

IGBL: Journey to the End of the Course (in which Our Hero Battles with the Monster, Pat Kane)

*He who fights with monsters should look to it
that he himself does not become a monster
F. Nietzsche*

In his “Welcome” text, Hamish McLeod invited us to think about the roles of tutor and learner as a sort of game we would play, and warned that as tutor he reserved the right to change the rules should he find himself losing. I enjoyed this thrown-down gauntlet, reserved an index of suspicion and prepared myself to expect the unexpected; pleased with the paradox that the tutor had been “honest” enough to admit that he might be “dishonest” later in the “game”. A bit of honest cheating and a declaration of intent to be slippery: I could respect that, even if it *was* a double bluff (perhaps intended to convey essential “trustworthiness” through the ruse of an open “confession”). Only time would tell, and meantime it put me at ease and on guard in equal measure: the ideal attitude, I felt, for entering the arena of an unknown game.

So, then, off to a promising start! But my early blog posts reveal a discomfort which never truly left me. This synopsis, therefore, will lack the narrative arc that learners intuitively come to understand as a prerequisite of the “reflective essay”. By convention this follows something like the form of “The Hero’s Journey”¹, complete with an episode corresponding to “resisting the call” wherein our protagonist-learner shrinks from the challenge ahead or – alternately – puts up a spirited defence against the imposition of knowledge and ideas which will later prove transformative.

This narrative flatters learners *and* educators. The former get to display powers of courage, openness and of overcoming (often self-made or illusory obstacles). The latter can play benevolent keepers of the keys, passers of the mantle, ever-patient ushers at the gates of knowledge; sensei, even.

But this is no such narrative. I am untransformed.

My “journey”, such as it was, might be better described using the metaphor of a constipated bowel motion, rather than some cathartic crossing-over-and-return-with-sacred-wisdom. I am hacking together a narrative here, because the truth is there’s not much blog to synopsis. I got “stuck” early in the course and after some dutiful early blogging, decided I preferred the liveliness of the discussion board, with its shifting, multiple perspectives.

¹ A summary of the steps of the Hero’s Journey, as identified by Joseph Campbell, is available here: http://www.thewritersjourney.com/hero%27s_journey.htm

Feeling disinclined towards monologue, I shied away, nonetheless, from opening my blog to classmates. I set down occasional private thoughts, but was failing to maintain a personal dialogue with the reading material, perhaps because I heard in some of it a false note, which stalked me like tinnitus.

Pat Kane (2005) epitomised my dilemma. My blog entry on the subject is marked "private" due to un-academic phraseology. Here is a sample, complete with nested quotation from the happy Kaner:

Then there was the Kane reading, by none other than Pat Kane of Hue and Cry! [...] what can I say? A man responsible for making some atrocious "music" in his day, he has now gifted us with a whole book on the ethic of play. This is what old Pat has to say for himself:

if your actions are adaptive, imaginative and passionate, but if you also accept that the results of your actions won't be predictable or retractable, then you will be able to make the most of the networks of modern life wherever they pertain. But if your actions are conservative, routine and apathetic - yet you hope that the acceptance of your role will guarantee you a certain security and status in the hierarchy - then you will eventually be switched off from your networks. And for good reason.²

This deluded creature believes that success within the "networks" comes to the worthy and failure to the dull. He has such a total lack of self-awareness and irony that he name-drops Guy Debord and talks about recuperation... and here he is guilty of the foulest act of recuperative perversity, essentially saying if you're a wage slave and have to worry about such conservative concerns as - how about feeding your family, to name just one, Pat? - then you're a lumpen dullard of a security-chasing prole and deserve to be cut dead in your tracks like a mistake in evolution. He has claimed "outlaw" status for the network's [sic] central winners, and in an act of supreme twistedness, has decreed that those condemned to remain outside are the conservative, conventional people, void of imagination and adaptive prowess.

Ah Pat Kane [...]! Your music was [*expletive removed*], mate, and your patter is worse.

Reminds me of a documentary I saw about how in India the Dalits ("Untouchable" caste) are given all the dirty jobs to do, like cleaning the hole-in-the-ground toilets. The fact that they do these jobs is taken as proof of their uncleanness, which in the cruel circularity of this logic was why they were given the crappiest³ jobs to do in the first place.

Within any society, *who gets to play* and who gets assigned the necessary tasks which make play possible? This is a question having everything to do with power. To see someone as "apathetic" because their role demands routine or uninspiring activity is as blinkered and self-serving as chastising those who do society's dirty-work as though it represented - or contaminated - their essential inner natures.

