Winning the Writing Game

BY THOMAS BARKER | *Fellow*

A RECENT ARTICLE in *Vitae* by Elizabeth Hyde Stevens at Boston University gives us a glimpse into the world of the academic who wants to expand the reach of her writing course. In "Reaching Students who 'Don't Need Writing,'" Stevens brings up a key point about writing among STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) students: their motivation. Realizing that many of them are gamers, Stevens observes, "When you think about the amount of dedication, attention, and precision that goes into saving the planet from zombie alien overlords, you realize that gamers are already highly motivated achievers. They only need to transfer their skills to writing. And the key to that is giving them a winnable goal." New directions in game-oriented writing courses might also give instructors a winnable goal.

In keeping with this issue's theme of technical communication on the Web, it might be interesting to follow up on the academic conversation about instructional design and gaming, and gamification in writing instruction. What would a game-based or "gamified" writing course look like to a student? What principles of gaming can be useful in course design? What would such a course look like from a teaching standpoint?

To answer these questions, I spoke with Roger Graves, director of the Centre for Teaching and Learning at the University of Alberta. Graves specializes in writing across the curriculum, or writing as a tool for all disciplines in the university. Three years ago Graves, and two of his colleagues, Heather Graves and Geoffrey Rockwell, redesigned an earlier version of a basic research and writing course. The result was a course called "GwRIT," or "The Game of Writing: Writing in the Disciplines."

But the course is not simply a game version of writing. The way to win at using games means that you need a winnable interface and student experience, sound gaming principles to drive the design, and a working and winning course model.

What the Student Sees

Let's start by looking at "The Game of Writing" from the students' perspective. If I'm a student in GWrit 102, I log into something called the Game of Writing System. I see some very typical writing course elements: syllabus, assignments, and rubrics. I see videos explaining ideas like the writing process, research topics. This looks easy, but I'm not seeing how I can save the medieval village here. I read on.

The Introduction to the course explains that this course is based on theories of writing and that I will work in an "interactive writing context." It tells me that learning how to use the reviewing/commenting function and to respond appropriately and usefully to others" is a key component in learning to write well.

Hmmm. I skip ahead to my first assignment. Here is something I have seen before: three assignments to choose from: one from STEM areas, one from social sciences, and one from arts. This is new because I can write on any one I want. I choose my warrior path.

I read an assignment. Here is something new: I can see all the other drafts of all the other 169 students in the course. So if I'm lost I can probably dip into someone else's work and get inspired. So I write my essay and submit it. I read the work of others. I find something I want to comment on. I highlight it and write my comment. Here is where the course starts to look different.

If I get a comment on my writing, I can either like that comment, dislike that comment or zap the comment into oblivion. This I like! But some comments I can't delete, which are the ones with star icons on them. This means that an instructor or TA has marked these as important. These little monsters move to the top of the list and challenge me until I do something about them.

I also see a Leader Board that lists the top 10 warrior commenters. Some writers really get into this commenting. I'm off. I'm learning the genre by reading others attempts to perform it.

So on the surface, the interface, while it may look like the usual Web-browser fare, has some elements that draw me in as a gamer. I have a choice, I have challenges, and I have a team, a cohort of others with the same goal. What's more, I can see their work. If we lift the hood on this interface, what principles are at work?

The Principles of Gamified Writing Instruction

The sophisticated interface that students see did not come about without some careful attention to the gaming ideas that specifically pertain to writing instruction. To find this out, I asked Graves about where the idea for a gamified writing course came from. He explained that about five years ago a grad student came up with this idea to make a writing game based on "gaming" rather than writing. "It was a bragging game, so you would brag about how much writing you did to your friends." I laughed.

"See?" asked Graves. "Anyone in
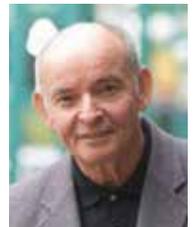
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