

VIDEO GAMES AND LITERATURE: BEYOND STEREOTYPES

ABSTRACTS (in order of presentation)

Angie SPOTO

Not Geek Enough: Crafting a Ludic Novel for the Non-Credentialed Nerd

I aim to subvert the notion of who a geek is by writing a ludic novel, a story that takes place inside a virtual game world. While ludic novels, like Ernest Cline's *Ready Player One* have reinforced the identity of geeks as straight white males, I use the form to draw on a different geek cannon.

- I. The 'ludic novel'
 - a. Defined by Megan Amber Condis
- II. The hoard of 'geek capital'
 - a. Who rules geekdom and why
- III. Performativity and identity – avatars matter
 - a. Being picky about POV
- IV. Defining a new geek cannon
 - a. Fairy tales, queer and femme

Stevie HARVIE

The Video Game Avant-Garde?

My paper considers whether there exists an avant-garde for video games in the same way that there is for literature. Literary modernism created a landscape for experimental, unorthodox literature and art which invented and twisted radical techniques such as stream-of-consciousness, collage, automatism, free verse and many others. Experimental approaches have continued throughout the 20th century and into the 21st. My contention is that we can now talk about a similar series of movements we could reasonably call a video game avant-garde. The rise of independent game development has encouraged new creative paths which forgo traditional and conventional design goals, not unlike the literary modernism which preceded the medium.

Alison BOWN

Playable text in sonic worlds: how language and sound can be combined to make bookish games

This talk will provide an overview of the considerations and decisions made when writing a born-digital sequel to an original novel. The talk will examine which elements of the story were extended into the digital text, and how it was decided which elements were to be played and which were to be read. The term bookish game has been coined to describe the piece as it contains no graphic elements aside from the typographic design of the UI-based page. Its game-like properties lay in its use of a 3D audio engine and the designing of writing that has inherent ludic qualities. The changing role of the writer, specifically the need to morph into a designer with the coding skill to create texts that interface with game engines, will also be explored. As the writer of this piece is also a sound designer with experience in AAA games, the talk will cover how game engines afford opportunities to combine literary writing with simulated sonic environments. Finally, I will look at how placing kinetic, interactive text inside a 3D soundscape affects the writing line by line.

This talk is aimed both at writers interested in the approach taken and those interested to know how sound can work with language.

Cailean McBRIDE

A FUNDAMENTAL tool in the writer's toolbox is point of view, and one which often causes them the most agony. It's the fundamental entry point to drama and conflict, and the primary means for advancing narrative. I would like to discuss, as a fiction writer, how games, particularly FPSs (first-person shooters) and RPGs (role-playing games), challenge traditional concepts of narrative focalisation. Beginning with a discussion of recent work by Nitsche, Calleja and Arjoranta, building upon the theories of Genette and Bal, I will discuss the ways in which they believe traditional concepts of focalisation can be applied to videogames and the ways in which they consider them lacking, before echoing the call of these theorists for a modern iteration of narrative focalisation designed solely for engagement with this exciting new artform.

Robert GALLAGHER

Interactive Friction: Narrative Games and the Age of Information

In his 2003 study of 'the computer game as a fictional form' Barry Atkins laments that while videogames seem to promise a 'truly radical break with the ways in which we have previously told ourselves our stories', in practice they tend to 'remain fixed in narrative traditions' dating back to 'nineteenth-century realism'. While scores of games have explored more innovative approaches to interactive storytelling since 2003, many developers remain intent on integrating traditional narrative structures and strategies into their technologically state-of-the-art games.

