Reading video games as literary texts: exposing the literariness of narrative games

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# Introduction

This paper argues that video games fulfil some of the same roles literature and film play, in terms of their relation to hegemonic culture, their critical potential and their narrative functions, and, consequently, should be recognised as a medium with definite literary potential. Drawing from, amongst others, *Metro: 2033* and *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*, the paper demonstrates that video games can and do share various characteristics of literary texts. Initially approaching video games from a historical angle, video games’ literary roots are discussed, which leads to the position that from very early in their development, video games have been a narrative medium. Arguing that the differences are largely superficial, while the similarities are more essential, the paper claims that narrative video games are actually of a very literary nature, not only in terms of narrative structure, literary techniques and generic conventions, but also with regard to their socio-political functions and in challenging readers’/players’ sense of morals, ethics and values. Through an analysis of *Metro: 2033* and *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*, I demonstrate that literary theory can be applied to video games, exactly because of the literary nature of some games. Consequently, this paper not only argues that it can be very productive to engage video games using tools from literary studies, but calls for expanding a cross-media approach already developed through the interplay between literary studies and film studies, and advancing the formation of a comprehensive field of study, centred around the notions of narrative and literariness, regardless of the type of media of the texts concerned.

# Digging for the literary roots of video games

That video games and literature (as well as film) share certain roots is obvious, considering the history of video games: very soon after the technology started to develop, games with narrative elements started to appear. Whether judged by sales or critical acclaim, many of the most successful video games of the past thirty years are story-driven, to a greater or lesser extent, and the language used when talking about games tends to feature terms we recognise from literary studies, such as genre, protagonist and plot. Additionally, it is generally accepted that video games are also related to film – a medium that is also inherently related to literature. It is hardly surprising, then, that some games have such a literary feel to them. In fact, as video games are finally shaking of their stigma of being inherently low culture and/or childish, we can recognise some games to be of such obvious merit that some scholars are starting to ask the question “Are video games art?” (Smuts) (Ryan).

Obviously, video games are a relatively recent phenomenon, though the medium has undergone a very rapid development since its early days. As the development of games has always been highly dependent on the available technology, it stands to reason that the earliest games were simple ones, such as *Spacewar* (1962), the very first computer game, and the well-known Atari game *Pong* (1972). These games were, by and large, only focused on gameplay, without any particular narrative. This changed, however, with the introduction of text adventures, such as *Adventure* (1976) and *Zork* (1981), which are games “where the user types commands to move around a ﬁctional world solving puzzles and ﬁnding treasures” and which were often set “in a Tolkien-like fantasy world where he or she has to perform a quest” (Rockwell 347). With the addition of such fictional worlds and quests, these games were the first to include a notion of storytelling and narrative, and from this point onwards, narrative has always played a large role in the development of video games.

From these simple origins, the medium developed into various different ways, sparking a vast number of titles, some more narrative in scope than others. Despite their humble beginnings, three main strands have grown to be particularly narrative in scope. I will briefly mention some of the early examples here, that set the standards for their respective game type. First, we can see the emergence of narrative puzzle games, such as the 1993 game *Myst*, which sparked a number of sequels, all exploring a highly developed fictional universe through the use of hints and puzzles. (Interestingly, the *Myst* franchise also comprises three companion novels, providing additional background narrative – one of the first game franchises to spark the writing of novels.)

Second, the original text adventures also eventually led to the development of what we now know as the Role Playing Game, or RPG, which are generally story-driven action games, where the player experiences the narrative from the perspective of the protagonist. Notable early examples of this type of game would be *Fallout* (1997), Planescape: Torment (1999) and *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* (2003). Particularly *Planescape: Torment* has earned critical praise for its literary qualities, both for the quality of its writing and for the sheer scope of the narrative, comprising some 800.000 words of in-game text (see, for example, Griliopoulos 2009).

