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Multimodal, Interactive Storytelling:
Critical Reading of Video Games

I walk slowly toward the large observatory, follow-ing the glowing traces of light illuminating the stone path. Entering the building, I find myself in a dark, vast space with stars glittering where I would expect walls to be. I see a figure before a reel-to-reel tape player; she is composed of glowing particles, surrounded by ribbons of twisting light. The figure bends over the machine, presses a button, and I hear the voice of Dr. Katherine (Kate) Collins begin her final message as a bright, brilliant rectangle gradually opens in the field of stars above me. The particles and ribbons, which I now understand to be an "echo" of Kate's once-physical form, flow gently and purpose-fully into the light. When the recording ends, I am bathed in a brilliant white glow before I hear the click of the tape machine turning off and see the credits roll up the screen. I lean back and relax my hands, surprised to find that they had been clenched tightly around the controller. I am puzzled, trying to make sense of what I've just experienced, but I am also exhilarated at the opportunity I have now to finally put together the pieces of the complex narrative I have spent the last few hours immersed in.

I have just finished "playing" the game *Every-body's Gone to the Rapture* (The Chinese Room, 2015), and I am as awash in emotion and wonder as I have been so many times before when I have closed the cover of a powerful book. I know that the story I have just experienced will haunt me for days to come, and I expect to scour the Internet for discussions that inter-pret the game's ending and examine how the scattered pieces of the story spread across the game fit into a cohesive narrative.

I have played video games since the days of mall arcades and the Atari 2600. While their entertainment value has kept me interested into adulthood, my fa-vorites are those that focus on delivering a compelling story. Just as I have been attracted to the finely drawn characters and thoughtful themes explored in print, so have I been drawn to stories told through the multi-modal medium of the video game.

This experience is particularly important for me as an English teacher, someone who advocates for story and the important role it plays in our lives and who also recognizes that new media and technologies are changing the way we share stories. Video games are indisputably popular with teenagers and an important part of their culture; as we consider the ways in which new forms of media shape the landscape of stories written for young adults, we should include video games. In this article, I make the case for classroom study of video games as bridges to multimodal textual study. Video games draw on traditions of storytelling at the heart of our discipline, and in doing so, they employ multiple modes (visual, auditory, gestural) that can significantly shift the nature of stories told via this medium. I suggest that by bringing story-driven video games into our classrooms and to our adoles-cent readers, we can not only reinforce our objectives for teaching narrative, but also initiate students into meaningful discussions about how visual, auditory, and other modes work to convey meaning.

Video Games as a Storytelling Medium

The first widely available video games date to the early 1970s, with games like the now-classic *Pong* (Atari, 1972), which even in its simplicity (two rectangular, white "paddles" hitting a square "ball" across a black background), stretched the technological limitations of the time. These early games featured little in the sense of a narrative, aside from the drama that might play out between competitors engaged in the game. But the storytelling potential of these interactive games was quickly explored by companies like Infocom, who brought the genre of interactive fiction into commercial success. The resulting products, inspired by games written by programmers working on mainframe computers at institutions like MIT, allow the player to interact with virtual worlds by inputting text as they attempt to solve puzzles (see Fig. 1), with players' input meaningfully altering the state of the game world (Montfort, 2003).

Like early movies, which were basically filmed plays with a static set and limited camera work, these early works of interactive fiction borrowed much from print, relying heavily on the alphabetic medium to convey their story. As technology has advanced, however, video games have become more sophisticated. Just as Orson Welles's work demonstrated how film could leverage its unique affordances to tell stories in new ways, today's video game designers are leveraging the multimodal affordances of the medium to tell

