the participants, it is important to, once again, recognize the mention of *limitations* in their discussion, during both phases of drafting the exercise and in the group interview as well – this time most directly and in a self-affirming expression.

4.1.9 "50 Shades of Evil"

> *Part 1: Every game has their boss level in one form or another. Invent and describe a villain of your own or borrow an existing villain and describe WHY they are the villain of your story.*
>
> *Part 2: Invent and describe three or more new villains that either come AFTER, or PRECEDES your first villain. Describe their hierarchy and relation with a fitting narrative and its relation to imagined gameplay or game mechanics.*

With mental fatigue finally setting in and the conversation losing its track, the group agreed to this exercise being the final one of the workshop. Their initial prompt and apparent origin of inspiration came from one of them asking the group: *"what is something that we all appreciate in a story?"*. While the initial answer for their own question once again seemed to drift towards "characters", one sentiment quickly replaced this more vague description: a proper villain. They expressed how the traditional "black and white – good versus evil trope is boring", they began telling about their experiences with "grey villains", referring to characters and villains that were somehow relatable or that the person experiencing the story would, quoting the participant driving the conversation: "empathize with the bad guy". Remarkably, their initial suggestion for the first draft was nearly identical to one created in the pilot study for this thesis: reversing the affiliation of a fictional character and his villain – turning the tables on, for example,

Batman and his nemesis Joker and writing a short story about how Joker becomes the force for good, and Batman becoming his arch-nemesis and the villain of the story.

However, as one of the participants had previous knowledge of the pilot study, the researcher suspected that it was inspired partly, if not fully from that previous session. After having confirmed these suspicions, the group abandoned the idea for the one they came up with, dubbing it in their drafting phase as "layers of evil", and later titling it how it is now, as they expressed significant struggles not only trying to verbalize their idea – much like with all the other exercises respectfully, but also struggling to formulate a formal set of instructions for the exercise. With inquiry, the participants expressed a desire for the researcher to step in and help them as the "authority figure" in the situation. Abiding with their desire for a lifeline and understanding their exhaustion for brainstorming, the researcher proposed for them to think about what they might consider as inspiring for an exercise that would address the theme or "villains and evil". This suggestion promoted some of the less exhausted participants to talk about their favourite examples from fiction which they could use as an inspiration or an example for what they felt like was good or bad writing for villains. On the good side, once again, many of them agreed with the notion that the character *Jaime Lannister* and his story of redemption up until the final season of the show *Game of Thrones* served as an example of a "morally grey and compelling writing", while fantastical creatures like vampires and werewolves were described to being "underutilized and often terribly written", citing that: *"Twilight totally ruined vampires for me. I want to see them as brutal monsters just like werewolves where the person underneath would actually struggle, but now they are just basically sparkly and all about porn."*. This sentiment carried on to many of the participants agreeing and sharing their own experiences about how vampires were no longer villains, but rather objects of affection and hyper-sexualized characters in harlequin romances. One participant countered this experience with one of their own that they considered a

redeeming success, referring and crediting her inspiration to the game *Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* in a small side quest titled *Wild at Heart*, and later on with the game's expansion *Blood and Wine*, where: *"they portrayed vampires really well – an example of how they should be written."*.

The reason this specific conversation piece was recorded and what makes it interesting, is that the participants were not aware that they were only moments ago discussing the idea of *reimagining* things to create new compelling stories and narratives. There is little argument that even though the participants expressed their dislike for such stories in *any* media with quite strong language, what they were often referencing in this final exercise were all re-inventions of old characters and stories, and they are, despite them considering them "bad writing", they are still immensely successful and influential stories in popular culture. It was noted, that the sense of self-awareness and the recurring moments of self-reflection throughout the study dwindled nearing the last two exercises. While the group could most certainly identify instances and original examples of what they would consider as their inspiration for coming up with such an exercise, the role of game writing in the conversation was barely mentioned, while writing *in* games was a recurring theme. The group was much less concerned with the writer, as much as they were inspired by the *writing*. Nevertheless, inspiration was credited, in addition to the aforementioned titles, but also to other experiences such as the team-up of Crash Bandicoot and Doctor Cortex in the game *Crash Twinsanity* as a compelling "concept" in game writing. They referenced it as being a concept they would especially enjoy seeing applied in other games more often: the villain and protagonist teaming up to defeat a common enemy, which served as the penultimate credited inspiration to their final exercise. Though the participants followed this with a brief final discussion and a review of their efforts one by one with the researcher carefully observing and noting down their final thoughts, the workshop was concluded with several of the participants showing and expressing

considerable mental fatigue, but on a lighter note, thanked each other for the experience with the final comment from one of the participants giving a summary for future considerations on studies like this one: *"This was fun. This should be done again sometime."*.

