

Video Games & the Novel

Eric Hayot

In the last sixty years, the video game industry has grown from quite literally nothing to a behemoth larger than the film or television industries. This enormous change in the shape of cultural production has failed to make much of an impact on the study of culture more generally, partly because video games seem so much less culturally important than novels. No one has ever imagined the Great American Video Game. But video games have more in common with novels than you might think, and vice versa. Anyone trying to understand the combination of neoliberal individualism and righteous murderousness that characterizes our world today will do well to pay them some attention.

The scholarly study of video games dates back to the late 1990s, when the field's first major journal, *Game Studies*, was founded, and the first major work was published in the field. Perhaps typical for any new academic endeavor, the field justified itself partly via claims of video games' radical difference from other forms of culture. Unlike novels, films, or television, games, we were told, were interactive, not passive and linear; they were oriented toward kinesthetic pleasures (jumping, running, flashing lights), not intellectual or emotional ones. Games were about simulating activities, not just imitating them. In fact, games were so different from novels, films, or drama that anyone seeking to simply slot them into that longer aesthetic history would be effectively attempting to "colonize" a new medium, to strip an exciting and unique cultural form of all of its novelty and interest.

The argument for the uniqueness of video games worked best if one emphasized certain types of games, games like *Super Mario Bros.* or *Tetris*, which highlighted precisely the kinesthetic and interactive structures that early game scholars identified as the crucial distinguishing elements of the genre, and deemphasized the kinds of games, also quite popular, that involved adventure or story. And indeed if one considers games like *Super Mario*, which draw so clearly from a longer tradition of kinesthetic and antagonistic play (what one sees in a game of jacks or pin the tail on the donkey), then the game enthusiasts had point. Video games are not like novels and films, partly because they do not simply represent their story-worlds, but rather invite their users to shape them in action. Understanding games while relying solely on existing theories of the novel would be to make a significant category mistake.

And yet. Plenty of video games involve stories, enough that attempting to think about what games do or are, culturally speaking, without any sense of how storytelling works would be a pretty odd thing to do. Games, after all, did not just emerge *sui generis* from the cultural landscape, from a set of technological and social conditions that had nothing to do with anything that came before. The people who made the first video games had, after all, grown up in a cultural environment fully shaped by the existence of the novel, indeed had grown up in a world in which the novel had been a dominant cultural form. And they had grown up in a world full of television, film, and theater, a world about which one can honestly say that – in the United States of the 1960s – practically no one alive had *not ever* seen a film, watched a play, or read a novel. At some broader level, all the storytelling media, games included, borrow from a set of tropes, cultural patterns, and forms of production, distribution, and consumption that extend backwards to the very beginnings of human culture. All of which is to say: video games are not novels, but they certainly share with novels a relation to a much longer history of narrative.

To separate video games fully from the novel (to deny, even, that games are a narrative medium at all) is to make a difference of degree into a difference of kind. Even in the case of user interaction – which may well be the most distinctive formal feature of the video game genre – we would do well to notice areas of overlap, areas in which thinking more expansively will give us a less chopped-up picture of the work of culture. Consider, for instance, that interactive fiction and poetry emerge, historically, at almost the same time as do the very first video games: *Spacewar!* (1961–1962), an early precursor of *Asteroids*, appears the same year as Raymond Queneau's *Cent mille milliards de poèmes*, which invited readers to make up one of a trillion sonnets by mixing and matching ten options for each of the poem's fourteen lines. Two years later, Julio Cortázar's *Hopscotch* invited readers to bounce around the pages of the novel rather than read them straight through. And in 1969, B. S. Johnson's *The Unfortunates* was published as a bundle of bound chapters in a box, the middle twenty-five of which could be read in any order you liked. That same year, Ralph Baer programmed *Pong* into an early version of the video game console called the Brown Box. Aesthetic interaction was, let's just say it, more generally in the air in the 1960s and 1970s. Insofar as there is something to be said about the relation between games and the novel, it will have to take place in a larger cultural context in which both genres reacted to and were shaped by a set of common forces.

And this is true not just for the 1960s, but for any larger sense of the relation between interaction and storytelling. Think of folk stories or popular theater – like Punch and Judy shows – in which shouting at the stage is not only accepted but encouraged, or Shakespearean asides, or, at the limit, of the implied addressee of so much lyric poetry, in which the line between story-world and audience be-

comes, at times, blurry indeed. Interaction was a story-mode for centuries, if not millennia, before the arrival of the microprocessor. Whatever video games are doing with interaction, they are doing in a context that emerges from a long history of interactions actual and represented, in a world in which the capacity to act, or to interact (or the inability to do so), has in fact constituted a major concern of all aesthetic making, from the most popular to the most highbrow.

