Enhancing Narrative Writing Skills through Action-Adventure Video Games

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Abstract

Video games have become a big part of a student's life. With the influence of massively marketed commercial games, teachers can no longer ignore the role it plays in the student's overall development. This research investigates the link between commercial video games and the teaching and learning of the English language, specifically, narrative writing. This research utilized a pre-experimental research design on 4 respondents using the Sony PlayStation 3 gaming console and Naughty Dog Inc's "UNCHARTED 2: Among Thieves" video game. The results of the research show that there are several narrative elements in the video game which differs from the standard narrative structure used in an English language classroom and these elements were transferred to the respondents who played the game, as evidenced in their post-experience narrative essay. The three features of the game: Three-Act Narrative Structure, Double-Climax feature and the existence of the Orientation suggest the positive influences of the video game on the respondents' narrative writing ability. From the results of this research, teachers will be able to tap into the educational potential of commercial video games to further enrich their writing class by integrating commercial video games into their narrative writing class. It challenges ESL teachers to break out of their traditional methodologies and use commercial video games as a tool to enrich the students' learning experience and retention.

Keywords: Narrative writing, video games, three act structure, narrative structure, ESL

1. Introduction

The idea of adapting games into the classroom is not new. Coleman (1971) maintained his three stances which describes gaming as an agent of experiential learning, attention grabber, and aids the conversion of teachers' role to a helper and coach. These stances are still being supported by proponents of video game-based learning.

There is an element in a game-based approach which will greatly enhance student's engagement in the classroom, immediate feedback. In a video game, we instantly see the results of our actions and assessments are provided in-game with story progression, item/gold accumulation or scores. Traditionally, feedbacks of a particular task are given orally or through comments in the submitted homework. Negative feedbacks are the major source of student-teacher confrontation. Letting the game perform the job of giving feedback and assessment, teachers can now play a supportive role rather than the opponents to the students.

It is an undeniable fact that narrative writing is one of the most difficult concepts to teach in an English writing class. However, Shih (1986) found that the students become better attuned to the language if teachers put the process of writing as the focus of their teaching. Thus, it is common to hear English teachers complain about which methodology is best suited to teach a subjective and creative topic such as narrative writing.

In the Malaysian context, teachers and even educators in universities have been trying to prescribe a methodology on teaching narrative writing. However, only a small minority would turn to Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) as a possible solution and how many would actually realize that youths of this generation are very much technologically savvy? By exploiting this trend, we might be able to integrate technology into the classroom on a whole new level, beyond the initial theories of CALL. Video games, a form of entertainment enjoyed by youths and adults alike hold a well of potential in aiding language learning. In this research, I will be looking at how playing a specific genre of video games will influence the narrative writing skills of a Malaysian ESL learner.

2.0. Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to:

1. Investigate the attitudes of the players when playing an action -adventure video game.
2. Identify the effects on the players' narrative writing after being exposed to the narratives in the video game.

2.1. Students, Education, and Video Games

It is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore the role of commercial video games in the lives of an average student since the inception of the first gaming console in the 1990s. As pointed out by Becker (2007), the current generation's culture of passing their time demands interaction and video games filled the needs of the current generation's culture. With its development so interrelated with youths' development, educational issues are

bound to arise. The biggest concern is that playing video games may adversely affect the students' academic performance (Gentile, Lunch, Linder & Walsh, 2004). In a study done by Barr, Noble & Biddle (2007) found out that student gamers spent an excessive amount of money, time, effort and concentration on video games. In a review done by Harris (2004), video games were stated as the cause of students performing poorly in schools and created less sociable attitudes. This is due to the fact that hardcore gamers tend to isolate themselves from other students. Thus, it is understood that parents and educators alike are expressing their concern about the negative effects of video games.

Despite all the concerns, it is almost impossible to separate current generation youths from video games. According to Wittwer and Senkbeil (2008), computers had little or if not no significant influence on a students' academic achievement no matter how they use it; be it for learning or entertainment. On the other hand, Cagiltay (2007) found that video games can positively influence a students' academic performance, motivation (Schaefer & Warren, 2007), attention (Roussoe, 2004), and initiative to learn something new (Bailey & Moar, 2001). Therefore, it would seem that the numerous research and studies done contradicted each other. What the previous research failed to do is to separate personal choice and the psychological influences of video games. Educational purist looked at video games with bias and prejudice, assuming results and constructed their methodology to suit their assumption, ignoring its benefits. What educators should do is not to argue trivial adverse psychological effects of video games but to exploit this video gaming culture for their educational development, teachers are encouraged to integrate some forms of gaming in their lessons to promote meaningful learning and students' self-development.

