

Building a Mile in my Shoes: Cultivating Empathy Through Textual World-building

In the process of writing and playing interactive world-texts, students experiment with and exercise practices in persuasive rhetoric and the cultivation of empathy. Interactive-Fiction, once popular in early hypertextual games and experiments in the '90s, has returned in public discourse. The Google Play Store and the Apple App Store features dozens of interactive-fiction "gamebooks" such as "Choice of Robots," which have drawn in thousands of downloads. Zoë Quinn's "Depression Quest," written in the free Interactive-Fiction platform Twine, has garnered critical accolades and recognition across the discourse of games studies with its effectiveness in putting the player in the shoes of one who suffers from severe depression.

While texts like this can be powerful and persuasive on their own, I argue that it is the act of writing such a piece of interactive work that offers the most transformative pedagogical potential. By asking students to write interactive-texts that cultivate empathy, students must come to think of the writing process as a performative act of communication that moves and plays between the reader/players and the writers/world-builders. In the act of building interactive, persuasive text-worlds, students will learn to play with and express aspects of their identities as they cultivate rhizomatic writing, develop creativity, build technical skills, and engage in what Ian Bogost refers to as "procedural rhetoric" (2007).

This presentation will introduce and model the use of free interactive-fiction software (Twine, Squiffy, and Inklewriter), and will demonstrate how to get students set up in the world-building environment and how to distribute finished interactive-texts. The presentation will then conclude with a pedagogical consideration of how students can be prompted to respond to literature, build narratives, and construct persuasive or empathic environments through this interactive-fiction genre.