Collaborative Creative Writing in the L2 Classroom Using the Software Twine

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Abstract

Among the four skills in second language teaching, writing has a rather difficult position: Teachers often consider it to be too time-consuming to extensively train writing in class, instead assigning it as homework. As a result, many students begin to consider these tasks tedious and dull. Besides, writing tasks are often limited to so-called "functional writing" as suggested by many textbooks: letters, notes, and argumentative texts.

Unfortunately, none of these text types give enough room for the creative energy of L2 learners, often leaving their potential untapped.

Creative writing is therefore a welcome alternative to regular writing assignments. This paper presents the free software Twine, and outlines its application to the collaborative writing process. Twine brings the nearly forgotten genre of gamebooks (such as the popular "Choose Your Own Adventure" series) back to life and allows users without prior programming experience to write interactive fiction in the form of web pages. In order to use Twine in a group and make sure the story evolves and comes to an end in time, some logistic precautions have to be taken.

1. On Writing in the L2 Classroom

Among the skills in second language learning and teaching (listening, speaking, reading and writing), writing is in a rather difficult position: Even though – when asked – teachers tend to consider writing an important task, it is widely seen in its supportive function, e.g. in order to train grammar structures or apply new vocabulary (Faistauer, 1997).

As they are rather time-consuming, writing assignments are often assigned as homework, thus making them a solitary activity. An additional disadvantage of this paradigm is that students will always write for the same audience: their teacher.

Fortunately, creative writing has begun to find its way into L2 classrooms, a change facilitated by teachers who are willing to break with convention and understand the potential of creative writing as a means of furthering one of the fundamental skills for an adequate development both in the academic and personal spheres (Pujante, de Lucas Vicente, 2014)

By inviting the students to write their creative texts not individually in the solitude of their homes, but rather in class, teachers can leverage the potential of social interaction, peer correction and a sense of co-ownership, which leads to a higher engagement of the individual student and "better texts in terms of task fulfillment, grammatical accuracy and complexity". (Storch, 2005)

2. A different approach to collaborative writing

When used in the context of L2 teaching, the term "collaborative writing" usually refers to a group of students synchronously or asynchronously working on the same text, sharing the same audience and usually the same purpose.

In the past, this was typically carried out by writing assignments in class, where students worked together in groups and planned, wrote and revised the desired text. Web 2.0 tools represent a giant leap forward in collaborative writing, as they allow students to collaborate in the same text or set of texts without the need to be at the same location.

This paper suggests a different approach to collaborative writing. It remains collaborative insofar as it is a group of students working on the same project, but they do not have to share the same idea. In fact, diverging ideas represent an advantage to this specific type of collaborative writing. This may sound cryptic or contradictory, but is possible in interactive fiction.

3. Interactive Fiction

"Interactive fiction" nowadays refers to a genre of computer games in which the player controls a character and their interaction with the environment using often a text-only interface.

The term can also refer to the so-called "interactive narrative", in which a single starting point of a story can lead to multiple different outcomes. This type of narrative is outlined in a tree structure,

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giving the reader the possibility to make choices at several points of the story, which lead to new choices, allowing multiple endings.

Although this type of fiction is commonly associated with the early age of home computers, its history goes back to so-called gamebooks, which were particularly popular in the 1980s and 1990s.

The following example, taken out of a gamebook from the popular "Choose Your Own Adventure" series illustrates the process of this type of interactive fiction:

> *You glance out the window. It's about a twelve-foot drop to the soft grass. Maybe you can jump for it and escape from the thugs waiting on the stairs below.*
> *If you continue to follow the plan and roar to terrorize Vargas, turn to page 116.*
> *If you try to jump for safety, turn to page 49.*
> *If you try to call the police to tip them off, turn to page 111.*
>
> (You Are a Monster, Edward Packard, Choose Your Own Adventure, 1988)

After the decline of commercial interactive fiction in the 1990s, a group of online enthusiasts kept the genre alive by developing a variety of design environments, which allowed users to create their own pieces of interactive fiction. While some of those users focused on the ludic dimension of the genre (such as riddle-solving), others took those technical possibilities as a playing field, where they could experiment with new writing and storytelling techniques.

Today there are a variety of non-commercial tools for writing interactive fiction available, such as:

- Inform 7 (http://inform7.com/)
- TADS (http://www.tads.org/)
- Quest (http://textadventures.co.uk/quest)
- Twine (http://twinery.org/)

For the presented approach to writing interactive fiction in the L2 classroom, the application Twine was chosen for its ease of use, active community, and comfortable publication process.