Last, there is the First Person Shooter, or FPS, derived from the first person perspective generally seen in these games. This type of game is generally considered to originate with *Wolfenstein 3D* (1992) and *Doom* (1993), and tends to be more action- or gameplay-oriented than the RPG. Here, the narrative was traditionally seen as a mechanism to keep the gameplay going, though the advance of technology has made it easier to combine gameplay and narrative, allowing for more effective (and, in some cases, extensive) storytelling. By and large, these three game types still make up the majority of video games played today and still follow the same basic structures, though the advances in computing power and graphical technology have made their mark on the visual aspects.

Interestingly, in that small set of examples, the crosspollination between literature, film and video games is already illustrated by the various instances of remediation and mutual intertextuality. Already briefly mentioned earlier, the *Myst* franchise contains a set of novels exploring the background of the characters in the games, thus expanding the narrative experience by serving as prequels. The game *Planescape: Torment* has two novelizations, in turn, that both (loosely) follow the game script. *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*, on the other hand, was the remediation itself, inspired by the film series by George Lucas (or, to be precise, based on a table-top game inspired by the films series) and part of the extensive cross-media Star Wars franchise. This franchise includes, in addition to the films, a range of books, comic books, games (both analogue and digital) and toys, essentially all tied in to the overall Star Wars narrative. Considering that in all these examples, the game narratives are interwoven with those of the related novels and films, it is much more productive for an analysis of these games’ narrative qualities – or even of their characters or settings – to approach them from a wider angle, rather than segmenting the objects on the basis of their medium. Indeed, one could argue that to limit the application of literary theory to purely literary texts is an old-fashioned and artificial constraint, in an age of cross-media franchises, remediation and intertextuality.

# Video games, storytelling and narrative depth

Although the vast majority of video games are narrative in nature, it is clear that video games also differ from literary texts in key ways, most notably the difference between the roles of the player and the reader – a difference that has been discussed extensively. Looking at the differences between these media, though, these differences are largely superficial, and do not exclude approaching a video game through the lens of literary theory. This is also the point Connie Veugen makes, in her 2011 dissertation, when she paraphrases Marie-Laure Ryan: “Responding to the ludologists (in this case Eskilinen, Aarseth, Frasca and Juul) who claim(ed) that games and narratives are two separate entities, she countered that ‘every medium capable of narrativity presents its own affordances and limitations’, therefore games as well” (Veugen 227). On the one hand, it is true that the narrative in a video game is mediated by gameplay and the constructs that allow the player interaction with the game world, and that this can influence the way the story is told, or even the way the narrative progresses. On the other hand, video games potentially have more room to develop their narrative, in terms of time invested by the audience, and have the option of telling a story through a combination of methods, potentially leading to a higher rate of involvement.

A frequently noted difference between literature and film, is that literature offers much more space to develop a narrative, because films have a much more limited duration. While this comment is often accompanied by some problematic premises, such as the idea that a longer text automatically implies a ‘better’ narrative, it does raise interesting questions with regard to narrative video games. The approach of video games through the lens of literary theory implies they offer a certain amount of depth and critical value, as is increasingly recognised by scholars in the humanities. In contrast to the limited duration of film, the technical and practical limitations on the duration of video games are generally beyond what is deemed desirable by their developers, be it for reasons of scope, gameplay or production costs. The average playthrough of many narrative-driven video games can range from 10 to as much as 50 or 60 hours[[1]](#footnote-1), compared of the 1,5 to 2 hours of most feature films[[2]](#footnote-2). Consequently, this offers the chance to develop a narrative with a depth reminiscent of a literary classic.

