


6-2016

# Embodied Narratives in Video Games: The Stories We Write as We Play

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EMBODIED NARRATIVES IN VIDEO GAMES:  
THE STORIES WE WRITE AS WE PLAY

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A Thesis  
Presented to the  
Faculty of  
California State University,  
San Bernardino

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts  
in  
English Composition:  
English Composition and English Literature

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by  
Patrick John Harrington Sichtler  
June 2016

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores the nature of narrative in video games, and how it can be applied to the contemporary classroom to help teach literature and composition. Specifically, it is concerned with the idea of embodiment in video games. First proposed by theorist James Gee, embodiment is a word describing the phenomenon wherein a player inhabits the character that s/he plays. This article takes the idea of embodiment a step further, by introducing the idea of the embodied narrative, the idea that players do not only embody their characters, but those characters' stories as well, and are composing unique, personal stories as they play. This article also explores the importance of narrative in teaching writing, as narrative and stories are fundamental to the ways in which we think and learn. It proposes that, because video games are a literary medium in which composition is actively taking place, they have the potential to be used in literature and composition classrooms alongside, or even in place of, more traditional methods of teaching. In addition, they can serve as an excellent way of integrating the study of narrative into the composition classroom.

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CHAPTER ONE  
CONFERENCE PAPER PROPOSAL

Embodied Narratives

One of the limitations that has been troubling me about composition studies is the division between composition and creative writing. Although the construction of narratives is a fundamental part of the way in which we think and learn, creative writing has been relegated to its own field, and is barely considered in composition. I propose to explore the union of these two disciplines through the study of video games.

Video games are a unique medium, in that they are literature in which the player is actively taking part as a character, and making decisions on that character's behalf. This results in players actively creating unique, personal narratives as they play, meaning that, in addition to being literature, video games are spaces that encourage composition.

I call these interactive, creative spaces, embodied narratives, and will suggest that these embodied narratives can be used in the composition classroom to help students develop their critical thinking, and a sense of agency, as well as giving them experiences on which to reflect in their writing. The current problem with embodied narratives is that, while people use them to explore alternate versions of themselves, and to take on different roles in different settings, we rarely reflect upon the narratives and identities we construct. Through the space of the composition classroom, these narratives

can be drawn upon, both to help students better understand themselves, and to help them better understand how stories shape who they are.



## CHAPTER TWO

### CONFERENCE PAPER

#### Embodied Narratives in Video Games

We are, at this very moment, crossing into new territory. The digital age has come and along with it, we have been exposed to strange new ways of recording, reading, and thinking about texts. For the majority of history, text was something static -- something that was only produced by, and only accessible to, a minority. Texts were handed down from generation to generation, and for most the emphasis was on memorizing and regurgitating the information contained therein. Of those few who could read and write, only a small number actually produced, and so the generation and proliferation of new information was slow.

Then came the Renaissance, and the rise of modernism. With these movements, aided by advancements in technology, humanity experienced an explosion of information. The invention of the printing press made it much easier for anyone to produce texts, and to produce them in great numbers. As technology became more complex, the invention of radio, film, and television changed the very nature of what a text could be.

We now have the computer and the internet, and with these technologies the nature of text is changing once again. As with the printing press, we are now experiencing an unprecedented increase in the ability of common people to both produce and access texts. We are once again changing the definition of what a text can be. New media are on the rise, allowing us to experience and compose

literature in strange new ways. In fact, with certain new media, there is some question as to whether they can truly be considered either literature or creative media.

The medium I am talking about is the video game.

As video games increase in popularity, it is becoming increasingly apparent that this medium, contrary to what many of our parents thought, is not just a shallow waste of time. Video games are, in fact, literature. True, many early games were simple and mechanical, but as the technology has improved, so has the complexity of what it is able to create for us. Although simple games certainly still exist, many modern games feature immersive stories, with literary themes and morals, but unlike other forms of media -- other forms of literature -- video games offer something more. Through them we don't just read stories, we experience them. This is where video games differ drastically from other media, and this is the subject that I will be focusing on here. When considering video games as literature, it is important to consider their interactive quality, not just as a novelty, but because the experience of playing video games changes our very understanding of literature, and the line between reading and composing. For when we play video games, through the act of participating in their stories and making decisions in those stories, however small, we are, in fact, composing -- writing our own narratives. This is a process that I am calling "embodied narrative," and in order to properly teach literature and writing to today's digital

natives, we need to understand this phenomenon -- this space where we are both readers and authors.

Video games, as a medium, are framed as stories and, much like novels or films, draw people in through narrative. But why study video games at all? Quite simply, we should investigate video games *because* they are so popular and compelling, and because they are attracting more users by the decade. New types of games, in new formats, are continually being released in order to appeal to new audiences. Within the past decade, the rise of “casual” gaming has drawn even more people into the medium, and from the looks of things, this trend is only going to continue.

When video games did begin appearing on the market, narrative quickly became a major element in them. Even the earliest video games, like *Pong*, *Asteroids*, and *Space Invaders* came with narrative themes and scenarios (a game of table-tennis, navigating through an asteroid field, and fighting off an alien invasion, respectively), which were not in themselves narratives, but which created spaces where narratives could be constructed by players. As the genre became more popular, and more sophisticated, narrative elements developed into fully-realized stories -- stories which, with consecutive generations, are becoming more complex, and providing players with increased levels of agency to make their own decisions within these stories -- to make these stories their own.

Agency has always been one of the key factors that sets video games apart from other storytelling mediums, and for contemporary writing instruction, it is this agency that gives players the ability to explore themselves through a variety of different lenses and narrative possibilities. Things like public performances and choose-your-own-adventure books might have audience involvement, but not to the degree that video games do. Immersion -- the ability to take part in the story -- is the reason many of us play.

But what is the ultimate purpose of all this exploration of narrative in video games? Where is this all leading? Sure, we can claim that video games are spaces in which we can construct narratives, and we can even claim that this level of immersion and agency is revolutionary in that it changes the ways in which we both interact with, and react to, literature -- but what is the practical application? How do we take the phenomenon and make it useful?

In his book, *What Video Games Have to Teach Us about Learning and Literacy*, James Gee describes something which he calls “critical learning” (31). Critical learning might best be understood as “hands on” learning -- quite possibly the most natural and comfortable form of learning. We can be told how to do something, how to make a chair, for instance, but we won’t actually develop that skill unless we have tried, unless we have gone through the trial and error of making chairs, failing, and correcting our methods.

This, as Gee points out, is one of the critical educational advantages that video games offer (64). A book tells us information, but a video game actually

requires us to perform in order to progress. As an example of how this works, Gee describes the tutorial, a short chapter at the beginning of most games that describes how to play the game. The specific example that he uses is *Tomb Raider: The Last Revelation* (115), but I am going to describe the tutorial in *Fallout 3*, as it is an excellent example of a well-crafted tutorial.

