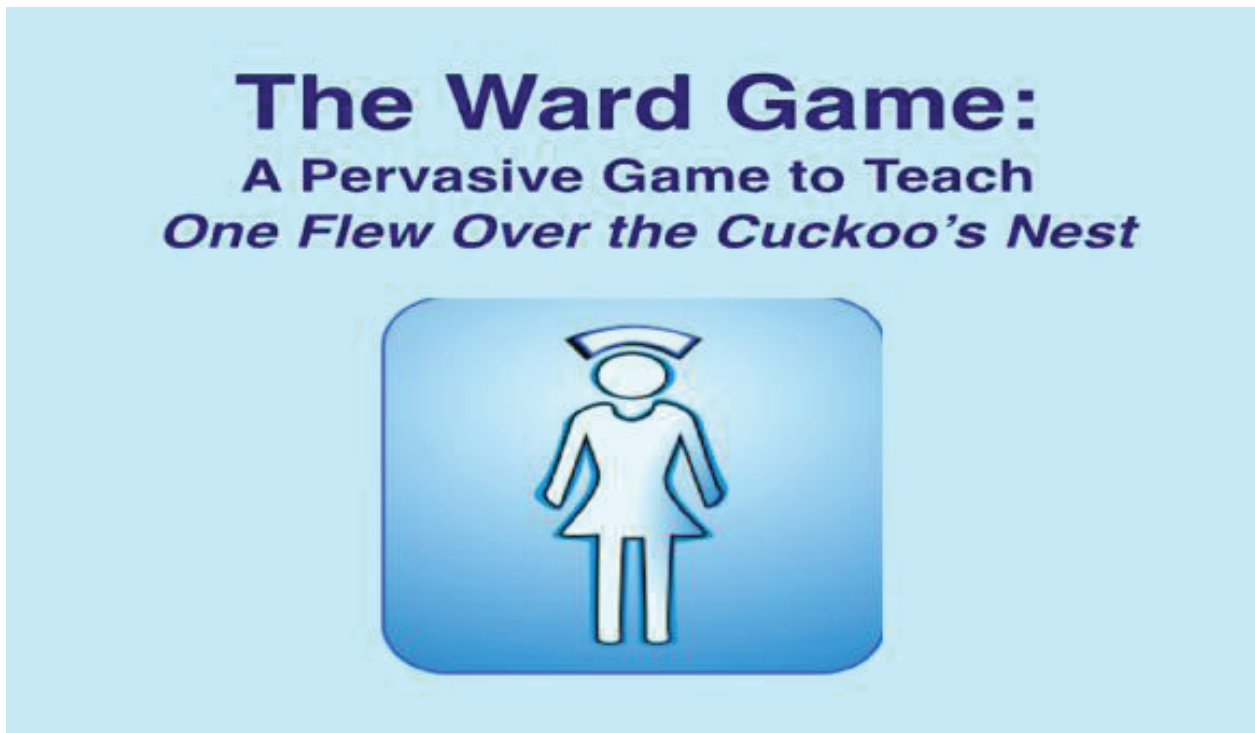


The Ward Game: A Pervasive Novel Study

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Example URL: <http://www.workingexamples.org/example/show/632>

The Ward Game is a pervasive game where students experience the world of a novel in an embodied and immersive fashion. Designed to teach Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, players are transformed into patients and the school's classrooms, corridors, bells and clocks became those of Nurse Ratched's ward. For 30 days, players are plunged into the world of the novel through a modular elixir of video game mechanics, videos, social media, interactive tools and locative activities.

Seed

Tell us about your idea or project. What's your vision?

My vision for *The Ward Game* emerged from thinking long and hard about how to engage my Grade 12 English students in a novel study during the height of senioritis, where they essentially coast to the end of the year once they've been accepted into university. It occurred to me that Kesey's institutional critiques in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* were wholly transferable to the education system, as both post-industrial institutions operate on similar principles. The way Nurse Ratched runs her ward is a satirical exaggeration, but the general mechanisms are not much different from the realities of many schools today.

By assuming the roles of patients in the ward, and being subjected to similar systems of oppression and conformity, I hoped my students would feel deeper empathy and engagement by embodying the themes and lessons of the narrative. They would be immersed into a strict world of control and low level paranoia that strove to follow the novel's narrative arc. Ideally, they would not only think about the themes of the story and the treatment of mental illness, but they would also reflect and question their own school experiences at the end of their graduating year.

Despite the game's outward demand for conformity, it would paradoxically bestow total and complete choice throughout. Students could choose to play or not play, accept or decline any mission or task, and even tailor their own missions. Depending on the activity, they had the choice to respond by writing, filming, recording, designing or carrying out kinesthetic tasks like flash mobs and dramatic performances.

Finally, my basic blueprint for engagement was to externalize video game mechanics into the real world to activate elements of the narrative. It was almost a year after the first iteration that I discovered that the best term to describe this dynamic was, broadly, a pervasive game.

What problem are you trying to solve and why does it matter?

When I first took the plunge, it was really just a matter of engagement. Doing something so different, complex and unexpected that I could draw my students in, despite their best efforts to resist.