Such narrative depth is obviously dependent on the storytelling, which, in turn, is restricted to a greater of lesser extent by gameplay decisions. For instance, a game offering a large amount of freedom in terms of gameplay and world exploration can limit the affect of the storytelling, as the player can choose to ‘dilute’ the experience of the narrative, by interrupting the story by other activities. Alternatively, a game can be constructed in such a way that the player can only progress in the game through progression in the narrative. Another factor affecting narrative depth is the amount of interactivity: some games allow players to alter the narrative according to their gameplay choices, with effects ranging from merely achieving a different ending to experiencing completely different narratives, while others offer only one version of the story, regardless of how a player behaves in the game. However, these factors can also contribute to a more immersive experience: the player can be offered the freedom to get acquainted with the setting, so the world of the narrative feels more familiar, or he can be provided with a story that progresses at a high tempo, giving the impression of controlling the protagonist in a film. Coupled with the advantage of the longer duration of a video game experience, not only compared to a film, but also compared to many works of literature, these factors can create an experience with at least as much narrative depth, complexity and immersion as a literary text.

# If it defines literariness in one medium, why not in another?

So far, this paper has mostly considered component parts that video games share with literary texts, which presents a somewhat reductionist picture. We’ve established that the video game is a thoroughly narrative medium, and that the interaction of a player with a game can last as long or even much longer as that of a reader with a work of literature. However, there is more to the story than this: when discussing the value of literature, or its critical potential, an analysis is hardly limited to such objective properties. Indeed, there have been long debates on what makes literature so valuable, with arguments including the potential to broaden horizons, stimulate personal development and instil or reinforce a sense of ethics, by providing the reader with an experience outside that of his normal daily life. Most literary classics are lauded exactly because they excel at these things, and analyses of how texts achieve these effects form a sizable part of literary scholarship. In this section, I will argue that many of these aspects are equally present in many narrative video games, thus rendering them equally viable for an analyses using literary theory.

One of the more traditional theories on the value of literature concerns the potential of the literary text to contribute to a reader’s sense of ethics, thus making him or her a better person, citizen or part of society. This is an idea that can be traced back to classical antiquity, with roots in Plato, who considered the poet inspired by the gods, and Aristotle, who stresses, in his Poetics, that literature imitates life, and can thus be used to teach valuable life lessons. The idea has persisted throughout the ages, and became particularly popular in the 18th and 19th centuries, when literature became related to nationalism and citizenship in scholarly discourse (Widdowson 34-5). This view of literature was also expressed by Italo Calvino, for instance, here succinctly summarised by Lucia Re:

[L]iterature, Calvino says, or actually, poetry, through its multiple, contradictory work (lavorio), can and does shape human sensibility, giving form to the moral impulse (scatto morale) and the way one looks around oneself. "Only poetry can teach these things" (Solo la poesia pub insegnarle) (Saggi 9). […] Literature is a kind of sentimental, moral and intellectual education which - Calvino says - is irreplaceable in terms of quality and value. "Literature (he goes on in the same essay) teaches us to find proportions in life, the place of love in it, the place of death - the hardness, the pity, the sadness, the irony, the humor" (21-22). (Re 123)

To this day, many literary scholars subscribe to this point of view to a greater or lesser extent, and it has been of great influence on the development of literary studies, as a discipline.

Alternatively, the value of literature is often located in its potential to broaden the reader’s horizons and to provide a hint of an experience not usually encountered in everyday life. This more recent approach takes the individual as the starting point, for whom reading can contribute to the personal development, with regards to both themselves and their surroundings. For instance, literature can put our experiences within a broader perspective, turning experience into knowledge:

Why does an individual read? Reading gives us articulation of ourselves, solidity where before there was only the empty air of experience. Words, pictures, conceptualizations of ourselves: this is knowledge, initially about ourselves and perhaps later by extension about others. (Fleming 471)

On the other hand, literature also opens up experiences otherwise closed to us, such as those of different eras and cultures. This can increase our understanding of our past, but also of the present, as the historical perspective allows for different interpretations of events and experiences. Additionally, both literature of the past and texts set in fictional or future settings can stimulate us to rethink certain clichés and commonly accepted truths, and even provide new insights about the present, through the process of cognitive estrangement (Roche 234-7) (Suvin). As such, literature can, then, contribute to personal development, by broadening one’s horizons, providing new or improved perspectives and opening up new realms of experience.

