researchhub

CREATING THE WORLD OF A COURSE

Raising the level of student engagement.

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GetSmarter

WORLD CREATION

A mournful, headstrong queen walks into the blaze from a pyre. After some time, she emerges, unscathed, with a flight of dragons.

We accept this.

A brilliant detective, with a history of substance abuse, plummets from a towering height. Though widely believed to be dead, he reappears a few years later, emphatically alive.

We accept this too.

The jumping abilities of a plumber are instantaneously enhanced when eating mushrooms. This seems nutritionally dubious, but even this we accept.

Why are we so willing to suspend disbelief in all these instances? How can these events be so immersive, so convincing in their authenticity, that we dare not question them when they happen? The simple answer? Consistency. There is a consistent set of rules that applies to the worlds in which all of these events occur. We are eager to engage with these worlds, on an ongoing basis, because of how well established and rigid their logic is.

Raising the level of student engagement is a perennial concern in the design of educational programmes and courses. Consequently, there is much to be learned from the practices of world creation, which can be regarded as a form of creative problem-solving. This paper first uses the design challenges of two courses to demonstrate how different styles of world creation are appropriate for the educational requirements of specific subject areas and desired learning outcomes. Building on this, I look in more detail at one of these courses to tease apart the complexities of storytelling and, in particular, at how to manage the representation of time and the focusing of points of view.

CREATIVE PROBLEM SOLVING

Approaching learning design as problem solving focuses attention on the objectives of the proposed course, requiring that these are clearly defined. Here, this is illustrated by two, very different, courses in GetSmarter's portfolio; the University of Cape Town's Compliance Management and the University of the Witwatersrand's Teaching with Technology.

For *Teaching with Technology*, the design team established in the analysis phase that the course needed to be aimed at educators along the entire continuum of learning: primary, secondary, tertiary, and corporate education. One way to approach this would have been to create four characters for the course matched to each sector of the industry. However, this would have been over-demanding on both the graphic designer and the learning designer, who would have had to conceptualise and create all of those characters, and then use them proportionately throughout the course. Keeping in mind that the typical GetSmarter short course is 8 to 10 weeks long, it is not ideal to conceive and use four different characters of equal prominence.

The solution for *Teaching with Technology* was to develop two characters, "Mr Knott" and "Ms Bapela", who have rich and meaningful back stories which were used at pertinent points in the course, and who appear both as educators and as learners in a range of educational contexts (Figure 1). In a metafictional sense, this approach reflects the experience that students have had in their own lives, increasing their engagement with the course.

FIGURE 1: Mr Knott and Ms Bapela.

The objectives and requirements for *Compliance Management* were quite different. Here, the course material is dense, theoretical and has the danger of being perceived as deeply boring. In order for the course to be consistent with GetSmarter's constructivist pedagogical principles and approach, it was necessary to repackage the conventional, bookbound content that would have been used in a conventional, face-to-face presentation. The design team plotted and schemed and eventually came up with a passable solution.

To counter the perceived dryness of the content, the world of *Compliance Management* was suffused with a nautical theme. A business pursuing its goals was reimagined as a ship - the Enterprise - setting out on a voyage (Figure 2). The CEO is the captain steering the ship (Figure 3), the workers are the crew, the strategic plan is the map, and the sea is the market in which the business operates. The challenge for compliance management is presented by analogy to a nautical disaster (Figure 4). In this visually and conceptually evocative way, the design team was able to use students' existing sense of the world to help them acquire new information. Here, and in contrast with *Teaching with Technology,* it was not necessary or appropriate to name the characters. This was because the aim was to create a world in which students identified with broadly shared seafaring adventures, rather than with the life histories of individual characters.
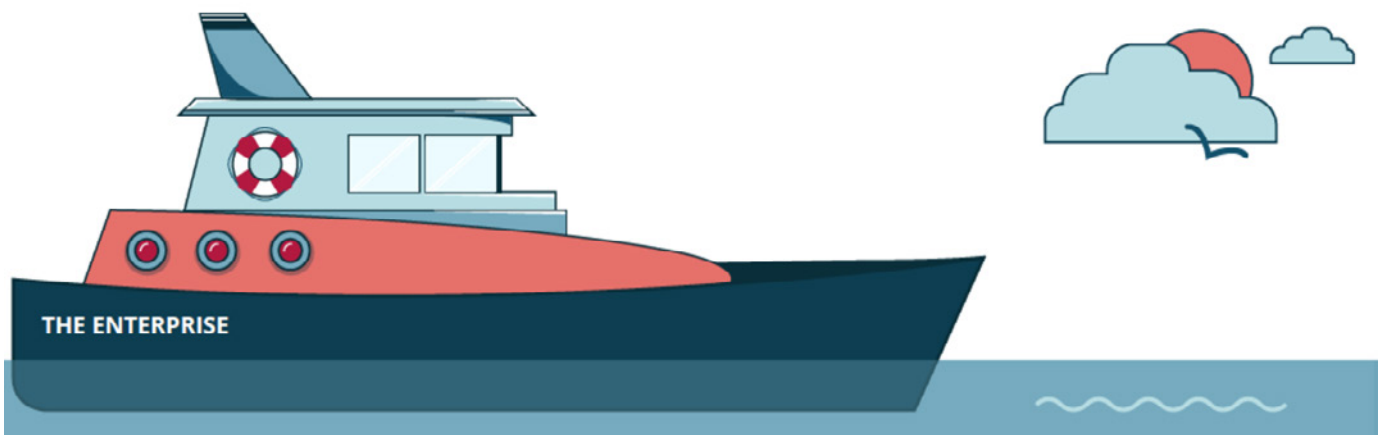

