

Narrative-Based Games for learning in GLAMS: Overcoming professional hesitancies through an introductory guide

Sophia Booij

University of South Australia
Level 4, Kaurna Building
City West Campus, Adelaide
04 23488480
sophia.booij@mymail.unisa.edu.au

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INTRODUCTION

Learning games (also known as educational, serious, or purposeful games) of all kinds continue to be underused by the Australian collections sector (Galleries, Libraries, Archives, and Museums, or the GLAM sector), despite having been shown to promote student/visitor/player engagement and learning in a variety of contexts (Backlund and Hendrix 2013; Fasce 2015; Holmes and Gee 2016; Anderson 2019). This underuse is especially apparent in low-resource collections, evidenced by a paucity of Australian examples of collections learning games in general.¹

This paper reports on the first study of the author's PhD research project, providing insight into the current landscape of professional perspectives on the use and utility of games for education in the collections sector. It forms a part of a larger project responding to an urgent need for collections to expand their educational outreach and engage diverse audiences in new ways. This need is driven both by the recent Covid-19 pandemic, and more long-term shifts towards the digital and the visitor within collections practice over the past two decades (Hooper-Greenhill 2006; Grek 2009; Davidson 2013; Bagnall 2015; Smith 2020). With institutions now striving to "engage and serve" their local communities through "inspiring curiosity" and "excitement" in visitors as they "explain" our histories and realities, new methodologies past traditional curation and teaching are necessary (History Trust of South Australia 2022).

In this paper, learning games are defined as a "a series of interesting choices that inform, train(instruct), or influence" the player (Sid Meier n.d., referenced in Alexander 2012; Champion 2016). Narrative-based learning games do this through the medium of storytelling, employing techniques such as role-play to engage players in desired activities and discussions (Carstensdottir et al. 2019; Breien and Wasson 2021). For collections, whose role in 'interpreting' history and culture through 'experiences' is invariably tied to educational programming, this narrative will be related to the storytelling specific to both the institution and its goals (whether this be targeted audience engagement, boosting the collection's profile, certain learning outcomes, etc), as well as the expertise of the educator/s crafting it.

Drawing on the thematic and statistical analysis of an ongoing series of surveys and interviews with collections professionals (in both paid and unpaid roles), this paper

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investigates the hypothesis that the relative lack of collections game development in Australia is underpinned by industry perceptions of games as:

1. Difficult and time-consuming to produce,
2. Uncertain in their learning outcomes, and
3. Costly in their development.

The results of the survey thus far will be discussed, within the context of the sample demographic, with emphasis on how a universal interest for game use in GLAMs within the group measures against their perceptions of ‘pros and cons’ of the genre. Additionally, which sorts of games they believe would be useful within their own collection’s contexts.

Drawing on the survey experience, this paper then discusses strategies for incorporating end-user data and feedback into design processes, and the importance of participatory design principles to creating adaptable and useful games/guides/content (Reason and Bradbury 2008; Smith and Iverson 2018). These approaches attempt to address a common issue encountered in this field related to resource obsolescence and obscurity, by bridging the gap between academia and industry. Using examples from the author’s ongoing design of a step-by-step ‘introductory guide’ to game design for collections educators, the impact of participatory design methodologies on both research development and user-designer relationships are explored.

Within Australia, there remains a critical lack of scholarship on collections-specific game development. This project argues that a shortage of research and guidance is hindering the ability of Australian collections professionals to both recognise the potential of this medium and develop games that have lasting impact. Through the development of game design guidelines for beginners in the sector, this work aims to inspire those already working within the collections industry to diversify their educational activities through narrative-based games. The interviews and surveys presented in this paper are the first step in the process of co-designing this resource, with further industry-specific workshops planned in partnership with the History Trust of South Australia in 2024.

ENDNOTES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

Endnotes

¹ Notable exceptions to this statement are the suite of games produced by the National Maritime Museum, Sydney, respectively *The Voyage* (reported on in Kelly et al. 2014; and Rowan et al. 2016), *Views from the Shore: Cook’s Voyages*, and *Wreck Seeker*. In addition, Seale et al.’s (2023) work on immersive gameplay at the Hellenic Museum, Melbourne, and the interactive fiction game *Home of the Blizzard: An Antarctic Adventure* (2021) produced by the NFSA.

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BIO

Sophia Booij is a second-year PhD candidate in the University of South Australia Creative faculty, researching strategies to promote the development of narrative-based learning games by and for Australian collections. She is currently working on an introductory 'how-to' game development guide for industry professionals. Her work is informed by a background in interactive fiction, digital humanities, museum studies, collections management, and digitisation. Sophia is supervised by Assoc. Prof. Erik Champion, Dr. Susannah Emery, and Dr. Lisa Bailey, of MOD. Adelaide.

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