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It's Dangerous to Learn Alone – Play This: Video Games in Higher Education, Particularly in the Composition Classroom

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ABSTRACT

When people think of educational games, they often just think of ones geared towards kids: these might include spelling and vocabulary games like *Scribblenauts,* creative games such as *Minecraft*, as well as historical games such as *Carmen [Sandiego]'s Ancient Caper*, but according to the Entertainment Software Association in 2019, 65% of adults play video games (almost half of which are female), the average gamer is 33 years old, and 63% of all gamers are playing *with others* at least one hour a week ("Essential Facts" 4, 5, 8). This means that the majority of the population plays video games of one type or another. Video games are part of most people's discourse today, so it is odd that they are virtually ignored as a pedagogy once students enter middle or high school, and they certainly are not considered as a viable learning method in college. However, since games may be the key to how the majority of people of all ages learn best, it is a tool worth utilizing in higher education. I believe in particularly stressful classes, such as freshman composition, gamifying the classes can help reduce student stress and help achievement by couching complex and unfamiliar ideas in a fun and familiar structure.

Thus, dialect is important because we often get caught up in "proper dialects," academic language and in this case, traditional academic formats. And while these are important to learn, students can learn them better when working by adapting an already-effective language to new and often intimidating information. Gaming has been proven to be one of the most effective methods of motivation and feedback to exist which is exactly what students need.

Keywords: video games, higher education, composition, writing, dialect, English, game, gaming, university, fun

ARTICLE

When people think of educational games, they often just think of ones geared towards kids: these might include spelling and vocabulary games like *Scribblenauts,* creative games such as *Minecraft*, as well as historical games such as *Carmen [Sandiego]'s Ancient Caper*, but according to the Entertainment Software Association in 2019, 65% of adults play video games (almost half of which are female), the average gamer is 33 years old, and 63% of all gamers are playing *with others* at least one hour a week ("Essential Facts" 4, 5, 8). This means that the majority of the population plays video games of one type or another. Video games are part of most people's discourse today, so it is odd that they are virtually ignored as a pedagogy once students enter middle or high school, and they certainly are not considered as a viable learning method in college. However, since games may be the key to how the majority of people of all ages learn best, it is a tool worth utilizing in higher education. I believe in particularly stressful classes, such as freshman composition, gamifying the classes can help reduce student stress and help achievement by couching complex and unfamiliar ideas in a fun and familiar structure.

Two ideas will contextualize the connection between composition studies and video games. First, the Committee of the Conference on College Composition and Communication said in 1972:

> **We affirm the students' right to their own patterns and varieties of language** ...The claim that any one dialect is unacceptable amounts to an attempt of one social group to exert its dominance over another... [emphasis mine] ("Students Right...")

It should be noted, this represented a fundamental shift in teaching pedagogy that is still followed today. Thus, "dialect" is important because we often get caught up in "proper dialects," academic language and in this case, traditional academic formats. And while these are important to learn, students can learn them better when working by adapting an already-effective language to new and often intimidating information. Gaming has been proven to be one of the most effective methods of motivation and feedback to exist (something on which I will speak later) which is exactly what students need.

To further emphasize this student-centered pedagogy is the current Mission Statement from the university at which I teach English, Southern Utah University. I use this as an example of the typical university mission statement:

> Southern Utah University, as our founders envisioned, is a **dynamic teaching and learning community** inspired by its unique natural surroundings. As Utah's designated public liberal arts and sciences university, SUU engages students in a **personalized and rigorous experiential education, empowering them** to be productive citizens, socially responsible leaders, high achievers and lifelong learners. [emphasis mine]

David Bartholomae is a prominent composition scholar; in his landmark 1986 article called "Inventing the University," he described what students are typically facing in college: "**[Students] have to invent the university... They must learn to speak our language.** Or they must [...] carry off the bluff, since speaking and writing will most certainly be required long before the skill is "learned" [emphasis mine] (4). I believe this, unfortunately, is the stance that the majority of professors still take: "learn the conventions of this classroom or leave." It is completely contrary to the ideas put forth by the CCCC and SUU's mission statement and what many universities and professors say they believe.

