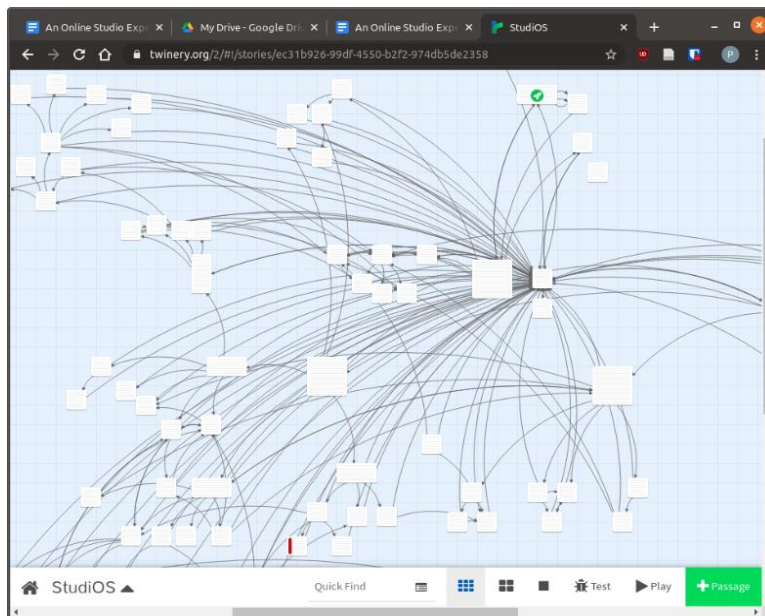


2021

Interchapter 4D

Unconstrained by Space and Time: Creating a Choice-Rich Virtual Studio

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A branching-choices learning interface designed in *Twine*

About the Author

Pippa was a peer tutor and student coordinator at Western Washington University's Writing Center between 2011-2014. She was Assistant Director at Western Libraries' Hacherl Research & Writing Studio from 2016 to 2020. The editors welcome communication about this piece through the Studio's email: rws@wwu.edu.

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Although the Hacherl Studio's in-person space has evolved an innovative structure and pedagogy, the same is not yet true of our online space. Our website, along with the majority of existing educational websites, still largely follows the customs of a reception office where people can view a variety of informational pamphlets, book an appointment, or consult with a specialist. In reception offices, no one really talks to each other: users choose to engage with the service, read about it, or leave. These limited choices don't align with our ambitions to host learning that is community-centric and student-driven. The educational world suffers from a decades-long creative block when it comes to utilizing the potential of the internet for supporting learning. Yes, we create high-effort emails, fancy videos, cute websites, and classroom management system integrations. But rarely does our use of these tools extend beyond the reception-office or talk-to-an-expert models. Imagine an online space where people choose, uncompelled, to engage in play-based learning, solve problems together, and develop important life skills. Education hasn't done this. Instead, the differently-structured spaces of forums and games have allowed communal learning to flourish, and HEIs are decades behind in learning from their example.

While the physical Studio's design helps foster new ways of interacting, our virtual spaces continue to look traditional and communicate a traditional *built pedagogy*¹. There is little difference between our website and the website of any business. As a result, the expectation for a passive, transactional interaction holds for visitors and even for us. We've implemented bite-sized strategies in online interactions, yet bound by the same structure, we fall into the same habitual norms. Online

¹ *Built pedagogy* is what Monahan calls the "architectural embodiments of educational philosophies" (2002, p. 6).

interactions², in the form of draft responses and video conference sessions, may not be intended to produce a transactional relationship, yet the reality often stops well short of our desired outcomes around inquiry, collaboration, challenge, and agency. Our in-person Studio makes possible a bustling, drop-in study community and invites students to take agency in personalizing their learning environments. Our virtual Studio does not. Yet in domains outside of education, the online world creatively offers exactly this experience. Why haven't we?