What this means is that any understanding of video games that does not include the novel – or that treats them as a radically new form of culture untouched by the vast histories of storytelling and play that precede it – will necessarily be incomplete. But the reverse is also true, since both games and novels 1) participate in the larger cultural context of which I have been writing, but also 2) because the novel today is unquestionably being shaped by the cultural presence of video games, just as it has been shaped by the history of television and film. We can talk easily about the transfer of the cinematic gaze to fiction; we can recognize clearly enough the ways in which certain novels are written in order to become movies. Can we see the same, or say the same, for video games?

Undoubtedly, yes. In the early days of video games, the structures of influence go almost entirely in one direction. This movement from the culture-at-large to the nascent form is a law of aesthetic novelty: early films copy novels and plays, for instance, and the early novel draws on the structures and patterns of romance and the picaresque, before each medium finds its “own” form. But as time passes, the traffic in culture flows both ways.

Consider, for instance, the near-simultaneous appearance of the most important early text-based adventure game, *Colossal Cave Adventure*, developed by Will Crowther for the PDP-1 mainframe computer between 1975 and 1977, and the “choose your own adventure” genre of children’s fiction, the first of which, *Sugarcane Island*, was written by Edward Packard in 1969. Published in 1976 in a series initially called *Adventures of You*, *Sugarcane Island* became in 1979 part of Bantam Books’ *Choose Your Own Adventure* line, which sold more than 250 million books between 1979 and 1998. Today, the genre has been remediated once again, as a board game, which sells at your local Target. (If you are eager to find a highbrow predecessor for this kind of second-person storytelling in the novel, look no further than Michel Butor’s 1957 *La modification*). Something similarly remediative has happened to the Tom Clancy franchise, which began as a series of single-authored books before ending up as an empire that includes films, television series, ghost-written airport novels, and some forty or fifty different video games. We see similar transference effects in the vast number of rethinkings and remakings of Tolkien and his fantasy world, most directly in the games and films based directly on *Lord of the Rings* and, more generally, in the tens of thousands of novels, games, films, and television shows that take the dwarves and elves, swords and dragons of Tolkien’s invention and make them the basis for new stories.

Recent years have seen the rise of an entire subgenre of fantasy fiction known as LitRPG, in which the basic mechanics of tabletop role-playing games like *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974), these days almost entirely remediated through their video game versions, return to novelistic fiction, which then organizes its narratives around the scaling of levels and abilities, the acquisition of weapons and characteristics, and so on, that define those game modes. The most successful instances of the LitRPG genre, like Ernest Cline's *Ready Player One* (2012), have topped the *New York Times* bestsellers list and been made into major Hollywood movies. But the vast majority of them – thousands and thousands – exist as digital-only objects sold via Amazon's direct publishing platforms.

Scholars have with few exceptions ignored this vast creative output, which is of dubious literary value in the usual sense. And indeed, anyone trying to understand “the novel” today can probably afford to ignore the actual texts in question. But it would be foolish, I think, not to recognize the ways in which the field of the novel has been altered by online publishing platforms, and by the kinds of fiction they sell, which tend to be – unlike highbrow fiction – intensely generic and serial. Their success suggests something important about the current appetite for the consumption of culture, namely its new, or seemingly new, emphasis on bingeing: binge-reading, binge-watching, binge-playing, what amounts to a desire for the total absorption into a storytelling universe, from one perspective, or a radically frenzied and consumerist fall into a fully capitalist aesthetic, a kind of storytelling shopaholism, from another.

Whatever the novel is today, then, it is that by virtue of its location within a more general system of narrative media, one that has been profoundly influenced by both the mechanical (interactive) structures that video games afford, and by the story-worlds that video games have helped to make so culturally prominent. Understanding that system is not a matter of grasping any single instance of influence or interference, but rather of seeing the patterns and structures of the system as a whole, and of recognizing that even those parts of the system that seem to have withheld themselves from it – here I am thinking specifically of the highbrow or literary novel, with all of its rejections of the popular narrative genres and modes – nonetheless operate with, and only make sense within, the very media system that they are so often invested in resisting.