5 ANALYSIS

Based on the compiled results of the workshop, this section will summarize and categorize the main findings and compare them with the primary literature discussed in the *Theoretical Background* section of this thesis, mainly with Jackson et al. (2022) and the described *narrative standpoints* and *ludic standpoints*. The results of the analysis are divided into four distinct themes representing the different perceptions of game writing that were discovered from concurring descriptions of inspiration and their application, and the repeated but necessary efforts of the researcher refocusing the creative process in order to make notes of patterns in the discussion with the participants. The four most repeated themes of discussion within the workshop were as follows: *Understanding limitations*, *Reliance on traditional storytelling techniques*, *Design-oriented mindsets*, and *Problem-oriented approaches to inspiration*. Each of the four themes will be discussed and analysed accordingly in their own chapters. Each chapter will detail what the researcher of this thesis is referring to with each theme, how they were discovered, their significance to the literature of this study, and, finally, the significance of the discovery to the topic of perceptions about game writing. With all four themes described and analysed, the final chapter of this section will then summarize the main discoveries and provide a brief outline of how they contribute to the wider field of professional game writing and for future research of similar nature.

5.1 Understanding Limitations

Categorizing this discovery into *understanding limitations*, the researcher refers to the numerous occasions of the participants becoming clearly self-aware of the limitations that game writers and the practice of writing is often imposed with. They explicitly expressed either concerns over what they could or could not do with their crafted exercises or how they perceived game writers being forced to deal with certain limitations in their practice

and during game development. The discovery becomes relatively obvious with nearly every exercise during the discussion portions of the process and in their pondering over inspiration, in which the group would often limit themselves to addressing one specific element or issue at a time and openly admitting on several occasions that they needed to consider limitations such as time, detail, genre, player freedoms, et cetera in order to properly realize their vision of the exercise and their sources of inspiration. A note of interest for this theme is that in their discussions of limitations and their understanding of them, the participants remarkably often considered and expressed them in a positive light. In several examples, the participants expressed descriptions and signs of relief that a game writer or the way in which a story is told applies sometimes strict limitations over how the story can be experienced. In terms of practices, with each instance when the participants applied and discussed imposing limitations, the creative process became significantly more streamlined and even their descriptions of their inspiration and their experiences became much clearer as well. They were able to focus their efforts to very specific instances of their lived experiences and even contributed limitations to being a part of good practices as well as something that they explicitly expressed *knowing* to being a part of game writing, more-so than in other mediums. Excessive amount of freedom in a game world, convoluted and widely spread storytelling, sensory overload and overflow of narrative elements were described as fundamental issues. In contrast, modernized storytelling devices and systems that carve out story elements such as long, text-based dialogues and "lore dumps" and how they repackage them into a more malleable and digestible forms were all contributed as inspirations during discussions of limitations. With nearly every instance, the participants expressed appreciation for ways in which the described issues could either be addressed and fixed by a writer or directly praising elements that they considered as particularly innovative and wished more game writers would apply similar techniques in their practice. In summary, limitations were not

only understood and contributed to being an integral part of game writing but also directly appointed as a characteristic of good practices. The participants expressed relief and appreciation for imposing limitations on game writing and game writers, as well as expressed having deeper understanding of what *kinds* of limitations game writers and other writers can familiarize themselves with.

Comparing the participants' discussions, descriptions and the outcome of their efforts with the characteristics of Jackson et al. (2022), the results of this study align with several of their points on both the narrative and ludic points. Several instances in discussing story structures in games and their examples of inspiration correspond with the narrative point that a game writer should understand how that structure is *manipulated* to create interest and keep the player guessing. Reflecting the results with this point the participants too understood the different narrative structures employed in games and understood, or at least perceived, that they are extensively utilized in game writing practices. "Keeping the player guessing" can be understood to refer to imposing certain restrictions on the players experiencing the story, in that the story elements are not freely and openly available to a player from the start and must be presented and arranged in an order that entices the player to advance in the narrative in the way the writer intends or expects while maintaining immersion and engagement. A similar sentiment can be derived from the results of the workshop in several instances from not only their discussions but also from the exercises such as the "50 Shades of Evil", "Branching Out", "Exposing the Story", "Bag It", and "The Camel Fart", all of which impose certain restrictions on a writer and refer to creating a specific structure or a system that would manipulate a narrative in a particular manner. Discussions of limitations were often in conjunction with the topic of *structures* and the participants' understanding of what they are in both traditional narratives as well as in games. While Jackson et al. (2022) and the participants of this workshop both reference *time* being integral with game writing, the professionals in the descriptions of Jackson et

