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## Writing Like a Game Designer *Elizabeth Caravella & Rich Shivener*

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# Writing Like a Game Designer

*Elizabeth Caravella & Rich Shivener*

## Overview

As students turn to composing more multimodal and digital pieces in their writing courses, a number of writing instructors have employed the process known as gamification, or, the application of game-like elements, to their classrooms. Through this activity, students will learn to also utilize such practices, especially those relying on gameful design, to better understand and execute the often messy research process. Especially because most students are more familiar with games than research, these parallels not only provide students with research terms and concepts in a way they're more familiar, but also help illuminate for students the advantages of experimentation and unconventional approaches when performing research. As students are being asked to compose more multimodal pieces, this essay aims to help them start thinking about the research process as a kind of design process, allowing students to more readily move from traditional writing processes to those necessary for effective digital composing. Especially as writing classrooms become gamified more frequently, and as students are asked to compose more and more digital pieces, seeing how video game designers tackle the research process helps students learn to think gamefully so that they may bring these innovative processes into their own work in the writing classroom.

## Time Commitment

1-2 weeks or longer

## Activity Process

This activity outlines 7 individual steps in the research process with their game design parallel and relevant examples. As students tackle each step in the research process, have them

move through the table and fill in the final part of the table after reviewing the information and checking out any provided examples (See Appendix for printable table for students to fill out).

### 1. Finding a Problem

*In traditional research:* Often the first step when we learn something new, finding a problem or issue we want to learn more about gives us a starting point for the research process. This problem or issue might stem from personal experiences and feelings as well as national and international conversations in the now.

*In Game Design:* Game designers play many games for inspiration, but in many cases, their inventions stem from felt experiences—frustrations with a day job, haunting memories from their childhood, nostalgia for a game design. As Dodick Sudirman writes about their studio’s dark and twisted game *My Lovely Daughter*:

“The game also became a medium for some of our team members to express their own experience of having a very tough childhood and growing up with strict and/or abusive parents. Parents who manipulated and exploited their children for their own gains. Such as forcing their children to be someone they are not to fit the parents’ own ideal, or forcing them to do hard labour, ‘killing their souls’ in the process. It’s a taboo topic that is rarely discussed but happens more often than we think. Through this game, the team found an opportunity to talk about it” (Sudirman).

### 2. Seeing What Others Have Said

*In traditional research:* An important step so you don’t repeat points others have already made, once you find a problem you must contextualize it in current conversations about the topic.

*In Game Design:* Game designers are on the pulse of industry

standards and conversations. For example, they pay attention to software being used by the industry (e.g., the Unity platform) and read player reviews. They also play loads of games! Take it from Kate Stavola, a designer for the mobile game *Restaurant Story 2*:

"Like most game developers, we're gamers ourselves. As a result, sometimes we get a little too excited and lose our objectivity. When we started creating the ingredients system for *Restaurant Story 2*, we were inspired by all the possibilities for how we could make the game cooler and add more "flavor." It sounded like fun in our heads—an element of surprise and chance. But we'd lost sight of what our gamers are looking for—that sense of control, of a world with predictable rules where they can accomplish things" (Stavola).

### 3. Clarifying the Problem

*In traditional research:* Also referred to as adjusting your scope, this step adjusts your problem or topic so that it can contribute to existing conversations.

*In Game Design:* To test the scope of their project, game designers often prototype their work, meaning they create a digital mock-up, a brief segment of gameplay, or even a paper-and-pencil sketch of their idea. Brandon Dillon, project lead for the game *Hack 'n' Slash*, says the following about games studio Double Fine's prototyping practice.

"Double Fine has this great prototyping process called Amnesia Fortnight. It's a two-week period where everyone in the company forgets what they were working on and builds prototypes of new ideas. The ideas come from anyone in the studio; the majority of people in the company wind up pitching ideas every Fortnight. The process started during the development of *Brütal Legend*, but 2012 was the first year that Double Fine conducted Amnesia Fortnight in public" (Dillon).

### 4. Defining Key Concepts

*In traditional research:* Once you've solidified the problem you're examining, you'll want to define any key terms or concepts associated with your project. These can be terms related to either the problem itself, or your proposed solution.

