

Creative Struggle: Arguing for the Value of Difficulty in Supporting Ownership and Self-Expression in Creative Writing

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ABSTRACT

In each step of the creative writing process, from ideation to generation to revision, authors must grapple with their creative goals and personal perspectives [10]. This self-interrogation drives both the author’s sense of ownership over the output and sense of authenticity of self-expression. As ever more capable language models and generators accelerate the development of intelligent writing assistants, it is essential that designers of these tools consider how writing assistants affect perceived ownership and self-expression in the creative writing process. Here, we suggest that the role of writing assistant software should not be to remove all obstacles and frustrations, but to enable the writer to focus their efforts on the creative challenges that are the most personally fulfilling to solve. We believe that considering psychological ownership over the self-interrogation process, or the *creative struggle*, can be a productive way to center the writer’s experience as a key design goal. A focus on psychological ownership can frame the pieces of the creative process that may be offloaded without interfering with a writer’s own sense of expression. By participating in the In2Writing workshop, we hope to bring the concept of creative struggle into discussions of ownership, taxonomy, and future directions of writing assistant design.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Human-centered computing** → **Human computer interaction (HCI)**; • **Applied computing** → **Arts and humanities**.

KEYWORDS

intelligent writing assistant, creative writing

1 INTRODUCTION

A journey along the unbeaten path and the triumph of good over evil are unmistakable elements to the archetypal fantasy narrative. In *The Lord of the Rings*, these themes are the reflections of J. R. R. Tolkien’s life as an officer in World War I and upbringing as a devout Roman Catholic [7, 15]. Creative writing is a form of self-dialogue, a struggle to disambiguate experience, perspective, and emotion into deliberate language. As AI assistance becomes more entrenched in writing tools and acceptable to use, it will almost inevitably alter the creative process. Since the creative writing process is so closely tied to self-identity [12], we must consider how intelligent writing assistants will affect a writer’s self-dialogue and engagement in critical thought, in order to maintain the authenticity and creativity in this self-expression. Self-examination can be a difficult task, requiring effortful and critical thought; in this position paper, we frame these tasks as “creative struggle,” to foreground the necessity of effort in this process. We propose that considering creative struggle can

uncover latent boundaries that writers desire between themselves and their computational tools in order to maintain psychological ownership and elucidate the processes and metrics that should be supported by writing assistants.

2 PRIOR WORK

2.1 AI Tools and Psychological Ownership

Psychological ownership in the context of creative writing is important for two reasons: writing is something we create and therefore own [2], and all writing is autobiographical [12]. The desire for ownership over the creative work and output has been a common theme in studies of AI creative writing assistants. Professional writers have expressed that they do not wish to cede the creative process to AI, but rather want it to enhance their own ideas [9]. For co-writing tools, Calderwood et al. showed that generative assistants should emphasize the suggestive element of its generated text in order to enable an editorial feedback loop between writer and assistant [4]. Writers may feel less ownership over their writing when too much of it is done by the assistant [8], while increased interactivity integrates the writer into the process and provides them a greater degree of control [8].

In past work, we have explored AI tools that support creative writers in reflecting on their own perspectives around literary style, finding that engaging in active interpretation encourages self-dialogue and critical reflection [14]. In general, an AI assistant can negatively interfere with a writer’s writing process if it takes too much control over their creative process [3]. These prior findings show that writers desire to maintain control and interaction when using AI tools.

2.2 Creative Momentum through Offloading Effort

Professional writers have sought writing assistants that can expand their characters and story arcs, to organize their ideas, and to stylistically refine prose [9]. Offloading frustrating or uninteresting struggle may enhance ownership since it shifts the writer’s focus into an area where they have greater motivation and expressive ability. Each writer may have individual needs, depending on how well the writing assistant can complement the writer’s abilities; for example, writers capable of composing eloquent prose may be more interested in story ideas and not stylistic suggestions [9].