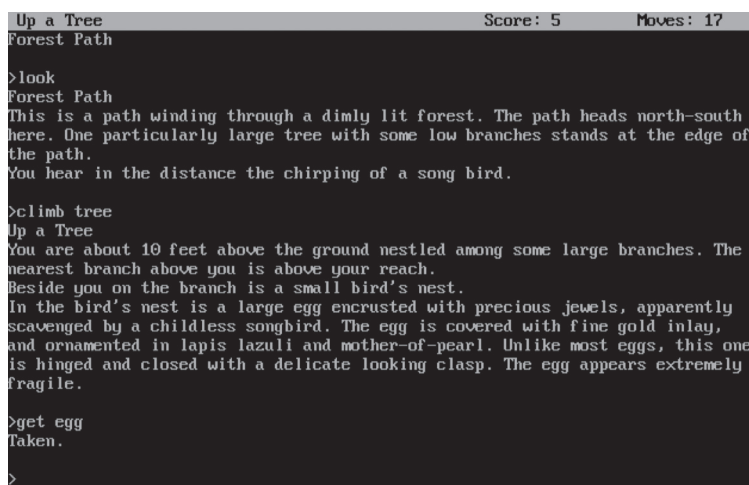**Figure 1.** Screen capture of story path influenced by the player's decisions

stories uniquely and innovatively (Murray, 1998, pp. 66–68).

As they have become more sophisticated, video games have become more popular. In a recent survey, 97% of teens report that they play video games (Lenhart et al., 2008), and consumer spending on games in 2014 topped $21 billion (Entertainment Software Association, 2015). This popularity has perhaps contributed to a perception of video games as merely popular entertainment not worthy of legitimate study in an academic setting. However, video games can more accurately be seen as part of a larger societal and cultural shift in communication from words on the page to images on the screen—a shift that has been accompanied by evolving ideas about literacy (Kress, 2003). Linguist and video game researcher James Paul Gee (2008) argues for video games as an art form, given that they connect the abstract rules systems typical of games with elements (characters, settings, actions) of stories (p. 84). Janet Murray (2004) has suggested that these digital games embody "a new kind of storytelling emerging to match the need for expressing our life" today, as we are "outgrowing" some of the restrictions of traditional storytelling modes (p. 4).

Video games have been implemented before in classrooms. Lancy and Hayes (1988) used interactive fiction games as recreational reading materials with reluctant readers, and Newman (1988) documents how students used game-creation software to write their own adventure stories. Adams (2009) utilized video games in her classroom to help enhance reading comprehension skills, and Jolley (2008) drew on interest in video-game-based books as a way to bridge to other kinds of reading. In addition, specifically designed games have been used to help teach students about social issues (Sardone & Devlin-Scherer, 2010). However, here I am arguing for something unique: using video games with their multimodal character to study traditional narrative elements and develop literacies in non-alphabetic modes.

A Theoretical Frame for Examining Video Games

Video games deserve a place in our traditional study of narratives because they provide an important opportunity to experience and interpret multimodal narrative texts. Additionally, given the unique fea-

tures of this medium, the close study of video games can encourage young readers to think more critically about narrative elements across media. The theoretical framework for this argument includes ideas about both the positioning of these games as multimodal texts and also a framework for examining the unique affordances of these games.

Video games represent multimodal texts in the sense that their designers avail themselves of multiple modes (visual, auditory, alphabetic, gestural, and spatial) in designing the game that players experience. The action of playing video games, Gee (2007) asserts, "is a multimodal literacy *par excellence*" (p. 18, emphasis in original). In his work, Gee explores how players in video games learn to navigate each game's rules and engage in problem-solving behaviors that teach them to be literate in new domains. Gee suggests that video games are complex texts because they represent interrelated semiotic domains (or constructed spaces where people are encouraged to think or act or feel a certain way) that must be "read" by the player if he or she is to successfully experience the game.

The unique and complex ways in which games utilize different modes represent a potentially rich experience for literacy teachers and their students. As one (very popular) exemplar of the "burgeoning variety of text forms associated with information and multimedia technologies," video games provide a means to encourage literacy skills in "understanding and controlling representational forms," as advocated for by the scholars of the New London Group (1996, p. 61). In advocating for a pedagogical focus on multiliteracies, this group suggests that the content of a multiliteracies curriculum should center around design (both as the choices that inform the final product and as the process of creation) and its related elements: linguistic, visual, audio, gestural, and spatial. These modes are core elements used in the design of video games and thus offer students of the genre an opportunity to explore how they work in creating and communicating meaning.

