

(CAMF6005)

GENRE CASE STUDY

Assessment 2 – Essay

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Assignment Question.

- *Conduct a case study, considering the ways in which film and television genres are making the transition to new media such as the videogames, based upon the critical analysis of at least ONE module text.*

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References.

- *Film / TV / Game Sources*
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THE GOLDEN AGE OF GAMING:

With a helping hand from Genre.

At this very moment in time, narrative within video games has reached an exciting milestone. It's a milestone that demonstrates just how seriously video games are being taken as a form of commercial storytelling, and as a result it seems inevitable, that one day gaming will rival even the most popular of mediums such as Film and TV. This essay will breakdown and analyse where narrative in video games began, where it could be heading, and how genre has helped pushed the narrative of games to the point of competing with other modern mediums. Firstly though, it would be relevant to explore the development of narrative in video games, in order to give context about the position they're in today in comparison to Film and TV.

A quote from an article by video game website Ceros gives us a relevant starting point when looking at what initially drove narrative into video games. "In a darkened cinema, an audience is captivated and transported to a world of sight and sounds. With simple game mechanics, a player guides a character through an on-screen narrative" (Ceros, 2017). The key components of the quote here are 'player', 'character' and 'narrative', as these three points act as the driving force of emotionally and attentionally involving a player within a game's story. The player controls a character, which drives the narrative forward, which invests the player in the game, and therefore the player must control the character to keep the story going. This flow is perhaps the key difference when comparing video games to Film and TV, a difference which will be explored later on in this case study.

Modern-day video game narrative, however, isn't used in the exact same way as it used to be.

According to Burks (2013), the old point-and-click adventures of the 1990s used narrative / storytelling simply as a means to motivate the player forward throughout the gameplay. *The Secret of Monkey Island* (1990) is one such example, where a loose narrative propels the player through the games' many puzzles. There is, however, an even earlier example of a narrative being used to motivate players through a game. Nintendo's incredibly iconic arcade classic *Donkey Kong* (1981) motivated players to advance through the many difficult levels in order to "save the princess" who'd be captured by the titular character. Although there isn't really any storytelling happening, this is perhaps one of the first bare-bones example of a narrative structure being used in a video game.



Figure 1. *Broken Sword: Shadow of the Templars* (1996)



Figure 2. *Grand Theft Auto III* (2001)

It could be argued that developers, during the more primitive times of video game history, have always longed for the medium to advance enough graphically in order to be able to tell more engaging and emotional stories. According to Cobbett (2009), because of the early graphical limitations during the 1990s, developers were forced to think outside the box in regard to art-style and make a decision that pushed games in vastly different directions. Two examples of two different directions are *The Broken Sword: Shadow of the Templars* (1996) [fig.1] and *Grand Theft Auto III* (2001) [fig.2].

The *Broken Sword* series, which sees the player experience a story in a linear puzzle-solving fashion, albeit with a timeless art style, is one example of a game with a narrative that already knows how the player will engage with it. The other side of side of this coin, however, is *Grand Theft Auto III*, which although may have a pre-written narrative, it's sand-box gameplay mechanics allows for the player's imagination to seep and mash-together with what's already on offer. What you have here, are two

early examples of games in which players are either completely at the helm of someone's vision or are allowed enough freedom to use their own imaginative and explorative qualities to fill the game with a narrative of their own. There is no right or wrong answer to how narrative should be portrayed or exercised within video games, as these two examples both elicit their own unique pleasure that neither bests one or the other. The reason for briefly exploring these two particular games, is that they both represent early examples of two very different modern-day source texts that will be analysed throughout the main body of this case study. Those modern-day source texts being Rockstar's *Red Dead Redemption 2* (2018) and Telltale's *The Walking Dead* (2012-2018).

In this very moment, with today's graphical capabilities, video games and cinema are more closely connected than they ever have been before. Giordano (2015) believes that video games and cinema are "interconnected not only through their textual fabric (sharing and influencing each other in form and contents), but also in their practices and the theories that accompany them." In regard to this, there is one particular company, founded in 1998, who've seem to have made it their aim to smear the giant bold line that lies between the worlds of video games and films. This particular company, is Rockstar Games. Their latest effort, *Red Dead Redemption 2*, stands as a fine example of just how far they've come in the industry – and a look book at their extensive catalogue shows how their use of Film Genre has helped them achieve such critical and commercial success.

