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Interactive Media—the Next Literature?



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Abstract

Perceptions of video games (computer games/games played on consoles) have evolved from stereotypical viewpoints that games are just a type of passive learning. My research demonstrates that video games are indeed active by categorizing levels of interactivity and by providing additional ways that they have educational value: defining the cognitive aspect, drawing a comparison between the developments of a children's museum, and studying serious games. I then establish the relationship between video games and literature, drawing comparisons between the relationships between the author, reader, and text and the player. I conclude that video games can recategorize literature.

According to a National Endowment for the Arts survey, “Literary reading is in decline with fewer than half of American adults now reading literature” (Davis para. 1). Dana Gioia, the National Endowment for the Arts Chairman, states that “this report documents a national crisis,” as reading, which is important to education and lifestyle, is at risk (Davis para. 3). As literary reading continues to decline, the question becomes what are people doing instead? As the study shows, “people who do not read literary works watched an average of 3.1 hours (of television) daily” (Davis para. 14). Of course, this is not the only reason for the decline, but television is a dominant interest among children and adults. “America can no longer take active and engaged literacy for granted,” according to Gioia. “As more Americans lose this capability, our nation becomes less informed, active, and independent minded. These are not qualities that a free, innovative, or productive society can afford to lose” (Davis para. 15). Because America, “a free, innovative, or productive society” cannot afford to lose such qualities, what solution or solutions will help solve the problem? (Davis para. 15). Gioia does not believe there is a solution; however, there are ways or opportunities that are being ignored or not even taken into consideration. There are other mediums, specifically video games, which have educational value and even dynamics similar to literature.

Video games, once negatively classified as passive learning, have advanced beyond such mediums as television and film, and now can be considered active learning. Video games are simulations of new experiences and new worlds, and players are able to create, take risks, succeed, develop critical and problem solving skills, and explore within the medium.

According to Marilee Sprenger, an international educational neuroscience consultant and author of *Differentiation through Learning Styles and Memory*, “There are some brain basics that will

affect all students to varying degrees. The characteristics of a strong cognitive environment include predictability, feedback, novelty, choice, challenge, and reflection” (18). These characteristics of a strong cognitive environment exist not only in a classroom learning environment, but also within the playing experiences of video games. Unpredictable situations within a classroom interfere with the learning process of the brain (Sprengrer). Video games are developed to comply with the need for predictability. The first level of any game is designed for the player to become familiar with his surroundings. Without having played the game, the player can predict that the puzzles in the first level will be rather easy to solve, or if by chance there are enemies, they will not be as much of a threat as later in the game. For instance, in the “new” game *Food Force*, created by the United Nations World Food Programme, the player becomes a crucial part in the process of delivering food aid to an area in crisis. The first mission entitled “Air Surveillance” is relatively simple in order for the player to become familiar with controls and the geographical area. During this mission, the player pilots a helicopter over the fictitious island of Sheylan (the crisis zone) and locates hungry people and the fastest route to deliver food. The description of the mission may seem difficult but the player is only controlling the helicopter by using the mouse (of the computer) and highlighting groups of people on the screen. The difficulty of the levels occurs with progression as, later, the player will have to create a well-balanced diet of sugar, rice, beans, and salt for the population of Sheylan, complete logistic puzzles to buy food donations, and manage projects to rebuild the Sheylan community.

If the game is too unpredictable and the player is faced with too-difficult puzzles, the game becomes unappealing to its audience. The game does not allow the player to advance. This is important with regard to feedback: “Neuroscientist William Greenough believes that interactive feedback is required to learn from experience” (Sprengrer 20). The player learns from his experience of the game when he receives feedback from the outcome of his actions. This learn-

