Playing to Learn: Integrating Story-Based Games into Secondary English Curriculum

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Acknowledgments

"If we lived forever, maybe we'd have time to understand things. But as it is, I think the best we can do is try to open our eyes and appreciate how strange and brief all of this is."

What Remains of Edith Finch

First and foremost, I want to thank my thesis advisor, Professor Stephanie Ceraso. I am grateful for her tireless patience, guidance, and encouragement during this thesis-writing process, and for inspiring my love of teaching writing.

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Introduction: Reloading Learning with Digital Games

Night in the Woods, a 2017 independent (indie) adventure video game, centers on Mae Borowski, a college drop-out returning home to the dying town of Possum Springs to confront a troubled past. Throughout the game, the player is responsible for navigating Mae's decisions as she spends time with her friends, copes with her declining mental state, and unravels a sinister mystery in Possum Springs. While Mae is designed as an anthropomorphic cat (all of the characters appear as anthropomorphic animals), the game covers human issues such as existentialism, poverty, and mental health. It also portrays the harsh reality of growing up and growing apart from the people who were once so important to us.

In 2017, I had just graduated high school and was beginning my first year of college. While I would go on to graduate in 2021, thankfully without dropping out, I found that a lot of Mae's experiences paralleled my own. I knew what it was like to lose and move on from friends: I had recently drifted from my high school friend group after breaking up with my boyfriend of one and a half years. I knew what it was like to struggle with money. I knew what it was like to be an only child with your parents' hopes pinned on you to succeed and have a better future. And I knew, most critically, what it was like not to trust your own brain: I've dealt with several anxiety disorders and major depressive disorder since middle school.

Though only a game—just pixels on a computer screen—*Night in the Woods* offered a compelling narrative through a gripping plot, extensive character development, and detailed dialogue ripe for close reading, much like a traditional novel. *Night in the Woods* also held my attention as something profoundly and personally resonant; seeing parts of myself reflected back at me through the screen captured and maintained my interest throughout repeated playthroughs. To this day, Mae's adventure in Possum Springs is one of my favorite stories, and it reminded me of some of the most formative young adult literature I had read both inside and outside of an

academic environment. Despite not being delivered in the form of a typical text, this game led me to think more deeply about the place video games can have in academics and the potential roles they might play.

In the context of secondary English education, forms of digital entertainment typically seem antithetical to the mission of exploring literature. However, video games, especially those rooted in storytelling and narrative, have the power to offer a rewarding reflective learning experience for players. In this thesis, I will propose that video games deserve a place in the high school English classroom and, when explored as literary texts, can increase in-class participation and motivation in students. I argue that story-based video games, a form of entertainment typically not associated with educational value, can fill a gap in adolescent students' academic engagement, help them hone their literary skills, and encourage them to develop deeper senses of self.

First, I will provide a critical examination of the intersections of game studies and literary studies, drawing from the works of several game theorists. I will bring their research together to assert that video games can provide valuable opportunities for critical analysis alongside traditional literature. I will focus my argument specifically on story-based games and what their narratives can offer students, briefly summarizing the ongoing discourse surrounding story-based games, digital literacy, and the evolving nature of storytelling in the 21st century classroom.[1] I will also contest that while video games should not replace books in a literary learning environment, scholars should adopt them as viable learning tools and alternative storytelling vehicles. Next, I will pivot to a discussion of my "Writing about Video Games" course design, a

[1] For clarification, I am not writing about intentionally educational computer games many schools have already embraced due to their ability to support children's learning skills, such as letter recognition, working memory, and concentration. The games I am arguing to include in English curricula were not originally intended for an academic setting, but still offer grounds for critical thinking.

first-year Writing and Critical Inquiry course (ENWR 1510) at the University of Virginia, and offer an overview of our course activities, readings, and assessments. Following my description of my course design, I will offer a course rationale in which I explain my logic, strategies, and inspiration for structuring my section of ENWR 1510 and appeal to several pedagogues as well as attachment theory to defend the merits of bringing video games into the classroom. Lastly, I will include an array of my students' reflections about their experiences with our course content. I will first engage with their perspectives on games as potential texts, and then report their thoughts on what it was like to play the games for the course.

Section I. Game Theory Meets Reality: A Critical Overview of Game Studies in Education

In this literature review, I will discuss two main subject areas involving game studies. First, I will define the storytelling function of video games with a focus on the narrative versus ludic aspects of games. Secondly, I will investigate the capacity of video games to provide beneficial learning opportunities for adolescent students specifically in English literature and writing courses. Although this critical overview is not intended to be comprehensive, it demonstrates many reasons why video games belong in and can even enhance educational environments. Building on this body of work, I aim to demonstrate the ways in which story-based games can reinvigorate high school English classes and student interest.

Basis for Storytelling

To better elucidate my inspiration for both my ENWR 1510 section and this thesis, I first want to examine the merits of story-based games in relation to literature subjects. Rather than focusing on creative construction or physical combat, a story-driven or story-based game centers itself on narrative elements and player immersion. As Amy M. Green describes in her book, *Storytelling in Video Games: The Art of the Digital Narrative*, "These are stories producing the

same effect as those in the very best of literature: they can reduce players to tears or incite anger, surprise, terror, or astonishment. They are part of our collective need to tell and experience stories" (Green 66). Just as the most potent literature can transport a reader to another time and place, a story-based video game can place the player into another character's position and evoke strong emotional reactions. Green's equation of these media's ability to convey stories further demonstrates the validity of video games as potential learning tools. In *Video Games and Education*, Harry J. Brown highlights the ways in which story-based games guarantee "coherent narrative structure. Although we may choose to disrupt narratives, most adventure and role-playing games carefully script and constrain player action through limited dialogue options and the use of cinematic cut scenes to establish major narrative events and transitions" (Brown 13). These games funnel players through carefully woven storylines to arrive at complex conflicts and meaningful resolutions, while also allowing for various levels of player intervention. Many games even function as a kind of hypertext, allowing individuals to carve different stories and paths through their experience of play.

Furthermore, in his article, "Video Games and the Novel," Eric Hayot speaks to the universal language of storytelling across time and humanity. He argues that "At some broader level, all the storytelling media, games included, borrow from a set of tropes, cultural patterns, and forms of production, distribution, and consumption that extend backwards to the very beginnings of human culture" (Hayot 179).[2] Time has already laid the storytelling groundwork, and story-based games succinctly fulfill our desire to witness these topoi and patterns in action.

[2] To the point of human universality: while video games have a reputation for being a medium exclusively targeted toward a white, straight, cisgender male audience, game designers are making great strides toward improved inclusivity and representation in games, away from predominantly Western, patriarchal-centered narratives to illustrate a myriad of stories from diverse perspectives. In my own course, I endeavored to incorporate games that offered such breadth of and care toward representation.

Hayot also advocates for the separation of video games and novels, reminding readers that "video games are not novels, but they certainly share with novels a relation to a much longer history of narrative" (Hayot 179). From overlapping with traditional literature to extending beyond its bounds, story-based games require players to analyze complex situations, make strategic choices, and carefully weigh their options, whether in terms of dialogue or action. Theorists also shed light on another crucial educational advantage of video games: their capability to immerse players in a way that novels may not. For example, in her essay, "I Struggled a Long Time with Surviving," Elissa Washuta describes her pandemic playthrough of *The Last of Us: Part 1* as if the events of the game were happening to her. She writes of the beginning sequence of the game, "When the car crashes and Sarah's leg breaks, the game asks me to become Joel. It puts the little girl in my arms and tells me to run" (Washuta 4). In this moment of suspenseful gameplay, Washuta, the player, and Joel, the character, became one. The game's carefully constructed narrative, musical score, and character interactions caused Washuta to take on Joel's mission, stressors, and emotional ties as if they were her own.

While story-based games have understandably grown in popularity thanks to such emotionally resonant writing and narrative crafting, it has not been without pushback from gamers and theorists, alike. Within the video game community and in the field of video game studies, there exist two conflicting schools of thought: narratology and ludology.[3] The debate between the two centers on the perceived split between the focus on a game's mechanics and gameplay elements versus their storytelling elements. In their book, *Gamer Trouble: Feminist Confrontations in Digital Culture*, Amanda Phillips (they/them) succinctly summarizes this conflict in game studies, stating that "so-called ludologists sought to carve out territory for the

[3] From the Latin "ludus," game, and "logia," research.

study of games as systems by labeling other critics 'narratologists' who only see to understand games as stories" (Phillips 17). Whereas narratologists evaluate games with a classical approach focused on setting, characterization, plot, point of view, motifs, and symbolism, ludologists focus on gameplay mechanics, such as a game's controls and the actions a player can choose to take. Phillips further highlights the disparity between ludology and narratology, noting that while ludology carries a connotation of "rational, precise logic" and methodological thought, players as well as scholars continue to view narratology as "sloppy," overly emotional, and "feminine" (Phillips 18). Despite this pejorative language surrounding the function of narrative in video games, for the purposes of this thesis and my own teaching, I subscribe to a more narratologist framework. That being said, I also want to acknowledge the value of ludology in my argument as I regard both play and narrative as essential to gaming as a unique experiential practice.

