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Abstract

A review of Andrew Burn's book *Literature, Videogames and Learning*. Published in 2022 by Routledge. ISBN: 9781032024523, pp. 232.

Keywords

From Meg Jayanth writing back to Jules Verne via *80 Days* (Inkle, 2014) to *Akumajō Dracula X: Chi no Rondo* (Konami, 1993) lifting characters from *Carmilla* (Le Fanu, 1872), videogames have long taken inspiration from literature. But how might this relationship develop in the future? And what exactly happens when literary texts are reimagined as videogames? These are the questions at the heart of Andrew Burn's *Literature, Videogames and Learning* (2022). Burn presents a framework for understanding gaming's relationship with literature, while advancing a vision of how literary game making might feature in the school curricula of tomorrow. In so doing, he also sketches some fruitful future directions for game studies. As the book demonstrates, there is still a lot that literary studies can teach us when it comes to understanding the videogame's affordances as an expressive medium, discussing the ontological status of gamic characters, and exploring parallels between the oral storytelling cultures of yesteryear and the forms of algorithmic narration emerging today.

Burn's approach is three-pronged, encompassing theory, criticism, and creative practice. The early chapters of the book lay the theoretical groundwork, offering a blueprint for a "multimodal rhetoric and poetics of ludic narrative and drama" (2022, p. 54). The middle section applies this model to commercial videogames based on works of children's literature. Burn offers critical analyses of *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (EA UK, 2002) and *The Golden Compass* (Shiny Entertainment,

2007), dissecting the developers' renditions of key scenes from their source material, explaining how these sequences differ from the literary and filmic versions of the same scenes, and asking what young readers/players make of them. The final few chapters draw on Burn's experiences running workshops in which participants are challenged to reinvent literary texts using Missionmaker, "a game-authoring software tool for young people" that Burn and his collaborators have been developing since 2007 (2022, p. 6). Chapters seven, eight and nine draw on sessions centred on the Anglo-Saxon epic *Beowulf*, while chapters 10 and 11 discuss games produced as part of workshops on Shakespeare's 1606 play *Macbeth*, a text that many British teenagers are required to study for their GCSE English exams.

As that precis suggests, different parts of the book are likely to appeal to different audiences, and which sections the reader is drawn to will depend to some extent on whether that reader is a narratologist, a theorist of adaptation, a videogame designer, or a schoolteacher. Which is not to say that the whole fails to hang together. In fact, for a book grounded in almost two decades of writing, research, design, and pedagogy, it is commendably cohesive. But it is also refreshingly accommodating. This is evident from the way that Burn presents his theoretical framework. Aware of the pitfalls of "mechanistic formalism" (2022, p. 54), Burn is less concerned with constructing an all-encompassing analytical apparatus than he is furnishing readers with terms and ideas that can facilitate new approaches to "reading and writing, playing and designing" (p. 19). Of the many ideas advanced in the book's early chapters, I was particularly struck by how Burn turns to Aristotle to advance a vision of a literary education that would enable students to become "*rhetor-rhapsode*[s]" (p. 108, emphasis in original). The Aristotelean rhetor deploys rhetoric, a set of "tools for argument and persuasion", to convince their audience (p. 64). In Burn's model the rhetor's toolkit expands beyond the linguistic to encompass other forms of multimodal meaning-making, including what Ian Bogost (2007) famously theorised as "procedural rhetoric", or the configuration of systems and simulations in such a way as to endorse particular values, ideologies, or points of view. Burn also wants students to become "rhapsode[s] … engaged in ludic poetics" (p. 66). In Aristotle's era rhapsodes were performers—but also interpreters and critics—of epic poetry. The title "combines the ancient Greek words for 'stitch' (*rhaptein*) and 'poem' (*oide*)" (p. 19, emphasis in original). The rhapsode, then, was a weaver of poems, unpicking threads from older works in order to stitch together new narratives (p. 27). Burn proposes that we might see videogames as "*digital rhapsodies*: woven artefacts stitched together both by author and player*" using components that range from audio files and 3D models to rules and code to written text (pp. 19–20, emphasis in original). The rhetor-rhapsode, in short, is a figure versed in both critical analysis and creative expression, one whose purview extends across modes and media.

In developing these ideas Burn makes a strong case for an expanded conception of literacy, one better suited to "classrooms where language is no longer the unique, privileged, mode of representation" (2022, p. 27). At the same time, the book shows

that traditional literacies can enhance our understanding of how videogames function. In particular, Burn demonstrates how a command of grammar can assist in articulating and exploring the expressive possibilities of videogames as a code-based medium that asks players to assume in-game roles and perform actions that alter the state of a game-world. While it has long been commonplace for game designers to think in terms of the "verbs" available to the player (see, for example, Schell, 2008, pp. 141–144), Burn goes further, drawing on the work of narratologists like Gerard Genette and Ivan Todorov to address the narrative functions of verbs in terms of "tense, mood and voice" (p. 24). He offers insights into the relationship between players, avatars, and designers, too, following Ensslin (2014, p. 96) in proposing that "the second-person [is] the characteristic grammatical disposition of the videogame" as a medium that enjoins *you*, the player, to act (Burn, 2002, p. 9). He also draws attention to the forms of "pronoun-switching" that players resort to in their reports of gameplay, noting that avatars are sometimes treated as separate entities, and sometimes as extensions or symbiotic partners of the player (something also noted by Poppy Wilde [2023] in her recent account of digital gameplay as a form of posthuman entanglement).

