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What games writing teaches us about creative writing: A case study of The Fullbright Company's *Gone Home*

Abstract:

This paper challenges the popular perception of creativity as a characteristic of special individuals and, instead, proposes that creativity is an emergent event resulting from the dynamic interaction of a creative subject (or subjects), a social and cultural context, and the material artefact (itself embodying its own social and cultural history). This theory of creativity derives inspiration from the social psychology of creativity and, especially, the research of Vlad Petre Glăveanu, who analyses Romanian Easter-egg decoration to establish how creativity in all its manifestations occurs as a 'distributed, dynamic, socio-cultural and developmental phenomenon' (2014: 2, original emphasis). This paper focuses on games writing. Taking as its case study The Fullbright Company's multi-award-winning computer game *Gone Home* (2013), and informed by an interview with The Fullbright Company's Steve Gaynor, this paper attends to the 'sociality, materiality and temporality of the creative work' (Glăveanu 2014: 5). Having deliberately chosen a game with literary characteristics, the paper aims to arrive at a deeper appreciation of a new form of creative writing (conceived here in a way that accepts medial change as a fundamental part of literary history). It concludes with a reflection on the possibility for a less Romantic and elitist understanding of creative writing in its traditional forms.

Biographical note:

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Introduction

Creativity has long been associated with the iconic figure of the individual genius. For Pierre Bourdieu, the '"charismatic" ideology' of creativity, which 'directs attention to the apparent producer, the painter, writer or composer' and away from 'the field of production and circulation of cultural commodities', is central to the charmed 'belief in the value of a work of art' on which the culture industries of modernity rely (1993: 14). Cultural theorists, such as Bourdieu and Roland Barthes (among others), have historicised and interrogated the phenomenon of authorship, but the intrinsic specialness of the creator continues to be endorsed by peak creative-writing institutions such as the famous University of Iowa Writers' Workshop, which advertises the following philosophy on its website:

> …the fact that the Workshop can claim as alumni nationally and internationally prominent poets, novelists, and short story writers is, we believe, more the result of what they brought here than of what they gained from us. We continue to look for the most promising talent in the country, in our conviction that writing cannot be taught but that writers can be encouraged.

Faith in the creative individual also informs scientific investigations. Psychoanalytic and psychological studies of creativity, for instance, typically focus on individual pathology (as Kay Redfield Jamison does in her monograph on Robert Lowell's bipolar disorder and poetry [2017]) or psychometric tests (such as the Torrance Test for divergent thinking, Sam Mednick's Remote Associates Test, and the popular Alternative Uses Text) to diagnose how creativity emerges from exceptional individuals. Even sophisticated neurological studies, such as Arne Dietrich's *How creativity happens in the brain*, which rejects pseudo-phrenological 'left-brain' hypotheses (among others) in favour of understanding creativity as a 'highly distributed and embedded … phenomenon that emerges … from goodness know how many processes and places in the brain' (2015: 28), nevertheless isolate creativity as 'an evolutionary system … that … happens in brains' (67).

As Therese Amabile observes, the focus on the 'peculiar characteristics of … creative people' in the sciences has meant that 'some potentially important areas of inquiry have been virtually ignored' (1996: 5). Addressing these aporias in creativity research, Amabile is one of the pioneers of a more holistic alternative known as the social psychology of creativity. Others include Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, who argues that 'we need to abandon the Ptolemaic view of creativity, in which the person is at the center of everything, for a more Copernican model in which the person is part of a system of mutual influences and information' (1988: 336). According to this social model of creativity, the artist is stimulated by precursors and contemporaries (that is, enabled by a tradition), and responsive to gatekeepers and audiences (that is, informed by a context of evaluation and consumption.) Keith Sawyer, another forerunner of the social psychology of creativity, reconfigures creativity from '*an internal mental process'* into a series of 'practices' that are 'externally visible and embedded in the social and physical world' (2014: xiv, original emphasis). Conceptualising creativity not as the spontaneous result of autonomous inspiration but as an enacted process, he emphasises not only creativity's socio-cultural dimension but also its material one.

