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Video Games as Narrative: Pedagogical Strategies for Using Games as Literature in the Composition Classroom

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Abstract

Video games have developed into movie-like productions. This paper addresses how modern video games deliver a developed narrative and how such games can be used in the English Composition classroom, much like traditional texts, to help students learn writing craft. Through the exploration of pedagogical strategies for such use, this paper can inform English professors on how they might incorporate video games into their composition courses. The transformation of video games mimics that of movies decades ago; they can now be treated as a viable narrative medium. Games like *Mass Effect*, *Bioshock Infinite* and *The Last of Us* tell stories in varying degrees of linearity. Gamers experience this narrative and upon completion, they have experienced enough story to fill several books. Not only do students serve as an audience to narrative, in many games they serve as shapers of the story. The English composition instructor oftentimes struggles to unpack narrative for students, and can use the familiar video game to illustrate the storytelling process. By understanding of how video games form stories, students can learn to do so themselves. Just as the older video games helped develop creative imagination,

newer games engage players in narrative that spans many topics, including social commentary, popular culture, and literature traditions. This paper focuses on games with strong narrative backgrounds and delves into the benefits and problems associated with using such games in the classroom.

Keywords: Video games, composition, narrative, technology and learning, literature, teaching, writing

Introduction

It's time to take video games seriously as literary works, capable of informing students on narrative in a college classroom setting. Video games have taught many students the foundation of craft for both narrative and character, even if students only see them as entertainment. A great many of them open doors to imagination and creation so necessary to the writing process. Video games help the student writer understand the formation of narrative, and, at times, can even illustrate how *not* to build narrative. Recent games—notably *The Last of Us*, *Heavy Rain*, and *The Witcher III: Wild Hunt* incorporate intricate narrative themes, and allow players to take a first-hand part in the delivery of that narrative, putting games in a place no medium before has been. The player influences the story. By illustrating how this happens, a composition professor can inform students—both those who play these games and those who do not—on the narrative process as well as the practice of writing, in general. Video games helped spark the imagination of many young people in the 1980 and on, cultivating a sense of story. Current games can help illustrate narrative form for students. And this was something heavily discussed in the 1980's and 1990's, that video games would provide “a textual medium of a new order..., the fourth great technique of writing that will take its place beside the ancient papyrus roll, the medieval codex, and the printed book.” (Boltier, 2001) This aligns with the teaching of narrative and student experiences. Most assume they do not engage with narrative, yet they do on a daily basis. “Our lives are ceaselessly intertwined with narrative, with the stories that we tell and hear told, those we dream or imagine or would like to tell...” (Brooks, 1992) Video games are just one other way that students participate in narrative, and they can help bridge the understanding of narrative

from their everyday lives to literature in the classroom.

Paper

More people play games than ever before. On consoles, PCs, tablets, and smartphones. Video games have come a long way. Sixty-eight percent of adults over eighteen play video games. Forty-five percent are female. (Galarneau, 2014) When looking at a class of students, it's likely more than half of them play games, and the hobby has become a major part of their lives. They spend time in a vast, narrative space. As a child, I lived in fantastic worlds in my mind while delving into dungeons or traveling through space with only words on my computer screen to help me conjure up the images. I soared through the galaxy in the Heart of Gold playing the text adventure *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* and then watched the movie decades later, seeing a different version on the screen. Replaying the text adventure recently, I found that both universes converged—the one he created from the game and the movie—in a way that altered my perception. Both mediums had helped me create a vision of Douglas Adams' literary work, yet the computer game allowed me to bring the world to himself, whereas the movie prefabricated it. Decades ago, some had theorized that games and narrative did not mix. "It then appears that trying to add a significant story to a computer game invariably reduces the number of times you're likely to play the game. Literary qualities, usually associated with depth and contemplation, actually makes computer games less repeatable, and more "trashy" in the sense that you won't play again once you've completed it. There's no point." (Juul, 1998) Now, much has changed, and gamers come to classrooms with almost a decade of interactive narrative experience. Much like writing, playing a video game today incorporates direct involvement, and the act of playing mimics the act of writing. Video games have come a long way. "Since 2003, games have gained considerable traction—they've really matured since then—with the diversity of games themselves, with the emergence of serious games as a genre, the proliferation of gaming platforms, and especially the evolution of games on mobile devices," says Veronica Diaz, associate director of the nonprofit EDUCAUSE's Learning Initiative. (Wecker, 2012)