In *Fallout 3* you start out by being born, while your father and the doctor consult a computer that tells them how you are going to look when you grow up (this is the part where the player gets to choose his/her gender and appearance). Next, you flash forward to yourself as a toddler, where you are taught the basic movement and interaction controls; then you flash forward to being a child, where you learn how to navigate the dialogue interface at your birthday party and learn how to shoot with a BB gun that you receive as a gift. Lastly, you flash forward to yourself completing high school, where you must take a test that will determine your skills and your position in society.

I chose this tutorial as an example because it does very effectively what a tutorial should do. It teaches you how to use the controls by having you use the controls, and it does so by immersing you through the use of narrative. The player is not “learning,” the player is experiencing a story, and learning is a natural process that arises out of that experience -- just like learning real skills in life.

This is a practical educational application for video games -- the simulated, narrative-driven learning environment. The ability to teach, not

through lectures and worksheets, but through interactive experiences where every skill learned has an immediate practical application, and helps the player to achieve specific, immediate goals. A good example of this is the game *Kerbal Space Program*, in which the player builds and flies rockets using a realistic physics engine, and thus learns about the physics of flight, orbit, and space travel.

It's one thing to claim that video games can teach us in more accessible, natural ways, and another to actually take that claim and construct a practical pedagogy around it. In this case, we are not concerned with the sciences, which is what *Kerbal Space Program* teaches us, but with the intertwined fields of literature and composition. So, in order to determine how video games are useful to these fields, we must first establish the point of these fields. *Why* do we teach literature and composition? And what do we expect our students to gain from studying these subjects?

First, I will consider the field of literature, which grants us insight by giving us the ability to see and understand the world through the eyes of others. This grants us a greater understanding of the human experience, and has the potential to make us more capable of empathy, and of recognizing the motivations of others. This insight, this ability to understand and predict others, can also go a long way towards improving our critical thinking skills. Lastly, responding to, and pushing back against, literature can help to foster student

agency, as it teaches them to develop their own opinions, rather than just accepting the text because it has been published.

Composition can serve as an even more effective tool for critical thinking because the act of writing, of taking our thoughts and putting them down on the page in a concrete format, enhances our ability to think through complex issues, and to construct logical arguments. Composition also helps students to develop feelings of personal agency, as it teaches them to develop their own unique voices, and to record and explore their thoughts in a (potentially) public format. And, of course, composition can serve as a great supplement to the study of literature, as the page can serve as a great space for exploring and refining our responses to literature, allowing us to develop even greater insight from it.

These three qualities, critical thinking, personal agency, and insight, are extremely valuable for any student, not just students of English studies. Being capable of critical thinking, having a confidence in one's voice, opinions, and abilities, and possessing insight into the feelings and motivations of others are traits that can help students get ahead in any field they choose. This is why the study of literature and composition is so important.

I also believe that, when studying composition, personally-generated narrative is a very important, though under-explored feature of these disciplines. This is because narrative is not only one of the fundamental ways in which we think and communicate, but because the construction and analysis of our own

personal narratives helps us to further develop a sense of agency, and a greater understanding of the self.

The modern video game has the potential to be very useful because, as literature that allows us to compose within its space, it lies at the crossroads of these various aspects of the fields of composition and literature. Many players see video games as an extension of literature – as another way of experiencing it, but one that grants them a greater sense of personal agency. These games allow them to take part in the story, and to make decisions in it, rather than merely witnessing it. In this sense, video games are both literature and composition – a medium in which players both “read” and “write.” It’s a medium in which they are not only exposed to literary themes, but where they also must think critically and engage in problem solving in order to continue reading the story.

The video game also blends elements of insight and agency through the act of embodiment, as they are often asked to play as another character, and to see the world through that character’s eyes, while simultaneously guiding that character and making decisions on his/her behalf.

This does not come without challenges. Players are limited by an inability to interact fully with the game world, by an inability to make an unlimited number of choices, and by the fact that many games relegate player agency to physical action, and do not allow them complete control over their avatar’s dialogue and responses. Players make up for this by filling in the blanks, so to speak, and



imagining a richer world than the one that has actually been presented to them, or taking steps to “own” the areas of the game that they are given control over, imposing their personalities on those points as much as possible. This results in every player composing a unique narrative as they play – what I call the embodied narrative, but which we can also consider to be an act of composition.

So, ultimately, what can students be expected to derive from the use of video games in literature and composition? The answer is that they provide a kind of microcosm of the field – a space where the various benefits of studying literature and composition are all at play on the same stage. In these digital spaces, the player is literally asked to view the world through the eyes of another, and to consider that world as another might see it, while simultaneously being offered the chance to explore their own agency by making decisions on that character’s behalf. They are also required to problem-solve, and think through problems critically in order to successfully navigate their way through the story, which they are, in effect, writing through the act of their decision-making.

And all of this takes place through the element of narrative. It is the narrative, the story, that draws the player in, that keeps them engaged, and that imprints itself upon their memories once they have finished playing, helping them to mentally organize what they have learned. This is the ultimate multimodal space, and is set to become the way that we interact with media, and learn from it, in the future – a space where we can learn about others, and gain a more

complete understanding of the human experience, at the same time that we try on different skins, explore different paths, and learn more about ourselves.

## CHAPTER THREE

### JOURNAL ARTICLE

#### Embodied Narratives in Video Games, The Stories We Write As We Play

I'm running down a long corridor -- feet pounding on hard-packed earth, rotting support beams jutting out on either side of me. Up ahead, through the decaying slats of a wooden door, I see bright light -- but my attention is more focused on the shouts and curses behind me. I've done it. I've been told my whole life that it was impossible, insane, but I've done it -- opened the massive, heavy vault door and escaped. This tunnel should lead me to the surface, and they won't follow me up here -- at least I hope they won't -- like me, they've been raised to believe that there's only death on the surface.

Sure enough, their voices fade as I reach the door. There is no handle, only a ragged space where a handle used to be, some centuries ago. I throw myself against it, using my full weight to jar the rusted hinges.

Too much -- there's a crack, and I go stumbling forward as the door swings open, propelling me out into a world of blinding white light.

It takes a moment for my eyes to adjust. Of course I know about the Sun. Astronomy was part of my extensive education, and I've seen films from the surface -- from before the war -- but I've never seen it with my own eyes. It's blinding. Painful. But as I stand, panting, body tingling with fear and adrenaline, the world comes into focus.

It's horrible. Nothing like the clean corridors and soft lighting of the Vault. Here, the harsh sunlight scalds down on a broken world. As far as I can see, there is desolation: shattered roadways, the hollow husks of houses, and beyond that, looming just on the horizon, the monuments of old DC. But even at this distance I can make out the damage, the decay -- like so many rotten teeth jutting up towards the harsh, blistering sun. And all around, among and beyond the desolation, is the waste. An endless sea of brown dirt, grey stone, and dead trees.