al. align it more with the narrative standpoint, while the participants of this thesis were more inclined to discussing time as an external restriction or limitation for a writer. The professionals seem to connect time as an element that connects and moves the game narrative, while the participants attribute time as a restriction that concerns the writer more than it does their narrative. From a ludic standpoint, understanding limitations connects with the sentiment that a writer should understand how to balance what the player can and cannot do in the game world and what they are meant to understand from the narrative. This sentiment directly connects with the discussions over how a narrative is presented and in what order or in what pieces, or perhaps more accurately, in what *size* pieces. Their understanding of limitations is perhaps most deeply in tune with the first ludic standpoint. All in all, the participants seemed to perceive limitations as one of the most integral things for a game writer to understand and prepare for as they re-enacted and considered the practice during the creation of their exercise, which is very much in line with especially the ludic standpoint described by Jackson et al. (2022).

5.2 Reliance on traditional storytelling techniques

As the title of this theme and major recurrence in the data would suggest, the participants expressed a strong reliance on traditional storytelling techniques in their discussions of practicing game writing. Not only that, but during nearly every exercise and every inquiry into their inspirations for their exercises, the group expressed a vast variety of instances and examples from storytelling mediums that were *not* related to games. Movies, books and television series were perhaps the most majorly credited pieces of storytelling across all media in their inspiration, which they, after self-realizing this, wanted to "gamify" and, in a way, translate into game writing.

As the background theory of this thesis would strongly suggest, games are no stranger to traditional storytelling devices and writing techniques derived from across different

media, this was quickly evident in the workshop from the very first exercise, which was inspired almost completely by what the participants described as a very traditional method of conducting "imagined interviews" with fictional characters. The inspiration of using stories and storytelling techniques was constant in every exercise. One of the foremost contributors for this approach by the participants was suspected to be their educational backgrounds in literary studies, which they were all also readily willing to admit to and accept that it had the potential of affecting the results of the study. In several instances during drafting the exercises, the researcher intentionally asked, after long discussions straying away from games altogether, whether there were any *games* that would contribute to their idea of the exercise, to which they had to clearly exert more effort compared to how many examples they used and credited as an inspiration from other mediums. Even when each exercise was intended and emphasized to being an exercise about *game* writing, the participants were strongly inclined to attributing their inspiration and their discussion towards examples that were hardly connected to games at all. With Petitmengin's (2006) methods in mind, the researcher was prompted and often forced to refocus the participants' attention towards thinking about *game* writing exercises, as the conversations and early drafts of the exercises often drifted towards creating exercises more fitting for screenwriters or novelists.

Interestingly, in nearly every discussion about inspiration, game writing and games in general seemed to come as an afterthought, which suggests that in this case, the participants were almost excessively reliant on other mediums for inspiration *and* in drafting their exercises, which upon closer inspection are not always entirely specific to games and could be applied and practiced by other writers in other mediums as well. Exercises like "The Interview Game", "The Camel Fart", "Musical Chairs", "Branching Out", and "50 Shades of Evil" could all be applied to mediums other than games. Simply disconnecting the word game from the instructions of the exercise and replacing them

with a medium of one's choosing or with some of them simply taking them out of the context of games and presenting them in a traditional writers' workshop, one could apply themselves just as well as a game writer could. Many of the exercises are dependant on the context in which they are presented and relate to more general skills and techniques that are not necessarily specific to games.

Nevertheless, the discovery being so overwhelmingly apparent from the data, it deserves to be recognized as a theme of its own and be analysed accordingly. While the discovery may not align very well with the ludic standpoints described by Jackson et al. (2022), the data adjacent with talks about traditional storytelling and the described examples certainly align with the narrative standpoints in almost every regard. Discussion over compelling story structures and concepts, experiences of engaging storytelling, inspirational settings and characters, varying points of view within stories they describe as engaging and inspirational are all clearly and varyingly present in the participants' discussions and examples. This discovery suggests that while the professionals like Novak (2012), Nicklin (2022), Suckling & Walton (2012), Despain (2020) would agree that traditional storytelling practices are still not entirely useful for game writers, they can still be significantly influential for aspiring game writers. While inspirational and capable of providing writers frameworks for *portions* of a story, games come with challenges in writing that those frameworks are not necessarily capable of tackling. Despite all that, the participants of this study seem to contribute not only a major part of their credited inspiration to more traditional means for storytelling but also consider them as being effective and useful in exploring ways to write for games. The sentiment is more in tune with perhaps Nicklin (2022), who suggests that they should be treated as tools rather than strict rules for writing. Connecting the sentiment of this study group to the narrative standpoints of Jackson et al. (2022) suggests a similar sentiment that understanding even the more traditional means for writing is still immensely valuable to understanding game