The work of Amabile, Csikszentmihalyi and Sawyer has been extended in recent years by scholars such as Vlad Petre Glăveanu, who stresses the distributed 'sociality, materiality and temporality of creative work' in opposition to the location of creativity 'in the "box" of the mind' (2014: 5). He analyses the Romanian practice of Easter egg decoration, but only in order to underscore the sociality of all cultural traditions – including those deemed high 'art' rather than folk 'craft' – and to show how cultural artefacts are always the result not of 'the creativity of one individual but the creative action of *many* … working together or apart, at different times and in different settings, all immersed with a physical and symbolic environment that affords and constrains their expression' (2014: 1). In addition, taking inspiration from Bruno Latour's Actor-Network Theory and theories of distributed cognition, Glăveanu acknowledges how the materiality of artefacts – embodying technological and symbolic properties that inevitably reflect social and cultural histories and that suggest their own creative possibilities and limitations – demonstrate agency in the creative process. He describes creativity as arising from 'a more or less conscious decision to *share agency* with the object and follow its lead at different moments within the process' (2014: 60, emphasis in original). Creativity's grounding in tradition, and in dynamic interaction with the materials and emerging form of the artefact, mean that it is also characterised by temporality. Creativity, as Glăveanu puts it, is not about 'universal and static intra-psychological processes' but is a 'developmental' phenomenon (2014: 74) or an event 'unfolding in time' (65). Glăveanu clarifies that his argument is against '*individualism, not the individual*' (2014: 9, original emphasis), who is part of a series of 'co-agentic systems that function as a totality' (2014: 88).

My paper takes inspiration from Glăveanu's account of creativity as a form of action spread along 'three distinct yet intertwined "lines" of distribution: social, material, and temporal' (2014: 81). My case study, unlike Glăveanu's, is conspicuously modern: The Fullbright Company's multi-award-winning computer game *Gone Home* (2013). A computer game is a useful example for exploring Glăveanu's social psychology of creativity because it patently discourages an ideology of individualism (though the romance of the auteur is emerging in association with computer games, as it did with films, showing the power of the culture industries and its ideology of the singular creator.) A computer game's multimedia content is created by differently skilled team members and within the obvious context of an industry – something often pejoratively highlighted by gatekeepers of more traditional media forms in a fundamentally competitive media environment. In addition, the materials of composition are almost impossible to ignore. As Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin argue, a new medium 'strives to make the viewer acknowledge the medium as a medium and to delight in that acknowledgement' (2000: 41-2) – even as it 'promises to reform its predecessors by offering a more immediate or authentic experience' (19) – thus generating the apparently paradoxical situation wherein 'immediacy leads to hypermediacy' (19). Finally, given how the digital artefact of the game is so clearly an instantiation of both social and material processes of composition, the temporal nature of creativity is made apparent. The Fullbright Company's *Gone Home*, however, is of special interest to this paper because of its particularly writerly qualities. I have deliberately chosen a game that can be defined, in Astrid Ensslin's terms, as a 'literary game': a creative artefact that demonstrates both 'ludic … and literary … elements' or 'both *readerly* and *playerly*

characteristics' (2014: 1, original emphasis). This is because I want my analysis of games writing to resonate with creative writing in its more conventional manifestations. Indeed, in the conclusion to this paper I reflect explicitly on the ramifications of my findings for creative writing in traditional media.

Creative writing has long been perceived as 'what happens in the mind, not on the page' (Piper 2009: 12). This is evidenced in the common creative-writing institutional credo that creative talent is innate to special individuals. It is also apparent in the lasting tensions between university literary-studies and creative-writing departments, where the domain-specific expertise represented by an engagement with literary form and tradition is often conceptualised as optional if not irrelevant to the cultivation of an individual's 'gift' – as if literary creativity made sense as anything other than skill in a material domain. In part, as Bolter suggests, the enabling traditions and technologies of literature have been overshadowed as dynamic agents in the creative-writing event because of the habituation of the writing space, which has, through familiarity, assumed an immediacy or invisibility that has led to the medium's figuration as a 'metaphor for the human mind' (2011: 13). However, as Bolter also points out, digital forms of writing can engender a heightened awareness of not only their own material technologies but also those of older media, revealing how the defamiliarised scene of writing is always 'generated by the interaction of material properties and cultural choices and practices' (12). This premise is central to my paper, which examines the creation of the 'literary game' *Gone Home*, informed by interviews with Steve Gaynor, one of the founders of The Fullbright Company and designers of *Gone Home*. The objective is to arrive at a deeper appreciation of a new form of creative writing – conceived here in a way that recognises medial transformation (from oral poiesis to fiction writing to film scripting to digital publishing) as a fundamental part of literary history – and to, more tangentially, encourage greater self-consciousness about what happens during the act of creative writing more generally.