The results are often awkward, resulting in what designer Clint Hocking has influentially dubbed 'ludonarrative dissonance'. But if such 'dissonance' tends to be understood as a consequence of sloppy design, we can also read it another way, as a symptom of what scholars like Scott Lash see as a historical shift away from stories and towards statistics and simulations. Caught between these different forms of 'cultural inscription', contemporary culture holds on to conceptions of time, identity and society inherited from the realist novel even as it embraces digital networks and big data. As (often uneven) blends of traditional storytelling and ludic simulation, videogames are uniquely equipped to address the ensuing friction. Reading a range of recent games about surveillance, research and investigation through the lens of D.A. Miller's account of Victorian literature in *The Novel and the Police*, this presentation shows how thinking about literature and games in tandem can illuminate what's at stake in the shift from narrative to information.

James BUTLER & Rebecca HUTCHEON

Narrative Education Exploration Systems (NEES): Engaging pupils through creative gaming literary adaptations

This paper will discuss the work undertaken by **Creating a Chronotopic Ground for the Mapping of Literary Texts** research project on the use of videogames to supplement secondary literary education curricula on the poetics of place, environmental design, and literary mapping.

A pilot study (The Lakescraft Project) utilised two focal lessons built around the primary gameplay mechanics of Minecraft (exploration and construction) were adapted to teach about the environmental narrative techniques used by Arthur Ransome in his version of the Lake District found in *Swallows & Amazons*. The main project builds on this framework to teach similar extra-narrative environmental analysis using *Lord of the Flies*, *Treasure Island*, and *Gormenghast*.

The software provides an ideal creative toolset for exploring all manner of subjects and is finding a growing academic audience (as evidenced with the recent *Minecraft.Edu* release), but prior to our work very little had been done with the humanities. Our lesson plans and videos feature introductions to name studies, literary forms, mapping of fictional environments, poetic stylisations, tourism politics, and UI design considerations pertaining to mapping (another key gaming factor). The project feedback highlights some clear directions useful for the field of interactive educational resource design as a whole that shall be examined in this paper.

Videogame resources offer a uniquely interactive medium for informing pupils about wider interpretative considerations. We will discuss how the creative adaptation of material to explore literary narratives – very much from new perspectives – is key to establishing their relevance in the modern classroom.

Mona BOZDOG & Dayna GALLOWAY

Worlds at our fingertips. Navigating the multiple readings of walking simulators

This paper engages with walking as a form of reading a game (in terms of both spatial progression or traversal, as well as unlocking potential layers of meaning), and reflects on the design of five walking simulators to analyse the style of ‘writing’ in these game spaces. Since the launch of *Dear Esther* (The Chinese Room, 2012) multiple titles have emerged that reclaim the derisive genre-name coined by a frustrated player community. This frustration was in response to an alternative style of gameplay that eschews complex challenge, objectives and goal-oriented systems. In walking simulators, you ‘just’ walk. But walking is “a mode of inquiry, a politics and an aesthetic practice” (Bassett, 2014, p399) that engages the walker in critical acts of reading, challenging and/or performing a landscape. The player becomes a wayfarer (Ingold, 2016) in the virtual world.

In order to understand the language and design of walking simulators we read closely some notable examples of the genre, each with unique vocabulary and style of ‘writing’: *Dear Esther*, *Everybody’s Gone to the Rapture* (The Chinese Room, 2015), *What Remains of Edith Finch* (Giant Sparrow, 2017), *Tacoma* (Fullbright, 2017) and *Proteus* (Key and Kanaga, Curve Digital, 2013). We argue that the walking simulator genre is an ideal medium for experimentation with literary and interactive forms because of its accessible design and its creative engagement with walking as an aesthetic practice. They invite diverse readers by lowering the barrier to entry, while the ambiguity embraced in their design (Muscat, 2016), lacunary narratives, environmental storytelling and evocative settings (Jenkins, 2004; Smith and Worch, 2010) makes them an ideal playground for storytelling in which stories are weaved in innovative and playful ways.

Claudia ROSSIGNOLI

Playing with God: Dante’s Otherworlds in the Digital Age

In the seven centuries of its continuous and successful circulation, Dante’s *Comedy* has been one the most productive examples of the adaptive and transmedial potential of literary works. The complexity of its intellectual background, the timeless relevance of its fundamental moral questions, the cosmic dimension of its imaginative power, and the outrageous intensity of its realism, all hold unparalleled promise for any kind of adaptation, translation, transference or transmediation.