The foundation laid by the New London Group has led to formalized expectations that instruction in multimodal literacy be included as part of literacy education in schools (International Reading Association, 2012; National Council of Teachers of English, 2005), and many researchers have explored the value of incorporating students' out-of-school digital literacy practices and encounters with multimodal texts into classrooms in meaningful, critical ways (Alvermann, Moon, & Hagood, 2002; Lankshear & Knobel, 2011; Jewitt, 2008). However, as O'Brien and Bauer (2005) have illuminated, integrating multiliteracies and multimodal texts into schools and classrooms is problematic given the emphasis in schools on traditional notions of literacy that favor print modes almost exclusively. In this context, I suggest that video games offer a connection between the traditional practices of school (especially narrative analysis) and the development of multiliteracies that scholars have suggested are so important.

Building on work in multiliteracies and in game studies, researchers in Australia have developed a model for exploring this intersection of multimodal literacies and video games (Apperly & Beavis, 2013; Beavis, 2014; Beavis, Apperly, Bradford, O'Mara, & Walsh, 2009). In this article, I draw upon this model to describe how video games can be used in meaningful ways with adolescent readers, focusing particularly on *games as text* and *games as action*. When we analyze games as texts, we explore "the role of the multi-modal meaning-making taking place in the digital game text" and also situate these games in broader contexts of the medium of the video game (Apperly & Beavis, 2013, p. 5). When we analyze games as action, we focus on the way a game is played—players' interactions with the game world and their avatar within that world, the design of the game that invites and facilitates action, and the broader contexts in which these actions take place.

In studying games through these lenses, we invite students to consider carefully the nature of narrative as well as to engage in critical thinking about the influence that the multimodal medium of the video game has on the storytelling experience—in other

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words, to examine its design and design elements (as defined by the New London Group). To demonstrate how we might accomplish this, I present a case-based analysis of a video game and share ideas for inviting students to examine it as a narrative, as an example of the multimodal video game medium, and as an experience in gameplay.

Case Study: *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture*

The richly imagined *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* (The Chinese Room, 2015; gameplay viewable at https://youtu.be/T2yJL59FWxg) opens with a tantalizing sound bite from a Dr. Kate Collins, who tells us that she is "the only one left." As reader-players, we find ourselves on the side of a road outside the quaint English village of Youghton, Shropshire; the town has been quarantined for reasons that are not immediately clear. As we begin to explore, we find the first of many radios we will encounter in the game that provide audio recordings left by the same Kate Collins. Her first recording alludes to "The Event" and to "markers" left behind and suggests that answers will be found "in the light." Other characters' voices and experiences are brought into the game through recorded messages left on phones around the town. It soon becomes apparent that the inhabitants of the village have vanished as a result of The Event, and

our first impulse as players is to discover what really happened here.

This discovery is aided by several encounters with twisting spirals of glowing particles, light sculptures that are "echoes" of the vanished inhabitants of the area and that give glimpses of conversations between those inhabitants (the "markers" that Dr. Collins refers to in the very beginning of the game; see Fig. 2). These vignettes are "triggered" as a glowing ball of light leads the reader-player through the countryside, into homes and shops and churches and farms. Reader-players uncover clues and insights not only into the mystery of what happened to the inhabitants of Shropshire, but also into the lives of the missing residents—their hopes and disappointments, their relationships, their conflicts—in the days immediately before and after The Event.