4. Twine

Twine enables users to create interactive fiction and text adventure games. The finished works are exported into an HTML file readable by any web browser as a website. This makes it easy to publish online, either on one's own web space or on one of the various platforms of the vivid interactive fiction community. Depending on the user's experience with web design and programming, different levels of complexity can be achieved in Twine:

- Without any specialized knowledge of web development techniques, users are able to design their own pieces of interactive fiction. For the purpose of writing interactive stories in class, the basic functionalities suffice perfectly.
- A command of the HTML and CSS markup languages gives users control over text formatting and lets them use additional elements typically found on websites, such as images, tables, lists, headings, and links.
- Advanced users can use the JavaScript programming language as well as the built-in Twine syntax to implement features such as conditional logic (e.g. option B disappears when option A is chosen), timers, random events, or scoring systems.

Twine organizes the separate paragraphs in a tree structure, allowing the readers to move from one section of the story to the next by making choices between options.
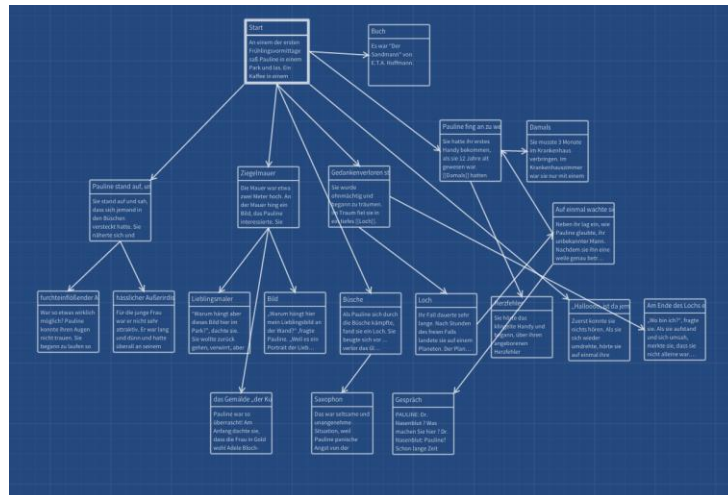
Fig. 1: Example of the narrative tree structure in Twine

5. Collaborative Interactive Fiction Writing With Twine

This chapter describes the approach the author took on creating a piece of interactive fiction in a collaborative way and should be understood as a suggestion. Of course, any of the individual processes can and should be altered according to the students' L2 level, the course duration, or other organizational requirements.

One factor any teacher must be aware of when starting a similar project is that it will require a considerable amount of time in and outside of class both for the actual creative process and the logistic aspect.

In order to keep control over text quality as well as the technical and organizational aspects of the project, students were asked to either send their texts via email or write them in Google Docs. Afterwards, the texts were inserted into the software and hierarchically linked together. The story was updated and published online regularly, so that students could keep track of the different developments within the plots.

5.1 The Ignition Spark (1st through 3rd Lesson)

In order to create a common idea to depart from, the following paragraph (originally in German) was handed out:

> *On one of the first mornings of spring, Pauline was sitting in the park and reading. (…)It was pleasantly quiet and she could enjoy her book, which she had already read several times. Suddenly Pauline heard a cell phone ring somewhere behind her. She didn't react and tried to focus on her book.(…) The phone, which had been sounding for almost a minute, reminded Pauline of her first cell phone. She turned around.*

Providing the initial setting gave the author control over the narrative perspective (third person), the time period (contemporary) and physical setting (urban surroundings) in which the main thread was to develop. It gave the students enough freedom to further both the rest of the story and the main character, Pauline.

The text was handed out to groups of three to five students, who were asked to continue the story, maintaining both tense and narrative style. This exercise resulted in four threads, which were then processed in Twine, and hosted online. In the following lesson, students again worked in groups, this time continuing a thread they hadn't been working on previously. As a homework assignment at the end of the third lesson, students were asked to continue one of the sub-threads individually. By that time, the initial idea had evolved into a widespread narrative tree with plots evolving in diverse orientations.

