The Story Engine: Offering an online platform for making "unofficial" creative writing work

Introduction

The use of digital technologies to support creative writing has not been widely addressed by contemporary research. The Story Engine, an online writing tool developed by London creative writing centre *The Ministry of Stories*, provides one model for the way that digital technologies might complement the work of teachers in promoting creative writing in the classroom. This article considers the relative success of this model, exploring how "unofficial" writing practices (Dyson, 2008) might be reconciled to the ways that writing is currently taught in England. The nature of the Story Engine as an online platform using a remote mentor's help in constructing a story highlights a range of issues for both teachers and educators working in informal spaces, including writing styles, engagement with popular culture, students' expressive intentions, and the writing process

The Story Engine is a prototype online platform[1] to support creative writing through the use of engaging tools, structures and prompts, and an interface for dialogue between learners and mentors operating remotely. It emerges from the context of creative writing programmes delivered by the Ministry of Stories (MoS), a writing centre in east London, and consisted of an adapted Wordpress interface developed by its tech partner The Workshop, a Sheffield-based company with extensive experience of developing digital content for the education sector. The MoS provides out-of-school, face-to-face workshops, as well as a variety of projects collaborating with schools. Key elements of its strategy are an emphasis on young people's agency and choice – encouraging their creative development while providing structured support – and the use of volunteer writing mentors who work flexibly to help them develop their writing. A wider study of the work of the MoS indicates that the mentors are not usually teachers, but volunteers from a range of backgrounds who have some interest in writing and quite often see their role as being a change from whatever they normally do (Wyse et al, 2016.).

The questions explored in this article are threefold. First, what evidence is there of creativity in the students' writing as they presented it through the Story Engine? Second, how does this creativity contrast with or complement the kind of writing that the students normally do within their English classrooms? Third, to what extent can this creativity in writing be attributed to the online platform? These questions arose from discussions of the data held amongst the project team and researchers, as well as the wider remit of the longitudinal study to which this research was related (Wyse et al, 2016)

Creativity and creative writing

The focus on these questions of creativity and creative writing requires some elaboration. Even a cursory view of the literature on writing – briefly summarised below –reveals an elusive quality to a form of writing which is apparently both everywhere and nowhere. Everywhere, in that students, teachers and academics know that people do it and sometimes even publish it, but nowhere in that

---

[1] Story Engine was funded by the NESTA/ACE/AHRC Digital R&D in the Arts programme, 2015-16.

there are very few references to it in curricular documents, educational resources or academic research. Indeed, research in this field (e.g. Dockerell et al. 2016) suggests that there are no systematic studies of the *teaching* of writing, creative or otherwise in UK Primary Schools. While a number of academics have conducted studies into the kind of *creative writing work* produced by pupils at this age range (Barrs, 2000; Dyson, 2001), there appear to be few comparable studies at a secondary school level. While it is important to acknowledge James Britton's seminal study *"The Development of Writing Abilities 11-18"* (Britton et al., 1975*),* it is also important to note that the bulk of Britton's data came from what was termed composition – writing that was not always intended by the teachers setting the writing task to be creative. While Britton did identify creative – or more accurately what he termed "expressive"- elements to the compositions, this is probably a very different data to the kind of work regarded specifically as "creative writing" today. Cremin & Myhill (2013) do include the work of secondary school students in their research data, however, there are still some significant gaps in the literature indicating the need for a discussion of both the kinds of creative writing students at this level produce and the way creative writing is taught.

Jones and Wyse (2013) observe that the origins of creative writing lie in an approach pioneered by Alec Clegg in the 1960's which "involved the teacher providing a stimulus, such as a piece of music or visual art , which was followed by an immediate response. This often resulted in brief, personal forms of writing, such as a short descriptive sketch or a poem" (p.22). The Story Engine platform also uses stimuli, though in the form of buttons and prompts (see below) rather than music or art. Perhaps the most relevant difference though is agency: the student can choose to use the Story Engine stimuli or not. In some instances, described below, the students choose to do so, while in other instances they choose other stimuli: games, books and TV programmes all become pressed into service - or as Dyson describes it, "entangled" (Dyson, 2001) with each other.

This agency is a key component of the creative element in the Story Engine project. Burn and Durran (2007) argue that to a greater or lesser extent, all literacy involves remaking texts as well as understanding them. The data presented here consists largely of stories, written by students who are, in many ways, remaking and remixing a range of stimuli from both their popular and personal cultures. These transformations can be termed creative writing in ways specified by academic accounts of the way that literacy, technology and creativity are connected (Banaji et al, 2006; Connolly & Readman 2017; Jones & Wyse, 2013). The model developed by the wider longitudinal study of the MoS's work (Wyse et al, 2016) balances originality against the adaptation of cultural sources, and value to the child against value to wider groups. This article will discuss how the students' stories display these kinds of creative transformations; how these transformations are enabled by digital platform; and finally how they differ from "official "versions of writing practice that the students encounter in school.