Games now can tug at emotions, attempt to make social commentary, and represent the state of our society. Anyone who watches the opening scene of the zombie apocalypse game *The Last of Us* without feeling moved must be completely detached from any form of visual media. Few games bring the visceral emotions that opening scene produces. After watching the main character, Joel,

lose his daughter in the, a scene *played* by the player, students become emotionally involved, something they want from their readers. They continue with the game not only because of its stellar gameplay and tight controls; they want to move the story forward. Their readers should want to do the same with their stories, and this game can help instruct this. They play as Joel a few years later, living in the aftermath of the apocalypse, and he is tasked with bringing a young girl across the devastated and dangerous country to help find a cure. He keeps the girl at arm's length, the scar of her loss leaves an indelible mark on the narrative, and we all know this will come to a head later. We can't wait as we play. We watch the events unfold in order, and this is where the professor can illustrate where the narrative process comes into play. Because Joel's story has played out on-screen, the player becomes attached. A writer can do the same, if he or she follows this sort of narrative structure.

The Last of Us uses its narrative to up the stakes for the player, not unlike how a writer can elicit reaction from readers with the proper details. When a key character sacrifices herself for the rest early in the game, players become even more involved. Her loss resonates throughout the game, much like the daughter in the first scene. Now Joel must deal with these losses as he guides this young girl across the country, a girl just like his daughter, just as defiant and strong as the woman who sacrificed her life so they could escape. The story builds emotionally and narratively, and serves as a good example of craft. Much of the gaming journalistic media felt the same, that the game had achieved a new benchmark in game writing. "The characterisation and literary restraint in *Left Behind* allows an experience that feels exciting and surprising while still managing to convey something deeply universal." (Biggs, 2014) This narrative happens in the background, and students who play are not fully aware they create and experience the narrative as they advance. By the time it is over, they realize they were a part of something bigger, and they have a keener insight into the formation of narrative craft. By breaking the story down, piece by piece, students (players or not) can see how the game designers and writers shaped the story. Because games take so much longer than movies (*The Last of Us* takes roughly fifteen hours to complete) the narrative is interspersed with action scenes. To the casual watcher, these scenes appear to have little value. Yet, the emotionally-involved player, or even the one curious to see what comes next, plays these scenes with more purpose. And a student writing a narrative for class can use this model to let readers into their world, so the reader, like the player, becomes emotionally

involved, and what would previously seem an uninteresting detail can take on a more tangible purpose in a student narrative.

A writer would want to focus on the story of video games, and show students how the game designers use certain literary devices to bear on the game. The author used to interview such game designers, and one thing that resonated from those interviews was that the designers always kept the overarching story in mind, something the author constantly stresses to his student writers. Games like *The Last of Us* or *Heavy Rain* truly help in *displaying* the narrative process unlike other mediums. Games involve the player, unlike the passive practice of watching a movie or television show. We watch characters in movies as they turn a corner, knowing something waits. In games, *we* walk around that corner, at our own pace, with the anticipation running completely through us, and it is in these such moments that we can feel the narrative at work. We want this for readers of our narratives, to let them in, feel as though they walk with us, and thus, react to our world. Merely showing the opening scene of *The Last of Us* elicits audible and visible reactions from nearly every student in the class, even those who have played the game before. Having a student play the opening scene, with controller in hand, eyes locked on the screen, brings an effect I have not seen any other medium match. James Paul Gee talks of active learning, and playing the video game enables “*experiencing* the world in new ways, forming new *affiliations*, and *preparation* for future learning.” (Gee 24) Students playing this scene from *The Last of Us* certainly engage in active learning in regard to the narrative process. What they experience in the game can bring forth better narrative work when they sit down to write their papers, as they can attempt to mimic the way the game delivered narrative. They remember the impact that opening scene had, and perhaps they do the same in their own work.