More fundamentally, Burn proposes that we might see the translation from literary text to videogame as effecting a "crucial switch in the grammar of the narrative" (2022, p. 23), whereby "every event, in effect, becomes an 'if-clause': If Beowulf owns the sword, he can kill Grendel's Mother; if Macbeth kills Duncan, he will gain the crown" (p. 26). Making a literary text into a game means bringing about "a form of narrative transformation in which a modal auxiliary is inserted, a possibility left open" (p. 32)—so that we move, for example, from a narrative in which Lady MacDuff is doomed to die to one in which it becomes possible that she *might* escape her assassins. It is this "rendering of narrative as subjunctive" that, for Burn, defines ludic reinterpretations of literary texts, which must translate the scenarios they inherit into forms compatible with the "conditionality" that is the "natural mood of game grammar, encoded in the very rule system of the game" via the if/then statements that make up its programming (p. 26).

As this suggests, the book is, among other things, an extended meditation on the nature of adaptation—though this is, for various reasons, a term that Burn mostly eschews. Rather, he invites readers to see games based on literary texts as examples of "playful reading" that necessarily entail "interrogation or interpretation" of the original texts (2022, p. 9). Burn also draws on Luke Kelly's (2016) concept of "ideality" to propose that we might see older literary texts as aspiring to forms of interactivity that only became possible with the advent of digital games (Burn, 2022, p. 15). Taken too far, such a stance could seem patronising or presumptuous—as if the entirety of literary history was merely the precursor to the arrival of videogames. As a cue to imagine how traditional texts might be playfully reinterpreted, however, it is a suggestive prompt. For Burn, conversations about adaptation too often get bogged down in questions of fidelity, revolving around the issue of how far derivative works

stray from their inspirations. The concept of ideality, by contrast, asks us to recognise the ways in which a written texts might *already* be like a film or a game.

This proves easier with some texts than it does with others. As Burn acknowledges, certain literary texts, forms, and genres are obviously "game-like" in one way or another (2022, p. 5). *Beowulf* is structured around a series of battles in which the eponymous warrior vanquishes increasingly powerful monsters; its protagonist "is what [Walter] Ong [1982] called a 'heavy hero': characterised by simple memorable qualities; and *agonistic*, solving problems through physical action rather than psychological effort" (Burn, 2022, p. 107, emphasis in original). As Burn concedes, the poem's portrayal of its hero's plight "resembles the adventures of Spiderman, Superman and Batman more than it does the tortured protagonists of Renaissance drama or the modern novel" (p. 107). It already has a lot in common, in short, with games like *Alien Soldier* (Treasure, 1995) or *Shadow of the Colossus* (Team Ico & Japan Studio, 2005). Fantasy literature in general, with its "quests, potions, puzzles" and magic, has been proven time and again to translate well into games (Burn, 2022, p. 78). Playtexts, meanwhile, could be considered akin to videogames insofar as they must be brought to life by actors, just as games are nothing without players to realise the possibilities immanent in their code (p. 153). Burn also follows Ensslin in pointing to the playfully subversive literary experiments of figures like Borges, Beckett, and Sterne, and to "born digital" texts like Michael Joyce's experimental hypertext *afternoon, a story* (1990), as having elements that are notably game-like in one way or another (p. 14).

But Burn also insists "that literature *in general* is playful" (2022, p. 14, emphasis in original), and that videogame designers can and should look beyond texts that foreground quests and combat to explore "interiority, thought, motive, morality" (p. 171). While emotional depth and psychological insight are "sometimes popularly imagined to be difficult to achieve" in videogames, the *Macbeth* games that students create with Missionmaker find ingenious ways of translating the complex psychological and emotional dynamics of Shakespeare's play into playable form (p. 179). One pair of students designs a game in which Macbeth's levels of conscience, ambition, and courage can be boosted or lowered by certain objects (a strategy that Burn argues resonates with the play's imbuing of certain objects with talismanic or metonymic properties [p. 159]); others use spatial metaphors to render inner states, trapping a controllable Lady Macbeth in a labyrinthine space meant to represent "the sewers of [her] mind" (p. 156).