A virtual studio equivalent to our in-person one should provide asynchronous learning experiences that fully include students who could or would never come in person, and they should also offer synchronous social options that match or surpass the in-person environment. The structure of the online studio itself would prompt reflection and agency. The richness of the online environment would distinguish it from other, normative online spaces and in doing so create room for the unexpected, room for interaction on levels beyond the default ask-a-question-get-an-answer service norm. Since this kind of online studio doesn't exist yet for us, I decided to start creating it. I'll share the tools that matched our connection and interactivity goals and demonstrate ways I began using them to design an online studio experience. Notably, both tools arise from the world of games, not from the worlds of education or business. Yet they are so versatile that many have already used them to create bespoke educational experiences.

² Note that during the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic from March 2020–no end date, all Hacherl Studio interactions remain virtual. This new reality exposed the gap between in-person and virtual pedagogies in ways very noticeable to both staff and visitors.

Hosting a Peer Learning Community in *Discord*

What is Discord?

Discord is an online communication platform where individuals can create and join private or public chat servers. After the mass exodus from past standbys like *Facebook* and *Skype*, *Discord* has become a popular communication tool, partly because it combines the option of *Zoom*-like voice and video calls with forum-like instant message boards, and partly because it fills a different communicative niche than still-active social media platforms like *Instagram*, *Snapchat* and *TikTok*. At the time of this writing, *Discord* is where you're most likely to find teenagers and young adults hanging out together, but its popularity is slowly growing with the older crowd too.

I recently joined a *Discord* server called *Study Together!* which is set up to offer custom study rooms for students around the world. I tried out the 1-to-1 room option and met a study buddy who was a college student in Korea. They kindly introduced me to the server, teaching me how to set a custom study timer so that it would remind me to take a break and update my study goal if I needed to. They also offered to leave their microphone on while we worked, explaining that some people like to hear the sound of typing in the background for focus. We shared our screens to watch each other make progress on our projects. Figure 1 on page 10 shows my screen in *Study Together!* The right side shows my own work on *Google Docs*, while the left shows the study room video call containing our user icons and the live images of our shared screens. The notes included with the figure image includes a clickable link to a video demo of *Discord*.

Discord in Action

Join me on my hypothetical online Hacherl Studio shift where I'm using *Discord* as the platform. After I log in, I see all the visitors currently studying, what they are working on, and other details they've shared in their profiles. I can also see how many are in various study rooms: some rooms are open to all, some have a specific content focus, and some are for project groups. Rooms also cater to different levels of engagement preference: some are text-only, some have audio enabled, and some have video and screenshare enabled; all are equipped with study break timers. Visitors signing in for the first time receive a welcome that orients them to the space and prompts them to choose one or two tags for themselves, such as their current classes or major. They can also display optional information, like current projects, pronouns, clubs & organizations, or a looking-for-study-partner tag.

As I log in, visitors also get to see me. I am listed as *Pippa (Studio Assistant)* in a color unique to staff. Visitors can click on my profile to see my details, including my pronouns (she/her), major (Education), specialties (research posters, etc.), and fun personal details (Ask me about chocolate mug cakes!). I may choose to broadcast announcements, directly greet individuals, or unobtrusively lurk in the general forum. Today there is an event happening, so I broadcast an announcement. "Hi everyone, Pippa here—just letting you know that we have a de-stress session starting in 15 minutes. Join by text, voice, or video in the *#events* channel!" Since I have a little time before the event, I post a few messages in the *#general* channel to highlight resources and ask engagement questions that visitors can respond to with text or an emoji. Some of my posts are study-oriented; some are just-for-fun.

On shift, I facilitate connections, answer questions, provide timely resources, and link to other tools and services. For instance, if multiple people have similar questions, I invite them to an *ad hoc* group, which is easy to facilitate given that we can switch between text, voice, and video without launching another application. Asynchronous and synchronous communication can all happen in the same place, and the format makes it easy to leave the online space running in the background; it just takes a single click to catch up with what's happening. But visitors don't need staff to use the virtual Studio, because they can use and control their environments. For instance, they can message staff or pose questions in the general channel for all to see. Visitors can work with an accountability partner, and they can check for others who have taken the same class. They can enable or disable post and announcement notifications in bulk or for each channel. In other words, visitors have full control over how connected they stay to the online Studio community.

