Storytelling in video games: a literary analysis of tropes and mechanics of the first-person shooter genre

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Introduction

Video games are a massive segment of the media industry, totaling $180.3 billion in global sales in 2021. While other popular media sectors such as film have become widely accepted subjects of literary analysis, most scholarly articles on video games focus on the technologies they implement from a design perspective rather than their narrative capabilities. This is a rich area of potential study; many video games prioritize storytelling in a way that their players find deeply engaging and impactful.

With this in mind, I chose to write a report on some of the storytelling tools unique to video games which make them a powerful medium for storytelling and engaging the audience with a narrative. I focused specifically on the first-person shooter genre of game, using one of my personal favorite titles, *Halo: Reach*, as an example to illustrate these storytelling mechanics.

Player/Character Identification

A common topic when analyzing fictional media is its ability to make the audience empathize with the main character, allowing them to experience a perspective other than their own. First-person games capitalize on this ability of fiction, but often blur the lines between the player’s perspective/control and the character’s perspective/autonomy along a spectrum. Some first-person games give the player control of a protagonist character with no customization allowed. While the player controls the character’s actions, the character’s identity and appearance are predetermined, and the player experiences the game through the lens of the character. Some games give the player complete control of the protagonist through dialogue/action choices and a character creation menu. The “player-character’s” appearance and every action is determined by the player, and they serve purely as an empty vessel for the player to inhabit.

*Halo: Reach* falls between these two extremes. *Reach* prompts the player to select the protagonist’s armor and voice (pictured below), allowing the player to identify more strongly with the protagonist character, but their background and choices are predetermined.

Player Immersion

Immersion is a term commonly used by video game players to quantify the extent to which a game can make them feel like they’re “in” the experience. It’s synonymous with suspension of disbelief, but often goes further; in addition to helping the audience “buy into” the story, immersion helps a player feel as if the events occurring in the game are actually happening to them, and/or make the world of the game feel more “real” and three-dimensional. The first-person genre focuses heavily on immersion. The game’s “camera” is fixed to the player-character’s point of view, placing the player more firmly in the body of their character and giving them more of a feeling of direct control over the character’s actions. Some games, such as *Halo: Reach*, design elements of the game’s user interface to look like natural (or at least unintrusive) parts of the character’s vision.

Interactivity and Involvement

The biggest difference between video games and other forms of media is the focus on interactivity. The audience is not a passive observer of the narrative; instead, they are required to interact with the game for the story to progress. This can help create a greater connection to the player-character’s actions within the narrative, as they are effectively the player’s own actions even if they were not given a choice whether or not to perform them. The interactive component is the entire draw of video games as a medium. Having the player engage directly with the narrative creates a sense of involvement in that narrative that can draw the player into the game and encourage greater identification with the character.

Pictured above: various in-game objectives and items require the player to interact with them to progress the story. Some academic papers on game design consider player involvement to be a more useful and concrete metric than player immersion.