José P. Zagal also contributes his voice to the critical evaluation of ludology in *Ludoliteracy: Defining, Understanding, and Supporting Games Education*. He reiterates that while the narratological view of games asserts games "should be understood as novel forms of narrative and can thus be studied using theories of narrative," proponents of a ludological position maintain that "games should be understood on their own terms" and concern the "abstract and formal systems they describe" (Zagal 17). Zagal emphasizes that "for ludologists, the focus of game studies should be on the rules of a game, not on the representational elements which are only incidental" (Zagal 17). However, such presentational elements are integral to the conception and interpretation of story-based games; these choices are hardly secondary and can even overtake gameplay mechanics in terms of what the player will concentrate on. In his own exploration of ludic literacies in his book, *Literature, Videogames and Learning*, Andrew Burn similarly denotes the remarkable middle ground of a "kind of traffic between the rich visual

landscapes and procedural actions of digital game" (Burn 58). As Burn iterates that play and literacy go hand-in-hand, he showcases the unique opportunity of video games to offer an educational springboard for the subject of literature.

In the 21st-century market, many game theorists and critics have spoken to the rapid growth and diversification of both video games' audience and genre. Patrick Jagoda notes the expansive and ever-changing landscape of video game production in his article, "Videogame Criticism and Games in the Twenty-First Century." Tracing the resulting ripple effect on an increasingly broad demographic of gamers, he states, "Myriad factors in the early twenty-first century—cultural, aesthetic, and technological—have precipitated a multiplication of what is now meant by 'videogame'" (Jagoda 206). Jagoda defines this period as one of innovation and experimentation in video game styles and forms. Interestingly, he claims that "these various developments occasioned the continuation and evolution of game criticism, including a greater diversity of methodologies, many of which mirror approaches adopted across the longer history of literary criticism" (Jagoda 207). This ability of video games and game criticism to dabble in more sophisticated literary and theoretical elements demonstrates an incredible evolution in the field of game studies and theory. Astrid Ensslin similarly underscores the significance of these recent gaming developments in her book, *Literary Gaming*. She notes, "More recently, the rapid growth and diversification of the gaming industry has coincided with (if not generated) a sharp increase in the awareness of the importance of play and games as constitutive elements of human nature and everyday life" (Ensslin 20). If scholars and critics recognize the magnitude of play and ludic immersion on the human experience, secondary school educators may be able to base their video game pedagogy on a solid foundation that reflects core theoretical standards.

Literary Experiences

I now want to bridge the connection between story-based games' focus on narrative and storytelling elements and their capacity to enrich and enliven the high school English classroom. Green identifies how video games open possibilities for students to engage in a more accommodating form of English study. She writes that "students who assert a wish to avoid traditional literature courses are more likely to study storytelling when given the opportunity, in whole or in part, via the study of video games" (Green 192). Story-based games can offer compelling examples of narrative and complex characterization without the intimidation of a confusing or lengthy text, which can open the doors to shier readers. Students who might have previously resisted the learning goals of a literary course may find video games a more inviting vehicle through which they can hone their close reading, analytical, and critical thinking skills. Students can perform the same interrogative exercises with video games as they do with novels, poetry, nonfiction essays, and plays by investigating rhetorical, authorial, linguistic, and non-linguistic choices, pulling and analyzing textual evidence to build upon an idea or argument, and making broader connections between the text and real-life events. All the while, students also receive firsthand knowledge of a video game's emotional impact on its audience.

Furthermore, compared to traditional literature alone, video games can provide a more fully embodied experience for students. In her essay, "Representing Race and Disability: *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* as a Whole Text," Rachael Hutchinson paints a vivid picture of video games as an amalgamation of several creators to create a single "text" for players and viewers to consume. She claims that "the whole text thus encompasses not only what was created by the developers but also the multiple possibilities of narrative created by players in their own gameplay experience" (Hutchinson 175). In contrast to the more stringent path of novels, players have the chance to shape their video game experiences to varying degrees. In addition to their

capacity to speak to everyday life and personal experiences, video games as texts prove invaluable tools to embrace a student's voice with unapologetic verve, repair their relationship with literature, and promote multiple possibilities for learning.

James O'Sullivan posits in his book, *Towards a Digital Poetics*, that video games could soon become the dominant form of electronic literature. However, he maintains video games as a medium continue to resist rigid classification. He writes that "even when one takes the dangerous step of fragmenting modalities, separating word from other in an effort to classify art forms based on the components that they typically privilege, there are intersections which deconstruct any possible typology" (O'Sullivan, 49). In fact, when one defamiliarizes themselves from viewing video games as strictly non-literary, they may recognize more traditional literary elements within games usually associated with in-depth analysis, such as metaphor, allusion, irony, and figurative language. O'Sullivan further emphasizes this interplay between video game text and the player: "reading static text can produce a range of complex interactions between reader and surface, whether that surface be page or screen" (O'Sullivan 50). While primarily a form of visual media, video games are not without the influence of text-based language to communicate their narratives, whether through lines of dialogue, characters' spoken tone, or creatively integrated documents and artifacts which players can investigate for a deeper understanding of a game's worldbuilding. The range of factors which O'Sullivan describes all hinge on a reader or player's mood, experience, background, and current environment. Regardless of the way someone engages with a text, it is never a passive activity, and they will come away from this contact with a uniquely enriched and individualized experience.

At last, I arrive at theoretical advancements of James Paul Gee, a pivotal figure in game-based learning and a pioneer of game studies, to demonstrate the benefits of incorporating video

games into secondary English curricula. In his book, *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*, Gee attests to ways in which video games may reinforce players' presupposed perspectives on the world, or "through their creation of new and different worlds and characters, video games can challenge players' taken-for-granted views about the world" (Gee 140). As he considers key learning principles across a K-12 education, Gee acknowledges how video games can encourage people to reevaluate various cultural models of learning and reassess their long-held worldly perceptions. I also found Gee's explanation of the combined nonlinear and linear movement of video games particularly useful to my mission of video game pedagogy. He explains how each framework contributes to gaming's exploratory approach to both storytelling and problem-solving:

> [Video games] stress both nonlinear movement—exploring all around without necessarily moving forward toward one's ultimate goal and the mastery defined by that goal—as well as linear movement, which, of course, eventually happens, greatly deepened, sometimes transformed, by the horizontal movement. They stress multiple solutions judged by a variety of different standards, some of which are internal to the game (different things happen when you take different tacks) and some of which are set by the player (who wants to solve the problem on his or her own terms and may play scenes over to solve problems in different ways (Gee 164).

Gee succinctly reflects the freedom and flexibility in the duality of game design. While nonlinear or horizontal movement represents the effect of deepening and transforming one's gaming experience through exploration, linear movement represents a player's progression towards a specific and inevitable objective. Video games can thus enrich learners' experience in the classroom with a dynamic blend of exploration, challenge, and personal agency.

Moreover, video games may be able to reintroduce literary elements and takeaways to uninspired and disinterested students. Green writes that just as "literature courses are important as means to connect students to the tensions, dialogues, and negotiations within a written text, so too are video game studies vital for students to understand how to view digital stories as cultural artifacts" (Green 193). As she emphasizes the inherent intersection of video games, culture, and society, Green praises the ways in which video games can facilitate students' interrogation and analysis of cultural phenomena. She later states:

> Courses asking students to analyze digital stories with the same exacting level of attention they would give to traditional written stories allow not only for additional meaning-making, as they speak of here, but perhaps more crucially, for an understanding as to how meaning-making originates from an individual level and from a given cultural perspective (Green 200).

Here, Green expands upon the idea that high school students of literature can analyze digital stories with the same level of scrutiny and care as they do traditional literature, and to even more thoughtful outcomes. She argues that integrating video game studies and even interactive play into secondary education can help students gain a critical understanding of both socio-cultural dynamics as well as their own developing identities. Green's emphasis on digital games as valuable ways of interpreting and communicating with the world supports my belief that video games can teach students effective ways to analyze and make meaning of their surroundings.