Everybody's Gone to the Rapture as Narrative

Examining the narrative that unfolds in *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* (hereafter referred to as *Rapture*) provides rich opportunities for a traditional narrative analysis. First and foremost, the game presents a unique setting that plays an important role in the conflicts experienced by characters and the themes that eventually emerge. Shropshire is a rural English village with small, quaint homes and neatly manicured lawns and gardens nestled among green, fertile farms, with an idyllic vacation resort by the local lake (see Fig. 3). This warm and welcoming physical setting is in very real tension with the reader-player's growing understanding of the frightening events that befell the unsuspecting residents of Shropshire as part of The Event and which have seemingly resulted in the disappearance and supposed death of every resident. Careful study of this game can help students analyze how the choice of this setting shapes our response to the story. We might ask them to consider how setting the story in small-town America or in an industrial or post-industrial area might result in a different reader response. Such analyses help our students see how choices about setting are essential to the way we perceive the story.

Barbara: But he had a rifle. A soldier, with a rifle. In Shropshire.

Figure 2. "Echoes" of vanished inhabitants give clues to The Event that left the town of Shropshire deserted.

Figure 3. Detailed map of the fictional village of Shropshire

As with any narrative, characters also play an important role in the story. *Rapture* is organized into five "chapters," with each chapter focusing on a single area of the countryside and a single character. For example, reader-players become familiar with the village priest (Jeremy Wheeler) who has generated no small controversy by aiding a terminally ill parishioner in her desire to end her own life and who, in the face of the mysterious disappearances of local residents, begins to question the faith he has in a benevolent, all-powerful God. In their glimpses of Jeremy, reader-players see his humane efforts to comfort parishioners as they try to understand the disappearances of friends and neighbors and the broader tragedy that arrives with The Event. In his earnest efforts, he recaptures the trust and respect of some who had previously criticized him. As he watches those in his parish gradually fall ill and vanish, though, he himself struggles with anger against a God whose actions seem arbitrary and difficult to understand.

Reader-players also become acquainted with Kate Collins, a newly married American scientist who feels like an outsider, scrutinized and found wanting by the provincial residents of Shropshire. Throughout the game, reader-players witness her gradual retreat into the study of a mysterious pattern of signals that travel from deep space and are first detected at the observatory. Reader-players also come to know her husband, Stephen, a fellow scientist who, in returning with his new wife to Shropshire (where he was raised), also returns to a woman, Lizzie Graves, with whom he previously had a serious romantic relationship. Lizzie, who is also married, suffers from feelings of insecurity that seem to be assuaged by her reconnection with Stephen.

While reader-players learn about these people solely through dozens of light-sculpture vignettes, most characters are, nevertheless, complex. For example, while Kate does seem ambitious and aloof, evidence suggests that the villagers have perhaps judged her too harshly. Similarly, Lizzie is cheating on her husband, but she also runs a tidy summer camp for families and youth and puts on a play to help take residents' minds off the growing number of disappearances. A close reading of *Rapture* suggests rich possibilities for character study and for drawing inferences about the relationships between the inhabitants of the village as a backdrop against which the catastrophic event and consequent fallout occur. Students could choose one of the characters and compile evidence from what that character says and what others say about him or her to create a character profile and to explore how each character is connected emotionally in the context of the game's setting.

In examining the characters, their conflicts, and the story's setting, students can also explore some of the themes that *Rapture*'s developers have so carefully and thoughtfully threaded into the game. To consider one example, Kate's status as an outsider, her fragile marriage to Shropshire's golden child, and her increasing obsession with finding the meaning behind these alien signals dominate much of the game. In analyzing her experiences and reactions, reader-players see the developers exploring the themes of isolation and Kate's growing desire for control. Her quest for knowledge and answers mirrors a broader human endeavor that does not always end well. And as reader-players' understanding of The Event unfolds, they are invited to ask deeper questions about Dr. Collins and her role in the tragedy. Her growing desire to "make a mark"

by solving the mystery of the strange signals takes on increased importance as the new life she is starting with her husband becomes increasingly threatened.

