

## “Musicologists’ Creed”: Digital Interactive Fiction, Historical Role-Play, and the Pedagogy of Contingent Narrative

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Teaching history typically entails developing narratives which link individuals, contexts, causes, and effects in order to enrich learners’ comprehension. “Musicologists’ Creed” is the umbrella term for an ongoing teaching project at Texas Tech University School of Music, which exploits the intersections of digital technology, narrative contingency, and the playful pleasures of immersive gaming contexts. #MCreed resists presumptions regarding chains of sequential historical moments, instead prioritizing a more reflective and “contingent” understanding of historical experience.<sup>1</sup>

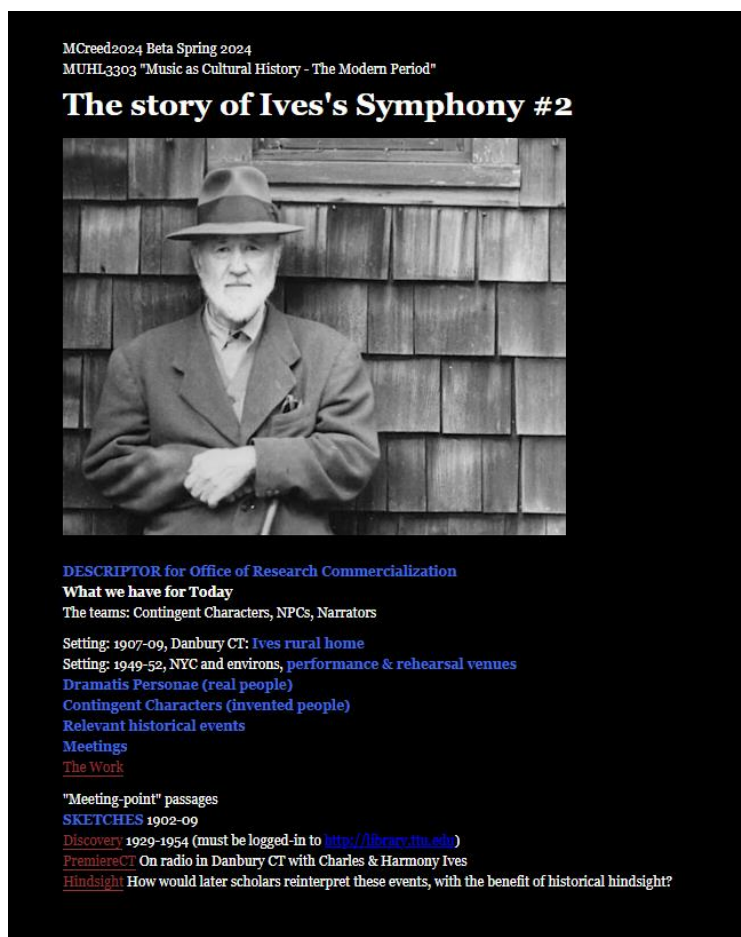


Figure 1: Screen capture of 2024 #MCreed build

#MCreed in practice borrows the historical role-playing models of packages like “Reacting to the Past”<sup>2</sup> and books like Mark C. Carnes’ *Minds on Fire: How Role-Immersion Games Transform College*, but adds a parallel stream: that of interactive fiction.<sup>3</sup> This enables students to engage directly with primary sources, debating policy, reenacting key moments, and developing historical insight through replicated experience. They also develop trans-media skills required to employ interactive-fiction tools like Twine and (formerly) Twitter.



