

Tech and Fiction

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MULTIMODAL WRITING EXPERIENCES IN A CREATIVE WRITING RESEARCH GROUP

Conservative Creatures

In a 1992 article for the New York Times, Robert Coover claimed that it was not easy to convince creative writers to use new forms and media. A long time might have passed, but his words still ring true:

Writing students are notoriously conservative creatures. They write stubbornly and hopefully within the tradition of what they have read. Getting them to try out alternative or innovative forms is harder than talking them into chastity as a life style. But confronted with hyperspace, they have no choice: all the comforting structures have been erased. It's improvise or go home (COOVER, online).

At the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio Grande do Sul [PUCRS], in Porto Alegre, Brazil, Creative Writing is still a relatively new field. Even though writing workshops were easy to find, we had no Creative Writing courses anywhere in the country until 2006, when the possibility to submit a creative piece as part of a Master's dissertation was presented to students of the Literary Theory concentration of our Graduate Program in Letters.[1] A few years later, in 2012, Creative Writing became an MA and PhD concentration too. More recently, in 2016, we created the country's first Creative Writing undergraduate course.

This initiative was part of a larger effort to attract new students, but it also felt like the next logical step, considering there had been a traditional and successful

writing workshop in activity at PUCRS since 1985. The Creative Writing courses at all levels continue to grow to this day. Although fundamentally grounded in Literary Theory and writing practices, our courses at PUCRS try to give students opportunities to explore writing beyond traditional forms of Narrative, Poetry and Drama, offering classes and workshops on digital writing, screenplay, writing for comics and creative entrepreneurship, for example.[2]

We have noticed that, just like Coover mentioned, students come to PUCRS with the aim to publish their books in print; we can also say, according to our experience, that lecturers are also more interested in traditional publishing. However, over time, students started to demand a more interdisciplinary approach to writing and a stronger dialogue with other forms of art.[3] Among the changes to address this issue was the creation of a new research group.

The Technology and Fiction Research Group (Grupo de Pesquisa em Tecnologia e Ficção, in Portuguese), also called TECFIC, was created in 2017.[4] The group was led by a lecturer in the Letters Graduate Program, and welcomed graduate and undergraduate students from Creative Writing, Letters and Communication Studies. The aim of the group was to establish an opportunity to explore, through creativity and theory, what happens when we try to tell stories using diverse forms of technology.

TECFIC members met every two weeks and operated

on a project-based approach: each semester we chose one or two ideas to develop. The group was diverse in its interests, so we explored topics such as interactive narrative, literary events, geek culture, fandom studies, game development and podcasts. The rationale behind this approach was to give maximum flexibility to the students involved, so we could test new ways to tell stories and research how all our interests connected.

In this article, we will present an account of what we did over the last three years (2017-2019), detailing our projects, interests and initiatives. We discuss how they were developed, what we learned in the process, and how this multimodal approach can help developing Creative Writing in Academia.[5]

Choose your own adventure

Initially, the group coordinator posted an open call to students interested in joining and, during the first meeting, presented its aims and scope, pointing out that the group was mostly practical, focused on creating and writing, even though critical discussions would be part of the meetings. In the first meetings, the participants listed topics that could be relevant in the study of technology and fiction, with special attention to the creation process and multiple literary modalities. From that, the group decided on its first assignment: the production of interactive narratives.

At first, the coordinator brought interactive narrative books (in the style of *Choose Your Own Adventure* or *Fighting Fantasy* series) for members to read in order to explain the basic concepts of building a product of this type and get to know the functioning of an interactive narrative. Then, the participants were invited to write their own stories, in pairs or individually. It is important to highlight that most people had no prior knowledge on how to use interactive writing tools.