For a moment, I stand stock-still -- overwhelmed by the sheer expanse of the world that stretches out before me. I have never seen so much space before. But I can't stay here. The sun is uncomfortably hot, and the tunnel at my back is making me nervous. Part of me expects them to overcome their fear at any moment, to come up here and finish me -- just like they did Jonas and Tom. I don't know what's out there, but I can't stay here, and I

can't go back. Wearily, I force myself to put one foot in front of the other, small clouds of dust rising with each step, and I make my way down the small hill, and into an uncertain future. (Sichter)

### Composition, Narrative and Embodiment

We are, at this very moment, crossing into new territory. The digital age has come and along with it, we have been exposed to strange new ways of recording, reading, and thinking about texts. For the majority of history, text was something static -- something that was only produced by, and only accessible to, a minority. Texts were handed down from generation to generation, and for most the emphasis was on memorizing and regurgitating the information contained therein. Of those few who could read and write, only a small number actually produced, and so the generation and proliferation of new information was slow.

Then came the Renaissance, and the rise of modernism. With these movements, aided by advancements in technology, humanity experienced an explosion of information. The invention of the printing press made it much easier for anyone to produce texts, and to produce them in great numbers. As technology became more complex, the invention of radio, film, and television changed the very nature of what a text could be.

We now have the computer and the internet, and with these technologies the nature of text is changing once again. As with the printing press, we are now experiencing an unprecedented increase in the ability of common people to both produce and access texts. We are once again changing the definition of what a

text can be. New media are on the rise, allowing us to experience and compose literature in strange new ways. In fact, with certain new media, there is some question as to whether they can truly be considered either literature or creative media.

The medium I am talking about is the video game.

The first primitive video games appeared in the public sphere in the 1970s, and the genre has been gaining popularity ever since, to the point that now, nearly half a century later, almost 50% of people living in the U.S. play some form of video game. And those numbers show no signs of slacking, with adults making up an increasingly larger part of that percentage (2015 Sales, Demographic and Usage Data, 2). This medium is not just for kids. In fact, many video games are made purely for adult audiences.

As video games increase in popularity, it is becoming increasingly apparent that this medium, contrary to what many of our parents thought, is not just a shallow waste of time. Video games are, in fact, literature. True, many early games were simple and mechanical, but as the technology has improved, so has the complexity of what it is able to create for us. Although simple games certainly still exist, many modern games feature immersive stories, with literary themes and morals, but unlike other forms of media -- other forms of literature -- video games offer something more. Through them we don't just read stories, we experience them. This is where video games differ drastically from other media, and this is the subject that I will be focusing on here. When considering video

games as literature, it is important to consider their interactive quality, not just as a novelty, but because the experience of playing video games changes our very understanding of literature, and the line between reading and composing. For when we play video games, through the act of participating in their stories and making decisions in those stories, however small, we are, in fact, composing -- writing our own narratives. This is a process that I am calling “embodied narrative,” and in order to properly teach literature and writing to today’s digital natives, we need to understand this phenomenon -- this space where we are both readers and authors.

Before I delve into the subject of the embodied narrative, I would like to briefly establish a basis for my argument: firstly, why is the study of narrative important to English composition? And secondly, why study video games as part of such an exploration? To answer the first question, I would like to turn to Kendall Haven, who, in his short book *Story Proof*, argues that listening to, and re-telling, stories has a great positive impact on our focus, our comprehension, and on our ability to remember details (98). In other words, when we hear information, or are taught a lesson, in the form of a story, we are much more likely to pay attention, understand the message, and remember specific details later on. In fact, he claims that “[stories match] the way that humans naturally think and perceive. Humans learn better *through* stories because story structure is how human minds naturally seek, process, and understand new information” (103). So naturally, if stories make it easier for us to comprehend, then encoding

information within stories will make it easier to communicate -- to deliver messages to others. Thus, storytelling has the potential to be an extremely effective tool in written composition, though it is unfortunately underused in composition studies.

In her 2012 address to the CCCC, Malea Powell makes a similar argument. She opens by focusing on Native Americans, and on the ways in which they use stories to teach and learn -- but she does this in order to expand on the idea of narrative in teaching and apply it to the entire student body (392, 401-02). In her speech, Powell identifies many Native American cultures as being deeply involved in storytelling (388-89). This is because, until only a couple hundred years ago, Native American civilization did not possess the written word, making them a civilization of oral traditions, which involve a lot of storytelling. This cultural difference is one of the things that makes it so difficult for Native American students to find success in Western schooling -- because Western education is rooted in Western legalism, rather than in storytelling. This, as both Powell and I see it, is a problem. As she says, quoting a Native American student whom she interviewed, "among European scholars there is an alienated notion which maintains that theory is separate from story, and thus a different set of words is required to 'prove' an idea, rather than 'show' one" (384). But in reality, ideas do not have to be relayed entirely through academic-style writing. In fact, "showing" an idea can often be far more impactful. This is why it is so important to include narrative as part of composition studies --



because it is not just art. Stories align with the way we think and comprehend, and can serve as powerful rhetorical tools.

Consider the famous television show, *The Cosmos*, created by physicist Carl Sagan (or its reboot, narrated by Neil deGrasse Tyson). This program was created in order to teach people the foundations of scientific thought, but rather than just explaining scientific principles, Sagan chooses to instruct through stories. He tells the stories of the *people* behind the discoveries -- of how they lived, what they valued, and how they made those discoveries. And the show was designed this way very deliberately, because for most of us, when we are given some dry, classroom-style lecture, we tend to lose interest, to zone out. But take the same information, and weave it into a story full of wheres, whos, whys, and hows, and suddenly that dull information comes to life, and even becomes easier to recall later.

Video games, as a medium, are framed as stories and, much like novels or films, draw people in through narrative. But why study video games at all? Quite simply, we should investigate video games *because* they are so popular and compelling, and because they are attracting more users by the decade. New types of games, in new formats, are continually being released in order to appeal to new audiences. Within the past decade, the rise of “casual” gaming has drawn even more people into the medium, and from the looks of things, this trend is only going to continue.

Video games are taking on the role of contemporary literature, not just because they are fun, but because they cater to a major shift in the way in which we have come to relate to media in the age of information. This is considered by Nicholas Carr, in his essay "Is Google Making Us Stupid," in which he points out a disturbing trend that has arisen since the development of computer technology -- our attention spans are getting shorter. He claims that, where he was once able to sit down and read traditional text without any trouble, he, and many others, now have a difficult time doing this without becoming restless and unfocused (63-64). He blames this phenomenon on the internet, and on the way in which it presents information -- in a quick, easily-digestible format, which has made us accustomed to processing information in a condensed format, and jumping quickly from one piece of information to the next. This has made us good at processing information quickly, but has seemingly detracted from our ability to focus on singular texts for long stretches (65, 73).

