What Do Video Games and Writing Have in Common?

Andrew Taylor

Whether or not you've stormed Bowser's castle as Mario, faced off against an army of Covenant soldiers as Master Chief, or rolled the world up into a katamari as The Prince of All Cosmos, you likely know that video games speak in a language all their own. To those initiated into their worlds, video games blossom at the touch of a button into a realm of possibilities. But to many others, they seem a baffling prospect. I have often heard my relatives and friends, unpracticed in the art of playing video games, comment on how games have gotten too complicated these days, with all their buttons and confusing objectives. "I like *Super Mario Bros.*," they often say with a sigh. "*That* game was fun." When I ask for specific reasons why *Super Mario Bros.* is considered the pinnacle of gaming achievement, the answer I receive most often is "there's only three buttons to press." So is that it? The captivating world of our most interactive medium barred to millions because of a complex control scheme? They just don't care enough to learn, that's all.

Andrew graduated with an MA in literature from Western Michigan University and plans to pursue doctoral study in the near future. When he's not writing or working diligently, he's probably playing some form of video game. He's convinced that electronic media hold untapped storytelling potential and will continue to hold his breath in anticipation for the next big breakthrough. His primary research interests are Anglo-Saxon languages and literature, new media, and their intersection, medievalism. Andrew currently resides happily in Kalamazoo, Michigan, with his wife and his two cats.

Or so I thought. Over the years I have pondered the answers I have received upon asking this question, and slowly built what I consider to be a major reason why the world I love so much is inaccessible to so many. My wife is responsible for a great deal of my revelations in this area. When we first started dating she began playing a particularly favorite game of mine. She could not, however, progress beyond the very beginning; she kept dying. I tried to coach her, reassure her that it takes time, but she simply could not jump in time, could not swing her sword fast enough, could not shield herself before her enemies' blows landed. Tentatively, I asked her what was wrong. She responded, "I just can't press the buttons fast enough. I take too long thinking about it." There it was—an answer I had been looking for.

I would ask a favor of you, dear reader. Raise your right arm for a moment. Go on; just raise your right arm and then let it fall…thank you. Now let me ask, how exactly did you raise your arm? Did you think, "Well, first I have to send a motor impulse racing down the nerves into my arm, flex and relax certain muscles, then hold those muscles steady for a moment before relaxing my arm and letting it fall gently to my side"? Of course you didn't. Most of us have spent our entire lives manipulating muscles in very complicated ways to the point where we don't have to direct ourselves mentally—we simply do it subconsciously. Now, return to my wife's statement. Since she was so new at video games, she had to essentially follow that laborious path I just described in order to jump:

> "Okay, so now I need to jump."

> "Let's see, to jump I need to press the X button."

> "Where is the X button?"

> "Right here."

> "Okay, so now I need to press it."

> *press*

Alas, by the time this complicated scheme has played out in the space of a mere second, the blow has landed, the opportunity has been missed, and my wife is dead.

I, on the other hand, have had a lifetime of practice. I received my first Nintendo Entertainment System on my 5th Christmas, and since then have grown on a diet of increasingly complicated demands on my neural circuitry.[1] Now think about how you raised your arm. You just did it

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[1] Steven Johnson's book *Everything Bad is Good for You* argues that the complicated demands modern popular culture places on our brains are actually making us smarter. It's an interesting theory that runs counter to traditional thought on modern television and video games.

without thinking, right? A person who began playing video games at a very young age will do the very same thing. When playing the same game as my wife, I don't follow that lengthy mental process; when I have to jump, my mind does all the work for me, moving my thumb a bit down and to the side from neutral position and pressing. It's simply how you jump. Why think about it?

"So, what does this have to do with writing?" some of you may be asking. It provides an example for considering how our brains can become so amazingly adjusted to a specific task that we no longer have to think about it. It becomes engrained into the way our minds function and makes our work easier, particularly if that work is something we do regularly.

But this feature of our brain is a double-edged sword. It's wonderful that our minds can adapt so readily to a specific action or way of thinking, but what happens when that action or way of thinking is changed? How will the brain respond? I'll illustrate, again, with a video game. Let's say, for example, I've just finished playing through the game previously mentioned. I've spent approximately 30 hours over the course of a few weeks existing in this world where you press X to jump, O to raise your shield, and square to attack. These motor functions are now firmly embedded in my brain. But now I'm finished with the game, so I move on to a new one. In this new world, however, the X button is assigned to 'attack' and the square button is assigned to 'jump'; the O button only brings up the menu. It is during the first hour or so of gameplay that I have the most difficulty; often I will jump when I want to attack, or I will accidentally bring up the menu when an enemy is about to strike. My brain, so entrenched in the old ways of doing things, needs time to adjust to this new method of acting. Fortunately, my long years of practice have also conditioned me for this process, and I am able to switch between control schemes with relative ease.

