

WRITING ON WRITING: A PROTEAN PORTFOLIO  
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## **Abstract**

Writing is not a single skill, as it encompasses many talents and styles. This portfolio presents one author's recent writings, representing a variety of formats, topics, audiences, and skills that include composition, editing, management, and layout. The writing samples are categorized and analyzed, showing that, rather than existing in their own context, this portfolio's content and styles demonstrate, reaffirm, and occasionally challenge the philosophies of Zinsser, Strunk, Bruffee, Stanislavski, and other communication theorists.

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## Introduction

"I didn't like your class," said a student to me upon his graduation. "But don't take it personally, Mr. Gagne; I just prefer writing in my own style." Had I demanded my students transition to an impersonal style? Had I, despite my best intentions, set out to stifle this student's creativity?

To better understand my student's view on writing styles, I analyzed my own, represented by this project. I began by looking back to when I had been that student's same pithy age. When caught writing outside the classroom, I would defensively brush off my scribblings by saying, "I write about what I do - but writing isn't what I do." I wanted to be a programmer, a musician, or anyone who actually produced something worth writing about - not some passive observer who wrote about everyone but themselves. I would not let my penchant for writing pigeonhole me into the role of bystander.

As I pursued writing about my interests - which I continued to stress did not include writing - it seemed appropriate that I learn to do so well, if only to better represent those true interests. I easily got behind the advice of Strunk & White's Elements of Style, which espoused concepts I could relate to. "Omit needless words" - the programmer in me appreciated tight, efficient code and prose. "Use definite, specific, concrete language" - all the better to describe the video games I was reviewing and the songs I was singing, my dear.

I continued on to the works of William Zinsser - and became confused. Strunk & White's rules of thumb were simple and universal; they were, after all the elements of style, singular. Zinsser, on the other hand, was trying to teach me to write interviews, travel articles, science reports, and humor separately. Different rules for different genres? Wasn't it all the same thing - writing?

I may not yet have identified as a writer, but I was definitely a reader, and such a simplistic view does not benefit either of those capacities. I didn't read fiction with the same expectations with which I read philosophy; each had a unique style I appreciated for different reasons. Non-fiction styles, too, it seemed, had to be approached differently not only by the reader, but by the writer as well.

With each genre came various rules. These rules did not dictate my style, but asked me to select from a bank of skills only a few that would be combined and expressed in a specific form and purpose. Rather than limit myself to one particular style, I could instead adapt myself and my craft to suit various audiences, formats, topics, and purposes. A scientist does not write to another scientist the same way he does to a banker; neither would he write to a scientist in a newspaper, but instead in a trade journal or laboratory report. Such schemes are not always externally imposed, be it by teacher or editor, but are often internally generated, saying something about both the writer and his community. And since few people hold membership in only one community; this overlap allows each person the opportunity to develop a unique set of styles and voices to suit many situations. My own memberships in communities theatrical, technological, and youthful were a testament to multiplicity.

Given a nearly infinite combination of forms, audiences, and purposes, writing cannot be categorized as a single style or talent. It requires knowledge from interviewing experts to revising drafts to editing other people's work to laying out the visual design. Each writing assignment I've tackled has reminded me of this chameleon need; learning or expressing one style neither locks the writer into that style nor precludes other styles. Most important, such adaptability has taught me that being a writer is okay, too; expressing one talent does not prevent the pursuit of other interests and occupations - even the ones I'm writing about.

By combining those interests with writing, I have been able to write professionally for the last nine years and be published over three hundred times. This project presents a selection of my works, divided into six chapters by related criteria such as topic, audience, and skill set: journalism, interviews, critique, and creative writing are among the topics explored. Some pieces were written years ago; others were produced alongside this project's manufacture. Some represent the bulk of my work; others are from areas I have barely begun to explore. As I am usually occupied with the production of new material, these chapters present the opportunity for me to step back and analyze where I've come from and where I am, and the larger rhetorical context in which my writing has been created and placed.

Each piece of writing may be limited in its scope, but it serves the opposite function of limiting me, as each piece of writing contained herein is another role in which I can perform. The more audiences I write for, the more topics I cover, and the more purposes my writing fulfills, then the more faceted a writer I become - bowing not to external circumstances and sacrificing my style, but absorbing more styles to call my own.

Each chapter is prefaced by an introduction, or “interchapter”, that offers a commentary and analysis of the content to follow. In so doing, general themes emerge that often echo the teachings of media scholars and popular composition theories, including those of Zinsser, Strunk, Bruffee, and Stanislavski.