Considering that the theoretical tools of literary studies have been developed with these ideas on the attribution of value in mind, this implies they should be applicable to other narrative media that satisfy these criteria – the value is not derived from the medium or form, but from the content. Turning to some narrative video games, it turns out that they can and do in fact meet these ‘criteria’.

First, we will look at the 2010 game *Metro: 2033*, a first person shooter with a mostly linear narrative, set in the metro network of a post-apocalyptic Moscow. As Howanitz notes, “the virtual world of Metro 2033 was created with great attention to detail, and the overall setting is intriguing” (Howanitz 98). The player experiences the game from the perspective of Artyom, one of the survivors of the nuclear holocaust that live in the subway system, largely protected from the radiation and mutant creatures of the surface. Early on in the narrative, Artyom/the player is tasked with sending one of the centres of government a warning about a dangerous new type of mutant, seen in the tunnels. This sets the player on an eventful journey through numerous tunnels and stations, some populated, some abandoned, coming into contact with a variety of people.

Throughout the game, the player is presented with opportunities to decide on how to interact those around him: donate some of the sparse currency to a beggar or not, save prisoners of war encountered in an enemy camp or not, stealing certain resources or not, or even just talking to certain people. These are generally situations where it would be more practical or easier not to do the ‘good’ thing, and there is no obvious punishment for not doing them. However, depending on the amount of good deeds performed, the player can experience different endings – a featured shared with numerous other games. In the normal ending, Artyom and his fellow survivors launch a missile strike at the home of the ‘Dark Ones’, the intelligent mutants, in order to eradicate them. If the player has performed enough good deeds, though, he does get the possibility to save the mutants, by realising in time that they were only trying to communicate – a realisation that comes too late in the other ending. In this way, the game takes into account the players’ moral decisions, not exactly punishing a choice of self-interest over charity, often arguably the pragmatic choice, considering the limited amount of resources, but also providing a ‘good’ ending for those that went out of their way to be kind and help their community. One could even argue that there is an implied message in this system, that ethical behaviour can eventually have far-reaching consequences – a message that is highly reminiscent of the moral of many works of literature.

A somewhat different ethics system is present in the 2011 game *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*, which is set in 2027, in a setting where large corporations are more powerful than national governments and people are increasingly getting cybernetics implanted, both for medical reasons and for cosmetic, recreational or practical reasons. Another game with an extensive and well-written story, *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*, forces the player to make more active choices. In terms of dialogue options generally include joking, kind, surly/aggressive, all gameplay situations can be solved through violence, but also through non-violent means or with very selective application of force, and at various point in the narrative the player gets to decide how to proceed – often influencing the way the next section will be played, as in the very beginning, where the player is tasked with resolving a hostage situation and can choose between being equipped with lethal and non-lethal weapons.

Again, we see numerous small ways of interacting with the game world, such as acting on a message read during gameplay or talking to certain characters, either reassuring them or telling them to get out of the protagonists way. However, the player is also forced to take a position on the issue of cybernetic implants – the acceptance of which is a prime aspect of the game’s narrative. Interestingly, there is no inherent judgement in the way any of the options are presented: at the ending, at the culmination of a conflict between various interest groups, the player can side with, for instance, a party radically opposed to cybernetics, arguing that they create further inequality and give big corporations even more power, or with a corporation promising a better future for mankind, by helping the disabled and easing everybody’s life. Or, alternatively, the player can decide on a more nuanced course, curbing the power of corporations, but defending the potential of cybernetics. The player even gets the option of abstaining from active action, placing one’s trust in mankind to find ways of dealing with these issues without any particular guidance. This is a conscious decision on the part of the writers:

To promote player thoughtfulness, the games’ protagonists begin as blank slates, ignorant of the debate over augmentation and therefore able to change per the players’ interests. Mary DeMarle, thelead writer for *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*, says that Adam, the protagonist, “gets exposed to the full brunt of prejudice on both sides. Since you are playing Adam, you get to experience this ﬁrsthand as well. Thus, how Adam’s perspective changes over the course of the game really depends on how your perspective shifts. You’re the one playing him. You are the one making choices and witnessing the consequences.” (Geraci 742)

This way, *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* actively puts the player in a position where he or she must make personal judgements, throughout the game, both promoting immersion in the experience of the game world and requiring deliberation on one’s position within that game world, not only in terms of ruthless/kind, but also with regards to the ethical debates in the game (which are promising to be increasingly relevant to everyday experience, as time goes by).

