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## Reading with Joysticks: Video Games in the English Language Arts Classroom

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Reading with Joysticks:  
Video Games in the English Language Arts Classroom

By  
Wesley Wingert

An Alternate Plan Paper Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts and Literature and English Studies

Minnesota State University, Mankato

Mankato, Minnesota

May 2022

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READING WITH JOYSTICKS: VIDEO GAMES IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE  
ARTS CLASSROOM

By Wesley Wingert

An alternate plan paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts and Literature and English Studies, at Minnesota State University, Mankato.

Minnesota State University, Mankato

Mankato, Minnesota

May 2022

This paper examines the new literary format of video games and argues that video games can be studied as their own text in the English Language Arts classroom through the lenses of film theory, narratology, and ludology. In order to be precise, the paper offers explicit connections to each of the reading and writing standards supplied by the Common Core State Standards. The paper then suggests that video games as literature can offer opportunities and skills beyond what traditional literature can, including problem solving and communication skills. Next, the paper lays out a framework to be used in order to select the right video games to be used as literature, mainly naming and defining criteria to be considered by the teacher. Finally, the paper acknowledges the hurdles to including video games in the classroom, and offers some suggestions to these problems when available. Ultimately, the paper argues that video games cannot be ignored as a new and exciting literary format for study in the classroom.

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## List of Abbreviations

AI - Artificial Intelligence

CCSS - Common Core State Standards

DLC - Downloadable Content

ELA - English Language Arts

ESRB - Entertainment Software Rating Board

LGBTQ - Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer

MMORPG - Massively Multiplayer Online Role Play Game

NPC - Non-Player Character

Reading with Joysticks:  
Video Games in the English Language Arts Classroom

## **1. Introduction**

In many ways, the instruction of literature in your typical English classroom is no different now than it was decades ago. A teacher sets out to explore with their students a text of literary merit, be that a poem, a short story, or a novel. Students and teacher work together, with the student taking the lead more often in recent years, to uncover themes, define literary terms like irony, point of view, antagonist, and more, to interacting with the text or plot to have discussions about motive, symbolism, finding motifs, to evaluating and even challenging the author's choices, to debating both in discussion and on paper some surface level to extremely nuanced perspectives on the text. Ultimately, the students walk away from the text with an appreciation for its significance that they may not have seen or considered on their first read, and an understanding that their perspective on the work can be different from someone else's--and neither person is necessarily wrong.

While the methodology in each teacher's classroom is bound to be different, and while activities, approaches, and standards have morphed, been dropped, substituted, explored, and expanded, the core has essentially remained the same. What has changed in the past few decades, however, is the definition of a term I slipped in early on in this definition: literary merit. Every single year books are scrutinized by English departments, school boards, parents, and even students, determining whether or not it is a text worth

exploring. The bread and butter of English classes since their inception have been works by lauded authors in traditional formats-- novels, plays, nonfiction essays, and poetry.

Once comics and graphic novels entered the discussion decades ago, things were thrown into turmoil. To this day most high school classes do not cover graphic novels in their curriculum, and one is likely to hear a parent say that they know their child could be reading a “real book.” When it comes down to it, however, many have come to understand that graphic novels can accomplish the same goals that other texts can, teaching all of those things mentioned earlier, and even more on top of that. Not only can teachers help their students to develop their reading skills, but also to expand their understanding of visual layout, background imagery, to genre specific terms like icon, closure, panel, bleeds, zip ribbons, and word balloons. Progress has finally been made in critics seeing graphic novels as works of literary merit, and as a result classes on graphic novels are appearing, many a thesis has been written on them, and colleges and universities are accepting the field as a worthwhile field of study.

But this thesis isn't about graphic novels; it's about an even newer text that should reach the same level of literary appreciation in the classroom that graphic novels have—the video game. Video games are their own, unique literary genre; they have the same literary elements present in film, novels, and comics, but they also contain distinct literary features that only games can have, and offer added opportunities in the classroom.



## 2. Defining Film Theory, Narratology, and Ludology in Gaming

Video games are far from a new art form, and the topic being explored in this paper won't even be that video games need to be appreciated as art. Very few would or even could argue that there is no artistic merit in a sprawling, beautiful game like *Ghost of Tsushima*, or even in a game that is far more simplistic, like *Prominence Poker*. Only within the past decade or so, however, has a field of study been developed that seeks to explore and defend video games in terms of their ability to tell a story. As the field is only just developing (in comparison to traditional fields of literature that can stretch back centuries), much of the authorship that will be referenced in this paper will be from new voices, including even some other thesis work. Within this field of study that is still emerging, there are three pathways to analyzing video games: film theory, narratology, and ludology. All three of these pathways contribute to the story-telling ability of video games, and I will provide a brief description of each.

Film theory is perhaps the best way to begin exploring a video game's ability to tell a story, as film theory is a well-understood field of study already. Those things that separate film from most printed texts (save, of course, graphic novels), can also be found in video games. Camera lighting and movement, transitions (through editing, not wordplay), framing elements, dialogue, acting, sound, and even prop design and usage can be explored not only in film, but also in video games. These elements all work together to create a cohesive story within both a film and a video game, so each of these ideas from film study can be used as a basis of analysis for video games. Take sound, for instance. In David Besell's article "What's that Funny Noise?" from the book *ScreenPlay*,

Besell explores ideas such as how video game music shows a distinct influence from film music, using traditional underscores to emphasize changes and leitmotifs to identify character. He also points out that, as an interactive medium, there are distinct challenges for video game composers (King 141). Anyone who has studied film would agree that the soundtrack (or lack thereof) contributes to how the story is told. How different would *Interstellar* be without organs blaring at every climactic moment? In video games, this same discussion could and should be had. Even if the music fails to further the story, that in itself is a discussion worth having. With any change in medium (novel to film, film to stage, etc), there will be different approaches, but we can use our knowledge of what came before to aid our discussion in how it is approached in the new medium. Sound is just one example of those discussions.

Narratology is the classical approach to video game study that explores games through those same devices we find in both film and literature—setting, plot, character, symbolism, point of view, and much more. The narratological approach is beneficial in understanding video games in that every student and scholar has had to tackle literary texts. Throughout our lives we have tested the merit of work from literary masters, and the tools we've used to define that merit have been the basis of any critical understanding of the work. By using these tools on video games, we can compare the games to great works of literature and determine the effectiveness of the game in telling a story. But to use only narratology and even film theory to approach video games would be to ignore what makes video games unique from film and traditional literature.

In video game studies, perhaps the greatest debate is that video games should not be approached through solely those means of study and frameworks that already exist, like film theory and narratology; that's where ludology comes in. Ludology is the approach to analyzing video games that looks at the games as what they are, and explores those things that are unique to games, like resource collection, inventory management, combat mechanics, and more. The Oxford English Dictionary notes that ludology "is not about story and discourse [narratology] at all but about actions and events" ("Ludology"). These are the actions and activities that the player chooses to partake in, and these actions contribute to the story the game tells.

What ludologists don't do, however, is view these things in isolation. Espen Aarseth, in his paper "A Narrative Theory of Games", argues that the ludological approach to video games is best because it emphasises "the crucial importance of combining the mechanical and the semiotic aspects" and that the approach is a "reaction to sloppy scholarship, one-sided focus and poor theorizing, and [is] not a ban against the application of narrative theory to games" (Aarseth). Essentially, an approach to video games not only has to include a discussion on ludology, but also has to emphasize the interdisciplinary nature of gaming, and how ludology happens in conjunction with narrative structure and film theory.

All three of these pathways (film theory, narratology, and ludology) are ways of telling a story. In his paper "Finding Meaning through Video Games", Christopher Althoff, a graduate of Brigham Young University, notes that "video games create meaning by using and combining the visual and audio elements of film theory, the

storytelling elements of narratology, and the interactive elements of Ludology”, but, beyond having meaning, if there’s a healthy mix of all three of these elements, we have a story that we could look at and study in a classroom *as literature* (Althoff). As radical as it sounds, by using these three elements, video games can find a place in the ELA program. That is where this paper breaks away from what has been argued before.

The video game is not only a worthwhile field of study that has meaning and can not only be used as an educational tool in the classroom, as has been argued by many in the past decade, but it can also, in the right situations, be used in the ELA classroom as a literature. There is a large difference between arguing that educational games can find a place in the classroom and arguing that commercial video games that many students already actively play could find a home as a work of literature. I would like to stress here that I am not the first to approach this idea.

Some ELA teachers, like Mark Clutton--a secondary English teacher in Canberra, Australia--have already started to experiment with using video games in the classroom. In his classroom he replaced all his novels, poems, and any other traditional literature with video games. He took several different games and allowed students to play them after he lectured for a day on the ways students might approach the game. He also had discussion points that he targeted. In the article “Interactive Literacy: Studying Videogames in the Classroom” he cites the semester as a “fantastic success” wherein there were “full essay submissions from boys who had struggled to complete full paragraphs in the past, and a strong sense of community thanks to the constant team-play” (Clutton 66). It’s rather obvious that a benefit of the inclusion of video games in the curriculum would be the

buy-in from students, but we can already see the educational benefits, though they are only vaguely described in this article.