writing, even if all traditional techniques may not always be applicable to games. As some of the background theory also suggest, games are a product of multidisciplined professionals and as such they borrow inspiration from varying and diverse backgrounds and practices. The overall sentiment that is captured from the data of this study in the discussion of reliance in traditional storytelling techniques and connecting that sentiment with the research and input of professional writers and researchers, is that *without* referencing back to what inspires game writers, would the stories told by games be as diverse, engaging and innovative as they are today?

5.3 Design-oriented mindsets

Another major discovery from the data could be summarized with the question that was posed by the participants of this study in nearly every exercise as either a passing comment or a topic of deep and interested conversation later turning into an exercise of its own: “what is the difference between the narrative designer and the game writer”. To answer this question the participants went through the additional effort of trying to come up with an explanation of their own and craft an exercise dedicated to exploring the answers, as the question became a recurring cause for stress whenever it was prompted by one of the participants. Interestingly, the question was at no point directly proposed by the researcher, but came as a result of one of the participants being reminded of the varying titles in game development of people involved in developing the narrative. The only contribution to this constant and recurring topic of conversation by the researcher was a comment addressed to the whole group saying “You seem to be very interested in game design as well”, during the “Bag It” exercise, which upon closer examination is particularly aimed towards practicing the design skills of a game writer rather than their narrative development skills. While the comment was meant as praise, the participants had an altogether different response to what they seemed to consider as more of a

suggestion than anything else. When inquired later on after the workshop, they described to have misconstrued the comment as criticism and as a gesture to focus *less* on the design aspects of games and move towards something considered a writer's skill in particular. Nevertheless, the question carries much more weight than anticipated, as the participants wanted to know whether their understanding and definitions were more right or wrong. The question and thought in itself affected every exercise moving forward as the group was *already* inclined to thinking about design mechanics and game design in general in their inspirations even before the researcher made them become aware of it.

While the title *narrative design* was not mentioned in the conversations apart from in which it was directly addressed, the group expressed a constant need to include specific game mechanics in their discussions whenever games were a part of them. Reflecting on the workshop as a whole, the group, despite their background and lesser familiarity with games, made very specific mentions to design elements that, having more technical knowledge of them or not, were all very much aligned with the skills and practices that both the professional handbooks and researchers like Jackson et al. (2022) address and credit to game writers and good practices. The inspirations for design and the discussions in which the participants described their reasoning for including design elements in their exercises and examples were perfectly in line with the ludic standpoints of Jackson et al. (2022), which are derived from the experiences of professional game writers and which are also perfectly in line with the professional handbooks used as a point of reference and authority on game writing practices. Each of the ludic standpoints described by Jackson et al. (2022) and further supplemented by the likes of Despain (2020) and Nicklin (2022) match the described understanding of the participants when inquired on the matter of design skills being a part of game writing. It would not be too bold to suggest that based on this brief study, this group, at least, expressed quite an adept awareness of game design being an integral part of game writing. On the matter of perception, the group seemed to

express very little doubt of design being embedded with game writing practices. Despite them being confused by the explicit definitions and roles of narrative designers and game writers, they expressed acute knowledge and keen interest in specific and sometimes specialized implementations and examples of narrative systems and game design elements. Based on the extent of the discussions and the recurrences of the subject in a majority of the exercises, with one even being specially tailored to addressing the matter, the researcher would then characterize the group of this study as being a rather design-oriented in their process. A genuine concern of the researcher at the later stage during the workshop was, that the conversation was at risk of drifting off into territories of design where the writers commonly had a much lesser role, primarily based on the excitement and the length of the discussions had in the numerous occurrences throughout the workshop.