This project is not just a portfolio of my writing; it is also a response to my student. He came into my classroom with his own style, which I hoped he would learn not to replace but complement with a variety of new styles to accommodate the diversity of assignments he would encounter in school. But just as a piece of writing is molded into a single style defined by criteria such as audience and subject, this student had defined his status as a writer by a single

style. Any expansion into another style was an intrusion into his own - not generated internally by the writer, but forced upon him externally by environmental factors. For him, it was about assimilation, not adaptation.

This student wants to be a scientist. He will find not only that writing is a predominant means of expression even in science; he will also discover the strength of diversity, be it in society, ecology, or agriculture. I had tried to teach him science writing; perhaps he will one day realize the science of writing, and the strength that diversity brings to this field as well.

## **Chapter 1: Video Games: From Pong to Publication**

The birth of a new medium engendered my own interest in an old one. The public emergence of the Internet in the early Nineties allowed people from different geographical regions to connect, expanding the resource pool from which to compile material for a desktop publishing venture. When a friend and fellow teenager, Scott Weller of Rhode Island, posted an online message asking for video game critics to provide content for a newsletter he was putting together, I volunteered. His response: "I didn't know you're a writer!" This struck me as an odd comment, especially in an online medium where all communication occurred through writing. It also never occurred to me that having opinions on a subject and expressing them in writing were such different crafts as to distinguish people as writers and non-writers.

Five years later, after I'd had some writing and publishing experience with the Boston Herald and when video games were a bit more mainstream, I convinced my hometown newspaper to cover the topic regularly and professionally - a service which I would provide. This unwritten contract lasted six years, during which time I primarily reviewed video games, but occasionally reviewed movies, books, and audio CDs, and provided my own editorials and coverage of gaming events and news.

The leisurely nature of the topic effected a writing style akin to the casualness of the Internet and less formal than straight newspaper reporting, even in matters as simple as conventions. Contractions, generally considered informal, were not avoided in a video game review. I used first-person pronouns not once in my first year of writing, then slowly accepted its occasional presence; I was writing my opinions, after all - no sense in hiding myself, or in trying to arrogantly offer my thoughts as fact.

More important, the format for a game review differed from a straight news report. For example, most newspaper stories present information in descending priority, allowing an editor to cut from the bottom up to conform to space constraints. I wrote my video game reviews as a more typical narrative with a beginning, middle, and end. The first paragraph would present a brief, factual description of the game; the following paragraphs would detail its various elements, such as graphics, sound, and plot; the final paragraph then compiles these reflections into a summary recommendation, supported by what came before. (See Chapter 5 for how this format mirrors established movie reviews.) To cut the concluding paragraph - as some inflexible editors were wont to do - would leave readers unsure of my endorsement.

This non-journalistic style did not free me from the need for attention-grabbing and informative leads, though. Of the hundreds of reviews I wrote, several have passages of particular creativity, but I have chosen the "Shenmue II" article to include here. When I presented several samples of my writing to my former manager, Ron Luks, he cited this piece's introduction as an example of a great lead-in: it's short, punchy, and dramatic. Though I was competing with no other game critics in this newspaper, I was still competing with all the other writers surrounding my text for the audience's attention. If I can't get it in the beginning of the article, I won't have it at the end.

The "Shenmue" introduction is one paragraph: "Hello. My name is Ryo Hazuki. You killed my father. Prepare to die!". I like it because it is informative even to those who aren't familiar with the source of the paraphrase. Video game players (especially hardcore players) tend to immerse themselves in a common set of media, often including superhero comic books, Dungeons & Dragons, and films such as The Matrix and Office Space. The first line of the "Shenmue" review is a paraphrase of a popular quotation from The Princess Bride, a well-known

book and movie, especially among youth culture. Those who don't recognize the paraphrase will nonetheless immediately infer key elements about the "Shenmue" plot while intriguing the reader enough to read more: Who is this young man? Who killed his father - how, why? This article, which originally amounted to 535 words, was expanded to 732 when posted to the Internet, where the space constraints of newsprint were nonexistent.

Given these space constraints, even an introduction had to be as informative as possible. The following introduction, at 153 words long, made up nearly 25% of the review in which it appeared. Yet I felt its anecdotal and concrete approach both was informative and put the audience immediately into the action:

I rolled up my sleeves, worried by the situation. Lira had fallen, though not before her Thunderslash had taken down the mage whose Requiem spell had so decimated my ranks. The hero Joshua was left alone to face the assassin Grief and his blackguard; be it Joshua or Grief, the first to die would lose. Grief's Dervish attack prevented Josh from approaching, so I instead ordered the hero to race through the field, tiring the killer until his magic was depleted. I then lured Grief into the thick brush, where the enemy warrior could not follow due to his heavy armor. Grief lacked something I have: the ability to logically guess his next move. I ordered Joshua to strike at an empty spot, then watched as the two fighters faced off. Grief made to attack Joshua, but by then the hero had already relocated, striking a fatal blow to Grief's unprotected back. Victory!

