

Do It for the Kids: Incorporating *Her Story* and Open-Ended Games into the Mainstream Classroom

by Emma Hoyer

Within the last several decades, video games have become commonplace in the lives of multiple generations. As technology has advanced and the industry for video games has expanded, a variety of forms have emerged, some more popular than others. With the forms of video games ranging from classic arcade games, like *Pacman*, to adventure games, like *The Legend of Zelda*, to first-person-shooter games, like *Call of Duty*, there's a game to suit just about everyone's interests. It's undeniable that the rise and prevalence of video games has shaped the way in which the youngest generations learn and perceive the world. They have never known a world without technology, and thus, it's imperative now, more than ever, that what they have become accustomed to makes its way into education. Not all video games have their place in the classroom; some games are created for pure entertainment value and don't provide (relatively) as much educational value. The type of game that should be used within a classroom context should be one that allows students to use essential literacy strategies during gameplay, including inferencing, activating background knowledge, and higher-level thinking. *Her Story*, as well as other games with open endings, simultaneously promote multiple literacy strategies while engaging students, and thus, educators should look into prominently involving these types of games in their curriculum.

Her Story is not a mainstream game, in the sense that it doesn't involve "typical" game controls or an adventure/action storyline. Instead, *Her Story* is a mystery, in more than one sense of the word. When a player first begins this game, the controls are simple: type keywords into a search box and watch video clips. There are other elements on the screen to interact with and read, but the goal is simple – figure out what happened. The player functions as a detective, and

throughout the gameplay and discovery of new video clips (which are all one-sided, featuring the same woman), the story unfolds. In order to complete the game, the player does not need to interact with everything within the game; only a limited amount of information must be acquired before the game is “complete.” This, along with the player’s preferences, past experiences, and personal interaction with the game, contributes to the formulation of multiple interpretations of the story of *Her Story*. This is aided, chiefly, by the fact that the creator of the game, Sam Barlow, left the ending open and refuses to provide a definitive answer.

Barlow intentionally created the format and story of this game to promote uncertainty, doubt, and questioning once the player has reached the “end.” The amount of uncertainty and doubt a player feels can depend on how much of the information they have received (i.e. how many video clips have they accessed?) and/or what they “bring to the table” (which involves previous experiences with gaming, as well previous experiences in general). This directly references Reader Response Theory, which has its roots in Louise Rosenblatt’s *Literature as Exploration* (1938). In summary, “Reader Response Theory illustrates the uniqueness of each individual reader as an integral part in any reading experience. That is, every individual has unique sets of knowledge and experiences that influence how he or she interacts with and makes meaning of any particular text” (Gillern 668). While we can think of video games as texts that can be examined through the lens of this theory, there are shortcomings. Video games have additional dimensions that traditional texts cannot provide, primarily dynamic visual elements that players interact with. The difference between someone as a “reader” and someone as a “player” therefore requires a different theory to be applied when examining how background knowledge, previous experience, skills, and even the video game format contributes to meaning and understanding.

Thus, the Gamer Response and Decision (GRAD) Framework can aid in examining the benefits of *Her Story* and other open-ended games in literacy development. Sam von Gillern, in his recently published article “The Gamer Response and Decision Framework,” explains the framework as follows:

The GRAD Framework identifies the gamer, his or her decisions, and the game as critical and dynamic features of video gameplay, all of which occur in a larger environmental context. Exploring these features and their subcategories illuminates gamers’ interpretation, decision-making, and learning processes during gameplay, which results in a unique experience for every gamer. (670)

Gameplay is very different from reading traditional texts by this definition, and thus, the GRAD Framework allows the following analysis and argument to hold more weight than if Reader Response Theory were applied to *Her Story*. The narrative itself functions as a portion of the game, but when it comes to essential literacy strategies and educational value, more than the narrative must be critically examined.

There are several areas that the GRAD Framework focuses on that directly correspond to how players function and proceed within the constraints that Barlow has created within *Her Story*. Decision-making is one of the first functions of *Her Story* that players encounter, and it’s also the first dimension that the GRAD Framework looks at. When players begin *Her Story*, they have to ask themselves this question: “What word am I going to type in the box and search for?” Barlow gives them a first word – “murder” – and that sets the mystery tone of the game. Beyond that first given word, though, players must make a decision as to what they want to search for. The GRAD Framework highlights, “The decisions that gamers make during gameplay, which are affected by the gamer’s experiences, knowledge, skills, agency, self-efficacy, and goals,

influence how the game unfolds and the meaning the gamer makes from their experiences” (Gillern 670). Within *Her Story*, the words that players search influence the order in which they receive information, as well as the way in which they eventually interpret the story. The words they search are, arguably, influenced by how previous knowledge dictates how they approach this situation. Whether they have delved into murder narratives before or this is an entirely new experience, they will take a unique course and arrive at a unique solution to the story. This also relies on both their in-game and out-of-game experiences, as well as their profile as a gamer (Gillern 672). If they want to fully flesh out all the details of the game, they are a different type of gamer than someone who is interested in just coming to the “end” of the game. All of these factors combine to influence and create that unique experience.

