Basho & Friends Literacy Game for Tablet

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Abstract

Basho & Friends is an in-progress prototype for an interactive children’s book. Here, children ages 8-13 collaborate with young Basho, the legendary founder of haiku poetry, to become poets themselves. This project exemplifies a “convivial tool,” defined by philosopher Ivan Illich as a platform designed to promote creative expression. Here, we imagine new possibilities for reading, sensemaking, and creative writing based on past forms and ideas. Through poetry, Basho promotes meaningful principles of literacy and sustainability today. Children can engage with Basho’s story in an historical context and practice haiku to see themselves as authors of their life stories.

Essay

“People talk to you a great deal about your education,” writes Dostoyevsky in The Brothers Karamazov, “but some good, sacred memory, preserved from childhood, is perhaps the best education”(ch. 3). As an educator, writer, and designer, I wondered how to design experiences that cultivate good, sacred memories for young people—especially for underserved children alienated from reading and writing who might not have positive memories in traditional educational settings? I identified two mediums that could help elevate children in their education: games and stories. Games introduce players to a world, made real through aesthetics, boundaries, rules, and artifacts, and actualized through actions. Stories help readers and listeners lean into inner worlds of emotion far from their own. When created with a humanist intent, both mediums can educate. Games excel in creating fun experiences that help players discover and develop mastery while stories promote literacy, empathy, and beliefs.

This insight led me and my collaborator, Julie Finton, to create Basho & Friends, an in-progress prototype of an interactive children’s book. Here, children ages 8–13 can close gaps between
Design Goal

This app prototype promises to become a vivid and shareable innovation in literacy and sustainability for creative writers and designers. Through this prototype, we ask, how might we create learning experiences that help fulfill the needs of underserved children? These children, reading grade levels 4–8, attend regular and special education programs like bilingual programs or home school, and often live in urban and suburban settings where children lack sufficient access to nature and printed books. In Basho & Friends, children can become more motivated to write while cultivating familiarity with haibun and haiku. Other long-term benefits of this project include an awareness of the human impact on the environment and an appreciation for historical contexts of literature.

Unlike many print children’s books, Basho & Friends encourages students to write into the narrative to complete the unfolding story. Unlike many interactive games on the market, Basho & Friends promotes literacy, the ability to infer meaning in context. While some forms of reading literacy translate from print into digital media, others transform. For example, in digital media, “the notion of rhyme may be extended beyond the repetition of identical or similar sounds in words to the repetition of identical or similar animation as a new way of creating paradigmatic relationships between the elements of kinetic text” (Simanowski et al. 6). We aim to help children—especially those who lack frequent access to nature—to harness their innate capacity for curiosity and learning with a digital tool that hones their literacy in multiple modalities. Children can move from the immersion of a story and a game and into competence, autonomy, and creativity in reading and writing haiku. This practice can also help children later in their studies and in life. James Paul Gee, a professor of literacy studies at Arizona State University, observes that, “[t]he human mind works best when it can build and run simulations of experiences its owner has had (much like playing a video game in the mind) in order to understand new things and get ready for action in the world.” Video games are a domain where young people of all races and classes readily learn specialist varieties of language and ways of thinking without alienation. Thus it is useful to think about what
they can teach us about how to make the learning of specialist varieties of language and thinking in school more equitable, less alienating, and more motivating. (3–4)

**Game as “Magic Circle”**

In his 1938 book *Homo Ludens*, cultural historian Johan Huizinga coined the term “magic circle” to describe the experience of stepping into a game. Here, players willingly suspend rules from their ordinary life and accept challenges that make achieving their goals more difficult. As game designer Raph Koster notes, games make learning fun through pattern-matching against experience and puzzles. Fun from games arises out of comprehension. It is the act of solving puzzles that makes games fun. I believe that children might more willingly accept challenges while learning literacy patterns and skills in the context of a digital game.

The historical Basho embodies many qualities that young learners can emulate inside and outside of the magic circle. In his book, *The Art of Haiku*, Stephen Addiss describes characteristics of Basho: “Don’t fit into categories...Appreciate the past but don’t be overwhelmed by it...Seek the new...Be curious and non-judgmental...find the humor and lightness...bring together the unlike...know that nature and human nature are the same” (123–126). Born in 1644, scholars believe that Basho soon became orphaned and was sent away to apprentice at the nearby Ueno Castle. Here, Basho may have worked as a cook, and he befriended Yoshi, the son of the feudal lord of the castle. He began to learn the art of poetry writing, especially a collaborative form called renga, which is likened to games like Scrabble today. Haiku, in fact, means “play verse” (Aitken 26). Yoshi’s death as a young man devastated Basho. He would soon leave the comforts of his adopted home to become an itinerant scholar and austere poet, sleeping in a hut near a banana tree (“basho” is a pen-name that means banana). Basho would only return to the castle of his youth many years later for a brief visit, which provides the narrative framing for the app.

**The Basho & Friends Play Experience**

*Basho & Friends* opens with a screen inviting children to learn about Basho and his poetry.

The main experience anchors children in Basho’s childhood, living in the castle grounds. Basho is about twelve years-old. The story is written in haibun form: prose paragraphs punctuated and deepened by haiku poems. The story moves forward as cut scenes in discovery and feedback moments. During discovery moments, children are introduced to new challenges and ecologies. In feedback, they see the results of their actions. Children complete the haiku challenges and explore the game map, making it less linear than traditional narratives in books. In the game, these haikus give voice to the animals in Basho’s world.
The story begins with Yoshi and Satoko, Basho’s brother-and-sister friends, who introduce us to Basho’s backstory. While they traverse the castle grounds, multi-modal readers and players of the app can glimpse a rich natural environment. They may also notice trees felled in the background, which hint at the call-to-action in the story and the stakes of the game: the animals are losing their habitat, and they need help.