The *Comedy*, and especially its first infernal *cantica*, get periodically reinvented and transferred into continuously innovating communicative media (such as music and the visual arts), using narrative strategies and creative outlets that are increasingly technology-driven. In

an age of rampant medievalism, a gaming adaptation of the poem was therefore only a matter of time, even if the release of *Dante's Inferno* by EA in 2010 was depicted in mainstream media as an extraordinary and pioneering novelty.

This paper will explore existing gaming adaptations of Dante's *Comedy*, including *Dante's Inferno*, leaving aside the partially irrelevant (and often disappointingly patronising) issue of accuracy to focus instead on the one hand on textual aspects that are mostly exploited to achieve innovation and commercial success; on the other on the narrative, psychological, imaginative and visual potential offered by the text and often marginalised, side-lined and overlooked by developers. The paper will discuss in particular the ways in which stereotyping annihilates the *Comedy's* inherently disruptive, provocative and radical energy, proposing two possible creative approaches that would allow for a gaming experience that could maintain the authenticity, intensity and relevance of the 'original'.

Espen AARSETH

Novel Experiences: Massive Singleplayer Games as a Literary Genre

Computer and Video Games is an extremely varied field, offering experiences ranging from (e)sport to gambling, via simple brain teasers and simulators to virtual social worlds with millions of concurrent participants. Can they also be said to offer literary experiences, in the narrow, original sense of Literary texts? This paper will answer in the positive, and go further by proposing the massively singleplayer role playing game genre (also known as open-world RPGs) as a novel kind of novel, a ludic continuation of the genre which relies on verbal, written communication for aesthetic effect.

"Game" series such as *Mass Effect*, *Dragon Age*, and *Fallout* all contain massive amounts of text, typically more than twice the amount of, say, Shakespeare's collected works, in a single game. Infused with long, branching narratives and intriguing, complex characters that the reader/player can explore for hours (or simply choose to ignore), these works can be dismissed as trivial soap operas that go on almost infinitely, or we can recognize (some of) them as a new kind of literary masterpiece. These massive games are not so much a narrative or even meta-narrative as – literally – a literary world; a spatially structured literary work and perhaps the closest thing yet to Borges' famous novel/labyrinth/garden of forking paths, since it leads the reader-as-player to experience the same events in different configurations; each playthrough a potentially unique version.

This paper will argue that gameworlds such as *Fallout: New Vegas* (2010) can fruitfully be regarded as novels. Their detailed characters, environments, historical and intertextual references, their capacity for social commentary and for psychological depth and ambiguity, as well as their centering of the reader/player has created a Literary form that both shares and explodes the structures of the novel, like this anti-tradition has seen many times before.

Ted BERGMAN & Mark CHEN

Gameplay, *Don Quixote*, and the Active Deconstruction of Literary Genres

This paper explores the idea of comparing tropes from modern video game genres with those from early-modern literature through their use of similar tropes. Pastoral romance is a common Renaissance literary genre that relies heavily on particular concepts of love, and in which the reader vicariously participates in the emotional life of the narrative voice. In equal measure, there is a genre of video game called "dating simulator", although it allows one to

participate more actively than merely reading, since a player can choose different paths leading to success or failure in a relationship. Miguel de Cervantes wrote pastoral romance during the early-modern period, but he also deconstructed the genre in his famously literarily self-conscious masterpiece *Don Quixote*. In that work, narratives and characters' speech are specifically designed to interrogate pastoral tropes that readers had previously taken for granted. In the world of modern video games, designers have taken similar steps by writing dating simulators whose setting, characterisation, and plots deconstruct the genre's tropes. In both cases, the stereotyped young male perspective on finding love is twisted, reversed, or taken apart in a form of parody and literary satire that bring the potentially unexamined tropes into sharp relief. The last part of this talks looks at how lessons learned from both *Don Quixote* and genre-bending "dating sims" can be used to produce a video game based in the world of pastoral romance and designed to give players the opportunity to simultaneously question the way literature and video games perpetuate a point of view that distorts human relations.