Beyond the way in which the player eventually interprets the “end” of *Her Story*, a player’s use of the game mechanics also adds another dimension to examine. This, within the GRAD Framework, is referenced as the player’s “skill,” and that can vary as well, based on both in-game and out-of-game experiences. The GRAD Framework asserts, “Gamers use and develop their skills to achieve goals within games, such as beating a level (or game), acquiring a special item, or completing a difficult but optional task” (Gillern 673). While this explanation is referencing the more popular types of video games, there is this development of skills within the constraints of *Her Story*. While typical game mechanics feature movement, action, and other dynamic skills that can be visually seen throughout gameplay, *Her Story*’s use of game mechanics are dynamic within the brain. Decision-making is the first cognitive process a player is introduced to, but this game is not limited to that. Players, after beginning to understand how the game functions, develop skills and strategies as they proceed. In order to decide what words are going to be searched for next, the video clips must be analyzed, connections must be made

between chunks of knowledge the player receives, and inferencing must occur (whether the inferences end up being right or wrong). These are all skills that *Her Story* promotes within a player in order to allow them to proceed in the game. The “task” that the GRAD Framework references remains the same throughout *Her Story*: figure out what happened. Other video games have different tasks throughout, but *Her Story* channels the players’ attention and focus onto one, potentially daunting task.

Her Story also features an array of multimodal facets that all contribute to understanding the story. The GRAD Framework argues that, “gamers undergo a complex iterative process of interpreting multimodal symbols...During the course of many modern video games, players regularly encounter a variety of multimodal symbols and experiences” (Gillern 674-75). Some of these multimodal symbols include dynamic visuals, oral and written language, tactile experiences, and abstract symbols. These combine, in *Her Story*, to present both a story and game elements, seamlessly connected and interacted with by the player. We have the video clips, the subtitles, the search box, the screen flickering, and the additional elements on the screen that reinforce theme or provide subtle hints. The player has to synthesize these elements together to understand and make meaning, no matter what form they are presented in. This synthesis and interpretation of narrative across a mixed-media platform is a complex cognitive skill, and again, it’s directly tied into delving into the story and accomplishing the game’s single task.

Last, but not least, the GRAD Framework has direct commentary on story and dramatic interpretation by a player, which ties in with the multiple interpretations that players of *Her Story* have created to explain the “end.” The Framework states, “gamers interpret these story and dramatic elements with their own personal histories in mind, often relating the story to their own conceptions of good and evil, justice and injustice, and duty and defiance” (Gillern 676). Any

conclusions about the “ending” of *Her Story* rely on a player’s conceptions, preferences on story genre, and more. Considering Barlow left the ending and overall interpretation of the information within *Her Story* entirely undefined, whether players buy into the gothic fairytale theme that potentially arises during gameplay, choose to believe the Dissociative Identity Disorder argument that many players have developed, or create an alternate theory all their own, it all goes back to their own personal histories and how they relate to the story, based primarily on out-of-game experiences. Who we are speaks volumes about how we interact and function within a video game, and that notion is amplified especially within *Her Story*, due to the constraints, functions, and, most importantly, the open ending.

From an educational standpoint, when the GRAD Framework is applied to *Her Story*, and the mechanics of the gameplay are put under that level of analysis, the benefits are enormous. Essential literacy skills are at the forefront of what teachers must develop within their students, and what the GRAD Framework reveals about *Her Story* includes decision-making and problem-solving skills, analyzing, making connections, inferencing, synthesizing across mixed-media platforms, and the notion that personal history contributes to interpretation and understanding. These are all not only essential literacy skills, but they reflect what education, cross-circularly, tries to accomplish. The challenge for teachers in developing these skills typically involves lack of student motivation, and that is where video games, or digital narratives that feature mechanics that are reminiscent of video games, come into play.

Video games, as mentioned, are prominent in the lives of the modern student. Educators are too quick to dismiss technology as a detriment. However, games like *Her Story* can be a benefit for a variety of reasons. Students, inherently, will spend more time with games than a traditional text. It will feel more like entertainment and less like learning, although the same amount of

cognitive processes, if not more, will be applied during gameplay. *Her Story* also promotes discourse, both written and oral, due to the open ending. Students will want to discuss what happens, because it's not definite. It's left up to interpretation and that fosters discussion in students, no matter what age (Irvin 38). Additionally, best-practice engagement strategies, including “making connections to students' lives, thereby connecting background knowledge and life experiences to the texts to be read and produced” and “having students interact with text...in ways that stimulate questioning, predicting, visualizing, summarizing, and clarifying” are implemented just by playing *Her Story* and using it within a classroom setting (Irvin 38).

Once video games and digital narratives are examined like this, there is no reason why these games shouldn't/couldn't be included in schools, as long as they are age-appropriate. *Her Story* might not necessarily work with younger students, but developers of technology for education should strongly look into developing games that would. *Her Story* would work well for secondary education, but the skills and benefits it provides need to have a foundation in the younger grades. For the future, and for the sake of making education relevant to the needs of modern students, games like *Her Story* need to make their way into the mainstream.

Works Cited

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- Irvin, Judith L., Julie Meltzer, and Melinda S. Dukes. *Taking Action on Adolescent Literacy*. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2007. Print.