5.4 Problem-oriented approaches with inspiration

With the topic of inspiration being somewhat less fruitful in making discoveries about the perceptions of the participants, one of the main discoveries more than makes up for the lesser impact it had on the results: the repeated expressions of inspiration for their thinking and exercises being things that the participants described as being explicitly *bad*. In their discussion and from the inquiries into their reasoning for making whichever exercise they were making, one thing seemed to connect each inquiry with their inspiration: the desire to *improve* something in which a writer had failed. Specific examples that they credited as their inspiration were less often something that they would have described as “good writing”, but the exact opposite. Similarly, some things they felt were entirely missing in a specific territory with games, for example, the extended discussions over co-operative games being felt to lack proper or engaging narratives. What excited the group in each discussion about inspiration were the examples that were

described as bad, which would often inspire the group to come up with an exercise that would somehow rectify or address that flaw rather than trying to come up with an exercise that would somehow mimic the examples of what they considered as “good writing”. In nearly every instance, the resulting exercise was credited to being *more* inspired by bad examples than good. The ‘good’ served more as the examples of what the group desired in the games that they played. This was a wishful outcome of having good practices in game writing and having writers innovate and create narratives that were more in tuned with concepts described in, for example, study such as this where the by-product of the results is also discovering the interests and desires from a focus group particularly interested in the storytelling aspects of a game.

Connecting this with the background literature of this study, the researcher proposes referring back to Thrash et al. (2014) for interesting additional insight for analysing the results related to their description of the component processes of inspiration. In characterizing the described sources for inspiration as being either *bad* examples from writing, and contrasted by the *good* examples, taking a look at the component processes, the researcher connected the described process of being ‘inspired *by*’ to being very much connected with the participants’ accounts of *bad* writing. In contrast, being ‘inspired *to*’ was more connected with the accounts of *good* writing. To elaborate on this connection, the participants were observed, on numerous occasions, being far more inspired *by* subjectively bad experiences and examples of writing. This compelled them to think of ways in which they could improve or fix those flaws with either addressing the issue or implementing means into their exercises that would somehow approach them. Describing this during the exercises, they were essentially pointing out flaws in popular storytelling on numerous occasions and also turning bad examples into good. With every good example or revision of the bad, they instead became inspired *to* do something – to actualize the inspiring qualities in the evocative object. This meant becoming inspired to

create a game writing exercise of a subjectively good example and have it realized or reflected in their creative efforts. Even in the cases where a participant described a subjectively good example, without addressing a bad one beforehand or have it be connected to anything subjectively bad, they were observed as being more inspired *to* take action instead of returning to an evocative state and think of further inspiration to be inspired *by*.

Connecting this discovery with the topics of perception once again, this thesis proposes considering the careful examination of inspiration as a practice, an exercise of its own for game writers, no matter what their perceived skill might be. The results and the analysis of this thesis suggests is that by examining inspiration among game writers, researchers and professionals have the potential of discovering both subjectively good and bad instances of writing. In addition, they are able to consider their own perceptions of *why* they think this way, whether they could find innovative ways of doing the same thing *better*, and solutions on rectifying what they consider having gone wrong. This discovery, in a way, serves as the researcher's own contribution to the workshop – an exercise among the others which came about as a culmination of examining the vast and diverse accounts of inspiration of both subjectively good and bad examples of writing, and consider what we can learn from them. This is in accordance with Ballentine (2015) who proposes a similar sentiment in his own approach to educating game writing. Instead of focusing and hanging on the negative, this thesis proposes to first recognize what game writers perceive as flawed and then be inspired *to* innovate and do better.

6 DISCUSSION

The purpose of this thesis is by no means to ascertain or generalize the key findings explored in the analysis as conrcete *right* answers to *how game writing is perceived*. As an exploratory study, it aims to explore what *kinds* of perceptions can be observed and discovered in a certain setting and with particular lines of inquiry. This thesis found that, in this iteration of the workshop with the participants characterized as a group of aspiring and novice game writers, they nevertheless exhibited a significant reliance on examples of more traditional storytelling in mediums other than games when, in fact, the task was to create *game* writing exercises. Yet, despite the reservations of some of the professional and educated opinions, such as that of Nicklin (2022), stating that traditional means are simply not fully cut out for game writing as frameworks, the novices in this study were still particularly inspired by them and applied their knowledge of them into games deftly.