If that is so, then, rather than begin with the question about what makes video games different from novels, we might do well to ask what makes them similar. I have already given you some answers: games, like novels, belong to a system of intertextuality and remediation that characterizes all media environments, not only the ones of the twentieth century and beyond; games, like novels, belong to a longer history of storytelling from which they emerge, themes and narrative strategies already in hand; and games appear at a historical moment when audience interaction in a number of other art forms – including fiction, yes, but also,

of course, drama! – constitutes a major source of aesthetic interest. All this suggests not so much that we need to “apply” what we learn from video games to our understanding of the novel, or the reverse, but rather that we ought to think them together, to see how aspects of each illuminate a larger cultural picture in which both participate.

To say the obvious and very simple thing first: the rise of interactive aesthetic activity in the twentieth century responds to a far longer unit of human concern than anything local to that period. *Choosing* as a theme predates both the novel and the video game. Abraham hearing the angel, Antigone before Creon, the miller’s daughter and Rumpelstiltskin: each of these scenes testifies to the narrative potency of the moment of choosing, and to its vast importance to the very idea of human life as it confronts the face of power and the possibility of its own impotence. The arrival of video games as a new cultural form in the last sixty years must therefore be understood as an event inside this larger context, one of whose other major events is, of course, the novel, which has been the matizing choice for as long as it has been in existence. (Think of Defoe’s *Crusoe*, who shows us choosing in its most triumphant, individualistic mode; or of Anna Karenina; or of that great refuser-to-choose, Melville’s *Bartleby*.)

What remains, then, is to think of the specific meanings that the various cultural modes – here the novel and the video game – codify in their general representation of choosing, and to ask what these codifications tell us about the cultures that produce them. In a famous example of this kind of reading, Erich Auerbach, in *Mimesis*, points out that the Arthurian knight Calogrenant, in one version of his tale, turns “right” into a forest while on a journey. But Calogrenant does not really turn right, Auerbach says. He makes the “right” turn, whether or not there was a right turn in that forest on that day, whether in fact there was a forest at all, makes no difference. What looks like a choice in the story is in fact the mechanism of rightness, of justice, making there be turns where turning is needed. In this sense, all turns in the Arthurian romance, even the wrong turns, are the “right” ones, since the decision-making process that drives them stems not from the individual choice made in the present of the narrative, but rather in the fact that the major characters – the knight, the monster – are the *kind of person they are*: that is, the kind of person who turns right at the right time, or who tricks others into making the wrong (but therefore also right) turn.

One might contrast this with the agonies of choice we see in the modern novel to begin to grasp some difference this newer genre makes. For the modern novel means for its readers, I believe, to grasp its protagonists’ choices – again, think of Anna Karenina, or of Woolf’s *Clarissa Dalloway*, choosing to get the flowers herself – as decisions that could just as well not have been made, as decisions made within a framework that is fundamentally rational, even if it is also constrained.

Indeed, the tension between constraint and freedom – the cultural mores that make Emma Bovary or Anna an adulteress, the ones that turn Lucien de Rubempré toward his amoral triumph – constitutes one of the major plot points of modern fiction. This secular, rational orientation toward the possibility of choice-making explains both why the real alternatives to characters' final choices must be made so vivid as possibilities in the text – Crusoe's success on the island depends, as a matter of narrative interest, entirely on the idea that he might at any moment fail in his endeavor – and why, also, the collapse of the possibility of meaningful choice so often appears, in the modern novel, as a matter of madness (Gilman's *Yellow Wallpaper*), trauma (Faulkner), or bureaucracy (Kafka).

Against this more general backdrop, we encounter something fairly remarkable about the video game as a cultural genre, something that may help us understand the larger cultural forces that are shaping the contemporary interaction aesthetic, and also why the video game industry has gone from literally nothing, sixty years ago, to an economic force larger than either the television or film industries today. It is this: that players of games must be able to *win*. Any obstacle faced by their protagonist, any blockage in forward progress, whether its agent is the environment or a villain, *must* be able to be overcome through the player's effort. The game does not end until all such obstacles are overcome. As with genre fiction, it is the final overcoming of the final obstacle that closes off the story and frames the happy ending of the diegesis. This is, finally, as true for phone games like *Candy Crush* (even if there will always be another level to play) as it is for narratively elaborate, multimillion-dollar titles only playable on personal computers or game consoles.