*In Game Design:* At this point, game designers begin defining their game's genre, its character designs, and platforms on which the game will appear (e.g., Nintendo, Xbox). Jon Ingold and Joseph Humfrey explain the following about their hit, globe-trotting game 80 Days.

"The success behind the art style wasn't a matter of pure aesthetics, however. We were consciously making a decision to make a style that would sit well with iOS 7. Apple's controversial UI overhaul focused on flat design and primary color highlights, and we made sure to point out the visual design when we pitched the game to them. We thought about our art style early, with the marketability on the platform in mind, and we feel it paid off" (Ingold & Humfrey).

## 5. Determining the Audience

*In traditional research:* As different audiences care about different things, once you know what conversation you want to contribute to and some of its key elements, you'll want to figure out who's talking about, or who needs to be talking about, this problem, and how you can best reach them.

*In Game Design:* In addition to prototyping, game designers release demos of their games, and many have released works-in-progress through the games distribution platform Steam. Called Steam Early Access, the program allows studios to reach audiences before a game is finished. As Charles Cordingley writes about their stealth space game *Concealed Intent*:

"There are many stories about Steam's Early Access program, both positive and negative. For me the experience has definitely

been positive. It has not made me much money, but that was never my goal. Instead, the game has received the feedback it desperately required. Also, just knowing that some people have paid their hard earned money for the game is a huge motivation to make it the best game I can (admittedly not many people, but even one is enough). Lastly, almost everything I know about game marketing I have learnt the hard way through my time in “Early Access” (Cordingley).

## 6. Determining the Methods for Collecting and Analyzing Data

*In traditional research:* Whether your data comes from a single close reading of a primary source or you want to craft a survey for others to respond to, your data collection and means of analysis should align with the previously determined audience.

*In Game Design:* After releasing a beta version of a game to the public, game designers and studios analyze the number of downloads and player reviews about it (see above). They also conduct “playtests” with gamers. In playtest sessions, they might record a gamer’s screen while they play through a game and interview them at a later date. Sara Casen’s describes the value of playtesting behind studio Midnight Hub’s puzzle game.

“We invited around 40 puzzle games (most of which we didn’t know personally) to the studio. There we watched them play and asked them follow-up questions from a prepared protocol. We always had predefined hypotheses that we worked with during these game tests, like how long the ideal playtime for a level was, how many tries a player should make before solving a problem etc. If something deviated too much from the desired outcomes we compiled this feedback in an actionable way to the development team” (Casen).

## 7. Reporting Results

*In traditional research:* The final stretch in your research process, here is when you decide what form or mode your research will take, based on any prescribed requirements from any stakeholders and/or the expectations of your target audience.

*In Game Design:* After much testing and revising, game designers ship and help circulate the final version of the game. When they do this, they pay attention to dates (e.g., the winter holidays), spaces with captive audiences, and collaborators who can help promote it. Consider what Doctor Ludos says about their retro platform game *Sheep It Up!*, which was made in 2017 for the 90s game console Game Boy.

“Another funny fact about the game is that it was showcased during one of the largest video game conventions in the world: the Paris Game Week .... for this opportunity all my gratitude goes to OrdiRetro. It’s a French association dedicated to video game history, and more specifically to the brand new games released for old consoles and computers. They had a booth at this event to showcase a selection of games. Thanks to a friend of mine, Julian Alvarez, they heard about the game and proposed I display it during the event” (Ludos).

## Learning Outcomes

Students engaging in this activity/assignment will:

- Understand the parallels between the research process and the game design process, and how students can use said understanding to achieve their own writing and design goals.
- Practice thinking gamefully during the writing process, and use this to scaffold their progress or otherwise help them chunk the research process in a more familiar way.
- Experience how real game designers go through their composing and design process, giving students a new foundation for understanding the research process.

## Learning Accommodations

- Material can be presented in multiple formats to include in-person instruction and asynchronous, digital delivery.

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## Appendix

Fill in the blank box for each section of the table by answering the following question in the space provided. Refer to the numbered step and information about traditional research and game design for each question.

How could framing this step like a game designer help your research process?

1. Finding a Problem:
2. Seeing What Others Have Said

3. Clarifying the Problem

4. Defining Key Concepts

5. Determining the Audience

6. Determining the Methods for Collecting and Analyzing Data

7. Reporting Results