ing process combines with the reflection process. Based on the actions and outcomes within the game, the player receives positive or negative feedback. Positive feedback may result in a high score or continuing to the next level without much “damage,” just as negative feedback may result in not completing the level. In this case, the player has to reflect on certain emotions that arise from the playing experience, what works or does not work, or what adjustments are needed to do better. Here, the player reaches higher-level thinking of analyzing and synthesizing the content. This also enhances memory, as the player will remember what to do in a particular situation. Because video games offer novelty and choice, the brain is able to respond positively. The player is introduced to a new world that he is able to experience. Allowing the player to make choices within the video game adds to his experience. The player develops problem-solving and critical thinking skills. In addition, choices can enhance motivation to proceed and experiment, since the player is not confined by rules. The challenge of a video game motivates the player to continue the game. If *all* the levels of the game (not to be confused with the theory of the simplicity within the first level) are considered “easy,” the player loses interest and does not need to use critical thinking skills. Video games have to be well-conceived and executed cognitively in order for them to be successful.

As video games are developed to engage the player, children’s museums also use a similar successful environment as an innovative way of getting children interested in learning. The Grand Rapids Children’s Museum provides a “dynamic educational setting where all types of informal learning can occur” (Grand Rapids Children’s Museum para. 4). It is important to note the word “informal” in reference to activities that are not typically done within a classroom environment. Video games (informal learning) can also provide a “dynamic educational setting.” The most interesting aspect linking the children’s museum and video games is the concept of play.

During a visit to the Grand Rapids Children’s Museum, Community Relations Manager Jan Stone explained to

me that it is important for children to discover, play, and learn by doing—all terms related to the development of video games. To fully understand how one playing video games might “discover, play, and learn by doing,” it is necessary to examine the identity of the player without any negative preconceptions. Indeed, the player plays by using a handheld controller that allows the player to dictate the character’s actions. The most impressive contribution of video games to the player is the ability to explore worlds and discover objects or new techniques, as well as learn through experience. For example, *Food Force* has six different missions, entitled “Air Surveillance,” “Mission Pacts,” “Air Drop,” “Locate and Dispatch,” “Food Run,” and “Future Farming,” each demonstrating part of the process to deliver food aid to crisis areas. The player becomes familiar with the reality and activities of the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP). For instance, the player learns how global climate changes, such as drought and civil wars, can lead to area crisis. The player also learns the importance of nutrition: what ingredients constitute a nutritional meal, how the WFP responds to emergencies by dropping food from an airplane, and that the WFP has limited funds, relying on donations to deliver food to over 800,000,000 people across the world.

To deepen the playing experience, *Food Force* incorporates real video footage of land areas, helicopters and equipment, and discussions within planning rooms to provide the player with more than just an animated visual experience. The player is also able to take on different projects such as “School Feeding,” “Food for Work,” “Food for Training,” “Nutritional Programs,” and “HIV/Prevention” which, together, demonstrate a strategic planning of rebuilding a community over a ten year period so that the community will become self-sufficient. What would take years of training and expertise with handling food assistance is accessible to a player of any age with the game *Food Force*. Not only does this game “serve as a classroom tool for teaching about hunger and has a wide-cross curricula appeal (geography, social studies, and health) as well as strategic

thinking and decision-making,” the most effective aspect of the game is that it gives players real life experience applied to current crises—the war in Iraq and Hurricane Katrina (*Food Force*).

Although a children’s museum cannot provide such an intense hands-on experience as delivering food aid and scaling the surrounding area from a helicopter, it does provide exhibits that are relevant to someone’s everyday lifestyle, such as shopping at the grocery store. In the far corner of the Grand Rapids Children’s Museum, there is an imitation grocery store with a cash register and conveyor belt, shelves filled with cereal boxes, bread, juice containers, laundry detergent, and sections of plastic fruits and vegetables. The child learns how to run a grocery store by restocking shelves, bagging groceries, and handling prices and money.

