An Emerging Literature:

Reading Video Games in the Classroom

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ABSTRACT

The question as to whether or not video games can be seen as literature is an ongoing debate. Cases are strongly made for both sides, and the conversation surrounding it is receiving widespread interest. In order to contribute to this ongoing discussion, this paper analyzes this emerging media within the realm of a literature classroom to better see, and understand, how video games have grown from their beginnings and entered the realm of storytelling. Understanding that the various genres of video games limits their ability to be seen as literature, while working to rebuke the stigmas that surround video games altogether, I claim that video games have an opportunity to not only allow for a new field of study and criticism, but enhance the argumentation and analysis that already exists. By looking at the current discussions regarding video games, as well as the listings and reception of video games within universities, I hope to give evidence and reasoning to back up and contribute to the idea that video games will soon be introduced into the classrooms and criticized as a narrative genre.

KEY WORDS:

INTRODUCTION

The presence of video games within the realm of academia is an arising topic. Over the past few decades, the progression of games have allowed for the growth of a medium that has paved the way for new discussions and conversations to take place. While scholars and gamers alike voice their opinions as games rapidly progress and evolve, the analysis of games, and how it should be approached, is a discussion that is growing as fast as the gaming industry. For the purpose of this paper, the focus is on the potential to analyze games as pieces of literature. While this approach comes with certain caveats, the idea is that games have the ability to thrive under this type of analysis. While the field is still emerging, the attention games are receiving have certainly sparked countless articles and discussions, not only as an entirely new field of study, but a field that is heavily influenced by years of traditional criticism. In many ways, video games stand as a link between the past and present and, as argued in this paper, time will bring

video games into the classroom as documents to be analyzed critically by scholars and students alike.

One of the caveats previously mentioned is there must be distinctions regarding what genre of games can qualify for analysis. It should be noted that it is unlikely that every game has the potential to enter the literary classroom. Therefore, the first step is to distinguish what games are capable of such analysis. Looking at how video games have progressed from their humble beginnings as simple mechanical games like *Pong*, to open-world and visual games like *Skryim*, it is clear that not all genres can be viewed in the same way. By separating games that contain elements of narrative from those that are purely based on mechanics, the specific games qualified to enter the classroom can be narrowed down. However, it should also be noted that the line is not as clear as separating games such as *Tetris* from *The Legend of Zelda*, in which mechanics and story are easily distinguishable. Games like *Mario Brothers* sit on the fence between mechanic-focused and story-focused. Elements of a story are certainly present, the princess gets kidnapped and it is up to the hero to rescue her, yet the plot acts more precisely as a catalyst to begin the game rather than an active narrative. In games such as this, and there are certainly many cases like it, the blurred line does not necessarily limit the scope of interpretation but must be taken into consideration regardless. It is up to the players and scholars alike to test their abilities and dig deeply into games to uncover narratives that are both obvious and embedded, and discern those that are capable of being viewed with narrative potential.

The distinction between mechanics and plot immediately brings up one of the most notable debates currently surrounding the analysis of video games. The debate between Ludology versus Narratology is a common topic that cannot be avoided when discussing games. At their base levels, Ludologists argue that games need to be viewed as an entirely new form of

study, with a focus on mechanics and interface. On the other side of the debate, Narratologists tend to apply traditional means to this emerging media. I want to first clarify that this is a simplified version of these two approaches. The debate between the two is an interesting and in-depth conversation in and of itself, with both sides presenting excellent argumentation that has been discussed greatly over the past several years. However, for the sake of this paper, my focus lies in the ability to analyze games through a traditional lens rather than discuss the pros and cons of these two perspectives. Because the argument is geared towards that of a narratological approach, I feel it necessary to say that the mechanics should, and can, be used as evidence to support claims made about plot and symbolism as they often directly, and purposefully, reflect those messages. In fact, because one of the unique features of games is the player's interaction with the story, the mechanics continuously connect the players with the world that is created within the story. This is important to note as I want to assure that the mechanics and rules within the game are taken into consideration whenever a game is critically analyzed. That being said, the emphasis on the narratological approach comes from the desire to bring games into the literary classroom. By approaching games through this lens, both the integration and application of traditional values are easily transferred into a scholarly conversation and can be argued for their potential within a literature curriculum.