Aside from serving as a larger step toward a more student-centered learning environment, the integration of video games into the English classroom also encourages multimodal exploration in class activities, formative and summative assessments, and creative projects for a more well-rounded learning experience. Andrew Burn defines multimodality as "the combination

of modes of communication which characterise contemporary culture" (Burn 36). By working with rather than fruitlessly against omnipresent technology, educators can continue to adjust their teaching practices to reach more students and have a lasting impact on their education. I consider the benefits of such a multimodal approach twofold: it will equip high school students with an array of interdisciplinary skills and provide stimulating diversification of assessments. O'Sullivan concurs that "The experiential nuances across the spectrum of these interactions will be different, but they are all equally significant when treated at the macro level—modal selections have been made for aesthetic purposes" (O'Sullivan 50). Despite relying largely on audio-visual elements to communicate world-building, characterization, and environmental atmosphere, story-based games still leverage language as a powerful instrument of expression and experimentation.

I want to clarify that bringing video games into a high school classroom does not mean replacing traditional literature altogether. Including video games can enrich, refresh, and diversify current secondary education curricula alongside other written texts, such as poetry, plays, novels, and short stories. Gee concisely summarizes the all-too-familiar pedagogical concern that "if the virtual world and virtual identity at stake in learning is not compelling to the learner, at some level, then little deep learning is liable to occur, in part because the learner is going to be unwilling to put in the effort and practice demanded for mastering the domain" (Gee 63). When properly scaffolded, video games can help educators combat this persistent dilemma of student indifference by appealing to what students care about in their learning. Moreover, in their article, "Video and Computer Games as Grounding Experiences for Learning," John Black, Saadia A. Khan, and Shih-Chieh Doug Huan concur that the well-rounded aspects of video games, especially when accompanying a scaffolded curriculum, focused learning activities, and

supplemental reading material, hold promise for honing students' critical thinking skills and capacity for understanding. They claim that video and computer games can provide "rich, perceptually grounded experience with the content to be learned. This experience, when combined with the interpretations provided by more formal learning activities, provides deeper, more robust learning that transfers to other situations, activities, and content" (Black et al. 299). These games ultimately benefit students' transfer of knowledge, information retention, and overall learning experience through visual, auditory, and "force" feedback, the simulation of real-world physics. In sum, video games have the potential to help reinforce complex concepts, enhance students' experiences in class, and make the process of learning more engaging.

Section II. From Pixels to Prose: Course Design

I now want to offer a brief overview of how I designed my course, including how I scaffolded readings, assessments, and class activities to provide a more comprehensive understanding of my ENWR 1510 section.

I decided to structure my course primarily around my chosen video games. Our first unit revolved around the 2016 mystery-adventure game, *Firewatch*. In our second unit, we analyzed the hit action-adventure game *The Last of Us: Part 1*, originally released in 2013 and rereleased in 2023 for PC. For our third and last unit, we studied the 2017 walking simulator exploration game, *What Remains of Edith Finch*. While I chose the three major unit games for our course for both semesters, I could encourage student choice by allowing my students to propose and vote on their own communal game for us to watch and play together toward the end of each semester. My students appreciated the chance to have an impact on our course content and enjoyed getting to direct the trajectory of our final weeks together.

As an ENWR 1510 instructor, I knew that I wanted my classroom to be a space of collaboration, generosity, and personal improvement in which students could lean into the challenge of writing with low-stakes and even enjoyable exercises. By cultivating flexibility rather than rigidity through writing-based exercises centered on our course games, I would validate students' self-expression, help them develop confidence in their unique writing voices, and celebrate their individuality on the basis that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to writing. Our weekly free writings and online discussion posts offered consistent low-pressure opportunities for students to practice their writing and expand upon ideas from our games or class discussions that had intrigued them. For in-class writing activities, I would ask the students to email their responses to me so I could compile a record of their writing and keep track of their progress in the course.

Moreover, in addition to experimenting with various writing prompts, students could partake in small- and large-group discussions. Often, I posed a series of questions about the day's homework, which students could brainstorm individually, discuss in think-pair-shares, and then tackle as an entire class. While I wove several supplementary written pieces into weekly homework assignments and lesson plans, I prioritized our games as our core "readings." From class to class, I would ask students to watch or play chapters or pre-divided sections of our game for that unit, a process which I will expand upon subsequently. The readings I assigned included brief essays, reviews, and meditations on our course games often in the form of online articles or informal blog posts. I often asked students to analyze these pieces in terms of both the extent of the author's analysis and the quality of their writing.

I scaffolded each unit so that it culminated in a major summative assessment in the form of an essay. I typically constructed our weekly writing exercises around the style of writing we

were working toward for that unit. For example, the Unit 2 Summative Assessment required students to apply what we had discussed about argumentative and persuasive writing to make and defend a claim about character relationships in *The Last of Us: Part 1*.[4] Many of the resulting free writes for *The Last of Us: Part 1* centered around students crafting and defending their own arguments around various polarizing viewpoints. We then focused on bolstering these skills through class discussions and constructive debates.

One of the most important aspects of my ENWR 1510 section was that I had to iron out how my students would interact with the course games. Unlike our supplemental readings, which I could up upload as PDFs onto our course site for students to view, I needed to figure out the most accessible and cost-effective way for students to engage with the games. The most practical solution I could come up with was first to arrange ahead of each semester for the games to be provided for free at the University Games Lab for ease of access. Next, I carefully curated individual playlists of YouTube walkthrough or playthrough videos for students to watch for each of our three games for the course (one per unit). I also gave students the choice of whether they wanted to watch videos with or without commentary. This way, students could watch a YouTuber's playthrough in case they were not able to play the games each week and, with the availability of no-commentary videos, have an uninterrupted experience with the games.

While students could, in a time crunch, easily watch the playthrough videos on YouTube to keep up with the course, there is a significant difference between playing a video game for oneself and watching a video of the game being played by someone else. Naturally, many students opted solely to watch the playthroughs. When I first encountered *Night in the Woods*, I watched a complete "Let's Play" of the game online before purchasing the game and playing it

[4] See Appendix D for the full Unit 2 Essay Assignment.

myself.[5] While I felt deeply connected to *Night in the Woods* even from watching someone else navigating the game, not everyone will have the same experience from just watching a walkthrough. As a result of this disparity, I encouraged my students in the spring semester to play the games firsthand by giving them an assignment to visit the Games Lab, play a chapter or section of one of our course games, and write a review of their experience. While only a few of my fall semester students visited the Games Lab and played the games for themselves, each student in my spring semester ENWR 1510 class could speak to the impact of what it was like to be in control of the game, the narrative, and the player character. Many of my spring semester students felt even closer to our course content as a result, which I will discuss in depth toward the end of Section IV.

Section III. Gaming the System: Course Rationale

In this section, I will elaborate on my pedagogical rationale for the class, focusing on how video games can increase three key features of learning: perceptions of writing, personal investment through identity, and attachment theory.

As a substitute teacher serving across preschool through twelfth grade from 2021 to 2022, I noticed substantial lulls in focus and an increased fixation on screens at all age levels. High schoolers seemed to be especially impacted by a co-morbidity of screen addictions and abbreviated attention spans. Thus, in designing my section of ENWR 1510, I knew I wanted to center it on something that not only interests me but would also resonate with a group of eighteen-year-olds. I turned to video games with the hope that it would prevent potential

[5] A "Let's Play" is the colloquial term for the documentation of the playthrough of a video game usually with added commentary by the YouTuber or streamer playing the game. The primary pull for viewers is two-fold: they can experience the game without having to buy it for themselves, obtain the specific gaming console, or learn the controls, and they can also interpret the game based on the reactions of the person playing it and share in the experience as a more communal activity.

disinterest or boredom and encourage genuine engagement with the material. I decided to build my curriculum around several story-based video games to arrive at my course topic, "Art Imitates Life: Writing About Video Games." To my mind, appealing to an enjoyment of digital media would open up opportunities for students to learn in a more exciting, inviting, and educationally liberating context. Providing alternative methods for students to engage with the facets of what make literature great, while maintaining students' attention through the application of more accessible and relatable content, could be a game-changer in raising the stakes of a mandatory writing seminar. Our course games would cover stories of love, sacrifice, and loss, and tackle themes of identity, morality, and legacy. By bringing video games into my class, I thought I would be able to increase student interest, facilitate more discussion around self-expression, and encourage a genuine embrace of their individual writing voices. In sum, I believed video games could be a valuable access point for first-year students who might be averse to taking classes focused on reading and writing.