Video games have their own dialects, their own lexicons, although they are ones in which many educators are either not well-versed or know how to apply in the classroom. Additionally, they are ones which society is in the habit of dismissing as childish and a waste of time. However, these dialects may be the best way to teach students the material and skills we want them to learn. This doesn't mean that they don't need to learn academic language and conventions, but if educators can make these conventions easier for students

to learn by translating the new academic language through the familiar video game dialect, then it should be done. An example of a game that already does this is the language-learning game *Duolingo*, where the player learns another language by using multiple-choice, fill-in-the-blank, and speaking-into-the-mic questions. The rewards for playing, besides learning the language, is the ability to level-up, to compete with others by way of a public XP chart showing the amount of time each has played, upgrades to the owl mascot's outfit, and the ability to "buy" extra levels. To date, there are 120 million *Duolingo* users, most of whom play on their own, but many language classes have also added this game to their lessons because it is a motivating and fun way to learn.

Kurt Squire, who studies the learning aspect of games, says that games are more than spitting ideas of what is supposed to have been learned back to a teacher (a traditional classroom practice) but games allow a player to step inside and explore and experience new kinds of things, test hypotheses and develop new kinds of knowledge, all to become a new person." He also explains that a good game is designed to be a smooth experience, meaning there is a logical order to the learning experience. (qtd. in Engenfeltdt-Nielsen). This is one reason they are so well-adapted for college classrooms. Even though most professors have a logical order in which information is given to students, the students don't often easily see it. In composition, for example, each concept builds upon the last: we learn formatting, then how understanding audience is the foundation of good writing, then we add how to make a good argument using a thesis statement, how to back that statement with reliable sources, etc. At times, no matter how much I reiterate these connections in class, in the way I lay out my assignment order and in individual assignment directions, as well as through grading rubrics, students do not always readily see how one skill builds upon the last; this manifests itself when some students do not use proper formatting or explain their arguments in their final papers, even though that was what we had been practicing all semester. Video games do this better than professors can because of their tight design, meaning that in most cases, there are clear objectives and immediate consequence or reward, whereas there is time between when classes meet, assignments take time to grade, etc., sometimes causing a disconnect for students. For example, when a person plays *The Legend of Zelda*, (a game that is a good example, because most people have at least heard of it) the player gets to be Link, an adventurer with great fighting and musical abilities who gets to battle evil and save the world. But it's more than that. The player gets a condensed experience so that while they get to live this adventure, they don't have to experience months of useless wandering like one would in a real-life parallel. They get to try dangerous things and then see what the consequences are, all in the safe space of the game. And usually, they can keep trying (and want to keep trying) until getting the desired outcome. Daniel Johnson, who studies language and culture, states:

> General knowledge of video game culture demands acquisition of the language which embodies the constituents of our subculture (i.e. the language is part of the knowledge) ... As a group of people who share a common fondness to video games, our commonality creates what one might call a subculture. There are ways in which we interpret and react within this world that is heavily influenced by our role as a member of the video game playing populace. This influence, of course, varies depending on the games we play and the way we interact with others within this community, if at all.

When playing *The Legend of Zelda*, there is essential knowledge that is needed (which is taught by the game as it is being played). There are the main characters: *Link* (the player), *Princess Zelda*, who needs Link's help, and *Gannon*, who is the adversary. There is the player's *life,* represented by hearts; when the players hearts run out, they *die* and have to start over. *Weapons* must be acquired and *skills* must be learned to protect this life while *potions* can restore any lost life. All of the parts are needed to get to the *goal* of the game, defeating Gannon and returning the *triforce* pieces to Zelda.