Though people like Mr. Clutton have already begun to approach this discussion and even practice, it is worthwhile to take a deeper and more specific dive into just how effective video games could be when approached as a new literary format. The way to do this for many teachers would be to explicitly describe how the teaching standards we are held to could be taught through video games. So long as we can use many of the same standards for reading and writing in the Common Core State Standards on video games that we use in literature, video games should be valued as a new and profound literary format.

Clearly, though, video games go beyond what is even in the CCSS or there would be little point in throwing video games into the mix. Ludology, in conjunction with narratology and film theory, is the entryway to discussing this new literary format in a way that cannot be done with most films or novels. Literature and movies involve buy-in, but video games require co-authorship. As Kristin M.S. Bezio says of video games in her work "Playing (with) the Villain: Critical Play and the Joker-as-Guide in Batman: *Arkham Asylum*", "Participatory engagement is unique to games and to play because it refuses to permit passive observation; it embodies [a character's] varying personae more fully and more powerfully than the experience of spectating a cinematic text (Bezio). Those choices that characters make in literature and film that we can debate, in video games we can often choose for ourselves, others, and impact the conclusion to the story. In other words, ludology is unique to video games, so there would be educational benefits

from video games as literature that we could not find elsewhere. Even in games where choice is limited, we have new areas to explore and expand on the literary merit. Before exploring how video games can teach the CCSS (wherein ludology will offer unique approaches), let us establish a basic framework.

### **3. A Framework for Video Games as Literature**

In order to accomplish teaching many of the standards that will be mentioned for reading, writing, and listening and in order to explore the unique opportunities and develop the different skills that will be mentioned later, not all video games could work. In the coming discussion, I will mention a slew of diverse games, but how does one decide what is a worthwhile video game to explore? To be sure, games like *Pac-Man* and *Tetris* wouldn't be effective in almost all of these areas. This is not to say that these games lack quality—that would be blasphemous—rather these games lack a substantial overlap with traditional literature. Those games are simply not rich enough for study in the English classroom on these terms. So what games are rich enough? What games have that oh-so-hard-to-define literary merit? In order to decide what games could be considered in the first place for ELA classroom purposes, we must establish some basic frameworks. The following frameworks do not necessarily delineate literary merit, but rather help a teacher decide what texts would be appropriate for the specific things they want to teach.

The first framework we'll consider is that of the narrative elements of kernels and satellites. Espen Aarseth tells us that Kernels are events that define the particular story

and move the story along, while satellites are supplementary events that fill out the discourse and could be removed or altered without changing the core of the story (Aarseth). While games vary in many other ways as well, it is important to know whether or not your game has flexible, fixed, or no kernels at all, and the same with satellites. *Bioshock*, for instance, has many fixed kernels (like going down into Rapture after surviving a plane crash or killing Andrew Ryan with a golf club); some flexible kernels (like the choice to either harvest or rescue Little Sisters mentioned earlier); and several satellites (like weapon and plasma selection). Whether or not a game's kernels or satellites are fixed would not determine whether or not the game would be suitable for study—that would be mixed.

When choosing a game for study in your classroom, a game may not suit your purposes if it doesn't have flexible kernels. It all depends on what you want to teach. If you're using the game to teach ethics and want to have discussion on student choice, you would need a game that has flexible kernels. However, if you want to ensure that every student reaches the same ending so that you are certain they will pull from the same events for analysis, you may actually want a game that has fixed kernels. If the game has no kernels at all, then it simply isn't providing a narrative. While one should consider narratology, film theory, and ludology when choosing a text, you simply cannot use a game as a literary text if it doesn't have a narrative. These would be games like *Pong* or *Flappy Bird*. When it comes to the satellites, one may consider choosing a game with flexible satellites if they want there to be greater discourse and variety in how students complete the game (like an *Assassin's Creed* game), or they may want fixed satellites so

students can focus on the story (like many *Telltale* games). You are unlikely to find a game that has no satellites unless the game also has no kennels.

Another basic framework one should consider is the world of the video game. A game can consist of only two types of space: the ludic and the extra-ludic. In other words, the area in which you can play, and the area in which you cannot. In *Bioshock*, ludic space is limited to hallways, corridors, dilapidated businesses, and other such rather narrow trajectories, while you are surrounded by beautiful extra-ludic space. A so-called open world video game like *Fallout* or *Horizon Zero Dawn* has much more ludic space, but that space is still confined within extra-ludic space (usually mountains that you can't climb or bodies of water where you either hit an invisible wall or the waves prevent you from moving further) (see fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Mountains are extra-ludic space in *Horizon Zero Dawn*. Source: Gartenberg, Chaim. "Horizon Zero Dawn Is an Open-World Game Where Story Is as Important as Scale." *The Verge*, The Verge, 31 Jan. 2017, [www.theverge.com/2017/1/31/14453446/horizon-zero-dawn-preview-open-world-playstation-4-pro](http://www.theverge.com/2017/1/31/14453446/horizon-zero-dawn-preview-open-world-playstation-4-pro).



Other video games, like a virtual poker game, have only ludic space.

When looking at ludic space for a game as literature for your classroom, there are several things to consider. If a game has only ludic space, the game may still be able to tell a story, as is the case with some 2D games like *Papers, Please*, but most games open for consideration would have that extra-ludic space. The real concern here would be being aware of just how much ludic space there is. The more ludic space there is in the game, the more chances there are for new areas of exploration, but also difficulty and getting lost! If a teacher wanted to use *Fallout*, as mentioned before, they would have to tackle the hurdle of asking students to do an awesome, literary quest that is on *the other side of the map*. Imagine a student coming to you the next day and telling you that it took them two hours just to get to the text that you assigned. In this way, games with less ludic space, like a level-by-level game such as *Bioshock*, may be far easier to manage in terms of both traversal and chunking.

Other items to consider when picking a game for study in an ELA classroom are the objects and characters that inhabit the game. Are the objects static? The more static the objects, the more narrative control the player will have. The more modifiable the objects within the game are, the less narrative control the player would have. In *Minecraft*, for example, a player has great control over the objects, but this is at the cost of a story. Other games, however, have static objects like journal entries, tape recordings, and computer logs that could contribute to the story (though co-authorship is still relatively limited here). Much like a novel, are the characters flat or round, or, in video game terms, merely bots? The more robotic the characters, the more the game is based

around ludic elements; the more round the characters are, the more the game is based around a narrative. Many games contain a mix of several types of objects and characters, and each would factor into the conversation of ELA study.

If choosing a video game of literary merit, one would likely have to exclude games that have too many modifiable objects and environments. With *Minecraft*, as mentioned before, the game simply does not tell a story (beyond defeating a dragon, which is completely optional), because it would be hard to tell a story wherein the player has the freedom to completely demolish the map or build skyscrapers out of pumpkins. A game with weapons being the only modifiable objects, either with swapping or upgrades, however, could still tell a concise story about someone on a rampage to defeat demons (I'm looking at you, *Doom*). Games with very little in the way of modification are more apt to have a focus on narrative, as you are losing more of the ludic aspect. *Heavy Rain* is one such game where there is so much focus on the story that the player does not have freedoms they may be used to seeing in games, like designing what their character looks like or what weapons they can use in a given encounter. A video game like this may be perfect for your use in the classroom due to these reasons, or perhaps be too restrictive.

As for round or flat characters for video games as literature, this would largely come down, once again, to what your goal is in teaching the text. If a game is filled predominantly with bots, the character analysis would likely revolve around the character the player/reader is inhabiting, as there would be no character growth elsewhere. If one wished to use a standard *Mario* game for examination, Mario would almost certainly be the focus of the analysis, as he is the only non-bot in the game. However, if a teacher's

goal in teaching the text is to cover some of the standards for literature like examining the author's choice in character development, world-building, story arcs, and more, they would often be far better served in choosing a game with a healthy mix of flat and round characters. This is not surprising, as a teacher would likely prefer a novel that has a healthy mix of these things as well.

We now have narrative elements (kernels and satellites), the world, the objects, and the characters all factoring into the decision of what video game to use in the classroom as literature. Should accolades be considered as well? Almost certainly. Just as there would be little merit in a teacher having the whole class read a novel that is critically panned or it not lauded as a great, a teacher would do well to consider what video games have received accolades, and why. Of course, not every video game would be winning awards for the reasons you want. *Beat Saber*, for instance, has won many awards, but it has no narrative elements whatsoever. So you must look for video games that have won awards due to their narrative strengths, rather than simply their ludic strengths. Just because it is a great game doesn't mean that it is a great story. But you would be right to point out that there are plenty of narrative-driven video games that haven't gained the attention or prestige of games like *Horizon Zero Dawn*, *The Last of Us*, or *The Witcher*. In deciding on a video game to teach as literature, then, a teacher would have to do what any good teacher does when deciding on a traditional novel in their classroom: read the text first and decide if it fits into what you are trying to accomplish.