Not only did introductions work hard, but the entire article had to do in 600 words what I could not do in 4,000. Publications aimed at gamers are often able to bypass any real introduction, since they assume the audience is steeped in the background of any individual title or genre and needs simply an assessment of its qualities without any factual basis. In a newspaper medium, my challenge was to balance fact with opinion, providing my diverse readers with enough context to understand the game's genre, goals, and the like. I could not assume the readers had followed the development of this game through news and previews that I had not provided; I could not always compare a game to other games that the audience may not have played. I had to provide sufficient foundation to understand the game's mechanisms while leaving enough room for critique of key aspects, such as graphics, sound, control, fun factor. This approach was not formulaic in that I commented on these specific qualities because it was expected; not every game could be shoehorned into that template. I instead played a game to see what it had to offer, and noted whatever features most contributed to or detracted from the overall experience.

Regardless, a newspaper's inherently limited column space often prevented me from discussing the minutia and nuances of the medium, forcing me to cover the same key elements in each game and nearly producing a template. As one critic put it, "if everyone gives Halo 2 the core 600 words... most of the reviews are going to hit on the same topic... [whereas] if one publication is known for its massive 6-8 page, 4000 word reviews of big games, readers automatically know that they're going to find out more when they read that publication" (GameDaily BIZ). My newspaper outlet had a small but diverse audience and little room in which to address them. Had I a larger but narrower audience and more leeway to play with, then

more breadth, depth, and variety would've been possible. Instead, my writing fit neatly into how one journalist, Aaron McKenna, perceives what he dubs to be video game journalism:

Most reviews follow a simple formula of going through the game, taking apart all the bad points if it is a bad game and sticking a line or two in about its redeeming qualities, if in fact there are any, at the end, or else (if it is a good game) going through all the really good points about the game, and then sticking down the negatives into a paragraph at the end, usually beginning something like "Despite all this, Game X does have one or two minor problems..."

This writer's frustration may stem from what he perceives to be the diminished role of the press. McKenna says that in the Sixties and Seventies, critics played vital roles in helping shape and evolve the music and film industries. As the video game industry and its participants and consumers have matured from its genesis in the 1970's, the internal perception is that the medium needs to be accepted as not just a means of entertainment but as an art form, joining film and music. In contrast, in the context in which I was given to operate, I considered my job to be to help consumers make wise purchasing decisions. In a column entitled "It's Our Fault Video Games Aren't Considered Art," Kyle Orland distinguishes my role from one that would advance the medium:

... game reviews are mainly commercial tools, meant to help consumers decide whether or not a game is worth their money and time. Game critiques, on the other hand, are more concerned with the totality of a game's design and what a game does to

advance the state of the medium or even society as a whole. The former considers mainly whether a game is fun, the latter whether it is worthwhile.

Furthermore:

A critic's writing should betray deep feelings of ownership for the industry they love and study and write about. Sadly, many reviewers (and reviews) are merely interested in whether a game is bigger, faster, or stronger than what has come before. They have no business calling themselves part of the industry.

If I suffered the inability to distinguish myself and my writing from the formula McKenna defines, it may have stemmed from my inability to distinguish my topic as an art form. I consider such a definition to be an overcompensation for years of public perception of games as a purely juvenile pastime, much as comic books are still perceived. In my self-charged role in what Orland defines as a reviewer, and based on the feedback I received from readers, I consider my run in this industry to have been successful nonetheless.

Games are, after all, only one aspect of a much broader culture. Be it movies, video games, or comic books, there is often a common audience that finds all these media appealing. It was my pleasure as a fan and writer to follow this thread wherever it may lead, such as to the book reviewed in this portfolio.

My review of the book Dungeons & Dreamers was written for a slightly different audience from that for youthful video gamers; this article would be read by older computer

enthusiasts, fans of vintage computers. The origins of both cultures are closely intertwined, though, and this book details the key players in the computer and gaming revolutions.