After the first run, what was most remarkable and moving, was witnessing students who had wilted at the back of the class for 4 years come alive and work tirelessly at a time when they should have been at their lowest levels of motivation. Yet more proof that the hard wiring of traditional schools alienate and snuff out many bright lights. It was amazing to see that an alteration of the system could so dramatically recalibrate student performance. This observation is, of course, largely anecdotal.

There has been some discussion of the crisis regarding boys and reading, and I feel that notions of what a traditional English class looks like have to change. Reading and writing are the critical communication skills that underpin most other media, but English teachers have to consider the diversity of forms and literacies that are quickly dominating modern channels of communication. *The Ward Game* is an attempt to recast narrative in relevant and contemporary forms of communication.

As much as I love and believe in games, I don't think that they are the silver or magic bullet to solve all problems in education, but they are certainly part of the solution. The first run of *The Ward Game* also taught me that not all students like games, or this type of game in particular. An ideal educational program should offer a variety of systems and opportunities to harness the myriad of complex ways that intelligence is manifest.

It was also interesting to note that *The Ward Game* naturally invited multidisciplinary education. It included an economy, art, historical considerations, various forms of media production, collaboration, community service, privacy and surveillance literacy, physics, and narrative study. At the same time that the game, in the spirit of the novel, exaggerated and satirized some of the biggest problems in education, it subtly pointed to a viable set of solutions.

What challenges might pop up?

I've worked largely in isolation and, at this time, *The Ward Game* is more of a patchwork model rather than a cleanly scalable or transferable product. So much of it is dependent on my willingness to alter my personality and act like a doctor for 30 days, as well as the stress of negotiating the game's day-to-day unpredictability. I would appreciate some feedback and ideas as to how to help other teachers adopt and implement this type of game.

Formal assessment is also a big question. I've worked on a basic 100 point system with diminishing returns, that is also fed by an in-game economy and achievements. In some ways, video games are the best assessment tools out there - they provide constant feedback loops on player performance. I'd like to find out about possibilities for more intricate assessments that would more effectively measure student performance and provide ongoing feedback while they play.

As I am not a programmer or software engineer, one big gap in my game is the absence of dedicated software. I spend hours tallying points, distributing achievements, keeping track of missions, etc, but I'm certain that the right tools would free me to better respond to the evolving game rather than getting lost in menial labor.

Finally, I'm interested in the copyright implications of *The Ward Game*. In its current state, it is allowable within fair use laws in Canada. I have no desire to commercialize any aspect of the game, but I believe that it may be a canary to explore how pervasive game narratives might be interpreted by the individuals or institutions that hold the rights to works that might potentially be used.

Looking beyond the Kesey novel, it would be interesting to consider what types of narratives and stories best lend themselves to be developed into pervasive or environmental games.

Sprout

Tell us about your process and how your idea is evolving throughout the project.

My first iteration in 2012 was quite rough, and many aspects of the game diverged from the core *Cuckoo's Nest* narrative. In fact, I didn't really feel compelled to faithfully abide by the dictums of the source text. I used aspects of the main characters, tried to conjure a similar atmosphere to Ratched's ward and created mini-games that were thematically tied to the narrative. Largely, the idea was to create an unstable environment that was at once unpredictable and oppressive. That first run created a deep bond between my most active participants and myself, and

yielded many memorable anecdotes. A great deal of what occurred I made up as I went along (very stressful!), and in so doing, I essentially wrote the game's first draft.

The 2013 run was richer, better organized, more immersive and more faithful to Kesey's narrative. I made wide use of social media, and introduced lotteries, fishing expeditions, mock medication by appointment, a basketball tournament, propaganda videos and posters, a relevant and sophisticated economy, and a hunt for a stolen jar of Dilantin. I also developed a partnership with our Center for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) in Toronto. One of the quest chains led students interested in social justice and medicine to visit the facilities and better understand the treatment of mental health patients and the current uses of ECG. Functionally, I tried to make every aspect of the game relevant to the novel.

The second run definitely evolved into what the game development world would call a beta phase, but there remains ample territory for refinement, expansion and improvement.

What interesting patterns or insights have you discovered?

Remarkably, both times I've run the game, the playfully oppressive regime inspired equally playful rebellions. Much like McMurphy's defiant response to Nurse Ratched's authority in the novel, players creatively and harmlessly hacked and disrupted the game, inadvertently externalizing the book's key conflict. Framed in contemporary terms, by creating what amounts to a surveillance state, hacker factions rose in opposition to the systems of surveillance.

The game's elements combined to externalize Kesey's narrative and it unintentionally created a sort of microcosm of the emerging social and institutional issues of the early 21st century. Along the same lines, I believe that games are the defining cultural form of the 21st century, and by playing a sophisticated game many of the oft-cited 21st century learning skills naturally occurred without my having consciously built them into the game.

One aspect of the game I had to be careful about was that some students had trouble ascertaining that I was playing a character. Early in the first and second run, a few students became a bit unnerved and I had to speak to them informally to explain that it was all an act.

Finally, as I mentioned in another section, in both runs of the game, many of my lowest performing students did an about-face and became some of the game's most active and productive players. Something about the ludic dynamic empowered and engaged them. They proceeded with an aura of energy and self-confidence that had been, seemingly, mostly absent until that time. That, to me, remains the single most important element of the entire experience.