The rating for a video game should also be considered. Here a teacher would consider the ESRB rating for the game, which every game features on the front cover or case. Additionally, these ratings can easily be searched online. The hurdle of covering a novel with adult themes, such as *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* for its coverage of characters using drugs, having sex, being molested, dealing with trauma, and the exploration of LGBTQ youth, is compounded ten-fold when considering a video game as literature. Covering a movie for study in the classroom is often enough to merit a slip sent home, letting parents decide whether or not their children can see certain images. For a video game as literature, parents would have to be alright with their children inhabiting a character who does some of these things. There is a large difference between reading about a rugged hero mowing down bad guys with a rifle and *seeing* a rugged hero mowing down bad guys with a rifle, and there is an even greater difference between seeing it and *being* the rugged hero mowing down bad guys with a rifle.

So how do you find maturity level appropriate video games? One can use a website like *Common Sense Media*, as many already do for movie and novel consideration in their classroom. On this website, one can look up a video game and see a concise description of what elements of the game could be a concern to a parent or teacher, and direct reviews from parents and children themselves who have played the game. For something like *The Last of Us*, they even break the game down into scores on how much the game shows positive messages, positive role models and representations, ease of play, violence, sex, language, drinking, drugs, and smoking, and even consumerism (see fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Some violence in *The Last of Us*. Source: “The Last of Us Violent Moments (18+).” *YouTube*, YouTube, 20 Feb. 2014, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=4BapYyLn7IE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4BapYyLn7IE).

This website, along with personal gameplay to find these potential issues, would be the best way for a teacher to determine what parents need to be warned about or what games should be excluded from consideration as literature for their classroom.

If a teacher were to look at how *Common Sense Media* describes the educational value of the game, however, they would be quite severely discouraged. The website says, “*The Last of Us* wasn’t created with educational intent, and we don’t recommend it for learning” (Saltzman). A teacher should not go by this ruling, however, as it would hardly be controversial to say that most novels are not created with educational intent, but are still useful for study in the classroom. Even something deemed wildly popular and read in a student’s free time by choice, like *The Lightning Thief*, has educational value if the

teacher sets out specific goals or at least helps students develop tools to use for analysis when reading, both passively and actively. Video games are no exception then, and you can rest easy knowing you can prove *Common Sense Media* wrong. Just as *The Lightning Thief* could be used to teach many of the standards that will be explored shortly, along with themes of friendship, destiny, and even Greek mythology, *The Last of Us* could be used to teach themes of revenge, morality, the human spirit, and dystopia *and* the standards.

Depending on the game a teacher chooses for study in the classroom, they would have to start by establishing some basic video game vocabulary with the students. In the same way that students would have a difficult time analyzing a novel if they didn't know the terms chapter, paragraph, or introduction, they would have a hard time analyzing a video game as literature or even understanding how to play the game at all if they didn't know some of the basic terms. Teaching what a heads up display is (HUD), a cutscene, a loadout, backpack, menu, avatar, boss, campaign, co-op, D-Pad, Render distance, easter egg, and more, are essential for a student to have an entry point into discussion and analysis on the video game. The same conversation and vocabulary lessons might have to be taught for things related to film as well.

It would also be worthwhile for students to know those terms used primarily in the study of video games. Some of these terms have already been mentioned, like kernels and satellites, and ludic and non ludic space. One interesting term that students should know for the study of video games as literature is ludonarrative dissonance.

Ludonarrative dissonance is a term first coined by Clint Hocking to describe when a

game has dissonance between “what it is about as a game, and what it is about as a story” (Hocking). He actually coined the term in a critique of the game *Bioshock*, noting that the ludic contract in the game is to do what is best for you at all costs, but the narrative contract is to help another person to progress. A more clear cut (and humorous) example of ludonarrative dissonance can be seen with Nathan Drake in any of the *Uncharted* games. We have a character we are supposed to respect as a hero who just wants to get his hands on some treasure, but, in the midst of said story, players must kill a *ton* of people. Obviously killing hundreds of people and being on a journey that one knows will provoke that kind of outcome, all in the search of wealth, clashes a little with the idea we are supposed to hold of Nathan Drake. It would be worthwhile for students to know video game specific terminology like this so that they could have similar conversations about the texts they are reading.

Now that we have properly explored what makes a game worthwhile for literary consideration in the classroom, we can finally dive into how exactly one would go about using a video game to teach the CCSS.

#### **4. Video Games and the Common Core State Standards - Reading**

To begin, we should examine the reading standards of the CCSS and see if video games could accomplish this task. To keep things consistent, I will refer to the standards for 11th and 12th grade across all standards related to the ELA classroom (except those standards having to deal solely with American literature). Throughout this section I will use many different video games to provide examples. My hope is that by doing so one

can see that a wide variety of video games could be effective in the classroom, rather than a limited few. One should also bear in mind that video games, like novels, don't have to be used in full. You could very much take a single mission from a game and treat it like a short story. That being said, let's dive in.

In the Key Ideas and Details section of the standards, our first standard notes that students must “cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain” (Common Core State Standards Initiative). Say that a question is posed to students asking, “what are this main character's motivations in this story?” A student could pull textual evidence from video game cutscenes for dialogue, or they could quote any number of outside bits of dialogue or text one may discover in the game. This could be lines that the character says out loud while in the midst of combat, or it could be diary entries that your character makes as they explore their surroundings or progress through the story. One might even find the answer in the game's interface, which could be supplying you with objectives, character bios, and more. Much like with a movie, the student could also use a description of a scene, a character or AI's actions, or even the landscape itself, as their textual evidence in providing an answer to that question. What is especially exciting here is that many video games, especially open-world games, would have so many places and opportunities to pull textual evidence from that each student might provide an entirely different answer, or even the same answer, but with a different source for that information. One student might argue that Louis's mother in *Ghost Giant* has depression by pointing to a moment in the



game where the mother refuses to get out of bed, while another student might make the same argument by pointing to a line that Louis utters about his mom needing to get better (see fig. 3). Here, students would very well have the opportunity to make inferences.



Fig. 3. Louis's mom in bed in *Ghost Giant*. Source: *Ghost Giant Is Giving Us ALL the VR Feels*, 14 May 2019, [cocomanwar.blogspot.com/2019/05/ghost-giant-is-giving-us-all-vr-feels.html](http://cocomanwar.blogspot.com/2019/05/ghost-giant-is-giving-us-all-vr-feels.html).

Next up under Key Ideas and Details of the Reading standards, students are asked to “Determine two or more themes or central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to produce a complex account; provide an objective summary of the text” (CCSSI). Here we see a very closely related standard that can be approached in much the same way. The analysis of the textual evidence from video games described in the previous paragraph would be used here instead to find common themes. In the same way that students could look at the first chapter of a novel to determine what possible themes

might be explored throughout the text, a student could be tasked with doing the same in a video game by looking at the first mission or opening cutscene(s). Two video games with similar themes could even be compared in how they go about accomplishing the exploration of that theme, using narratology, film theory, and ludology. *Mad Max* and *Fallout*, for example, would each have different ways of approaching the theme of a biotic ethic in a dystopian future. One might rely more on clues from the environment and goals in *Mad Max* (barren landscape, collect oil canisters), while in *Fallout 3* one might rely more on cutscenes and optional conversation with AI about living in a post-apocalyptic wasteland.

Our final reading standard in this section asks students to “analyze the impact of the author's choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama”, looking at things like setting, the order of action, and how the characters are developed (CCSSI). When it comes to video games, the question of authorship is far more complicated than with novels or even film. A video game usually has a host of authors writing scripts for both main story lines and side quests and even side characters that don't factor very much into either. To throw in even more complications, one of the authors of the text, in certain situations, is the player of the game themselves, as mentioned earlier in our discussion of co-authorship. So how do we go about having this discussion? In several ways. For one, students might discuss the studio's choices in the basic premise of that game, to more complicated ideas like why they placed what mission where. In Insomniac Games's *Spider-Man*, for example, it is worthwhile to consider why Harry Osbourne is never seen in person, but can be listened to in audio recordings in

optional side-missions. Perhaps it is to build anticipation for a sequel game, or maybe just to tease those players that know the mythos and that Harry will eventually become one of Spider-Man's adversaries.

For this standard, there are a whole host of ideas to consider. Students might also discuss how the characters are introduced, either through cinematics or gameplay, and whether or not it is possible to interact with them before their official introduction. Students could also even analyze the studio's choices in what they have the character do when not locked into a cutscene/cinematic. In one game a character might slip into a back room out of sight, and, upon inspection, be found to be standing in one spot, doing nothing. In another, the character may be programmed to sit at their desk and shuffle papers.

When it comes to co-authorship, we enter into even more possible discussions. Students could have discussions on what order *they* decided to complete missions and side missions, or whether or not they decided to pick a companion and what effect that had on their interpretation of the story. In *The Outer Worlds*, a student's perception of their main character or the mission they are on would likely change depending on whether or not they picked up Parvati Holcomb when offered, or if they refused her offer and decided to go it alone. Additionally, students could analyze the impact of things unique to video games, such as the environment that is evident in each scene, weapon and resources, crafting, and enemy AI. In *Skyrim*, if one decides to brandish a knife instead of a magic spell, they may find their narrative is more about a legend of stealth rather than a powerful wizard (see fig. 4).



