



NEW WRITING
NORTH

YOUNG WRITERS



Creating 'Playable' Texts.

Session Two

this workshop follows on from Creating 'Playable' Texts session One

Notes

Anything written in purple and italics – like this sentence – is a helpful hint, example or prompt to help if you're unsure or feeling stuck.

Take as long as you need or want to finish tasks. Be kind to yourself. Remember everything is a first draft / work in progress. It doesn't have to be perfect first time.

If you're really suffering from the dreaded writers' block forget about the task and just free write whatever is going on in your head for 2 minutes. Or read something, look up some artists on Instagram, play a game. Often when we're not thinking about writing is when we have our most creative thoughts. Giving your brain a rest is an important part of the process.

For this session it would be good to have some post-it notes/scrap paper, string and some colourful pens to hand.

Introduction

What is a playable text?

A playable text is story, play, poem that has the reader take in an active role when reading the text. This could be following instructions or making choices that affect how the story progress.

'Choose Your Own Adventure' books are probably the most well-known example of this.

Choose Your Own Adventure is a genre of game books where the reader makes the decisions for the character and jumps from scene to scene within the book. They have a distinct second-person narrative and few specific details allowing readers to use their imagination to fill in the blanks.

Another example of a playable text would be role-playing games with branching dialogue paths. (Life Is Strange for example) Most often people think that a Choose Your Own Adventure has to be a fantasy or sc-fi. But it's a very adaptable form – you could cast your reader as detective who must solve a crime or maybe someone caught in a love triangle.

Have fun and be inventive. Remember playable texts are about allowing your readers to experience your writing in a different, new and fun way.

Take an existing novella or short story you've already started writing and see if it can be adapted into a playable text using the exercises below.

Warm Up:

Start a short with a “bland” sentence. For example ‘They were waiting at the bus stop, it was raining’ or ‘We stopped the car, switched of the engine and got out’.)

Then continue the story the following sentence making the situation better. Meaning some good or positive happens to the characters. The next sentence should see a change of luck for the worst. Keep going, alternating between making the situation better and then worst with each alternate sentence.

Try this a couple of times – during the first round make the action as outlandish, silly and fantastical as possible. Each sentence should make the story more dramatic and raise the stakes.

This can a solo exercise but can also be fun with others. You can encourage people around you to play in person, or play with others through Whatsapp or Google Drive. Whatever works best for you!

If you're doing the exercise with more than one person, each write an opening sentence then write the following sentence making the narrative better or worse for the character(s). You might want to alternate this i.e.: A writes a line that makes situation immediately worse for their characters whilst B writes a sentence that makes the events of their story better.

Then fold the paper over or turn the font white so the sentences cannot be seen. And pass it on and the next person writes the next sentence, remembering to alternate between making it better and making it worse. It's probably a good idea to writer better, worse, better etc ... down the edge of the page or at the beginning of the sentence to help you keep track as you pass the story between you.

You might also want to try this exercise multiple times with different rules such as; try a version that feels more balanced, that if something dramatically bad happens it becomes better in a smaller way. Find the smallest or most ordinary way that the events of your short could be better or worse for the characters.

Finally you might want to try a version that isn't about 'events' but all about a character changing emotions or decisions.

Get Inspired:

Play '[NWN Prototype Adventure](#)' – this is a text adventure written in collaboration with New Writing North's Newcastle Young Writers last year as a test for writing their own 'Choose Your Own Adventure.'

Give it a Try:

Exercise One – Prewrite (20mins)

Either browse through magazines/newspapers reading only the headlines to use inspiration for a short story or adapt the adventure from the last session.

Write for 10 minutes. Try and write using second person narrative (you), think about establishing location and a narrative hook.

Read back through what you've written. Think about choices the characters make in the text and the different possibilities that might lead to – are there already any moments where if the character had done something else, the story would have been different, or where you could write a branching path? Highlight or mark these moments in your draft.

If you're not sure what I mean by making choices or creating branching paths, go back and play the NWN Prototype again. You'll notice at the end of each section the reader is given a choice. Those choices are all based on possible actions the character would naturally be able to do in the setting.

If you're still stuck, write about where you are and what you're doing right now. Now list all the possibilities that could happen. What are all the things you could do right now e.g: stand up, go to the window, go into the kitchen, put some music on and dance, hide behind a door, have an argument with your sibling about something they did two years ago that annoyed you etc.

Write about why might you do those things? What would happen if you did?

Exercise Two – Flow charting

Now we've got a draft for the beginning of our adventure it's time to start structuring the rest of our story, trying out different possibilities and keeping track of details. To do this we're going to use a technique called flow charting.

This isn't just useful for planning and writing 'Choose Your Own Adventure' stories. If you're writing a novel with several characters arcs, or a play or even designing a game, this is a great way to be able to see how major or small events alter the narrative, to remind us of all things that might not happen on the page but will affect the way a character behaves at different points in the story etc.

Using post-it notes or coloured card or scrap paper, string and some colourful pens note down the following:

Major Events (including endings and conflicts that will change the course of the story. Major events are the big scenes in your story and usually put the characters in danger. This can be physical danger e.g. a battle, crossing a rickety bridge, or emotional danger e.g. deciding to confess their love for someone or having a big argument with their closest friend. Major events add moments of conflict which hinder or prevent the characters from achieving their goal)

Decisions (the choices a character has during or following a major event. Even if we're writing a 'choose your own adventure' there has to be opportunities for the player to, well, make a choice! For you, these will be points where the narrative shifts. A helpful way to think about this is to identify decisions as dark or light choices – the 'light' choice means your character moves closer to becoming the hero, a 'dark' choice puts them on the path of becoming an anti-hero)

Story Elements (this will include elements such as the story opening, world building, introducing new characters, the result of any conflicts or the characters acquiring important items. A simple way to identify story elements is to think of them as things the players doesn't have a choice in but will affect future choices.)