The ideological implications of this winning constraint offer gamers a fundamentally libertarian worldview. In a world in which everyone has the same chance at complete success, and access to absolutely the same computational and diegetic resources, any failure can only be the result of an individual lack, of "user error." The moral outcomes of the vast majority of video game universes thus express – and allow players to practice and play with – a version of personal equality that exists nowhere in real life. Video games have a very hard time representing powerless people, or imagining a world in which such people suffer, through no fault of their own, the effects of structural or social violence. As with most modern fantasy fiction, powerlessness in video games exists only as a prelude to its transformation into diegetic omnipotence, weakness only as a prelude to strength.

This predilection for the happy ending makes games little different from the vast majority of the modes of genre fiction from which they most frequently draw: namely, science fiction and fantasy. There, the trials suffered by novelistic heroes exist – speaking here of their narrative function – mainly to *extend* the time of the story, since without them there would be quite literally nothing to tell. (Imagine: "In a town there was born a child. She lived happily ever after.") Nonetheless, we

may want to note that the general lack of unhappy endings provides an interesting brake on the overall capacity of video games to represent culture and, particularly, to enter into the consideration of those of us whose tastes and modes of interpretation have been weaned on tragedy, pathos, and trauma, for whom something like “realism” is usually associated with emotional difficulty and devastation: Pecola Breedlove, Hamlet, the man without qualities, and so on. It seems unlikely that video games could become a fully mature cultural formation – mature in the sense of having the capacity to represent the entire range of emotions and outcomes that we associate with all the developed aesthetic forms – without being able to access the unhappy endings of the tragic mode. (Or even, more minimally, to ironize them: to taint the happy ending, as so often happens in Dickens, with a sense of loss or anxiety that undercuts the very finality of the story.)

In other words, the structural constraint created by the need to win makes it difficult for video games to break out of the basic comedic structures that characterize genre and popular culture more generally. And this in turn makes it difficult for games to fully represent, as can novels and films, the full emotional and social range of human life.

But the situation is changing. Consider Toby Fox’s *Undertale* (2015). The game presents itself as a role-playing dungeon crawler, a genre in which the player moves through underground spaces encountering various creatures and killing them for their gear, progressing toward a final encounter with the main villain, whose defeat ends the game. In an echo of the genre’s origins in the 1980s, *Undertale* presents this generic structure in a deliberately anachronistic design language, the visual equivalent of a film shot entirely in sepia tones. The resulting nostalgia, and the fact that the game’s protagonist is a young child, vibrates against the major traditional constraint of the genre, which is that any movement forward through the story traditionally relies on killing any creature that gets in your way.

What is odd about *Undertale* is that, as it turns out, every single encounter in the game can be won by subduing or otherwise pacifying – but not killing – your enemies. This, in effect, reveals the traditional constraint of such games as a *form of mass murder*, and opens a dark window onto our contemporary fascination with child killers (consider *La Femme Nikita*, *The Hunger Games*, or Tana French’s *In the Woods*). Players can, of course, play the game any way they would like, but the game’s endings differ substantially depending on what the player chooses to do. Indeed, the decision to kill everyone the player encounters produces the game’s only decidedly tragic ending, in which a traumatized and angry opponent destroys the entire universe, essentially deciding that, if genocide is the only way to move through the story, neither the player nor anyone in it are worthy of continued existence.

For the ordinary player who enters the game-world with no knowledge that mass murder can be refused – for whom killing has not yet become mass murder – the fundamental moral logic and surprise of the game will come, then, somewhere in the middle of the game itself, when she realizes that it has been possible all along to avoid killing anything at all. At that point, of course, it is *already too late* to go back. The game’s creatures, who have been until then, in the nature of all video game obstacles, eminently killable – who have seemed in fact to *invite* being killed – suddenly become endowed with the possibility of further life, and enter thereby into a field of moral consideration and legitimacy that has the effect of turning the game completely upside down (an under-tale, indeed). What players do next is, of course, up to them: one can finish the game more pacifistically, and then replay the entire game (whose diegesis will recognize that this is a second playthrough, and respond to the results of the first one) in that mode, in order to achieve the game’s “happiest” ending. Or one can shrug one’s shoulders and go on killing.

