

Felicia Scott

Professor Liu

English 149

Final Essay

8 December 2013

Literary Re-do: The Scope of Literature and the Collision with Gaming

It started with a book about ghosts. Short, simple -- a chapter book in the most basic of forms. For some people that is all literature needs to ignite a spark: three ghosts sitting on a fence, speaking in rhyme. For others it starts with fairies, princesses, odes to the Lord, and so on, and so on. Literature spans across many different genres, giving birth to the idea that somewhere out there, there is a book to fascinate even the most stubborn of illiterates. Although literature spans over centuries, times are changing and new forms of entertainment are developing within this changing world. Due to a more technologically savvy culture, this is where gaming started to gain more of a following since fictional universes were no longer just to be learned like they are in novels, but experienced and even lived through the medium of any particular gaming console. Up until now, gaming and literature have existed separately from one another, both with different reputations that attract different crowds, but by combining these forms of entertainment not only will the novel (in this case, *Alice in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll) be updated to attract an increasingly stimulant-obsessed society, but video games (gamebooks specifically) will receive that intellectual dignity they have been considered lacking as well.

In a very literal sense, a “gamebook” means exactly how it sounds: it is the combination of playing a game and reading a book at the same time, the first of its kind to bridge this gap.

The premise of a gamebook is relatively simple to understand and Blue Flame Publishing's website describes it as the following: "...you're able to choose the paths for the main character to follow. Your choices affect how the story unfolds, and your decisions have a significant impact on the story's events, the journey your hero takes, and the conclusion he ultimately faces" ("What is a Gamebook?"). The player/reader of the gamebook is introduced to the story on the first page and upon reaching the bottom of the page they are given a selection of choices which they may choose from and which path they choose is the one they see to the end. As a result, the reader/player is successfully both reading and gaming, reading because they are viewing letters on a page and interpreting their meaning, and gaming because they are "making choices and taking actions" (Salen & Zimmerman, 60).

It is without question that literature has a reputation of being intellectually stimulating. It is because of literature that mankind has been able to document its progression in nature and in their own mind. To put it simply, literature has value and meaning, something that gaming has fallen short of producing in its output from its conception. "Meaningful play emerges from the interaction between players and the system of the game, as well as from the context in which the game is played...The meaning of an action in a game resides in the relationship between action and outcome" (Salen & Zimmerman, 60-61). From the Salen and Zimmerman article, the subject most in discussion is the design material it takes to create a game that possesses value, in-game play centered around the model of the technology, but what about the model of the content? In terms of this project, the level of quality of the content in the novels was entirely based on popularity either over a number of years and/or the amount of people whom the book finally reached. Based on those qualifications, Project Literary Re-do (members comprised of Julian

Bustos, Felicia Scott, and Sarah Yim from the University of California at Santa Barbara) selected *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* by J.K. Rowling, *Alice in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll, and *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen.

Creating the gamebooks for each individual novel was made simpler by the program that was chosen for this task. Inklewriter is a software developed by Joseph Humfrey and Jon Ingold from Inklestudios specifically for the benefit of creative writers interested in interactive fiction intended for a wide audience across different technological devices (“About Us”). This software is perfect for two simple reasons: not only is it beautifully designed, but it is also easy for even the most technologically inept user. The software offers a multitude of features that only add to the software’s practicality. Within the program it is possible to add pictures either from the internet or from the user’s own computer hard drive. The interaction aspect of the gamebook is not only limited to a story intertwined by a series of links, but the possibility to create what the program calls “conditions” that can only be reached after the player hits certain markers within the games following a series of correctly chosen paths. The “conditions” also add to the depth behind the gameplay, adding to the stakes set within the game and increasing the player’s desire to make wise decisions. In this way, not only does this software increase the quality of the reader/gamer’s experience, but it increases the quality of the actual game.

If anything was gained from this project apart from a more complete understanding of the technology behind gaming and the deliberation behind the writing process, it was a firmer grasp on the importance of finding a reliable website. This means a long process of trial and error, because while there are other websites that can serve to any particular task, there are few that are catered to however specific one idea may be. Before choosing Inklewriter to host the

actual gamebooks used for this project, other sites like Text Adventures and Codeacademy were considered. Text Adventures allowed for a more text-specific type of game and Codeacademy allowed for the option to develop one's skills in computer programming and a guide on writing code likely for the first time. Ultimately these were not chosen since they did not fit exactly into the project's fully-formed idea better than Inklewriter, however, upon first discovering Wix (wix.com) it was extremely clear that this would be the website that would house the project's actual webpage. Similar to Inklewriter, Wix was developed with the goal to make webpage creation more simple. Wix, on the other hand, is more customizable and caters specifically to the taste of the creator. Since this project is so concerned with books and gaming, it was important to add images of video games and novels onto the webpage, and Wix's easy interface allowed for these specific changes to the chosen template.