Making Exploratory Learning Possible with *Twine*

Discord, however, is not the only resource that facilitates self-directed learning. According to its website, *Twine* was developed as “an open-source tool for telling interactive, nonlinear stories.” If you've ever read a choose your-own-adventure book or played *Zork* back in the eighties, you're familiar with this concept. *Twine* makes it possible to rapidly design and launch a DIY branching-choice adventure. Many non-educators use it to create and publish games, and a few educators have used it to create simulations. But rather than using it to create an actual game, simulation, or adventure, I am using it to create a 100% student-driven studio interaction that is not just informational but also personalized, unpredictable, and quasi-social, yet still

independent of the presence of another human being. Figure 2, page 11, demonstrates using *Twine* to create a self-directed learning interaction. The notes below the figure image includes three links to videos demonstrating the user interface and behind-the-scenes development.

Making a Virtual Place: A Stepwise Approach

Although I've chosen to demonstrate using *Discord* and *Twine* to enhance virtual learning, academic support programs should tailor tool selection to their own program goals. For those just beginning the transition away from static email-based response to more equivalent virtual placemaking, I recommend first working through the principles presented in [Chapter 4](#) (Kjesrud, 2021a), because they will help practitioners align space with high-level programmatic and pedagogical goals. From there, begin exploring and experimenting to build up a repertoire of tools, experiences, and ideas before finalizing the plan for your online ecosystem.

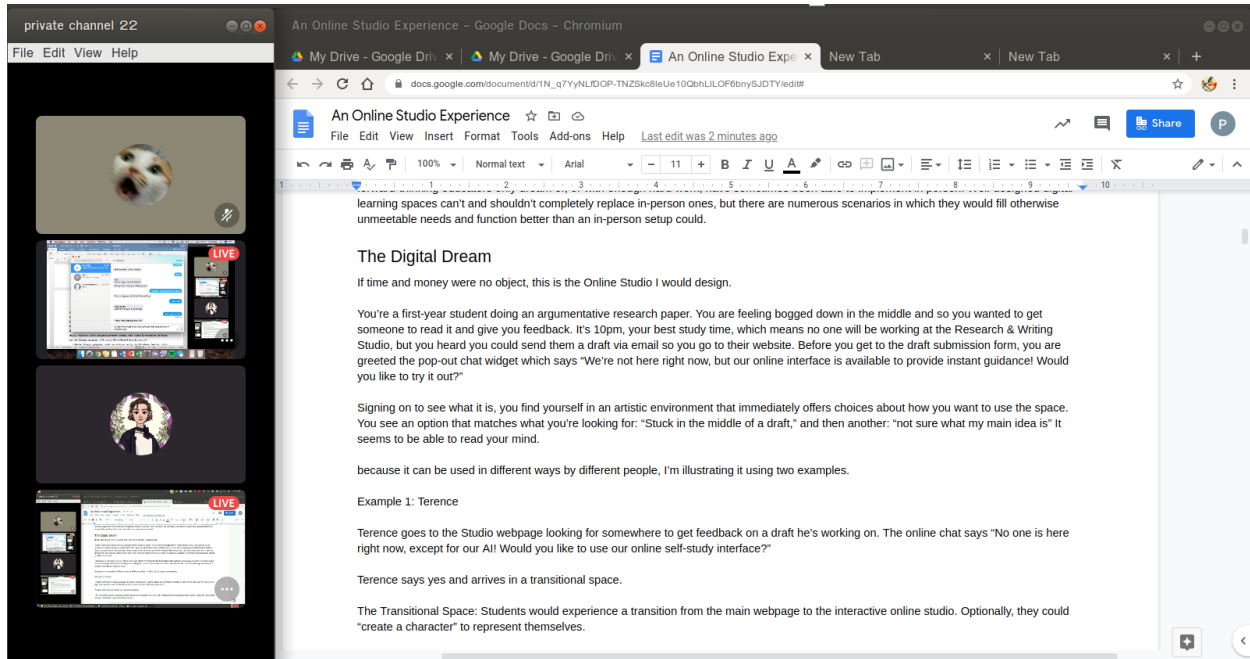
Virtual placemaking starts with identifying potential tools—the digital equivalent of choosing furniture. The best tools are ones you'll probably stumble across as you become more connected to people who already use them. By learning about the variety of tools and applications that already exist, you can build a rough mental map of what is theoretically possible to achieve in an online setting. Then, with your mental map for inspiration, you can identify a need and check to see whether someone has already created the perfect tool for it. Appendix A suggests strategies for identifying potential tools that match program goals. Once tools are identified, incremental steps can ease the exciting-but-scary transition to new tools and a new virtual philosophy. As suggested in [Chapter 2](#) (Kjesrud, 2021b), carefully scaffolding each change can help emphasize the