Gone Home as a 'literary game'

Gone Home is a 'story exploration video game', as described on The Fullbright Company website, or an example of a genre that Alexander Muscat et al identify as the 'First-Person Walker' (2016: 1), an often-maligned adaptation (in masculinist gaming culture) of the action-oriented form of the 'First-Person Shooter'. The 'First-Person Walker' is a game distinguished by 'slow pacing of the game play, and ambiguous goals' (Muscat et al 2016: 1), which combine to invite a deep focus on 'the audio-visual and virtual environment' (5), drawing attention not only to 'what can be seen, but also the unseen' (11). The environment for exploration in *Gone Home* is a pseudo-Victorian mansion, which is the home of the Greenbriar family. Playing as the character of Kaitlin (or Katie) Greenbriar, a college student who returns home from a trip abroad, the game begins at the front door of the manor, located in a forest in Oregon, at 1.15am on a stormy night. The year is 1995. Meta-fictively reflecting the player's own experience, the house is completely unfamiliar to Katie because her family moved there while she was away. The house is also locked and empty. A note on the door from Katie's younger sister Samantha (or Sam) urges Katie not to try to find her, thus making Sam's absence

of paramount interest. This note provides the epistemophilic impetus for the game play. It also signals the central role that reading will take in this literary game, defined by Ensslin as a type of computer game that remediates various literary techniques 'such as quotes from the Western literary canon, verbal rather than graphical cursor devices, dramatic dialogue, interior monologues, epistolary elements, and subtextually rich dialogue patterns or poetic interludes' (2014: 49).

In terms of 'epistolary elements' (Ensslin 2014: 49), *Gone Home* makes greater use of text than perhaps any precursor. The Greenbriar house is full of textual assets: notes and letters (which are, as one might expect of such archival material, particularly revealing when it comes to character development); school books and children's hand-written stories (complete with misspellings); journals and diaries; a feminist zine in Sam's room called *Kicking against the patriarchy*, and other comics and magazines; advertisements and brochures (including, notably, for a marital counselling retreat); shopping receipts and ticket stubs; birthday cards (one of which reveals Sam's age) and postcards (including from Katie when she is away); mix tapes and VHS cassettes with hand-written labels; and even books on bookcases and in boxes, including those by Katie's father, Terrence L. Greenbriar Jr (though only the covers can be read.) The game also makes use of kinds of 'interior monologues' (Ensslin 2014: 49): diegetic voiceover in the form of messages left on the telephone answering machine; and extra-diegetic voiceover in the form of journal entries by Sam (addressed to her sister), which are activated at strategic points in the game play. Pieced together with the epistolary artefacts, these pseudo-monologues enable the player to trace the stories of the four members of the Greenbriar family. Katie's and Sam's father, Terrence (or Terry), whose science-fiction JFK conspiracy books have not been a great success, is experiencing something of a professional crisis. This is compounded by the disapproval of his father, a Professor of English and the author of the dauntingly authoritative scholarly book, *Joyce: A complete understanding*. The title provides one of several references to the 'Western literary canon' (Ensslin 2014: 49), thus again demonstrating the game's literary qualities (as well as its subtle sense of humour.) It also seems that moving into the Victorian manor, which Terry inherited from an abusive uncle, called Oscar, has triggered further issues for him, including a drinking problem. Terry and his wife Janice (or Jan), who works as a forest ranger and who has been tempted by an affair with a co-worker, have experienced a marriage crisis, and the player ultimately discovers that they are away at a counselling retreat. More importantly, the player learns that Sam has fallen in love with a girl called Lonnie and, reacting against familial and social disapproval, has absconded with her. *Gone Home* is thus essentially a lesbian love story, inspired by the star-crossed lovers' trope of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, as Gaynor himself admits (Miller 2016).

