

## Project Cover Sheet

*Name:* **John Pray**

*Current working title of this project:* **Writing an Interactive Experience** + yet-untitled creative work

### Coming to Terms with Your Own Work-in-Progress

My project—part creative work (video game) and part research—attempts to explore the nature of narrative in video games as it has appeared and as it has the potential to appear.

As far as strengths, I feel that I've managed to find some very good scholarly sources (considering the youth of video games as a medium) that do a good job of describing the elements of the game experience. I have tried to bring those descriptions together to paint a general picture of video games and how they work as a medium.

You will shortly see that this paper is not quite as far along as I'd prefer it to be. I have my structure and my main points down or, in some cases, at least outlined; what I really need to fill in are the examples I intend to pull from video games I'm particularly familiar with (including my own creation) and, after all of that, some conclusions. (As far as length, please keep in mind: this is only the research component of my project, which comes alongside a separate creative work; as such, the final draft will not span a full 25 pages.)

### Process Notes

When it really came down to it, what really worked best for me was to examine the research that's already been done on games to really get a concrete understanding of what the "formal" elements of the game experience are. Then I was ready to write about it all, bringing the many elements together.

### Guidance for Peer Reviewers

Please, any thoughts you have at all will be useful: what parts work well, what parts you didn't understand, what could be fleshed out more, times that I'm being repetitive, how disgusted you are at my lack of examples, and so on. The examples I'm planning to look at are games that I'm particularly familiar with, but if you can think of any that would be interesting for me to examine, please do suggest. And again, any little thought you have might be useful to me, so write it on down.

I wish I could have you all play my game and give feedback on it, too. (That'd be a lot more fun for you all, I'm sure!)

### Other Comments

Thanks for reading and for your feedback! It really is very appreciated.

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ENGL425 Senior Seminar

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Capstone Paper – **Research Element: A Rough Draft**

## Writing an Interactive Experience

### INTRODUCTION

[A brief history of video games and the cultural and technological context in which they've emerged. Some mentions of other forms of media and their age in society compared to the youthful video game.]

Like most new media, early video games have largely dealt with similar subject matter and had similar conventions to one another. Also like most media, until the last few years, there was a well-defined border between video game creators and video game consumers (players). In recent years, as people have begun to see the potential in interactive media for conveying information and experiences (stories) and as advances in technology and shifts in culture have placed media creation tools in millions more hands than ever before, both of those truths have been steadily dissolved.

Games like Heavy Rain abandon the subject matter and control conventions of many games that have come before (while maintaining enough convention for accessibility and practicality), and have been commercially and critically successful despite their deviations. Such successes encourage other creators to similarly deviate from what has already been done, to explore what can be done with video games that hasn't yet been done.

At the same time, games like *LittleBigPlanet 2* have been putting the tools necessary to create and distribute an interactive experience directly into the hands of those who previously were only or primarily consumers. Even games whose main focus isn't content creation have begun to include it as a side or central element, since consumers have responded positively to also being creators and since such elements add greatly to the lasting power and perceived value of a product. Role-playing games like *World of Warcraft* and *City of Heroes* let players customize their own in-game characters as they see fit even as the rest of the game experience follows the traditional creator-to-consumer model. Some games, like the Wii's *Super Smash Bros. Brawl* and many PC games, unintentionally allow players to customize their game experience through "hacking", and in fact this may largely be where the trend of consumer-content-creation started.

But creating a game is inarguably different from writing a book or a screenplay (or a short story, poem, stage script, or song, as the case may be). Besides the obvious technical difference in tools used, the interactive nature of games as they are being consumed makes them fundamentally different from the much more passive traditional media. This not only affects the consumer but the creator. For example, the creator must have a firm grasp of the interactive nature of their creation, of how the sequence of events could be totally different for two players who play the same game differently. A game creator must plan for these differences, must decide how wide of a range of possibilities to allow for without making the game seem too open-ended or too linear. The creator, then, must even decide what he or she (or the target audience) considers to be "too open-ended" or "too linear".

A game creator has decisions to make that an author or screenwriter would never have to make. And a game creator also doesn't have to make decisions that a creator in a passive

medium does, like how events will definitely play out, which character's point of view all consumers will experience the story from, or even what the intended message of the work is. This allows more freedom, perhaps, in the exploration of a subject or experience, but it also makes for a tight balancing act. This by nature lends video games better to some subject matter, to some methods of storytelling than do passive mediums, and worse to others.

As the video game is still a very young medium, the ways in which it has been used so far largely imitate the already-established media, especially film, with which it has many superficial similarities. But the essential elements of the game, the ones that sets it apart and gives it so much potential to branch off in different directions from what has come before, are its *interactivity* and its *variability*. Those games which embrace those unique properties above all others and build their experiences around them will be the most successful, the most effective in conveying their messages to their players.