As we have seen, both games clearly provide new perspectives to the player, while they also stimulate thinking about ethics and morals. Both put the player in the perspective of a protagonist in a very different kind of world, forcing the player to draw on their existing knowledge and experiences to make sense of that world. In doing so, these games influence the player, as, by triggering these things in the player, they also put them in a new and different perspective, potentially effecting personal development in the player. Additionally, the player is prompted to act in certain ways, or abstain from acting in certain ways, according to decisions of a decidedly ethical or moral nature. As in real life, decisions have consequences, even if they are restricted to the in-game experience, which can still cause the player to pause and think about how to proceed – that realisation in itself can be a very valuable lesson, even if not coupled to any moral/ethical considerations. These examples, then, demonstrate that, if these features are perceived as markers of literary value, video games can not only be narrative in nature, but can even be said to have literary qualities.

# Conclusions

In the course of this paper, several ways in which video games are similar to literature have been discussed. Drawing inspiration from literature from very early in the development in the medium, video games have been shown to be a largely narrative medium, not only depending on storytelling for aesthetic reasons, but because narration is a very central element of the way in which many games are structured: the stories are tightly intertwined with the gameplay, giving purpose to the in-game acts a player performs and structuring the experience. As such, the player will generally be immersed in a narrative experience much longer than that of the average film, and often even spend a longer time playing through a video game storyline than he or she would spend reading a literary text. Additionally, the examples of *Metro: 2033* and *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* illustrated that the narrative experience of a video game can meet most standards of literariness: not only do these games have a narrative, but they actively stimulate players to broaden their horizons and make ethical decisions. They can cause existing preconceptions to be reanalysed, by triggering existing knowledge and experiences to interpret the game world, thus potentially altering one’s perspective on the world, and they can urge players to take up positions regarding questions of ethics and worldview. They can even get people thinking about concerns society is facing or likely to start facing in the not-too-distant future, thus contributing to public debate and intellectual development. It is clear, then, that video games can definitely be literary texts, even if they are not (yet) generally recognised as such.

However, it seems very arbitrary to exclude the possibility of video games having literary merits on the grounds that they are not books, especially considering that the traditional paper book is undergoing highly turbulent times. While I am clearly not arguing for video games to be reclassified as books, because they clearly are not, I am suggesting that it might be time for literary studies to recognise that some of the traditional boundaries are becoming very blurry. And this does not only apply to literary studies: it applies just as well to the narrative aspects of film studies, and to any other field that faces these issues. I think that, rather than maintaining artificial boundaries in the face of cross-media productions and franchises, even texts involving multiple media within one texts, it is time to approach narrative texts (and I use a very broad definition of texts here) as one field of study. Literary theory is still very valuable, but there is no particular reason to restrict the application of that theory solely to the printed word: there may be some minor bugs and errors when first applying literary theory outside of its traditional domain, but, as this paper has demonstrated, there are no inherent compatibility issues.

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1. See <<http://www.howlongtobeat.com/stats.php>> for statistics on average playtimes for most popular games. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. An infographic from the gift company Personal Creations estimates the average reading time for a novel at anywhere between 5 and 20 hours, by “multiplying word count by the average person’s reading speed”, with Tolstoy’s War and Peace peaking at 32,63 hours: <<http://www.personalcreations.com/blog/how-long-does-it-take-to-read-popular-books>>. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)