As I re-read this article years after having written it, I notice that the writing uses longer sentences and words than some of my video game writing. Since my audience was perhaps better educated, and my subject more literary, I may've felt the need to write more formally. Age may have also been a factor: with video games, I represent the average demographic (male in his mid-twenties), and video game reviews were my way of "speaking" informally to my peers. In the community for which the Dungeons & Dreamers review was written, I am the youngest person I know, with most members ranging in age from forty to eighty. Again, my admiration for these people as superiors, not peers, may've influenced my writing style.

The article for Worcester Magazine returned me to my informal roots, but under different constraints. An annual "Christmas Wish List" feature had me accustomed to writing briefly on several games, but such articles were reviews of games released in the last year, presented in a thematic order. For Worcester Magazine, I wrote a forward-looking piece, presented chronologically. None of the games featured in this assignment had yet been released for public consumption; thus, I was unable to cull from my own past work, as I did every Christmas. I had to rely on less intensive or less direct experiences, such as brief demonstrations at the E3 convention, reports from gaming web sites such as IGN.com that had had more hands-on time with the software, or Internet message boards that indicated high demand and anticipation for pending titles, suggesting that they would sell well regardless of quality. Also, of the ten games I selected for this article, all were based on existing properties, allowing me to

make educated guesses regarding their content and quality, based on past experiences with the franchises.

Just as that article required the pulling together of many threads of personal interest, so did my first Major Qualifying Project (MQP) allow me to write on topics I was passionate about: video games, comic books, and Dungeons and Dragons. The 21,000-word original document's three main chapters covered the previously listed topics. It was these chapters I decided to include five years later when I sought publication for my work, considering that to be the final step before I could put my first MQP to bed and start fresh on a second such project.

Intending to remain in the realm of the print publications that had been my publishing home for most of my life, I knew that anything found on a magazine rack would likely be too competitive and selective to consider my material. My status as a published writer did not distinguish me in an industry of critics, developers, and marketing specialists; I needed some other identity by which to distinguish myself. In the past, I had used my membership in other communities, such as a geographical region, to good advantage; so I considered my Mensa membership might make my writing eligible for that organization's monthly publication, the Bulletin.

In theory, this magazine consists of material aimed at the brightest 2% of the population, but in reality, the material is written by, not for, that segment - and not its members are good writers. And since Mensa is a nonprofit organization, there is little compensation or competition for submissions. I decided a November submission of my MQP for January's game-themed issue would be a timely and well-received. Other than this theme, the submission guidelines offered no criteria for content or style; indeed, past articles have been mostly of a

rambling, narrative variety - hardly the groundbreaking, scientific journal articles one would expect. The only guidelines were for format, which included a 1,000-word maximum length.

Eliminating 20,000 words from my project to fit the submission requirements of the *Mensa Bulletin* was not easy. Much discussion of history had to be eliminated, preventing me from demonstrating trends within a medium - eliminating the trees for the forest, so to speak. I also happily eliminated any reference to rock 'n roll; though pundits may feel no discussion of moral panics is complete without rock 'n roll, surely there are other historical moral panics that were also overlooked in my original MQP. Narrowing my focus to the three interactive media I chose seemed a suitable approach.

No new content was researched for this version of my MQP. The introductory and concluding paragraphs were new, with the former touching upon a recent spate of negative press the electronic entertainment industry has experienced, reminding my audience that the topic was (still) timely. The body of the article would primarily be culled from the 5% of the MQP that could survive the transition to this shorter format. Given this emaciation, retaining the essay's essence was paramount. Some text was cut-and-pasted, which required reworking to make it sensible in the new context. Though some new content had to be created, a surprising amount of original text was workable into the published edition; it was selecting which passages that would work that was the challenge. As I progressed through the abbreviated edition, I shared various revisions with three co-workers, none of whom had previous experience with the source material. Each provided similar insight and feedback; when disparate individuals independently agreed on a proposed revision, I knew I was on the right track. For example, I initially tried to define a moral panic by describing the context in which the term was coined. The Mods and Rockers of 1960's Britain was not an interactive medium, though, and did no more to define a

moral panic than the three examples I provided afterward. Abstract definitions of the concepts of a moral panic replaced this earlier attempt. Some later, specific quotations were also removed in favor of broader generalizations. Given the constraint of 1,000 words, becoming too enmeshed with only the specifics would leave me too far to step back to look at the broader context.

Stepping back now, I see that video games were the proving grounds for my writing. It helped me develop a critical eye, which in turn granted me the precision with which to express my opinion. I learned brevity and balance; I immersed myself in, and became proud of, this culture of electronic entertainment; and it enhanced my confidence in my opinion by validating it through publication. Who said games aren't educational?