*Figure 2: Professor Horatio Parker & father George Ives argue about son Charles’s mediocre grades at Yale, while a conductor looks on.*

#MCreed models historical contingency.<sup>4</sup> Role-playing and interactive fiction games can be a bridge to students’ comprehension of history’s qualities as contingent, challenging, and fun. Over the course of ten years (2015-2025) of developing, refining, and employing *Musicologists’ Creed*, I have found that many undergraduate music history students respond well to this approach. Some choose the sophomore-level #MCreed course, “Music of the Long Twentieth Century,” because they are tired of writing the conventional undergraduate research paper—and others because they dread it. Some are gamers or cosplayers, intrigued by the idea of inhabiting historical characters and their worlds. Some are curious, and, after the first class meeting, opt in because the #MCreed experience is “different.” I continue to refine the game, revising watershed events and assignments, finding better ways to teach the simple Twine coding and to build historical content into the coding assignments, and this year, extending the game to all class members.

A core skill set in teaching across the fine arts and humanities is critical thinking: that is, the ability to look at physical, perceptual, or semiotic data and discern underlying factors shaping the data's organization. As writers and researchers, we engage these skills in our scholarship; as teachers, we model, describe, and coach the same techniques with our students. Teaching history, in particular, implicates the development of narratives that link individuals, contexts, causes, and effects in order to understand why events unfolded as they did.

Teaching history as *contingent* means finding ways to problematize canons, timelines, and expository narratives. Students sometimes perceive music history as a chain of sequential, successive events—great works, great men—each seemingly arising inevitably and unavoidably from its predecessors. I want to help them understand that particular historical results are instead a product of complex interactions whose outcomes were, in their time, uncertain. I'm also interested in flipping other elements of classroom delivery, including the use of technology/social media, the dynamics of back-and-forth communication, and a freer flow of information between and among participants. Developing this mode of instruction has required a lot of trial and error. For example, in the first iterations of #MCreed, I found that although students enjoyed role-playing, there was little “research output.” I sought to extend the appeal of the course to those interested in narrative and immersive computer games. I incorporated Twine, the free, open-source, in-browser editor that permits learners to author their own interactive fiction and choice-based texted narratives. It provides both appeal and a collaborative research output: a game, group-authored and unique to that year's participants, that could be output as .html, hosted online, and shared across the web.<sup>5</sup>

#MCreed's design thus incorporates resources and critical-thinking skills which, though myself not a gamer, I have encountered within the gaming and interactive fiction communities. Those communities encompass surprisingly wide and diverse demographics, for whom a significant percentage of gameplay's appeal can derive from its immersive historical contexts; designs like *Assassin's Creed* Discovery Tour, for example, deactivate the run-and-fight model to permit players' free-flowing exploration of a rich virtual world.<sup>6</sup> A tranche of even simpler text-focused games uses branching narratives to allow players to explore spaces and events.<sup>7</sup>

When I began teaching second-year-level music history, the standard metric for demonstrating critical thinking skills was the scaffolded research paper. This is a tried-and-true mode of assessment, and it still has powerful merits. However, I teach large-enrollment classes of 100 students: 100 student papers, each undergoing four to six stages of review and revision, present a massive workload. One practical motive behind the shift was the impossibility of sustaining multi-stage writing assessment in large-enrollment classrooms. In addition, Texas public education standards have shifted from “writing-intensive” to “communications-intensive assessments.” But what exactly is or should be defined or assessed as “communications literacy”? Could it be possible to turn this challenge into an opportunity? A

flipped approach to teaching history—shifting from memorization of chains of facts to the creation of alternate-historical scenarios, and shifting from the conventional “term paper” toward what Jesse Stommel and others have called the “unessay”—felt as if it had more juice in it: more energy, more unknowability, more possibilities: in short, more *contingency*.<sup>8</sup>