The sense that videogames are at a disadvantage when it comes to portraying believable characters with complex inner lives is one reason why they remain subject to snobbery and suspicion as a narrative medium. Presenting Missionmaker games that challenge this preconception, Burn also asks readers to recognise that the tendency to equate literary quality with the creation of 'deep' characters who follow developmental arcs is historically and generically contingent. Oral narratives like *Beowulf* never had much truck with questions of interiority or character development,

and nor does most children's literature. Avant-garde and experimental literature, meanwhile, has spent more than a century interrogating the model of the subject articulated in realist novels and classical autobiographies—and here it is perhaps noteworthy that recent works of experimental life-writing by authors such as Oli Hazzard (2021) and Michael Clune (2014) have turned to gaming to find alternative frameworks for thinking about selfhood, intentionality, and (un)consciousness. Burn also calls into question the fetishization of originality. He points out that if video-games share epic poetry's taste for heroic battles, another trait the two forms have in common is their *formulaic* quality. If today we tend to hear that word as a pejora-tive, this is in part thanks to Romanticism's championing of the idea of the true artist as singular, *sui generis* genius. As Burn suggests however, 'formulaic' need not be an insult. Epic poetry is often full of stock epithets and phrases, "us[ing] and re-us[ing] ... building blocks of text" (2022, p. 123). If this made it easier for rhapsodes and their counterparts in other cultures (like the Anglo-Saxon *scop*) to remember long narra-tives, it also made those narratives easier to elaborate and reconfigure. Seen this way, oral composition and transmission begin to betray parallels with the "formulae of game programming" and the way that a finite stock of commands, rules and as-sets can provide a basis for countless hours of compelling permutations (p. 27). Without resorting to relativism, Burn insists that readers consider how cultural tastes and aesthetic values are developed, articulated and contested within particu-lar social and historical contexts—processes that young students are already partic-ipating in when they link Lady Macbeth to later gothic heroines or debate the relative merits of *Chamber of Secrets* and *Resident Evil 3: Nemesis* (Capcom, 1999).

Elsewhere the book raises some interesting questions regarding cultural belonging and the ownership of texts and tools—questions that it is a pity there is not more room to explore. *Beowulf* and *Macbeth* are cornerstones of the English literary canon; the kind of works that conservatives love to represent as part of some precious na-tional patrimony, despite *Macbeth*'s roots in Scottish history and the fact that *Beo-wulf*, often heralded as "the first great piece of English literature", lays its scene in sixth-century Scandinavia and "deals not with England or Englishmen at all" (Swan-ton, 1997, p. 6). Burn acknowledges the tradition of using these texts to mediate questions of identity and belonging while steering well clear of parochial jingoism. Opening *Beowulf* and *Macbeth* up to student-led processes of "creative re-making" (Burn, 2022, p. 126), he encourages students to draw on their existing knowledge and skills to produce works that better accommodate their identities and reflect their interests. In one workshop a year 10 student from an East London comprehen-sive uses the episode of Banquo's murder to imagine how a young woman of colour might have fitted into *Macbeth*'s world. In another a group of boys at risk of exclusion from a different London school come to recognise *Beowulf*—a poem written over a millennium ago in a dialect that has very little in common modern English—as a forerunner of games like *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2011), part of a media culture that they feel at home in and capable of contributing to. Through such anecdotes Burn highlights the importance of public domain texts as sets of "cultural resources" (p. 127): reservoirs of characters, narratives, situations

and "storyworlds" (Ryan & Thon, 2014) that anyone can draw on. The Missionmaker software essentially literalises this metaphor, providing a database of character models, environments, and computational scripts that users can mix and match, tweak and tailor to produce games that offer new spins on a common literary heritage. As the game industry, and the media industries in general, becomes ever-more obsessed with amassing and exploiting intellectual property, such resources become ever-more important.

Which brings us to the ownership of tools, an issue brought to the fore by the recent Unity debacle. Long popular with indie studios and hobbyist game developers, and widely taught on university game design programmes, Unity's owners dramatically revised their terms of use in September 2023. Under the planned changes, developers whose games were created using Unity would have become subject to a "runtime fee" based on the number of times their game had been installed—a move that, among other issues, might have left developers whose games had been widely pirated, or who had contributed games to charity bundles, subject to crippling costs. While Unity walked back their plans in the face of widespread outcry, the episode was a reminder of how risky it is for creators to rely on corporate platforms. Then there are the ethical questions posed by the rise of *Roblox* (Roblox Corporation, 2006), which journalist Simon Parkin (2022) has charged with constructing an "empire built on child labour". While this aspect of the Missionmaker software is not stressed in the book, Burn makes a compelling case for giving young people access to tools that are not owned or operated by profit-driven private companies.

This is not how we tend to think about the role of game design in education—where, at least at university level, many institutions seem to have accepted that it is the job of educators to produce an oversupply of graduates who are already proficient with industry-standard tools and can slot easily into existing pipelines and workflows, keeping labour costs low (see Harvey, 2019). Burn is acutely aware of the challenges facing the humanities at all levels of education. By showing how game design can fit into literature syllabi, he provides much-needed ammunition to those making the case to governments that literary studies have a viable future. Ultimately, however, he is adamant about the limits of such instrumental thinking. Yes, creating literary games in the classroom can be a way of fostering brighter futures by cultivating civic engagement, media literacy, historical awareness, and a grasp of the principles of programming. But beyond the imperative to make students more employable, or even to help them become better citizens, Burn's epilogue insists on a different rationale for equipping students to reimagine literary texts as videogames: because it is fun; because poetry and play are inherently "enchant[ing]"; because a future devoid of "illusion, dressing-up, roleplay, magic and fantasy" is no future at all (2022, p. 212).

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