Alicia COPELAND

Creating Worlds with Words: Exploring the Language of Digital Games using a Corpus-Driven Approach

This research investigates the linguistic style of fantasy roleplaying games using linguistic analysis techniques, as applied to a specialized corpus created from the language used in Bioware's 2009 game, *Dragon Age: Origins*. From an academic standpoint, this research furthers interdisciplinary literary and linguistic work within video game studies. More specifically, the unique language of fantasy roleplaying games is analysed in relation to semantic prosody, keyness, and readability measures. In this way, the language (notably barks, codices, cut-scene transcripts, and dialogue trees) of a fantasy roleplaying game will be compared against standard language and other examples of literary language. From an industry standpoint, this research sheds light on the importance of language in world-creation and how games are similar and dissimilar to traditional forms of literary text.

Jacob Wayne RUNNER

'My guise doth not incur thy trust': Archaic Language as an Element of Game Localisation

In Woolsey's original English translation of the critically acclaimed *Chrono Trigger*, a character originating from the equivalent of the European Middle Ages was presented speaking in admittedly flawed and inconsistent 'Shakespearean' English. When rereleased, however, much of the game's fan base was alarmed and even outraged to discover that the dialogue had been retranslated into contemporary English which was more in keeping with the standard Modern Japanese of the original script. Utilising this game as an individual case study, this paper will present and assess larger questions which surround historical and literary language's place within game translation and localisation.

Sally BUSHELL

The Chronotopic Ground Project and LITCRAFT

My paper will provide a brief overview of the core structure and aims of our AHRC funded project (see below) which seeks to use the digital medium to advance understanding and interpretation of literature in new ways through mapping and visualization. Conceptually the project solves the fundamental problem of how to generate a base map for texts with no real world correspondence by generating the map using corpus linguistics. We aim to create the ground from within the literary work itself in a way that is intrinsically linked to text, genre and author.

The second half of the paper will focus on a spin-off from the main project: LITCRAFT which uses Minecraft to re-engage children with literary classics. The paper will describe the resources and virtual world that has been created for Michael Morpugo's *Kenzuke's Kingdom* and the way it is intended to aid reluctant readers in reconnecting with reading.

Kieran WILSON

Inaccurate Guides and Spurious Parables: The Unreliable Narrator in the Games of Davey Wreden

Unusual among video games, *The Stanley Parable* (2013) and *The Beginner's Guide* (2015) contain narrators as a core element. Throughout these games, Wreden – writer on both – explores the idea of the unreliable narrator from two different perspectives. This presentation will examine the diegetic position of these narrators, what makes them unreliable, and how these texts relate to the history of unreliable narration in literary studies. This presentation aims to demonstrate that video games are a continuation and development of established literary tropes and forms; adding additional layers of complexity due to the nature of viewpoint and interactivity in the medium.

Emma REAY

Rethinking the Relationship between 'the Child' and 'the Videogame': Appraising the Poetic Power of Children's Videogames

To date, most studies of videogames by children's literature scholars have been 'child-oriented' rather than 'text-oriented', focusing on the needs and capabilities of child-players rather than on the literary and artistic potential of the games themselves. This talk proposes that in-depth textual analyses of children's videogames will not only illuminate the aesthetic potential of specific texts, but will also refashion and redirect scholarly debate about the medium itself. I argue that the threshold between children's literature scholarship and games scholarship might be a particularly strong strategic location from which to challenge hegemonic theories of literature and art, and suggest that the two fields are, in fact, natural allies. I conclude by making some tentative suggestions as to what might constitute a 'children's videogame' and outlining potential directions that this interdisciplinary venture might explore.