"Game Design and Meaningful Play" by Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman was a huge inspiration for Literary Re-do upon first initial meetings regarding the topic for this project. As avid game players and lovers of all things literature, group members of the team knew from the beginning that this project would either have something to do with gaming, or something to do with the specifics of what a novel needs to be. Upon reading this article, it became clear to combine the two. The idea of "meaningful play" (Salen & Zimmerman, 60) sparked the discussions about the limitations of gaming. Obviously the core concept of an individual game in interesting because it is exciting to play and it has the ability to attract a following, but the act of playing a video game has been followed by a negative connotation, especially in the academic community. However, gaming is not just a form of entertainment used to occupy time, as it has appeared to be before. In fact, based on studies at the University of Rochester in Rochester, New

York, it was discovered that “People who play a lot of action video games are known to perform better in a variety of sensory and perceptual tasks...such games improve a key aspect of decision-making: the ability to infer quickly the probability that a given answer is correct on the basis of limited evidence” (Bavelier, 254-255). While reading has the ability to expand the mind and force one to actively play a part in development, playing video games also has the ability to cause a positive effect on the mind and enhance one’s decision-making, which not only shows in the success of one’s gameplay, but also in the success of one’s every day life during every day activity.

The choice of *Alice in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll was not a selection made lightly. One of the main reasons this work was selected was because of its massive outreach from the time of its first printing. Millions of people have read the story or been told of it before they sleep at night, and the adaptations of the work have also made relatively smooth transitions across different mediums, be it in film (both animated and live-action), and also in video game culture. Another aspect revolves around the world of Wonderland itself; a world that presents a creative freedom that is not seen in other works of literature. Not only is this fictional universe presented as a place with infinite possibilities, but it does so on an intellectual level unmatched in other pieces of both children’s and adult’s fiction even to this day. With *Alice in Wonderland* the potential exists to read this book at separate occasions in one’s life and take something different away from it each time. There are references to the literature of the time, both in novel and poetic forms, references to pieces of numerical authorship, as well as advanced diction and a firm grasp on the idea of not only what makes good literature, but what makes for good poetry as

well. This book is one of few that can span across different genres throughout its entirety, and Lewis Carroll is able to exemplify a truly creative mind with each chapter presented.

One of the main concerns in creating this gamebook was remaining loyal to Carroll's original intentions for the novel, and also to remain loyal to his original tone. This meant an attempt to cross to a different time period and copy the diction of the era, resulting in a gamebook that sounds more serious than any game would intend to be. At the same time, although *Alice in Wonderland* is a story that entices audiences of all ages to this day, the shift in language since the writing of *Alice in Wonderland* creates a boundary between the story and the readers of current society, but particularly with the younger audience that is more likely going to be exposed to this literary work. In order to appeal to a larger range of people, it became necessary to fade away from Carroll's original tone once the story shifted away from Carroll's original story line. The gamebook style assisted in a smoother transition away from the more archaic word choice, and as the reader/player keeps making decisions that abandon Carroll's plot, the fade in to a more contemporary fantasy tale becomes more believable.

In order to keep to Carroll's writing style, another program called Signature was discovered. This program in particular specializes in "the comparison of texts, with a particular emphasis on author identification" ("The Signature Stylometric System"). After an initial textual analysis of Carroll's style using simple observation and flow, this program allows the user to submit pieces that have been written and see if the program agrees that they were written by the same person. Signature has been used in the past to verify whether or not a literary piece was written by a particular author, and although it is relatively affective in detecting similarities and has an authority to give a positive or negative answer, it does have its limitations, particularly in

the patterns writers use with their grammatical style. This is why a combination of naked eye observations and studies in the tone of the work, as well as a constant use of Signature, was necessary in the attempts made to replicate Carroll's style.

Ultimately, the exact idea of uniting literature and gaming was discovered to be without its hardships. By using well-known stories, even though that is only one potential story arc in any of the three stories, one successful end to any of the gamebooks is already revealed, and not including this pathway from the beginning would be an injustice to the original arc. Because of this, the stakes within the game are lowered, resulting in a gamebook based on meaningful play that has lost a huge part of its meaning. This is why it became necessary to add in story arcs created by the gamebook adaptor for each work. Then, not only is the story given a new and exciting viewpoint even after years of inactivity, but the gamebook is able to get back on track and new choices that the reader/player has not been exposed to are revealed almost creating a new story, but without the drift away from loyalty to any given author.

Part of the excitement that stems from reading a novel is that question of "what if?". What if Harry chose to stay with the Dursleys at the beginning of Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows? Or even worse, what if he had never left with Hagrid in Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone at all? What if Elizabeth had chosen to marry Mr. Collins in order to spare her family their rightful property and ease her mother's mind? What if Alice had paid attention during her lessons that fateful "golden afternoon"? Ultimately, the response to all of these questions would be the loss of a story that has captivated millions and become beloved in their reader's hearts. Literary Re-do did not stem from the idea that the original authors mistreated their own stories by following certain pathways to the end. It stemmed from the idea that anything is possible and

capitalizes on the firm belief that literature and gaming share the same interests: creating meaning in a story and discovering an adventure based on the value found in a truly spectacular story. By combining literature and gaming, Literary Re-do was able to prove the possibility of collision, and if not collision, than a respect gained from two mediums of entertainment co-existing in a world that needs them both to find a story worth believing in.