In the fall of 2023, my first semester teaching writing at UVA, I asked my newly graduated high school students about their prior experience with English classes and, more specifically, with academic writing. One student confessed that he had never felt he was "good" at writing, and he dreaded English courses because he couldn't understand Shakespeare's plays. He expressed that he had always struggled with writing about and comprehending Shakespeare in high school because he found his verse tedious, impossible to read, and not personally resonant. Many students in the room nodded in agreement and seemed to share this distaste for the playwright, along with other authors of canonical literature. A couple of other students confessed that they shied away from writing assignments due to the hard and stringent rules their high school teachers enforced. One day, I gave them a free writing prompt to discuss their

writing voice. This was an opportunity to practice using personal writing and to unlearn a high school habit of never using "I" in an academic context. Half of the class comfortably used "I" as they described how they felt their writing came across and represented them as individuals. Conversely, the other half of the class was reluctant to refer to themselves in the first person and wrote generic statements about how people's writing voices may come across.

A central goal of my ENWR 1510 course thus became helping students unlearn certain rules ingrained in them from high school and reevaluate their idea of what writing in an academic context could look like. Interestingly, our course games helped my students learn to frame candid identity discussion and embrace personal reflection. As the conversational dialogue and text in games is more raw and sparse, our course games modeled how to let go of more formal restraints and arrive at a much closer representation of my students' true writing voices. Gradually, I coaxed them to break the boundaries they had set for their high school selves surrounding thinking and writing. Instead of providing steadfast rules and rigid guidelines, I encouraged my class to experiment, take risks, and lean into potential discomfort. My writing seminar thus offered both welcome relief for students who feared the content of humanities courses as well as a chance to explore something in an academic context that few would ever associate with education. While not all of my students necessarily self-identified as "gamers," and several of them had never played video games before, they were eager to learn about video games as a storytelling vehicle while practicing their writerly confidence.

As I refined my syllabus, assessments, and course calendar, I committed to this student-centered teaching model rooted in experimentation. For the first major essay assessment, I asked my students to write a personal narrative essay in which they were to reflect on a salient part of

their identity and explain its significance in their lives.[6] Many students were initially hesitant to write about themselves and unsure of how to start the essay. However, just as some were hesitant to embrace video game chapters as their weekly readings, they began to warm up to this freedom to express themselves. In their reflection for their first essay revision, many students noted this boost in self-assurance.[7] After revisiting and making changes to her first essay, one student wrote, "My writing felt more authentic than I was used to, and felt more like something I would actually say to someone when telling a story than something I would turn in as homework." Allowing for this more conversational approach allowed this student to channel a far more genuine writing voice that even mirrored her own storytelling style. Another student praised how what he had learned in the course had helped him produce an even stronger first essay. He claimed that "Through the exercises we did we learned to provide detailed descriptions, write colorful dialogue, and create suspense while simultaneously writing it through our voice." These students could apply what they appreciated of video games' visualization efforts in their own writing and even mimic the storytelling techniques they encountered.

I was also motivated to use video games in my classroom because of my knowledge of attachment theory and student agency. When students care about something and feel genuine enthusiasm for a subject, they naturally commit themselves to it with greater effort and verve. In both of my ENWR 1510 sections, I observed a major uptick in productivity levels in students who cared deeply about video games. When students feel they have a more personal stake in their learning, they are more likely to absorb the material and take it to heart through active involvement. Kevin M. Gannon asserts in *Radical Hope: A Teaching Manifesto* that "our

[6] See Appendix C for the full Unit 1 Essay Assignment.
[7] I received explicit permission from all students in my spring semester ENWR 1510 section to include their free writing and reflection excerpts in this thesis.

pedagogy is a declaration of what we think matters. It's a living description of how we think good teaching and learning should occur, and of the moral imperative to create the type of inclusive and equitable learning spaces in which our students become critically conscious and actively engaged in their own education" (Gannon 22-3). For Gannon, educators accomplish actionable instruction by teaching beyond rhetoric, identifying entry points of interest for students, and cultivating student engagement through attachments. By appealing to students' personal connection to and inherent affinity for a topic, one that I also embrace with enthusiasm and passion, I encouraged them to consider our content more deeply and see where it might be relevant in their own lives.

Additionally, I found that using video games as course content could reach potentially disinterested students. In her introduction to *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks claims that "the pleasure of teaching is an act of resistance countering the overwhelming boredom, uninterest, and apathy that so often characterize the way professors and students feel about teaching and learning, about the classroom experience" (hooks 10). It was my hope that I could combat boredom by bringing something into the classroom usually associated with pleasure and fun rather than pain and mundanity; certainly, too, the act of playing video games rather than reading a literary text might even be healing for a student so scarred by his experience with Shakespeare that he feared any future English classes. Applying video games as a learning tool within the context of academia proved a creative and engaging tool to motivate student participation and even enhance their media literacy.

Attachment theory presents another justification for incorporating video games as pieces of curricula. Academic and critic Rita Felski provides a postcritical view of attachment which I have found incredibly helpful in understanding how we forge connections with what we enjoy.

As she validates the enjoyment of popular culture such as film, music, and television shows, equating them to an appreciation of "high art" in *Hooked: Art and Attachment*, she challenges academics' reluctance to value attachment as a valid theoretical framework. She emphasizes that attachment "is a question not just of feeling but also of valuing: something matters; it carries weight" (Felski 32). Attachment, as enduring ties to that which we care about, bypasses mere emotions. In an academic environment, our students decide what matters to them, what they value, and what they want to change in the world. We, as pedagogues, simply provide the space or vehicle for students to foster these attachments through the expansion of their worldviews and exposure to new ideas and perspectives.

In order to more accurately illustrate students' capacity for personal investment in digital games, it would be useful to include Felski's description of how art forms inspire attachments. I contend that Felski's discussion of validating audiences' attachment responses to other forms of art also extends to appreciating video games. She argues:

> Our encounters with art are not cut off from the world but are infused with thoughts and feelings that shape other aspects of our lives. What art does offer, though, is training in modes of paying attention. Through its relentless curiosity about detail and nuance, its fierce concentration on the qualities of its own medium, it invites us to look closely at what we might otherwise overlook (Felski 60).

Like other pieces of media, literature, and art, the video games that I ask my students to watch and play do not exist in a vacuum. They speak to the world around them and to the relevant and pressing themes in their own lives. As these games evoke personal reactions, they also encourage students to reassess what has shaped these perspectives and values. As Jagoda writes, "Even as some of these games address broader, systemic issues, videogames have also become a medium

of expression increasingly capable of addressing personal topics" (Jagoda 212). For example, *Firewatch* explores themes of isolation, responsibility, mental health, identity, and companionship; *The Last of Us: Part 1* focuses on unconditional love, survival, loss, morality, and loyalty; and *What Remains of Edith Finch* examines sensitive topics such as grief, death, family, legacy, and fate. Increasingly, as video games explore themes related to individual experiences, emotions, and relationships, they serve as platforms for tackling real-world issues and offer opportunities for both social reflection and introspection. As a result, these games are far more likely to resonate with students and encourage personal attachments which, naturally, lead to greater dedication to their studies.

Now, I want to return to the concept of "paying attention" which Felski highlights as a core element of how one forms attachments. Ryan L. Schaaf and Nicky Mohan's book, *Game On: Using Digital Games to Transform Teaching, Learning, and Assessment*, describes the benefits of game-based learning in the digital generation by urging teachers to cater to young learners' permanently altered visual and mental processing abilities. To combat pervasive digital exposure and distractions, Schaaf and Mohan stress the importance of fostering critical thinking skills by using games as an educational medium that will reliably hold students' attention. They claim that "digital technologies like video games are designed to keep players enticed and motivated in both the short and long term" (Schaaf and Mohan 39). When incorporated into course curricula, video games can offer the incentive these students need to feel invested in their learning to justify devoting their time and energy. I also subscribe to Schaff and Mohan's claim that "the interactivity of digital games helps teachers make the move to a more student-centered learning environment" and "can bring excitement into the classroom by involving students in the learning and decision-making process" (Schaaf and Mohan 41). Students thus become active

participants in their learning through video games' promotion of reasoning, comprehension, and encoding skills.

In addition, I decided to include two walking simulators in my course because they necessitate attention to detail and encourage a more thorough exploration of in-game environments; these factors significantly enrich a story for both players and viewers.[8] As Schaaf and Mohan hypothesize, "Digital games allow learners to explore for themselves. They have immersive story lines, where decision making is unavoidable, and thereby reinforce higher-order thinking skills" (Schaaf and Mohan 41). Many of my students expressed immense satisfaction when they noticed something in one of our games which others had missed, or when they picked up on minor details that contributed to world-building, character development, and overall deeper connections within the game. Often, and to my delight, they wanted to explore every facet of the environment, as I will clarify later in Section IV. This interactivity turned into valuable opportunities for engagement, analysis, and depth, where students could exert some control and take their learning into their own hands.