Really, we can look at the structure of any college course in the same format. When taking English composition, there is essential knowledge that is needed (which is taught in the class). The main characters: *the student* and *the professor*- who needs the student to complete tasks- and the *assignments leading up to the final grade,* which seems like the adversary. There is the student's final grade, made up of many smaller grades. Skills must be learned to be able to write, and there are peers, office hours, and the Writing Center to help with any lack. All the parts are needed to get to the goal of the class- learning writing skills that will help them in other classes and life, as represented by a grade.

By applying gaming language and structures to a class, a language many students already know, professors can use game structures to make students feel like insiders; they will then have more commitment to what they are learning. But it can go farther than that. The English composition community has been talking for over 40 years about how to create a student-centered classroom. Peter Elbow famously discussed the idea of having a classroom without teachers: "In proposing the teacherless writing class, I am trying to deny something- something that is often assumed: *the necessary connection between learning and teaching.* The teacherless writing class is a place where there is learning but no teaching... I think teachers learn to be more *useful* when it is clearer they are not *necessary*." While I'm not advocating that we design all classes for an online, on-their-own experience, what better way to initiate the motivation of learning on one's own than to create the classroom as a game. Daniel Johnson, who wrote "Analysis: Mapping Gamer Dialect," says, "Strip it all down and video games are fundamentally a series of rules with attached terminology." A perfect scaffolding for teaching.

According to Jane McGonigal, there are four defining traits of a game, no matter the type or genre: 1. *A goal,* 2. *rules*, 3. *a feedback system, and* 4. *voluntary participation* (21). "The *goal* is the specific outcome that players will work to achieve. It focuses their attention and continually orients their participation throughout the game. The goal provides players with a sense of purpose" (21).

Looking again at *The Legend of Zelda,* the *goal* is to get all the pieces of the triforce in order to defeat Gannon and save Zelda.

In the classroom, most students' goal is to get an A or sometimes just to pass with doing as little as possible (the point being that the goal for the majority of English composition students isn't to become better writers, except in relation to their real goal of a grade) .... it doesn't matter that professors try to teach them to think outside of the bubble of the classroom or that improvement is the goal and that writing isn't something a person masters in one or two semesters. When they don't reach that goal, they often say, "But I've turned in all my homework!" or "I worked really hard on this!" This indicates that they already look at the classroom as a game, but in their minds, it is a poorly constructed one because there isn't a clear enough way to "win". In reality, if they'd put in the practice and work required, they could easily win, but they rarely are willing to do the actual amount of work it would take. In the gaming world, we call repetitive tasks like fighting minor enemies "grinding". It is understood that in order to gain gaming skills to level up sufficiently for the coming tasks, a good amount of grinding is necessary. However, the idea of practicing writing over and over in their "spare time" is not a concept that students have considered worth their time.

Looking at McGonigal's second trait for defining a game, she says, "The *rules* place limitations on how players can achieve the goal. By removing or limiting the obvious ways of getting to the goal, the rules push players to explore previously uncharted spaces. They unleash creativity and foster strategic thinking" (McGonigal 21).

In *The Legend of Zelda*, the *rules* are: fight monsters to get rupees in order to buy weapons and other necessary supplies. Get enough weapons in order to work through each dungeon (level) to defeat the minor bosses in each which are guarding more powerful weapons and magical items necessary for harder dungeons. And try not to die.

The *rules* for university students are laid out in a syllabus. They usually include the necessity for coming to class, to do assignments on time, to not plagiarize, and it indicates how many points equals which grade. Each assignment has another set of rules that include the topic on which to be written, writing conventions needed (like a thesis), formatting rules, length of the paper, etc. The problem here is that students usually believe that grades are given arbitrarily, not based on concrete rules, even when there is a grading rubric showing them what they did right and wrong and why. Because there can be different perceptions on if a student is writing well, they often think they have accomplished the goal, when according to the rules from the professor, they have not. Therefore, they need a clearer set of rules to follow for them to feel like the game is winnable and fair.

Third, the *feedback* system tells players how close they are to achieving the goal. It can take the form of points, levels, a score, or a progress bar. Or in its most basic form, the feedback system can be as simple as the players' knowledge of an objective outcome: 'The game is over when...' Real-time feedback serves as a promise to the players that the goal is definitely achievable and it provides motivation to keep playing (McGonigal 21).