However, these researches were often foreign-based, carried out mainly in developed western countries (Yee et al, 2009). Little was done to study the effects of video games among Malaysian students. Malaysia, like many other Asian countries perceives school as a rigid place of learning of standardized knowledge (Tan & Law, 2004) and that learning revolves around memorization and geared towards scoring for a public examination. Video games are seen as a distraction, a waste of money and used solely for entertainment. This paradigm not only hampers students' ability to generate new, creative and innovative ideas, but it also made students' lose interest and perceive the teachers' lesson as dull and boring (Eow & Roselan, 2008). If parents and educators can set-aside their current perception of video games and accept the culture of video gaming, equilibrium could be reached and commercial video games can finally be exploited for its educational values.

2.2. The Video Game Narrative Structure

Narrative functions differently in video games than it does in other existing media. Celia Pearce (2001) described video games as a platform for structured play. She states that, in the majority of the cases, this form of structured play will include some type of goal, obstacles to that goal, resources to help the player achieve the goal, as well as consequences, in the form of penalties and rewards. At its core, a generic deconstructed narrative structure could be formed from these elements. Craig Lidley (2005), in his paper *Story and Narrative Structure*, named the three-act restorative structure as the common narrative used in video game writing. This structure is modeled after Joseph Campbell's analysis of the structure of myths and is widely used in literature, drama and film scriptwriting (Vogler, 1988). The three-act restorative structure consist of a beginning (the first act) where a conflict is established, followed by the enactment of the implications of the conflict (the second act), and is completed by the final resolution of the conflict (the third act) (Dancyger & Rush, 1995). This structure features a central character(the hero), a conflict introduced in the first act involving a dilemma of normative morality, a second act perpetuated by the hero's false resolution of this dilemma, and a third act where the dilemma is finally resolved by an act that reaffirms the hero's normative morality. Each act in the three-act structure culminates at the point of crisis, the resolution of which kicks the plot into the following act, or to the final resolution.

Despite the significant wealth of narrative structure in video games, almost all previous research on educational correlation of video games overlooked the narrative aspects of the video game. Even though the main objective of a video game is about interactive fun, a great amount of effort is needed in its development. Perhaps the second most crucial part in video game development after programming is its script. Like a movie, a video game needs to build itself around a solid story with strong characters around it. In order to immerse the players into a believable world and creating an emotional connection to the characters of the game, the narrative structures of a video game needs to be coherent and powerful (Bateman, 2007). Thus, a lot of planning needs to be done to the game's narrative and if we breakdown the game into its narrative script, we would find a well of rich linguistic knowledge and many game developers are not even aware that their game is rich with educational elements they indirectly inserted throughout the writing process (Robison, 2008).

It is clear that video games hold a mountain of potential to teach narrative writing to second language learners of the English language. Teachers need embrace the video gaming culture to harness its rich potential to exploit in the classroom. Not only will the interest in narrative writing will increase but students will also be able to express their creativity in relation to the game they played into their essay. This study will be exploring the

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possibility of video games influencing a student's narrative writing skills.

2.3. Carl Roger's Theory of Experiential Learning.

The theory of experiential learning was first proposed by Carl Rogers in his book, Freedom to Learn for the 80s (1983). In his book, he identified two different types of learning which is: cognitive (meaningless) and experiential (significant). Cognitive learning refers to the acquisition of academic knowledge such as vocabulary and grammar; while experiential learning refers to the acquisition of applied knowledge such as learning vocabulary in context, communicative speech, real-world grammar and authentic interaction. Roger's experiential learning theory revolves around the idea of what are the wants and needs of the learners themselves? He stated that in order for any type of learning to be experiential and meaningful to the learner, the lesson itself must somehow involve the learners in a personal manner (hands-on), initiated and evaluated by the learners themselves, and has a pervasive effect on the learner. The role of the teacher here, as asserted by Rogers, is only as a facilitator rather than the deliverer of knowledge. In order for significant learning to take place, the learner must be able to relate the subject matter to their own personal interest. This makes the learning process very personal to the learners as they are directly involved in the learning process. Not only that, the learner needs to feel that they are in total control of the lesson's nature and direction, learning only what they are prepared to learn. This way, the learner does not feel threatened by the lesson itself, leading to a faster acquisition of the intended knowledge. This particular theory spawned the Task-Based learning approach as students are able to 'manipulate, comprehend and interact' with the task to facilitate learning (Nunan, 1989).