While opponents of video games may criticize them for a lack of meaningful characterization compared to literature or even film, many story-based games develop rich, emotionally compelling personalities that have true staying power for players. As a result, there are even more chances for a player to develop attachments to a video game's cast of characters. In her chapter of *Hooked* dedicated to the concept of identification, Felski illustrates the complexity of our relationship to the art that resonates with us.[9] She claims that identifying "does

[8] A walking simulator is typically defined as an adventure game where the player observes, explores, and gradually uncovers information about their surroundings by "walking" around. As walking simulators usually center on discovery and movement rather than action and combat mechanics, many gamers disparage them or refer to such games pejoratively as not true video games.

[9] Felski describes identification as branching into four categories: alignment, allegiance, recognition, and empathy. She characterizes identification as providing something shared that expands beyond mere co-feeling or identity conflation.

not simply entrench a prior self but may enrich, expand, or amend it. Perhaps we glimpse aspects of ourselves in a character, but in a way that causes us to revise our sense of who we are" (Felski 83). It is my belief that video game characters, along with their plights and stories, can resonate deeply with students in the same way as other pieces of media such as literature and art, and that this relationship can be reflexive. Our course games were incredibly effective at eliciting strong emotional responses and students came away deeply affected by what they had viewed and played.

Another argument against detractors of bringing digital media into the English classroom is that a video game's ability to immerse a player in its environment, plot, or overarching narrative increases its overall appeal and ability to captivate an audience. The way a video game can resonate with a player or viewer "mirrors a reader's ability to find a point of connection with a text or a viewer's ability to become engrossed in a film" (Green 39). If a game succeeds at engaging a player emotionally, it can trigger a sense of identification with a particular character or characters. Green states that this, in turn, "can lead to a scenario wherein the player imaginatively projects himself or herself more fully into the digital story" (Green 62). Many of the discussions we've had over the course of my two semesters teaching ENWR 1510 have been rooted in what connections students felt to different characters and events in our content games, and how they could relate or not relate. I encouraged them to write about what was most emotionally resonant for them, what characterizations touched them the most, and what kinds of impacts these stories had on them. In turn, my students were able to articulate more effectively their beliefs and perspectives and walk away from the course having thoroughly embedded themselves in these stories.

Section IV. Leveling Up: Student Experiences

Of course, what matters more than my own motivation and intentions for the course is how students themselves experienced it. In this section, I will first share students' responses to several aspects of the class, including their thoughts on incorporating video games as texts in a literary context. In the second part of this section, I will include several reflections from my students about what it was like to play the games for themselves.

Video Games as Literature

To get at the question I am after in this thesis of whether a video game could ever be treated as a "text" in a secondary English classroom, I decided to ask my students directly. During Unit 1 of my spring ENWR 1510 section, I posed the following free write prompt to my students: *How would you compare how video game narratives engage players' empathy and emotions compared to traditional literature? Can video games ever be considered a literary genre in their own right?* It was interesting to see the fluctuation in their responses.

One of my students drew a connection between traditional literature and video games in the way they can evoke emotions through storytelling. She claimed that just as a reader can get attached to the characters they read about, "the gamer is involved in the storylines – they have a direct stake in the matter. The outcomes are much more personal, evoking stronger feelings." Many students echoed this perspective in their reflective writing.

Moreover, several students noted how the interactivity and factor of immersion in games allowed for greater engagement than other media. One student wrote that "video games could tell stories in a different, more interactive way than books or movies can. The player can change the narrative and explore in the way that they choose, which separates video games from other forms

of media." Player influence, through decision-making or gameplay style, can have a substantial impact on a video game's story, depending upon the type of game.[10]

Another student agreed that she felt that video games could engage players' empathy and emotions more than literature because they allow the player to feel more enveloped in the world of the game. She reasoned that player agency and the act of making choices in a game help put the player inside of a character's head and allow for greater attunement: "you get to experience what they are experiencing, think what they are thinking, and decide what they are doing. By making difficult decisions you can really envision the mental turmoil in the characters' minds, and to see that is to feel it. Understanding what someone is thinking can help you form completely different opinions based on what is happening to them." To this same sentiment, a different member of the class cited the ability of video game graphics and usage of first-person point of view to generate a more immersive experience for players: "this creates the impression that the player and the character are one and the same, which makes the delivery of emotional impact far more effective." This student then argued that "the ability to interact with the game environment also makes it so that the player feels like they truly exist in the world in the video game, creating a far stronger connection than one would usually obtain in another medium like literature." This emerging parallel between player and character was an especially thrilling realization for many of my students.

[10] While my ENWR 1510 section features story-based games like walking simulators and action-adventure games, there are many other types of video games out there, including but not limited to platforming games focused on gameplay mechanics; sandbox games that allow a player to create in and interact with an open-world; role-playing games; sports games; survival/horror games; and puzzle-solving games. It is worth noting that not every type of game allows for player choice, and the extent of the choices a player can make might be limited. For example, in the game *Firewatch*, the outcome of the game and the major plot events will always be the same, but the player as the main character can choose what to explore, what dialogue options to respond with, and how to personalize the main character's background.

However, not all my students agreed with this perspective of video games creating stronger connections with their users compared to books. A different student rejected this idea that someone could gain the same internal view of a video game character and think what they think just by playing as them. She concluded that "players cannot really get into the heads of the characters, but instead, they are left to mush together the dialogue of the characters and their own interpretations and biases to form an incomplete hypothesis of what might be going on inside of a character's head that made that character act in that way." In this student's opinion, not hearing a character's inner monologue unless they are speaking out loud detracts from and destabilizes video games' potential positioning as literary objects. One student who self-identified as an avid reader asserted that "video games capture your attention in the moment more easily, but books stick with you longer once you're done with them." She felt she could remember quotes and stories from books she had read with ease but did not feel as strong a connection to a video game unless she was the one playing it. Occasionally, students would feel pulled out of their immersion if a game seemed to offer the player choices but, in truth, had a pre-set outcome regardless of player intervention. Several students also expressed the importance of a game's graphic quality and flow in its believability, while others were excited to suspend disbelief when a game leaned away from realism and into the more fantastical.

Nevertheless, I was amazed at the way my students welcomed our class topic. In a pre-semester survey, a student wrote that she had never played video games before and was a little nervous about what the class would entail. In the free writing I mentioned above, this student confessed that she had ended up enjoying the course immensely. Meditating on and writing about video games in this class revealed a new perspective for her, which she reflected: "before this class, I wouldn't have thought they even qualified as literature. I didn't know games like

Firewatch existed, it is basically an interactive movie." This language of an "interactive movie" is vital to understanding how students viewed our games, both literally and figuratively: many enjoyed the way the playthroughs played out cinematically, but some stated that they felt detached from the game by merely watching without playing it for themselves. Consequently, most of my spring semester students felt more deeply invested in these stories as they played the games for themselves. By encouraging my students not only to watch the game playthroughs but to play a section of one of our games (per their choice), I facilitated far greater hands-on student involvement in our course content. Regardless of prior gaming experience, students in my ENWR 1510 course threw themselves into our games and came away with a better understanding of what it was like to direct the course of action in these stories.

Watching Versus Playing

I now want to pivot to several highlights of students' reactions to playing our unit content games. I asked students to share their honest reactions to playing a section of one game in a Gameplay Review discussion post on our course website, with a special focus on the game's playability, ability to hold their attention, and their experience of controlling the player characters.

When given the time to explore the games for themselves, my ENWR 1510 students took full advantage of exploring and examining the game environment with which they had become familiar by watching the playthroughs. One student wrote in his Gameplay Review that "[*The Last of Us: Part 1*] has a lot of background dialogues when you walk to certain areas which adds to the world building and makes it constantly interesting. It also affected some segments of the game as actually playing the game creates way more tension." These surrounding conversations between background characters contributed to this student's interest and fleshed out the game's

atmosphere. This student then explained that the intensity of playing, compared to watching a playthrough of the game, "Adds a lot more to the story. Actually struggling in the game added a lot more sense of accomplishment when I progressed through the story." From his experience working his way through *The Last of Us: Part 1* for the first time, this student appreciated the game's storytelling aspects much more as well as the difficulty of navigating the game. He could feel a sense of satisfaction upon his exploration, both in terms of gameplay and his understanding of the game's environment. Another student who played *The Last of Us* agreed that "playing the game gives you much more of an immersive experience into the dangerous, apocalyptic setting," and could help her put herself in the shoes of the characters.

