

# The Narrative Capabilities of Gaming: A New Chapter in Fiction

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If you were to share with someone in the 1800s what is possible in video games, you would be burned at the stake. Nevertheless, here we are. Game developers use techniques from all prior media types to create various virtual experiences. Film, music, writing, and acting are all part of modern video game production. Each of these has multiple roles necessary to complete a project. That is a massive amount of source data to comb through! Let us specify. In what way are video games the next frontier in delivering a unique and engaging narrative to the consumer? Video games can possess the best aspects of all multimedia precursors in an interactive virtual setting when adequately utilized. The innovation in video game technology is unprecedented in any other modern media type due to the combination of interactivity and written story narrative. While the plot might not always be why someone purchases a game, the active input of a gamer's control opens the possibility for a storytelling experience unlike any media type that has come before it. A concept vital to understand gaming as it exists today is that of "transmedia storytelling" (Schiller 97), which Henry Jenkins describes as:

A process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience. Ideally, each medium makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story. (qtd. in Schiller 97)

This concept was around for thousands of years before the existence of the modern entertainment industry. Ancient Greeks told stories of Gods, which became plays, literature, and eventually movies. Batman originated in comics, appearing later in television shows, movies, and fanfiction. These fictional universes became part of a greater collective. People of different artistic skills and niched mediums contributed to an imaginary world that grew in complexity as more people contributed. Humans, by nature, are social creatures, and when someone finds a captivating story, they are likely to share their discovered world with others, which leads to a growing fanbase. While others may be interested in creating fanfiction additives to their beloved virtual worlds, one scene written into source material can lead to authenticating others' work. Consider the example of

Netflix's *Daredevil*; this fictional character is Matt Murdoch, played by actor Charlie Cox. The Netflix series was not canon to Marvel at its release. As this series gained popularity, it only took one scene of Cox in *Spiderman: No Way Home* (00:07:48-00:08:49) to make the show *Daredevil* canon in the Marvel Universe. Video games can provide a similar effect to existing media, novels, films, or otherwise—they can expand and recontextualize aspects of the fictional world to bring fans together in mutual appreciation.

The ability of games to create a riveting story narrative has even led to video games often creating more buzz than movies that came out simultaneously, such as No Film School awarding the video game *The Last of Us Pt. II* the 2016 Trailer of the Year Award (Fusco). This trailer outranked others for box office hits such as *Suicide Squad*, *Logan*, *Dunkirk*, *Get Out*, and *Thor 3: Ragnarök*—however, *The Last of Us Pt. II* was the focus of fan controversy due to the narrative leading to the gruesome death of the original game's beloved main character, Joel. Grieving gamers then had to play as the character that killed him. Imagine Games Network (IGN), a video game review website, has over 91 thousand dislikes on a video calling the game a perfect ten out of ten (“The Top 10 Most Disliked IGN Reviews of All Time!” 19:43-19:57). Most of the hate is directed at IGN for calling the story a “stunning, nuanced exploration of the strength and fragility of the human spirit. The PlayStation 4 has one of its finest exclusives and one of the generation’s best games” (IGN qtd. in “The Top 10 Most Disliked IGN Reviews of All Time!” 20:56-21:11). Knowing full well that fans would be upset, the developers of this game, Naughty Dog, made an unforgettable narrative decision to delineate the story as a tragedy. This bold choice was at the expense of players who had become attached to Joel as the leading protagonist.

Today's technology powering video games is leaps and bounds ahead of what was possible even twenty years ago, evolving from the minimalistic days of PONG to using a virtual reality headset to physically play as an avatar in game. Today, game developers consider composition, lighting, dialogue, camera angles, sound design, and many other artistic disciplines, which are all heavily influenced by film development over the last century. Many modern games use Performance Capture, which effectively records an actor's movement, audio, and interaction with a Motion Capture studio in real time. Often in the presence of other actors to replicate the dynamics of a natural scene. This has proven to be a vast improvement from the days of clunky-sounding game dialogue caused by a voice actor reading off a script in a sound studio. 2018's *God of War* is a notable example of Performance Capture that was utilized in a way that integrates the best

aspects of live-action and gaming technology ("The First 9 Minutes of *God of War*"). Different film and acting techniques are included, made possible by the current technology. The performance is physical as well as verbal. Indeed, writing about them does not hold up to the experience of watching or playing the game. A particular scene involves the player using their gaming inputs as Kratos carrying the last log to his late wife's funeral pyre, accompanied by his grieving son.

There is one major difference between gaming and other media types. While imagination may lead to involvement in a passive viewership role in different media types, it is not as easy to assume an active role as it is in the input in video games, which can be as simple as pressing X to jump. Gaming is a highly received medium amongst its fans as "both a fantasy world and a means to excel at something" ("Impact of Video Games on Culture"). It is hardly a secret that video gamers were more widely known as being geeks in the past. However, the term geek has less of a negative connotation now than it used to as "[g]eeks may have become 'cooler,' but mainstream culture has also become "geekier" ("Impact of Video Games on Culture"). Look no further than *Vogue*, a modern fashion and lifestyle magazine that included a spread of "Top Ten Cinematic Nerds" (Sharp qtd in "The Impact of Video Games on Culture"). Schiller reinforces the impact of video games on culture by discussing how gaming's success is part of "a cultural shift from a spectatorial culture of 'passive' media consumption to a more active, participatory culture" (Schiller 98). There will always be a place for button masher games like *Super Smash Bros.* in the community. However, regarding narrative, the "temporal composition" (Schiller 102) of videogames continues to grow more intricate as the industry becomes more widely accessible to the public — both as consumers and as contributors to the story.

As someone who appreciates gaming, I admit to a moderate bias. The experience of a provocative film or book lingering in the mind for some time is undeniable. However, video games continue to integrate into memory with each new play-through. Gaming has the potential for the consumer to actively play out the role of any story they have perused in the past, provided that a game developer makes the vision a reality. The first time I saw a zombie in a film is gone from my memory, but the first time I saw a Necromorph in *Dead Space* still haunts me upon mention. Having to turn and run away from one of these grotesque abominations after it kills a crewmate on the spaceship USG Ishimura... chased down the hall, with no time to look back and no means of protection as it roars mere steps behind. Admittedly, not every game primarily focuses on narrative development, but then a game comes along like *God of War*. Diving into the story with

minimal expectations, I found myself craving the next chunk of time possible to digest the virtual representation of the nine worlds of Norse mythology. The way it integrated the lore of ancient written mythos, the acting of a play, the cinematography of film, sound design, choreography, stunt coordination, composition, and much more. All of which created an interactive title, leading to a truly captivating story.

In short, gaming is the next frontier in the development of transmedia storytelling, harnessing new-age technology and the attention of engaged gamers. The ways game developers cater to fans is leading to a phase of “collective authorship” (Bernardo qtd. in Schiller 98) in the medium. Ever-changing technological discoveries will also continue to build reasons for non-gamers to check out what the hubbub is about. It is exciting to see how the gaming industry’s brightest and best contributors can develop from here as technology continues to improve over time. Only time will tell how the storytelling process evolves in the ever-growing gaming industry.

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