Teaching history in a fashion that centered contingency might speak to twenty-first-century learners’ capacity to problem-solve, to prefer learning collaboratively, to employ a web-style capacity to synthesize demonstrated and empirical knowledge—and, importantly, to their sense of the world as uncertain, unpredictable, fragile. I was inspired by the *Reacting to the Past* curriculum; however, I chose to write my own scenarios. Recently, we focused on three watershed events in late-nineteenth-century music history contexts: the 1876 premiere of Wagner’s *Ring des Nibelungen* at the Bayreuth Festspielhaus, the 1888 visit by the Eighth Cavalry Mexican Military Band to the New Orleans World’s Industrial and Cotton Centennial Exposition, and the 1893 opening of the World Columbian Exposition in Chicago. All are resonant and redolent of their historical contexts, all employed sound and music as experiential factors, and all provided primary sources, texts, descriptions, biographical sketches, images, and a range of materials that could be “inhabited” by teams of students. As some of the interpolated images from our preparations and our festive “Reveal Day” show, student participants entered into the role-playing with gusto. The unpredictability of the questions from the faculty and student guests in turn encouraged #MCreed participants to think on their feet and respond in real time, relying upon their command of biographical and historical details. But at the same time, “Reveal Day” also required that the participants think *beyond* their teams’ prepared scripts and imagine how their historical characters might have responded in precisely the contingent ways in which #MCreed argues history works.



Figure 3: Dual portrait of two Elliott Carters composing



Figure 4: Soprano soloist, Narrator, and Composer at an Ives premiere

This evolving approach in #MCreed really took off when I paired the immersive-learning space with Twine, available as free, open-source code that works either through a browser or via desktop application, supported by a robust user community, and capable of outputting a complete multi-staged branching narrative fictional game as a single, portable HTML file. Twine replicates “Choose Your Own Adventure”-style formats and reader pleasure in a handy and low-footprint digital tool.<sup>9</sup> Having students participate simultaneously in the creation and embodiment of (real and invented) historical observers, and in the coding and authorship of the digital game, provided experiential and collaborative learning, and a concrete output that could be saved, played, and shared with others.

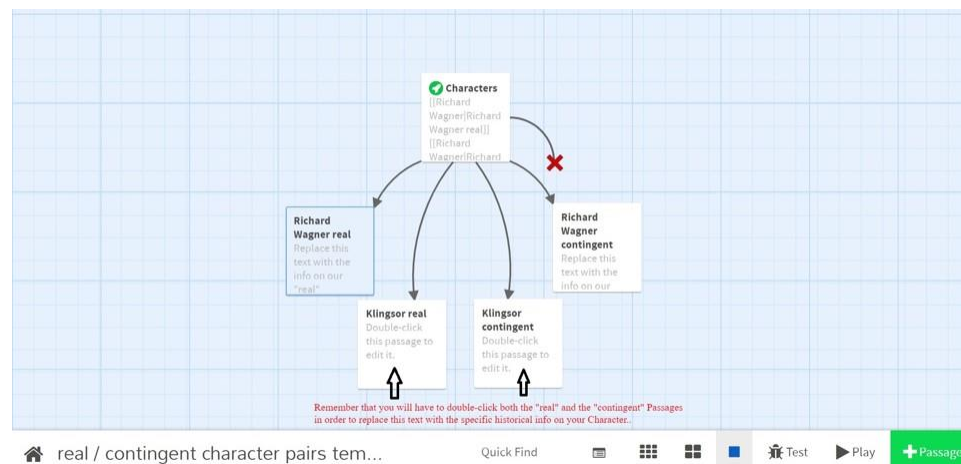


Figure 5: Sample of a Twine workspace build

## The Content

Module One: In this introductory module, which takes as its watershed event the opening of the Bayreuth Festspielhaus in 1876 with the premiere of Wagner's Ring cycle, students are introduced to the idea of historical contingency and learn the basics of Twine authoring. They author simple biosketch passages for either real or contingent characters.

Module Two: In the second module (around week 6), which focuses upon the impact of the 8th Cavalry Mexican Military Band at the World's Industrial and Cotton Centennial Exposition in 1884 upon the New Orleans brass band tradition, we introduce gamified "branching narratives," in which they learn the Twine skills to create multi-staged "Choose Your Own Adventure" gaming architecture.

Elena BERGERSSON is packing up her viola as one of the few straggles left from rehearsal. She's not sure about the plot of this ballet and it feels like it's something she's seen before. It would probably be more enjoyable if she understood the folk music being used. As she's putting away her music she hears a commotion from on stage. She looks up and sees Francis Augustine.