Something like that, minus the shoulder-shrugging, characterizes another recent game, *The Last of Us* (2013). Published by a major studio, Naughty Dog, *The Last of Us* tells the story of a postapocalyptic United States on a planet that has been devastated by a zombie-creating fungus. Part of the game’s pathos involves walking through the devastated ruins of our contemporary civilization, witnessing the fall of buildings and the fall of the political and legal institutions that support our (relatively) safe, healthy lives, and witnessing, therefore, the return of the forms of inhuman brutality, including cannibalism, that we today imagine would characterize the loss of technological modernity. In this way, the emotional structure of the game takes part in the larger postapocalyptic imaginary characterized by films like *Mad Max* or *The Day After*, and by any number of novels, graphic novels, or television shows that fantasize the zombified future of ordinary life.

The plot of the game is simple enough. The protagonists are Ellie, a thirteen-year-old girl who seems to be the first person to be immune to the virus, and Joel, an embittered forty-something whose daughter was killed during the first days of the apocalypse, twenty years earlier. Joel reluctantly agrees to accompany Ellie from Boston to Salt Lake City, where a team of doctors will examine her in order to begin researching a cure. Over the course of this journey, Joel’s hard-bitten interior gradually crumbles, and he begins to love Ellie as a daughter and imagines that they could live a life together as parent and (replacement) child.

This growing emotional intensity causes what happens next. As the two reach Salt Lake City, it becomes clear that the only way for the doctors to create an antidote or vaccine will be to destroy Ellie’s brain. She willingly steps into the operating room, confident that her sacrifice will save humanity. But Joel cannot stand it. Under the player’s control, he rushes through the hospital, killing doctors and security guards along the way, to reach an unconscious Ellie, and pulls her from the

operating table. The game ends as she wakes up in a car, with Joel driving, taking them to an encampment in the wilderness. What happened? she asks. Oh, Joel says, the doctors took a look, and realized they didn't need you – you were just like a number of other patients they'd already seen.

I need to explain what it feels like to play the game in these moments. I did not *want* to kill the doctors, who, as far as I knew, are literally the only experienced medical professionals left on the planet. I did not want to rescue Ellie, and I did not want to remove her from the operating room. But the game treats any refusal to pursue *Joel's* course of action as a refusal to play and sends the player back to the game's opening screen. The player therefore must choose either 1) to refuse to continue playing the game, or 2) to become directly complicit in Joel's love for Ellie, to pull the trigger on the diegetic gun that kills the doctors, to move to pull her from the table, and so on. In short: the player participates actively in the creation of a tragedy or must cease to play entirely.

One has of course felt, watching *Othello* or *Hamlet*, the desire to reach out and stop the madness, to throw oneself athwart the inevitable and often stupid march to disaster. But one was not, at the time, actually playing the characters involved. Here, part of the emotional force of the tragedy happens because one is so accustomed, in video games, to the possibility of a happy ending, that one cannot, at first, accept that the game is going to force one to participate in its opposite. What makes *The Last of Us* interesting, then, is how it takes away the possibility of interactivity; in order to produce its tragic ending, it must keep the player from choosing any other ending. This makes it more like a novel, to be sure, but not entirely like a novel. For in *The Last of Us*, the work of art gambles that we will care more about reaching the end of the story than we will about losing the chance to save the planet, that we will, correctly prompted, like Joel, love the end of the world more than we love the possibility of its redemption.

With *The Last of Us* and *Undertale*, then, we have two games that, if they appeared in another cultural genre, one accustomed to the kinds of interpretive force I am putting on it here, would minimally be recognized as significant works of art.

That they are not, and probably will not be, reflects the strangely narrow social band within which video games operate today. Everyone has seen some television, watched a few movies, read a novel or two. But many, many people have never played a video game. And the group of those who do – the stereotypical gamers – are young, White, and male, though less and less so each year. My argument here is not that, if these things were to change – if, for instance, video games achieved the kind of cultural penetration that characterizes the other genres, or if they were regularly able to “equal” (whatever that would mean) the aesthetic achievements of the best novels or films – then video games would finally somehow deserve the right to be included alongside those more prestigious genres in the pantheons of the university or the magazines and cultural reviews of the elite. The point is rath-

er that any consideration of what the novel is today, and any true understanding of what narrative aesthetics are doing in general, is impossible if we do not also understand the work video games are doing on that front, or how, or why, or for whom they are doing it. If, as I have been arguing, one of the things video games reveal is the centrality of libertarian choice to a certain fantasy of modern life – and if some recent video games themselves are engaged in a critique of that fantasy, in precisely the represented practices of world-saving and mass killing that have been its bedrock – then anyone trying to understand the combination of neoliberal individualism and righteous murderousness that characterizes our world today will do well to pay attention.

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