In order to contemplate the different modalities of interactive narrative, members could use plain paper or Microsoft Word and build the narrative in a similar way to the gamebooks, or use interactive narrative software such as Twine or Inklewriter, where products could be prototyped and then exported to html files. Inklewriter and Twine were chosen because they are free to use and have intuitive interfaces, important aspects considering no one in the group had more than basic programming knowledge. In both tools, publication was online, and it was possible to insert images and other resources. They also provided easy access to tutorials and examples. In the end, the interactive narratives were brought together and turned into an interactive book that has not yet been published (but will be available as an e-book soon).

During the process of building interactive narratives, participants were invited to discuss topics of interest involving literature and new writing technologies. At the same time, we worked on our interactive narratives, both during meetings and at home, in our own time,

we started reading groups. The five reading groups were defined by theme: online fandom, genres and intertextuality, uncreative writing, the paratext of fanfiction and the culture and business of cross-media productions. Through the discussion of the articles, it was decided the group would split between interactive narratives and the production of an academic article.

When approaching technology and fiction, it became clear that we were dealing with interdisciplinary topics that go beyond the boundaries of fiction. In the same way, other themes were revealed from the articles: geek culture, Digital Humanities and fandom. It seemed to us that all those topics were connected, even though all that interdisciplinarity was somewhat overwhelming.

The choice of outlining the article to specifically address fandom came from observing the growth of studies that aim to investigate community relations with media products. This perception turned to studies that consider the practices of consumption and production of cultural artifacts in the digital environment. The objective of this investigation was to map the theoretical and methodological paths applied by the researchers and the contemporary trends of fandom studies in Brazil, as well as the challenges of such research. The importance of this study was based on the culture of convergence: connected, collaborative and online and carrying great social, cultural, artistic and economic impact.[6] The group responsible for producing the article, composed of five members, carried out a state of the art of recent Brazilian academic publications from 2015 to 2018 (currently undergoing review, aiming at a future publication). The articles had to be peer-reviewed and address fandom. The corpus of 51 articles was found based on the keywords “fandom”, “fan culture”, “fan studies” and “fanfiction”.

Among the types of fandom, the highest occurrence of fandom was from television series, fanfics and narratives considered as transmedia. One of the specific objectives of this research was also to know which methodological procedures were most used by fandom researchers. We noticed that most researchers relied on bibliographic analysis and digital ethnography, but many studies did not explain the methodology. We inferred fan culture maintains ties with different cultural, economic and even political sectors, confirming the importance of continuous studies on its functioning, manifestations and productions.

Another important result was the perception that a standardization would help to better establish the vocabulary shared by fandom researchers in the country and thus consolidate this area of studies, because many researchers used different terms to address the same concept, making it difficult to categorize the studies. On the other hand, it was also possible to see that a field such as fan culture is very broad and covers a wide variety of interests, themes, communities, productions and events, so the standardization of methodologies and approaches is difficult.

The collective production of the article was important to understand the research process that involves academic writing. The final paper was presented at the IV Reception Studies Conference at the University of Caxias do Sul (2018) which reaffirms the potential of a research group such as this to improve academic and professional skills, so necessary to those who work and study in universities, even in an artistic field such as Creative Writing.

Gato Bonsai and the making of a visual novel [7]

Driven by the idea of interactive narratives and the desire to experience different ways of contact with them, TECFIC directed its efforts towards exploring visual novels, a sub-genre of electronic adventure games. Extremely popular in Japan, they use a whole range of features that gamify narratives, such as animated characters, soundtrack, visual effects, and even puzzles inserted inside the story (see Salazar, Nakajima and Alexandrova, 2013). They are often written in first or second person, making the experience of reading or playing it more immersive.

Some members of the group were familiar with the genre, others not so much, so the first step of our exploration was to investigate a few references suggested by those that already read/ played visual novels. Then, we sat together in a meeting and decided we did not have the technical knowledge in programming to create a complex narrative, but we could try a simple one. We began a collective brainstorming, thinking about narrative genres and plots. Finally, we decided on a mix of horror and comedy.