opportunity and minimize the fear. Appendix B suggests strategies for scaffolding change while developing virtual place.

The bones that comprise studio pedagogy are already present in these and similar online resources. Simply by implementing one, you will have partly implemented studio pedagogies implicit within its structure. Well-designed virtual places can't and shouldn't completely replace in-person ones, but they do fulfill otherwise unmeetable needs and frequently function better than an in-person setup. If we aren't learning from the best that interactive online environments have to offer, any advances we successfully make to our in-person support will lead to a greater and greater equity gap for our students who, for any reason, rely on learning online. It doesn't have to be all or nothing, and it doesn't have to be difficult. Each tiny structural change creates new possibilities. And by engaging in this experimentative learning, you'll be even better equipped to support your visitors in doing the same.

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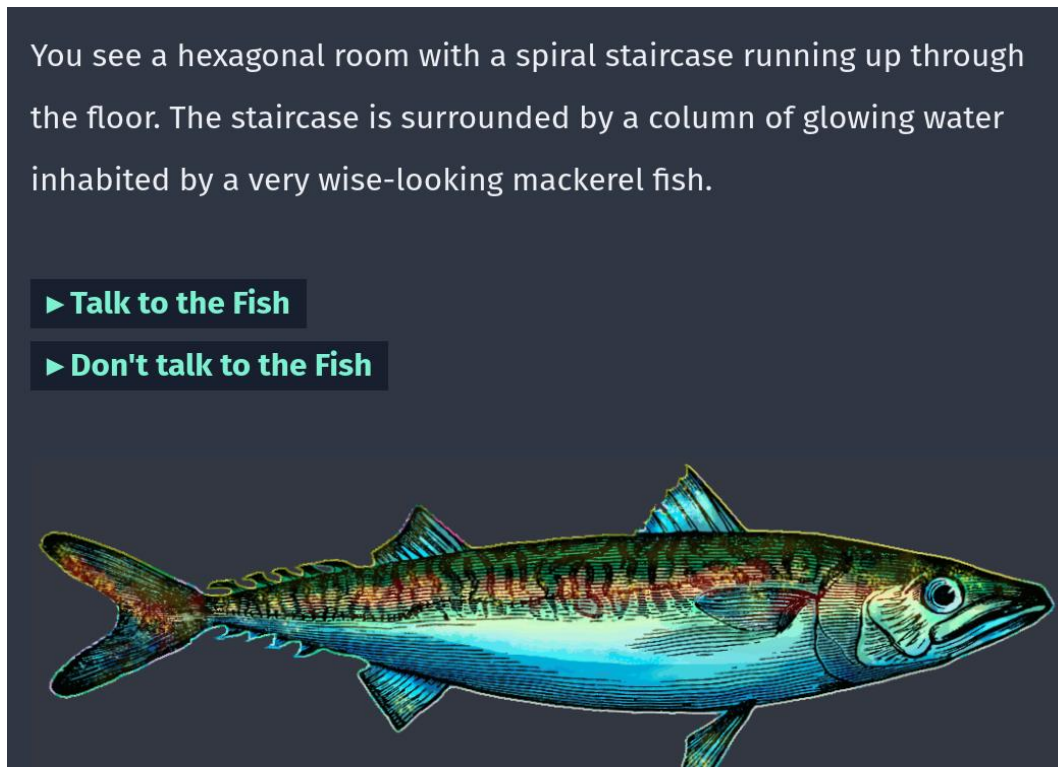
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Figure 1***Study Together!*** image from [Discord](#)

Note: Image shows the screen from a 1-to-1 working session in the *Study Together!* server on *Discord*. In sessions like this one, users share their screens to help each other with motivation and accountability. Click the link below to play a demonstration video.