ONGOING CONVERSATIONS

By entering the conversation at this point in time, teachers have an opportunity to be part of an essentially experimental approach to an emerging field of study. As courses are developed and teachers and students alike adapt video games into both their lives and their academic careers, the molding of this field has really only just begun. This allows room for individuals to have their own ideas as to how games can, and inevitably will, be implemented. When it comes

to what is currently underway, video games have previously been used for younger audiences. The idea is that video games can enrich the learning process and allow an authentic assessment of 21st-century skills (Gee & Shaffer 26). Especially for children who are growing up in a technological world, offering video games as a method of learning helps to them adapt and take on difficult subjects, while also helping to connect them with the material on terms they understand.

Children who grew up with the early 2000s might even remember computer games that have long been trying to teach math, typing, and computer/programing skills. Games like *Jump Start* and *Number Munchers* have long been incorporating these skillsets into youth, with several games like *Reader Rabbit* and *Word Munchers* that included helping beginner readers learn simple words. Not only can this approach for children help them to learn material they struggle with, the approach of using technology they are familiar with (and associate with more fun activities) helps them to engage more readily with the curriculum. This being said, using video games for grade school, particularly those that fall into the elementary to middle school age groups, seems promising. However, when it comes to including video games into both literature classrooms and more advanced age groups the focus shifts to the effectiveness of video games for a demographic that contains an entirely different set of needs. While including these types of games into more advanced classrooms is not currently being explored on a widespread level, the research is steadily beginning to grow.

Easily one of the most identifiable, and important, experiments in terms of a games capability of being viewed academically was Dr. Julian McDougall's 2013 experimentation with the video game *L.A. Noire.* His research project involved undergraduate teachers and students studying the game as a literary text. This particular case is especially effective, and an excellent

case study for this emerging field of analysis, as the game is based heavily on the traditional mystery-detective novels of the early 1900s. Because of the game's connection to literature, it helps students and educators alike more readily apply their literary knowledge to this new medium. The project involved students and teachers playing, analyzing, discussing, and teaching elements of the game in order to see how and if this "transmedia" approach to literature could be possible and substantial. While there were many obstacles that had to be overcome, such as finding ways to play the game as a class and overcoming in-game obstacles such as puzzles and mechanics, the study did show the that it is possible to integrate games into a classroom.

The responses to this study varied from person to person, with some "reading" the game "as if it were a novel" while others asserted that "if it is a game it cannot be literature" (Berger and McDougall 63-64). But like the discussion surrounding the idea that not every game can be viewed in the same light, one interviewer takes into consideration that the same can be said for any genre of literature as well. The lecturer commented on the viability that games have as a literary text, saying that not even genres of literature have remained consistent over the years, but rather they "recur with variation and modification over time as the world in which they are produced also changes." Just as games are now a part of the world in which we live, they too can have a significant contribution to the way that we perceive literature in our digital age. The lecturer reiterates this idea by commenting that the adaptability of video games "was made clear in the case of the noir genre by the study guide – which was effective because it enhanced some of the ideas about how literary genres and narratives structures evolve that the students had already started to develop during their degree" (Berger & McDougall 63). By looking at video games as another addition to a long line of storytelling, games seem to have an ability to stand their ground as another literary genre.

Even with the differences of opinion regarding whether or not games can be looked at as literature, McDougall also significantly notes that "both teachers and students were entirely comfortable with a collaborative approach to the learning, with the discussion over space and time arising from logistics for gameplay – as opposed to more straightforward novel reading" (Berger & McDougall 65). Just by looking at how games can be comfortably integrated into the classroom, the transition to including video games does not seem so daunting. In many ways, this comment also encompasses the variety of ways in which a game can be interpreted that are distinctly unique to that which is found within this genre. As the discussion "over space and time arise from logistics for gameplay," it emphasizes a games unique ability to place players into the environment and interact with it. The effects that a game's environment can have on the interpretation of the story relates to what scholar Henry Jenkins noted as narrative architecture.