As I previously discussed, and as some of my students' responses articulated, video games have the power to immerse a player and draw them fully into a story through auditory and visual factors, extensive world-building, and the opportunity for player impact. One student wrote in her Gameplay Review of *What Remains of Edith Finch*, "There are so many amazing little details that stand out when you are the one who can look in every nook and cranny of every room you explore." She explained that not only did she feel more emotionally connected to the game while she was in control, but that her ability to influence what happened allowed her to explore the game's environment more thoroughly and even gain a better understanding of the game. Another student echoed this sentiment and claimed that playing the game allowed her to become much more immersed and captivated her. She wrote that what made her realize the impact of playing the game versus watching a playthrough was "how locked in I was while playing. I focused more on the walking simulator aspect and figuring out the controls. Making my own decisions led me to exploring and going on my own path rather than just listening and analyzing the plot. These realizations honestly make me wish that I had played from the

beginning for all the games." This student highlighted a central experiential difference of personal agency in shaping her own experience in the game, which actively drew her in. She found value in learning how to move, explore, and interact; to harness that attraction and interest for academic purposes holds immense promise.

However, to provide a more well-rounded perspective of my spring semester students' reactions to actual gameplay, I want to highlight some of the more negative experiences a few students had playing the games. While most of my students found their time playing a section of one of our games beneficial, several students voiced their frustration with the learning curve of the games' mechanics, controls, and kinesthetic structures. One student confessed, "I really struggled with this game because I was expecting I could just kind of press buttons and then the game would carry me through the rest of it, kind of just allowing me to sit back and let the dialogue play through or for the scenes to move from one to the next, but I was wrong. I am realizing that gaming is not for the weak because I actually got frustrated whenever I couldn't figure out where to go next." Another student concurred with this reaction and stated that her "opinion of the game honestly did not change" because she felt like "it would take a lot longer for me to go through the game while playing it rather than watching it due to my inexperience with video games." Therefore, I believe that for the most impactful outcome of this activity, I would need to explain player controls for each game, provide advice on how to best approach a course game, and offer more opportunities for students to play the game outside of class.

My students' free writing reflections and Gameplay Review comments cemented for me the power of video games to reach students in a classroom potentially beyond what traditional literature alone can accomplish. Integrating interactive digital media such as video games

alongside books may allow educators to foster more meaningful conversations about writing, storytelling, and identity.

Conclusion: Beyond the Console

As students navigate high school, their motivation may fade, and they may not feel that their reading and learning materials fully stimulate them. At this age, adolescents are also adjusting to new and complex social dynamics, encountering rapidly changing emotions, and beginning to explore their identities more seriously. Offering video games as texts worthy of analysis and exploration can reinvigorate English curricula at the secondary level, eliciting genuine student interest in their learning material through appeals to emotion, identity, and attachment. As a medium, video games provide a surprisingly sophisticated entry point into literary analysis. They also offer a meaningful avenue for self-discovery. If we as teachers can apply academic values and learning goals to what is typically a form of non-educational entertainment, we can promote significant engagement in English language arts and literature with higher personal stakes for our students and more enduring learning.

In teaching a course centered on writing about video games, I could root my students' learning in material that would be relevant and meaningful to them and consequently inspire them to write what they care about. In counteracting apathy and disinterest in the classroom, I wanted to focus my course on students and their interests, and ultimately relate our coursework to real-world resonant experiences. Based on the genuine and earnest engagement my ENWR 1510 students demonstrated, I feel excited about the possibilities of what students can accomplish in high school literature classes with story-based video games integrated into traditional curricula. By tapping into adolescent students' innate digital literacy proficiency, I

believe I could leverage video games' immersive abilities in the classroom and further inform my own pedagogical approaches and curriculum development.

However, I want to acknowledge the need to align the study of video games as texts with learning objectives, mandated educational standards, and consistent grading criteria. Educators would also need to address the limitations surrounding various games' accessibility, such as the need for specific gaming platforms and consoles or students' technical proficiency, which may prove difficult in a secondary school environment. For high school students, I could imagine aiding the class in gameplay tutorials and providing advice on what to expect when they eventually play the games, but an instructor would need to solidify how students would be able to access the games reliably and regardless of financial barriers. In addition, as I prepare to teach my own high school English classes, I aspire to compile a larger list of story-based games that promote diversity and inclusion.

My students overwhelmingly developed a new appreciation for video games as a medium and as something worthy of study, regardless of whether they were gamers before taking my ENWR 1510 course in the fall or spring. Our games added depth and intrigue to our lessons and enhanced their media literacy; I hope to channel similar intersections of literature, technology, and media studies in my future teaching practices. With continued effort on the parts of educators, I believe video games as electronic literature can reinvigorate and enrich student interest in our discipline and bring about new, exciting, and inspiring opportunities for analysis and reflection in secondary education classrooms. Eventually, video games might be taken seriously as potential literary objects. As one of my students expressed, "it may take time for video games to garner that kind of respect, but I think we are well on the way."

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Night in the Woods. Infinite Fall / Finji, 2017.

The Last of Us: Part 1. Naughty Dog / Sony Computer Entertainment, 2023.

What Remains of Edith Finch. Giant Sparrow / Annapurna Interactive, 2017.

Appendix A: Course Syllabus (Spring of 2024)

Syllabus

ENWR 1510: Writing about Digital Media
Art Imitates Life: Writing about Video Games
Spring 2024

Caroline Ford
vrt6km@virginia.edu
Office hours: over Zoom (by appointment)

Time: MWF 12:00-12:50
Location: Bryan 334

Course Description

Video games are a beloved source of entertainment that offer both an escape from reality and an opportunity to pursue a myriad of storylines. In addition to providing rich and unique interactive experiences, they can also have a profound emotional impact, whether joyous, light-hearted, bittersweet, distressing, or even outright maddening. Many would even consider video games an art form, but how far can we push the intersection between video games and academic value?

In this section of ENWR 1510, we will extend beyond the scope of video game coding and mechanics into an exploration of the relationship between video games and writing. In our classes together, we will examine how video games come together through soundtrack, characterization, dialogue, world-building, and narrative. As we look specifically at story-based games, we will focus on a few key questions:

- How do video games evoke emotions, empathy, and attachment in their players?
- How do video games demonstrate different lived experiences, themes, and ideologies?
- What makes a story?

Through our reading, writing, viewing, and discussion, we will learn about the creative possibilities in our own writing through video game storytelling. We will work collaboratively to think through writing as a process, express thoughts with clarity, and develop writerly confidence. Unit topics will be paired with games, brief articles about said games, and various supplementary essays. No previous video game interest or experience is necessary. Games will be made available through the University or are observable through free online video walkthroughs.

Course Objectives

(What can I expect to get out of this course?)

In this course you will:

- Practice writing as a creative form of inquiry and expression.
- Think critically about writing and rhetoric through the lens of video games.
- Build community through thoughtful evaluation with your peers.
- Develop strategies for drafting and revising your writing.
- Dedicate time and space to improving your voice, style, and confidence as a writer.

Learning Activities

(What will we be doing?)

Major Assignments:
Over the course of this semester, you will have the opportunity to complete **three major writing assignments**. The first two will be essays, and you will have a choice for the third whether you want to write a third essay or complete a creative final project. Any major essay assignment you complete should be 5-7 pages in length in 12-point Times New Roman font on double-spaced pages with default 1-inch margins. I will distribute more thorough assignment outlines and rubrics later in the semester and invite you to collaborate with me on said rubrics!

For your first and second essays, you will have a **revision opportunity** to revise and resubmit your work alongside a one-paragraph revision reflection describing your experience with the revision process. The first revision is mandatory, but the second one will be optional. In your re-working of your paper, I'll be looking for improvements to your prose, argumentation, and/or structure. I will grade your revised essay and give you the higher grade between the original and the revision. For best results, I encourage you to meet with me during office hours and take advantage of the Writing Center.

Weekly Exercises:
To practice your writing skills, you will occasionally complete **in-class writing assignments** and craft **online response posts to writing prompts on Canvas**. These brief assignments will be graded for completion – I am looking for how you and your writing grow throughout the semester. There will also be opportunities to share your writing in class to contribute to our discussions.

For our weekly Canvas discussion posts, you will write a short paragraph (100-300 words) about our game and/or reading materials from that week. Weekly posts will be **due by 11:59pm on the Wednesday** of the assigned week. These exercises will be a chance to explore your thoughts in a low-stakes experimental environment, and to respond to your peers informally. I will offer several different frameworks and prompts for you to choose from. You can also always pull from your discussion posts when constructing your essays.

Peer Review Workshops:
As this is a writing-centered course, you will meet a total of 3 times in class with a small group of your peers to review your and others' writing together. Peer review is a crucial aspect of this

course and your attendance at these review sessions is mandatory. We will divide into several groups within the first two weeks of the semester.