FIGURE 2: The Enterprise.
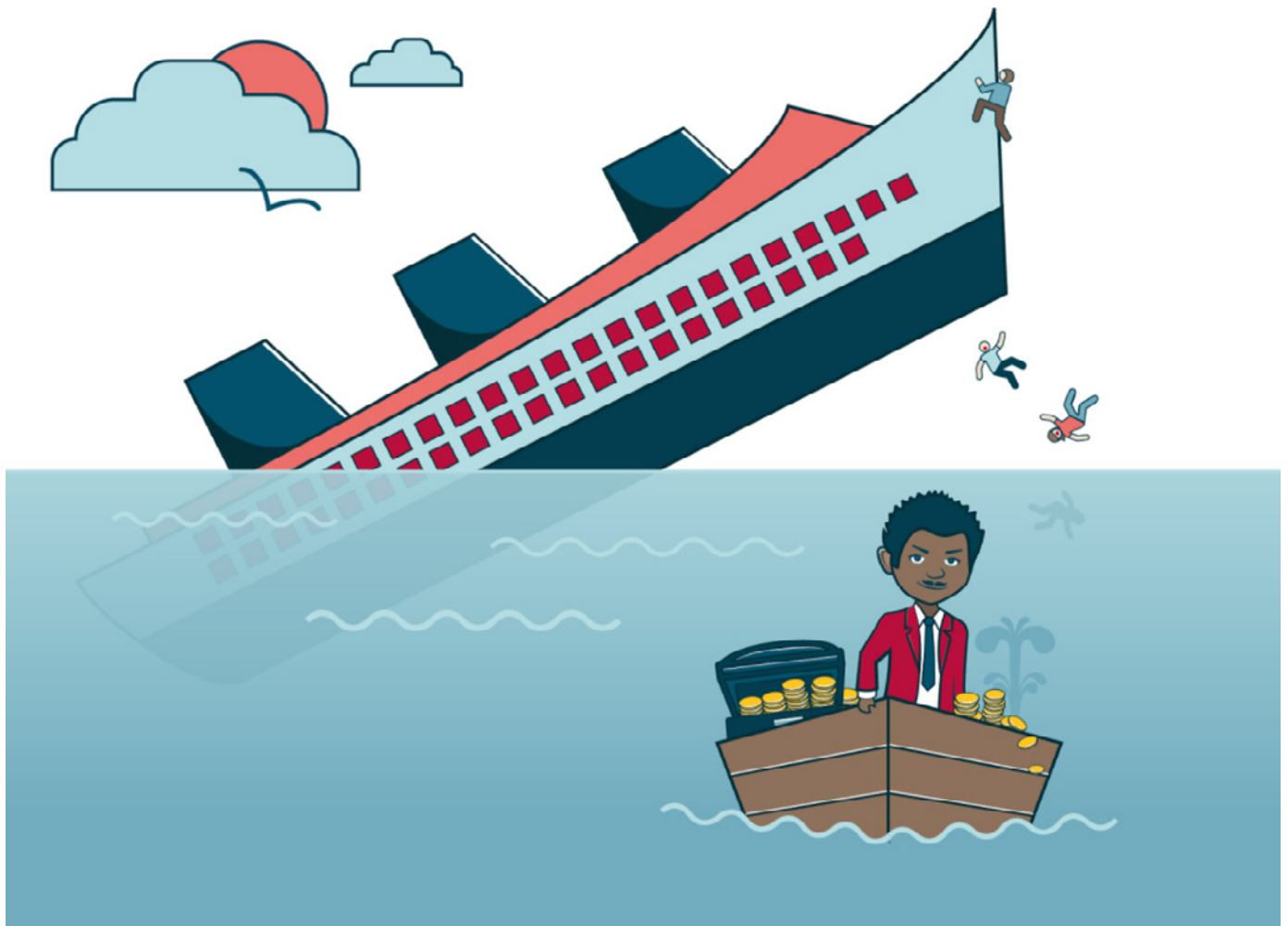

FIGURE 3: The captain.

FIGURE 4: Overboard.

Having this theme settled at an early stage of development gave the team the space to carry out a lot of detailed planning. For instance, the backgrounds for all of the presentations were conceived during the design phase. In turn, this served to draw others involved in the creative process into the emerging world of the course. For example, when the learning design plan was shared with the graphic designer, she took one look at Module 4, which deals with the stakeholders in the compliance framework, and identified those stakeholders as the crew. For Module 5, which covers how to assess and manage compliance risk, another team member suggested making the background a shipping yard, with cargo (potential risk) being labelled (assessed) and loaded aboard the ship before it sets sail. The graphic designer created that image upfront as part of the course's