The *feedback* in *The Legend of Zelda* comes from getting new weapons and abilities- it's better to be able to kill a blue *octorok* (the spiky octopus-like creatures at the beginning of the game) with one blow of the white or magic sword instead of two blows of the wooden one, and it's better to bomb holes in the wall of a dungeon to make a shortcut instead of going around. Players like to see their rupee numbers go up and have the ability to buy supplies that they couldn't afford before; they are willing to put in the work for these small upgrades and to level up, which tells them how close they are to winning the game.

Students like feedback, but often they aren't getting feedback that will help them "win" the grade they want. Some professors only give a grade without any explanation of what was wrong (or right, for that matter). Some give notes on the final paper or exam but no opportunity to improve. If the goal is to learn certain skills in a class, students have to be given the opportunity to try again. Imagine playing a video game that does not allow the player to try again- one chance and that's all. That will illicit frustration, not success.

Lastly, *voluntary participation* requires that everyone who is playing the game knowingly and willingly accepts the goal, the rules, and the feedback. Knowingness establishes common ground for multiple people to play together. And the freedom to enter or leave a game at will ensures that intentionally stressful and challenging work is experienced as a safe and pleasurable activity. (McGonigal 21).

In *The Legend of Zelda*, players choose to play, so they don't mind (for the most part), killing monsters over and over in order to get enough rupees to buy something wanted/needed to progress in the game. Many players get every item that is earnable, not because those items are needed to pass the game, but because the player can choose that challenge for themself.

Going to college, of course, is *voluntary*, but once there, freshman composition isn't. If the class were set up like a game played in the classroom but with the professor as the Dungeon Master of sorts, so that they are also part of the game, students would react more positively to a class that in reality is forced on them, because they'd feel like they had some control over their learning. In this scenario, some quests (assignments) would be required, some wouldn't be. Some things would be collaborative, some wouldn't be.

McGonigal goes on to say, "This definition [of goals, rules, feedback, and voluntary participation] may surprise you for what it lacks: interactivity, graphics, narrative, rewards, competition, virtual environments, or the idea of "winning"- [these are] common but not defining features of games." Because games don't require these "extras" that most assume are essential to games to be engaging to the player, the structure transfers easily into the classroom (25). There is an intrinsic reward in leveling up that makes players want to do it again and again, even when a level is hard. That is what we need them to feel in our classes. In the book, *Glued to Games: How Video Games Draw Us in and Hold Us Spellbound,* the authors argue that content does not matter. What matters is how players interact with the material (Rigby and Ryan 6). A good illustration of a video game

lacking all of these extras is *Zork,* a *text-based* or *interactive fiction* game that came out in 1981. Rob Lammle explains the basics of the game:

> The game's environments and the actions you take are described for you. For example, the first line of *Zork* is **"You are standing in an open field west of a white house, with a boarded front door. There is a small mailbox here"** [emphasis his]. Using a series of simple commands, you direct the main character to do something, like "open mailbox." To which the game will reply, "Opening the small mailbox reveals a leaflet." Naturally, you would then "take leaflet," "read leaflet", and then maybe "walk east" to get to the house. The story unfolds from there as you collect items, like a sword, a lantern, rope, and other adventuring necessities, before entering a vast, underground cave where you'll face enemies inspired by *The Lord of the Rings*, like elves, trolls, and the darkness-lurking grue.

This kind of game acts like a choose-your-own-adventure book, though by deciding what commands to give, it is even more immersive for the player than the former is for the reader. Without a defined list of commands, the player has to try different wording until the player finds the right command to accomplish a goal to forward the story.