In discussing themes like this one, educators can also encourage students to explore light as a central metaphor in the game. Many of Kate's final words (explored in the last "chapter" of the game, which takes place in the observatory) allude to the complex nature of light—its power to illuminate, to give warmth and life, but also the ghostly traces it leaves behind that are mere suggestions of what has been. Light is a powerful motif used throughout the game to evoke the experiences of the characters and the themes of connection. The game's use of light helps reader-players to explore the impact that characters' choices and actions have on others in this tight-knit community that is "invaded" by a mysterious outside force in the form of alien signals.

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Rapture as an Example of the Video Game Medium

While focusing on the narrative elements in a video game allows us to reinforce and explore techniques of traditional literary analysis, examining the multimodal elements of the game can initiate students into important discussions about how different modes express meaning. We should help students apply their understanding of and experiences with video games to recognize how the affordances of the video game medium are leveraged to convey significant meaning.

One significant mode or design element used in video games is the spatial element—the physical space laid out and navigated virtually by the player. *Rapture* fits into the genre of games that present a mysterious situation and then encourage the player to uncover the truth by exploring his or her surroundings. These games rely heavily on creating a compelling and immersive atmosphere and often eschew traditional elements of gameplay, such as combat, in favor of a more leisurely gathering of clues and insights into a central mystery. Noted cultural scholar Henry Judkins (2004) asserts that these games are an example of "environmental storytelling" that "[privilege] spatial exploration" (p. 125).

This is very true for *Rapture*, as the goal of exploring the game's physical space becomes inextricably linked with exploring the events that led to the catastrophe alluded to in the game's beginning. This physical exploration parallels the psychic exploration players become immersed in as they gain glimpses into the complex lives of the Shropshire residents. The spatial mode provides an easy way to start discussions with students about how the opportunity to physically explore the in-game locations shapes the way players perceive the story; for instance, much more information and sensory stimulation are provided through this exploration than one would normally encounter in print, and this changes the immediate impact that the setting might have on players. This is especially interesting in the case of *Rapture*, as the game's developers limit the player's in-game speed to a pace that encourages (almost requires) carefully observing and taking in the setting.

The game's developers leverage other modes to convey a distinct mood in the game, drawing upon the soundtrack music (haunting, airy strings with a melancholy flavor or warm piano tones), the lighting (the game is set in the late afternoon, so long shadows and warm colors dominate), and audio cues (the reader-player is immersed in bird-song and occasional animal sounds, even though the area is conspicuously devoid of any visible life, human or animal). Educators can help students analyze how these modes shape their experience by encouraging them to reflect upon their responses as they play.

By way of example, consider one specific scene in which players witness an encounter between the local priest and a woman he finds in a home that does not belong to her. She tells the priest, tearfully and with rising anxiety, that her husband and two children were trying to escape Shropshire but were blocked by the quarantine. She recounts how first her sons and then she and her husband began to suffer from headaches and nosebleeds (which we understand by this

point to be a precursor to death or vanishing); they decide to wait out the quarantine in this unfamiliar house whose owners, we infer, have vanished and left the home abandoned. Her husband has taken the boys upstairs to rest, and she has remained alone in the downstairs living room. When the priest encounters her, he learns that she has been waiting for six hours, paralyzed by fear at what might await her upstairs. As the conversation ends, players follow the swirling lights that represent the priest into the upstairs bedroom, only to find an empty bed, sheets slightly disturbed, and tiny, brilliant light particles drifting in the air. As players observe the conspicuously empty bed, the music shifts to a soft chorus of angelic voices.

The pathos evoked in scenes like this one rivals what we might experience when reading well-crafted stories in traditional print forms. But in the video game medium, many of our senses are engaged in the process, thanks to the different modes employed. When I analyze such scenes with my students, we first explore the multimodal dimension by considering how experiencing the game is different from reading a print story. To explore the impact of the visual mode, for example, I ask students how it might be different to read this scene in print compared to seeing it. We then look at specific images from this scene and talk about how elements like color choices influence our response or how the creation of contrasts between light and dark might encourage us to feel a certain way. I ask students to consider the audio and how it shapes their response to the scene, especially the angelic choir that comes in at the end. Is this supposed to reassure us? Or does it add to the mystery of what is happening? Finally, I ask students to consider a mode that is very unique to video games, the gestural or physical mode. I encourage them to evaluate how their physical involvement in the scene (the fact that their actions with a controller move the scene forward) changes the way they experience the moment.