[Hosting Online Learning Communities: A look at the *Study Together!* *Discord* Server](#)

This video offers a brief tour of one *Discord* server where students come to keep on track while studying.

Figure 2**[Self-directed Learning Interaction using Twine](#)**

Note: Image shows the first page of a self-directed learning interaction designed in *Twine*. As users make choices, they self-assess their current needs and arrive at learning resources and advice specifically tailored to their situation. Click the image to play a demonstration video.

[An Interactive Studio Interface Created Using Twine](#)

This video shows an interface that allows visitors to have a self-driven conversation about their goals and to learn key strategies without interacting with another person.

[Twine Behind the Scenes](#)

This video shows the tool used to create the interface.

[Potential for More Personalization](#)

This video shows an aspirational demo of some features of *Twine* that could make for a more personalized and self-reflective experience if carefully implemented.

Appendix A: Exercises for Identifying Virtual Learning Tools

1. Get connected with those who know.

Ask staff (especially peer staff) what digital tools, apps, or websites they currently use for projects, fun, or studying. Why did they choose that tool over others? Do they ever share their own content, such as images, games, blog posts, or videos? If so, how?

2. Research potential tools.

Think of a tool, service, or object that you use in the physical world. When you start to think “I wish there was a tool for X,” you’re ready to begin researching whether such a thing exists. Use the same research skills you would for any other project, focusing on blogs and forums as your main sources. For instance, let’s say you brainstorm these needs: journaling app, digital concierge, online synthesizer. Search for each by adding the word *digital*, *online*, or *app*. Who knows what you might find! The point of trying these searches is to notice how people transform in person experiences to virtual ones.

3. Experiment with an online community platform you haven’t used before; use it authentically for yourself.

Learn how to quickly discern between healthy and unhealthy online communities on new platforms. While you may come across communities that are off-putting or hate-filled, you will also find some that are extremely uplifting and supportive. Move on until you find a community that is helpful and interesting. You could try platforms such as *Discord*, *Reddit*, or *Mastodon*.

4. Maintain safety and privacy during testing.

As always, be careful about sharing any personal information. The more details you share, such as photos, location or profession, the easier it becomes for anyone on the internet to identify you. I recommend making a new, anonymous email address specifically for exploring with. Be on guard if someone messages you privately without asking your permission first.

5. Look to the “edges”—non-mainstream uses and users

Often the most exciting developments are not immediately obvious: they exist on the social edges. For example, according to surveys, users of *Reddit* tend to be young and male, which is reflected in the popularity of many of the largest *subreddits* (discussion communities) like *r/gaming*. But there are also smaller *subreddits* devoted to specific identities and life-experiences, such as *r/asktransgender* and *r/eldercare*. Each *subreddit* has its own unique rules, purpose, and culture. Explore the edges to find the richest ideas.

Appendix B: Scaffolding Implementation

1. Talk it Up

- Test the tool yourself so that you understand its features and benefits
- Rave about it to everyone you meet
- Show it off

2. Try a Soft Launch

- Find or make a tool to fill one teaching/learning need or teachable moment
- As you gain more experience with the tool in one-shot situations, assess whether to revise, implement it more fully, or abandon it

3. Make it Staff Official

- Incorporate the tool into your staff trainings and routines
- Informally assess how the tool affects staff education outcomes

4. Go Public

- Use the tool to author a learning resource
- Create an example of how students could use the tool to accomplish a goal
- Sometimes, you might find it appropriate to incorporate the tool into your regular offerings of services
- Example: *Zoom* sessions are now standard interaction options for many Studios