The Research Context

While writing is a key aspect of school life in both the subject of English and across the curriculum, the research literature does not have either the depth or prominence that one might expect, in sharp contrast to the literature addressing reading, despite UK government research suggesting that writing is the area of literacy in which students of all ages perform least well in (Education Standards Research Team, 2012). Meanwhile, an emphasis on the statutory teaching of grammar (DfE, 2013;

DfE, 2014) means that this aspect of writing is perhaps better represented in the research literature than others.

For the purposes of this article, the key literature regarding writing in the classroom can be viewed through three themes of particular relevance to the Story Engine project:

1) The **approaches** that teachers choose to take to teaching creative writing.

2) The constraints placed on writing in the classroom by institutional concerns about the **impact** of teaching writing on educational standards.

3) **Technologies** and creative writing in the early 21st century.

Approaches

Process (Graves, 1983), skills-based (Medwell & Wray, 2007), and emergent (Teale and Sulzby, 1986) theories of writing all support particular approaches to teaching writing that emphasise a pedagogic sensitivity to the cultural diversity of narrative styles, of children's intentions and experiences, and of processes of experimentation, drafting and editing. One critique of the way that these approaches have diminished in English classroom across the last thirty years is offered by Rebecca Bunting (Bunting, 2010), who comments that while we might expect teachers and students to be comfortably familiar with the notion of "writing a story", an impoverishment in the prescribed models for narrative writing in schools has undermined these certainties:

> *We might expect teachers to be more confident in the area of narrative, a common enough feature of primary writing, but even the writing of narrative receives little support in terms of the explicit teaching of generic features. In fact, the term story is often used to refer to both narratives and recounts, and for some children, writing a story means writing a recount.*

> *(Bunting 2010, p.15)*

This comment suggests that recent practice treats narrative writing merely as one of a number of text types, influenced by the notion of "genre writing", derived reductively from sociolinguistics (Halliday, 1975), to the detriment of creative writing. By contrast, the workshop approach of the Ministry of Stories favours an emphasis on creative writing, and on the process writing approach addressing audience and purpose (Graves, 1983). The longitudinal study to which the present research is related gives a fuller account of the way these approaches have informed both the work of MoS and the discourses outlined above. (Wyse et al, 2016).

As the distinctive nature of creative writing has received less attention in curricular policy and resultant classroom practice, approaches to teaching creative story writing have received less research attention. Recent exceptions to this trend include Cremin & Myhill,(2012) who note that one way to develop creative writers in the classroom is to think about the way that their teachers are developed as creative writers. For Cremin and Myhill, this role of the teacher is part of a wider discussion of narrative creativity and how the teacher might facilitate the development of writing amongst their students. They draw on the work of Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) to support the idea that one of the important functions of the teacher of creative writing might be to help their student to find their creative writing "voice", but that this voice might also be constrained by the demands of

writing for an externally imposed purpose. The data presented here supports this idea, with students making use of a range of what Cremin and Myhill call "multimodal textual experiences" (Cremin & Myhill, 2012; p.51) to inform their writing. The project also promotes the development of what we could call polyphonic and heteroglossic approaches to creative writing in contrast to the univocal, monoglossic models promoted in curricululum policy (following Cremin and Myhill's use of Bakhtin).

Impacts

Research about the impact of creative writing on attainment standards in literacy is particularly sparse, an observation made by policy-makers in the UK (Education Standards Research Team, 2012) and academics (Myhill & Fisher; 2010). The focus of the research which exists is on the impact on specific skill sets within writing practice, such as the secretarial and compositional aspects of writing. Systematic reviews of research in this area (Andrews et al., 2006; Andrews et al. 2009) suggest that researchers have predominantly looked at the way that teaching can improve easily quantifiable improvements in spelling, syntax, punctuation and grammar. Other research also concludes that there is no strong evidence that a pedagogic emphasis on such features actually improves them (Torgerson et al, 2014) . Similarly, the work of Fisher (Fisher, 2012), suggests that a focus on the technical, by both teachers and researchers, is a result of the imposition of external testing regimes. While the Story Engine was not the kind of project that looked at attainment outcomes, it did produce some evidence that as well as being a platform focused on creative development, there was the opportunity to improve the technical aspects of writing in a way which was integrated with the creative process rather than being abstracted from it. As a consequence of these findings, it may be useful to look at explanations of how such constraints affect the way that students perceive writing. Anne Haas Dyson's work on "official" versions of writing sanctioned by teachers and school authorities is a helpful concept here (Dyson, 2008). For Dyson, these official versions of writing as it is taught often ignore what she calls the "textual inventiveness" that pupils display in their creative writing, a useful distinction to apply to the creative transformations occurring in the Story Engine project.