In his essay, "Do They Really *Think* Differently?" Marc Prensky goes even further -- claiming that it isn't just our behavior that's changing -- it's our neurology, the very structure of our brains (12-13). According to Prensky, the ability to focus on, and to recall, long pieces of text is not inborn, but learned, and modern media, including video games, is rewiring our neurology -- changing the ways in which we process and recall information (15-17). This is kind of scary, but it's not exactly a new concern. When writing first came to Ancient Greece, the great philosopher Socrates (according to his student Plato) complained that

“this discovery... will create forgetfulness in the learner’s souls, because they will not use their memories; they will trust the external written characters and will not remember of themselves,” and goes on to argue that

Writing is unfortunately like painting; for the creations of the painter have the attitude of life, and yet if you ask them a question they preserve a solemn silence. And the same may be said of speeches. You would imagine they had intelligence, but if you want to know anything and put a question to them, the speaker always gives an unvarying answer.

With the invention of the printing press, similar concerns arose -- that once anyone was able to publish, the quality of literature would decline dramatically. But in both cases, these fears were proven wrong, and these new technologies only served to improve our access to information and our ability to generate it.

Now we are undergoing yet another shift, and like the others, it’s here to stay, so we should learn to take advantage of it, rather than working against it. The same student who will struggle to read a book for more than twenty minutes, will easily engage and focus on a video game for 5-8 hours. This is a phenomenon that should be harnessed.

## Narrative in Games

Narrative in games is not a new thing. Games have been around for a long time, and narrative in games has been a developing trend. Early games, such as mancala and Go, often featured very simple designs -- stones moved across wooden boards. And yet, even these simple games included narrative elements, elements which are not found within the games themselves, but with the players. A situation in which two (or more) people are in competition with each other is one that breeds narrative. This narrative is present in the pre-game boasts of each party, in the highs and lows of the struggle, as players celebrate their victories or mourn their losses, and in the climax of endgame, and the high of success. In other words, even games that are not designed with a narrative in mind still end up being driven by *player-generated narratives*. We see this same phenomenon in sports, where the rivalries between teams, and the celebrity of players, can become almost mythological in status, with fans watching the proceedings with the same interest that they would devote to any other story. But in games there are no scripts. There is no predetermined end. The story unfolds in real time, before the eyes of both player and audience.

Eventually, we do begin to see stronger narrative elements appear in games, such as chess, which is clearly designed to tell the story of two armies clashing in a pitched battle. Narrative elements in games would become even more popular with the industrial revolution, when mass production would make it possible to generate intricately painted boards and molded figurines. Games like

*Monopoly*, *RISK*, and *Battleship*, are designed to encourage narrative thinking, and it is very easy to succumb to that thinking. Most of us who have played *Monopoly* have fallen into the fantasy of the hotel manager when charging players who land on our properties, or the business-person when making deals. Roleplaying, even if it is spontaneous and just for the sake of humor, is an inevitable part of these games, and helps to keep the players engaged and entertained.

During the 1970s, we were introduced to a new type of game -- the tabletop role-playing game -- which abandoned the strict structure of traditional board games in favor of a design that was almost entirely dedicated to roleplaying and storytelling. In these games, one player acts as the game master, describing setting and acting as the non-player characters within that setting, while the others each act as a character, and make their decisions in the game world as those characters. In essence, these games give players the opportunity to play through a story (the fact that these games are usually modelled after generic literary settings, like Tolkienien fantasy, Lovecraftian horror, or American Westerns, is telling), and they were, and still are, widely popular. These were the first embodied narratives, stories entirely generated in the minds of players, and they were also the forerunners of many video games, for which it would become common to adopt the rule-systems and aesthetics of these tabletop role-playing games. These sorts of games are also important because they encourage creativity among players. The person running the game

is required to write a story that will keep his/her audience engaged, while those playing the game are often expected to create compelling backstories and motives for their characters. So embodied narrative does not just encourage players to explore different, interesting versions of themselves, but to do so through the act of composition, something that could be adapted into a classroom environment.

When video games did begin appearing on the market, narrative quickly became a major element in them. Even the earliest video games, like *Pong*, *Asteroids*, and *Space Invaders* came with narrative themes and scenarios (a game of table-tennis, navigating through an asteroid field, and fighting off an alien invasion, respectively), which were not in themselves narratives, but which created spaces where narratives could be constructed by players. As the genre became more popular, and more sophisticated, narrative elements developed into fully-realized stories -- stories which, with consecutive generations, are becoming more complex, and providing players with increased levels of agency to make their own decisions within these stories -- to make these stories their own.

It's been several days since I emerged from the Vault, and I am beginning to grow accustomed to this blasted land. I've found a town, not too far from the Vault, and, to my surprise, I was welcomed here readily enough. The people here live miserable lives -- cowering behind walls of scrap, constantly on the lookout for

raiders and mutants (I have yet to see either, but from the descriptions I've heard, I would much prefer to go without the experience), and plagued by scarcity. They grow no food, relying on scavenging, and on trade with other waste-towns to stay fed, and their only source of water comes from an ancient purifier that constantly seems on the verge of breaking down. And yet they survive -- mostly by relying on each other. In that spirit, I offered my help to keep the purifier running, and it was gratefully accepted. For now I have security, I suppose, but I can't remain here.

Father left the Vault before I did. It was his defiance that caused all this -- his leaving that caused the Overseer to initiate the lockdown and turn on those of us who he thought complicit. He's out here somewhere, and I need to find him -- to ask him, at the very least, why he left us. I barely know where to start though -- it's a big world out there, and I have no idea where he went. Tomorrow I'll begin asking around. He must have at least passed through here, so someone must know something. In the meantime I'll begin scraping together what supplies I can. From what the locals have told me of the waste, I'll need to be prepared if I'm going to survive out there. (Sichter)

## Why We Play

In order to understand how people are actually using games to construct unique personal narratives, it's important to talk to players, and to get a sense of how they play. Fortunately, I know a lot of people who play games. Games provide structure to gatherings. They give people something to focus on. They're exciting, but in a participatory way that's difficult to pull off with other media. We don't just play games together. We also talk about them. We all play games on our own, as well as with others. And when we play these single-player games we have different experiences -- different ways that we react to games in our heads, and shape our game worlds through our choices. At backyard barbecues and at the pub after work, we critique the games we've played, what we liked about them and where we felt limited. We discuss choices we've made and consider the impact that those choices have had on their stories. And, of course, we compare notes.

So I begin to ask questions. I want to know why these people play games, aside from the obvious entertainment value. And I want to know how they think about story and narrative, and how they construct their own personal narratives as they play.

There are a surprising number of similarities in the stories that I hear, and the first in a number of common threads is the relationship between gaming and love of literature.



Most of the people whom I interviewed about this subject are in education, and all are intelligent, educated people, and avid readers. Some of them, when answering my questions, express that this is the reason they became interested in video games, such as Participant 8, a coworker, who tells me how important reading is to her. “As a kid,” she says, “reading was my escape, and as an adult, reading is still my escape. It’s how I get away from stress.” But she admits that reading is not without its limitations. “I love to read, but reading doesn’t give you the affordance of making decisions, and going places, and really affecting things in the same way that gaming does. It’s kind of a more open way of absorbing a story” (October 2015).