Course Readings (and Games)

We will be reading several essays, game reviews, and opinion pieces over the course of this semester. I have made all of these available to you on Canvas at no cost. I do not require you to print out our readings, but you may do so if you prefer (sometimes a hardcopy can be helpful to work with, especially during workshops!). We will watch any clips from video game-related shows together in class; no streaming subscriptions are necessary.

In addition to our readings, the story-based video games we will view together will include:

- Firewatch (2016)
- What Remains of Edith Finch (2017)
- The Last of Us (2013, Windows remake 2023)

You will have swipe access to Wilson 207 starting Friday, August 25th so you can visit the Games Lab and play our course games at any time.

Note: Some of our readings and games contain sensitive topics. I will provide content and sensitivity warnings for many of these materials in advance. If you sense that a class selection might be too triggering, please let me know and we will arrange an alternative. I always want to respect your boundaries.

Appendix B: Sample Course Calendar (Spring of 2024)

Course Calendar

*Note: homework (**HW**) is listed under the day it is **DUE**; plan to complete that assignment for that class meeting.

Week 1: January 15th to January 19th: **Let's Go Gamers**
Wednesday, Jan 17th:

- Introductions and Syllabus Day

Friday, Jan 19th:

- Wilson Space info session and tour

UNIT 1: Identity in Storytelling

In this unit, we will explore the ways in which we as individuals can connect to video games. We will evaluate how video games use storytelling to communicate themes, personality, and meaning in our study of the 2016 adventure game *Firewatch*. As we respond as readers and players/viewers to themes of mental health, isolation, companionship, and uncertain futures, we will discover how story-based video games both reflect and influence identity in powerful ways. Through our discussion and interrogation of these identity-based writings, we will identify various strengths we want to embody in our own writing.

Week 2: January 22nd to January 26th: **Introduction to Identity**
Monday, Jan 22nd:

- **HW due**: play/watch *Firewatch*: Introduction and Day 1
- **HW due**: read "The Relationship Between Games and Identity" by LMamotte and "Identity in Gaming" by Low Five Education

Wednesday, Jan 24th:

- **HW due**: play/watch *Firewatch*: Day 2
- Submit Week 2 Writing Response by 11:59pm

Friday, Jan 26th:

- **HW due**: play/watch *Firewatch*: Days 3-64
- **HW due**: read "Finding Henry–Embodying a Character in *Firewatch*" by Apple Cider

Week 3: January 29th to February 2nd: **Gender and Sexuality**
Monday, Jan 29th:

- **HW due**: play/watch *Firewatch*: Day 76
- **HW due**: read "The Importance of Representation in Video Games" by Drop-In Gaming and "How Gamers Use Video Games to Explore Their Gender Identity" by Andrew Fishman

Wednesday, Jan 31st:

- Writing Center info session
- **HW due**: read "How video games helped me realize my sexual identity" by Gal Alperovitch and "Gender and Love in 'Life is Strange' and 'Firewatch'" by Merlin Seller
- Submit Week 3 Writing Response by 11:59pm

Friday, Feb 2nd:

- **HW due**: play/watch *Firewatch*: Day 77

Week 4: February 5th to February 9th: **The Scope of Humanity**

Monday, Feb 5th:

- **HW due**: read "Explore Humanity and Uncover an Uncertain Past in *Firewatch*" by Moses Concha

Wednesday, Feb 7th:

- **HW due**: play/watch *Firewatch*: Days 78+79
- **HW due**: read "Firewatch, Projection and Isolation" by Reid McCarter
- Submit Week 4 Writing Response by 11:59pm

Essay #1 draft due midnight on Thursday, February 8th via Google Drive

Friday, Feb 9th:

- Peer review introduction and first small-group workshop
- **HW due**: read "Guidelines for Students – Peer Review"; "Giving and Receiving Feedback"; and "Responding—Really Responding—to Other Students' Writing" by Richard Straub

Week 5: February 12th to February 16th: **Video Games and Storytelling**

Monday, Feb 12th:

- **HW due**: "Realism in Games: What Makes Firewatch Feel Personal" by Randon Banuelos

Wednesday, Feb 14th:

- **HW due**: read "The Importance of Video Game Narrative" by **Adeyemi Thompson** and "How Video Games Have Changed Storytelling" by Jason Hellerman
- Submit Week 5 Writing Response by 11:59pm

Friday, Feb 16th:

- **HW due**: work on your papers!

Essay #1 final draft due 4:00pm on Friday, February 16th via Canvas

UNIT 2: Relationships of All Kinds

This unit will explore human relationships and connections through the 2013 action-adventure game *The Last of Us*, remastered in 2023 for PC. As we explore various representations of relationships, we will interrogate personal connections we have to other people as friends, family, and lovers and connections we have to the world. We will also question how video games can help us represent these attachments in our own writing, and where we can build upon our understanding of popular culture as it informs our life experience.

Note: We will have to read material with spoilers for many of our classes for this unit before we have reached the corresponding events in the game. If you are someone who does not want the story spoiled for them, I suggest playing/watching ahead!

Week 6: February 19th to February 23rd: **Companionship and Connection**
Monday, Feb 19th:

- **HW due**: play/watch *The Last of Us* (*TLOU*) Chapters 1+2: "Hometown" and "Quarantine Zone"

Wednesday, Feb 21st:

- **HW due**: play/watch *TLOU* Chapter 3: "The Outskirts"
- Submit Week 6 Writing Response by 11:59pm

Friday, Feb 23rd:

- **HW due**: read "Explaining Tess's Importance in The Last of Us" by Carlos Zotomayor and "Without Tess, There Would Be No 'The Last of Us'" by Cameron Kunzelman

Week 7: February 26th to March 1st: **Romantic and Family Ties**
Monday, Feb 26th:

- **HW due**: play/watch *TLOU* Chapter 4: "Bill's Town"
- **HW due**: read "The Last of Us: What Happens to Bill and Frank In the Game?" by Matthew Byrd

Wednesday, Feb 28th:

- **HW due**: play/watch *TLOU* Chapter 5 "Pittsburgh"

Friday, March 1st:

- **HW due**: play/watch *TLOU* Chapter 6: "The Suburbs"
- **HW due**: read "The pain and power of loss in The Last of Us" by Jimmy Tran; and "The Hardest Lesson in The Last of Us" by Leon Hurley
- Submit Week 7 Writing Response by 11:59pm

Week 8: March 4th to March 8th: **SPRING BREAK – No Classes**

Week 9: March 11th to March 15th: **Combat and Conflict**
Monday, Mar 11th:

- **HW due**: play/watch *TLOU* Chapter 7: "Tommy's Dam"
- **HW due**: read or listen to "Joel and Ellie's War-Time Relationship in 'The Last of Us'" by Nick Dinicola at https://www.popmatters.com/the-war-time-relationship-of-the-last-of-us-2495722638.html

Wednesday, Mar 13th:

- Robertson Media Center info session and tour
- Submit Week 9 Writing Response by 11:59pm

Friday, Mar 15th:

- **HW due**: play/watch *TLOU* Chapter 8: "The University"

Essay #2 draft due midnight on Friday, March 15th via Google Drive

Week 10: March 18th to March 22nd: **Empathy and Perspective**
Monday, Mar 18th:

- Peer review time in class – small-group workshops
- **HW due**: work on your papers!

Wednesday, Mar 20th:

- **HW due**: play/watch *TLOU* Chapter 9: "Lakeside Resort"
- **HW due**: read "In the Video Game The Last of Us, Survival Favors the Man" by Chris Suellentrop and "The Last of Us and Grading on the Gender Curve" by Carolyn Petit
- Submit Week 10 Writing Response by 11:59pm

Friday, Mar 22nd:

- **HW due**: play/watch *TLOU* Chapter 10: "Bus Depot"

Essay #1 revision and reflection due midnight on Friday, March 22nd via Canvas

Week 11: March 25th to March 29th: **Morality and Ethics**
Monday, Mar 25th:

- **HW due**: play/watch *TLOU* Chapters 11-12: "The Firefly Lab" and "Jackson"

Wednesday, Mar 27th:

- **HW due**: read "What 'The Last of Us' Taught Me: An In-Depth Analysis of Naughty Dog's Smash Hit Game" by Mikayla Connolly and "The Last of Us Makes Players Feel Really Bad – and That's Great" by Gabriel Aikins
- Submit Week 11 Writing Response by 11:59pm

Friday, Mar 29th:

- Class *TLOU* debate
- **HW due**: prepare for the debate and work on your papers!

