



Essay on the Role of Video Games in Teaching Literature

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Abstract: In an era of continuous digitalization, teachers turn to new technology in order to adapt to the universe of their students, to remain relevant in this constant change of interests. Students are motivated by elements of popular culture, being constantly exposed to an environment that is rich in information and textual patterns. And yet, what is the connection between literature and video games? Is there such a connection in the first place?

Students need guidance when it comes to developing their literary skills of analysis and communication, as well as literary thinking. Hours dedicated to integrating video games in our educational environment corresponds to students' passions, highlighting one of their major interest, represented by entertainment in a virtual environment. We can all see this happening when it comes to our students. They can be easily absorbed by any kind of virtual reality that may encounter, but it is so hard to get the same reaction from them when it comes to a classical way of teaching. Until now, reading competences and literary skills were applied to books. But the same skills can be applied to many other mediums in which storytelling plays out the main role, such as comics, movies, and video games.

Video games have evolved from a simple means of entertainment to a tool of deep quality learning. Often, students feel that they are a more significant part of a story within a video game than in the environment created by books. Let's face it! Students love to play, but sometimes they hate to read, especially when they feel forced to do so. The need for teachers to examine video games as literature starts from students' lack of interest in reading, which comes from the way they lived their lives until now, growing up spending more time playing video games than reading books. This is a reality that we do not only need to accept, but also to adapt to it and to make the best out of it.

But how can we use video games to teach literature and develop the analytical skills of our students?

Keywords: serious games, teaching literature, video games, digital pedagogy

Video games can be seen as interactive stories, most of the time involving the player directly and giving them control over how the game evolves. The game, as a way of interpreting the text, contributes to the development of creativity and to the stimulation of the ability to make decisions based on logical reasoning. The video games are influenced by a primary form of storytelling, but they influence storytelling as well. Many games have their source of inspiration in

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books, and joining these mediums of presenting common themes can lead students to divergent, complex thinking that enables them to identify defining elements in both environments.

The first method by which we can use video games as a didactic method is represented by the use of materials that teach content. These games use skill collections, practices, values and identities. Teaching through content-based games and, to be more specific, epistemic games, promotes understanding, effective social practice, strong identities. Another way in which video games are useful to us in our literature classes is represented by their interpretation as texts. We got used to only using texts from books when it came to decoding the meaning behind words and analysis. Written fiction is the most widely used form of text that is meant for interpretation. But limiting ourselves to this type of text limits the very capacity for interpretation. When a student plays a complex narrative game, this involves exploration, rules, taking risks, developing and testing hypotheses, reading words, interpreting sounds and images. What makes gaming such an interesting alternative? In addition to their educational character, the motivational component it develops among students has a significant contribution to the learning process. Students are motivated to achieve their goals and to persevere in their attempts, despite the failures that might occur. Games also develop cooperative problem-solving skills and recognition of the efforts of others. Games are, most of the time, a challenge for children, and they don't play them because they are simple, but, on the contrary, because they are difficult, causing them to make a sustained effort in achieving their objectives. They feel part of the story, of the adventure, and this sense of purpose has a profound effect of motivating them. There is a sense of control that they notice when it comes to playing and this gives them a powerful feeling. But there is also a balance in the ratio between creativity and control. Games promote mistakes as a means of finding creative solutions. And this is what we want our students to learn, creative problem-solving, having a sense of purpose as a guidance, being motivated by wins and not getting discouraged by failures, always trying to do better, to improve their abilities.

Digital Identity

In order to motivate students to be actively involved in the learning process, it is necessary to explore the concept of identity within video games. Popular culture, through its branches represented by media, television, film and the music industry, influences the formation of identity. But video games have the biggest impact on user identity. They encourage identity work and identity-based reflections in clear and meaningful ways.

To introduce the concept of gamification, it is necessary to lay the foundations of this approach by creating and analysing a character, an element known as an avatar in the environment of video games. Most activities based on the use of an electronic environment require creating a virtual representation of the user – an avatar, defined by Klevjer (2007) as a replaceable body that allows the player to be present in the fictional world. In education, avatar is a fun and handy way to engage students in the activity, giving them the chance to express themselves and to create a character according to their personal desires and ideals. Going beyond stereotypes and standardized representations, theta are commonly used, limiting the creativity of creating one-self, the student discovers its defining elements, contributing to the creation of a character that will represent him, but will not replace him in the process of learning.

Exploring Narrative in Video Games

The use of video games as literary texts, subject to interpretation and analysis, encourages student participation and connect literary concepts through multimodal learning. To play a game, the player must interact with it, both physically, via controller, mouse or keyboard, as well as intellectually, by the way the narrative is directed. Games provide the participant the chance to identify at an advanced level with the player, or virtual identity. Movies give you the opportunity to see the characters in action and follow their journey, however games allow you to direct this action, to control the character, playing a role that makes you get attached and experience the emotion at a high level. This kind of involvement determines the student to connect deeply to the narrative of the video game.