Participant 7, an old college friend, goes into even more depth. “I’ve always been a reader. I’ve always loved stories... exploring crazy fantasy worlds that are nowhere near our reality... I like hearing a different side of things, and once you’re into these kinds of stories, you wish you could take part in them. Video games give you that outlet.” When discussing the different types of games that he likes to play, he makes sure to point out that, “a lot of these games didn’t speak to me as much as the ones where you ran around, where you were given a story and had to fill in the gaps. You realize that this game that you’re playing has narrative, and there’s more to be had than just shooting them up and taking over the objective” (September 2015).

The digital generation is already thinking of games in the same category as literature, only it is literature in which they have more of an investment. This

creates some fascinating possibilities for writing instruction, as commentary and critiques centered on video games involve not only literary analysis, but, inevitably, recountings of personal narratives, and of how those narrative choices shaped, or were shaped by, the literary aspects of the game.

Even those who don't tie their gaming directly to their love of reading still make sure to insist on the importance of story when playing games, such as Participant 4, an acquaintance met through a mutual friend, who tells me, "when I choose to play a game, it's usually because it's a different way of experiencing a story, or storyline, or telling. I mean, I got my degree in English Creative Writing, so I tend to gravitate towards games that have really good storytelling" (August 2015).

Participant 3, the mutual friend, agrees, saying, "Story's a big thing... I like games that have story, like *Bioshock: Infinite*. I hate the gameplay -- absolutely hate it... the story, that's why I play that game. It's tugging you along. It's like, 'I gotta find out what happens!' After every chapter it's, 'Ugh, I gotta find out what happens!'" (August 2015).

So for Participant 3, in this case at least, story alone can serve as a reason for playing. It's not about the actual gameplay, so much as the gameplay is just the medium through which he experiences the story.

Some players aren't even interested unless they are given a good story. Participant 6, an educator who has recently started playing contemporary games, tells me that he doesn't like games like *Batman: Arkham Asylum* and *The*

*Last of Us* because they don't offer him enough choice. He goes on to say that he's "really engrossed by narrative, and so having a mode of entertainment that allows me to participate in narrative is part of what draws me, and it's why I like games like *Skyrim* and *Fallout* more than I do typical arcade games" (August 2015).

These sorts of examples are important because they show us how valuable games are as a means of getting people involved with and invested in stories. For a member of the modern digital generation, these spaces can be more enticing than the books that they are assigned to read in class as they provide the "reader" with more involvement, and with a space that is constantly shifting depending on their actions, providing them with a wealth of possible narratives to draw from. Those who have spent their whole lives reading and watching stories, and fantasizing about taking part in them, are able to live those fantasies through the act of playing video games. This desire to experience story, rather than just spectate, leads many players to demand choice out of their games. It isn't enough to just be a character, and to perform that character's tasks on his/her behalf. Many players desire a more in-depth experience – one in which they can make choices for their characters – choices that will affect the character, the game world, and the outcome of the story. After all, what is the point of embodying a character if one does not get to make important decisions on that character's behalf?

Even for those games that offer only limited options to their players, there are ways in which we still claim agency and make these characters, and their stories, our own. In her short article, "When We Play Video Games, Who Are We?" Leigh Alexander considers whether or not we can ever fully embody the characters we play. As she watches her boyfriend create a character for himself in the game *Destiny*, it occurs to her that there is a problem with embodiment in video games. "Games have many commonalities with theatre," she writes. "But [in a play] an actor has internalized that she's performing as someone else... but games, designed to let us act as some fantasy of ourselves, don't often ask us to think about what someone else "would" do" (3). Games, rather, are more interested in letting us explore what we would do in any given situation.

And yet, as Alexander tells us, this perception of games is somewhat flawed -- because while some games do allow us to enter into them in a state of tabula rasa, most game characters that we will play come equipped with some sort of backstory -- some history that they lived before their lives, and their fates, were placed in our hands. Most of them even have personalities that are separate from our own. She gives two examples of free-choice, open world games in which this occurs: the *Mass Effect* franchise, in which you play Commander Shepard, and the *Walking Dead* story game, in which you play Lee Everett. Although both of these games provide players with a considerable amount of freedom, in neither game is the player playing as themselves, but

rather as Commander Shepard or Lee Everett, respectively. So we aren't really thinking, "what would I do?" we're thinking, "what would Shepard do?" (5).

Even when video games seem to lack immersion, the player is still busy constructing unique narratives, as is pointed out by James Gee. In his article, "Video Games and Embodiment," he establishes this blending as a normal (and fascinating) phenomenon in the gaming experience. He sees a video game character as a union of two personalities. On the one hand is the character, who comes with his/her own history, personality, and ambitions. On the other is the player, who (usually) is responsible for accomplishing the character's goals rather than setting them and who is, in many ways, along for the ride. However, Gee argues, even when players are offered only limited options, they tend to put their own spin on things -- they construct their own interpretations of the characters who they are playing, and act according to the motivations that they think their character would feel (but which are, in reality, more rooted in the personality of the player). It's this hybridization, this blend between the written character and the player's interpretation of that character, where embodiment lies, at least according to Gee (258-61). But I would argue that it goes deeper, that through ascribing our own motivations to the characters, and interpreting their actions through our own lenses, we are doing more than just embodying the character. We are embodying the story - writing our own versions of it in our head as we play.

Such is the case for Participant 6, who describes how, as he plays role-playing games like *Skyrim* and *Fallout*, he will often find himself imagining the inflections associated with the dialogue options he chooses (as those options are not voiced by actors – though characters in the game world do respond to them). He also expresses that sometimes he will be surprised by the responses of in-game characters to what he said, as they will sometimes respond to inflections or tones that he did not imagine himself using (August 2015). Although instances like this kind of break the fourth wall, they are nonetheless examples of players actively merging themselves with their characters.

It's in these blended experiences – this synthesis of the story that is presented to us, and the one that we compose ourselves, where the true value of video games as pedagogical tools lies. These are not just pieces of literature to interpret, but are spaces that provide us with the tools to compose, explore, and relate our own unique narratives. “Reading” these stories, and writing about them, has the potential to provide students with richer and more personal experiences than would other forms of media.

I killed a person today.

It all started with an attempt to make a little money to scrape together the supplies I'll need for my travels. Moira Brown, the local trader, is writing a book on wasteland survival, and asked me to help her with her research. She's writing a chapter on

scavenging in the wasteland, so she sent me to a nearby mini-mart to see what I could find. She thought it would be abandoned.

She was wrong.

Place was crawling with raiders. I managed to sneak my way in, but as soon as I made my way into the back room, a group of them returned from a patrol, trapping me. Desperate, I did my best to barricade myself in, but they quickly became aware of my presence, I knew the barricade wouldn't be enough. With no other option, I set up the best defenses I could -- a few fragmentation mines, discovered in the storeroom, set at the threshold. They would break through, and I would use the confusion caused by the explosion to make my break.

It worked. They broke through the door. There was a deafening blast, a scream, and I bolted. But on my way out I saw her. She was one of them -- dressed in their colors -- but she was young. Even younger than me. Her legs were blown off below the knee, and she was staring up at the ceiling, dead eyes frozen in pain and surprise.