Whilst writing these down allow your imagination to go wild. Any possibilities or ideas you have for the way your story can play out.

If you have a large cast of characters, have moments in your story where the cast split into groups. If you want to write a narrative which has different viewpoints and follows different journeys, write out some post-it notes with your characters on as well – this way you can keep track of who is in which scene.

Now arrange them in a flow chart / family tree structure (see my example below). Start at the top with any world building, protagonists and the first major event (the event that is the reason everything else in the story happening a.k.a. the inciting incident), and then branching down and out until the flow chart reaches your endings. Use string to connect each of the major event post-it notes so it's easier to see how the story events flow into one another. As you can see, I've colour coded my post-its – so if I want to check that all my events make sense in the narrative I can quickly identify them. You might have some gaps at the moment – that's ok. In fact that's brilliant as it's exactly what this exercise is for!

Think of this as you play testing your story. Rereading all the possible paths we have currently can we identify any plot holes, consistency issues, things that we need to be aware of in future paths? - has a character suddenly gained a power? Did they pick up an item that come in useful later?

The useful thing about using post-it notes or cards is it's easy to move things around! Try things in different orders, add things in quickly. You can also quickly try out different directions and plot points for your story without spending hours drafting a chapter – only to find you've forgotten a small detail which would change the way a character behaves or a location is no longer accessible to them. I haven't done it in the example above but it can be fun to have a decision which loops the player back to earlier event – eg if the player has been following the right hand path, a decision might shift them over to the left hand path.

Exercise Three – Just keep drafting, just keep drafting.

Now you've got your framework you just must keep writing. Choose scenes that you're unsure about or that are most exciting. You don't have to write in chronological order – you've got the flow chart to help keep you on track now. Keep checking with that structure. Keep moving things around and trying different things.

Try writing a few different endings first and then working backwards. Or do quick free writes using elements of the story. These don't need to be attached to any existing story. If the passage is fun or works with the story - try and work it in. Share with another person and chat about how you can match it up with their writing etc.

Challenge Yourself:

Something To Experiment With – Twine

The text adventure you played online earlier was built using a website called Twine. It's a really simple online tool that helps tell interactive, nonlinear stories. I was first introduced to it by a game developer who was using it to help build a role-playing game they were making which had branching narratives and dialogue options.

You don't need to write any code to create a simple story with Twine, but there's loads of easy to follow tutorials on the website to learn the basics and then develop your skills to build something more comprehensive. You can add inventory systems or animations to bring your story to life.

Twine also makes it really simple to share your work – just as we did with the adventure earlier.

Once you've got a rough draft of your playable text; why not experiment with it on Twine? And make a playable narrative that can be shared digitally.

I've attached the work-in-progress file for the adventure you played at the start of this workshop. I'll put instructions below on how to open that through Twines' website and you can see how the flow-charting structure for that game worked, the basics of how the game is designed and built. And hopefully get inspired to give it a go yourself.

Resources

[NWN Prototype HTML Download](https://www.twine.org/)

The image is a composite of three screenshots illustrating the process of using Twine. The top screenshot shows the Twine website in a browser. The URL <https://twine.org> is circled in pink, with the text "one. go to twinery.org" written in pink above it. A yellow box on the right side of the website contains the text "two. click use it online! - no need to create an account or download", with "Use it online" circled in pink. The middle screenshot shows a file dialog box titled "Opening NWN Prototype.html". It displays "NWN Prototype.html" (314 KB) and offers options to "Open with Firefox (default)", "Save File", or "Do this automatically for files like this from now on.". The bottom screenshot shows the Twine browser dashboard with "0 Stories". A pink dashed box highlights the main content area, which contains the text "four. drag& drop into the Twine browser dashboard and double click to open. you'll now be able to see the framework and open each story section to see how they're connected." A Firefox icon is shown being dragged towards the dashboard.

This workshop was devised by JG Tansley for New Writing North Young Writers.



JG is a theatre-maker, dramaturg and 'not-quite-drag' artist. When riding solo, under the alias dandysopic; they make work that is gender-bent, unapologetically camp, heartfelt and unashamed. Most recently they wrote and performed a solo theatre performance; 'SPACE: A Herstory'; a co-commission by Curious Arts & Northern stage. Other recent credits include Creative Associate on Northern Stage's 'A Christmas Carol' and directing Zoë Murtagh's 'Iconography'. They also work as a freelance arts practitioner with Mortal Fools.

New Writing North Young Writers is a programme for young people aged 12-19. We run creative writing groups, masterclasses and programmes in schools across the North East. We support young people to express their ideas, to work with professional writers and artists, to create and share new work, and to meet other young writers.

We would love to read your writing! Share it with us on social media using #writingfromhome or by emailing youngwriters@newwritingnorth.com. Search for New Writing North Young Writers on Instagram, Facebook or Twitter, where we will also be sharing regular writing prompts. Each week we will select a Young Writer of the Week whose work will be shared on our channels.

Find other writing workshops and much more on our website www.newwritingnorth.com

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