Even though the player cannot touch objects in a video game, James Paul Gee, author of *What Video Games Have to Teach about Learning Literacy*, argues that similar interaction is a crucial element in gaming, too:

Playing a good video game like *Deus Ex* [a role-playing/action-adventure game] well requires the player to engage in the following four-step process:

1. The player must *probe* the virtual world (which involves looking around the current environment, clicking on something, or engaging in a certain action).
2. Based on reflection while probing and afterward, the player must form a *hypothesis* about what something (a text, object, artifact, event, or action) might mean in a usefully situated way.
3. The player *reprobes* the world with that hypothesis in mind, seeing what effect he or she gets.
4. The player treats this effect as feedback from the world and accepts or *rethinks* his or her original hypothesis (90).

In another part of the Grand Rapids

Children’s Museum, I observed a young girl about the age of five at an activity called the Gravity Wall. The Gravity Wall included a double-sided wooden board with cut horizontal, vertical, and diagonal lines, colorful plastic planks to stick into the wall, and a tennis ball. At first, the young girl bounced the tennis ball, observed each plank, and stuck a few of the planks into the wall without a distinguishable pattern. Then, one by one, she lined the planks in what looked like a sideways “W.” Afterwards, she placed the tennis ball at the starting point to watch it roll down the path. However, the tennis ball stopped in between the third and fourth row because there was not enough space for the ball to continue due to the last plank in the third row. Since the girl was aware that I was watching her, she looked back at me (without asking for help) and smiled. Immediately, she rearranged the planks by removing the last two planks from the third row, rather than removing just the one blocking the path. To see the new effect of her rearrangement, she repeated the process with the tennis ball; this time, it did not stop. What was most interesting about this last process was that the young girl left right after solving the puzzle. She seemed to lose interest within the Gravity Wall because she did not try a new pattern, perhaps satisfied with the new effect.

As seen during the observation, the arrangement of exhibits encourages choices and problem solving. The areas within video games are also arranged in this way. For instance, the mood might change from one area to the next, which helps the player determine the level of danger. If the player leaves from an open field with upbeat music into a dark forest with dramatic music, the player uses the cue to be more cautious and examine the area. Throughout my conversation with Jan Stone, she kept referring to this idea of choice. She stated that, “It [being any activity, school related or not] is more successful when kids have choices.” This statement is very important as it reiterates what must be present within a strong cognitive environment as well as a good video game.

Each exhibit offers the awareness of patterns for different age groups. For

instance, there are three rainbow exhibits. At each rainbow exhibit, there are different plastic colored balls that are placed through a hole(s) to make a pattern. Depending on the age group, some children might focus on just putting the ball into the hole, as older children might try to make distinguishable patterns: all blue balls in the first line, all red balls in the second line, and so on.

According to Bryan Bergeron, author of *Developing Serious Games*, video games also follow this natural advancement:

The pervasiveness of digital technology in the classroom and workplace, as well as the popularity of gaming as a pastime for a large segment of the population, serve to strengthen the position that the use of serious games as educational vehicles is part of the natural evolution of educational technology (xix).

The serious games I have studied that follow this natural evolution of educational technology are *Life Preservers*, *Food Force*, and *Making History*. It is important to note the grade of difficulty of serious games in their relation to choice and interactivity. *Life Preservers* is operated by the Michigan State University Games for Entertainment and Lab. In *Life Preservers*, the player tries to protect Earth from alien ships, because the species on the ships could change the entire evolution of life on the planet. The “Tree of Life” (a timeline and family tree mapping the history of life on earth) is the primary display in the *Life Preservers* game. To the right side of the “Tree of Life,” there are questions that represent three adaptation challenges. During the ten rounds of play, the player figures out which “critter” (one of the dinosaurs) matches the adaptation. “A narrated, animated cut scene reinforces the key learning concepts that follows each round and relates those concepts to the pending alien invasion” (*Life Preservers*). The goal here is to learn as much about the “critters” as possible to prepare for the alien invasion. When the first alien invasion occurs, the player has the choice to pick which alien is most important to

stop to preserve life on earth. The player then learns how the chosen alien affects life on earth. The game is not constructed in such a way that the answers necessarily matter. Of course, the player has to get the correct answer to move on to the next stage, but this is not what is important. According to the Michigan State University Games for Entertainment and Lab, “The *Life Preservers* game acts as a good teacher, guiding learners to think about questions of evolution and adaptation in a carefully designed order. Learners will become accustomed to new ways of thinking about species and how they are adapted to their environment” (*Life Preservers*).