My God, I see her face every time I close my eyes. Haven't been able to sleep for days. Is this what it takes to survive out here? Is this what I want to become? (Sichter)

## Limitations

Agency has always been one of the key factors that sets video games apart from other storytelling mediums, and for contemporary writing instruction, it is this agency that gives players the ability to explore themselves through a variety of different lenses and narrative possibilities. Things like public performances and choose-your-own-adventure books might have audience involvement, but not to the degree that video games do. Immersion -- the ability to take part in the story -- is the reason many of us play, but even video games do come with limitations.

For one, there are the natural limitations that plague any video game world – the fact that every action and outcome must be programmed, and therefore it is impossible to truly have a game where any outcome is possible. More immersive games tend to offer a wider range of options and outcomes, and players certainly take advantage of this (which we will explore shortly), but many games (and all games to some extent) do what is commonly referred to as “railroading,” in which there is only a single path and a single outcome. Players still control a character, but these games are less concerned with players exploring options, and more concerned with players successfully completing certain tasks in order to move the story forward. These sorts of games also tend to tell their stories in ways that often involve little to no player participation, such as through cut-scenes.

However, even these severely limited games are not without a sense of player agency. This is what Gee is referring to when he writes of embodiment --



this tendency for players, even if they are offered only limited choices, to inscribe themselves upon the characters that they are playing as.

When I ask after people's favorite games, these sorts of games come up about as frequently as do the more option-heavy open-world games. Participant 4 lists one of his favorite game franchises as the *Portal* franchise (August 2015), while, as I've previously mentioned, Participant 3 lists his as the *Bioshock* franchise (August 2015). Interestingly, both of these games make use of narratives that explain or excuse their limited structure. In *Portal*, the player character is being forced to run through a series of "tests" by a sadistic artificial intelligence, which limits and chides the player's attempts to subvert it. Meanwhile, in the first *Bioshock*, the player character has been conditioned (unbeknownst to the player until the very end of the game) to follow the commands of anyone who utters the phrase "would you kindly." In the sequel, *Bioshock: Infinite*, the player character is caught up in a temporal loop, and must complete certain actions in order to complete the loop.

In both of their interviews, Participant 8 and Participant 9 (another co-worker), both describe a game called *The Talos Principle*, which is similar to *Portal* in that it involves a player character performing a series of "tests" and being guided by a disembodied voice. They both describe with amusement how, if the player chooses to stray from the path designated by the voice, the voice will become increasingly irate in an attempt to guide them back (October 2015).

Most of the more decision-limited games do not do this, but these cases serve as good examples of one of the ways in which narrative drives gameplay. It isn't enough that these games merely have good mechanics, they also must have stories that drive those mechanics, and that explain away any limitations caused by those very mechanics. In fact, they would likely not be so popular -- and both the *Portal* and *Bioshock* series are very popular -- without these story-arcs driving them. As I previously mentioned, Participant 3 does not even like the mechanics in *Bioshock*, but enjoys it purely for the story. It could even be argued that these stories are an integral, necessary feature, and that video games have significantly less appeal without them.

Even players like Participant 1 (a long-time friend), who claims that he has little interest in games for their stories, seem to get caught up in the narratives of the games they play, and begin to construct identities for themselves as the characters. When discussing the game *Farcry 3*, which strands the player character on a pirate-infested island and charges him with rescuing his kidnapped friends, Participant 1 begins to identify with the character, and think through what must be the character's own logical processes. "So you just have this choice -- do you kill your girlfriend or not? The only reason you'd kill your girlfriend is to prove that you've lost all ties to the real world, but why would you prove that? Why would you feel like you have to kill your girlfriend for that?" When given the choice at the game's conclusion between killing his friends and staying on the island, or freeing them and leaving, he chose the

latter, and he used a moral argument, constructed from a synthesis of his knowledge of the game world, his knowledge of the protagonist, and his knowledge of himself, to do so. But he doesn't just stop there. He goes even further -- speculating on what might happen to his character *after* the game has concluded. "You shouldn't have had a choice, right? I mean, after you've done all that -- after you've killed that many people and burned down that many villages, and done so many tribal ceremonies and had all these f----- tattoos all over you... you know, you're not going back. You're just not" (August 2015). Although this game may have started as just another shooter for Participant 1, it has become something more. He has invested himself in the story, and is analyzing it and speculating about it, as one would any piece of literature. This is ideally what we would expect from our students – analyses that involve not only exploration of a story's themes, but of the ways in which they reacted to and behaved in response to those themes.

### Games and Morality

Participant 1's description of *Farcry 3* is violent and disturbing, and brings us to two other aspects of the narrative structure that are at work in video games. These are the prevalence toward violence in video games, and the increasing popularity of the moral choice system. Both are important in a discussion concerning video game narratives in writing pedagogy because they have a significant influence on the types of narratives that players build.

First, why is violence so common in video games? As mentioned previously, many of the more limited games (those that railroad players) tell their stories through scripted events where the player does not get to choose his/her reactions, or through cut scenes – short movies in which the player character acts independently from the player. In these sorts of games, player contribution occurs mostly through action. The player is not given control over the character's dialogue or story choices, but is given control over the character's movement through physical spaces. This is done as a form of simplification. Choice might be entertaining and desirable, but it is also difficult to program – therefore, most games are designed with only a single story arc, and a singular sequence of events that are pre-scripted and designed to take the player from one action sequence to the next.

This is a big reason why violence is so common in video games. The driving elements in video games – the things that make them what they are – are immersion and player agency, but when you're trying to tell a story, it's very difficult to make these elements absolute. At some point, most games must take the wheel from the player in order to ensure that the scripted elements of the story are moving forward. Therefore action becomes the primary way for players to be included in the story, and the easiest form of action to work with is violence. This does create certain challenges when determining what games are suitable for classroom spaces. Fortunately, there are plenty of games that do not glorify violence, so this problem boils down to a simple matter of awareness.

Although video games tend to feature significant amounts of violence, they do not lack morality. In fact, moral choice systems are becoming increasingly popular in games. These systems represent a basic means of providing players with agency, by providing them with the ability to interact with the game's story by making moral decisions, and are a positive trend in providing players with more options for their unique embodied narratives. At points in the story, they will often be asked to choose between a "good" option, and an "evil" option, which will affect the shape of the overall story. Although somewhat simplistic, systems such as this allow players to feel more involved, and to take some control over their characters.

Many players will choose their morals based upon their own personal alignments. When describing the game *Mass Effect*, which provides its players with many options, Participant 3 describes a moral choice process based on rationality: "There are some things I'll do that are good in the game. However, there are some things that I'll do that align with my personal beliefs. For example, sometimes I will be a renegade if I think it's for the betterment of the game" (August 2015).