In these discussions, I am always careful to avoid the conclusion that print is better than video games (or vice versa); rather, I guide the discussion in ways that help students see how each mode has unique strengths. The notion of interactivity (a term I use to connect to the gestural mode) often dominates these discussions, as the agency that games offer players to control the direction of the story and its outcomes is one of the most unique features of this medium. In

these discussions, my students and I often decide that interactivity deepens immersion and investment in the storyline in unique ways, echoing the ideas of Espen Aarseth (1997), a prominent figure in video game and literary theory studies, who has argued that this interaction "[raises] the stakes of interpretation to those of intervention" (p. 4). Since this distinction between games and print texts is so clear, it is an easy entry point to discussions about individual modes and how each shapes our responses to and understandings of the story we experience.

This exploration of different modes allows us to help students think more critically about the elements of storytelling; again, I have found that having them compare storytelling games and print stories is effective. To suggest one instance, my students and I might discuss the metaphor of light used throughout the *Rapture* and how its use is different in a game where we *see* instances of that light throughout our play (the visual mode) but also are *led* through the darkness (gestural mode) and physically *surrounded* by that light (the spatial mode) in the final moments of the game when we explore the observatory after sunset. Students can analyze how the effect of these intersecting modes encourages them to consider this motif (and even experience it) in ways that are different from how they might perceive the motif in print texts. Some might find the experience more limiting, since the game's portrayals present only one vision, whereas print encourages individual readers to create their own mental imagery. Others may argue for the power of having the senses immediately stimulated by the game. In whatever way the discussion proceeds, students are engaged in deeper reflection on the use of motifs and their effects across different media. Similar discussions could explore how we apprehend characters in the game versus a print story or how audio dialogue influences characterization in a video game.

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Rapture and Games as Action

Discussions of the video game medium invite us to consider the game as an experience and to analyze the design of the game itself—another major thrust in multiliteracies instruction. The developers of *Rapture*, for instance, grant players the freedom to encounter vignettes and locations in the order of their choosing.

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While a humming, glowing ball of light suggests a path the player can take to uncover all the clues about a particular character's life, players do not have to take the suggested path and may instead choose to encounter the vignettes of past conversations in whatever order they want. However, even following the ball of light does not present the vignettes in a strictly chronological order. Thus, players are guaranteed a fragmented picture of the overall narrative of The Event and its ensuing tragedy. Even after uncovering every vignette and experiencing the game's final moments, players are left with much residual uncertainty about the events and characters portrayed.

This design choice gives educators an opportunity to explore the nature and consequences of fragmented narratives with students. We can talk about how we as readers rely on clues and inferences to make sense of a narrative that is presented to us in fragments. Or we can explore the way our understanding of events and characters evolves and changes when we experience a fragmented narrative and how this experience might seek to mirror the way we make meaning out of events and interactions in real life. This discussion should also lead students to consider how much freedom we have come to expect in video games—freedom to explore or to solve problems or discover the "rules" of the game on our own—and how the developers of the game allow us that freedom. This connection between player freedom and fragmented narratives in the video game genre can be contrasted fruitfully with postmodern narratives that explore fragmented storytelling (like Walter Dean Myers's *Monster* [2004] or Karen Hesse's *Witness* [2003]) and the different purposes that authors might have in each case.