Essay #2 final draft due 4:00pm on Friday, March 29th via Canvas

UNIT 3: Life and Death

In this unit, we will piece together conceptualizations of death, memory, and legacy through the critically acclaimed 2017 exploration game *What Remains of Edith Finch*. While this game presents vastly different life settings and experiences compared to *The Last of Us Part 1*, it touches on meaningful themes of what it means to live and die. We will look at how storytelling can take us to the edge of humanity, from grief to grace, and everywhere in between. We will also eventually choose a communal game to consume together as a class. A major goal of this unit will be to practice using your voice to analyze writing both inside and outside of these games, as well as to think critically about course content and effective writing strategies.

Week 12: April 1st to April 5th: **Grief, Loss, and Legacy**

Monday, Apr 1st:

- **HW due**: play/watch *What Remains of Edith Finch*: Part 1

Wednesday, Apr 3rd:

- **HW due**: play/watch *What Remains of Edith Finch*: Part 2
- Submit Week 12 Writing Response by 11:59pm

Friday, Apr 5th:

- **HW due**: play/watch *What Remains of Edith Finch*: Part 3

Week 13: April 8th to April 12th: **Existentialism**

Monday, Apr 8th: NO CLASS

- **HW due**: read "Mourning, Melancholy, Edith Finch, and My Mother" by Christian Haines and "What Remains of Edith Finch and losing someone you love" by Simone de Rochefort

Wednesday, Apr 10th:

- **HW due**: read "What Remains of Edith Finch and the Awesome, Terrible Power of Stories" by Andrew Bloom and "Edith Finch is a Game about (not) Telling Stories" by Max Goldstein
- Submit Week 13 Writing Response by 11:59pm

Friday, Apr 12th:

- **HW due**: read "Exploring the unknown propels 'What Remains of Edith Finch' into greatness" by Alex Martinez

Week 14: April 15th to April 19th: **Communal Game**
Monday, Apr 15th:

- **HW due**: Communal Game

Wednesday, Apr 17th:

- **HW due**: Communal Game
- Submit Optional Week 14 Writing Response by 11:59pm

Essay #3 or Final Project draft due midnight on Thursday, April 18th via Google Drive

Friday, Apr 19th:

- Peer review time in class – small-group workshops
- **HW due**: work on your papers/projects!

Week 15: April 22nd to April 26th: **Individual Meetings**
Monday, Apr 22nd: No Class – Zoom or in-person meetings

Wednesday, Apr 24th: No Class – Zoom or in-person meetings

Friday, Apr 26th: No Class – Zoom or in-person meetings

Essay #2 optional revision due midnight on Monday, April 29th via Canvas

Week 16: April 29th to May 3rd: **Wrapping Up**
Monday, Apr 29th:

- Last Day of Class, Course Evaluations

Essay #3 or Final Project due 4:00pm on Monday, May 6th via Canvas

Appendix C: Unit 1 Sample Assessment (Spring of 2024)

Unit 1 Summative Assessment

Description: Reflective writing is a form of writing in which you examine personal experiences, describe insights you've gained, and express some aspect of growth or self-discovery. For this first assignment, you will be writing a personal narrative essay about **one** aspect of your identity and the impact it has had on your life thus far. You will discuss how this part of who you are has shaped your life and how you have arrived at (or perhaps not arrived at) acceptance. Your job is to use personal anecdotes and reflections to describe your own relationship with this part of your identity and articulate what it means to you.

Before beginning your paper, you should narrow down what aspect of your identity you want to focus on. These include but are not limited to: gender identity, sexuality, race, ethnicity, mental health, ability, body size, religion, socioeconomic class, family relationship status, age, and outcome from an event or experience in one's history. Essentially, you may choose to reflect on any part of yourself you consider significant and meaningful to who you are! It may help to think about how *Firewatch* frames personal identity development and human connection.

Below are some questions to help you kickstart your brainstorming/writing process:

- Why have you chosen to discuss this part of your identity? What about it is meaningful or special to you?
- How has this part of your identity shaped/affected who you are and how you view yourself?
- What makes this part of your identity difficult or easy to talk about?
- What have been some of your experiences with this part of your identity?
- What is your relationship with this aspect of your identity now? What feelings does it evoke/how do you feel about it now?
- How have your feelings about this part of yourself changed over time?

****Please note that as we will be workshopping these papers as a class, I recommend writing about something that you are comfortable sharing with others.**

Writing Goals: The goals of this assignment are for you to practice using "I"-statements, writing descriptively, and engaging in thoughtful expression through your own writing voice. You should draw from anecdotes, memories, and key moments in your life. Remember: embrace the personal!

Papers that meet expectations will:

- Experiment with reflexive writing (lean into one's own personal style, voice, and takes!)
- Provide meaningful evidence in the form of **at least two** anecdotes
- Follow formatting guidelines and length requirements (below)
- Use detailed and specific description
- Demonstrate clarity in language and thought

Formatting:

- 4-6 full pages (1,000-1,500 words double-spaced)
- 12-point Times New Roman font
- A centered first-page title (be as creative as you like!)
- Default 1-inch margins
- Numbered pages
- Indented paragraphs
- Your name, my name, ENWR 1510, and the date at the top left of your first page
- No works cited necessary – everything should be coming from you!
- Please submit as a PDF or Word document

If you have any questions or get stuck while writing, come meet with me to talk things through! Also, be sure to take advantage of the Writing Center located in Bryan Hall 314 – you can schedule appointments for one-on-one student writing support.

Due Dates: Your first draft will be due **Thursday, February 8th at midnight** via Google Drive, which we will workshop together in groups. The final draft will be due **Friday, February 16th at 4:00pm** via Canvas.

Appendix D: Unit 2 Sample Assessment (Spring of 2024)

Unit 2 Summative Assessment

Description: For this second assignment, you will be writing an argumentative (persuasive) essay about character relationships in *The Last of Us*. We will have explored numerous character dynamics as a class from the familial to the romantic and read several other people's takes on some of these relationships. Now, it is your turn to argue what character relationships or dynamics you find most resonant, important, or worthy of further attention. I want you to choose **two** characters and write an argument around why their interactions stood out to you and/or deserve discussion. Like with most opinion pieces, your goal is to convince your reader why your chosen character relationships are valuable and why *you* believe they are significant.

I am also asking you to bring in quotes from the game's actual dialogue or written content to help inform your argument. This assignment will require you to use **MLA formatting** for **in-text citations** and a **worked cited page** (we will go over these details together as a class).

Before beginning your paper, it might help you think back on all the key characters we've encountered and how they interact. These characters include: Joel, Sarah, Tess, Marlene, Ellie, Bill (and a postmortem appearance from Frank), Henry, Sam, Tommy, Maria, David, and even Ish (the off-screen unsung hero of the sewers).

Below are some questions to help kickstart your brainstorming/writing process:

- What characters have you found to be most compelling in terms of development and/or the game's story as a whole?
- What character dynamics stood out to you as you played/watched? How do these characters interact with each other?
- What are the kinds of relationships do you find most interesting? How are those reflected in the game?
- How would you qualify your chosen characters' connections to each other?
- What are your takeaways/what conclusions do you draw from your assessment of these characters' relationship?

Writing Goals: The goals of this assignment are for you to practice making and defending an argument through writing, providing relevant evidence to support your ideas, drawing meaningful connections in reference to the source material, and expressing your beliefs and opinions succinctly and persuasively.

Papers that meet expectations will:

- Explicitly state the characters and type of relationship they are discussing
- Make a strong claim which the rest of the paper supports and defends
- Provide meaningful evidence in the form of analysis of **at least four** quotes from the game (not the show!) using **MLA in-text citation format**
- Not fall into the trap of too much summary – some context is helpful, but your paper should not be just recounting the game's events, it should offer an argument
- Use detailed and specific evidence in support of the overall argument
- Demonstrate clarity in language and thought
- Follow formatting guidelines and length requirements (below)

Formatting:

- 4-6 *full* pages (1,000-1,500 words double-spaced)
- 12-point Times New Roman font
- A centered title (be as creative as you like but it should be on topic!)
- Default 1-inch margins
- Numbered pages
- Indented paragraphs
- Your name, my name, ENWR 1510, and the date at the top left of your first page
- Works Cited page using **MLA format**
- Please submit as a PDF or Word document

Remember: if you have any questions or get stuck while writing, come meet with me to talk things through! Also, be sure to take advantage of the Writing Center located in Bryan Hall 314 – you can schedule appointments for one-on-one student writing support.

Due Dates: Your first draft will be due **Friday, March 15th at midnight** via Google Drive, which we will workshop together in groups. The final draft will be due **Friday, March 29th at 4:00pm** via Canvas.