Quoting back to Nicklin (2022) about game writers collecting "tools" for their toolboxes, the participants continuously exhibited a similar behaviour in that the varying sources of inspiration acted as their tools for constructing their exercises. Furthermore, as shown in the analysis, despite their reliance on examples and inspiration from sources other than games, whenever the study group refocused their efforts into putting things into the context of game writing, the researcher observed rather detailed and perceptive descriptions and judgments on game writing practices. While their understanding of limitations was one of the major findings that spanned across the majority of their creative efforts, several other plausible and articulate perceptions on the practices of game writing were also discovered: namely, character development rooted in their knowledge of drama, understanding relationships and characteristics between different systems and genres in storytelling, considerations of player agency and multiple points of view, areas where game writers may very well contribute aside from developing stories et cetera. The variety in their perceptions of game writing, particularly from a ludic standpoint (see Jackson et

al., 2022) was an unexpected discovery considering how the pilot study beforehand indicated the opposite. This is precisely why the researcher of this study identified and grouped the discovery in the results as the participants having a particularly design-oriented mindset during the workshop. Additionally, from the diverse set of described knowledge and perceptions of game writing practices, the researcher chose *limitations* as the one that stood out the most as the discussion and acknowledgement of limitations were often in conjunction with other perceived practices.

As the results may suggest, the value of using inspiration as the subject of inquiry and insight into what a group of participants consider as inspiring and described as being influential in constructing their perceptions of game writing may not have been discovered had the concept not been included in the discussions and examined as closely as it was. Including inspiration in this study uncovered more detailed insight into what the analysis describes as the problem-oriented approach among the participants. In uncovering and openly addressing their inspiration, they identified an objectively *bad* example of writing related to the topic of their choice and expressed their desire to address the issues they had with them. A vast majority of their inspiration could be traced to their percetions of certain aspects as being *flawed* or *lacking*, comparing them with examples that were subjectively *good*, and becoming inspired to producing instructions that would have the potential to address these comparable issues. Their approach and attitude towards the entire creative endeavour could be described as the group repeatedly positioning themselves as creative problem-solvers, which also characterizes an identifiable perception towards game writing in general. Based on the results and the analysis, game writing was both perceived and approached as a creative problem-solving practice that demands diverse knowledge of game-specific design elements as well as knowledge of past methods and examples of writing across different mediums. Game writing as a practice was perceived as an ability to not only recognize flaws, accomplishments and

innovations in writing but also as a skill to develop and nurture educated techniques of addressing the issues and strive to innovate and build on top of what is already perceived as a diverse and interdisciplinary practice.

The thesis recognizes that the outcome of the writer's work is a widely discussed topic in all facets of game-oriented discourse in academia, professional literature and among game cultures, but the attention given to the writers and their actual practices are less represented among the same communities. As the discussions during the workshop suggest, although smaller in number and therefore harder to generalize, a group of aspiring and novice game writers seemed more equipped and knowledgeable in discussing specific pieces of writing and analysing them for specific qualities than they were able to describe game writing as a practice – the activity and process of writing. *What* has been written is ostensibly easier for novice practitioners to verbalize and characterize than *how* it was written. This thesis uncovers some of the more pervasive perceptions that are held about game writing as a practice and recognizes whether or not those perceptions are rooted in informed and credible reasoning. Understanding the various perceptions helps practitioners and educators identify points of interest in discussions of their practice and guides them in addressing what could be common misconceptions that deserve to be rectified by educated professionals in the field. For example, the discussions held by the group in this thesis suggest that traditional narratives and practices still have significant influence on the process of writing games. Therefore, upon seeing such a perception being identified in a field study, a professional would have reason to address and speak out whether or not such a perception is founded and provide their own account on what *they* consider game writing to be, further contributing to the ongoing discussion that deserves more widespread attention.

While the approach of this study did not include taking participant backgrounds, education or any specific experience into consideration other than the participants

identifying themselves as “novices”, the researcher also recognizes that the participants’ level of expertise and described backgrounds contributing and affecting the results is not unreasonable. The group partaking in the creative exercise in the workshop was, after all, particularly reliant on their knowledge of *traditional* mediums, such as cinema and books rather than games when exploring their interests and inspiration for creating what they did, as showcased by the results and analysis. With possible future iterations of a study aligned with the methodology and goals of this research, analyzing and canvassing the participants’ backgrounds could provide interesting places for comparison - for example, comparing results between experts and amateurs by considering the level of expertise in how game writing is characterized and understood, or comparing perceptions between professional game writers and professional screenwriters.

