

Vampires, Drama, and Romance: Examining the in-game interactive fiction tools in *Episode* and *Dorian*

Stephanie Harkin

Swinburne University of Technology
John Street, Hawthorn
Melbourne, Australia
sharkin@swin.edu.au

Keywords

Casual games, *Episode* – Choose Your Story, *Dorian*, gamemaking, girlhood, interactive fiction, Pocket Gems

INTRODUCTION

Pocket Gem’s *Episode–Choose Your Story* (2013) (hereafter *Episode*) is a free-to-play mobile game that offers choose-on-your-own adventure stories that primarily focus on romance and melodrama. The game—which, in 2019, had been reportedly downloaded 50 million times with five million weekly users—has appeared in headlines reprimanding its controversial, unregulated, and age-inappropriate content (Cooper, 2019).

In this paper, however, I aim to draw attention to *Episode*’s Writer Portal, which is a HTML coding interface that allows users to publish and potentially profit from writing their own stories for the game. *Episode*’s Writer Portal includes a library of backgrounds, outfits, and characters along with several tutorials on how to create stories. The game’s website also hosts a community forum for promoting stories and sharing design advice.

Popular commentators have begun to point out that *Episode* and others’ like it are “quietly creat[ing] a new generation of game developers” (Marshall, 2019, para. 2; see also Silberling, 2022). I therefore overview the social affordances and constraints of *Episode*’s Writer Portal as a design tool for its player base of primarily young women.

I consider how the Writer Portal encourages an outpour of labour benefitting a multi-million-dollar corporation obscured behind a declaration of girl empowerment. Stories require a tremendous reader metric score before creators are eligible to receive payments, while those stories are comparatively obscured in way of *Episode*’s internally-written stories. The possible content created is also limited to ensure the games meet *Episode*’s thematic branding—“Pack in Romance & Drama” (Episode Support, 2017)—thus reflecting what Jonathan Gray (2010) would call “a policed playground” (165).

Proceedings of DiGRA Australia 2023

© 2023 Authors & Digital Games Research Association DiGRA. Personal and educational classroom use of this paper is allowed, commercial use requires specific permission from the author.

I further examine how “prosumption” (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010) business models are a growing trend within interactive fiction mobile games (of which there are *many*) and I draw contrasts between *Episode*’s monetisation structure to that of the more recently released game *Dorian* (Dorian Inc., 2021). *Dorian*’s stories are made up entirely of user submissions. Like *Episode*, it incorporates microtransactions for paywalled story-routes, although it offers a more accessible user revenue—any in-game microtransactions are shared with the creator. *Dorian* acquires IP licenses and encourages users to write fan fiction of their current acquisition (which at the time of writing is Ann Rice’s *Interview with a Vampire*), as well as fan fiction of each others’ work. *Dorian* also heavily encourages its users to stream their games to promote them, where they can also earn money through *Dorian*’s own in-app streaming infrastructure. The game therefore dubs itself a “Social Fiction Platform” (<http://home.dorian.live>).

Both *Episode* and *Dorian* involve overwhelmingly high young women player-bases. More than eighty percent of *Episode*’s players are female and seventy percent under twenty-five (as reported by app analytics firm Sensor Tower in 2017) (Castillo, 2017, para. 5). *Dorian*’s co-founder and CEO Julia Palatovska has meanwhile shared that its players are “nearly 100% female” (cited in Silberling, 2022, para. 17).

Creating fictional fantasies was one of many girls’ interests found by researchers studying girls’ play preferences in the 1990s (Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 1998). Games like *Rockett’s Adventure Maker* (Purple Moon, 1998) and *Barbie Storymaker* (Mattel Media, 1997) were responses to those findings. Appealing to girls through creativity was believed to foster literacy in computing. While this was one of the stated aims of the girls’ games movement, the games themselves did not include player access to mod their software, limiting an encouragement of programming (Hayes, 2008). HTML web design, however, was already popular among girls in the era (Kearney, 2006; Reid-Walsh & Mitchell, 2004; Stern 1999), through which they also often participated in dolling and fan fiction.

While *Dorian* proudly proclaims, “no coding!” (<https://doriancreate.notion.site/>), *Episode*’s Writer Portal is a coding interface. They both, however, appear to knowingly reflect the activities that were popular among girls’ digital DIY activities in the late twentieth century and early 2000s. These games therefore maintain and, in some ways, update the potential for transformative engagement in gamemaking than was seen in earlier gendered industries.

BIO

Stephanie Harkin recently completed her PhD at Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne Australia. She currently teaches in the Games Program at RMIT’s School of Design. Her research interests include girlhood and games, girls’ internet histories, and girls’ gaming cultures.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Cooper, J. M. 2019. “Episode – Choose Your Story: The inappropriate game your kids have probably played.” *The Conversation*. <https://theconversation.com/episode-choose-your-story-the-inappropriate-game-your-kids-have-probably-played->