Life Preservers follows the standards of the National Science Education for 9-12 graders, and the video game format provides more interactivity than that of a science book to the students; the students exercise choice. When the game begins, the student creates the lab assistant character: skin, hair, eye color, and what clothes to wear. The most important choices rely on which alien ship to send away from earth. Although these choices do not affect game play, it does establish some character development (the lab assistant) and literacy. Game play is indeed affected by the player’s choice in *Food Force*. For example, in Mission 5: Food Run, the player has the ability to clear land mines, rebuild bridges, and negotiate with local rebels forces. Although the player can choose different routes, either safe or dangerous, there will always be an obstacle to overcome before continuing to the destination. During my first time playing *Food Force*, I chose the safe route both times during the mission because I wanted to avoid any conflict that could slow down my route. However, even on the safe route, I encountered hostile bandits. The negotiation process was relatively simple because the “correct” responses were guided by the game. *Food Force* has established some freedom to the player, but it is still restricted.

Restrictions—limitations within the game—affect the player’s interactivity. In *Food Force*, there are two types of restrictions: the number of choices by the player, and the outcomes of these choices. Because the player can pick which

route (safe or dangerous) to take, there are only three obstacles at hand: clearing land mines, rebuilding bridges, or negotiating with rebels. What may seem to be what I will call an open-system game (a game with infinite choices) is really a closed-system game because the choices are generated. Although the probability completing the generated obstacles on any given path is unknown to the player, the player can predict that it will be one of the mentioned obstacles. Of course, a first time player of *Food Force* will not have this advantage. This may even be the case for a player who has played *Food Force* multiple times; a generated obstacle may not have occurred during game play (e.g. a player might never have to negotiate with rebels). If the player does not have the chance to negotiate with rebels, the player will not experience the other type of restriction. During the negotiation process, the player is allowed to choose one of the four statements to answer the rebels concerns. Although this appears to allow more choices for the player, one of the statements in each series of concerns from the rebel is directed towards the outcome the game wants. During this time, the player predicts that the answer with the WFP information is the right choice. This didactic outcome restricts the player from choosing his own answer, unless the player wants to intentionally affect his mission negatively to see how the different answers might affect his game play. Of course, *Food Force* is used to teach students about the WFP, so it is clear why the game is developed in such a way. However, the weakness in *Food Force* is that it is only good to cover a specific subject matter; with its restrictions, the player will lose interest in playing the game multiple times.

Making History: the Calm and the Storm by Muzzy Lane Software, takes this wide cross-curricula appeal of geography and social studies (including government and history) to a more advanced level. Indeed, *Making History* is a popular strategy game, though all Muzzy Lane’s games are built to be used in the classroom. *Making History* “invites students/players” to replay World War II based on military, political and economic factors (*Making History*). The students

also have the choice to play as the United States, Japan, United Kingdom, China, Germany, France, the USSR, or Italy. The goal is to devise strategies based on the nation’s strengths and weaknesses while managing military forces, cities, regions, and resources. Some of the historic scenarios cover the fall of France, Pearl Harbor, and the D-Day Invasion of Europe. David McDivitt, an Indiana social studies teacher, has taken advantage of the opportunity to cover such events by using *Making History* within his classroom. His classroom has been aired on CBS and his success has been published numerous magazines and newspapers like *USA Today*. Unlike *Life Preservers* and *Food Force*, *Making History* can be played multiple times because of the choices allowed for the player. *Making History* only becomes restricted to the player when played within the classroom environment. Because *Making History* has numerous hours of game play, completion takes too much time for an ordinary unit on WWII within a history class. The player is then restricted to which scenario to play to meet requirements of the intended WWII unit of a history class. If the player can play the game in its entirety, then that player has the opportunity to interact with or even lead each nation. A textbook cannot provide that experience.