The value of games as a narrative medium exists today more so than ever before. Games like *The Last of Us*, *Heavy Rain* and others bring about narrative from the player’s interactions. The game designers set out to incorporate narrative in such games through Narrative Design. “Narrative Design encompasses not only the story itself but also how the story is communicated to players and how other game features support and immerse the player within the game world.” (Despain, 2008) The choices can be related solely to the plot/action of the game, or have social implications within the environment. There is a direct causal effect from player action to environment and this translates into writing. They engage in narrative while playing. They can take this experience to

the page. By remembering the impact of certain scenes in the game, they can produce writing that offers a better sense of place, an improved narrative tone. This works even with a personal narrative; students get a sense of the power of images and words. With their memories firmly placed in the video game world, they can shape their own narrative by following this causal effect. We wouldn't care much about Joel if we didn't see the opening scene, and students learn that readers won't relate as well to their story if they don't include the details of their own lives and build to the message in their narrative. Students can see the importance of detail in reader involvement.

Of course, *The Last of Us* merely stands as an example of games that can inform on narrative. With more time, I could elaborate on several others. *Grand Theft Auto* offers an immense world with nearly limitless choices, and this game offers instructors the option of showing how a narrative can go off-track. Gamers are free to do what they want in the game, much like a writer can in their work. If followed strictly by mission structure, the game delivers an incredible narrative that rivals *Pulp Fiction*. However, the player can easily get side-tracked—much like a narrative can go off on tangents—and come across as a completely unfocused free-for-all. Many players end up in countless police chases for driving recklessly, and the game's narrative unravels quickly. Showing this on the screen after demonstrating a game like *The Last of Us* allows students to see the problems with poorly-planned and shaped narratives. It also gives credence to the importance of necessary detail. When the narrative flows, students can point out how the game painstakingly builds up tension through intricate detail at times, while moving fast during others. Their writing should follow suit. Everything leads to the message, and there are times for exposition and times for movement. In the games, they see the value of structure. I've found this to be a tremendous help to students forming their narratives for the first time. I count it as one more visual/technological aid I can use in my classroom. The makeup of my classroom varies from semester to semester, and I find tools that work in some classes fall flat in others, so the more the merrier.

The Witcher III: Wild Hunt, a fantasy roleplaying game, offers a two lessons in this world of video game narrative. Geralt, the main character has had many experiences before the events of this new game, and they have influenced what will transpire during the new game. The writers don't everything, but hint at many things, and this can work in teaching narrative structure.

Though I stress detail in student narrative, writers need to make choices, and learn what to put in and what to omit. *The Witcher's* story provides this. The game will also react to player input, and this game offers a fantastic glimpse into the world of interactive fiction, with the player working within the developer's framework, but free to create narrative of their own. Spanning 40-plus hours, *Wild Hunt* allows players to fully immerse themselves in the game's living world, and offers a chance at a never-ending story, if the player chooses not to follow the mission structure. Gee's Multiple Routes Principle rings true here, as student players can "rely on their own strengths and styles of learning and problem solving, while also exploring alternative styles." (Gee 105) Here, the learning outcome involves narrative, and they can see how this plays out on the screen. They can learn what their own strengths and weaknesses are in writing, like whether they go off on tangents, lack focus, or if they conjure detailed images for their reader. They can seek new ways to improve their work. This translates into new ways of forming narrative while strengthening their current understanding of the craft.