Technologies

Some researchers suggest that digital technology is actually changing the nature of writing (Merchant, 2005; Hicks, 2013), and that "additional" principles of digital writing need to be recognised beyond those of traditional transcription (Clay, 1975) . Others Berger & McDougall, 2014; Rowsell et al., 2014; Burn, 2007) see a connection between traditional storytelling and popular narrative media, especially video games. Such connections are evident in the findings of the Story Engine project, where the influence of video games was very prevalent in the writing of some participants. Again, Dyson (2001) has suggested that these connections are about a resourcefulness which is often not recognised within "official" discourses around writing in school. There are also questions about the relationship between the use of an online platform and the technical aspects. Some of these issues have been explored in Myra Barrs' and Sarah Horrocks' study (Barrs & Horrocks, 2014), which examined the way that blogging, by employing authentic forms of writing directly contrasting with the decontextualised exercises of government-endorsed literacy strategy, improved students' self-confidence, how much the students valued writing, and the quality and accuracy of their work. They also emphasise the significance of automaticity in both handwriting and

typing for this value to be fully realised, echoing the point of Medwell and Wray (Medwell &Wray, 2014) who argue that there is a fundamental connection between this kind of automaticity and higher level, conceptual thinking.

By its nature, a brief overview of the literature in these areas cannot do justice to the range of views and research relating to creative writing, but they do provide a useful background to some of the data themes we explore, creative pedagogies, student agency and voice and the role of technology.

The Story Engine Project: Development, Surveys, Methods

The Story Engine tool was devised through two alpha prototyping pilot phases, closely involving teachers and Year 7 students in schools in London. It developed into a structured platform with support for story writing, and prompts for plot, character and other features provided in a playful way through the interface. There were a number of means of getting ideas for writing such as the "inspirational jellyfish" which would produce ideas for the writer to use when prodded (clicked with the mouse). The screenshot below (Fig.2) gives some indication of what the student saw when they first accessed the platform. If the student pressed the "Get Me Started" button, they would be presented with a series of questions about character and location, appearing as they do below in Fig.1

Fig 1: "Get Me Started" Questions

Clicking on the "Inspirational Jellyfish" prompt would result in one-off ideas appearing on screen, such as *"Jump up and down. Pretend you are an inspirational jellyfish. Now try writing again. Are your juices flowing?"*. These prompts are deliberately designed not to answer specific questions, but instead their aphoristic nature is intended to have the student user think about the writing process
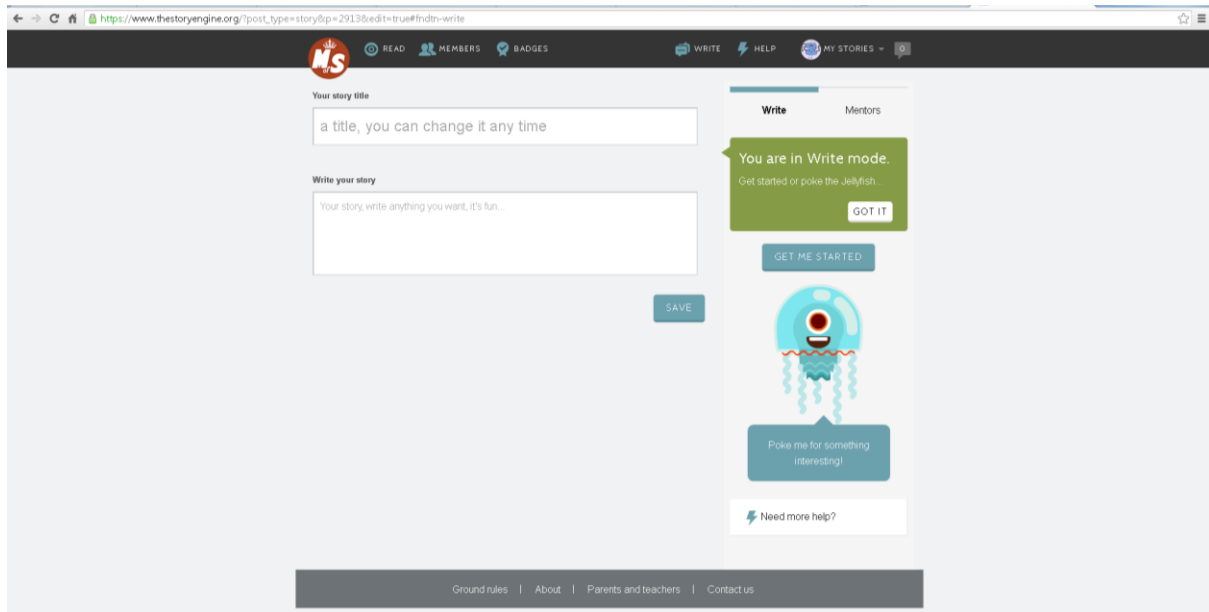
in a more lateral way.