Daniel Reynolds – building on Henry Jenkins' concepts of 'narrative architecture' and 'environmental storytelling' (2004) in the domain of computer games – describes the structure of *Gone Home* as an example of 'epistolary architecture' (2014: 48), defined by 'the distribution of messages around a game space' (48). Reynolds also notes how the game evokes horror conventions: 'A storm rages outside, floorboards creak, red hair dye in a bathtub initially reads as blood' (51). Sam and Lonnie have been using a Ouija board in the attic of a house described by hostile teenagers at her new school as 'the

psycho house'; there is a crucifix on a wall that, when investigated, switches off the lights; and the bookshelf in Sam's bedroom contains copies of a book by Edgar Allan Poe and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818). While Reynolds relates *Gone Home* to other gothic horror computer games, the literary references are notable, as is the way in which the game ultimately empties out its gothic signifiers to show commitment to 'the quotidian world' (Reynolds 2014: 51). This is crucial to the narrative arc and progressive agenda of *Gone Home*, but it also provides further evidence of its non-generic status or literariness. As Dimitrios Pavlounis argues, it is important that horror 'tropes' are exposed as 'red herrings' (a phrase suggesting the game's mobilisation of detective conventions often common to horror stories) and that 'the player's process of coming to be "at home" in the game world is framed as narratively symmetrical to Sam's coming to feel "at home" with her identity' (2016: 587). This is particularly the case given the ways in which homosexuality and horror have often gone together in the history of the genre – for example in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) and (albeit more self-consciously) Oscar Wilde's *The picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) – as noted by Paulina Palmer in her study of the lesbian gothic (1999: vii).

Another feature shared by both gothic texts (such as *Frankenstein* and *Dracula*) and *Gone Home*, as Reynolds himself recognises, is the epistolary structure, which asks 'readers to move from one piece of material to the next, addressing their relationship to one another and inferring the events implied therein and the impulses that led to their composition' (2014: 59). As such, as Reynolds points out, the epistolary narrative can prompt readers 'to think more about the act of writing than they might be in other modes of narration' (59). It is to the 'act of writing' – initially with specific reference to *Gone Home* – that I now turn.

Social, material, and temporal creativity in *Gone Home*

From Romanticism to Modernism, as Johanna Drucker writes, art has been 'emblematically stamped with the image of the One, the Individual, whose unique and original experience is uttered as a cry into the overwhelming sublimity of nature or against the supposedly crushing banality of culture' (2015: 91). However, as Drucker also notes, emerging collaborative practices in the digital arts are more suggestive of 'group mind, swarm think, hive speak' (91). Pawel Frelik similarly argues that, when it comes to computer games, 'theories of individual auteurism' are irrelevant, given the practice of 'collective authorship' by 'scriptwriters, graphic designers, sound engineers, and programmers' (2014: 279). In fact, the sociality of the creative process extends beyond the obvious element of team environments to include domain-specific knowledges, wider cultural and medial practices, and dynamic interactions with industry and audiences. As Glăveanu puts it, while

> centuries of philosophical thinking and some decades of individualistic psychological theorizing have embedded creativity into persons or products that "stand apart" from their social background … creativity is not the product of a "disconnection," but of deeply rooted "connections" between person and environment, self and others, creator and culture (2010: 147).

In interviews, Gaynor repeatedly emphasises The Fullbright Company's teamwork and the input of his 'story partner' (Gaynor 2013) Karla Zimonja, programmer Johnnemann Nordhagen, and environmental artist Kate Craig. He also acknowledges his immersion in the sociomaterial domain, rather than his isolation from it, as the foundation for his creativity. Gaynor evokes his experience of playing on a Commodore and then on a Nintendo as a youth, his subscriptions to gaming magazines, his early work as a certification tester for Sony and as a creator of expansion packs, and his later experience as a level designer for *BioShock 2* (2010), presenting his interaction with gaming culture as essential training for the creation of *Gone Home* (Prebble 2013; Miller 2016). This immersion gave him the necessary medium-specific skills in 'level design,' for instance, as Gaynor himself explains:

> You use lighting to guide the player and you put things that are important to the story near things that the player is going to have to interact with. If there's a lamp on a table, you can put a story element next to it because you know the player is going to walk up to the lamp and click on it to turn the lights on in the room … Stuff that's less important, you can hide in a drawer under a cabinet because it's only for the players who are really trying to explore as much as possible. It's just understanding player psychology. In the foyer when you walk in, there's a huge staircase in front of you, but the chronological order of the story starts when you exit the foyer to the left through a door on the first floor and most players do that … I know as a designer that most players, when they enter that space, they'll see that there's a big set of stairs to leave immediately but they'll also know, wait a second, I haven't looked around in the foyer yet to find everything so I'm going to find everything that I can here before I leave (Couch 2017).