visual style (Figure 5). This high level of consistency serves to build the authenticity of the world of the course, in turn enhancing the transmission of knowledge and students' learning gain.

FIGURE 5: Taking risk on board.

The consistency and authenticity of the world of Compliance Management was also at the forefront of the team's concerns when putting together the video outlines. This is reflected in the script, where the instructor may explain difficult concepts in terms of the nautical analogy. Video 1, from Module 3, demonstrates this point. In looking at enterprise-wide risk management, the instructor likens a business to a boat driven forward by the two engines of strategy and operations. Rather than being a throwaway graphic or animation, this reference supports an essential concept that students have to understand.
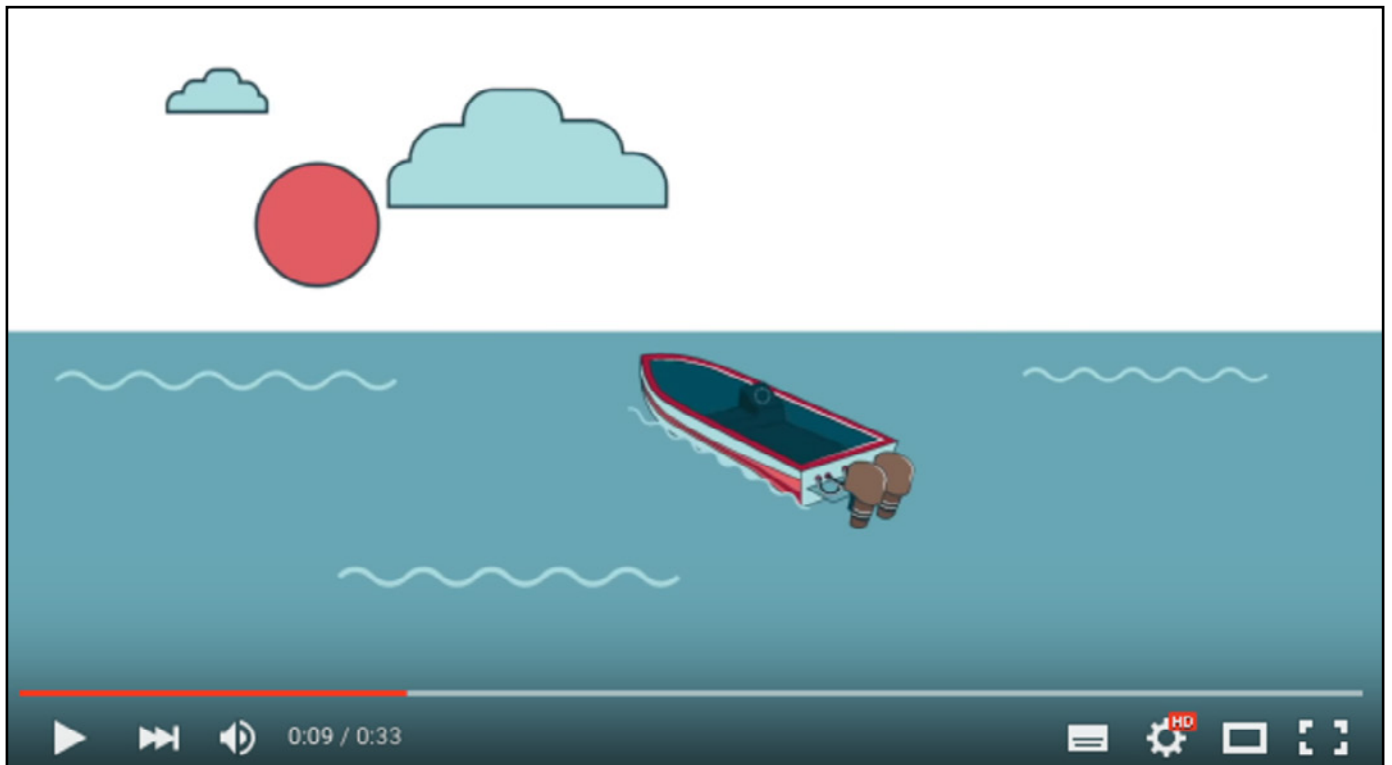
VIDEO 1: Two-engined boat analogy. (Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z-C5DTgJfjs)