Our plot consisted of the story of a “you” (the player/ reader) that has a romantic interest in a gothic/ satanist girl and, trying to impress her, accidentally summons a demon that possesses their cat. The demon proceeds to give the player/ reader a series of quests they must accomplish to save the cat’s life (and the world). The interactive part of the narrative would be deciding what to do for each quest. For some of them, “you” could get help from a friend, call an exorcist, go to the library to look for clues, etc. Every combination of choices would lead to a different ending.

Once the plot was defined, we had to create a story structure (figure 1):

TECFIC - VISUAL NOVEL STORY STRUCTURE

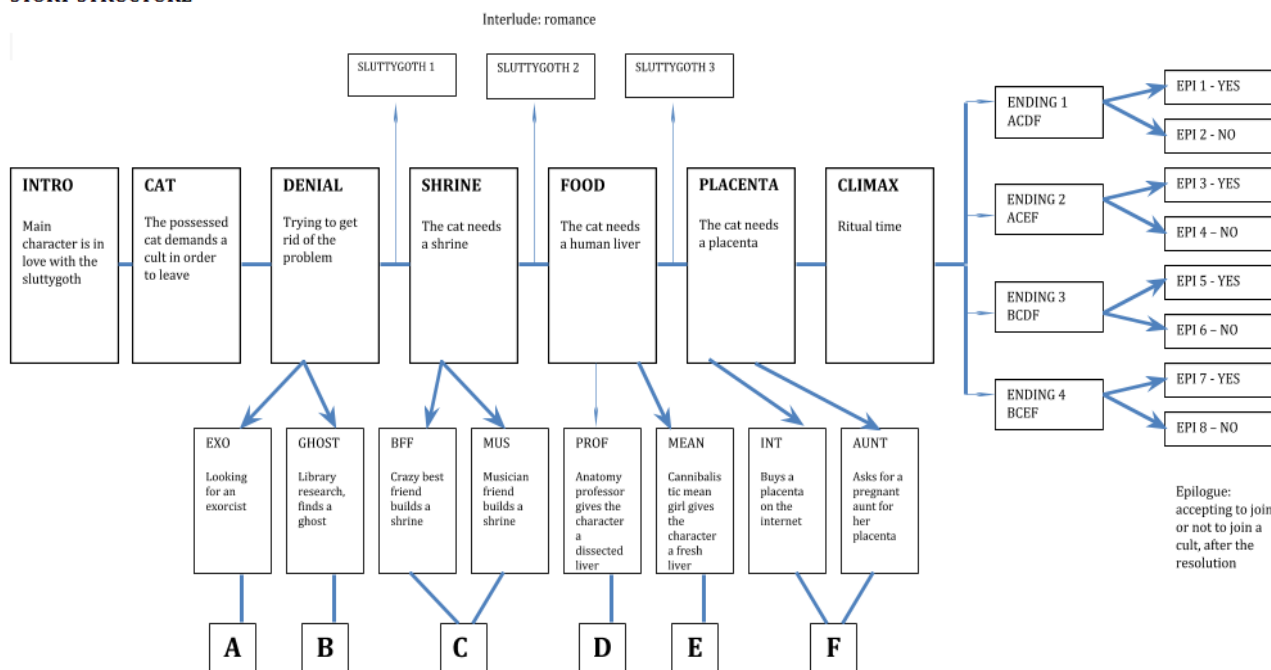


Figure 1: story structure

With an organized structure, it was easier to develop the characters. We did it collectively during a group meeting where we also divided the tasks. Every one or two members were responsible for writing a section of the story. This was a rather interesting experience: for many of us, it was a first try at writing collectively. In the end, it was fun because every author dealt with a different character and their part in the plot, so we had different voices to work with, and some of the dialogue was written together at the same time, with authors simulating a conversation between characters.