Fig. 4. Casting a spell in *Skyrim*. Source: “5 Unique Mage Builds to Try in *Skyrim*: Special Edition.” *Game Skinny*, GameSkinny, 12 Apr. 2018, [www.gameskinny.com/qmn48/5-unique-mage-builds-to-try-in-skyrim-special-edition](http://www.gameskinny.com/qmn48/5-unique-mage-builds-to-try-in-skyrim-special-edition).

If students were to look at how characters are introduced and developed, you could run into some complications. In a game with a large range of options for interactions with story characters, a student could very well struggle to keep up in a conversation about a side character’s development because they decided to kill that character early on in the game! Even if a student did this in an attempt to disrupt the kind of discussions that could be had in class, one would, at the very least, still be able to discuss the introduction of the characters, and, chances are, they haven’t managed to kill everyone (most games make this rather difficult, if not impossible). Finally, that would still be a worthwhile conversation to have about authorship. The author decided to kill a main character early on! How did the authors of the game itself establish a backup plan to still complete the game, and, subsequently, the story?

We now move on to the Craft and Structure section of the reading literature standards. The first standard here asks students to “Determine the meaning of words and phrases [. . .] including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh (CCSSI). Here students would be able to analyze things like irony in what a character says and does in the same way they could with a novel. Since the focus of this standard is on word choice, cutscenes and lines spoken aloud by characters in cinematics and other places would likely be where students immediately look for clues and passages, but we can also consider the text present in things like optional audio logs or diary entries that are present in many games. In *Batman: Arkham Knight*, for example, one can uncover and scan evidence of characters that you may or may not run into in other sections of the game. If you open the game’s “Batcomputer”, you would be able to analyze the tone in the description featured in each character bio. Usually here, the tone would be serious, but the mood might be quite comical. In regard to language that is particularly beautiful, students will surely have lines from the game that stick out to them as being packed with meaning, such as “It’s time to kick ass and chew bubble gum, and I’m all outta gum” from Duke Nukem. Okay, maybe our definitions of what language is beautiful differ.

The next standard in this section asks students to “analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a text contribute to its overall structure and meaning as well as its aesthetic impact” (CCSSI). This standard is almost indistinguishable from the final Key Ideas and Details standard, though here we are

examining aesthetic impact rather than the impact that these choices have on how the story is developed. In having this discussion, students would be able to consider narratology, film theory, and ludology. The kind of fight that the studio has you do at the end of the game is as relevant in the discussion of aesthetic impact as each characters' final lines of dialogue. For example, in *Uncharted 4: A Thief's End*, students might discuss the choice to have Nathan Drake fight Rafe on a burning, abandoned pirate ship loaded with gold, with the traditional hiding and gunplay of the game replaced with a no-holds-barred sword fight. If you struggle to see how a conversation like that would play out, consider this article for *Forbes* titled, "Uncharted 4's Final Boss Fight Screws Up A Near-Perfect Ending". Dave Thier argues, "the emotional climax of a narrative game is just about the worst time possible to introduce new mechanics: we're driving our story forward as hard as we can [. . .] and then we're [. . .] stuck, trying to figure out an entirely new combat mechanic" (Thier). Not only is a conversation like this possible using a video game as literature, but it may be an even more emphatic discussion.

The final Craft and Structure standard asks students to analyze a case in which grasping a point of view requires distinguishing what is directly stated in a text from what is really meant (e.g., satire, sarcasm, irony, or understatement) (CCSSI). Once again, students would look to those same elements in games that we have already described. In a video game especially, the way the player views the world would likely be quite different from the point of view of the characters within the world. In *Grand Theft Auto V*, students would be able to point out the satire in the way the game portrays conservatives and liberals to the absolute extreme. Students could do this by citing dialogue and actions

from story missions, audio clips from the various radio stations, and even those lines spoken by NPCs walking around on the streets in the fictional city of San Andreas. For example, the game features a parody of Facebook called Lifeinvader that has taglines like “Invasion never felt so good” and “It’s not technology; it’s your life!” (see fig. 5). Hopefully students could reflect here on why exactly these lines are so comical and, unfortunately, topical.



Fig. 5. Lifeinvader HQ in *GTA V*. Source: “Lifeinvader Office.” *GTA Wiki*, [gta.fandom.com/wiki/Lifeinvader\\_Office](http://gta.fandom.com/wiki/Lifeinvader_Office).

The next section of standards for reading is titled Integration of Knowledge and Ideas. The first standard in this section, the only relevant standard in this section, asks students to “analyze multiple interpretations of a story, drama, or poem (e.g., recorded or live production of a play or recorded novel or poetry), evaluating how each version interprets the source text” (CCSSI). This standard is perhaps one of the easiest to consider when approaching the idea of using video games in the classroom. Many works of literature, from classical to genre fiction, have video game adaptations. *The Witcher*

series, for example, is a very popular series of fantasy games based on novels by Andrzej Sapkowski. Other popular examples include the Harry Potter and The Lord of The Rings video games, but one may be surprised to learn that there are even video game adaptations of literary works of fiction or even nonfiction like *Dante's Inferno* (fiction) and *Walden Pond* (nonfiction).

When teaching a concept like transcendentalism through Henry David Thoreau's *Walden Pond*, one looks to the rich language used to describe the woods, woodchucks, loons, beans, and even ants. But the video game adaptation, created by the University of Southern California of Cinematic Arts, offers a unique approach to teaching the text and transcendentalism. Instead of simply reading the text, students can inhabit an avatar of Thoreau himself and walk through a virtual recreation of those famous woods in Concord, Massachusetts. In my classroom I have done this very thing and brought in my Playstation 4 console along with a copy of the game for my students to experience.

After students have taken turns exploring the environment and discovering that they can fish, plant and harvest beans, reflect on nature, read letters between Thoreau and others, and even visit Ralph Waldo Emerson, my students come to the same conclusion that I do: one could as effectively teach transcendentalism with *Walden, a game* as they could with the original text (see fig. 6). Transcendentalism's main tenets, as described in my class, asks people to be "open to beauty of the world". Rather than reading about Thoreau's interaction with two battling ants to grapple with the significance of getting lost in nature, students are able to zoom in on any object in the game and get a description, sometimes right out of Thoreau's writing. Getting a visual in the game aids



students in their understanding of getting lost in nature. Another tenet says that “trust your own heart, intuition, powers and resources. Rely on yourself.” Within the game, students get to inhabit Thoreau as he builds his own with his own hands, completes jobs for others for money, fishes, chops wood, and even plants beans, all so he can earn a living and support himself. What better way, outside of actually building a house themselves, might students come to see the value in what Thoreau and other transcendentalists claim about trusting your own abilities? In all of these tasks, Thoreau reflects out loud using passages from *Walden* the text itself, so one can not even claim the game is a replacement for the text.

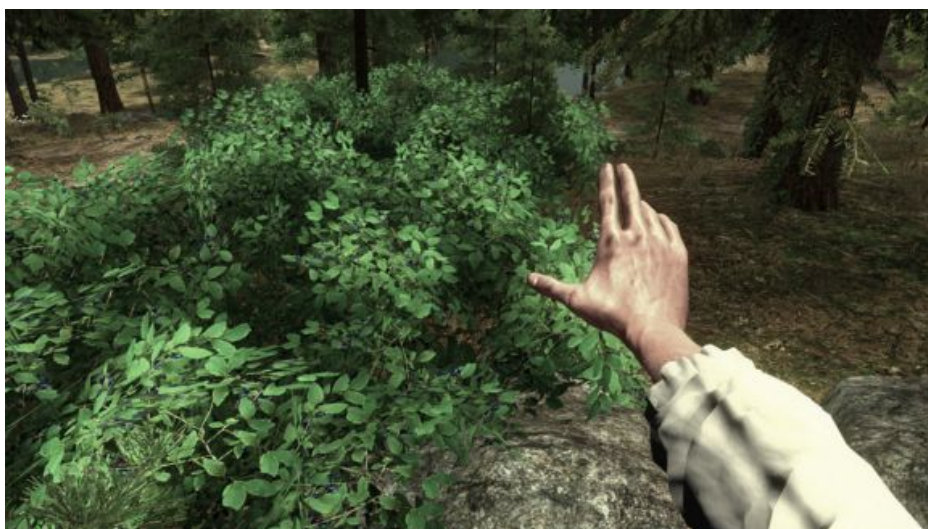


Fig. 6. Reaching for beans in *Walden, a game*. Source: “Walden, a Game.” *Humanities for All*, [humanitiesforall.org/projects/walden-a-game](http://humanitiesforall.org/projects/walden-a-game).

Beyond being able to teach the same concept through the game, this standard asks us to compare the interpretations. Students would pull textual evidence from both sources to answer questions like, “How is the main character portrayed in the video game versus

the original text?” For Visceral Games’s *Dante’s Inferno*, students would likely point out that they hadn’t imagined Dante to be rampaging through Hell on a hack and slash adventure, but rather on a more somber journey. Dante the pilgrim evokes images of an introspective and curious man, while Dante in the game provides an image of a man on a quest for vengeance. Students would also likely be surprised that the game includes explicit lines from Virgil and the text, and this would certainly have an impact on their interpretation of the lines spoken. So while one wouldn’t claim that you could teach 14th century Italian poetics, theology, and politics with the game instead of the text, students would come away with further understanding of comparative interpretation and analysis.

