Chapter 13
Game/Write:
Gameplay as a Factor in College-Level Literacy and Writing Ability

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the potential correlation between college students' leisurely video game experience and their narrative composition writing ability in a first-semester university writing course. This exploratory survey data report moderate correlations between students' aggregated video game experience (years spent playing) and their ability to articulate tension and turn, and use proper organization in composition assignments, notably a diagnostic essay assigned on the first day of class, prior to formal instruction. Findings suggest that leisure gameplay might help develop competency with the same cognitive and creative skills related to written narrative ability by exposing players – in particular, adolescents – to elements of narrative through the gameplay process, facilitating the learning of these skills in the classroom. In conclusion, the authors suggest areas for future research on this topic.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter explores correlations between college students' video gaming diets, or time playing video games, and their writing ability in order to answer the question: Does time playing games translate into effective navigation of the narrative features of written literacy? Our research looked at the intersection of entertainment computing qua video gaming and compositional writing ability qua scholastic performance on written assignments. Such a question is particularly germane to understanding the impact of

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video gaming on larger socio-cultural change. How so? Video gaming is among the most popular leisure pastimes across several target demographics for STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) learners in middle school, high school and college. Related to this, compositional writing ability has been identified as a key component of STEM education. Our study attempts to begin fusing two rather disparate activities, leisurely video game play and composition education, to suggest the potential for non-directed and leisurely gaming habits to have the potential to impact composition ability, which in turn might both foster an appreciation for composition while also suggesting games to be more than simple and mindless diversions. As detailed below, video game research has suggested that narrative is an important feature of video game play and it is also a key component of written composition. Given this connection, and the lack of directed research on narrative in games and composition, we are prompted to ask if there may be a connection between video game play and student success with the written features of narrative, which might in turn foster a renewed appreciation for narrative concepts and constructs. Specifically, our core research question asks (**RQ1**): Is there a statistically significant correlation between gaming diet and observed compositional abilities?

In our concluding section, we propose future directions for research to examine additional research questions that follow from these results. Our project was unique in combining quantitative approaches to game play with research in literacy and composition, and arose from an interdisciplinary team with scholars from the disciplines of literature, composition, and communications. A review of the literature provides evidence to propose the falsifiable hypothesis that there may be meta-cognitive aspects of narrative composition that apply across media forms. Put simply, while we often think of composition in terms of the specific act of writing essays, the essential elements of good composition—tension and turn, resolution and conclusion, description and detail, and organization—are not necessarily specific to a textual medium; indeed, they are the same elements of good narrative found in film, television, video games, and other media. Such a correlation might prove useful as educators continue to emphasize narrative communication skills in various speaking, writing, and STEM curriculum, as it suggests that students' regular video game play might be an unexpected source of narrative and composition skill.

In the following, we briefly summarize research on the centrality of narrative to video game play and the importance of narrative to written literacy, including emerging scholarship on the nature of videogame play as an act of composition (Alberti, 2008; Robison, 2008). We then connect this literature review to our research question, describing the preliminary study carried out at West Virginia University in the fall of 2014. Finally, we speculate on future directions for our research and offer hypotheses towards understanding what elements of narrative in video game, if any, transfer to other writing contexts.

BACKGROUND

Narrative, Defined

As formulated by Labov and Waletzky (1967), a narrative of personal experience is defined with three elements: an orientation, which focuses the reader on the background of characters involved; a complicating action, or a chain of events that results in the climax or "most reportable event" of a narrative (cf. Ouyang & McKeown, 2014); and the narrator's evaluation, in which the reader learns the narrator's dispositions towards the characters. Labov (2013) later considered the abstract as well as a resolution and coda, or the elements to end the narrative. In simpler form, Labov (1972) defined narratives as "a