Indeed, video games can be supplementary to textbooks. Marilee Sprenger identifies one of the basic premises of the multiple ways for students to absorb and express information: “Students must be involved in their learning process” (2). Interactivity is essential for a student to learn. Students who are able to not just necessarily participate in class discussions but actually explore and experiment with concepts will remember and understand what they are doing. Through experience students can recall important information more easily than by reading a textbook or listening to lectures.

Certainly, reading a textbook is a form of interaction in that the student flips through the pages, reads the text, and identifies the pictures. However, what becomes of the student’s learning experience if the student cannot process the text? The learning becomes passive. According to Eric Zimmerman, game

designer and CEO of Gamelab, interactivity can be divided into four types:

1. *cognitive* interactivity occurs on the level of interpretation, which demonstrates how the reader processes the text—constructing meaning and “filling in the gaps.”
2. *functional* interactivity comprises all the actions that a user can perform on the text’s material without altering it directly, for example, turning the pages of a poetry book.
3. *explicit* interactivity is designed by the object’s creator. This object requires manipulation by the interactor and the signs that make up the text affected by it.
4. *meta*-interactivity consists of acting on the text from its outside. This form of interactivity can be engaged when one claims ownership of the text and creates a variation of it (qtd. in Aresenault 10).

With regard to the definition for explicit interactivity, it is easy to see that video games hold more potential than textbooks and/or other media. When a reader cannot process the text, based on these forms of interaction, the reader only participates in the functional interactivity—he is unable to form connections to the text or write critical thoughts/reviews of the text. Video games, however, allow the player to interact at all levels of interactivity, and most importantly, manipulate the text through choices and action.

Of course, I can anticipate negative reactions to using video games within the classroom environment. I am not advocating that video games should be the primary learning tool within an educational curriculum; however, it is important to be aware of the possibilities that video games offer. Because it is true that video games hold more potential than textbooks, it is now safe to observe video games with literature. In fact, I believe that, by certain definitions, video games can be considered literature.

I do not think that it is necessarily pos-

sible to give a true definition of literature, as it varies from one to another. For those who need a basic definition, literature is “The body of written works of a language, period, or culture” and “Imaginative or creative writing, especially of recognized artistic value” (“Literature”). What is most interesting with these definitions is that literature is restricted to a written body of work. This might give one the impression that literature cannot be of a different form of art. Perhaps the unifying thread in all literature is the idea of experience, which is most important when understanding the relationship between the reader and text. Literature allows the reader to experience different cultures and different periods, whether it is a real or imagined event in human history. The author (which I will not limit to just of written texts) gives the reader a connection to the human mind. One cannot read someone else’s mind; the person has to rely on body language and expressions. Through literature, the reader “hears” the thoughts of the characters and has some understanding of a character’s particular action. This is how the reader becomes emotionally invested with the character. Indeed, this also gives insight to human behavior: how human beings interact with each other.

With the relationship between the reader and text, the process of reflection is also an important characteristic of literature. The human experience does not just involve the character within the novel, but the reader’s view of the character, situation, or environment. Literature can influence the reader to reflect on his or her own values, behavior, and life in general.

Before developing connections between video games and literature, it is necessary to establish the components of both literature and video games. The four basic components of literature, particularly fiction, are the author, the narrator, the point-of-view character, and the reader. The author is the one who originally develops and writes the work. The narrator (which exists in a variety of types) tells the story. The point-of-view character (which may be the same as the narrator) is the consciousness that the reader sees, listens, and feels in the story. And the reader is the one that reacts to

the piece.