Using a video game adaptation of literature is likely the place where most educators would first feel comfortable in including video games in their classroom. After all, this is usually where educators start when considering the inclusion of graphic novels in their classroom. It’s easier to start with a jumping point, like using *The Handmaid’s Tale: The Graphic Novel* in conjunction with the novel by Margaret Atwood. By doing so, teachers can more easily work with a new format while teaching it in many of the same ways they would the original text. However, educators would be remiss if they did not have students focus on those things unique to the format. So one can use *Walden Pond, a game* to teach literary ideas, but they should also discuss the impact film theory and ludology have on a student’s interpretation. If they don’t wish to have these conversations, they should stick to the original text. And if the text is far more complicated than can be revealed through the other adaption (as is such with the game *Dante’s Inferno*), don’t treat the game as a replacement, but rather a supplement.

It's a common trap for educators to fall into--swapping technology into their classroom with the earnest intention to keep up with the times and propel their class forward, but failing to make any actual difference in their teaching or using the tool to its maximum benefit. This idea is best explained by the SAMR model from education researcher Dr. Ruben Puentedura. According to Youki Terada of *Edutopia*, "the SAMR model lays out four tiers of online learning, presented roughly in order of their sophistication and transformative power" and "teachers often focus on the first two levels" (Terada). You can view the SAMR Model below (see fig. 7).

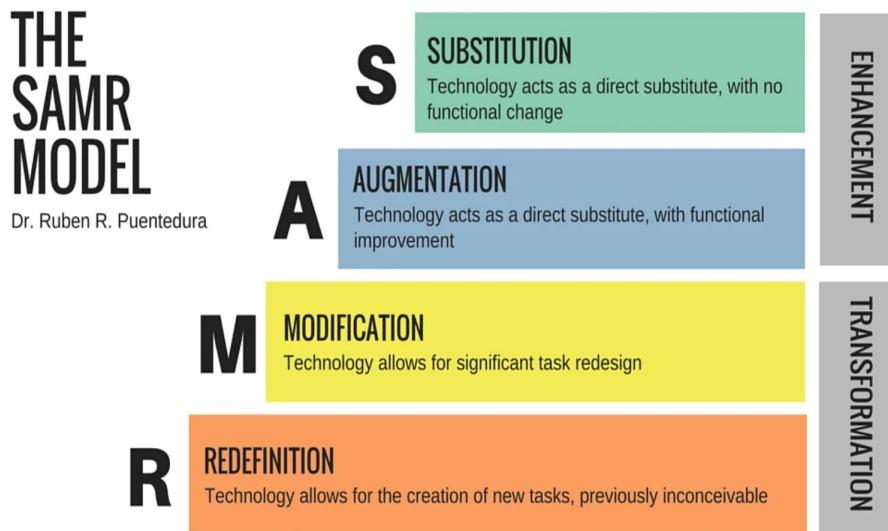


Fig. 7. The SAMR Model. Source: Terada, Youki. "A Powerful Model for Understanding Good Tech Integration." *Edutopia*, George Lucas Educational Foundation, 4 May 2020, [www.edutopia.org/article/powerful-model-understanding-good-tech-integration](http://www.edutopia.org/article/powerful-model-understanding-good-tech-integration).

The lesson to be learned here is that video games should not be used merely for substitution, wherein a teacher has their students discuss the text in the exact same way they usually would. Rather, a teacher should work toward redefinition. Using *Walden, a*

*game* as our example, rather than having students merely answer basic questions about transcendentalism, a teacher give their students tasks they otherwise wouldn't be able to, such as going to have a conversation with Ralph Waldo Emerson or trying to earn money to purchase a better fishing rod. Thus far, one could make the case that much of what I have described in teaching these reading literature standards with video games is merely substitution. While it is true that what I've described has attempted to prove that video games as literature can accomplish teaching the same standards that traditional literature could, we have already seen that video games can offer an approach to these conversations that traditional literature could not.

The last section of standards for reading is Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity, and has a single, rather self-explanatory standard. The standard says that, "by the end of grade 11-12, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, at the high end of the grades 11-CCR text complexity band independently and proficiently" (CCSSI). What video games can do for us here is certainly expand the range of texts that students encounter. When it comes to complexity, certain video games, just like certain novels and films, would have different levels of complexity. The video game *Portal* would be relatively simple (in narrative) compared to the more complex and mythos-rich story present in *Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order*. Perhaps one would start with a simpler narrative game and move onto a more difficult one.

## **5. Video Games and the Common Core State Standards - Writing**

With that, we have covered almost every single standard in the Reading Literature section of the Common Core State Standards. Of course, reading and writing go hand in hand in the ELA classroom, so we need to also prove that video games could work for the writing standards of the Common Core. The problem with approaching the reading standards in isolation is that it would not be appropriate to “read” a video game without written analysis in the same way that it would not be appropriate to read a novel without written analysis. Since there will be much overlap in the ways that students approach writing that they did in the standards for reading, this section will be much shorter and provide distinct examples of specific writing tasks that could accompany the study of a video game as literature.

The first section of the writing standards is titled Text Types and Purposes. The first standard here asks students to “write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence” (CCSSI). For this standard, our focus should be on the word “argumentative”. When we looked at the first standard of the Key Ideas and Details section of the reading standards, we talked about how students could cite textual evidence from a variety of places. In order to write argumentatively about a video game, students would have to find their own interpretive edge. An exciting aspect here is that many students would be quicker to form an opinion on a video game than they would with a novel. A task a teacher could assign to accomplish this goal would be a formal essay. Students could be given as broad an entryway into discussing the video game as being able to write about anything from

narratology, to film theory, to the ludic aspects (which would certainly be intimidating), to breaking those ideas up into individual categories.

We'll use Irrational Games's *Bioshock Infinite* as our baseline for this standard. With *Bioshock Infinite*, students could analyze Elizabeth's character arc and growth (narratology), the effect of bright lighting throughout the game on the way we see Columbia and its violence (film theory), or even whether your choice of vigor says something about your moral character or astrological sign (ludology)! (see fig. 8).

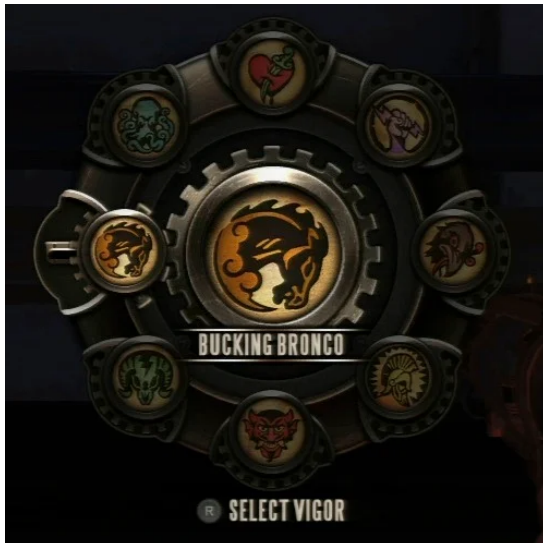


Fig. 8. Vigor selection in *Bioshock Infinite*. Source: "Vigors - BioShock Infinite Wiki Guide." *IGN*, 2 Apr. 2013, [www.ign.com/wikis/bioshock-infinite/Vigors](http://www.ign.com/wikis/bioshock-infinite/Vigors).

Each of these conversations would likely intersect, as each idea is incredibly difficult to discuss in isolation. Essays aren't the only way to write arguments, however. Students could be given smaller writing tasks, like a writing prompt at the beginning of the hour to kick off conversation, like "What effect does playing as Booker Dewitt but not being able

to choose your actions have on your perspective of him and the story?” There are a wide range of topics to write about while covering a video game, and one could write argumentatively while discussing any one of the standards covered in the reading literature section of the CCSS.

The next standard in this section asks students to “write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content” (CCSSI). The standard is nearly identical to the previous one, except that instead of writing argumentatively, students must write explanatory texts. Here a teacher’s focus might be in asking students to examine and explore specific topics or aspects within the video game in short or prolonged writing practice, or perhaps with the use of presentations or projects that involve writing. A teacher could take literary terms like irony and task students with finding and documenting examples of it within the game, and likewise with things like tone, setting, motifs, and more.

We’ll use Ubisoft Montreal’s *Assassin’s Creed II* to discuss this standard. With this game, the most obvious entryway for explanatory examination would be the historical accuracy and tie-in to the game. Students could be asked to examine the historical accuracy of buildings in the midst of the Renaissance in Italy during the 15th and 16th century. Or perhaps they could be tasked with finding out as much as they can about Niccolo Machiavelli through the game, and then to compare it with research that they conduct outside of the game (see fig. 9).



Fig. 9. Machiavelli in *Assassin's Creed Brotherhood*. Source: "Niccolò Machiavelli." *Assassin's Creed Wiki*, [assassinscreed.fandom.com/wiki/Niccol%C3%B2\\_Machiavelli](http://assassinscreed.fandom.com/wiki/Niccol%C3%B2_Machiavelli).