Fig 2: The Story Engine interface, including the "Inspirational Jellyfish"

The student could also receive help from a Mentor, by sending them a message requesting support or information. On some occasions in the data collection, this support occurred in real-time, with the mentors reviewing writing and messaging writers as they wrote, but more frequently it occurred on a post-hoc basis with mentors reviewing student writing a short time (anywhere between a few hours and a few days) after they had written it. Finally, clicking the "Need more help ?" button took the student to an online bank of written tips, videos and other resources which offered help with writing. These prompts and other means of help might be seen as offering a structure within which the student might work creatively ; something discussed further below.

The final version (beta prototype) of the tool was used with four schools – two in London (here referred to as London 1 and London 2) , one in Brighton, and one in Rotherham – reaching approximately 120 Year 7 students. All of these students completed an initial online survey of their experiences of writing both in and out of school, their relationship with popular cultural texts and their use of media technologies. This was to gauge some of the influences and habits that might have been at work in the student's writing beyond their direct experience of the Story Engine platform. A summary of these responses can be found in the full project report (Burn et al, 2015), but they indicated that many students had quite a negative view of writing in school, though they were not necessarily negative about it in their wider lives. Films, video games and popular fiction were popular cultural interests for students in all four sites; for many students these were significant influences on what they wrote. Students used the online platform across three sessions, each led by a teacher, though there were also often other adults in each session. These included teaching assistants and volunteers, researchers and (at two sites), Creative Writing practitioners. After a brief introduction in the first session from the teacher, students used the remaining time to write stories using the platform and communicate with mentors about ways of improving their writing. At the end of the third session students were asked to complete their stories and some of these were published on the MoS website.

This activity produced a wide range of data sets. These included observations of groups of students engaged in the writing workshops; semi-structured interviews with small groups of students conducted at the end of each writing sessions; teacher interviews; and finally, the writing that the students produced. These data sets were used to answer the key project research question of whether or not an online creative-writing and mentoring platform could both develop creativity and complement school-based writing programmes.

While almost 120 students took part in the project, between three and six at each site received more focused attention in research terms. Students were selected after the initial writing workshop and both teachers and researchers had looked at the written work produced in that session. In these cases the stories were examined in detail and compared to prior writing earlier in the year, and the students were interviewed about both samples of writing. These samples were also explored in detail in the teacher interviews. For the purposes of this article, three students' work is discussed: Matthew (Brighton), Maria (London 1) and Leona (London 2). These names are all pseudonyms.

What follows is some selective analysis of the data generated by these students in terms of both what they wrote and what they (and their teachers) said about it. While this is a small sample of the data, it goes some way to addressing the questions outlined at the start of this article: about evidence of creativity, how the writing contrasts and compares with the "official" writing students normally do in class and what we can say about the online nature of the writing produced here. There is also some comment made about learning progression, because concerns about the quality and development of children's writing skills articulated by both teachers and policymakers (Education Standards Research Team, 2012) suggest it is worth considering how the Story Engine project might offer an alternative to "official" versions of writing, and how such alternatives might improve learning outcomes.

Videogames: a resource for storytelling

As indicated above, the project data suggest that the young people's writing transforms cultural resources from media technologies. A pattern repeated at all sites was the influence of video games on what they wrote, as in the following example.

there was a little boy called Kyle and he was in a deep depression because his parents had died in a car crash and was living in a crockery old light hose in the middle of the ocean with his grandparents and all they did was eat, sleep and be old and cranky but I get to do any think I want really I found a little chest filled with ideas and a device that says Doomsday!!!!!!!!!