BERGERSSON: "Francis, what are you doing up there?"

AUGUSTINE: *looks bewildered at her until he recognizes her.* "Ah, Elena! I am trying to get some advice on my newest composition! It uses folk music and I wanted to see if I could meet Diaghilev."

Elena looks around and sees no one.

BERGERSSON: "Well there isn't anyone tied to the music composition here anymore, I guess you could come tomorrow, but Sergei Diaghilev didn't write this ballet, he only paid for it."

He looks around confused.

AUGUSTINE: "Well I must have gotten confused." *He looks down and mumbles mostly to himself:* "Then again I wasn't entirely sure who Monsieur Satie was talking about after how much he had the other night..."

Before he could finish his thought Jaroslav Vesely, one of the choreographers for the ballet, walks on stage and locks eyes with Francis before recognition sets in. Jaroslav's face fills with rage.

VESELY: "YOU. GET OUT."

Francis flinches, looking guilty.

AUGUSTINE: "I didn't do anything this time, I promise I'm just looking for advice!"

VESELY: *loudly enough to catch the attention of the remaining instrumentalists.* "I HAVE ADVICE FOR YOU, GET OUT"

Jaroslav seems to be close to seizing him, but with awareness of the unwanted attention from his colleagues only storms out in the opposite direction. Francis and Elena hurry out of the concert hall. While catching his breath and scratching his neck, He apologizes and asks Elena if she wants to get coffee with him to make it up to her. Elena finds that she is curious about Jaroslav's side of the story more and politely declines, but she isn't quite sure she has the energy after such a long rehearsal to sate her curiosity.

Should she:

A: Follow Jaroslav back inside

B: Go home

Figure 6: Sample branching narrative capturing a "contingent" meeting

Module Three: In this module (commencing around week 12), the group as a whole begins to merge both Twine skills and authored material into a single master game, focusing upon the multicultural vernacular musics presented in concert halls, exhibitions, and Chicago dance halls during the World Columbian Exposition of 1893. All three of these events are "watershed moments" that I can employ readily to help students understand the interplay of people, social factors, built environments, and cultural aesthetics that yield specific historic music sounds.

As a teacher of historical method (in my case, within performing arts), my approach to practice-based learning emphasizes situating students' critical perspectives *within cultural contexts*: moments across



diverse historical, cultural, and experiential situations, out of which have emerged particular artistic and critical creations. At Bayreuth, New Orleans, and Chicago, individuals and communities met one another in time and space. In the flipped teaching of #MCreed, students can, by embodying historical figures, inventing fictional observers, and grappling with period and contextual ways of seeing the world, music, and one another, meet one another and enter into history in a fashion that makes it engaging, contingent, and real. By contextualizing such creative expressions, modeling the factors and perceptions that shaped them, and—very importantly—exploring historical alternatives, I can model and evoke contingent thinking. #MCreed presents and collides the casts of characters and context-specific cultural aesthetics that have shaped watershed historical/artistic events; and the “alternate scenarios” through which, for example, Stravinsky’s *Le Sacre du printemps* (1913) or Satie’s *Parade* (1917) might never have been created—or, rather, created very differently.

Cultural aesthetics have shaped musical/stylistic changes in every era of every music worldwide, but particularly immediately and impactfully in the “long Twentieth Century” of European music—roughly 1857–1980. In the second-year undergraduate classroom, it has proved useful to describe aesthetics as “ideas about what music should be and should do.” We thus sometimes reference aesthetics in this way as “-isms”—Romantic**ism**, modern**ism**, impression**ism**, expression**ism**, neo-classic**ism**—because undergrad music students *will* have heard those terms. In our class, they can now learn to see such “-isms” as ideas shaping decisions across a number of 20<sup>th</sup> century art forms: painting, poetry, drama, film, and music, for example.