STORYTELLING

Once an appropriate world has been created it must be animated by the course content. This requires careful attention to storytelling, as can be illustrated by the example of Teaching with Technology. Here, the design challenge was ensuring that the course would engage students who are themselves educators along the entire continuum of learning. What follows is an account of how the design team made this work.

Effective and compelling characterisation is central to the authenticity of this world. Mr Knott and Ms Bapela appear throughout the course, often in alternating modules, and in different components. For example, in Module 2, Ms Bapela is the star of a scenario that precedes a quiz; in Module 3, students are prompted to download a lesson plan developed by Mr Knott, and in Module 4, both characters are referenced in the build-up to a discussion prompt. These appearances are always determined by the needs of the course content. In addition, the backstories of the characters are contextually tied to the content of the module. This makes the world of the course more likely to be perceived as authentic and immersive, rather than arbitrary and ornamental.

By way of example, consider this opening scene from the notes in Module 6 of the course, which deals with the demands of 21st century learning:

Back in his days as a learner, tasked with completing a project for school, Alan Knott would make his way to the local library. Even now, the grand old building's layout is safely locked away in his memory. It was a labyrinth in which he could be happily lost for hours at a time. There, the young Knott would marvel at the imposing shelves, the towers of knowledge that seemed to extend all the way to the ceiling, packed tight with dust-laden books, their pages yellowing from neglect. He would run his fingers along their spines, and promise the books he had yet to read that he would return for them. However, there never seemed to be enough time. If only he were allowed to take out more than four books at once, but this was always sternly forbidden by the grim and pedantic librarians. When they waddled off to make tea, he would fetch a chair from a nearby desk and, as an act of protest, would attempt to retrieve some unknown treasure from the uppermost shelves.

Once he had gathered his paperback reward and negotiated his way off the chair, he would find his spot, in front of the window near the magazine racks. This is where he would sit in the afternoon sun, immersed in his book, until those dream-crushing librarians came to tell him it was closing time. He would have to return the next day after school.

School is out now, and Mr Knott sits at his desk in the same midday sun, growing wistful at the thought of the paper-based past, as he marks the projects of his learners. Scanning their bibliographies, he notices the absence of books. Virtually every reference appears to be from the internet. Skimming through their content, he begins to get concerned about the reliability of these references. How can he teach his learners to identify a reputable source? How can he help them to evaluate the quality of the material that they come across and not to get submerged beneath the flow of information? These are just some of the challenges inherent in 21st century teaching and learning....

In this scene, the focus is on how educators can help learners to develop the skills that they need to succeed in the 21st century. There is a contrast between what learning used to be like and what it entails today. Because of his age, Mr Knott is the preferred choice to illustrate this difference.

We have a tactile experience in a physical location; a boy running his fingers along the spines of books, being overshadowed by the height of bookshelves; the past (Figure 6). This is set against something intangible – searching for and encountering information online (the present). There are also other contrasts here. Most significant is the difference between the Knott that the students have come to know (a teacher, who is apprehensive about the role of technology in his classroom) and the young Knott (a carefree learner, who loves books and lacks adult supervision).