– Matthew, story extract

The above extract is not untypical of the kind of writing presented by students involved in the project. It involves a kind of messy creativity – a quality that both the students and the staff see as being important to developing writing. The students describe the work they have done as creative, and the lead teacher in the Brighton school is convinced that the students are demonstrating a

creativity they are not often able to show in English lessons. She comments in particular that there are types of creativity not often acknowledged in the mainstream curriculum. Commenting on Matthew's work, she notes:

> *He's obviously really enjoying it, having a lot of fun here…he's not sophisticated enough to be able to order his thoughts into sentences yet, but he's got this stream of ideas, which is interesting, because it's very like a video game…it's very rich in ideas. It's massively unstructured, but there's a freedom to it…it's great as a creative process.*

> — **Brighton teacher, interview**

Researchers have noticed that the structures of games in young people's writing, while legitimate, are different from those normally expected, recognised or rewarded in school (McClay, 2002). Although the teacher's reference to video games is very general, Matthew's interview makes specific reference to an episode in Grand Theft Auto 5, a motorbike race to a lighthouse, which he has watched on YouTube and drawn on in his story.

> *I watch loads of things on YouTube…GTA5 things. They're kind of maps for things you can do (in the game). You can live another life in the game...live a bad life or a good life. In GTA5 there's a map which is a race to a lighthouse, which blows up at the end. I changed that up a bit (in the story).*

> **Matthew, Interview**

The story that Matthew actually writes appears loosely structured in various ways: it has three discrete, apparently unconnected episodes, and the protagonist named Kyle, introduced in the third person in the first sentence, gives way to a first-person narrative later in this sentence.

However, the discrete episodes seem less unstructured if seen in the light of game levels, while pronoun swapping between first and third person is a feature of videogame discourse, reflecting the player's ambiguous relationship with the game's player-character or avatar (Burn and Schott, 2004).

Later, the lead teacher acknowledges the point that some types of creativity are not recognised within the school:

> *(These students) are creative in a way that the female English teachers here aren't really used to. There are a few boys, white working-class boys, and I see them display this type of creativity that isn't really appreciated.*

> **– Brighton teacher, interview**

Implicit in this connection between Matthew's apparently unstructured writing and the creativity of these boys is the role of gaming. The interactive, online nature of the platform appeals to some students because it allows them both to explore and write about the kinds of worlds they inhabit as game players, but also because it presents some aspects of the writing process as decisions that are familiar to gamers. Activities such as taking the advice of the mentor, sending work to the editor and publishing your story, all have parallels in the world of gaming, such as seeking advice from characters in games (especially in training levels), finishing a level, making a video of your progress for YouTube, or writing fan fiction which may include backstory, poetry, or other expressive

amplification of the game narrative (Burn, 2006). This interactivity may allow some students to access creative writing in a way that they have previously found difficult.

Purposeful Creativity and "Official English"

The debates around the way that "official" discourses of writing constrain creativity are thrown into sharp relief by a closer examination of the way that the young people involved write as a means of circumventing the institutional and educational constraints placed on their writing. At the London 1 site, one student writes a short but entertaining story, called 'The Bullies', about an island where a group of Year 9 girls train to terrorise others:

> *Off the coast of Costa Rica at the school of #buff girls there were 2 teenagers called Tyra and Alexia. They were the school bullies. They bullied year 7 to year 11. They were in year 10. They always thought they were buff, and if anyone stood in their way they would bully them until year 9. They were stupid. They spent all there time hanging out on a cruise ship of the coast. Their head teacher wanted students that thought they were buff. This was only because she was an ex-model. She like the kids to put make-up on, have a spray tan, fake nails the lot. All the other schools tried to shut down the school. There was no shutting down the school.*

— **Maria story extract**

Discussion with Maria's teacher reveals that this passage is a disguised critique of her own school, and that Maria is generally not the kind of student to speak up in class very much. Her teacher comments:

> *I feel like she's really expressing herself here, making those kind of comments (in the writing) that I haven't seen at all before, but then maybe that's because a lot of the tasks that we set are so connected to whatever we're teaching at the time, that she didn't feel able to get her voice across before now.*

London 1 teacher, interview

This suggests that another creative element of Story Engine might be its propensity for letting students comment on their own cultural situation, either among peers or in school, perhaps because of its distinct identity, separate from the authority of school, and designed as a playful space. There is some precedent for this kind of link between creative production and cultural comment (Connolly, 2013), which suggests that this kind of work is an important outlet for students, licensing parody and satire as a way to challenge authority.