Within the video game setting, the components are analogous to that of literature, except for the technological advances. Video games have the ability to provide relationships to the reader (as player) that a book or written work does not have the technology to accomplish. In this regard, there are two authors within the video game: the game designer and the player. The game designer has obviously created the game; however, the player creates how the story is told. In addition, the narrator of a video game can either be a voice-over throughout game play, the animated cut-scenes, or the player (the player again tells the story which is determined by his actions). The character is the one represented in the virtual world, as well as the conscious viewpoint experienced by the player. Lastly, the reader is considered the player, since the player reacts and explores within the virtual world.

This relationship of the player as reader can be illustrated using the concept of Aristotle’s Rhetorical Triangle. The Rhetorical Triangle is used to illustrate the concept that each appeal is as important—how the writer presents himself, how it affects the reader’s emotions, and how the reader process the text.

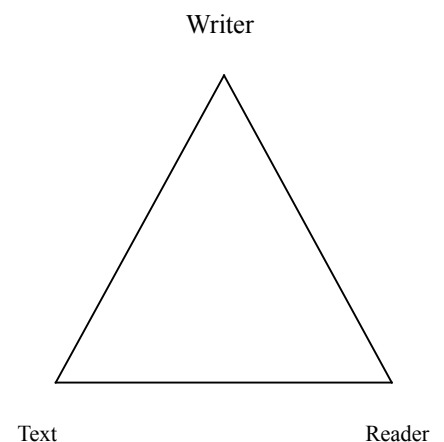


Figure 1: Aristotle’s Rhetorical Triangle

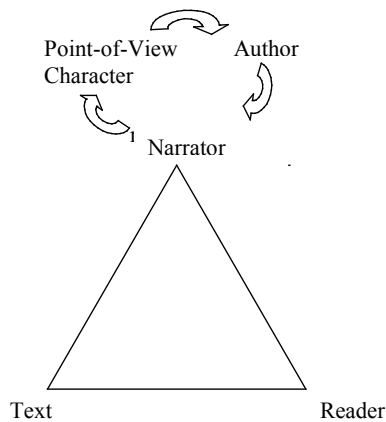


Figure 2: My Reconfiguration of the Rhetorical triangle

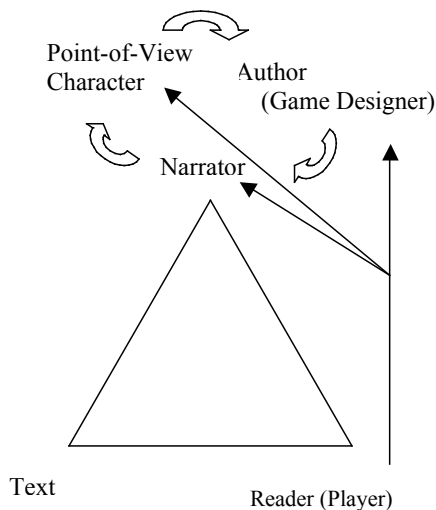


Figure 3: The Rhetorical Triangle used in reference to an open system video game

In literature, the writer can present himself through the narrator and the point-of view character. This idea is the same for video games in an open system, where infinite choices are allowed. The reader can become the author, narrator, and virtual character. In doing so, the reader can alter the text.

According to Wayne Booth, author of *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, “We can admit, of course, that the choice of evocative

‘situations and chain of events’ is the writer’s most important gift—or, as structure of the incidents” (97). This quotation is interesting as it relates to just the writer. The reader, being a dominant connection to literature, does not have this type of “gift.” Indeed, the reader can choose what to read and for what reasons, what is actually considered literature, and how to interpret a piece of work. However, the reader does not have this advantage over the work; the author chooses the subject matter and its delivery.

To understand the actual choice of the author, it is important to understand its limitation: “But his general emphasis is on the fact that the house of fiction has ‘not one window, but a million,’ that there are in fact, ‘five million’ ways to tell a story, each of them justified as it provides a ‘center’ for the work” (Booth 24). This idea of different windows leads to the relationship between cause and effect. Because the author chooses the story line, his end result would be different from another author writing a story with the similar idea. This concept of an overall idea with different results is very similar to the development with modern video games.