One could go even broader and task students with comparing this video game to others in the series of games or even other historical games. In order to do so, students would pull textual evidence from various moments in the game, and point to narrative, film, and ludic elements.

The last standard in this section asks students to "write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences" (CCSSI). While it would likely be easier to teach narrative writing elsewhere, we can still accomplish this task through video games. Perhaps students could be tasked with writing a short story that contains some of the same themes as the given video game. Or maybe students must lay out their own mission for the game, including writing some character dialogue. One might even task their students in writing an alternative scene for the game, wherein the events of the scene are drastically different. What would have happened if Ezio from *Assassin's Creed II* had



been able to make it to the scaffolding before his family was executed? Beyond these creative writing exercises, students could draw from the video games to write about their own personal experiences. While many video games feature dramatic storylines that we likely wouldn't be able to relate to (such as the execution of your entire family, as just mentioned), many of these same games feature themes or moments we can draw from. In Naughty Dog's *The Last of Us* DLC *Left Behind*, for example, we see the complications of an LGBTQ relationship. A student may connect with this on a personal level and write about some of their own experiences.

The writing standards in the Production and Distribution of Writing category are pretty self explanatory, provided one can effectively teach the previous three standards I've mentioned, so we'll move on to the Research to Build and Present Knowledge section. Here students are tasked with everything related to conducting "short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question or solve a problem". This includes "gathering relevant information from multiple [. . .] sources, and "draw[ing] evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research" (CCSSI). The ticket here would be a research project like the one mentioned earlier in connection to *Assassin's Creed II*. A whole host of things could be researched by students, from the historical accuracy in connection to this game, to how scenes are framed, to the characterization of a character across several iterations (like Laura Croft in the *Tomb Raider* games), to the harm of oversexualized representations of women in video games in general (again, in relation to *Tomb Raider*), and more (see fig. . Any one of these topics would require students to draw textual evidence from a variety of sources, including the

video game(s), short stories or novels on the same subject or character, and even film adaptations. Of course, students would also pull from peer reviewed journals and articles to back up their claim or analysis.

As for the Speaking and Listening standards of the CCSS, take everything that we have discussed in the literature and writing standards, and we can apply them to these standards. Mixed in with short and sustained writing projects, students would hold collaborative one-on-one, group, and teacher-led discussion on any one of the ideas mentioned or anything else connected to the narrative, film, or ludic elements in or inspired by the video games.

## **6. The Unique Benefits of Video Games as Literature**

Now that almost all of the standards for the English Language Arts classroom have been proven to apply to video games, we can accept video games as an occasional and appropriate format to explore in the place of graphic novels and more traditional literature. But we should take a moment to address an idea that I have already mentioned: video games are a profound format not simply because they can be an effective replacement for a novel, but also because they offer new educational opportunities in the ELA classroom that other formats do not. The types of conversations alone that one could have in an ELA classroom when discussing video games would go beyond what could be accomplished with a novel, or even those discussions comparing a film adaptation to its source material; some of these conversations exist outside of what the CCSS would traditionally include for literature.

What allows us to have conversations with video games that we could not have elsewhere is what is described by Espen Aarseth as the ergodic element present in gaming. In Aarseth's book *Cybertext—Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*, he says, "In Ergodic literature, nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text" (Aarseth). These ludic elements simply cannot be explored by traditional literature. What follows will be a description of some of the unique opportunities that video games offer in the classroom that could effectively expand our ideas of what is possible in the English Language Arts classroom.

One such opportunity is the philosophical discussion that could be had about the morality not of the character's choices, but of each *student's* choices. These choices could range from minimal to story altering, but everything is up for consideration. Co-authorship allows for diverse analysis, writing, and discussions. In 2K Games's *BioShock*, whether or not a student decides to harvest little sisters could arguably reveal something about who the player is (see fig. 10).



Fig. 10. Harvest or rescue in *BioShock*. Source: "BioShock: The Little Sister Controversy."

*BioShock: The Little Sister Controversy - Home*, [thelittlesistercontroversy.weebly.com/](http://thelittlesistercontroversy.weebly.com/).

In a sense, video games like this offer philosophical thought experiments that can drive ethical considerations for students. In Marcus Schulzke's article titled "Simulating Philosophy: Interpreting Video Games as Executable Thought Experiments", Schulzke argues that, though many video games do not do so intentionally, they can function like thought experiments that can "introduce, support, or challenge [philosophical and ethical] theories [. . .] without introducing the limitations or dangers associated with conducting experiments in the real world" (Schulzke). While traditional literature can offer discussions on the moral implications of characters' choices, video games offer that and far more personal philosophical experiments that can be both student and teacher driven in the classroom.

Another unique opportunity that video games can offer as a literary text is that of problem solving. Traditional literature can be used to evoke very specific writing prompts, such as, "You are stuck on the same island that our characters in *Lord of Flies* are, and you are tasked with coming up with a management system and delineating tasks to survive". While this problem-solving practice is valuable, everything written or discussed would be merely hypothetical. In a video game, students' problem solving skills are put to the test, and there may be actual implications from the success or failure of said problem solving or lack thereof. Moreover, with stakes at hand, with a minimum stake often being that of continuing in the game, students would likely find their problem-solving skills increasing. According to Paul J. C. Adachi and Teena Willoughby in their research published for the *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, "activities that encourage players to stop and consider different strategies when faced with a problem,

instead of simply using the first strategy that comes to mind, are critical during [adolescence]” (Adachi). Video games can be one of those activities in the classroom. Their study did indeed find a positive relationship between video game play and self-reported problem solving skills, and even a positive relationship between strategic video game play and academic grades (Adachi). While only certain games would work in this regard, with the right guidance from a teacher, students could not only gain traditional reading skills from this literary format, but also increased problem solving abilities.

This boost in problem solving skills would also likely aid students in their creativity. Part of solving a problem involves taking risks and trying to approach the problem from different angles. In many video games, players are given many ways to approach things like combat, puzzles, and even dialogue choices. While there are many who would end up playing the game the same way as the majority, many games offer a variety of solutions to any given problem. For instance, in *Spider-Man*, one may decide to slowly and stealthily tie up all henchmen in an area, while another player uses brute force and wears a suit that boosts their health and damage output (see fig. 11).



Fig. 11. Brute force in *Spider-Man*. "Is Marvel's Spider-Man the Most Overrated Game of 2018?" *PowerUp!*, 19 Dec. 2018, [powerup-gaming.com/2018/12/20/is-marvels-spider-man-the-most-overrated-game-of-2018/](http://powerup-gaming.com/2018/12/20/is-marvels-spider-man-the-most-overrated-game-of-2018/).

Another person may make use of all of the tech that Spider-Man's suit offers, and another might use a mix of all three. One player might attempt these fights early in the game when they haven't yet advanced their abilities and their suit, while another may come to the fight late in the game when it will be far easier to take out the enemies. Examples like this would be present in most games or "texts" that the students would play or read, and would be a natural benefit that they might not otherwise gain through traditional reading.

Video games as literature in the classroom also offer the unique opportunity for cooperative reading and experiences. When covering a novel, there can be a form of cooperation in the reading of the book through the conversations that students have with each other about their thoughts while they engage with the text. A teacher could even have their students work in literature circle groups and share their findings while tracking common themes. However, the reading of the text itself could not be cooperative on a more than superficial level, such as having one person read aloud while another person listens. Something to be considered with video games as texts is that some games offer cooperative play while progressing through the story. Gearbox Software's *Borderlands 3* is a great example of one such game. If students were to read that text in a classroom, the cooperative play would allow for unique approaches and a varied understanding of the story than if the student had read the text in isolation. Students would have to discuss with each other what the best way of defeating a boss would be, or whether or not certain side quests should be completed before moving on to the next story mission. Of course,

there would be benefits from this cooperative play beyond the unique approach to the story.

The very act of students partaking in a cooperative activity, to the surprise of no teacher, forces students to work together to solve problems and oftentimes think out loud. Thoughts can no longer be confined to one's mind, but must be shared for mutual success and understanding. Video games take this cooperative learning to another level, and may even engrain cooperative behavior in the student players. Tobias Greitemeyer and Christopher Cox, in their article titled “There’s no ‘I’ in team: Effects of cooperative video games on cooperative behavior” for the *European Journal of Social Psychology* conducted research to determine whether or not cooperative play would increase cooperative behavior towards a new partner. Their results, while self-admittedly limited in scope, showed an increase in levels of cooperative behavior, cohesion, and trust, after their subjects had played a game with another person versus playing that same game alone (Greitemeyer). These benefits would stem from texts that one wouldn’t usually consider, like a quest from an MMORPG, like *Runescape* (see fig. 12).



Fig. 12. Two players chat in *Runescape*. “Runescape Gameplay.” *Game Studio 101*, 7 Sept.

2013, [gamestudio101.blogspot.com/2013/09/runescapEe-gameplay.html](http://gamestudio101.blogspot.com/2013/09/runescapEe-gameplay.html).