The teacher discourse generally associates creativity with freedom, invoking the tension between freedom and constraint in literacy debates such as those discussed by Sharples (1999) who suggests that constraints "allow us to control the multitude of possibilities that thought and language offer" (p.41). We, as researchers, acknowledge this tension; however, the MoS approach does offer certain kinds of freedom, such as the freedom to choose topics, this tolerance of diversity in terms of

genres, styles and idioms , does not mean that the writing takes place in a completely unstructured writing environment. The development of story is supported through a range of prompts and the opportunity to make revisions throughout – things which no longer always seem to be evident in "school English" (Hawe & Parr, 2014). These productive constraints create a structured yet playful process, the kind of resourcefulness that Dyson identifies (Dyson 2001) as often going unrecognised in English classrooms.

Originality: creative pedagogies

The other debate in the field of creativity in education which can be addressed in the context of Story Engine is the much-vexed originality debate. This is conceived of in many ways within the diverse rhetorics of creativity (Banaji et al., 2006), but is distilled in a concurrent study of the Ministry of Stories (Wyse et al, 2014), into two contrasting aspects: "imaginative adaptation of cultural resources", and "newness". The interdependence between these two can be seen in relation to Vygotsky's model of creativity in adolescence, which develops from the transformation of cultural resources seen in play into more considered structures subordinated to conceptual thought (Vygotsky, 1931/1998). Such a model allows us to acknowledge the legitimate role played in the creative process by re-purposed cultural material, such as Matthew's adaptation of Grand Theft Auto, while leaving room to recognise the extent of imaginative transformation worked upon such material in the production of new stories. In relation to Story Engine, the same approach is evident, synthesised with the provocative value of prompts such as randomised names, vocabulary items and so on, which function in different ways: sometimes providing serendipitous readymade material; sometimes provoking sharp but equally productive reactions; sometimes simply providing a bridge across the blank screen.

At the same time, two kinds of pedagogic mediation support the process of the writing, the iterative, contemplative development from raw resources and serendipitous prompts to considered, innovative narrative. The project demonstrated that on the one hand, these are the open questions, rewards, and role of the online editorial function of the mentor. On the other, the teachers and other adults in the classroom encourage the reworking of the adapted material, both from cultural experience and from the engine's randomiser, supporting the growth of the conceptual structures Vygotsky's model requires, which can be, as we have seen, narrative, polemic, or communicative, while at the same time, supporting Cremin & Myhill's idea of the need to develop the students' creative voice (Cremin & Myhill, 2012) but also harnessing the heteroglossic energies of the online and classroom environments.

Learning progression

Concerns about the quality and development of children's writing skills articulated by both teachers and policymakers (Education Standards Research Team, 2012) prompt the question of how the Story Engine project might improve learning outcomes.

Previous creative writing work by the students at the London 2 site reveals significant differences in the focus of school-based work and the way the Story Engine project allows students to progress. Leona's earlier marked work received assessment feedback focusing on the use of parts of speech, exhorting the student to do things like 'use a greater range of adverbs' and congratulating them on their 'good use of verbs'.

The Story Engine process also features these 'schooled' aspects of creative writing quite prominently. However, there are also some clearly 'unschooled' elements of writing on the platform which demonstrate a creativity that sometimes goes unacknowledged in regular assessment feedback. For example, in the same student's work on the platform, the following line demonstrates a quality that might well be discouraged by certain kinds of teacher marking:

He had butterflies in his stomach, his head was beating like it was his heart, he couldn't focus on anything.

– Leona, story extract

'His head was beating like it was his heart' has no spectacular vocabulary choices, and is based in vernacular rather than literary diction; yet the innovative idea of the head beating, the linking of head and heart (and the easy alliteration of these two), makes this a more effective creative use of language than the sometimes forced and mechanical products of literacy pedagogies.

Oddly, such a product appears earlier in the same story: '*Aqua tears was coming down from her crystal blue eyes*'. The initial adjective makes no obvious sense and sounds unnatural, as if arbitrarily plucked from a thesaurus. Such distinctions recall Barrs' and Horrocks' study (2014), which sharply contrasts the mechanisms of successive literacy strategies such as 'power words' with the fluidity of authentic writing genres.

These examples suggest that there is room within the Story Engine model to have an impact on learning progression that includes a focus on these technical aspects of writing as well as on creativity. Perhaps the most important observation to be made here is that the Story Engine, like any technological innovation, could be used to valorise any approach to writing, but that the teacher and student ensure that it is used in a way that they both agree develops the student's writing.

Conclusions

What conclusions can one draw from a project like this then, particularly in a time when the focus of classroom writing seems to be on the technical skills of Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar? We would suggest that there are three points to take away from the study in response to the questions we posed at the outset.