While a large part of the group focused on the written part of the narrative, a smaller group was tasked with developing images, soundtrack, and programming. All those things had to be cohesive within the story and were very well thought by the group, that decided to go with a “trashier” approach to images, that would match the genre of comedic horror (figure 2):



Figure 2: gameplay screenshot

This is the image of one of the endings, where the demon is exorcised by laughter. We kept the background simple and focused the details on the cat and demon, but still in a rough shape with asymmetrical lines. The soundtrack was created in Apple Garageband. In the end, we revised the images and text, deciding what frame would go with what section of the written story. Meanwhile, since the beginning, one of the undergrad students oversaw programming in Ren'py, a simple visual novel engine that we chose to generate the visual novel. This way, we were able to connect all forms of narrative in progress and make sure everything worked together. We uploaded the finished product (figure 3) to Itch.io, a website dedicated to publishing independent games.



Figure 3: Gato Bonsai start screen

Steven Universe and background narrative

Narrative is not necessarily written text, therefore encompassing analysis of other media, such as comics and audiovisual products, is essential for one whose goal is to think and practice multimodal writing. Behind such products is, of course, a written script; however, if one sticks to it to study the work, there might be an oversight of essential extra-textual narrative elements which compose different media. With that in mind, we set out to investigate the use of backgrounds in Cartoon Network's animation *Steven Universe*, which ran under creator, writer and producer Rebecca Sugar from 2013 to 2020.

The study, presented at a regional event and later published in a national journal, focused on the differences between textures, lines, colours and effects as demonstrative of the contrasting moments in the relationship of two characters, Ruby and Sapphire. From bodyguard and royal consultant, the two turn into runaway lovers through the in-world mechanic of fusion, when two or more gems, the extraterrestrial beings they are, become an entirely different gem — a practice that is strictly forbidden in their community.

To proceed with the analysis, we made use of narratology as presented by Bal (1997), and resorted to *Steven Universe: Art & Origins* (2017), the series' official artbook, which also contains interviews with the show's crew and many insights on the process of making the animation come to life. These were used in an in-depth, almost scene-by-scene investigation of two episodes: *Jailbreak* (2015) and *The Answer* (2016). Both center around the relationship of the gems, showing them separate, as two different individuals, and united as one, Garnet.

Our primary hypothesis was that the backgrounds changed within certain fixed parameters depending on the pair's relationship status: when they are separate, they navigate clean, minimalist, almost disturbingly impeccable scenery, as opposed to when they are together and fused, when the backdrops become fuzzy, cluttered and imperfect. Through the analysis of the episodes, we were able to confirm such conjectures, besides understanding the specific message these changes want to convey: that relationships are messy and inexact, which is exactly why they are beautiful (see figure 4).

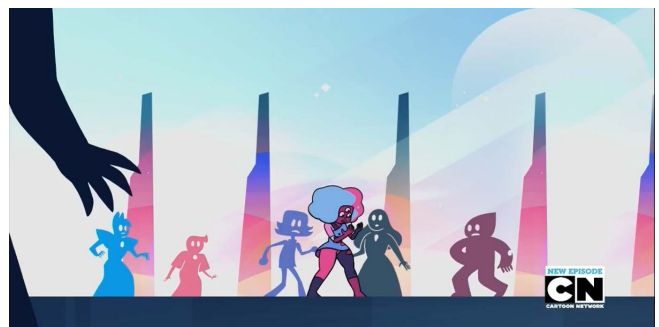


Figure 4: Ruby and Sapphire fused into Garnet

Studying the use of extra-textual elements in an animated series brings to light just how much of the writing process for non-exclusively textual narrative must revolve around using all the available tools to tell a story. Colour, for one, is easily associated with themes and concepts — there is a common use of white to represent peace, for example. Within a visual narrative, such pre-established correlations can be used, or they can be challenged, recreated; many effects can come from the colours chosen to represent a character, a place, or any given narrative component. To achieve the idea of uncomfortable perfection, for example, the show creators used at first light, open backgrounds. In *The Answer* (2016), white filled the screen while the characters walked and gave the viewer a sense of smallness in comparison to the wide, clean spaces they navigated in when still in gem domains. In *Jailbreak*, which was broadcast in 2015, but showed the characters much later chronologically, a similar sensation was built with tones of yellow and green. Here, besides the colours, more elaborate background elements also appeared: inside the gem spaceship, green tubes much like veins and a core much like a heart increased the alienness of the place. However odd these elements would have been in other circumstances, their weirdness was reinforced by the neat, almost sterile lines and ambience (figure 5).