Gaynor also recognises the importance to his creative enterprise of what he describes as the contemporary independent or indie games 'ecology' (Takolander 2017), which is cultivated through collaborative relationships as well as conferences (such as the high-profile Games Developers Conference or GDC), and which is by no means discontinuous with the AAA video games industry (with Gaynor's environmental storytelling in *BioShock 2* providing the foundation for *Gone Home*). He names other indie games such as *Dear Esther* (2012), *30 flights of loving* (2012), and *Amnesia: The dark descent* (2010) as direct inspirations for *Gone Home*, and his collegial relationships with other indie games developers are acknowledged in subtle ways in the game itself, such as in the visual nod to *Firewatch* (2016) – in the form of a cover image on a matchbox – incorporated into the console release of *Gone Home*. However, Gaynor also concedes that competitiveness is as important as collegiality: 'there is that overall feeling that you need to be doing at least as well as the people you respect' (Takolander 2017).

Neither is Gaynor reticent about his intention to reach and please audiences – 'we don't have patronage; we are doing this in a commercial realm' (Takolander 2017) – with 'four or five rounds of play testing,' he explains, conducted prior to the game's release (Couch 2017). While myths of auto-intoxicated individuals effectively disconnect creators from consumers, Glăveanu points out that 'the sociality axis of actor-audience' is in fact 'integral to the creative act' (2014: 40), which relies on a dialogical interplay between the inside perspective of the maker and the outside perspective of the

consumer, informed by values and ideals circulating in the relevant domain. Gaynor describes managing this 'balancing act,' between making something that is 'important to me' but also 'appealing enough to enough people that they'll pay us money so we can keep making things,' as a 'critical part of being a successful creator' (Takolander 2017). He also affirms that it is only because 'I am someone who has consumed innumerable games over the years [that] I can separate myself enough from the specifics of what I'm making to have a good feeling for … what is good for others' (Takolander 2017).

In addition, Gaynor contextualises the creation of *Gone Home* in the wider field of modern art, which he notably defines in terms of media competition and innovative paradigm-changing responses to the threat of media obsolescence. 'How can this form speak to this one and vice versa,' as Gaynor reminds us, 'is the story of popular art in the twentieth century' (Gaynor 2013). He cites as an example the ways in which 'Impressionism was an answer to the obsolescence of representational painting,' something suggested by the invention of the new medium of photography (Gaynor 2013). Of course, the 'literary game' might be understood in relation to the threat of obsolescence often articulated in print publishing since the digital revolution. In fact, *Gone Home* remediates various literary models. Gaynor relates, for example, how he was inspired by Alice Munro's 'humanistic exploration of normal people's lives'; by David Foster Wallace's *Infinite jest* (1996), which was 'one of the only books I read during the back half of the development' of *Gone Home*; and by Chris Ware's graphic novel *Building stories* (2012), which presents, inside a game-sized rectangular box, various textual artefacts that tell the story of a woman living in a three-story brownstone building in Chicago (Takolander 2017). Gaynor describes *Building stories*, in a way that resonates with *Gone Home*, as 'a book but not a book, using the form of printed material but as this non-linear collection of stories … and it's one of my favourite things that's been published in the last five or ten years' (Takolander 2017). Gaynor also names the site-specific theatrical production *Sleep no more* (2011), in which the audience is invited to move around a dark and atmospheric hotel to observe characters in different rooms, as nothing short of 'revelatory … because of how you're active in finding different points in these events and tying them together through your own observation' (Takolander 2017). Gaynor's college education in film and sculpture also informed the creative emergence of *Gone Home*, as did his study of architectural history, which enabled him to, as he puts it, 'think about what the implications of a classically symmetrical space are versus a space that has lowered visibility and organic shape or that is intentionally unbalanced or that restricts your view in certain ways depending on your placement in it' (Takolander 2017).