Focusing on their more successful efforts, Rockstar Games (formerly DMA Games) initially garnered success and controversy with their top-down title *Grand Theft Auto* (1997) [fig.3]. It used a crude mash-up of narrative and gameplay – crude due to the fact that the narrative side was created to try and fit a game that already been completed, but never-the-less proved to be a commercial success. An interview with Gary Penn, a developer for the original *Grand Theft Auto*, shows that the game originally had a cops and robbers dynamic. But the idea eventually evolved into the player taking on the role of several criminals, with Penn citing that "nobody wants to be the cop, it's more fun to be bad" (Donovan, 2011). It may be a small footnote, but this decision stands as an early example of a

film genre marking its influence on a video game - mostly likely due to the general audiences glamorised view of gangsters from films such as *Goodfellas* (1990).



Figure 3. *Grand Theft Auto* (1997)



Figure 4. *L.A. Noire* (2011)

Film genres continued to influence Rockstar's growing catalogue of games, with one example taking on one of the most recognisable genres in the history of Hollywood cinema. The Film Noir. The famous genre was pivotal in the birth of Rockstar's *L.A. Noire* (2011) [fig.4], a third-person game with an engine similar to that of *Grand Theft Auto 5* (2013) but with a dramatically different style. *L.A. Noire* wears its influences on its sleeve, beginning with an opening that harks back to Curtis Hanson's masterpiece *LA Confidential* (1997) – opening of shots that detail the city of L.A., with a voice over describing the seediness lurking around every corner. But *L.A. Noire* continued to serve its own narrative, one that fits within the conventions of the genre it pays homage to, as well as providing its own story. It could even be said, that with every instalment of the *Grand Theft Auto* franchise being cinematically influence by something different, that Rockstar's *Grand Theft Auto 5* takes extensive notes from Michael Mann's *Heat* (1995) – demonstrating that their employment of film genre to help work narrative and style into a game is still on going.

The influence of genre on video games over time is likely to have slowly changed a player's perspective on how they perceive the narrative of a video game, aligning with the way that audiences experience a Film or TV series. This isn't, of course, completely limited to Rockstar Games (a look elsewhere would require a case study much larger than what could be afforded here) but it's important to note that their ability to link film genres with their video games allows them to appeal to an audience's desire for storytelling on a much wider scale. The mass-appeal is evident in their incredibly

successful sale figures, with *Grand Theft Auto 5* reportedly made on large budget of \$265 million yet grossing over \$6 billion in sales to date – almost three times the amount of the higher grossing movie ever made. This conveniently brings us to *Red Dead Redemption 2*, a game which has already grossed over \$725 million in its first three days (Sarkar, 2018), continuing Rockstar’s never-ending run of commercially successful games. But although it stands as a commercial success, it would more relevant to explore how it stands at the fore-front of what video games have to offer as a storytelling medium.



Figure 5. Arthur Morgan – *Red Dead Redemption 2* (2018)



Figure 6. *Unforgiven* (1992)

Red Dead Redemption 2, the prequel to *Red Dead Redemption* (2010), follows a gang of outlaws on the run from the law, and the inevitability of a changing world that’s forcing their kind to become a mythical relic of the past. The player takes the role of Arthur Morgan [fig.5], one of several members of the Van de Linde gang, as they explore and survive in the incredibly detailed landscape of the wild-west. It could be said that the game has two stories. The one created for you to experience by the developers, and the one you create for yourself in the open world.

What’s obvious here, are the many influences the cinematic Western genre has had on the narrative of *Red Dead Redemption 2*. It would seem fitting, given how spaghetti-western completely reinvigorated the genre, that *Red Dead Redemption 2* would simply full its game with the style and story of any and all Sergio Leone films. However, this doesn’t seem to be the case. As Tallerico (2018) points out, there’s little here that’s tonally or stylistically referential to Leone’s films. A more fitting comparison would be that of *Unforgiven* (1992) [fig.6]. It’s revisionist tale about the mythical elements of the

Western becoming a thing of the past narratively resonates with Arthur Morgan's story throughout much of the game. But the influences don't stop there.