Both Krashen (1985) and Rogers (1983) agree that acquisition of linguistic knowledge will be at an optimum level with low inner inhibition from the learners themselves and Rogers maintained that the lesson itself must practical and applicable to the learners in order for experiential learning to take place. Thus, video games can provide an excellent source for teacher's to mould their lessons towards an experiential learning experience for their students (Gee, 2003)

3.0. The Study

This research used a pre-experimental research method with a one group pretest-posttest design without a control group. In a way, it is also a descriptive case study of 4 selected gamers to examine the effects of the action-adventure video game on the student's narrative writing skills. This pre-experimental research method is similar to the experimental study done by Betz (1995). In his study of the effectiveness of using computer games for teaching urban planning, he studied two groups: experimental and control. The former played a prescribed video game and the former being the control. Both groups received the same pretest and posttest and had their results compared. The experimental group was also given a survey after the treatment period to gauge their overall learning experience. I have used a variation of Betz's methodology which will not have a control group and will be gauging the overall learning experience in the form of journal writing as there are minimal external variables which might influence the results of my research.

My participants consisted of 3 upper secondary school students, selected based on their favorite game genre, gaming console, hours spent playing games and their interest in sustaining a particular genre of video game. Before the actual data collection actually begins, respondents were asked to write a pre-experience journal entry to solicit their opinion and perception of a game-based learning approach on their narrative writing. After that, a pretest was administered in the form of a narrative question. The produced essays were analyzed for its narrative structure. Then, over a period of 3 weeks, respondents were asked to play the selected action-adventure video game in a controlled environment where no external factors may influence learning process. Throughout the 3 week period, respondents were asked to chronicle their experience in the form of online weblogs (blogs). This is for the researcher to keep track of the respondents' holistic experience throughout the game as well as to identify the problems they might encounter along the way. After 3 weeks, a post-test consisting of a different question from the pretest, was given to gauge the extent of their narrative writing improvement. The results were analyzed for its narrative structure and compared to the results from the pretest. Finally, the respondents were asked to write a final journal entry to give an overview perspective of their experience with the game and their opinions of their own narrative writing ability.

For this research, I have used Naughty Dog Inc.'s *UNCHARTED 2: Among Thieves™* as my default software of choice. *UNCHARTED 2: Among Thieves™* used a narrative structure which contained an element which was not described in Dancyger and Rush's (1995) narrative structure model. The game opens with an initial situation in the present and used elements of flashback to bring the player to the past in order to understand how the main character ended up in the said situation. The game flashes back and forth numerous times before it goes back to the past one final time to establish a coherent timeline, thus, the real narrative begins at this point, not the first 15 minutes of the game.

Throughout the 3 week period, respondents were asked to write reflective journals to keep track of their gaming and learning experience. In their journals, they were required to write a reflection on the elements such as a

summary of their experience, how they relate to the story/characters/ events from the game, their feelings, what they have learned and what they hope to see next session.

At the end of the 3 week period, a different question was drawn and a posttest was given to the participants. After the posttest, the participants were required to complete a final journal entry to give an overview perspective of their experience with the game and their opinions of their own narrative writing ability. They were required to reflect based on the elements such as a summary of their gaming experience, their enjoyment level, their feelings throughout the gaming period, what they have learned, have their narrative skills improved and how the game's narrative can be implemented in their own writing.

4.0. Findings

4.1. Respondents' Initial and Final Perception Regarding Their Game-Based Activity

Throughout the 3 week data collection period, all three respondents were asked to keep an online weblog (blog) to track their progress in the study. Before playing the game, they were asked to write a pre-experience journal to gauge their initial perception towards this game-based approach in studying narrative structure. After playing the game for 3 weeks, the respondents were asked to write a post-experience journal in their blogs to gauge their final perception towards using video games in their narrative writing. The entries were then collected, compared and summarized as below:-

Respondent 1:

    i.   Pre-Experience Entry:

"...I think my narrative writing skills will improve after playing the game,as it will open up new perspectives for me.Finally,I believe that using video games as a classroom enhancement activity can help me improve my writing skills because,well,I'd be paying a lot more attention to the subject if my homework was to go home,play video games,and write about it."

    ii.   Post-Experience Entry:

"...I really think my narrative writing skills have improved after playing this game,as it opened up so many new ways to write.....I think that yes,using video games as a classroom enhancement activity can help me improve writing skills.....I'd recommend my friends to improve their narrative writing skills....because firstly they get to have fun,and they will absorb way more than if they just read a reference book or something like that,because they will be INTERESTED and enjoying themselves for a change."