Possible avenues for future research are numerous when further considerations are taken of the analysis, but as this thesis is considered mainly exploratory, perhaps the more valuable avenue for future implications and considerations would be to examine the methodology of this study and examine the process for its strengths and weaknesses before considering a new iteration of it altogether. The researcher identifies several flaws in this current approach as well as some hardships present in this kind of research. One of the main issues identified is the researcher’s position and conduct in the workshop. As Zhang & Wildemuth (2009) suggest, conducting unstructured interviews requires extensive preparation and particularly *skill* and experience, neither of which the researcher of this thesis can attest to having in abundance. Inexperienced in just how much even a single passing comment can have on the entire discussion, the researcher could easily identify instances where their contribution and them partaking in the discussion had an immense effect on the topics of discussion afterwards. Acting as a type of authority figure in the workshop, when the participants expressed strenuous difficulties in moving forward with their process, even simple gestures or examples were taken to greater

lengths than the researcher had anticipated. For instance, the mention of “narrative design” or “post-mortem” terms in game writing, which many in the group were unfamiliar with, were taken as direct inspiration for entire exercises when they struggled to come up with a new one. The impact of what was considered in the moment as a passing note had unprecedented effects on the results of this study, and should be therefore treated as examples of a slight lack of foresight and inexperience from the researcher. Further preparation and the *aide memoire* of the researcher (Zang & Wildemuth, 2009) deserves better attention and consideration when moving forward with methods that already require inherent expertise and experience.

Furthermore, the researcher observed that the group in this study in particular exhibited clear signs of repeated mental exhaustion after the second half of the workshop already. Deeming it worth investigating, the participants contributed it to the rather exhaustive and taxing methods that were applied simultaneously during the entire course of the workshop. Inquiries using unstructured interview methods and further applying Petitmengin’s (2006) rather scrutinizing approach for discovering deeper layers of the participants’ sources for inspiration combined with the task of constructing and following a creative endeavour was deduced to being rather strenuous for the ones involved. This was observed as having a detrimental effect on the progress of the workshop and on the motivation of the participants to put in the effort towards the end. Thus, the researcher chose to include those moments of the group exhibiting mental fatigue in the overall results as an integral part of the perceived process. For future iterations, the researcher proposes imposing limits on how many exercises the participants are required to come up with. Setting a goal could potentially encourage those repeating the efforts to think more precisely about their creations as well as give them an estimation on what is expected of them, as this was left unspoken in this iteration of the workshop.

In terms of the study overall, the inclusion of inspiration as the source for inquiry, while a fruitful endeavour, provides very broad ranging and descriptive data. This makes the process of analysis a heavily interpretive one where much of what is described by the participants is at risk of being misconstrued, misrepresented or misplaced under the wrong kind of characterization. The researcher tries to address this inherent issue by making their process as transparent as they are able and reviewed all that was written down and subsequently interpreted and analysed with the participants after the workshop. In addition to the qualitative data being heavily interpretive and descriptive, the amount of participants providing this data remains rather low to make any proper conclusive remarks or generalizations. This notion is supported by the fact that comparing the data of this study with the pilot study, the researcher came to two rather opposing approaches to the creative task by the participants. This indicates that the premise and instructions for the creative task of creating game writing exercises still need revision and more attention. Both circumstances suggest that the task itself could be interpreted in different ways by different groups, thus affecting the outcomes and results. It was only when the researcher provided the participants with hypothetical examples of how the workshop and the task could be approached and proposed certain questions for them to consider that both groups seemed to align and agree and worked towards similar outcomes in a similar manner. All in all, a new iteration of this study would require refinement in its methodology and, simply, more experience from the researcher in conducting such an ambitious undertaking that is perhaps more suited to a more affordable type of research. That is, as this study is a master's thesis, the rather meticulous methods and ambition of this study are perhaps more suited to an undertaking as that of a dissertation that affords more room for further considerations, such as the ones described here, and has the potential of establishing a better foundation for future iterations of a study such as this one.

7 CONCLUDING REMARKS

7.1 Summary

As discussed in the previous section, this study being exploratory in its style makes the results and analyses quite demonstrative and interpretive in nature, which, in turn, concludes the study overall as indicative for further enhancement, as an invitation for further development on using the workshop as a research method and increased inquiry on the object of inspiration in game writing. The results that were derived from the endeavours of a small group of aspiring writers provided valuable insight and a set of identifiable perceptions that contribute to the first and primary research question of this thesis: What kinds of perceptions do aspiring game writers have of game writing?