Stylistically, as Tallerico (2018) puts it, *Red Dead Redemption 2* "owes a great deal to *Deadwood* (2004-2006) with its emphasis on a lawless landscape and muddy, brutal style". He continues that the structure also mimics that of a TV series than a film, mostly due to the way in which the player consumes the story and gameplay. "Like an episodic TV series, you drop in for an hour, push the plot forward with a mission of two, learn a little more about the supporting characters, and bounce out again". The length of *Red Dead Redemption* as a whole means the player is forced to lean into this mindset, but given the rise of TV shows recently, it is something that audiences should take to without much problem.



Figure 7. *The Assassination of Jesse James* (2007)



Figure 8. *Red Dead Redemption 2* (2018)

Whilst these are the main influences, there is another worth mentioning. One particular mission in the game is an excellent homage to a scene from Andrew Dominik's epic western *The Assassination of Jesse James* (2007). The train robbery scene [fig.7], expertly shot by cinematographer Roger Deakins, is fully realized here [fig.8]. But what makes this homage interesting, is that is simultaneously highlights one of the benefits of video games in comparison to Film. The glamorization of an infamous outlaw such as Jesse James means that by placing this scene into the game, the player is able to fully realise the fantasy of becoming an outlaw. They're able to link their excitement with watching a film like *The Assassination of Jesse James* with the unique experience of being in control of such a moment. It's a completely different type of immersion, and one that deserves to be heard and felt by the masses.

It's a purposeful amendment on Rockstar's part, but Arthur Morgan is a very different protagonist to the previous iteration. John Marston [fig.9] was at the centre of *Red Dead Redemption's* story narrative, and his quest to complete his given mission in order to return to his wife and son was the player's main motivation for completing the game. It's a simpler and more emotional connection – this ability to empathise with John Marston's character made the game's back-stabbing finale a more shocking affair. This core mission that pushes Marston through every gun-fight and interaction he experiences, isn't present in *Red Dead Redemption 2*. This isn't to say that Arthur Morgan is a poorly designed character by any means. Gwaltney (2018) even argues that “Morgan's personality is slowly drawn out from the gruff façade he presents”, and that by the end of the game, his growth makes him a stronger character than Marston.



Figure 9. John Marston – Red Dead Redemption (2010)



Figure 10. Shaving – Red Dead Redemption 2 (2018)

This intentional withdrawal of an over-arching mission such as this, is possibly to make part of his personality a void with which the player can fill their own. The addition of new gameplay elements that Rockstar has introduced also aligns with this theory. The customizable character options, such as the ability to shave [fig.10], or gain / lose weight based what you eat, allows the player to manipulate his appearance to their desire. This manipulation, however, can start to cause a valley that separates the players experience from the creator's intentional experience. But it isn't just aesthetics. Klepek (2018) states that Arthur Morgan's wavering moral compass has created a gulf between the storytelling driven by the narrative and the one that players create through their own actions. This is, however, a side-effect of an open-world sandbox game, especially one with a narrative as deep as this. It's a side-effect that also adds to the boldness of the line that separates the mediums of Film / TV and video games. Some people may not see this as a problem, and rather, only appears as a problem

because of how the narratives in video games are often compared within the same specifications that one would use to critique that of a film. Thabet (2015) believes that “narration in games defies the conventional understanding of how stories are communicated, because the story is told by both the player and the game system”.