Respondent 2:

    i.   Pre-Experience Entry:

"...so we 2 could learn from games n may it can improve my narative writing in all kinds of methods.If the education system allows to use video games as a classroom enhancement activity,it would be WHEN PIGS FLY no matter how positive is the effect...."

    ii.   Post-Experience Entry:

"...Educationally,it affects the way of writing,make my essay more creative and completely attracts the reader attention....My narrative writing skill will improve n i will PROVE IT.....cause the game affects a lot....On my point of view,i would love to have this style of learning in my classroom provided with suitable equipments n surroundings."

Respondent 3:

    i.   Pre-Experience Entry:

"...I think I will learn more about PS3 games and maybe it can improve my narrative writing skills in this 3 weeks period.Base on my opinion,using video games as a classroom enhancement activity is very interesting and could improve my writing skills in study...."

    ii.   Post-Experience Entry:

"...I have also learnt a new element of writing an essay that is using the element of flasback....I think I have improved my writing skills after the gaming session that I have done with my friends.I realize this after I done the narrative test in the last day of the gaming session.On my opinion using video games as a classroom enhancement activity can help me and my friends to improved our narrative writing skills because just like in the gaming session I have learnt many new kind of words, characteristics and using the element of flasback in my essay...."

The above shows the respondent's perception towards using video games to learn narrative writing before and after they have played the game for 3 weeks. Almost all of them stated that they had an enjoyable experience playing the game and thinks that they have significantly improved their narrative writing skills. Not only did they acquire skills to enhance their narrative writing ability but they have also acquired other linguistic and non-linguistic values through the game. Almost all of them expressed knowledge of the usage of flashbacks and double climaxes within the game and noted that it will be helpful to them in their future essay.

4.2. Respondents' Pre-Experience Narrative Essay.

Before the gaming session began, the respondents were given a pre-experience narrative essay to write. The question for this narrative essay was taken by random. The respondents were given 1 hour each to write the essay and the essays were collected, analyzed and was compared to the Standard Narrative Structure prescribed to them. As expected, all of the respondent's pre-experience narrative essay followed the Standard Narrative Structure . Hence, it could be deduced that almost every student and teachers of ESL uses this standard structure as their guide to draft a narrative essay. Evidence of this could be seen in my analysis of the respondent's pre-experience narrative essay.

4.3. Respondents' Post-Experience Narrative Essay.

After playing the game for 3 weeks, the respondents were given a post-experience narrative essay to write. The question for this narrative essay was taken by random. The respondents were given 1 hour each to write the essay and the essays were collected, analyzed and was compared to the narrative structure used by UNCHARTED 2: Among Thieves. Interestingly, Respondent 1, 2 and 3's post-experience narrative essay followed the Three Act Narrative Structure used by the game script.

4.4. Summary of Findings

Before playing the game, the respondents wrote their narrative in a predictable way; using the general narrative structure used in conventional literature. Each of their pre-experience essays reflects the previously acquired and taught narrative structure. After playing the game, however, their post-experience narrative essays showed an influence of the narrative structure used in the video game. Elements such as the Orientation and the usage of double-climax is also seen the respondent's post-experience narrative essay. The respondents were asked to write a pre and post experience journal in their blogs to gauge their perspective on using video games in their English language classroom. Before playing the game, all respondents expressed their belief that video games will definitely enhance their narrative writing skills and after playing the game all 3 respondents, in their journal entries, admitted that they enjoyed playing the game and that their narrative writing ability had improved. Not only that, they have also expressed conscious knowledge of the intricate double-climax and Orientation feature of the game's narrative. Despite their self-admission,

5.0. Discussion

5.1. Dancyger and Rush's Three Act Narrative Structure in Both the Game and Post-Experience Narrative Essays.

It is clear that almost every respondent's narrative essay changed in style and structure after playing the game for 3 weeks. Clear evidence of the game's unique 'Orientation' cliffhanger and Dancyger and Rush's Three Act Narrative Structure (1995) could be seen in the respondent's post-experience narrative essay. From the respondents' journal entries, they expressed conscious knowledge of the narrative structure used in the game and its element of flashbacks but did not mention the Orientation feature nor the Three Act Narrative Structure. This goes to show that those aspects were acquired indirectly through the game without the respondent's conscious knowledge. This transfer of knowledge was first mentioned by Preston Parker (2006) in his paper *Learning when Using Commercial Games as Simulation*. He asserts that learners will be able to absorb maximum knowledge when they are actively engaged in the learning process and commercial games gave such opportunity to the learners. Learning how to write a narrative essay can be taxing and boring to the students, as the respondents testified in their journal entries. When the respondents are actively engaged in an immersive game such as UNCHARTED 2: Among Thieves, they are able to absorb the rich narrative knowledge of the game, indirectly. In the current context, learning goes beyond mere acquisition of a particular knowledge; as pointed out by Brown, Collins and Duguid (1989), learning is creating an "increasingly rich implicit understanding of the world in which [learners] use the tools and of the tools themselves (p.33)". UNCHARTED 2: Among Thieves gave the respondents an opportunity to use it as an indirect tool to acquire linguistic knowledge and a direct tool for personal enjoyment.