Kane seems unaware of the privilege supporting his "playful" position, or of the irony of identifying successful, well-networked people with creative chaos/playful misrule; whilst outsiders, clinging on to

² Kane (2005)

³ Literally

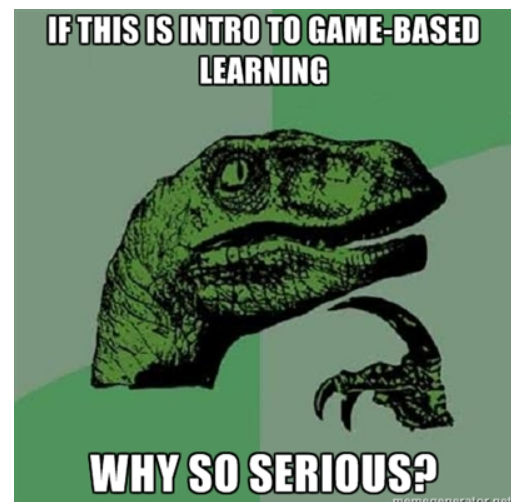
marginal security, are portrayed as mere cogs in the establishment machine. Let them eat Temazepam, the dullards!

Ok, so I was riled. But surely I was not so inflexibly wedded to my outrage as to remain stuck in it whilst the course passed me by?

I did *try* to let it go... but was sucked back into myself by the gravity of frustration. I rattled on about “power” and unfashionable notions like “class” on the discussion boards. Sometimes this gave others the impression that I was the political-correctness champion of the group, a rather kill-joy role, which I didn’t want. Others were interested in power dynamics and could see their relevance to game-based learning, but I felt further out on that particular limb than many classmates; perhaps because they had opportunities for bringing play into their daily work as teachers and academics, whereas my felt-lack of a similar outlet truncated my ability to weave the meaning of my learning into everyday life.

I reflected on this in terms of Gee’s (2007) work on projective virtual identities. Particular aspirational identities encountered in learning situations may present different challenges to different students dependent on their goodness of fit with real-world roles available. My inability to find a rewarding environment for applying my learning was contributing to my rejection of the “IGBL identity”.

To be fair, I was not really alone in my extra-curricular frustration. It was clear in discussions that many of the teachers were hamstrung by political and administrative contexts in which they fought to introduce more inspiring methods. I enjoyed these discussions and found them a positive spur towards engaging with group tasks.



Meanwhile, tensions developed in my team as we negotiated group activities. I knew this was supposed to be a useful “learning experience” in itself, but it was also frustrating. At times we worked well together, but at other times I suspect we each thought we’d achieve more alone.

Much of my energy was absorbed into social tasks, like trying to support teammates if they seemed not to be getting heard. Whenever collaborations or combinations of our various contributions didn’t work out, I was generally prepared to go with the ideas of others over my own if that’s what the majority wanted. However we weren’t getting far with establishing what “the majority wanted”. We made supportive noises at each other, and exchanged occasional polite criticisms, but the tension between being good team-players and expressing ourselves individually was not turning out to be a creative one as we flailed around in a no-man’s land of muted competition, hobbled by a wish to be team-spirited, which I think was quite genuine all round, though somehow not helping us.

Funnily enough, in a games-based course, I was reminded of mutually thwarted playground ambitions, when the shouted ideas of my childhood playmates and I, combined to stop a great new game from

getting off the ground. There was pressure to reflect on the repetition of this situation privately, with insights on what it means for game-based learning and perhaps even how such struggles might be harnessed creatively. But insights eluded me. If I could write down the incoherent thought in my head at the time it went something like this: “power again... bah.”

I wasn't blogging much at this point, bogged down as I was by the banality of my thought processes, and ineptitude at moving around in Braid.⁴ My digital character's resulting mobility issues were a fitting metaphor for general stuckness.

Some of my pet niggles were discussed on the boards – trust and danger in gaming/learning contexts; the question whether intrinsic motivation is a luxury after extrinsic factors are taken care of (etc). I joined in a fair bit and was genuinely moved by the posts of one or two classmates; even experiencing the odd pang of “belonging”, whilst still feeling like a tolerated heretic, albeit in a broad(ish) church.

Something which provoked my continued scepticism was Gee's idea that “the problem of content” isn't so important, since games bring into play capacities and strategies which are applicable to learning in multiple domains. However in the absence of evidence that these skills transfer to novel contexts I remained unconvinced by statements of the broader educational value of some of the video game examples from Gee's book. This led me to think about “the problem of transfer” more generally.

I believe the idea that we play games in our “real” lives is more than a conceit. It is not for nothing that the military are (deadly) serious about “war games”, or that economic behaviour is described in ludic terminology: e.g. “playing the markets”. In a manner of speaking, which is not merely metaphorical, our lives are constituted by sets of overlapping game-spaces, each with its own rules or conventions and sets of valued outcomes which may be called “goals”. On top of this we play a kind of meta-game, in which we take on the role of “Social Chameleon”, by whose lights changing our colours to suit different environments and value systems can be seen as a mark, not of hypocrisy or inconsistency, but of flexibility, social agility and success.

One consequence of the semi-boundedness of game-like activities is that we can often evade cross-examination by adversarial inner voices drawn from our diverse experiences of selfhood. Successful “players” are often skilful at shifting the criteria by which they judge their own success: now in the light of a “game” that values responsibility and prudence; now in the light of one which values risk-taking and “creative” bending of the rules. Likewise they can “fail” less successful players by shifting criteria to suit.