Personal narratives often have moral overtones. Students often struggle with handling this, either leaning to heavily on morality and accidentally developing a fable-like structure to their work, or they avoid the morals altogether, leaving a space sorely void. This can come from a closeness to their own story, and inadvertently leaving out key contextual details. Gamers play *Heavy Rain* as a father who lost one child and is now confronted with the kidnapping of his other. The game explores the concepts of depression, self-doubt, anger and revenge, topics common in student narrative, and this game helps show ways to illustrate these in a relatable way. The choice to kill or not, sacrifice or not, even to live or die faces the player constantly. For instance, the kidnapper will demand that the father cut off his finger to keep his son alive. There are several tools to carry out the job. When the game ends, the player's choices will result in a specific ending. Each play-through brings about different events, and the experience changes each time. This offers an opportunity to explore the evolving narrative through direct involvement. Games like *Heavy Rain*, with this one choice of how to carry out the self-amputation, illustrate how visual cues and perspective can influence a narrative. The students can see the effect of choices made in telling their own narratives, what details to put in, which to omit, on their readers. They also see the need for enough detail to get readers invested. Like our involvement with Joel, if we didn't know the main character's background with his sons, he would just be some guy cutting his finger off. This

ultimately leads to better narrative structure for students, as they can instantly see the effect of detail on their stories.

The practice of having students play or watch video games also lends very well to high-impact practices and newer techniques, like peer-based learning. Students can group by the type of video game they are interested in, and can then break down the narrative within the group, with the professor providing guidance on the technical aspects if necessary. The players can help inform the non-players, and the discussion can lead to a better understanding of narrative craft. Our gaming students have a strong dedication to their hobby and enjoy talking about the universes they exist in; the best of those include detailed narratives and backstories that make them come alive.

The older video games played in the 1980s developed the author's affinity and ability as a writer. Because they lacked quality graphics, the games' worlds existed in his imagination. He envisioned what his characters looked like and cared for their well-being. They had backstories and alliances. Some characters didn't like others. One was short, another tall. Sure, a child can conjure worlds with a book, but a player controls their characters' destinies. As much as they are external characters they also reflect the player's personality. The player chooses what they do and when, and even 'create' them through the allocation of attribute points and assignment of their moral alignment. A book dictates alignment and remove the choice from the reader. We can align ourselves with a villain or protagonist, but most of that is mapped out for us by the writer before we come to the experience. In games, the player engages in narrative from both the audience and the writer perspective. This can aid in the understanding of the framework of narrative on a closer level than literature. By outlining the choices a player makes and connecting that to the narrative that unfolds, we can show our students the crafting of storytelling, which can enable them to deliver better personal narratives in our classes, and even help them disseminate narrative structure in short stories and plays they read.

What we do with our characters on our TVs and computer screens is strikingly similar to what we do on the page. As we have our digital characters and avatars make decisions, we play the role of writer. And, particularly with avatars, we put ourselves into the game just as every piece of writing we produce has our imprint on it. This illustrates a path to the creation of narrative. Much like teaching students creative writing early on helps them recognize the elements of fiction in

what they read, showing them the forms of narrative they have already engaged in does the same. Having student gamers share their experience with narrative adds a peer-based dimension to this. Games span across disciplines. Computer engineering students offer tremendous insight into the making of games, of bringing this experience to the screen. All of this works with the literacies students come to the classroom with, and video games stand as one of the more easily demonstrable literacies they have.