With students who are familiar with other genres of video games (like first-person shooters or even some role-playing games), we can contrast this free-form presentation style with games that are much more linear. We can ask students to consider why developers might choose a more free-form approach rather than a more linear path that would ensure a more uniform experience. In critical reviews, games are often derided for being linear, and yet many popular games feature linear storylines. In light of this juxtaposition, students could share their thoughts about how a linear experience is different and why it might be preferable in some situations for some players. This discussion could also lead to a more general discussion about the emerging genre of games that favor exploration as a mechanic for uncovering a mystery rather than solving puzzles or completing mini-games within the game.

In a similar vein, the developers of *Rapture* deliberately make no effort to establish who the player is in the context of the virtual Shropshire. Players are given no backstory, no identity. When they find themselves outside the gates of the observatory at the beginning of the game, they don't even know what they are supposed to accomplish in the game. This is a significant deviation from the strong tradition in video games of establishing an alternate persona for the reader-player, whether that be the heartbroken plumber of the Mario franchise or the elite soldiers of the popular Call of Duty series. Students could be encouraged to speculate about why the designers of *Rapture* chose to reject this convention and how this decision affects the experience they have while playing the game. Might this be a commentary on the role of narrators in general, who often provide the alternative persona or "eyes" through which we see the story? How does not knowing who we are or the role that our in-game persona plays in these events complicate our efforts to make sense of the game's story and characters? How is the experience of playing *Rapture* different than the experience of playing a game where we adopt a more specific, but imposed, persona? If I bring this classroom discussion back to traditional narratives, I find that students are better equipped to explore how the role of a narrator can be more complicated than we might initially think. (I often use Almond's [2013] short piece on narrators to supplement discussions like this.)

In looking at the gameplay experience, some students are sure to suggest that *Rapture* may not even be a game in the traditional sense of the word, as it involves no hand-eye coordination challenges or puzzles that must be solved in order for the narrative to progress. In fact, it could be argued that in *Rapture,* players really have little control over how the story unfolds, especially compared to other games where they are asked to make crucial decisions about how their in-game persona will act or what he or she will say. The only real control players have in *Rapture* is in how they experience that story, determined by the order in which they encounter the vignettes and make connections about the characters and their experiences. This can lead educators and students to analyze genre expectations and how authors might deliberately violate our expectations for a specific purpose. They should, in analyzing the experience of playing *Rapture*, be able to explore both the costs and benefits of these design choices and how they shape the way reader-players think about and respond to the game's story.

However, other students are likely to point out that the game itself represents one large and complex puzzle: What happened to the residents of Shropshire, and what are we supposed to understand from uncovering this tragedy? Although the player's role in the game largely consists of exploration and uncovering the interactions glimpsed in the light-sculpture vignettes, the effort of puzzling out the answer to this mystery provides a unique, compelling challenge that, in the best postmodern tradition, invites the player into an active role as meaning-maker in the story. Again, students could be encouraged to venture some guesses as to why the developers have chosen to exclude traditional gameplay elements. How is the player's experience changed by this choice, and how does the experience of playing this game compare to playing other, more traditional video games? Does *Rapture* provide the same kind of compelling experience in gameplay as other games that have more concrete goals and rewards for completing levels?

Bringing Video Games into the Classroom

My experiences bringing games like *Rapture* into the classroom have highlighted both the potential and some of the challenges of using these texts for this kind of critical study (see Table 1 for suggestions of other games that have similar potential). These games take time to finish, and it may not be practical to play them together in their entirety during class time. To address this, I have engaged my students in group play of games, where I or another student controls the action of the game while soliciting input about what to do in the game world from the students in the class. This has been helpful to orient students toward a certain kind of game or to experience different levels of immersion by spending a short time with games that use different perspectives or make interesting choices in terms of design. These group experiences allow us to engage as a class in the analyses of narrative, modes, and design described in this article. Once students have this experience, they are equipped to work independently with other more familiar games.

As much as I (and my students) enjoy discussing the narratives in these stories (and as much as this helps reinforce traditional disciplinary knowledge), equally fruitful work comes when we shift the discussion and analysis to the way game developers use different modes to convey meaning (the game as text) and to how we experience the game itself (the game as action). This analysis helps students develop much-needed familiarity with other modes and broadens their understanding about the unique strengths of these modes and how they work together to convey meaning.