A teacher could take a single quest from that game and offer it to students as a cooperative short story, with the students either completing it side by side at the same time, or working together to complete said quest. Learning cooperative behavior is then yet another standard that we could now consider including in the ELA standards when it comes to covering a text.

Beyond both problem solving and cooperative behavior, cooperative gameplay would allow for increased social interactions in and outside the regular class time. Homework in an ELA classroom (in regard to reading) is usually isolated, but that couldn't be so if students had to play a co-op game, or could talk to each other about their shared progress in the story. Though the focus of schools is often on core academic skills, school also serves to prepare students for the outside world socially. There is a reason that even homeschooled children will get together with other homeschooled students from time to time: students need to develop social skills. While these skills are also developed in any traditional ELA classroom, video games as texts could expand that social interaction and allow students to connect with each other in ways they might never have before, in the same way that students can expand in different ways socially in a physical education class. In a video game like *Runescape*, mentioned earlier, would allow students to see each other in a new way, comparing things like their chosen avatars and in-game items and accomplishments.

One should also consider the increase in communication skills that would come with cooperative video game texts. Communication is certainly something that students will need in life post high school, whether it be in the workplace or in higher education,



and various studies have “demonstrated that playing commercial video games can have a positive effect on communication ability” (Barr). With a cooperative text, students would have to learn how to speak to each other effectively to produce a desired outcome. Ask any gamer why they prefer playing with someone over another, and inevitably the topic of communication or lack thereof will come up. In many games, like *Borderlands 3*, a lack of communication equates to repeated failure. If you do not work together and time who will die when in order to chip away at the boss’s health and ensure that their health isn’t reset, you will be in for a very frustrating experience. All of these reasons make a solid case for cooperative ergodic literature to be included in the ELA classroom.

Yet another opportunity that video games allow for in the ELA classroom is giving students a chance to be their own director and see their choices reverberate through the narrative. We have discussed how these choices might be viewed from a philosophical perspective, but how about a playwright’s? Or the director or actor? Video games are much like the newer form of interactive palys. Daniel and Sidney Homan write in their article “The Interactive Theater of Video Games: The Gamer as Playwright, Director, and Actor” that video games are similar to the concept of stage shows that involve audience participation. These performances, that involve things like the audience being able to get up close, ask questions of the characters on stage and more, become more alive due to the audience participation, and video games also offer this (Homan). In a video game, players have even more say in what happens in the narrative (in certain games), and can affect the very outcome of the story. Even if the outcome of the story doesn’t have room for change, the player directs what is focused on in the same way that

an audience member for a theater production chooses where to focus their attention. So, as Homan argues, reading or playing a video game becomes a case of “sharing creation, enhancing it, recognizing that a work, whether a straight play or a video game is a transaction among artist, actor, and audience, and that those roles need not remain distinct” (Homan 184). In this way, video games can function as an evolved and more complex literary format for the ELA classroom.

One final unique opportunity that video games as literature can offer in the classroom is the forms of assessment and various projects that could be assigned. As discussed earlier, one could and should certainly ask students to do extended writing projects in relation to the texts, in the form of research papers, narratives, and argumentative papers. But one would be severely lacking in imagination if they didn't explore other opportunities for assessment. For example, students could be asked to design their own game, perhaps framed around the same kind of theme(s) that were covered with another game that was read in the class. They would justify things like what weapons or objects are included in the game, what the setting is like, what the main characters would be like, and more. Or perhaps students could do a similar project asking them to create their own level or chapter for a game already covered, either for main characters or a side character. Rather than literally coding a game, students would be able to use a mix of writing with artwork in the form of drawings, paintings, or 3D modeling, or even with physical crafting through media like clay, woodworking, or metal. Perhaps students could even be asked to conduct interviews via email or Zoom with a game designer or developer.

For another assignment, students could be asked to do specific tasks *within the game*. With a novel, a student might be asked to plot the character arc of the main character. With a video game that offers player choice, a student could be asked to create several arcs for the same character, depending on what choices are made. Or a student could be tasked with defeating a game in a very particular way and writing about what their experience was like in comparison with regular play. This is much like what was mentioned earlier with choosing stealth over wizardry in a game like *Skyrim*. Students could even be asked to make different choices to create a different ending to the game, culminating in a writing project or presentation about the different perspectives that were gained from this. Being an English teacher is a practice in developing concepts with students in new and exciting ways and exploring new avenues—video games as literature is an entirely new avenue to explore.

## **7. Logistical Hurdles**

In order to accomplish the aforementioned task of teaching various ELA CCSS, there are many logistical hurdles to including video games as literature in the classroom that would have to be overcome. For each issue, it is worth taking the time to explore the problem and provide a possible solution. Creating a unit plan with the standards provided earlier is certainly possible, but it is also highly hypothetical in nature—actually executing said unit plan would be another matter entirely, and each issue should be addressed so that the use of video games as literature in the classroom can become a reality.

Perhaps the biggest hurdle a teacher would face would be that of backlash or misunderstanding from the community, principal, school board, and even fellow educators. A study on the perceptions from teachers of video game based learning from Hannah R. Gerber and Debra P. Price for *Educational Media International*, found that teachers fear “that they would be perceived as less of a teacher by their colleagues for bringing popular culture into classroom learning [ . . . ] regardless of if administrative support exists” (Gerber 60). Fellow educators, especially those veterans who have been in the field for a long time, might be resistant to change and be quick to judge a form of media they do not have much experience with. The solution to this problem would be for the teacher to communicate with their colleagues about their methods and intent in using video games as literature in the classroom. Though a teacher’s colleagues may not wish to use the texts themselves, they should eventually reach a point of understanding and support. If not, one may have to rely on the principal’s support alone. The principal’s support, along with the school board’s, would hinge on this same idea. A teacher would have to be completely prepared to defend their use of video games with a well-written plan and example lesson plans and units. One could not go into this idea half-baked.

Community and parental support may be a bit trickier. Of course, a teacher would not have to worry about this until they have the support of the principal and the school board. If a teacher has secured this support, this would aid a teacher’s defense to the community. Parents would likely not be able to see video games in an educational light from the start. They are used to seeing video games in their household as a choice that their kids make in their free time, and certainly not for educational purposes. A teacher’s

job, then, to get their support, would be to prove the value in studying a video game as literature. Use of the information above would help, and a teacher may also start with a small set of lesson plans, like a single chapter from a video game, and use student feedback and results to justify the use of a video game as a text. In my own experience, it is far easier to justify a lesson after having already done it in semesters past with success. At the very start, it may mean starting on a small scale.

Another hurdle to including video games in the classroom would be the cost of the endeavor. Books in an ELA classroom cost money, but the level of funding needed for certain video games would be much higher. Any of the games I have mentioned in this paper would likely be at least ten dollars, and for even a small class size of 20, you're looking at \$200 for a single text. And that's if you can guarantee that all students have access to the hardware needed to play the video games in the first place! Students would need access to gaming consoles, like the Xbox, Playstation, Switch, or a computer (and not just any computer). In my district students are one-to-one with chromebooks, but chromebooks cannot play anything but small mobile games. Most classroom budgets couldn't afford a single video game console to loan out to students, let alone several. But there are some ways to deal with the price.

One way to alleviate some of the cost would be to have students pay for their own copies of the video games that the teacher intends to teach. In my research, this is the exact method that several of the teachers used. Mark Clutton, mentioned earlier, had students pay for their copies of games, and in order to help out students who wouldn't be able to afford this, "the school's equity fund was used for students who were not in a

financial situation to buy their own copies, and some students played through together” (Clutton 66). This would also alleviate some of the issue with wealth inequality when it comes to more “expensive” teaching. A school’s equity fund would ensure everyone who wanted to participate would be able to. But a teacher would still have the problem of sufficient hardware for every student.

In order to alleviate the cost of hardware, a teacher would have to go a different route. If a school were one-to-one with laptops with Windows, the route would be relatively easy. Students could create accounts on Steam and download digital copies of games. But not every school would have this, and no classroom budget could accommodate securing hardware for every student, even with a small class.

One way that a school might get some hardware would be through the support of tech companies. Adam Evans, a teacher who wrote of the pros and cons of virtual reality in the classroom, explains that “companies like Microsoft are eager to work with colleges to create the next generation of tech-centered curricula” and he goes on to argue that “tech companies need to offer benefits beyond minor discounts” if they want to see changes in education (Evans). Tech companies, and even game studios, would likely be very excited by the prospect of their games and hardware being used in ways they had never imagined. If they were able to help some teachers get the ball rolling, they would be able to gain revenue from a new avenue, and would be able to boast of their efforts to collaborate with schools around the nation. With this in mind, these companies may be willing to offer some discounts and perhaps even some hardware.

Yet another way that a teacher may be able to get over the hurdle of hardware would be through fundraising campaigns. While hardware is expensive, it would usually last for at least 5 years, so the fundraising would only have to happen every so often. A teacher may apply for the various grants that appear now and again, and since this is a cutting edge curriculum, odds would be in their favor in being able to secure a grant or two. Additionally, a teacher might use something like *DonorsChoose*, a website for educators to secure funding for things in their classroom. Sometimes companies will even match any donations given to the campaign. Finally, if the school board were truly in favor of the endeavor to use video games as literature in the ELA classroom, they may even set aside some of the budget for this purpose. Unfortunately, cost is just one additional hurdle in the effort to use video games as literature.