Other players focus less on pragmatism, and more on exploring deviance, as video games do allow for a safe space. Participant 5, another colleague, does admit that during some playthroughs he will "stick to [his] own morals," and "make good choices when [he] feels that that's what [he] would do in that situation." But, "more often than not, [he] often ends up on the bad side." As to

what that says about him, his response is to point out that, “this isn’t a psychology piece, so I’m not worried about that” (August 2015). Really, for him, it’s just an excuse to have fun, and to explore different aspects of himself. But for writing instruction, this self-exploration, these explorations of personal morality, have more potential than as mere amusement. They provide us with the ability to construct different ethical profiles for ourselves, and to explore and analyze these profiles in safe spaces where we neither hurt anyone nor are forced to dredge up uncomfortable past experiences that we prefer to keep hidden.

As mentioned above, Participant 1 has some problems with moral choice systems. For him, they are often too rigid, with the “evil” options being too ludicrous. And his complaints aren’t just relegated to *Farcry*. When speaking of *Bioshock*, he says, “I thought that *Bioshock* definitely had one of those mechanisms to make you feel like you had some agency in it, but in *Bioshock* it was so grotesque. I always feel funny about a video game when it wants you to take part in ‘A or B’ morality tests, and I always feel a little funny taking the ‘B’ option. Like, really, who is that evil?” (August 2015).

This, highlights one of the major problems with moral choice systems -- having to choose not between a variety of options, but between two, where one is blatantly good, and the other is blatantly evil. When forced into such a choice the pragmatic player will usually always go with the “good” option. The “evil” option is more of a novelty, rather than a real, rational choice.

Fortunately, there are plenty of games that include more versatility -- not just in the wider range of choices that players are allowed to make, but in the fact that they are allowed to customize their characters, rather than using pre-made characters with pre-existing histories and personalities.

Interestingly, I found that nearly everyone I asked tends to choose characters that resemble themselves, both in gender and aesthetic. For example, Participant 8 typically chooses a female avatar with red hair, to match her own. She even admits that she often makes her characters shorter, like herself, even though she desires to be taller (October 2015). Similarly, Participant 3 usually gives all of his characters beards, because he himself wears a beard (August 2015). The only exception was Participant 1, who likes to pick female characters and design them to look as absurd as possible (August 2015) - but even this is a reflection of his real-world persona, as he is often driven to push boundaries, and to do the unexpected.

How we choose to enact our agency in games is about more than just appearance. Behavior is also important -- but again, the behaviors that many of my interviewees claimed to express mirror their real-world behaviors. In the medieval fantasy game *Skyrim*, Participant 6, a family-oriented man and an educator, marries, adopts children, and builds a house for them with an entire tower dedicated to an extensive library, which he fills with all the books he has collected while playing the game (August 2015).

An even more interesting case is that of Participant 2, a colleague, who likes to play a massive multi-player online role-playing game called *Archage*. *Archage* is similar to the highly popular *World of Warcraft*, but offers even more options to players, allowing them to take on a wide variety of different skills and professions. Participant 2, unlike most players, does not choose to get involved in the conflicts of the game world, but instead devotes his time to farming. He has purchased a series of farms within the game, and uses them to grow crops, which he then makes into potions and sells to other players. According to him, this is very similar to what he would do during the short time that he played *World of Warcraft*. “I bought the game to fish while I would read. I could be at it for hours and hours... so then, after a while, my friends were, like, ‘hey, can you catch me these fish?’ so I would start doing that, but then I would fish too much -- so I started selling them, and I got very good at making gold cause I would just fish over and over, and people needed it because they needed certain kinds of fish for potions, so I just started selling them.” Again, this in-game behavior mirrors Participant 2’s real-world mentality. One of the ways that he supports his family is by creating and running merchant websites which are very much the same as his in-game farming and fishing businesses (August 2015).

So as much as video games might offer us the opportunity to explore new horizons, they also allow players to explore their pre-existing preferences in new and strange situations. It seems less about climbing into other people’s skins,



and more about discovering how we would behave in different circumstances. This is by no means a limitation. Although many people tend to explore their own personalities in different environments, students could easily be instructed to construct and play characters that are very different from themselves, and to record their actions and reactions to being made to walk in the skin of another.

I can't stay here any longer. Hell, I've been here too long already. I've done what I can for the townspeople. I've helped them survive, but at what cost? I've killed for them, and I've seen things -- I've seen what people do to each other out there. I can feel the person I was slipping away, and that, more than anything else, is why I need to keep moving. It would be so easy to stay here, behind these walls. I could become one of them.

But Dad's still out there, and with him are the answers. Why did he leave? Why did he leave me? I need to know, and whatever I'm becoming, I can't stop until I've found the truth.

I'm ready. I've got supplies, weapons, and, more importantly, I know how to survive out there now. As tough as the wastes are, I can be tougher -- I'll need to if I'm going to finish this.

I don't know what's going to happen to me out there. I don't know how this is going to end, and if anyone finds this journal, I can't say I know what to tell you. It's a hard road, a hard life, and all we can do is keep on pushing forward, working together, and

hopefully, if we're strong and clever enough, we'll live to see another sunrise. (Sichter)

### Conclusion

What is the ultimate purpose of all this exploration of narrative in video games? Where is this all leading? Sure, we can claim that video games are spaces in which we can construct narratives, and we can even claim that this level of immersion and agency is revolutionary in that it changes the ways in which we both interact with, and react to, literature -- but what is the practical application? How do we take the phenomenon and make it useful?

In his book, *What Video Games Have to Teach Us about Learning and Literacy*, James Gee describes something which he calls "critical learning" (31). Critical learning might best be understood as "hands on" learning -- quite possibly the most natural and comfortable form of learning. We can be told how to do something, how to make a chair, for instance, but we won't actually develop that skill unless we have tried, unless we have gone through the trial and error of making chairs, failing, and correcting our methods.

This, as Gee points out, is one of the critical educational advantages that video games offer (64). A book tells us information, but a video game actually requires us to perform in order to progress. As an example of how this works, Gee describes the tutorial, a short chapter at the beginning of most games that describes how to play the game. The specific example that he uses is *Tomb*

*Raider: The Last Revelation* (115), but I am going to describe the tutorial in *Fallout 3*, as it is an excellent example of a well-crafted tutorial.

In *Fallout 3* you start out by being born, while your father and the doctor consult a computer that tells them how you are going to look when you grow up (this is the part where the player gets to choose his/her gender and appearance). Next, you flash forward to yourself as a toddler, where you are taught the basic movement and interaction controls; then you flash forward to being a child, where you learn how to navigate the dialogue interface at your birthday party and learn how to shoot with a BB gun that you receive as a gift. Lastly, you flash forward to yourself completing high school, where you must take a test that will determine your skills and your position in society.

I chose this tutorial as an example because it does very effectively what a tutorial should do. It teaches you how to use the controls by having you use the controls, and it does so by immersing you through the use of narrative. The player is not “learning,” the player is experiencing a story, and learning is a natural process that arises out of that experience -- just like learning real skills in life.