In describing the connections that he sees between literacy learning and playing video games, Gee (2007) notes that "knowledge of a given domain can be a good precursor for learning another one" (p. 39). The experiences that my students and I have had as we have explored narrative in multimodal video games bear out Gee's statement. My students have learned to think more deeply about narrative at the same time as they have developed skills in identifying how images, sounds, and other modes are used to communicate. Video games are an important medium for many of the young people with whom we work in schools and universities, and many games, through their narrative elements, enlighten us about the human condition just as the best traditional literature does. In a time when changes in media and technology are altering our public and private lives, video games offer an important chance to explore the new and compelling ways these media share stories that matter.

Table 1. Annotated list of story-driven video games

Life Is Strange (Dontnod Entertainment, 2014)
An example of an episodic video game (a game released in serial installments), this game puts the player in the role of Maxine Caufield, a high school senior who discovers a special ability to manipulate time. Max has visions of a catastrophic storm that will destroy her home town and uses her newfound abilities to try to prevent the destruction. The narrative arc of the game is determined by numerous choices made by the player and explores themes of memory and identity and the way choices have ripple effects. (Other episodic games like this that rely heavily on player choice include *The Walking Dead* and *Game of Thrones*, both based in the worlds of these popular franchises.)

Shade (Andrew Plotkin, 2000)
In this short work of interactive fiction, the player assumes the role of a nameless protagonist who is getting ready for a trip to Death Valley. As the player completes mundane tasks like finding plane tickets and shutting down a computer, it gradually becomes clear that the reality presented by the game may not be, in fact, the reality in which the protagonist finds himself. Light and heat play important roles in the gradual uncovering of the protagonist's real state; the gradual recognition of what has really happened to the protagonist creates a compelling sense of tension. The game is an interesting commentary on the way game design establishes a sense of place and requires significant inference-making on the part of the reader-player.

Her Story (Sam Barlow, 2015)
This game puts the player in the role of police detective using a 1990s-era computer interface through which the player can search through several videotaped interviews of a woman who is suspected of murdering her husband. The player cannot access the videos in their entirety, but instead must conduct keyword searches of interview transcripts, which then pull up short clips from the videotaped interviews. In this way, the game subverts some of the genre expectations of crime fiction and requires heavy inferential work on the part of the reader-player who must not only put clues together, but deduce the context of the video clips and the interviewee's responses.

Zork (Infocom, 1980)
This is one of the earliest interactive fiction games. It was critically acclaimed for its elaborate story world and (at the time) sophisticated parser, allowing lengthier and more complex player input. While dated by today's standards, it is still a compelling experience and a great introduction to video games and their storytelling potential. The game opens outside a generic white house that holds the entrance to a fantasy-themed underground kingdom. The player-reader is tasked with solving puzzles and navigating tricky mazes in the service of finding treasure. This game is available in multiple places on the Internet, including versions that can be played from within a Web browser.

Device 6 (Simogo, 2013)
Players assume the persona of Anna, a girl who wakes up in a mysterious castle with only the memory of a strange-looking (and creepy) doll. This is a text-heavy game (almost more of an interactive novel) that plays on iOS devices, with the narrative progressing through touches and swipes. The text layout changes and branches to match player choices, and the game presents the text of the story in novel ways that take advantage of the mobile device's interface. The game features interactive puzzles that must be solved to move the narrative along as Anna tries to escape the castle and figure out why she is there.

Jon Ostenson's earliest memory of playing video games is munching pellets and avoiding ghosts in the Atari 2600 version of Pac Man as a second grader. He has been playing and studying them ever since. He taught junior high and high school English for 11 years before joining the faculty at Brigham Young University, where he now teaches methods courses in the English Education program. His research interests include digital literacies and new media, teacher development, and young adult literature. He can be reached at jon_ostenson@byu.edu.

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