If we consider the composition classroom a socially aware place, then we should allow some space for the video gamer students to express their experience. Many of them may feel as like players do, as though they lived a part of their lives on the screen. Some teachers elicit papers on responses to movies and of course, we all want student reaction to stories, poems and novels. Imagine a student following their path in the digital world to one of writing, that the characters they created and navigated through that world mirror the very craft of writing. In addition, they belong to a community with its own codes and discourse, and experienced group accomplishment of a goal. We try to teach them the moral dilemma of Hamlet or the effects of war on Harold Krebs. Their reaction helps dictate their own perspective. So, the way they played through an RPG, or the ending they experienced in *Grand Theft Auto* also helps them see who they are in a sense. Thatgame also plays to stereotypes and sexism. From the outside, it appears offensive, but the game attempts to use its tongue-in-cheek approach to highlight these problems. Imagine a student paper on the objectification of women in video games with a relationship to the real world. Gamers have seen this, but they also have played games with strong female protagonists, games that explore the effects of such subjugation, and can understand better the need for change, but in the game universe and the real world. One of my greatest life experiences was in Venice, where I got lost within the maze of twisting walkways and canals, eventually finding hidden gems not always located on the tourist map. Not every player of a space adventure or RPG finds the same things, but they experience something similar to what I did in that old city; they discover the unexpected. The saying goes that in getting lost in Venice, one finds himself. In the mazes of a dungeon, or the never-ending towns and the people who populate them, the end result of the development of character mirrors this. And this can translate onto the page in the composition classroom. Students can bring a better understanding of what information they can relay through their writing, where to put their focus, in order to have their reader understand their journey.

Some of our students have walked the pathways of their imagination in ways we can only wish they would through the exploration of their writing. Instead of a personal narrative about an event in their lives, these students can write about what their gaming experience has given them, the universes they explored or created, the characters they lived and died with, and yes, held a dying daughter as she gasped her last breath (a la *The Last of Us*). Though some may scoff that this claim, games offer our student writers an area of internal reflection like that of literature, with a level of interaction in the narrative such a medium cannot deliver. A professor or teacher need only explain the composition that both the game developer and player engage in to show the framework of writing that exists in what many consider to be an idle hobby. In turn, students can inform their professors on narrative structure without realizing they are doing it.

Appendix

Video Game Play Statistics

58% of Americans play video games

62% of all gamers are adults

68% are above 18 and older

45% are female (up from 42% in 2012) and are usually over 18

Average of 2 gamers per household

51% of households own at least one console

77% of gamers play at least one hour a week

Many of our students play games or have some connection to them. They are learning narrative structure, possibly without realizing it. Composition professors can utilize this interactive tool to help elicit better student writing.

Student Gamers and Narrative

As students play, they can see narrative at work:

- Narrative in games creates emotional involvement

- Narrative detail leads to greater interactivity in games: this relates well to how students can learn to do the same in their writing
- Games are active—not passive—their narrative exists in real time, much like writing is an active task.
- We walk in our characters' shoes, feel emotions, attempt to understand their/our motivation. Writers want readers to react the same to their narrative
- Intricate detail leads to greater reader involvement. Students can learn from what they see on the screen in a game and translate that to better exposition.
- Proper narrative structure can elicit emotional reader involvement
- Students—through their composition coursework—learn to recognize themes in their games, which can reinforce classroom instruction and enable discovery.

Summary of Pedagogical Strategies

- Play Youtube videos of *The Last of Us*, or *Heavy Rain*- *Illustrates emotional involvement which can be translated into doing the same in writing.*
- Dissect the narrative of a video game's story: *Explain narrative structure through the motivations shown in a video game. Student gamers often help guide this conversation.*
- Have students play games in front of class: *This gives an opportunity to show interactive narrative, much like writing exists in real time.*
- Group students by game interest: *Peer-based learning strategy. Student gamers can inform non-gamers on the games' structure. Students learn from each other, even sharing game strategies, as well as those for writing.*
- James Paul Gee's 'Active Learning': *New affiliations, preparation for future learning through playing games and seeing the different narratives that come through interaction, which can be used for writing as well.*
- Gee's Multiple Routes Principle: *Identify strengths, weaknesses, alternative methods of both playing the game and structuring a personal narrative.*
- Outline moral choices in games: *Displays the effect of decisions on outcomes. Personal*

narratives often contain moral decisions and this practice helps students learn methods of delivering morality in their own work.

- Allow students to use video games as literature: *They write about the rich universes they've experienced and contributed to. Through their play, they can recognize a variety of themes discussed in composition courses, ranging from social commentary to the depiction of women in society/game universes.*

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