

Game Changer

I'm not a gamer, but when I heard about WITS Digital I wanted in. As a fiction writer, the idea of creating the story behind a video game intrigued me. I admit to having a certain mindset when it came to gaming. I thought it a solitary experience, which writing is, and maybe that's what drew me to it. Turns out I was wrong.

My first two Digital classes were after school placements at Lantrip Elementary. In the beginning, I feared not being a gamer would be a hindrance. I soon realized I was over-thinking it. Once I learned the ins-and-outs of Gamestar Mechanic, the online program WITS Digital uses for the game building, I found it easy and surprisingly fun.

The inaugural class at Lantrip was an exceptional group of self-starters. It was this class, particularly Isaac Cruz, who helped me find my way from the start. Isaac would go home after the lesson each week and play/work on his Quests. Quests are played before actual game design and teach the gamer how to build the game itself. He'd come back for the next class and share what he'd discovered. He wasn't the only one, and I started to notice something I hadn't expected, a spontaneous development of community. When one would have trouble mastering a level, he or she would shout out, moan, or any other verbal form of frustration, and someone would come to the rescue. Together, they'd work to overcome the obstacle.

This kind of teamwork proved the same in the next Lantrip class, as well as at the MECA summer camp. What's more, I noticed there was no competition between them. There was camaraderie and teasing, but no "*My game is better than your game*" mentality. Quite the opposite. I've never seen kids work together so smoothly, even when I split the summer camp kids into groups to design and build life-size games. They just naturally found a way to work together.

All of this was both interesting and gratifying, but it's a WITS project. There has to be writing. My inclination was to do fiction, and Rick had a storyboard and a Five Elements of Game Design handout that worked wonderfully with it. The elements of game design are very like the elements of storytelling, so that was easy for me. Then came the MECA camp, which made me have to reconsider my WITS Digital lesson plans.

The MECA camp had a theme they wanted followed, which meant the kids would be writing personal essays. I used poetry and song lyrics to get them to reflect on their life experiences. Then I taught memoir writing. (This was a four-week camp.) We used the game design storyboard to see if their memoirs would work as games. Some of the simpler stories adapted easily enough. A story about crashing a bike into a dumpster became a game about Dumpstertron and his evil minion dumpsters. Getting lost in the mall became a maze game. Then there were the stories that were more difficult to translate into a game. The loss of a grandmother became a game about getting the family to Mexico to celebrate her life and death. And a young man who'd been recently diagnosed with scoliosis called his game *Watch Your Back*, with the tagline: *Brace for Impact*. Each level reflected his experience with doctors, x-rays, and blood tests.

Having to take these personal experiences and turn them into video games helped me see ways of bringing other forms of expository writing into the project. These are a few ideas, some I used at MECA, I believe augment expository: personal essay; slogan/tagline writing, which forces the writer to focus on the topic; persuasive writing, in the form of commercials, again focuses on topic; cause and effect, How I Broke My Arm; procedural or technical writing, instructions on how to play a newly created board game. Given time, I'm sure there's more.

My experience with WITS Digital has been somewhat revelatory. What I learned about the different forms of writing that can be used in the lessons, as well as the atmosphere of friendship the game building inspires, amazed me. But it was a personal experience with one of my students that has affected me most. At MECA, I met Mili. Mili is a fourteen-year-old girl who, like any other girl her age, just wanted to fit in with her peers. But Mili couldn't help being different. She's visually impaired.

I had no advance notice that there would be a student who couldn't see in one of my classes, and I admit to momentary panic when she walked in. One of the camp counselors, Erika, was with her, though, so I assumed we could have Mili dictate to either of us and we could get the writing done. I had no idea what to do for the game play and design, but I had a few days to figure that out. In the meantime, I got to know Mili. She had a sharp wit, a truly wicked sense of humor, and innate problem-solving abilities that came in handy when her group had to design their board game. On the day the kids created collages from magazine clippings, Erika and Mili worked together. Mili expressed her likes and dislikes, and they made a charming collage. Mili had an honest understanding of who she was, more so than the girls worried about their hair and lipstick, and she was the one with something to overcome.

As time to play the game approached, I went to the camp director, who offered to find Mili something else to do during the computer time. I wasn't comfortable with that. It didn't set well with me that Mili could express herself so freely in her writing with us in the mornings, only to be pulled out, singled out, when it was game time. So I asked the director if I could try something I had in mind, and she gave me the green light.

After talking with Erika, we devised a plan that would allow Mili to play Gamestar Mechanic. This time, unlike the writing where she dictated to Erika, Erika would dictate to Mili. Mili sat with the laptop on the desk in front of her, while Erika perched over her shoulder in a chair behind her. As Erika gave commands—up, down; left, right; jump, jump, jump!—Mili's fingers frantically followed suit. As a writer, I should be able to describe what I witnessed, but words honestly fail me. I couldn't believe what we were doing. We'd found a way to keep Mili with us during the game playing aspect of the program. They laughed, shouted, and groaned like every other player in the room. It was incredible.

This has been a whirlwind year. I'm not sure I had a preconceived idea of what WITS Digital was like, but digital storytelling definitely turned out to be more than I could've conceived if I'd tried. My view on gaming went through a transformation. I now see how a gamer can get lost in a game the same way a reader can get lost in a story. But it's not simply entertainment; it's a connection with the person, or people, on the other end, the writer or designer who had

something they wished to share in an extremely intimate art form. And I, for one, can't wait to see other manifestations of this kind of art.