And so it is more important now than ever to seriously examine video games as an important medium and art form, for the sake of the new creators emerging every day thanks to tools like *LittleBigPlanet* and the new audiences discovering games every day as they emerge in more and more places, from web browsers to smartphones.

This paper and the accompanying creative work (a small video game) explore the notion that a video game need not include a narrative in the traditional sense (with a plot) to effectively convey a meaningful experience. To do so, it will first make sure the reader has a full understanding of the current state of storytelling in video games, particularly the conventions which are most prominent either for their commonness or for their uniqueness.

## INTERACTIVITY: PLAYER CONTROL or CONTROL OF THE PLAYER

Unlike in other media, the consumer of a game has a measured amount of direct control over what happens in the game world. Mark J.P. Wolf (2001) describes the experience:

Rather than merely watching the actions of the main character, as we would in a film, with every outcome of events predetermined when we enter the theater, we are given a surrogate character (the player-character) through which we can participate in and alter the events in the game's diegetic world. It is still, in the end, a vicarious experience, but a more interactive one. (p. 93)

Depending on the nature of the game and on the player's whims, the player can choose to progress slowly and carefully, quickly and recklessly, or to stand still or even regress, moving "backwards", away from the goal.

The game's designer strikes a delicate balance between the structure they provide and the freedom of control given to the player. Be too linear, and the game becomes a superficially-interactive movie. Be too open, and the player will derive no meaning, learn nothing. The message depends, like with all media, on what the creator wants to convey. But games are special because the message also depends on what the player wants to, and is able to, get from the experience. As artists and developers Auriea Harvey and Michaël Samyn (2006) put it, interactivity is "the one thing that no other medium can do better" and therefore, they say, it is the element around which the most effective games will be based.

[Examples of control and interactivity in Super Mario Bros., Resident Evil 4, Heavy Rain, Wii Sports, Super Monkey Ball, my game]

## VARIABILITY: THE “SECOND STORY”

There’s no questioning that a game can have a story. Often, games will even have plots, with pre-scripted events set by the developer to be experienced by every player (assuming the player doesn’t quit playing the game before a given event occurs). But what happens between those events, what order they happen in, and sometimes even the details of those events will be different for every player, for every play-through. James Paul Gee calls this variety in experiences the game’s “second story”:

But there is a second story. Every player of Castlevania who does everything you can do in the game will in the end have done all the same things. A player who does less will have done some subset of this. However, each player of Castlevania will have done and found things in different orders and in different ways from each other. Players will have ventured into the parts of the castle in different orders, they will have revisited them a different number of times. They will have faced the bosses at different times and will have defeated them in different ways. They will have found key items in different orders. They will have made different choices of what strategies to use and what equipment to wear and use. This is to say that each player will have enacted a different trajectory through the game. (Gee, 2006, p. 60)

Every player of the game has a different experience, and even the same player will have a different experience each time she plays the same game. This is where video games differ drastically will other forms of media and art. While there is always slight variation in an individual’s experience of a book, movie, or song, that variation always comes from outside the work itself, from the reader/viewer/listener’s past experiences or the environment she’s consuming the work in. The variation in a video game is a part of the work itself, an essential

element to its structure and, therefore, its greatest asset in establishing itself as a valuable medium alongside our established media of literature, film, and music. It brings new and valuable elements—interactivity and variation—to the table that make it worthy of being considered one of the most important achievements of human civilization—which it will when creators eventually fill-out its still-mostly-blank slates of potential.

As Kurt Squire (2006) argues, we should think of video games not as stories or static works of art like film but as *designed experiences*: [explanation of and expansion of that idea] [You're not trying to convey a specific story. You're trying to convey an experience.]

[Examples of designed experiences: Heavy Rain, Animal Crossing, Resident Evil 4, my game]

#### TRADITIONAL NARRATIVE ELEMENTS

[ ]

Plot serves a much less prominent role in video games than in other media, providing an outline of what could happen rather than a rigid map of what will. [ ]

Characters are broken down into two types: player characters and non-player characters. The player literally controls her player character, and the player character provides direct informational and emotional feedback to the player, bringing her more fully into the experience unlike in any other medium. [ ]

[Examples of player characters and non-player characters in Heavy Rain, Animal Crossing, my game]

## VISUAL AND AURAL DESIGN

Though not as essential to the experience as interactivity and variability, the visual and sound design of a game are still very important in the determining what the *designed experience* is ultimately like. Visuals and sounds indirectly and directly provide information to the player – providing direct and indirect (in-game maps) representations of the player-character’s location in the diegetic world; telling the player what’s happening now and what’s happened in the past; conveying emotions and themes through color, lighting, reverb (echo-iness), volume, character voices and sound effects; [ ]

Every decision about how things look or sound is a rhetorical one. The visual and aural elements are essential in shaping the experience. [ ]

[Examples...]

## THE WHOLE PACKAGE: Bringing the Elements Together

[Forthcoming.]

## CONCLUSIONS and THE FUTURE

[Forthcoming.]