This term is used to describe how games utilize their unique feature of world-building in order to better create a narrative. Jenkins clarifies that games "do not have one future," and individual games contain their own unique versions of storytelling (Jenkins 2). From games like *L.A. Noire* that contain clear plotlines to games like *The Unfinished Swan* in which the narrative is embedded into the environment that the character explores, a game's ability to tell a story is implemented in a variety of ways. Evoked narratives, embedded narratives, emergent narratives, and micro-narratives are some of the ways that stories are told. Henry Jenkins outlines these types of story-telling devices in his article "Game Design as Narrative Architecture." Evoked narratives arise through the details within the game that build off of what players may previously be accustomed to, such as a previous game or series, or even use cultural references to enhance the storytelling experience. Embedded narratives portray the plot through the games environment, while emergent narratives are not pre-constructed but rather rely on the player's

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interaction with the gameplay itself. Micro-narratives are often the smaller details surrounding the characters and environment that can act as plot-enhancers or subplots to the game. All of these are just some of the many potential ways in which a story can exist within a game, with each case containing choices about the design and organization that "have narratological consequences" (Jenkins 12). While every individual game will have its own unique interpretation of how the story is told, the very existence of plot, character, and setting allows for analysis through a literary-critical approach.

In addition to the two scholars previously mentioned, Eric Zimmerman also contributes to the discussion surrounding the potential ways in which we can view games. His article "Gaming Literacy: Game Design as a Model for Literacy in the Twenty-First Century" takes on the approach of game analysis as a form of "system based thinking." He argues that a game's design, and the interface that players interact with, involve more than just players interacting within a space-based environment as Jenkins suggests, but also the players ability to work with the multitude of overlapping systems that are present within the game. While emphasizing how these system ties closely with a ludologist point of view, the contribution that this article has on the discussion surrounding the analysis of video games shows the versatile nature that games possess. Zimmerman himself even states that "systems are important, but if we limit literacy to structural, systematic literacy we are missing part of the equation…games are social ecosystems and personal experience, and these dimensions are key aspects of a well-rounded literacy" (Zimmerman 27). The flexible nature that games possess allow for a variety of interpretations that, in many ways, are well-suited to the world of literature analysis.

While the discussions often involve debates between scholars over the "proper" way to analyze games, the very fact that the conversation exists expresses the potential that video games

offer. In the same way a novel can be viewed and interpreted through a variety of theoretical lenses, the opportunities that games present offer similar versatile and limitless grounds for analysis. I argue that the very fact that debates are being had over how to analyze games as literature is the very basis on which games can be viewed in this way. Similarly, as poetry and novels have always reflected the world that they were created in, video games can offer a similar connection. As they are important aspects of modern day culture, games can not only be seen as outlets of storytelling, but as a connection to (and product of) the human condition.

CURRENT CLASSROOM USES AND PERSONAL ANALYSIS

Just as McDougall implemented his research study in 2013 at Bournemouth University, other professors and colleges across the globe have been experimenting on video games usability. In Google searches alone, the idea of video games entering the literature classroom is progressively becoming more accepted. Places like Rice University, Saint Cloud State University and even the University of Texas at Tyler have all offered at least one course that analyzes games within the context of a literary classroom. Saint Cloud's "Video Games as Literature" class's syllabus states that the purpose of the class is to "explore video games noted for their excellent narratives" by "employing an adapted version of the 'reader response' method to help us understand the unique structure of interactive narratives and their effects on those who play them" (Barton). In another example, Rice University held a class that utilized the atmosphere and lore of *Skyrim* to analyze and discuss Scandinavian folk-lore (Ellard). These examples alone show the versatility that games have in the classroom. Regardless of the games purpose within the class, the emphasis on the relationship that the game shares with the player is unique to this medium.