This thesis set out to discover this first question by conducting a workshop with the task of having a group of aspiring or otherwise interested game writers create game writing exercises – a process which would hopefully disclose how those writers perceive the practice of game writing. In order to examine this properly, however, a set of mixed unstructured interview methods were applied in the process and, with them, the object of inquiry was defined: inspiration. Ascertaining their sources of inspiration for the exercises in the workshop, this thesis set out to explore its second research question: how does the concept of inspiration contribute to the perceptions of game writing? After an in-depth study involving six participants, who were characterized as novice game writers, the results of the workshop exhibited four recurring themes that represent the perceptions of the participants based on the accounts collected throughout the workshop and the analysis of the resulted game writing exercises. The analysis compiled the four themes as: understanding of limitations, reliance of traditional storytelling techniques, having a design-oriented mindset, and having a problem-oriented approach with inspiration. With

all of the aforementioned themes considered, the researcher of this thesis summarized their perception of game writing as follows:

> "Based on the results and the analysis, game writing was both perceived and approached as a creative problem-solving practice that demands diverse knowledge of game-specific design elements as well as knowledge of past methods and examples of writing across different mediums. Game writing as a practice was perceived as an ability to not only recognize flaws, accomplishments and innovations in writing but also as a skill to develop and nurture educated techniques of addressing the issues and strive to innovate and build on top of what is already perceived as a diverse and interdisciplinary practice."

The discoveries outlined in this thesis are among of potentially dozens more should the same lines of inquiry and methods be applied in any possible future iterations. That is, the aforementioned description of how game writing was perceived should not be misconstrued as something that equally applicable to other perceptions on game writing. Instead, it is a sentiment that supplements other future or past expressions of perception there exist of game writing. The description provided above encapsulates what the researcher considers as their answer for the first research question of this thesis. This does not, however, exclude the possibility of a variety of different expressions likely to be discovered when posing the same question to other groups from different backgrounds and levels of expertise.

As for the second research question, the researcher considers the matter of introducing inspiration as the object of inquiry as the standout success of the study. As was detailed in the analysis portion of this thesis, inspiration is the tool for discovering what may have gone undiscovered had the inquiry been directed towards some other process. Posing the question of what inspired them to create such an exercise, rather than asking "how did this exercise come about", the thesis discovered valuable insight into the examined group's intentions with the exercises. When summarized, these inspirations were often the evocations of subjectively bad experiences with stories and writing – the participants being inspired by something they considered as flawed and being inspired to address and

rectify those flaws to create something they considered as subjectively good. This discovery characterized the creative process for a majority of the exercises and showed a game writing practice being actualized, whether or not the participants themselves would have recognized it as such.

Rather than enouncing what they considered a practice, the introduction of inspiration into their discussions, seemingly unnoticed to the participants, had them emulating what could very well be considered a game writing practice. While this discovery did not directly answer the second research question of this thesis, it provided something the researcher regards as something even more valuable: recognizing the value and the potential of examining inspiration as a part of researching game writing practices. During the process of examining inspiration, both the researcher and the participants became noticeably more self-aware and reflective of their process and their ideas on how they perceived game writing. They not only discovered what inspired them in their efforts but also why it inspired them, and, as a result, became more considerate and reflective of the subject they were addressing at the time. The inclusion of inspiration in the discussions, therefore, added value and detail to the accounts from the workshop, served as a successful point of interest that helped in discovering the previously described recurrent themes, and, unexpectedly, aided in discovering a potential game writing practice on its own.

7.2 Future considerations

The practice of game writing remains disorganized, as the literature used in this study suggests. Rather than trying to challenge or strictly defining the practice, this thesis suggests examining the practice from the perspective of the aspects that game writers should understand. As the primary source for comparison, Jackson et al. (2022) have already taken an approach of this kind in their desire to explore what writers should

understand about creating engaging narratives -- thus, advocating practices in game writing from the perspective of the professional game writer. This thesis makes its own contribution towards that understanding by examining perceptions of game writing of a group of novice writers and seeing how their considerations compare with those of the professional, as well as examining the preconceptions of what game writing is to different people from different backgrounds and different levels of expertise. The inherent issue with discovering a coherent view of what game writing is as a practice is that the more a person becomes knowledgeable in their field the more their expertise becomes personal, embodied and remote from knowledge which is easily transmittable (Petitmengin, 2006). Essentially, the more a person understands their practice the more difficult it is to conceptualize and compact into simple terms. It is for this reason that research such as this strive to come up with ways in which this expert knowledge can be interpreted and endorsed, so that they may be studied further and be recognized.

Continuing with iterations of this kind of research has the potential of adding valuable insight and clarity to an expert field that is repeatedly characterized as muddled or convoluted. They provide perspective and help both the novice and the professional to recognize possible misconceptions about their field of expertise that deserve to be rectified. In addition, when they are in agreement with some of the perceptions that studies like this one display, they have the opportunity of supporting those insights with contributions of their own, adding to their legitimacy and value.

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