Jaime HARRISON

"The li'l goombas of the web, need to be stomped back to where they came from": Virtual Worlds and Video Game Intertextuality in Thomas Pynchon's *Bleeding Edge*

Published in September 2013, Thomas Pynchon's *Bleeding Edge* resonates with debates on technology and privacy which were brought to the forefront of public consciousness three months earlier by Edward Snowden. Central to Pynchon's participation in these debates is the fictional video game *DeepArcher*, an online world built on ideals of privacy and individuality. My paper considers how Pynchon presents a cultural snapshot to which games are an integral influence. This snapshot is bolstered by intertextual links to video game sources, which my paper seeks to unpack to present games as a source of cultural depth equal to more traditional texts.

Darshana JAYEMANNE

Chronotypology: A Comparative Approach to Videogame Narrative

This paper outlines the concept of 'chronotypology' as a method for rigorously defining narrative in performative media such as videogames. The approach extends Agamben's re-visiting of Lévi-Strauss' analysis of the experience of the sacred as a 'synchronic' experience: drawing temporal frames together (ie. An ritual in which an initiate is vested with the spirit of an ancestor). In his critique, Agamben develops the converse temporal schema: diachrony.

The paradigmatic example is play.

Play is liable to preserve a set of formal rules ('a topsy-turvy image of the sacred'). However, because it does not present a story or myth that connects with a meaningful history or tradition, it inscribes difference within repetition, resulting in a strong diachronic experience. For Agamben this is the import of 'Playland' in Collodi's *Pinocchio*, where there is only the bedlam of an eternal holiday: play involves the 'paralysis and destruction of the calendar' (68). Where the sacred turns events into structure, play turns structures into events.

It just so happens that computers make these transactions very labile.

Chronotypology draws on the concepts of diachrony and synchrony to provide a comparative method for analysing the complex temporalities of performative texts, with a focus on digital games. Diachrony arises when game performances are distinguished, becoming more distal. Synchrony arises when they concentrate, becoming proximal. In this light, narrative in games can be defined efficiently as *a structure which synchronizes all performances of a given game*. Engaging with both nonlinear literary texts (Perec, Oulipo) and videogames (*Life is Strange*), this paper will demonstrate the use of chronotypology in facilitating the application of literary theories and methodologies to performative texts such as videogames.

Nia WEARN & Esther MACCALLUM STEWART

"Case 88: Once Upon a Crime" Defining Hidden Object Games as Literary Narratives.

Hidden Object games are an element of casual gaming that has been consistently overlooked. A core reason for this appears to be their placement outside of gaming cultures, with narratives and ludic structures that identify more closely with key trash fiction genres, most notably crime, mystery and romance fiction.

This paper unpacks this idea by examining the literary construction of Hidden Object games (HOGs). The term has previously been used as a catch-all phrase for a number of different casual game genres. A key element in defining these games comes from their emulation of narrative and literary aspects in trash fiction, an aspect which differs across platforms, game types and formats. Whilst players are traditionally seen as cis-male, heterosexual and white, persistent research via bodies like the ESA demonstrates that not only is this inaccurate, but that female, older gamers have comprised a significant, stable percentage of gamers for over a decade. Hidden Object games are specifically aimed at this group, providing a multi-billion revenue stream within the games industry, yet they are rarely analysed or afforded critical attention. This player rarely self-identifies as a gamer, and has a cultural frame of reference originating from beyond gaming, including instead media such as long haul TV series and trash fiction. Trash fiction is consistently seen as lacking creativity despite the vast amount of the publishing market it dominates. Yet critics have also consistently discussed how romance, crime and mystery media are able to provide subversive readings of contemporary culture, or reflect some of its strongest anxieties. We turn this lens to HOGs, using the game *Criminal Case* (Pretty Simple, 2012 - present) as a specific case study, with an eye to seeing how they use tropes and motifs from these genres in order to develop their own cultural readings.