McGonigal calls the willingness to work hard on mundane tasks in games "blissful productivity," or a "virtuous circle of productivity" (53). Gamers want satisfying work that they know they can accomplish. In real life, people are not always sure that hard work will accomplish something. Many games like *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild I and II*(the latest iteration of the *Zelda* games), *The Last of Us*, and *Genshin Impact* have foraging and crafting as necessary to the player's survival. But even searching for and collecting ore or apples is satisfying, because players know if they need an item, they will be able to find it eventually. In the real world, if a person were to hit a rocky mountainside with a pick, they might not find anything, and even if they did, it would likely take a long time to do so and they wouldn't know what to do with it afterwards. In game worlds, they do. There is a guarantee of productivity in a well-designed game.

This is where gaming in higher education, specifically the composition class, comes in. The rules become the tricky part and why students struggle so much with composition classes and other classes like them. The professor can give them the rubric ahead of time, can provide them with examples of good essays for each assignment, can break down the concepts of a thesis, how to make a clearer sentence, how to transition between ideas, how to write for an audience. But in the end, it isn't always easy for them to understand why they aren't making a good argument or why their sentences aren't working for their audience, even when having it explained to them in terms they intellectually understand. They often repeat the errors and end up defeated and occasionally angry at the professor. The myth is that people have to have ideas completely together before writing so it will come out in one perfect session, which is totally false. But, students still tend to believe that myth even though they understand that this kind of mentality while playing video games is foolish.

It's not because students don't want to work hard, most of the time anyway. "Blissful productivity" is the reason gamers play for so long. "Just let me get to the next level!" "I almost have this boss!" They don't get overly discouraged when they fail, because they believe at some point, they will succeed. Students need to feel the same way, and that comes down to designing a good class.

Earnest Cavalli talks about the game *Age of Conan.* It takes 250 hours of gameplay to get to the maximum level- this means the gamer creates a character or avatar, then spends 250 hours molding and training their character until it is a master at whatever that character can do. *Then* the player is ready to really play the game. But, when *Age of Conan* came out, people were disappointed that it *only* took 250 hours to reach max level ("Age of Conan's"). If they didn't have the feeling of accomplishment during these 250 hours, they certainly

wouldn't be asking for more time. They are willing to work, and they want enough work to feel accomplished at the end. Let's compare this to a college class.

A semester of a class is 3 hours a week for 15 weeks= 45. Plus, the oft-quoted two hours of homework for every hour of class- this equals 90 hours for the semester for one class, so 45 plus 90 equals only 135 hours for one semester of work. And students often feel like they are dying by then. Yet 250 hours of gameplay is disappointing to them. It takes twice as long- 500 hours- to build up to maximum level in *World of Warcraft*, which has had more players than any other online game, because they enjoy the process as much as the end goal. Compare this with the 650 hours of a full load in a typical semester (15 credits plus 2 hours of homework per class period x 3 days a week x 15 weeks), which isn't even focused on one subject like those 500 hours for *World of Warcraft*.

So how do we do that in a practical manner and why is it so difficult, then, to mesh education and game design well? Part of the issue, according to Dr. Frans Mäyrä, is that Game Studies in general is rarely its own course of study. It is housed in other disciplines from communication to media studies, English to even Anthropology, depending on what degree the game studies scholars have themselves received. Even most undergrad programs in gaming focus on game design, not the entire field, and often there are only a few institutions that have more than one or two games studies scholars when they have them at all, making collaboration and mentoring that much harder both while pursuing higher degrees and then while doing research for the rest of their careers (5). And this fact hasn't changed since 2008 when Dr. Mäyrä explained the field. Dr. Bonnie Ruberg has updated the graduate degree options in the United States in 2019, and not one has a degree in "game studies."

Additionally, there is limited support given in the school systems. Max Lieberman is optimistic about educators' desires to implement gaming but explains the consensus that there are too many obstacles:

> Research and theory within this emerging field cover a wide range of promising approaches, but evidence suggests that teachers are focused primarily on the most straightforward implementations of game technology. In light of the obstacles faced by many teachers today, including government-defined educational standards (Simpson and Clem, "Video Games"; Charsky and Mims 42), limited time, money, and technological support (Charsky and Mims 39; Van Eck 25-26; Tüzün 471) and organizational skepticism of game-based teaching (Shultz Colby and Colby 302; Charsky and Mims 39), such strategies are quite logical. However, other approaches are possible and may prove more appropriate and effective in certain situations.