What evidence is there of creativity in the students' writing as they presented it through the Story Engine?

First, students' exposure to video games and other online texts means that they are now, more than ever perhaps, engaged with the idea of narratives across cultural forms and media platforms. Such texts, however, may not have traditional or even linear structures, but the freedom and playful environment provided by a platform such as The Story Engine may allow for a creative engagement with such cultural resources. As the existing literature acknowledges, these transformations are not really acknowledged within "official" school versions of writing. Meanwhile, the project also provided opportunities to develop technical aspects of writing: to experiment with sentence structure, adjective choices and vocabulary. Such development takes place in the context of playful, experimental approaches to language and narrative structure, legitimising the vernacular styles of popular cultural forms and the redeployment of a wide range of cultural resources.

How does this creativity contrast with or complement the kind of writing that the students normally do within their school classrooms?

Students who may not feel able to voice opinions or express themselves in class found a good deal of support in the online platform. The fertile environment of the Story Engine allowed for a diverse range of uses to be made of it by those participating in the project. For some, it was an opportunity to show that they were skilled and able writers; for others, the opportunity to write for a specific audience; for others again, the opportunity to express themselves using the cultural resources that they felt most at home with. Such support is not always offered by official versions of school English, or by the approaches that teachers take in trying to develop writing in the classroom. In particular, in some instances the effective use of prose drawing on stylistically diverse popular forms contrasts with the privileging of restricted and artificial literary markers encouraged by curriculum prescription.

Finally, to what extent can this creativity in writing be attributed to the online nature of the platform?

 The online nature of The Story Engine with its access to mentors and digital prompts may motivate some students in a way that a solely classroom based approach to teaching creative writing may not, offering implicit encouragement to explore the range of styles and voices characteristic of social media and online culture more generally. Both the platform and the mentor system foreground student choice, and the remote nature of their provision can encourage experimentation and loss of inhibition. Like all online cultural forms, however, it may be most effective in combination with offline engagement. The future for such technologies, then, may be most fully realised in a union between online, playful pedagogies and the best progressive traditions of classroom teaching.

References

Andrews, R., Torgerson, C., Beverton, S., Freeman, A,. Locke, T., Low, G., Robinson, A., Zhu, D., & Richard Andrews, C. (2006) 'The effect of grammar teaching on writing development', *British Educational Research Journal*, 32, 1, pp. 39-55.

Andrews, R., Torgerson, C., Lowe, G., McGuinn, N., & Richard Andrews, C. (2009)'Teaching argument writing to 7- to 14-year-olds: an international review of the evidence of successful practice', *Cambridge Journal Of Education*, 39, 3, pp. 291-310,

Banaji, S., Burn, A., & Buckingham, D. (2006) *The rhetorics of creativity: a review of the literature*. London: Arts Council England.

Barrs, M. (2000) "The Reader in the Writer." *Reading*, 34, 54-60.

Barrs, M. and Horrocks, S. (2014) *Educational Blogs and Their Effects on Pupils' Writing,* available at: http://cdn.cfbt.com/~/media/cfbtcorporate/files/research/2014/r-blogging-2014.pdf (accessed 05/05/16).

Berger, R. and McDougall, J. (2013)'Reading videogames as (authorless) literature'. *Literacy*, 47 (3), pp.142-149.

Britton, J., Burgess,A., Martin,N., McLeod,A. and Rosen, H.(1975) *The Development of Writing Abilities (11–18)*. London: Macmillan, 1975

Bunting, R. (2010) 'Process, Genre, Strategy, Framework: Three decades of development in the teaching of writing'in (2010) Graham, J. & Kelly, A. *(*eds.) *Writing Under Control* . London. David Fulton

Burn, A, & Schott, G.(2004) 'Heavy hero or digital dummy? Multimodal player-avatar relations in Final Fantasy 7', *Visual Communication*, 3, 2, p. 213-233

Burn, A. (2006) 'Re-Working the Text: Online Fandom'. In D. Carr, D. Buckingham, A. Burn, G. Schott (Eds.), *Computer Games: Text, Narrative and Play* (pp. 88-102). Cambridge: Polity Press.

Burn, A (2007) 'Writing Computer Games: game-literacy and New-Old Narratives', *L1 - Educational Studies in Language and Literature*, Vol 7, No 4, 45-67.

Burn, A, & Durran, J (2007) *Media Literacy In Schools : Practice, Production And Progression*, London: Paul Chapman.

Burn, A., Connolly, S., Rice, J., Macnab, L., Pearce, M., (2015) '"Ministry of Stories: Story Engine Research & Development Report" [PDF]. London: Nesta.