In regard to the previous quote, Thabet is correct in describing how “narration in games defies the conventional understanding”. There key similarity in books and film is that the reader / viewer is a permanent bystander to the story who’s unable to affect the outcome. Bishop (2013) explains that when you introduce the concept of interactivity, you fundamentally change the entire experience. One such developer, who sadly shut down their studios recently (Kuchera, 2018), revelled in a game design that proved to be a successfully popular formula. ‘Telltale Games’ initially developed titles that used a unique episodic formula, similar to that of a TV series, who’s gameplay harked back to the point-and-click adventure games of the 1990s, albeit a serious modern update. They also used officially licensed cinema franchises as the base for their games, such as *Jurassic Park* and *Back to the Future* (Williams, 2018), a trend they’ve continued throughout their catalogues of games. Their games relied on a small amount of interactivity from the player, with most of their efforts being channelled into making difficult decisions that affect how the story continues to unfold. It wasn’t until their most successful release, *The Walking Dead*, that Telltale Games completely hit their stride.

Fans and critics loved Telltale's version of *The Walking Dead*. It captured the dire tone and relentless despair of the comics and television series, but the player had the ability to make all the choices. *The Walking Dead* also nailed the characters, offering up memorable first appearances for Lee, Kenny, and Clementine, who would go on to become a focus for the series as a whole. The first season successfully sold the illusion of a branching storyline where your decisions really mattered. (Williams, 2018).

The Walking Dead doesn’t rely on state of the art graphics in order to faithfully tell its story, but rather, structures the narrative to engage players in a way that they haven’t engaged before. If anything, their lack of graphical fidelity is a testament to their writing. Telltale Games gives their players the choice to make decisions [fig.11] based on what they believe is the right path for the

character, but then forces the player to witness the repercussions of their decisions, eliciting unique feelings of tension and guilt. Robin Burks of Tech Times agrees about the emotional connections that players form with the characters; “many have experienced serious emotions while playing those, including fear, excitement and sadness. It’s those emotions that drive the story forward, making players want to continue playing to see what happens” (Burks, 2013).



Figure 11. Choices - *The Walking Dead* (2012-2018)



Figure 12. *The Wolf Among Us* (2013)

Another release by Telltale worth mentioning is their adaptation of Bill Willingham’s comic book series *Fables*, titled *The Wolf Among Us* (2013) [fig.12]. Although it may not carry the emotional heft that *The Walking Dead* does, *The Wolf Among Us* succeeds by giving players a beautifully unique neo-noir mystery story. It’s one that would seem incredibly difficult to see adapted to live-action, given the combination of fairy-tale characters with a brutally dark, seedy tone. But never-the-less, *The Wolf Among Us* garnered critical acclaim and a large cult following (Turner, 2015), demonstrating that games provide a platform to tell stories that otherwise may not have been possible through other popular mediums.

Giordano (2015) says that “cinema and video games have clearly developed a relationship that is as prolific in their practice and production as it is complex and problematic in its theorisation”. Such as theorisation has led to the development of several different interpretations of narrative in video games. For me, Telltale struck a niche that, although wasn’t clear at first, eventually convinced me that the closest meld of enjoying and experiencing video games in the same mindset as TV and Film has been through their games. Also, worth noting is the latest entry in Charlie Brooker’s *Black Mirror* TV

series, *Bandersnatch* (2018). Almost ground-breaking in its concept, *Bandersnatch* allowed viewers to make decisions for the main character (using a remote through Netflix) and alter the way the narrative plays out, all within a live-action story that's one of the most unique experiences with a TV show I've had in 2018. However, the actual story itself wasn't strong enough to warrant the inclusion of real-time decisions, but the concept was executed well, and will hopefully pave the way for more experiences like it.

For now, narrative in video games will always have to side with, or find a balance between, two things. Preserving the specific narrative of a developer by introducing a smaller amount of interactivity to keep the legitimacy of their vision, or allow players a greater amount of interactivity and use narrative simply as a means of pulling them along for the ride. Perhaps video games will always have this split, or maybe one can hope, that the ever-increasing graphical capabilities of games will make this dilemma a thing of the past. Camayak (2014) agrees, stating that "advance technology and graphics brings more to the gamers experience". The question of whether Film / TV narratives will fully make their way into video games is a question that seems to be taken more and more seriously, but it seems to be in perfect coalition with the increasing power of graphics. But is there such a need to combine these two mediums? As Proto (2016) puts it, "there is one thing we tend to overlook when it comes to these digital distractions: the mediums unique contributions to the art of storytelling".

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