In some ways, educators' hands are tied unless or until somebody outside the system designs a good gaming structure that would be adaptable to many different kinds of classrooms, all without making extra work for the instructors. But, in the meantime, there are steps toward that perfect gaming mechanism that can be taken, partly by piggy-backing on technology that school systems will invest in, such as the course management system Canvas.

I am in the process of gamifying my English 2010 classes. These are the intermediate writing classes all students must take. While my classes are face-to-face, or in the current Covid-19 climate, remote synchronous (live through Zoom), I have the syllabus, assignments, and most other information online through Canvas, our university's course management system. I've been working with a team from SUU to use what Canvas already has available and add gaming elements[1]. The student/player will start in the proverbial tavern and have

1 The rest of my team at Southern Utah University: Jill Mallek (Learning Management System Administrator); Kyle Dillon (Instructional Design Specialist); Andrew Mitchell (Illustration/Animation Production Specialist); and Jacob Klausmeier, Bryce Mecham, and Nikki Wood (Canvas Student Workers).

to make their first choice in order to start the adventure:

> You enter the local tavern, The Boozy Bard, late at night. It is hazy with candlelight. You sit at the well-worn walnut bar, nursing a house ale, watching the different characters who make up the scene before you. You've been itching for an adventure, but you must choose what you do next carefully. There is a man cloaked in the corner who is also people-watching tonight; you wonder if he, like you, is looking for others to join him on a quest. On the other hand, the tavern owner, Rosie, seems to know every person who comes in; surely, she could tell you the right person for you to meet. Who should you talk to? [Man or Rosie]

As they complete modules in Canvas, they will have more choices. Canvas already has the module structure integrated and is an easy way to separate the content of the class into levels for both the adventure and the assignments.

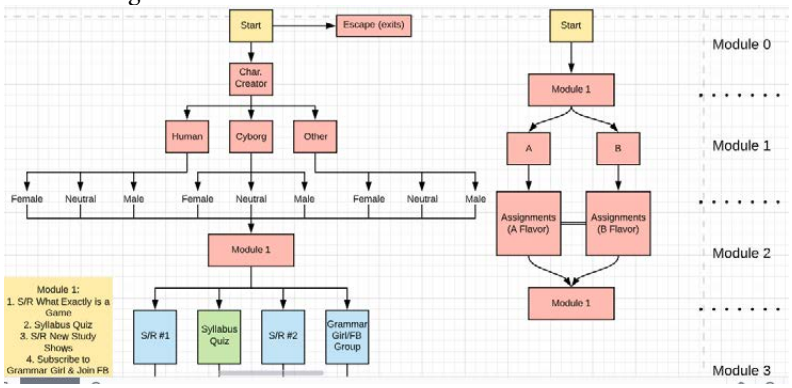
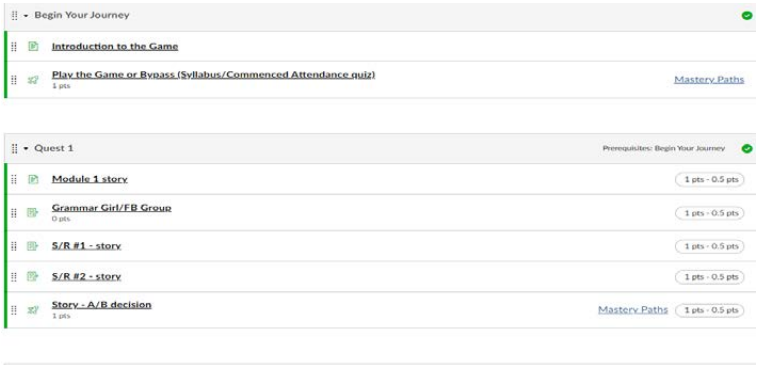
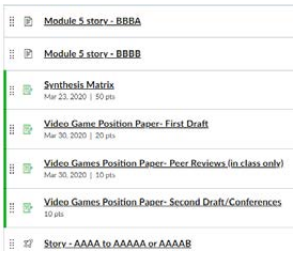


Fig 1. Concept of Canvas Integration





Figs 2-3. Screenshots of a few of the Canvas modules for structure reference, mixing gaming elements and writing assignments.