5.2. Student's Perceptions towards the Usage of Video Games.

From their post-experience journal entries, it could be seen that all respondents thought that video games will help improve their narrative writing skills. As pointed out by Respondent 1, playing video games will open up new perspective for them and will aid their second language acquisition. All respondent felt that teachers should integrate video games into the language classroom. All of them mentioned that the current English classroom is getting boring and uninteresting and that video games will somehow inject life and zest into the mundane classroom. All three respondents came from the same generation where technology is intricately woven into their everyday lives. As proven by Becker (2007), the respondents need for interactivity compelled them to explore the world of video games to interact actively with technology. Teachers can no longer ignore this aspect as it has become a general consensus that the current English classroom is indeed getting stale and monotonous. While the initial perception of the approach might not be positive in every respondent, a different picture could be seen

after they have gone through their 3 week gaming period. As seen in their journal entries, almost all of them stated that they had an enjoyable experience playing the game and thinks that they have significantly improved their narrative writing skills. This could be due to the fact that all respondents were thoroughly immersed into the game's environment and universe and had the elements of the game's narrative transferred into their own narrative essay.

Even though the 3 week gaming period changed and reinforced the overall perspective of the respondents, Respondent 2's opinion regarding its successful implementation remains unchanged. He maintained that the Ministry of Education will not allow such methodology to be used in the classroom as it may bring adverse effects to the students. Respondent 2's concerns were not unfounded as Prensky (2001) made a similar conclusion when he looked into the usage of First-Person Shooters in the classroom. He concluded that many educational institutions are unlikely to accept video games as a part of their curriculum due to its stigma as being 'un-educational'.

Respondent 2 also claimed in his journal that there are two different types of students: students who will be able to keep the lesson objective in mind while playing the game and students who will forget the lesson once they start playing the game. He stated that most students belong to the latter group and that the teacher needs to assess the situation first before actually implementing such method. I personally agree to his statement because this methodology indeed do have its flaws but my argument regarding its implementation still stands, the teacher will be able to control the lesson using video games should the selection of the game, platform and time invested is appropriate. According to Lindstromberg (2004), teachers need to invest a considerable amount of time, intelligence, patience and planning before implementing games into the classroom to ensure optimum classroom control. He further asserts that it is vital for the teacher to communicate the teaching objectives to the students in order to set the class in the correct direction and also to set a boundary for the students to thread in. Students will only lose the lesson objective if they are not made clear by the teacher in the beginning of the lesson. In this study, the objective of the study is made clear to the respondents before the actual gaming session, thus, the respondents are able to constantly keep their original objectives of playing the game in check. In retrospect, Respondent 2 might have been influenced by his prior experiences. Teachers who use unconventional technique ended up losing control of the lesson due to poor lesson orientation might have given the respondent an emotional trauma, hence, his skepticism.

6.0. Conclusion

Based on what has been found, it can be concluded that there are distinct differences to the narrative styles and structures of both the general ESL narrative and the narrative used in a commercial action-adventure video game. The game deploys a unique Three Act Narrative structure and included an extra feature of the Orientation, a suspenseful event that will prick the gamers' interest in exploring it. Besides that, the double-climax seen in its narrative structure further sets the game apart from other titles in the gaming industry. The narrative used by the game developers serves as an immersive tool to engage the players into an interactive, immersive environment where players are able to experience surrogate experiences; i.e. experiences they may not be able to achieve, through the narrative. This immersive nature of video games created realism to the player and thus, generated a pseudo-classroom where players learn in an experiential learning environment. During the whole game-play experience, the learner (player) do not feel threatened by the game's immersive nature, thus, lowered his/her affective filter, allowing optimum learning to occur.

Since the affective filter is lowered, learning proceeds faster and whatever knowledge or concepts being taught would be easily absorbed by the learner (Krashen, 1985; Rogers, 1969). Due to the fact that the game did not present its narrative structure explicitly, the game's Three Act Narrative structure, Orientation feature and double-climax got transferred into the learner's (player's) psyche. As a result, their post-experience narrative essays exhibits all the characteristics which are oddly similar to the one used in the game they played. Thus, it can be concluded that action-adventure video games might have played a role in enhancing an ESL learner's narrative writing skills due to this transfer of knowledge.

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