As we enter his home, we discover young Basho meeting with the animals of the pond, fields, and forest: frog, rabbit, deer, bear, and woodpecker. The village near the castle is expanding. The villagers are ploughing the fields, imperiling the rabbit; plucking the blueberries, leaving few remaining for the bear;
cutting down trees to build more wooden homes, leaving the woodpecker and her babies with fewer places to nest; and finally, creating a dam in the stream, depleting the pond and marshes, upsetting the frog.

The animals want the villagers to appreciate nature and change destructive actions to promote mutual flourishing. Yet they lack the language skills of Basho and his friends. The player of the game must explore the worlds of each animal and write haikus, which will be posted and read aloud in the village square. With each new poem created, spirits protect the animal’s environment. Shintoism believes that all of nature is animate and inhabited by watchful spirits. This manifests in the game as colorful lights filling up the landscape as feedback for each new poem written.

Completing the prototype at present, we anticipate that the final game will be scaffolded by adapting methods described by haiku poet Patricia Donegan in her 2018 book, Write Your Own Haiku for Kids.
The first interactive prompts will involve completing missing parts of Basho’s poems, shown inside a thought bubble as Basho contemplates completing his poem. Children will collect images observed in the landscape and drag and drop them into the thought bubble. The dragged-and-dropped images will turn into words to complete the poem. Once this initial poem is completed, the landscape will provide feedback in the form of the animated frog jumping into the pond with protective spirits lighting up the environment. The first poem will be Basho’s most famous:
The old pond;
A frog jumps in
The sound of water

(Aitken 25)

This mechanic corresponds with surface interactions of grammar and vocabulary. The 5–7–5 syllabic requirement would work well in concert with noun, noun-verb, and noun patterns that many three-line haikus follow, but it is a convention introduced in the West. As long as the poem can be spoken in one breath, as Basho would have wanted, we believe we don’t need the syllabic counter as a feedback device in the game. As the child moves from the pond to the forest or fields, navigating by clicking on a game map, they then use a seasonal journal, a common tool for haiku poets. This journal will function like a scrapbook, following a traditional collectibles format: the weather, the heavens, earth, humanity, holiday observances, animals, and plants.

The season affects what the player finds at each location. For instance, forest deer are signifiers of autumn. By tapping on an image in the game, a child can collect it into the journal. The player also has the option to simply write what they encounter. An interactive prompt encourages them to more richly describe each collected word and provide more context for it. Further interactive prompts, inspired by Donegan’s scaffolding, give children more freedom to move from the simple “doing” actions of dragging and dropping, to adapting poems, making their own, and creating new hybrid forms by creating surprising juxtapositions of images in three-line haikus.

By completing the haiku for each animal and all four seasons, children complete the haibun—the greater story of how the animals appreciate their land, and by sharing the haiku with the growing village, the villagers learn to appreciate nature with new eyes. In the magic circle of the game, reading becomes less abstract and interleaves with making. Captivating patterns, combined with a story, can help make learning haiku fun for children who might not otherwise resonate with this poetic form.

*Basho & Friends* core mechanic involves writing prompts and collecting images, dragging and dropping them, turning them into words, and scrapbooking through the seasonal journal. Goggles can also be a tool that allow a child to focus on specific areas in their environment and notice more. Children can then print their haiku journals using a system similar to FiftyThree’s Paper app, which allows users to create, print, and share illustrated Moleskin journals through digital and analog platforms.
Korenblat: Basho & Friends

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Conclusion

In the 1973 book *Tools for Conviviality*, philosopher Ivan Illich called for convivial tools that “enrich the environment with the fruits of his or her own vision” (21). With *Basho & Friends*, we intend to promote a new tool for convivial creative writing. By playing the game, children write their own haikus and can choose to publish them. They take creative actions, and through story, step into the inner-world of a creative writer. Children also complete a haibun, the prose-poem that propels the story and promotes an ecological message. Digital play, often associated with consuming, can become a place for producing poems. This app can help children step into their own world with a writing practice informed and elevated by Basho’s timeless principles.
This project is a collaboration between Joshua Korenblat, assistant professor of graphic design at The State University of New York at New Paltz; Julie Finton, a former ESL instructor at the Pratt Institute, writer, artist, and a researcher of digital learning; and Sweta Pendyala, an engineer. To learn more about Basho & Friends, please see our design document at bit.ly/2AINVbR.

WORKS CITED


BIOGRAPHY

Joshua Korenblat is an Assistant Professor of Graphic Design at the State University of New York at New Paltz, where he teaches data visualization and illustration. Joshua also teaches a liberal arts course in design literacy, theory, and practice. At SUNY New Paltz, Joshua serves on the Digital Humanities Board and is a Sustainability Faculty Fellow. Joshua has seven years of experience in the Art Department at National Geographic magazine and Science News. Joshua is also co-founder and Art Director at Graphicacy, an information graphics and data visualization firm based in Washington, DC. Joshua is the Education Lead at Viz for Social Good, an international platform founded by Chloe Tseng that helps mission-driven organizations tell their stories in vivid and shareable ways.

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