As students complete each "level" or module, they will make more choices about the adventure their character is going on. Some of the choices will include choosing to talk to the barkeep or the shadowy figure in the corner, choosing between two doors to open, picking up a lock pick or a hammer, grabbing a treasure or a spell book.

The result will be that they will need to complete assignments in a module in order to unlock the next part of the story. While initially, this will be the result of a simple decision tree, eventually, we will add side quests that add not only more to the story but will also give students more practice on

skills that they struggle with the most, skills like MLA formatting and grammar that we can only go over briefly during the actual class time but are things that they need to practice repeatedly to master.

The following images show the initial rough story layout for the modules..

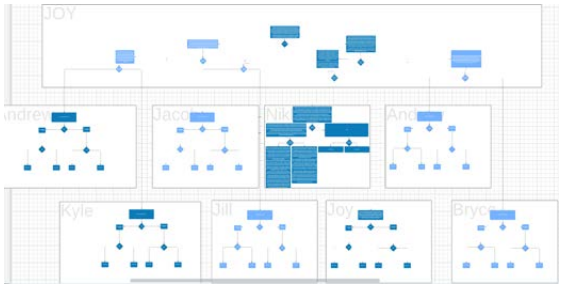


Fig 4. Storyline Decision Tree.

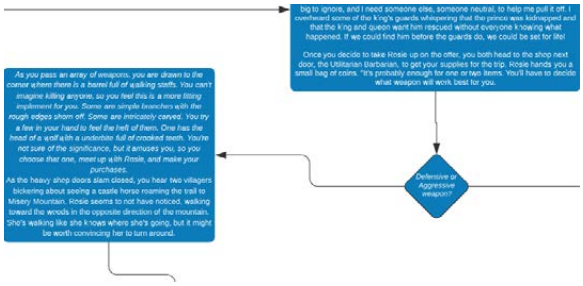


Fig 5. Detail of Storyline Decision Tree

Over time, and depending on the ability to integrate complex algorithms, I would like to see some game choices be dependent on the grade of certain assignments, so in order to get the best weapon, they'd have to get a 90% minimum on an assignment; this would give an added incentive to double-check the instructions and to match their work to the grading rubric to make sure they have done what it takes in order to receive the grade and the weapon desired. While they can, in theory, do these types of things with their assignments now, many lack the motivation to do so in a class that they traditionally are intimidated by and therefore often dislike. In an ideal future, classes could be plugged into a fully immersive world, a small-scale massively multiplayer online game where part of the adventure is to turn in quest work (assignments from the class) to an in-game professor character in order to help solve in-game issues. Perhaps the avatars can go to an inn and meet up with tavern keeper, who has a task for them to perform. Once they perform the task out in this virtual world, they must come back and report to the inn keeper, who in reality is the professor who can gather intel by way of a virtual drop box for their assignments. The possibilities are only limited by the fact that right now, professors work within the confines of their own disciplines, which rarely includes game design or the ability to program. My team and I at SUU are attempting to change that possibility in order for students to learn more and learn better based on their needs and abilities that tie into gaming mechanics and culture.

Game studies now is what film studies was in the 1970's, just starting to come into its own and gain acceptance in the academic community. As game studies continues to be taken more seriously as a discipline and in relation to other academic studies, I believe more professors will apply gaming principles to their classes. In the words of Jane McGonigal, "We can no longer afford to view games as separate from our real lives and real work. It is not only a waste of the potential of games to do real good- it is simply untrue" (354).

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