At Texas Tech, we concluded some time ago that we needed to de-emphasize accumulation of data in favor of more attention to modeling and practicing processes of analysis, critical reading, interpretation, and communication. This was exemplified in the shift within the Texas State standards from an undergraduate degree requirement of “writing proficiency” to “communications proficiency.” This shift permitted us to think about the various types of literacy and the many kinds of narrative media available to the twenty-first-century student. Likewise, it was consistent with our philosophical and pedagogical goal of balancing students’ need to learn new skills with our own willingness to meet them where they are.

Teaching critical thinking involves modeling of investigative processes: how to look at data, discern patterns within that data, identify particular moments of unexplained anomaly within those patterns, and formulate hypotheses that might explain those anomalies. These processes can be applied to a music score, a composer’s overall creative output, the consistency or variety of techniques employed in communicative media, or the philosophy it expressed versus the actions taken by historical actors. #MCreed’s immersive and *inventive* learning asks students to work together to imagine their way into the experience of individuals as they moved through historical moments. This, in turn, helps students convey that

experience of historical contingency to an audience of peers, teachers, and future learners.

After the pandemic lockdown, immersive and interactive elements proved to be important to students returning to the classroom. In Fall 2021 they were offered the opportunity to participate in the Wednesday 7:00 a.m. special sessions via video conferencing versus face-to-face meetings. Students' unanimous consensus was for the latter: They *wanted* to be in those real-world spaces together again, imagining and collaborating. In the wake of the lockdown, and in a contemporary landscape that seems more and more intended to provoke shock, paralysis, or despair, I am seeking to expand and energize student engagement. My goal is to create a kind of lateral energy between and amongst the students and student teams to correlate with that between the teacher and the student, which ultimately enhances students' capacity to take ownership of their own learning. I hope that through building #MCreed, and grappling with historical contingency, we as students and teachers can create an environment in which the contingency of history more accurately appears in the teaching of historical narratives. This can, in turn, empower learners to apply that experience to wider critical thinking and critical engagement tasks across their entire university education and, indeed, across their shared futures.

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<sup>1</sup> Jeremiah McCall, "Twine, Inform, and Designing Interactive History Texts," Playthepast.org, October 3, 2016, <http://www.playthepast.org/?p=5739>.

<sup>2</sup> "Reacting to the Past" is a range of curriculum developed by a consortium at Barnard College to provide participatory role-playing games. Reacting to the Past, 2025, <https://reacting.barnard.edu/>.

<sup>3</sup> Reacting to the Past; Mark C. Carnes, *Minds on Fire: How Role-Immersion Games Transform College* (Boston, MA: Harvard, 2014).

<sup>4</sup> See McCall, "Twine, Inform, and Designing Interactive History Texts." See also "Twine / an Open-Source Tool for Telling Interactive, Nonlinear Stories," n.d., [www.twinery.org](http://www.twinery.org).

<sup>5</sup> McCall, "Twine, Inform, and Designing Interactive History Texts."

<sup>6</sup> "Discovery Tour by Ubisoft: Teacher Learning Resources | Ubisoft (US)," n.d., Ubisoft, <https://www.ubisoft.com/en-us/game/assassins-creed/discovery-tour>.

<sup>7</sup> Ars Contributors, "From Infocom to 80 Days: An Oral History of Text Games and Interactive Fiction," *Ars Technica*, June 20, 2024, [arstechnica.com/gaming/2024/06/from-infocom-to-80-days-an-oral-history-of-text-games-and-interactive-fiction/](https://arstechnica.com/gaming/2024/06/from-infocom-to-80-days-an-oral-history-of-text-games-and-interactive-fiction/).

<sup>8</sup> Jesse Stommel, *Undoing the Grade: Why We Grade, and How to Stop* (Denver, CO: Hybrid Pedagogy: 2023).

<sup>9</sup> As, for example, R. A. Montgomery, *Journey under the Sea* (Boston, MA: Thorndike Striving Reader: 2020).