Here we see how, as Glăveanu argues, 'the success of creative actors depends to a great extent on their ability to discover, access and use the cultural stock' (2014: 55). However, interviews with Gaynor reveal not only how the creative act is shaped in a responsive dynamic with other cultural practitioners and practices, but also with the artefact that is in the process of being materialised. As Glăveanu suggests, 'the instrumental, functional, communicative and symbolic qualities' of emerging artefacts constantly 'mediate our action' (2014: 52) as creators in ways that ultimately demonstrate a '*co-constructed and dynamic agency*' (2014: 62, original emphasis).

Glăveanu refers to the work of Jerome Bruner, who attempts to account for the distributed event of creativity in interdisciplinary contexts:

> You begin to write a poem. Before long it, the poem, begins to develop metrical, stanzaic, symbolic requirements. You, as the writer of the poem, are serving it – it seems. Or you may be pursuing the task of building a formal model to represent the known properties of single nerve fibers and their synapses: soon the model takes over. Or we say of an experiment in midstream that it needs another control group really to clench the effect. It is at this point that we get our creative second wind, at the point when the object takes over (1980: 25).

Creativity relies, as Bruner puts it, on the creator's willingness to embrace the '*Freedom to be dominated by the object*' (1980: 25, original emphasis).

When it comes to the writing of *Gone Home*, Gaynor describes precisely how the creative impasses or opportunities afforded by the emerging artefact were active in the game's emergence. His account of the game's creation also points to the generative nature of material constraints, more generally, in ways that dispute the common vision of creativity as the expression of individual freedom. His description of the game's development provides nothing less than a fascinating portrait of distributed and dynamic creativity in action.

Dedicated to the concept of environmental storytelling but constrained by the limitations of a four-person creative team, which meant 'we couldn't build a whole city' (Gaynor 2013), Gaynor and his colleagues decided upon the creation of a single house. They located the house in the woods, Gaynor explains, so that the player couldn't 'just walk next door' (Takolander 2017), thus precluding the need to construct an external world. They introduced the plot device of a 'huge thunderstorm,' he adds, to further justify why the player is 'unable to go outside,' as well as to explain why the player has no access to 'outside communication' (Takolander 2017). After all, if the player (Katie) could access a telephone, the mystery of her missing family could be immediately resolved. The decision to set the story in 1995 was also pragmatic, because it precluded mobiles and the internet (Prebble 2013). It also justified the artefact-based and epistemological nature of the exploration game. At the same time, the medium's requirement for architectural exploration and incremental story-building suggested a house that resembled 'a big sprawling Victorian manor' with 'corridors with rooms branching from them' that allow for a 'progression of content' (Craig and Gaynor 2015). Because no one in The Fullbright Company was a character animator, the house also had to be devoid of people. (The player can only 'see' the Greenbriar family in a portrait located in the manor's foyer.) For the same reason, while the emergent gothic setting implied a horror plot – with Gaynor reporting surprise at the gothic 'signifiers' that arose, while also subsequently recognising the usefulness of starting 'from that tension of going into a dark house' (Takolander 2017) – the game had to be devoid of monsters. These factors, in combination with what Gaynor gleefully describes as the 'transgressiveness of making this game ourselves in our basement', led to their decision to focus on ordinary people (Takolander 2017). And so, *Gone Home* emerged as a game set in a domestic and everyday environment, which deployed gothic conventions but also, as Gaynor puts it, ultimately aimed to 'get people past' them (Takolander 2017).

These emergent constraints for the game, Gaynor explains, suggested their own questions: 'who is the family, what happened to them, what's the story, who are the characters?' (Takolander 2017). This led the team to a story of familial drama and finally, as Gaynor reports, 'a classic conflict like *Romeo and Juliet*, where one of the kids falls in love with someone that they're not supposed to and the parent don't approve' (Takolander 2017). The decision to represent a middle-class family living in an enormous mansion also required the rationale of an inheritance, which itself led to the backstory of Uncle Oscar's sexual abuse of Terry Greenbriar.