According to Gee, the story line in a video game is a mixture of four things:

1. The game designers’ (authors) choices
2. How you, the player, have caused these choices to unfold in your specific case by the order in which you have found things
3. The actions you as one of the central characters in the story carry out (since in good video games there is a good deal of choice as to what to do, when to do it, and in what order to do it)
4. Your own imaginative projection about the characters, plot, and world of the story. (Gee 82)

Here, the author has developed a game with one major storyline. For instance, in *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, published by Rockstar Games, the

dominant storyline revolves around the murder of the central character Carl “CJ” Johnson’s mother. However, there are other stories that the player can become involved in. Because the geographical scope illustrates three major cities of Los Santos, San Fierro, and Las Venturas, the player interacts with different characters, therefore producing more stories. One key element to this cause and effect relationship is that “Different players find different things and discover information relevant to the story line in a different order” (Gee 81). This relationship between choice and content is the most distinguishable characteristic between video games and literature. Video games allow nearly infinite choices and responses, in which the player associates himself as the author of the “text.” The player, as a character, is able to affect the environment with certain actions. However, he becomes the author by replaying levels, changing characters (if applicable), and making different choices which not only affects the environment again, but also changes the outcome of the story. Although there can be many interpretations from different readers of a specific piece of traditional literature, there is only one author and one ending. The reader cannot become the author.

Although it may seem as if the player has more flexibility when taking on different identities, the reader still has the same responsibility. According to Gee, “All learning in all semiotic domains requires identity work. It requires taking on a new identity and forming bridges from one’s old identities to the new one” (51). This idea of identity is essential to the player of a video game, as well as the author and reader of a piece of literature. The player must become the character within the video game and, on a deepened level when speaking of role-playing games, create a character that meets or disregards his or her personal values. For instance, in the popular simulation game *The Sims 2* developed by Maxis, the player must first create a character that is either male or female and choose between races and the following six life stages: a baby, toddler, child, teen, adult, or an elder. Depending on the preference, a female player might choose a male teen with aspirations different from

her own, but choose a personality that is identical: very neat, hardly active, and somewhat social. Personally, whenever I play *The Sims 2*, it is difficult for me to create a character that differs much from my own personality or beliefs. I always create an adult female and mix aspirations between “family,” “fortune,” and “knowledge,” depending on the lifestyle I want my character to live. These all are three aspirations of mine; however, the game is restricted to only choosing one during the creation of the character. The only time I “become” someone else is when my female character marries and has children; I have to control the entire household.

Throughout my personal experience of playing *The Sims 2*, I have touched upon what Gee refers to as “the three identities at stake” when playing a good role-playing game. He uses the fantasy computer role-playing game *Arcanum* (which focuses on the ancient world before Atlantis sunk) as a model to describe the three identities: “First, there is a *virtual identity*: one’s identity as a virtual character in the virtual world of *Arcanum*” (Gee 54). This type of *virtual identity* can be modified to what I call a *fictional identity*, where the author’s identity becomes the fictional character within the fictional world of a novel, such that the author becomes the character within the text he is writing.

“A second identity that is at stake in playing a game like *Arcanum* is a *real-world identity*: namely, my own identity as ‘James Paul Gee,’ a nonvirtual person playing a computer game” (Gee 55). Here, it is not an issue with the title *real-world identity* when relating it to the process of literature. It becomes an issue when referring to *who the real-world identity* accounts for. To be more direct, the *real-world identity* can be divided between two sources of literature: the author and the reader. The author’s identity is his own identity as a non-fictional person writing a novel. In this regard, the reader’s *real-world identity* is his own identity, a non-fictional person reading the novel. The reader cannot have a *fictional identity* because the character (within the novel) is already created; there is not a moment where the reader can change the action of the character.