Depicting the human experience is not only one of the unique ways in which games can reach their audiences, but one of the most significant ways in which video games possess the ability to relate with the human condition, just as writing as done for centuries. Games like *Papers, Please*, *Firewatch,* and *The Vanishing of Ethan Carter* all contain stories that comment on certain aspects of life. Whether it is dealing with morality or ethics (as found all throughout *Papers, Please*) the reality of loss and depression (as seen in *Firewatch*) or an account and commentary on abuse through the eyes of a young child (as in *The Vanishing of Ethan Carter*) games have a way of connecting readers/players to both characters and environments in ways that are completely unique to this medium.

In order to give an example, the following is my own short analysis of one of the scenes found in *The Vanishing of Ethan Carter*. To give some context, this game involves the player progressing through an open world and attempting to solve the mystery surrounding the disappearance of Ethan Carter. To categorize the game, is most closely aligned with that of an embedded narrative; meaning that the player interacts with the environment to uncover the story rather than the narrative being presented to the player. The following section is taken from one area of the game in which the player is searching through the abandoned home of the missing boy:

> "The maze-like nature of the house, and harsh memories of Ethan's abusive
> family that are triggered as the player walks from room to room, are all
> potentially a representation of Ethan's mindset. While the mechanics of this
> particular setting mirror that of a puzzle, in which the player is forced to start
> from the beginning if more than one mistake is make, the gameplay further
> reflects how the player might take one step forward that causes them to be pushed

back to the beginning. This mirrors Ethan's own fears about his home and his

inability to escape" (Willingham).

Just as the mechanics, design, and narrative come together in this short analysis on merely one

puzzle, each aspect of the game reflects the mentality of this young boy trapped within an

abusive household. This brief example expresses the ways in which the player is immersed more

vividly for both plot and character.

Not only does this provide evidence and support that video games have the ability to be

analyzed critically, but also to show the ways in which games are capable of capturing glimpses

of humanity. By taking such a dark concept, yet a harsh reality of the world we live in, the game

accomplishes what literature has done for centuries. By taking this into consideration, the growth

and acknowledgment that video games do have this ability to capture and emulate culture,

situations, and ethical dilemmas are all grounds that one can easily build upon in a classroom.

Just as the above mentioned universities have already begun embrace this relationship; the future

of games within the literary classroom is rapidly approaching.

CONCLUSION

The relationship between player and game, reader and text, especially in the interactive

environment in which video games offer, is a vital aspect in this media's ability to be integrated

into a literary classroom. Even within the context of traditional literature, in which the

acknowledgement of audience has always been a vital aspect of storytelling, the relationship that

video games offer to the players takes games to a level that no other genre been able to achieve

before. As the next generation of literature, or "English 2.0" as McDougall amusingly calls it,

video games have a great potential to be analyzed and interpreted as a link between traditional literature and modern technology.

While it will take time to incorporate games into curriculum, and for methods of research and analysis to evolve and adapt to the vast variety and genres of games, their future in the classroom seems inevitable. As various scholars have written on the subject, and as courses slowly emerge that delve into the possibilities that video games offer, it is clear that games have a future in the literary classroom. Just as McDougall's conclusion to his *L.A. Noire* study stated that the impact that games can have depends on English teachers "picking up the study guide and working through it with students," the future of games within the literary realm is both tangible and quickly approaching as long as there are those willing to contribute. Just as genres of writing have appeared over time, and writers all across centuries have added to, and manipulated traditional rules in order to create new works of literature, the progression of both literature and technology have come together and allowed for this genre to be introduced to our culture, and for future generations as well. Looking at a game's ability to openly and easily reflect the environment in which it is created, and connect with the human condition in ways distinct from other literary works, the future of video games within the classroom is currently underway.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author, Kaylee Willingham, certifies that they have no affiliations or involvement with any organization or entity with any financial interest or non-financial interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.