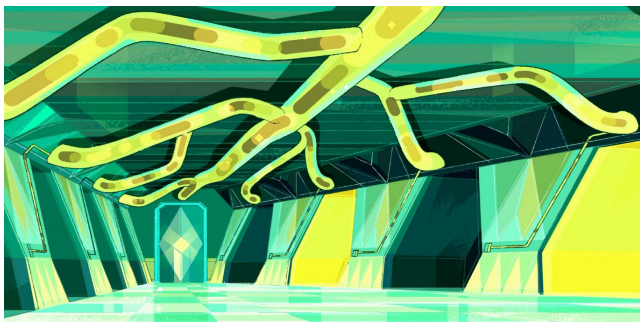


Figure 5: The alien spaceship

From analyses such as this, we as writers and creators understand the reach words sometimes do not have. Saying something is “alien” does not have the same effect as showing its alienness. And, of course, it can be said that all of this is simply “show, don’t tell”; but what we can see from studying a medium so different from the pure written word is that sometimes, instead of telling or showing, we need to make the reader/ audience feel.

Podcasts and the integration of theory and casual conversation

Podcasts are a fairly new alternative to radio programs. From 2005 to the present time, podcasts have gained major space as a communication tool, being now available in several free platforms. We can find podcasts about anything. It is a thriving form that condenses entertainment and information, and allows people to multitask, using their time as they like, while consuming information of their own choosing (Derman & Galloway, 2005).

The idea of working with podcasts came from outside the research group. The group coordinator was teaching a class on nonfiction for Masters and PhD students and, as a final activity, the class decided to record a podcast episode approaching the subjects discussed during the lectures, reading excerpts of students productions on the topic, and adding a fun creative side to it with impromptu conversations and a section of messages from fictional listeners. It was such a fun way of connecting theory with practice and humor, that the members of TECFIC that were present in the class decided to take the idea to the group.

The proposition was to record a series of podcast episodes based on themes that concern the group, such as games, horror, fanfiction and interactive narratives. So, we did a spreadsheet with major topics that had already been mentioned during meetings and everyone manifested their interests. This project started in the second semester of 2019, and a large portion of the meetings was directed at learning how to record and edit audio files.

The topics elected were fanfiction, horror, interactive narratives, games, and books that predicted the future. Since we wanted to use our meetings to record the podcast, most of the decisions were made online via Whatsapp group and using Google Drive to store the files. A second spreadsheet was made, where we distributed functions such as script writer, host, guest and editor. We also worked on podcast scripts, learning that they are a bit different than a regular script for something more structured like movies or television shows, since the goal of the podcast is to sound like a conversation: part of its success relies on spontaneity.

It was interesting creating for this platform, because we only had to write down the most basic information that would allow the recording sessions to flow. We did a first trial with an episode on fanfiction. Since we were not able to use the recording studio in the Communications department, we had to improvise with microphones from a conference room. Sound testing took up most of the time we had to record, so our pilot about fanfiction was mostly people reading fanfiction excerpts.

The second episode was on Horror. We happened to have a published horror writer a group member, so she was the main guest. We realized that the script we had was not functional, because we kept getting side-tracked in the examples and related topics. Horror is such a broad subject we had to transform our script to a diagram hanging next to the recording area (figure 6) to make the conversation more organized.