FIGURE 6: The tactile experience of the library.

In developing effective characterisation, the relations between narrative time and real time have to be handled with care. This is especially important when there are multiple timelines in play, which is always the case when fleshing out the backstory of a character. There are several timelines running through the library scene. First is Alan Knott as a child, scavenging for books ("Back in his days as a learner"). Then there is Mr Knott in the present reminiscing on this scene ("Even now"). Then there is the young Knott again, raging against the system. Finally, time is folded flat and Mr Knott is at his desk, still sitting in the light of the immutable sun.

There is a particular narrative device being used here known as analepsis. Analepsis is essentially a flashback that should help to inform the reader about the present circumstances of the character using formative events from their past. One of the reasons this narrative is effective is because of the seemingly natural transition that analepsis allows us to make. We have travelled from the narrative present into the past and returned again all in the space of a paragraph, covering thirty years, a period during which the nature of learning and seeking out information has fundamentally changed (the key content-related point that is being made). The reason this can justifiably be referred to as a "natural" transition, despite its achronological movement, is because the events of Mr Knott's past have been juxtaposed with the narrative present to shed further light on his character and the event in which he is currently engaged.

We meet Mr Knott fully formed. In order to understand how he came to be the way that he is (and, more broadly, why things are the way that they are now), we use the device of analepsis to peer just as far back as we need to into time. This presents students with a three-dimensional character to whom they can relate, which should lead them to invest emotionally in the events of Mr Knott's life, drawing them into the learning experience and elevating their engagement with the material.

Getting course content across with the frameworks of effective characterisation and narrative depends on focalisation. Focalisation is used to articulate the viewpoint, or perspective, from which the story is being told, as well as how events are being perceived and understood. It refers not only to the narrator or character(s) in focus, but also to the particular points in time and place in which and from which the story is being related. There can be a distinction between the person who is telling the story and the view from which the events unfolding in the story are seen; there can be both a narrator and a focaliser. The library in Teaching with Technology again serves as an example.

The description of the librarians, although narrated by an unnamed third person, is evidently focalised by Mr Knott, who remembers the librarians as having been "grim and pedantic" towards him. Rather dramatically, he views their noble attempts to carry out their duties as "dream-crushing". He even snipes at their weight, slyly suggesting that the librarians are portly by using the verb "waddle" to describe their movement. This use of emotive vocabulary communicates to us precisely how Alan Knott would have felt in the moment. The same can be said of Alan Knott's amazement at the "towers of knowledge". There is childlike wonder that is being related here. He "marvels" at the "imposing" shelves – a result of their physical size in relation to him at the time. The point to note here is that focalisation can be a straight line to empathy. It allows the student to identify with the character through a shared human experience.

WORLDS CREATED

The different learning requirements of the two courses reviewed here serve both to demonstrate the value in creating a rich, consistent and compelling world and also in understanding in depth what is necessary to ensure consistency and to establish authenticity. Overall, there are three main reasons for worldbuilding:

To deepen understanding of the course content: here, the principal aim is to create a visual and conceptual frame of reference to which students can return all through the course. This might take the form of a course-wide analogy or theme that uses existing, accessible knowledge to help students learn something new and more complex. Here, this has been demonstrated through the example of Compliance Management.

To speak to the student audience: participants will identify with the experiences of richly developed, relatable, and realistic characters. The aim here is to get students to invest in those characters, to root for them, establishing a straight line to empathy. The characters should encounter relevant and realistic challenges, which they eventually overcome, through understanding and applying the course material. Teaching with Technology demonstrates this principle well.

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To create a repository of graphics that can be easily repurposed: this is a time- and resource-saving strategy, allowing graphics to be adapted and reused as needed. It should also save some thinking time since a character is not appearing as an astronaut in one module and then being reimagined as a train conductor in the next. Taking this approach with both Compliance Management and Teaching with Technology freed the design team to pay more attention to aligning their work with the required learning outcomes for both courses.

Creating the world of a course is a challenging feat; the ultimate rewards – student engagement and understanding – are well worth the effort expended. As student data (both survey feedback and more detailed learner analytics) continue to accumulate, we should be able to glean, more accurately, the extent to which the practice of worldbuilding has proved to be effective in designs for online education.

FURTHER READING

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