This account of the game's emergence shows how, as Glăveanu puts it, the creative practitioner(s) and the creative object are 'open systems' (2010: 158) in dynamic and mutual interaction. It also reveals creative events as thoroughly temporal; as practices that 'can only be studied with their unfolding in time' (Glăveanu 2014: 65). This is in part because of 'the novelty of moment-to-moment discoveries occasioned by the changing artefact' (Glăveanu 2014: 77) – of the kind that Gaynor describes – but it is also because of the historical and sociocultural context for the creative act, which means that creativity is always marked by 'the "movement" from past to future' (Glăveanu 2014: 65). Thus, as Glăveanu argues, creativity cannot be understood simply in terms of 'a finished product or generic individual' but must be holistically conceived in a temporal and distributed fashion as '"creativity in the making"' (2014: 74).

Conclusion

In their introduction to *Rhetoric/composition/play through video games*, Richard Colby, Matthew Johnson, and Rebekah Schultz Colby ask: 'How can *playing* a video game encourage students to (re)consider how they write?' (2013: 4, my emphasis). Benjamin Miller, one of the contributors to the edited volume, draws attention to how playing action-adventure video games – which involve a 'complex process of exploration, discovery, and problem solving' – are 'useful as a metaphor for the writing process' (2013: 102). His agenda, for the sake of his students, is to contest the inhibiting myth that writing is 'a straightforward process of transcription and communication of already-known thoughts' (102), rather than a material engagement with words on an interface. My paper will conclude here with the question: how does the *writing* of a video game encourage students to understand creative writing differently?

Quoting the Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley – '"When composition begins, inspiration is already on the decline"' – Piper identifies the Romantic age as the modern source of myths of literary genius and of an 'opposition between technics and aesthetics that is in many ways still operative today' (2009: 12). The writer is believed to directly transpose her exceptional thoughts onto a blank page (or screen). However, while literary writing is persistently associated with individual vision, it also manifests the social, material and temporal characteristics of creativity identified by Glăveanu and made apparent in my study of the production of The Fullbright Company's literary game *Gone Home*.

To begin with, the act of traditional writing, while sometimes undertaken in solitary circumstances, is nevertheless always thoroughly marked by sociality. It is, as Timothy Clark argues, 'mediated by the literary, semiotic and linguistic codes of its day' (1997:

21), which are in turn informed by a millennia-old cultural history of the creative deployment of language in different media and genres and in changing contexts of reception and evaluation. Despite being associated with the ethereal life of the mind, writing is also a material practice. In interviews, Gaynor is notably reluctant to identify himself as a writer. This is owing in part to a perceived disjunction between the individuality and freedom he attaches to literary creativity and the technological grounding of his own practice, which begins, as he describes it, with the 'mechanics' and 'comes out of the form that's going to be expressing it' (Prebble 2013). However, writing is similarly prescribed and afforded by a technology – language – in which the mechanics of rhyme and rhythm can give rise to poetry (as in oral cultures) or in which the method of 'transparent' language use can sometimes produce a 'page turner' (in the modern context of print.) Genre, providing character types and other conventions, is another literary mechanism that generates form-specific content. For Clark, the 'empty page' with which the writer engages – a material interface to be sure – is in fact 'full of a sense of potential because it is really already a crowded page' (1997: 23), brimming with the possibilities offered by the technologies and traces of literary culture, which await dynamic enactment. We see the agency of literary materials acknowledged when poets speak of the magically propagative nature of verse – 'the viewless wings of Poesy' (Keats 1819: 60) – and when novelists express wonder at their characters assuming agency. While the technologies of writing are often overlooked, as Ian Bogost argues – evoking not only computer games but also poetry, hopscotch, playing a guitar, and even masturbation – 'the play is in the thing, not in us' (2016: 95).

So, to return to my concluding question, how does the *writing* of a video game encourage students to understand creative writing differently? My answer, following Glăveanu, is that it helps them understand how the creative act is always a '*distributed, dynamic, socio-cultural and developmental phenomenon*' (2014: 2, original emphasis). Pedagogically speaking, this suggests the need to shift the focus in our teaching of creativity from an innate psychological property reserved for the blessed few to a sociocultural event potentially available to anyone committed to the rigorous conditions of its enactment. When it comes to creative writing, this will let us play not only better but also fairer.

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