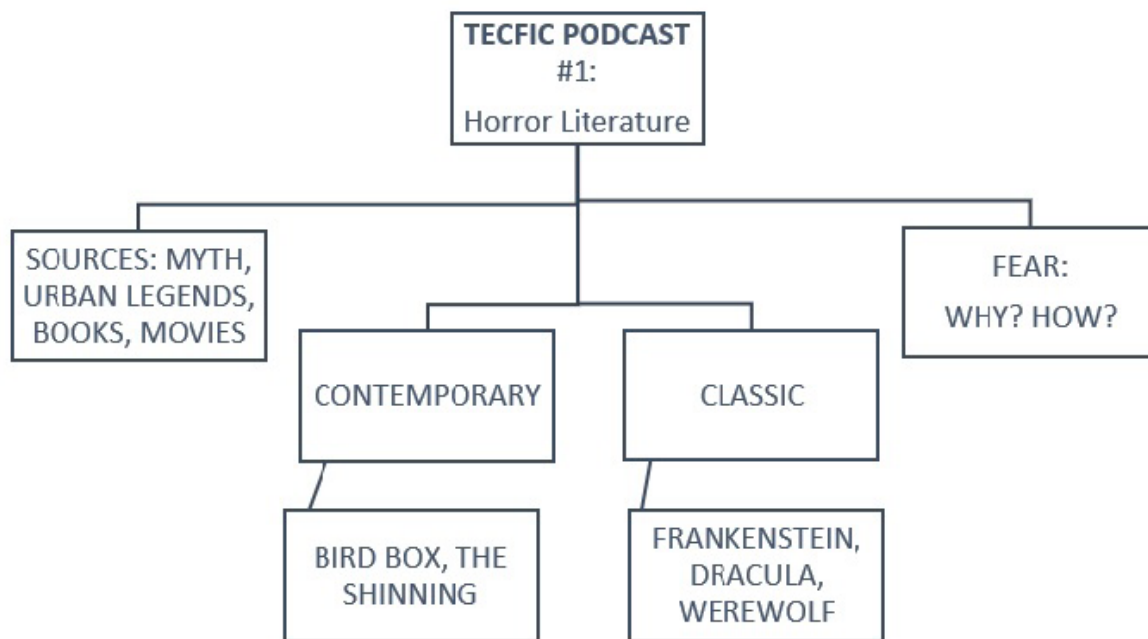


Figure 6: a podcast topic chart

One of the most important understandings that came from the podcast experience was that writing for different platforms does not work when we think about it strictly. Not everything must be on a script. Working with diagrams and excerpts gave us more freedom and organicity. We recorded an episode on interactive narratives and games following that plan, navigating between scripts and free conversation.

Building Communities

An important part of being a writer is building community. As a part of our group's activities, we have been organizing Fanthum (the name is a portmanteau of fantasy and humanities, since the focus of the first meetings was genre fiction, and they happened in the School of Humanities at PUCRS), an event in which the academic and writing communities come together on campus or in other places around the city, such as galleries and bookshops. The idea behind Fanthum was initially to bring accomplished local novel and short story authors of science fiction and fantasy to talk to the undergraduate and graduate students of the Creative Writing programme. However, as time passed, it became evident that such specific focus on novels and short stories would point those attending in those same directions, which are already established. Thus, in its latest editions, we tried to bring authors and researchers of different themes and media.

In 2018, for instance, we invited Karen Soarelle, who writes for the Brazilian Role-playing Game scenario *Tormenta*, as well as Cesar Alcázar, a novelist, short story writer and comic book creator, to talk about their creative processes. Karen's discussed the intersections between her work and the RPG players' experiences with the game. She pointed out, for example, that she tries to break the conventions of races and classes, in RPG terms, of her characters. Cesar, on his end, explained how he adapts short stories to scripts to explore the narrative in ways only the combination of images and words allows.

In 2019, Fanthum had two editions: one featuring American writer Christopher Kastensmidt, who lives in Brazil and writes in Portuguese (with a heavy influence of Brazilian folklore), and researcher Giovana Carlos, who studies romance fandoms, and another one with researcher Elói Vieira, who studied transmedia relations in *Doctor Who* for his Master's Degree. In Christopher and Giovana's edition, we discussed the use of Brazilian myths in writing and the growth of the public's appreciation of romance novels which have fantasy or science fiction elements. With Elói, the conversation navigated through all the different media in which the British series *Doctor Who* spreads — from TV to books, radio and comics.