In drawing, non-artists enjoyed the AI assistant acting as a co-creator, where the human and system would take turns, each prompted by the other, while artists were more interested in the assistant being able to understand their creative trajectory; knowing what the artist wanted in the future given what had been drawn so

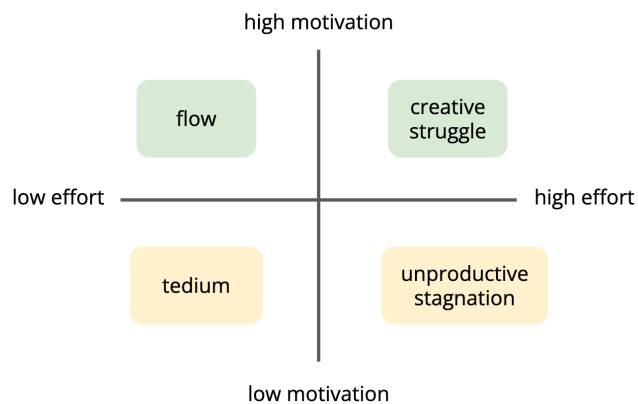


Figure 1: A hypothetical framework for considering the relationship of *creative struggle* to effort and motivation.

far [6]. Both instances demonstrate the value in *creative momentum*; creative struggle without setbacks in execution.

Some writers felt less ownership when suggestions made by an AI assistant were very good, which they may have viewed as contributing too much [8]. AI tools like text-to-image generators offload significant effort in creating high-quality images. However, they reduce the ability for the creator to develop an artistic practice due to the limited interaction available, lack of systematic control over output, and low ceiling for skill development [11]. Artists very cautiously guarded their successful prompts since recreating the resultant image would be trivial if the prompt was known [11]. These are cases where so much of the creative struggle is offloaded that the remaining work provides only a minimal sense of ownership over the final output.

3 CREATIVE STRUGGLE

Section 2 discussed the importance of ownership and control in the writing process, and the value of using AI tools to increase creative momentum. These perspectives inform where tools might draw the line between useful assistance and too much interference. We suggest an additional consideration: the value of *creative struggle*.

We define creative struggle as deep thinking about expression. This process, which we previously related to self-dialogue, is one that naturally leads to increased self-knowledge and psychological ownership. The result of creative struggle is always a combination of one's goal and one's self, and particularly in creative writing, these may be the same.

Figure 1 suggests one hypothetical structure for examining the position of creative struggle in the writing process. Amabile [1] discusses motivation as a key feature of creative work; we see effort discussed in prior work around ownership and expression. Here we map motivation against effort, and explore possible descriptors: "Flow" [5] and "creative struggle" are states of high motivation, where the writer is productively engaged. "Tedium" or "stagnation" are states of low motivation. While stagnation may seem negative, Sapp proposes that it plays an essential role in reaching the Point

of Creative Frustration (PCF), an inflection point where the practitioner moves from "familiar development" to illumination and creative growth [13]. Instead of seeing stagnation as a purely negative state that should be removed from the creative process, the PCF frames it as a necessary stage to push past the known and easy and into the creative and true. While often AI is framed as a resource for reducing effort, we note that high effort in this framework is not inherently negative: we hypothesize that the role of AI assistants may not be to mediate *ease*, but rather to help the writer perform productive effort and move from stagnation to creative struggle or flow.

We suggest that the ideal creative writing assistant will strike a balance between enabling creative momentum by offloading appropriate effort, while allowing sufficient creative struggle to let the writer not only feel ownership over the output, but also engage in the effortful self-dialogue that results in deeper self-understanding, authentic expression, and human creativity.

4 IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE WORK

We hope to discuss the role of creative struggle in perceptions of creative ownership and its relationship to AI assistants at the In2Writing workshop to better know how they may inspire future research. One goal is developing our understanding of the status of creative struggle — when and why it is going well or poorly. Currently, we are designing a study to understand how writers engage in creative struggle and transition between productive and unproductive effort, as well as perceptions of stagnation and tedium. We hope to investigate similarities and differences between novice and professional writers, as well as the topic and context of writing.

We see opportunities for further research in how the role of the intelligent writing assistant affects psychological ownership of the creative struggle. How does the writer's perception of an AI writing assistant as a tool versus a co-creator mediate their feelings of ownership? How are suggestions perceived differently when the writing assistant is a human instead of a computer? We are excited about the future research directions that psychological ownership of the creative struggle may reveal for intelligent writing assistants.

5 CONCLUSION

We propose *creative struggle* as an hypothetical framework for spurring discussion among the writing research community around the role of effort and ownership in creative writing. By embracing creative struggle as a source of ownership and fulfillment, we seek to focus intelligent writing assistants on enhancing the process of creative writing and complementing the human experience.

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