It might be helpful to look at our writing in a similar way, especially if we've been writing in pretty much the same way for most of our lives. Think of how many times average college freshmen had to write an essay in junior high and high school. It's very likely that the essay format accounted for almost all of their formal writing during that time. And so its conventions have been burned into their heads to where they use them at a nearly subconscious level. So what happens when an instructor asks students to write a formal argumentative letter? While some make the transition successfully, the majority of students retain some or all of the conventions of an essay as they learned them: headers consisting of name, class, instructor, and date, overly large paragraphs, rhetorical thesis statements, etc. While these features work well within the genre of essay (as hazily defined as that genre may be), they seem out of place in an argumentative letter. I don't suggest this is because of some deficiency on students' part; a seasoned newspaper editor of 30 years would very likely struggle if she tried to write poetry for the first time. It would probably sound a lot like journalism. In fact, in writing this article

I struggled to ensure that it didn't sound like literary criticism, a genre that I've been writing for most of my time as an post-secondary student. Every writer can easily get wrapped up in familiar genres.

Luckily for us, our brains don't become so hardwired that we *can't* get out of our familiar ways of doing things. Just as seasoned gamers can switch between control schemes with a little fiddling, so too can a writer learn how to transition more smoothly between writing genres. There are two things that you can do to streamline this process. The first is a simple knowledge that there are many, MANY ways of writing that reach far beyond what most people have encountered. Understanding that there will be times when you will need to switch genres and knowing that you're going to meet with resistance from your brain is the first step in this process. The second step is a bit more complicated, and so I will turn again to video games for an example.

There is another reason why I am better at video games than my wife. I have learned, through my years of playing, that in order to be successful in any game I had to learn what I was capable of doing in each particular game world. Generally, video games present the player with a great many obstacles, all which must be overcome to progress to the end of the game. Sometimes these obstacles are simply internalizing the controls to the degree where the player's movements become fluid enough to defeat certain enemies or other players; some require a great deal of tactical planning; others involve solving puzzles to reach the end. But in every one of these games, the player will increase her odds of completion greatly if she takes the time early on to explore the boundaries of that particular game world. She must ascertain what she can and can't do there and define her repertoire of interaction. She must ask, "In what ways can I interact within this particular game?" When the player knows what tools are at her disposal and how she is allowed to use them, her odds of success are greatly increased, while her odds of frustrated confusion and inability to progress are lessened. So, to illustrate, by knowing all the ways in which you can interact with blocks in a puzzle game, the player will be less likely to overlook the solution and will solve it more quickly. She knows that he cannot act outside of the preconditions of the game, and so modifies her problem-solving process to only include what is possible.

Though the boundaries of writing are much more hazily defined and open-ended, it is helpful to consider a similar process when approaching an unfamiliar genre. By knowing what your intended purpose is, what tools are at your disposal, and how people expect the genre to look, you can eliminate a great deal of uncertainty from your writing tasks. Why go through all the mental strain considering possibilities that are not feasible when you could narrow your options and choose what you think will work the best? Of course, bounding yourself in should not always be your plan—after you've gained some familiarity with a certain genre and understand well its governing conventions, you might decide to start pushing on the boundaries you've previously established and see where

you might take it. Actually utilizing this process in writing is, admittedly, far more difficult than in video games. In writing, there is not some developer who keeps you boxed in. Your options are limitless, and so there are many paths open to you that will lead to confusion on the part of your reader.

There are, nevertheless, steps you can take to write successfully by exploring your options. The first is simply knowing that not all writing is produced in the same way. Understanding that you may need to approach the task in front of you differently than previous writing projects will help you stay on your toes and analyze the expected genre critically. Then, you could ask yourself a number of questions to start building the boundaries of your writing project:

1. "Who am I writing to?"—Think carefully about your intended audience. The characteristics of that audience can give you vital clues in how to structure your work and guidelines for word-choice and phrasing. You would write a letter to your 6-year-old niece differently than you would a prospective employer. And writing terminology can be tricky; the term 'memoir,' for example, might mean different things to others (like your teachers) than it means to you. If possible, try to figure out what is expected of you instead of simply assuming that your idea of a genre is shared by others.

2. "How have others written in this genre?"—Odds are *someone* will have written a successful example of your genre. It may help to see how the author wrote, how she organized her information, how she appealed to the reader, and a host of other undefinables. You're not alone in writing, so don't hesitate to learn from others.

3. "What do I hope to accomplish?"—Successful writers rarely just sit down and write masterpieces. It is immensely helpful to have a plan in mind before jumping into composition. Think about what you want to include and exclude, what ideas and feelings you want to impart to your reader. Having this type of information in advance keeps your writing focused and limits rambling.

These are just a few of the many questions you could ask yourself to set up boundaries. This way you won't be overwhelmed by the limitless possibilities, but you'll still have room to move. Also, by consistently thinking about your writing task critically, as the questions above make you do, you'll increase your flexibility when faced with new writing tasks. There is always the danger of forming a new cognitive rut, as I experience with a new video game and *all* writers experience with new forms of writing. But as you spend more time carefully considering your writing choices, you'll be able to move from genre to genre with greater ease.