Pat Kane's inflexible losers were too rigidly rule-bound for “the network”. But how often do we hear of an underclass supposedly responsible for its own failure because its members are (allegedly) feckless and irresponsible; work-shy, pleasure-seeking, feral and lawless? Life's “losers” are damned if they embrace the play-ethic, damned if they don't. For “winners”, the opposite applies: in either situation they are canonized.⁵

⁴ My chosen game for the review assignment

⁵ We saw this played out in the recent financial crisis. The cocaine-fuelled trader, wheeling-and-dealing within the sober, centuries-established institution, perhaps personified the crisis. But illegal drugs and risk-taking are not a

What has all this got to do with games in learning? Quite a lot, I think. For one thing, it speaks of asymmetries of risk and permissible attitude which players might expect to face or enjoy depending on their backgrounds and experiences (perhaps indicating a need for what Gee calls “repair work” with vulnerable learners before they can get comfortable with game-based learning situations.) For another it illustrates our tendency to compartmentalize rules and values practiced in different contexts; perhaps partially explaining the difficulty of transferring learning.⁶

Paradoxically, game-based learning can provide opportunities for juxtaposing and/or integrating these various contexts, precisely because it re-situates them, or simulacra of them, in new spaces where rules and values are both the same and different from the everyday. For instance, while playing Braid for the review exercise, I noticed thematic resonances with my real life where I was trying to understand a specific area of conflict.

Braid ends with the hero finding out that he is actually the villain. I reflected on a situation in which I felt attacked; although the other party seemed uncomprehending of why I might feel that way. The possibility of seeing the situation entirely “the other way round” was uncomfortable *but I had to admit it as a possibility*. I also realized that howsoever my own position was transparently obvious to me, it might appear obscure from another perspective.

The perspective-shifting afforded in games like Braid can force players to consider alternative ways of interpreting situations and questioning familiar attributions. The ending suggests our actions can be opaque even to ourselves: not a new idea for me, but a concrete “playing” out of it, which forced me to re-engage with issues about which I’d become complacent, having “learned them already”. Keeping previous learning “live” in this way may be a function of games, as much as stimulating new ways of applying or interpreting it.

This capacity of games to embody or concretely exemplify ideas was demonstrated in our Alternate Reality Games topic, when the set puzzle led me to follow some bizarre “leads” on various internet ARG forums. I found myself succumbing to (then pulling back from) the seductive tug of apophenia – our human tendency to see patterns in tea-leaves, clouds and constellations (to name but a few canvases on to which we project mystery and meaning). To actually experience this in a learning context was far

shadowy underside of the financial industry; they are an integral part of its psychology. The essentially *boring* business of banking and finance cannot be seen to exhaustively define society’s ultimate “winners” – they require risk to stop from sinking into the nullity of being almost guaranteed top positions in the game; but we have seen that risk never rests with them when the music stops. Toy-risk is for the big players: it is always realised elsewhere.

⁶ There may be an underlying neural basis for this tendency which more or less co-incidentally protects the ego from confronting its own fragmentation. Neural nets (if not quite so literally, Pat Kane’s social ones) may give rise to cross-contextual inhibition as much as to inter-contextual excitation. But whether or not this is the case, it appears that we tend to organize our spheres of activity into game-like, semi-autonomous domains.

more valuable than simply reading about it, and caused me to reflect on how the phenomenon might be used to leverage curiosity in ARGs, as well as potential dangers it presents for educators/learners.

Given these examples why do I report scant progress in my non-journey through IGBL? It may be simply that I came away with my most pressing questions not only unanswered, but somehow unasked. I never felt I articulated them well enough, even to myself, to have a fighting chance of a satisfactory response, whether my own or worked out in collaboration with others. Play is vitally important; the very notion bound up with ideas of liberty, suggesting freedom of movement and thought. When we invite learners to play it can be liberating or it can be an incursion into one of the last realms of their liberty, given how much intellectual and emotional labour they may already be punting in exchange for life's necessities.

"We give you our work; let us keep play, for pity's sake!" I imagine them protesting (really I know this is me protesting). There is great potential value of play, if game-based learning opportunities are well designed.

During the induction-game task I worried aloud in the forum, along with another team member, about how easily an ARG in this context could come across as patronising. The success of ARGs has often been connected to their "underground" flavour: difficult to invoke in an institutional context. At its worst game-based learning risks domesticating what is thrilling in games, while trivializing the requirements of learning.

At its best... well, I have still so much to learn about that. IGBL has been a valuable introduction, and my sense of a frustrated *greater* promise could be turned into a motivator for discovering more.

But first I'll have to do some "repair work" on myself to deal with the red herring of Pat Kane, who for me symbolized (and it's always unfair to treat a person as a symbol) everything that's oppressive about the ideal of play when employed as an injunction or chastisement against those caught up in the more mundane demands of *work*; or even as an "ethic" - as Pat himself would have it - whose conditions may yet be unexamined by those embracing it.

Yet perhaps in this synopsis I've been playing with a projection of Pat Kane as my opponent/antagonist; a counterpoint against which to make my own case. In which case he is less a red herring and more a narrative device and I've ended up telling a Hero's Journey story despite myself! Pat Kane is The Monster in his networked maze... At this late stage in the game I can only acknowledge my hypocrisy - and surrender my sword.

REFERENCES

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