5.2 Defining the characters (3rd lesson)

In order to keep all the authors on the same page as far as the features of the characters were concerned, students were asked to collaboratively define each character in regard to appearance, age, language features, profession, educational level, family, hobby and interests, (special) abilities,

habits, problems and quirks. Once defined, these characteristics were considered binding, and were thus kept consistent throughout all further story development.

5.3 Keeping the text in shape (4th and 5th lesson)

In order to visualize the dependencies of the passages, they were printed out, glued them to a piece of paper and connected with lines, emulating the way in which interactive fiction is structured in Twine.
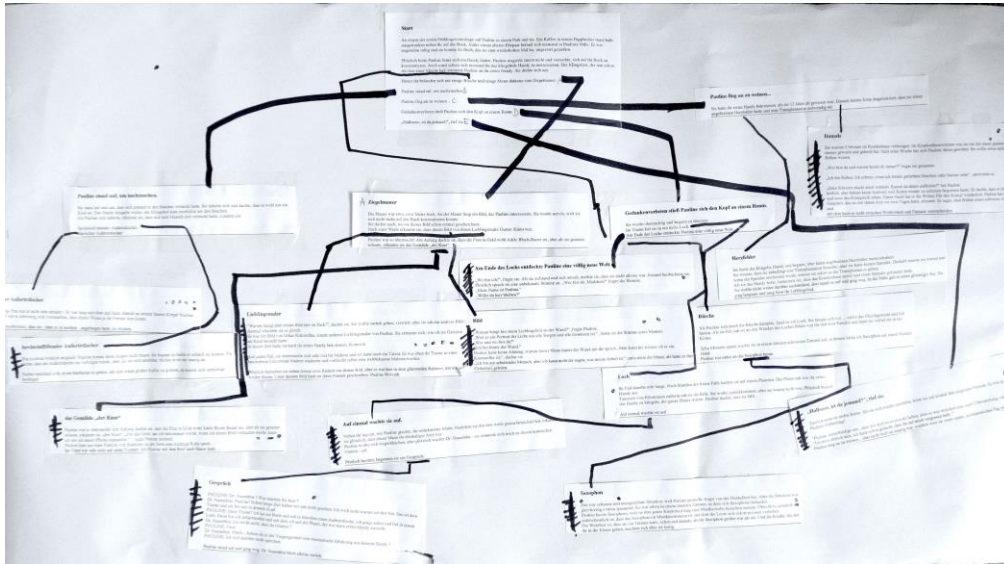

Fig. 2: Paper version of the interactive story after lesson #4. The dots on some of the passages reflect the students' voting process.

Everybody agreed that the interactive story had to be narrowed down to a limited amount of threads in order to be able to get a result by the end of the course. In consequence, students voted to choose the three threads which would be further developed.

As homework, students individually developed a conflict for a plot of their choice in three to five sentences. In the next class, the group voted again, this time defining the conflicts, which would rule the three threads in the following weeks.

5.4 Controlling the arc of tension (lesson #6 through #12)

By the time the students had voted on the threads and developed conflicts, the group had all the inspiration and information it needed for finishing the three selected stories.

In this phase, we agreed on slowly building towards a story climax by the tenth lesson. For each plot, one document was created on Google Docs, allowing groups of three to four students to collaboratively develop the story. In order to accomplish and foster a sense of common ownership (Kessler, Bikowski and Boggs, 2012) that applied to the whole interactive story (and not just one of the threads), a rotation system was implemented to ensure that each student worked on each thread at least twice.

Students showed a high responsibility in building towards the peak of the conflict at the suggested moment, finding different ways to control tension until then. As far as the development of the narrative structure was concerned, the students decided that no further division should occur.

6. Conclusion

Faistauer postulated, already in 1997, that

> *"writing shall be liberated from its image of isolated and solitary individual assignment and writing in groups should be seen as a further educational objective, which supports not only linguistic, but also personal development skills."* (Faistauer, 1997)

It seems that both the technical development, which has increased the technical possibilities for collaborative working, and the "noticeable increase in interest in collaborative writing," (Kessler, Bikowski and Boggs, 2012) prove that Faistauer's prediction has at least partially become true.

The presented project encouraged students to interact and construct meaning in a collaborative way. Despite its name, collaborative writing also has a positive effect on oral expression, as students must articulate their thoughts, suggestions and critiques. This process of reflective thinking might be just what Faistauer had in mind when she referred to "personal development skills."

The approach of using Twine for collaborative storytelling enables teachers to share the creative process with relative ease with their students and a wider audience.

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