Bringing these different perspectives together is important as we try to expand the reach of our writing, and understanding how, for example, a franchise such as *Doctor Who* works on different media. The perspective of someone who is not a writer can broaden our view of how the market and the creative communities work. It becomes evident, also, that we should value these other media as writers and researchers, as literary academics still focus much of their efforts in narratives created for traditional media.

Expanding Creative Writing

By sharing the experience of our research group, we hope to inspire creative writing instructors and researchers to expand the scope of their interests and teaching methodologies. To do so, we list below some suggestions:

Consider creative work a valid research activity: creative writing programs should encourage research groups that explore artistic and creative efforts as an important part of the academic experience. This includes a discussion on what is considered valid intellectual production, counting towards course evaluation (we acknowledge that this situation differs from country to country and institution to institution). The “publish or perish” game should allow for more diverse production beyond books and papers, such as podcasts, public engagement talks on pop culture and writing for games;

Encourage multimodal writing practices: writers, be they faculty or students, should experiment diverse genres, tools and contexts for writing, regardless of their chosen specialty. Creative writing is more than just traditional publishing on paper (or e-books) and there should be a healthy dialogue between different departments, to foster a knowledgeable academic community. This includes fostering interdisciplinary interactions between writers and literary scholars, art students and publishing majors, design researchers and journalists, among others, as well as encouraging the intellectual exchange between graduate and undergraduate students;

The writing workshop needs to be more diverse: instead of working only on short stories, poems and novel chapters, why not include game dialogue, branching narratives, social media posts? The same can be said about literary genres: all should be welcome, from literary fiction to science fiction and fanfiction;

Encourage and reward the joy of creation: not everything needs to have a clear goal — especially creative work. Sometimes faculty and students need to have the time and confidence to try something new, even if the outcome is not clear at first. This can take the form of a research or study group on a new topic, the creation of spaces for conversation and social exchange, or simply the freedom to experiment and fail (or, taking a hint from Beckett, “fail better”).

The points above are some of our conclusions from what we evaluate as a successful initiative within the scope of creative writing at university level. Our Technology and Fiction Research Group (TECFIC), will continue its investigations, hoping to keep contributing towards the expansion of creative writing as a field. After all, thinking of writing as an activity that involves only putting words on paper is a rather limited view on the potential of our art. Writing is a process in constant dialogue with other media, art forms, languages and social, economic and cultural contexts. Multimodal writing - in our case, relating to how literature and technology dialogue, should be an integral part of

every writing program. The world changed, and we can argue that online writing is now a much easier form for audiences to access than publishing in print. Not only that, but a writer who explores how stories can be told in a game or interactive narrative, who knows how to think and research writing instead of only practicing it, and knows how to build and foster communities, exploring the frontiers of their craft, will be a more complete artist, and will, most likely, have more fun in the process.

Endnotes

1. Letters is the Brazilian equivalent of English: a department focused on studying language and literature.
2. A more detailed account on how Creative Writing developed in Brazil can be found in Bueno (2018).
3. We conducted research into the students’ views of the course and what they felt like we needed to improve. The findings can be found in a pair of articles by Assis Brasil and Bueno et al., published in 2017 and 2018.
4. TECFIC is registered in the Ministry of Education directory of research groups (DGP-CNPQ) and is officially attached to PUCRS Graduate Program in Letters, which has three main concentrations: Creative Writing, Literary Theory and Linguistics.
5. According to Barnard (2017), multimodal writing is characterized by creative flexibility that allows the writer to move between forms of writing practice, from analogic to digital, and exploring different platforms within them.
6. Following Henry Jenkins (2009).
7. Gato Bonsai means “Bonsai Cat”. The title comes from an inside joke during the creative process of writing the visual novel, but the concept did not translate into the final game. The title, however, remained.

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