This is a practical educational application for video games -- the simulated, narrative-driven learning environment. The ability to teach, not through lectures and worksheets, but through interactive experiences where every skill learned has an immediate practical application, and helps the player to achieve specific, immediate goals. A good example of this is the game *Kerbal*

*Space Program*, in which the player builds and flies rockets using a realistic physics engine, and thus learns about the physics of flight, orbit, and space travel.

It's one thing to claim that video games can teach us in more accessible, natural ways, and another to actually take that claim and construct a practical pedagogy around it. In this case, we are not concerned with the sciences, which is what *Kerbal Space Program* teaches us, but with the intertwined fields of literature and composition. So, in order to determine how video games are useful to these fields, we must first establish the point of these fields. *Why* do we teach literature and composition? And what do we expect our students to gain from studying these subjects?

First, I will consider the field of literature, which grants us insight by giving us the ability to see and understand the world through the eyes of others. This grants us a greater understanding of the human experience, and has the potential to make us more capable of empathy, and of recognizing the motivations of others. This insight, this ability to understand and predict others, can also go a long way towards improving our critical thinking skills. Lastly, responding to, and pushing back against, literature can help to foster student agency, as it teaches them to develop their own opinions, rather than just accepting the text because it has been published.

Composition can serve as an even more effective tool for critical thinking because the act of writing, of taking our thoughts and putting them down on the

page in a concrete format, enhances our ability to think through complex issues, and to construct logical arguments. Composition also helps students to develop feelings of personal agency, as it teaches them to develop their own unique voices, and to record and explore their thoughts in a (potentially) public format. And, of course, composition can serve as a great supplement to the study of literature, as the page can serve as a great space for exploring and refining our responses to literature, allowing us to develop even greater insight from it.

These three qualities, critical thinking, personal agency, and insight, are extremely valuable for any student, not just students of English studies. Being capable of critical thinking, having a confidence in one's voice, opinions, and abilities, and possessing insight into the feelings and motivations of others are traits that can help students get ahead in any field they choose. This is why the study of literature and composition is so important.

In my argument, I also present personally-generated narrative as being an important, though under-explored feature of these disciplines. This is because narrative is not only one of the fundamental ways in which we think and communicate, but because the construction and analysis of our own personal narratives helps us to further develop a sense of agency, and a greater understanding of the self.

The modern video game has the potential to be very useful because, as literature that allows us to compose within its space, it lies at the crossroads of these various aspects of the fields of composition and literature. From my

interviews, I learned that many players see video games as an extension of literature – as another way of experiencing it, but one that grants them a greater sense of personal agency. These games allow them to take part in the story, and to make decisions in it, rather than merely witnessing it. In this sense, video games are both literature and composition – a medium in which players both “read” and “write.” It’s a medium in which they are not only exposed to literary themes, but where they also must think critically and engage in problem solving in order to continue reading the story.

The video game also blends elements of insight and agency through the act of embodiment, as they are often asked to play as another character, and to see the world through that character’s eyes, while simultaneously guiding that character and making decisions on his/her behalf.

This does not come without challenges. Players are limited by an inability to interact fully with the game world, by an inability to make an unlimited number of choices, and by the fact that many games relegate player agency to physical action, and do not allow them complete control over their avatar’s dialogue and responses. Players make up for this by filling in the blanks, so to speak, and imagining a richer world than the one that has actually been presented to them, or taking steps to “own” the areas of the game that they are given control over, imposing their personalities on those points as much as possible. This results in every player composing a unique narrative as they play – what I call the embodied narrative, but which we can also consider to be an act of composition.

So, ultimately, what can students be expected to derive from the use of video games in literature and composition? The answer is that they provide a kind of microcosm of the field – a space where the various benefits of studying literature and composition are all at play on the same stage. In these digital spaces, the player is literally asked to view the world through the eyes of another, and to consider that world as another might see it, while simultaneously being offered the chance to explore their own agency by making decisions on that character's behalf. They are also required to problem-solve, and think through problems critically in order to successfully navigate their way through the story, which they are, in effect, writing through the act of their decision-making.

And all of this takes place through the element of narrative. It is the narrative, the story, that draws the players in, that keeps them engaged, and that imprints itself upon their memories once they have finished playing, helping them to mentally organize what they have learned. This is the ultimate multimodal space, and is set to become the way that we interact with media, and learn from it, in the future – a space where we can learn about others, and gain a more complete understanding of the human experience, at the same time that we try on different skins, explore different paths, and learn more about ourselves.

APPENDIX A  
IRB APPROVAL LETTER





Academic Affairs  
Office of Academic Research • Institutional Review Board

June 11, 2015

Patrick Sichter and Prof. Jacqueline Rhodes  
Department of English  
California State University, San Bernardino  
5500 University Parkway  
San Bernardino, California 92407

**CSUSB  
INSTITUTIONAL  
REVIEW BOARD**  
Expedited Review  
IRB# 14098  
Status  
**APPROVED**

Dear Mr. Sichter and Prof. Rhodes:

Your application to use human subjects, titled "Embodied Narratives in Video Gaming" has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). The attached informed consent document has been stamped and signed by the IRB chairperson. All subsequent copies used must be this officially approved version. A change in your informed consent (no matter how minor the change) requires resubmission of your protocol as amended. **Your application is approved for one year from June 8, 2015 through June 7, 2016. One month prior to the approval end date you need to file for a renewal if you have not completed your research. See additional requirements (Items 1 – 4) of your approval below.**

Your responsibilities as the researcher/investigator reporting to the IRB Committee include the following 4 requirements as mandated by the Code of Federal Regulations 45 CFR 46 listed below. Please note that the protocol change form and renewal form are located on the IRB website under the forms menu. Failure to notify the IRB of the above may result in disciplinary action. You are required to keep copies of the informed consent forms and data for at least three years. Please notify the IRB Research Compliance Officer for any of the following:

- 1) **Submit a protocol change form if any changes (no matter how minor) are proposed in your research protocol for review and approval of the IRB before implemented in your research,**
- 2) **If any unanticipated/adverse events are experienced by subjects during your research,**
- 3) **To apply for renewal and continuing review of your protocol one month prior to the protocols end date,**
- 4) **When your project has ended by emailing the IRB Research Compliance Officer.**

The CSUSB IRB has not evaluated your proposal for scientific merit, except to weigh the risk to the human participants and the aspects of the proposal related to potential risk and benefit. This approval notice does not replace any departmental or additional approvals which may be required.

If you have any questions regarding the IRB decision, please contact Michael Gillespie, the IRB Compliance Officer. Mr. Michael Gillespie can be reached by phone at (909) 537-7588, by fax at (909) 537-7028, or by email at [mgillesp@csusb.edu](mailto:mgillesp@csusb.edu). Please include your application approval identification number (listed at the top) in all correspondence.

Best of luck with your research.

Sincerely,

*Judy Sylva*

Judy Sylva, Ph.D., Chair  
Institutional Review Board

JS/MG

909.537.7588 • fax: 909.537.7028 • <http://irb.csusb.edu/>  
5500 UNIVERSITY PARKWAY, SAN BERNARDINO, CA 92407-2393

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