“A third identity that is at stake in playing a game like *Arcanum* is what I will call a *projective identity*, playing on two senses of the word ‘project,’ meaning both ‘to project one’s values and desires onto the virtual character’ and ‘seeing the virtual character as one’s own project in the making . . .’” (Gee 55). In keeping the same meaning of *projective identity*, the author is able to project his values and desires onto the fictional character, as well as see his finished project of the fictional character. It is during this moment that, according to Wayne Booth, “To some novelists it has seemed, indeed, that they [the authors] were discovering or creating themselves as they wrote” (71). Again, the reader cannot project his values and desires onto the fictional character; however, the reader can reflect on his values and the values of the projected character. Although the reader does not have the ability to view the fictional character as his own project, the reader is able to view the fictional character as one’s (the author’s) own project in the making. During this second stage of the projective identity, “the reader knows where he stands in the world of values, as well as, where the author wants him to stand” (Booth 73).

When thinking about identity, it is apparent that whether it is the author, reader, or player of a video game, each person has placed himself out of reality and into the created world: “For Ford Madox Ford the common aim of good modern novelists like James, Crane, Conrad, and himself is ‘to take the reader, immerse him in an Affair so completely that he was unconscious either of the fact that he was reading or of the identity of the author, so that in the end he might say—and believe: ‘I have been [there], I have been!’” (Booth 30). The statement “I have been [there], I have been” can be said by both the reader and the player. Spending hours playing a video game has always been criticized as wasting time or a way for the player to (negatively) escape the realities of life. In this regard, should reading a novel also be seen as wasting time, when indeed, the goal of the author is to let the reader escape his own reality? Of course, the answer would be no, since reading is an activity that is positive and encouraged.

However, one cannot disregard that this is also one of the best contributions of a video game. As for a good video game, because the player can actually explore the world (beyond imaginatively), he can truly become the character and actually “be” in the virtual world.

Although video games have some advantages over literature, such as offering a player the essential power to create and become a particular identity, as well as alter the text, there is one crucial thing that video games cannot yet accomplish—conversation. In all honesty, it will take years for video games to exceed their limitations of technology and human interaction, such that “real” conversations between humans and artificial intelligence become possible. It is true that a reader cannot have a “real” conversation with the character in a novel; however, the reader is surrounded by language. With access to the internal thought process of a character, the reader develops a real-life emotional investment: “If we look closely at our reactions to most great novels, we discover that we feel a strong concern for the characters as people; we care about their good and bad fortune” (Booth 129). This is not to suggest that a player does not care about the “good and bad fortune” of the characters (since the player shares the same identity); however, the player in most cases can change the outcome. For instance, if a character dies within the virtual world, the player can restart the level. A reader, on the other hand, will sympathize with a loved character within the novel if he or she dies because there is no resurrection.

Game developers Michael Mateas and Andrew Stern have tried to fill this “gap” between human interaction and artificial intelligence with their interactive drama *Façade*. According to Mateas and Stern, “The dream of interactive drama, has players interacting with compelling, psychologically complex characters, and through these interactions having a real influence on a dynamically evolving storyline” (Mateas). During the twenty minutes of game play of *Façade*, the player is caught within the argument between the virtual characters Grace and Trip about their marriage. *Façade* is most compelling because of the new possibilities it offers to players:

This work is unlike hypertext narrative or interactive fiction to date in that the computer characters actively perform the story without waiting for you to click on a link or enter a command. Interaction is seamless as you converse in natural language and move and gesture freely within the first-person 3D world of Grace and Trip's apartment. (Mateas)

If more game developers adopt this new genre, the gaming world itself will change. With this advancement, players will not have control over the action of the video game but a more direct connection to the plot—the player does not change the storyline through action, but through communication. And when mentioning communication, I am not referring to the “branch-out system” of choosing one of the limited responses generated by the computer. Instead, the player creates his own response and the virtual character will respond, which is the same idea behind a book—the characters respond to each other, naturally. It is during this moment that video games will evolve beyond the visual elements and become a true literary work, possibly offering more than literature itself has to offer. Then it is possible that video games, with their already similar dynamics to literature, can recategorize for students, writers, readers, and players what is literature. ■

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