Clay, M. (1975) *What Did I Write?* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Connolly, S. (2013) *Learning Progression in Secondary Digital Video Production*. PhD Thesis. London. Institute of Education

Connolly, S. & Readman, M. (2017) 'Towards "Creative Media Literacy"' *International Handbook of Media Literacy Education*. De Abreu, B., Mihailidis, P., Yee, A., Melki, J. & McDougall,J. (eds) Routledge. Oxford.

Cremin, T. & Myhill, D. (2012) *Writing Voices: Creating Communities of Writers*, Routledge Oxford

Dockrell, J. E., Marshall, C. R., & Wyse, D. (2016) 'Teachers' reported practices for teaching writing in England.' *READING AND WRITING*, 29 (3), 409-434

Dyson, A.H. (2001) 'Donkey Kong in Little Bear Country: A First Grader's Composing Development in the Media Spotlight', *The Elementary School Journal*, 4, p. 417

Dyson, A.H. (2008) 'The Pine Cone Wars: Studying Writing in a Community of Children', *Language Arts*, 85, 4, pp. 305-315

Department for Education (2013) *The National Curriculum in England: Key Stages 1 and 2 framework document.* Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-curriculum-in-england-primary-curriculum (Accessed: 6 July 2017).

Department for Education (2014) *The National Curriculum in England: Key Stages 3 and 4 framework document.* Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-curriculum-in-england-secondary-curriculum (Accessed: 6 July 2017).

Education Standards Research Team(2012) *What is the research evidence on writing?* London. DFE

Fisher, R. (2012) 'Teaching writing: a situated dynamic', *British Educational Research Journal*, 38, 2, pp. 299-317,

Graves, D. (1983) *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work*, London, Heinemann Educational

Halliday, M.A.K. (1975) *Learning how to mean : explorations in the development of language* Edward Arnold.

Hawe, E, & Parr, J (2014) 'Assessment for Learning in the writing classroom: an incomplete realisation', *Curriculum Journal*, vol. 25, no. 2, pp. 210-237.

Hicks, T. (2013) *Crafting digital writing : composing texts across media and genres*. Portsmouth, NH : Heinemann

Jones, R., & Wyse, D. (2013) *Creativity in the Primary Curriculum*. Routledge.

McClay, J.K .(2002) 'Hidden 'Treasure': New Genres, New Media and the Teaching of Writing', *English In Education*, 36, 1, p. 46

Medwell, J, & Wray, D (2014) 'Handwriting automaticity: the search for performance thresholds'*, Language & Education: An International Journal,* 28, 1, pp. 34-51

Medwell, J. & Wray, D. (2007) 'Handwriting: what do we know and what do we need to know?' *Literacy,* 41 (1), pp. 10-15

Merchant, G.(2005) 'Electric Involvement: Identity performance in children's informal digital writing', *Discourse: Studies In The Cultural Politics Of Education*, 26, 3, pp. 301-314

Myhill, D, & Fisher, R. (2010) , 'Writing development: Cognitive, sociocultural, linguistic perspectives', *Journal Of Research In Reading*, 33, 1, pp. 1-3,

Rowsell, J., Pedersen, I. & Trueman, D. (2014), 'Playing as a mutant in a virtual world: understanding overlapping story worlds in popular culture video games', *Literacy*, vol. 48, no. 1, pp. 47-53.

Sharples, M. (1999) *How We Write : Writing As Creative Design*, London :Routledge

Teale, W. H. and Sulzby, E. (Eds.) (1986) *Emergent Literacy: Writing and Reading*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

Torgerson, D., Torgerson, C., Mitchell, N., Buckley, H., Ainsworth, H., Heaps, C. & Jefferson, L. (2014) *Grammar for Writing*. Report to Education Endowment Foundation, London.

Vygotsky, L.S. (1931/1998) 'Imagination and Creativity in the Adolescent', *The Collected Works of L.S. Vygotsky*, Vol. 5, 151-166.

Wyse, D. ,Bradford, H., Burn, A. ,Wiggins, M., Bryer, T. , Potter, J. ,Coles, J. (2014) *Young People Writing: A three-year longitudinal research evaluation of The Ministry of Stories (MoS)* : Interim Report for Year 2. Institute of Education, London.

Wyse, D. ,Bradford, H., Burn, A. ,Wiggins, M., Bryer, T. , Potter, J. ,Coles, J. (2016) *Young People Writing: A three-year longitudinal research evaluation of The Ministry of Stories* (MoS) : Final Report: UCL Institute of Education, London