The evolution of narrative starts from oral storytelling, going to written structure, then to the development of various techniques and ideas that facilitate understanding. New media allowed storytelling to evolve and express itself in many ways in a relatively short amount of time. In this new reality of technology, one of the underrated modes of expression is represented by the video games. Video games are a combination between film elements and the innovative structure of graphic novels. They manage to do things related to narrative that no other medium has done before.

First, the sense of control you can get from playing is really attractive for players, engaging them on a deeply emotional level. Reading books allows you to take part in the action, but video games can let you create it. This gives the players a new perspective on the relationship between characters and action, which cannot be experienced through written means.

Take, for example, the game *World of Warcraft*, a popular game among teenagers, lacking, at first glance, the necessary depth for decryption. In this game, participants make their choice characters belonging to a fantasy world (elves, dwarves, orcs, mythical creatures) and assume the role of heroes, completing missions, forming organized groups called guilds, in which they interact with other players, earn points and forge a well-established path through the endless Azeroth, an imaginary, fantastic world. The game revolves around missions that challenge players to explore new locations, find certain objects and interact with the presented narrative. In the studies conducted on the skills acquired while playing this game by researcher Jonathan Alexander, several fundamental skills were noted, these being: critical analysis, multicultural communication, collaborative writing, reflection on the relationship between the skills required in the game and those in real life. The game's narrative can be deciphered in parallel with certain books that allow students to make certain connections at the content level. An example of a book that can be used for this purpose is *The Hobbit* by J.R.R. Tolkien. Students can draw parallels between the characters in the book and the characters in the game, as well as write short stories based on these characters to explore various themes. In this way, they engage on a deep level, enrich their vocabulary and develop creativity. Some of the literary references that can be found in this game are *Alice in Wonderland* (Noggenfogger Elixir), *The Bible*, *British Poetry*, *Crime and Punishment*, *Don Quixote*, *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* and many others.

Interaction as a Form of Art

Video games, often viewed as a childish, time-consuming pastime, manage to offer more than that. This medium carries with it a huge potential for expression. We can perceive video games as a form of literature, thus giving rise to different approaches and some fascinating new stories among students.

What does the interaction that a video game proposes give us? First of all, individual stories, the chance to create a personal story around a character that represents the player, being able to experience the story in an individual way. Also, fascinating frames that can serve as a background or a point where we can focus attention in order to act according to our own goals. A writer's ability to create a complex spatial setting that can make the player fully engage, where he can explore and create new possibilities regarding his own narrative. The balance between entertainment and the technical side of the game translates into authentically connecting the player to experiencing the narrative.

Analysis and Critical Thinking

To truly understand the fundamentals of any video game, we need some careful and detailed analysis of the constituent elements. What can we really analyse within a video game and what literary skills can we use in this endeavour? As in any literary text, we start with the theme of the game. Theme plays a fundamental role within any environment, influencing every character, every part of the narrative, the spatial and temporal elements. We can also focus our attention to symbolism, to identify meaningful symbolic elements, chosen in order to successfully represent abstract ideas or fundamental concepts. Characters can be characterized in various ways, we can use archetypes to highlight their defining features. Action is often marked by conflict, which we can capitalize on by unfolding narrative threads in new directions, meant to expand the viewer's universe of expectation.

In order to evaluate and analyse a text belonging to a video game, we need tools that can help us identify the genre and through which we can contribute by adding critical value. We must keep in mind the figurative representations of the games, the intertextual references, the procedural and fictional adaptations of them, for being able to penetrate beyond the universe of meanings.

Among the fundamental qualities that video games develop in their players are critical thinking, confidence in one's own decisions and inner voice, and insight in terms of emotions and motivation, but also when it comes to the actions that are taken.

So what can we expect our students to gain through the use of video games in the study of literature and composition? The answer is that video games are powerful environments where players are given the opportunity to

see the world through the eyes of others, being simultaneously the heroes of their own story, by making decisions on behalf of the character that they represent. In this way, they are given the freedom to explore on their own, to act and influence the course of the narrative. They are also required to find solutions to the problems that arise, to make full use of critical thinking in order to make their way through the story. The narrative becomes a frame of the development of individuality, of creativity. The story makes them part of a fascinating universe, engaging them in activities with clear goals that allow them to develop their own way of acting, having control over the world around them. The game becomes a multimodal space, in which the player constantly interacts with others, with the story and with his own way of thinking, trying different approaches, exploring new paths and learning more about himself.

Further readings

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