The difficulty level of the video games also need to be considered. Much in the same way that certain novels could be beyond the abilities of some students, some video games could be far too difficult to progress in to be viable for students. Luckily, almost every story game has different levels of difficulty to choose from, and most offer a level even below easy--story mode (see fig. 13).



Fig. 13. Difficulty choices for *Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order*. Source: Kuchera, Ben. "At Least Try the Game on Story Mode, You Feel like a Killing Machine." *Polygon*, Polygon, 15 Nov. 2019, [www.polygon.com/2019/11/15/20966904/star-wars-jedi-fallen-order-difficulty-options-accessibility](http://www.polygon.com/2019/11/15/20966904/star-wars-jedi-fallen-order-difficulty-options-accessibility).

In these modes, enemies are much weaker, the avatar you control is much stronger, and sometimes entire sections of the game are removed, all so a player can focus on the story rather than the gameplay. This would help inexperienced students tackle difficulty in regard to enemies. But what about other kinds of difficulty?

Imagine a teacher assigns a single chapter of a game to be completed for class the next day. The teacher has a lesson prepared wherein students will get in groups, answer a writing prompt, and discuss various aspects of their play experience and the story itself. Students come to class, but before some even reach their desks, they come to the teacher flustered because they couldn't get past a small section of the level that asked them to jump from one platform to another (see fig. 14).

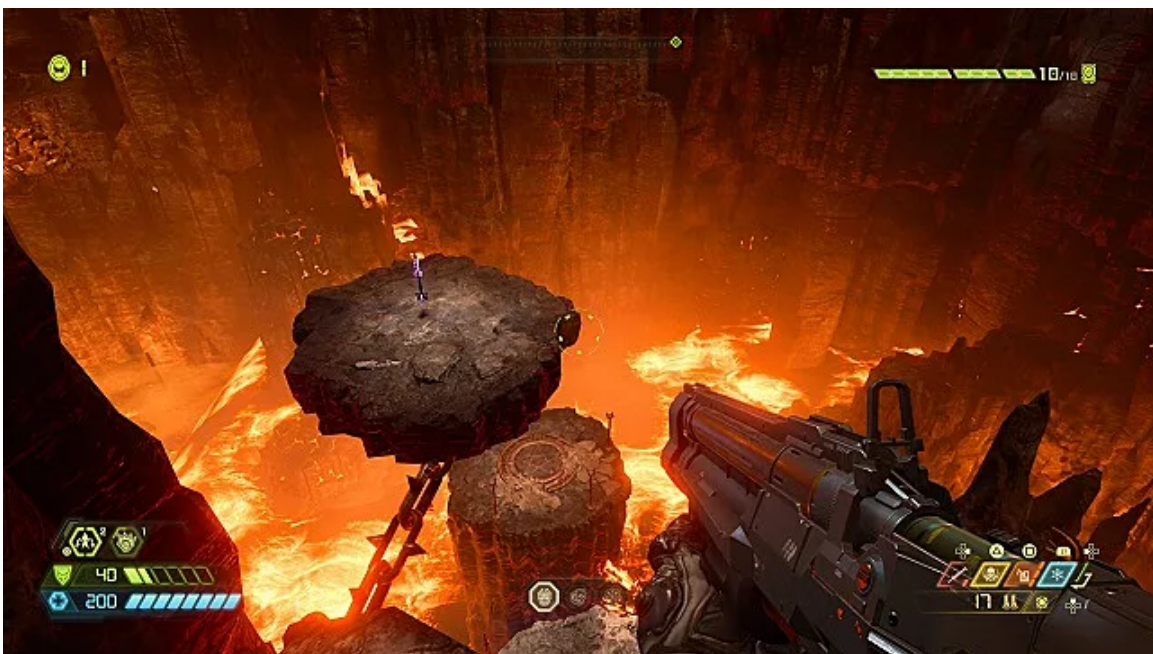




Fig. 14. A player about to platform in *Doom Eternal*. Source: Schutt, John. "Doom Eternal Guide: How to Find Every Slayer Key." *Game Skinny*, GameSkinny, 24 Mar. 2020, [www.gameskinny.com/wud8j/doom-eternal-guide-how-to-find-every-slayer-key](http://www.gameskinny.com/wud8j/doom-eternal-guide-how-to-find-every-slayer-key).

Platforming, as it's called in video games, would likely be one of the few things not affected by the chosen difficulty level of the game, and a teacher would certainly have students in the class who have never had to use one joystick (or WASD on a keyboard) to control movement, and another joystick (or mouse) to control a camera, all at once. For these inexperienced players, there are several methods a teacher might offer as help. For one, a teacher may allow two students to progress through a game together, pairing an inexperienced student with a student who regularly plays games.

Another solution to the difficulty problem could come in the form of something more simple: video playthroughs. For any video game under the sun, someone, somewhere, has created a video playthrough of the game, sometimes with commentary, sometimes without, and uploaded it to *YouTube*. A teacher may even create their own video playthrough if they want to ensure all content would be appropriate. A student would still be able to complete all the same standards mentioned in this paper, but with some slight variations. Rather than reflecting on their own choices within a video game, the student could reflect on the choices that the player chose. Watching someone else play the game would immediately remove any danger of the game being too difficult to complete, but it also offers a solution to another hurdle with covering video games in the classroom.

Whenever a teacher considers lessons, whether it be a short story or something lengthier, like a novel unit, they have to consider how much time it will take for a student to do that work. With a short story, one might be able to surmise a 20-40 minute time commitment from student to student. A video game level or side mission used as a short story, however, could take significantly longer. If the mission is on a particular point of the map, simply getting to the mission could take time. And how long does it take for a student to read a novel? The average novel takes about 5-6 hours to read, though one could assume this would get closer to 10 hours of students sitting down, getting the book ready, interruptions with phones, etc. A blockbuster video game with a story mode, on the other hand, can average about 20 hours, with a focus on the story missions alone. There are several ways that a teacher might tackle this problem. Besides limiting oneself by choosing games that are shorter, a teacher might offer the use of a video playthrough, so students would be able to ensure their time commitment or supplement gameplay with the video.

Another way to get around both time commitment *and* difficulty could be resolved through communication with the video game developers ahead of time. In the same way that Mojang has released an educational version of *Minecraft* for classrooms that was created specifically with lessons in mind, a teacher may be able to get a studio to develop a version of their game that more easily lends itself to being used as an educational tool (see fig. 15).



Fig. 15. *Minecraft Education Edition* with a lesson on Maori culture. Source: Jawad, Hamza. “Minecraft: Education Edition Gets a New World Focused on the Māori Culture [Update].” *Neowin*, 8 Sept. 2019, [www.neowin.net/news/minecraft-education-edition-gets-a-new-world-focused-on-the-mori-culture/](http://www.neowin.net/news/minecraft-education-edition-gets-a-new-world-focused-on-the-mori-culture/).

Some things a studio might be able to do via a software update would include removal of platforming (either by connecting the structures or by allowing the player to teleport or fly from one spot to another) and the complete reduction of threat from enemy AI to reduce difficulty. In order to reduce time constraints, the easiest thing a developer could do in a very linear game would be to allow level selection without any prior play of the game. In an open world game, the developer might add a feature wherein players can teleport to the desired location. In a future where video games as literature in the classroom is not an irregularity, developers will have to keep educational tools in mind.

## 8. Conclusion

This paper has attempted to prove that video games are not only worthwhile as a field of study by themselves, but also as a literary text within a classroom through the intersectional study of narratology, film theory, and ludology. Almost all of the standards required by the Common Core State Standards Initiative can be covered in some way through the proper video game, with many opportunities for unique approaches. I have even shown that there are many benefits to the classroom that video games as literature could offer that traditional literature simply cannot, such as more telling philosophical discussions about player choice, boosts in problem-solving skills and creativity, opportunities for cooperative reading that could boost cooperative behavior, positive social interaction, and communication skills, the ability to act as a theater director, and many unique project options. All of this was evidenced through specific examples from a multitude of games, many of which could be considered as the basis for several lessons or a unit plan.

We then discussed the elements that a teacher should consider when trying to find a game of literary merit. These included kernels and satellites, the world and ludic space, objects and characters, accolades, and maturity level. A teacher may also have to establish some basic video game vocabulary, and even some video game theory specific vocabulary. Finally, we spent some time tackling the various hurdles that a teacher would have to consider when trying to implement video game study in the classroom, such as community and faculty support, cost, difficulty, and time.

In a world blossoming with new technology, an English teacher would be remiss if they did not consider the inclusion of video games as literature in their classroom. While introducing this new literary format into the classroom is no simple endeavor, it would be a worthwhile experience for both student and teacher, and would be an exciting new addition to any ELA classroom. Reading with traditional novels will never go away, and never should, but the inclusion of new literary formats, like graphic novels, film, and video games, is a necessity for a classroom that wishes to challenge students in new ways, and to consider that the media they already consume could have educational merit.

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