THE NARRATIVE STRUCTURE OF MASS EFFECT 3 AND ITS POTENTIAL AS AN ESL TEACHING AND LEARNING TOOL IN NARRATIVE WRITING

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2013
"I hereby declare that I have read this thesis and in my opinion this thesis is sufficient in terms of scope and quality for the award of the degree of Master of Education (Teaching English as a Second Language)"

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A thesis submitted in fulfillment of the
requirements for the award of the degree of
Master of Education (Teaching English as a Second Language)

Faculty of Education
Universiti Teknologi Malaysia

OCTOBER 2013
I declare that this thesis entitled "The Narrative Structure of Mass Effect 3 and its Potential as an ESL Teaching and Learning Tool in Narrative Writing" is the result of my own research except as cited in the references. The thesis has not been accepted for any degree and is not concurrently submitted in candidature of any other degree.

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Name : Joseph Pang Kok Bing
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To My Bro, Chian Hou
and Commander Shepard
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ABSTRACT

Video games have become a big part of a student’s life. With the influence of massively marketed commercial games, teachers can no longer ignore the role it plays in the student’s overall development. This research seeks to examine the nature of narrative structure which is present in commercial video games and link it to the narrative which is typically employed during the teaching and learning of narrative writing and of the English language in general. The game writers may or may not be aware that the narrative structure they applied in their game script are being subconsciously absorbed by players to develop narrative writing structures of their own. Therefore this research aims to: (i) examine the narrative structures used in the Mass Effect 3 video game, (ii) to identify the similarities and differences of Mass Effect 3’s narrative structure and conventional narrative structures and (iii) to examine the suitability of video games to used as a teaching tool in an ESL classroom. This research utilized a qualitative research design which uses a structural analysis method as well as a survey using questionnaire with the players and developers. This research was done using the Sony PlayStation 3 gaming console and Bioware Inc’s Mass Effect 3 video game. The findings from the research showed that the Mass Effect 3 video game fulfills the narrative criteria and that the narrative structure used in the Mass Effect 3 video game closely resembles the narrative theories of film as well as the video game industry. The game uses a unique triple-climax feature and giving players the freedom of choice in its narrative to create an interactive, immersive experience. In addition, positive feedback was obtained from the gamers with regards to the story of Mass Effect 3 helping them in their learning of narrative writing due to the immersive and relaxing nature of the Mass Effect 3 video game. From the results of this research, English teachers will be able to tap into the
educational potential of commercial video games to further enrich their writing class. It challenges ESL teachers to break out of their traditional methodologies and use commercial video games as a tool to make the students’ learning experience more interesting and meaningful by supplementing in-class lessons with video games.
Bahasa Inggeris dapat meneroka potensi pendidikan permainan video komersial untuk memperkayakan kelas penulisan mereka. Ia boleh mencabar guru ESL untuk keluar daripada kaedah tradisional dan gunakan permainan video komersil sebagai alat untuk menjadikan pengalaman pembelajaran pelajar lebih menarik dan lebih bermakna.
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

KBSM – Kurikulum Sepadu Sekolah Menengah
SPM – Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia
CALL – Computer Assisted Language Learning
ESL – English as a Second Language
DMCA – Digital Millennium Copyright Act
ELT – English Language Teaching
ETMS – English for the Teaching of Mathematics and Science
FMV - Full Motion Video
DLC - Downloadable Content
L1 - First Language or Mother Tongue
L2 - Second Language or Target Language
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

The teaching and learning of writing has always been a difficult challenge for both Malaysian teachers and learners. Many Malaysian students are weak in writing and teachers find it difficult to motivate their students as writing yields the least rewards simply because the student have little or no immediate usage their writing skills (Chitravelu, Sithamparam and Teh, 2005). Throughout a Malaysian ESL learner's life, they are required to learn a few genres of English language writing such as narrative, descriptive, expository, argumentative and persuasive essays. Among all of these genres, narrative writing can be said as the toughest to teach as it requires the teacher to activate the student's creative outlet and creativity is extremely difficult to impart (Yee, Wan Zah, Rosnaini, & Roselan, 2009).

One of the objectives of the KBSM English curriculum (2000) states that students should be able to “listen, view, read and respond to different texts, and express ideas, opinions, thoughts and feelings imaginatively and creatively in spoken and written form” (pg. 6). Thus, narrative writing has become a staple question in the Continuous Writing section of Paper 1 for the English SPM examination. Even so, it is common to hear upper secondary English teachers complain about the different errors their students
made. Even though these errors are mostly linguistic errors, errors made in writing mechanics are equally as damaging.

Since the KBSM curriculum's inception, teachers all around the country and even educators in universities have been trying to prescribe a methodology on teaching writing. However, only a small minority would turn to Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) as a possible solution and how many would actually realize that youths of this generation are very much technologically savvy? By exploiting this trend, we might be able to integrate technology into the classroom on a whole new level, beyond the initial theories of CALL. Video games, a form of entertainment enjoyed by youths and adults alike hold a well of potential in aiding language learning.

Video game developers designed their software with only one objective in mind: to provide an immersive gaming environment for the players to truly enjoy their video gaming experience. To make such environment possible, developers need to utilize the latest technology in character modeling, game engine, design, soundtrack and most of all, a captivating storyline and believable characters. Video game narrative has always been an area of focus which the developers invested heavily on, constantly employing different narrative techniques to capture the players' attention and imagination by either borrowing from conventional narrative structures from films and literature or by being innovative and invent a new narrative technique to be used in their video game. Thus, video games contain an abundance of rich narrative source for teachers and students alike to exploit and learn vital narrative techniques to be used in their own narrative writing.

My passion for video gaming began when my father bought a Super Nintendo Entertainment System (SNES) console in 1990. Back then, simple pixilated games such as PacMan, Pong, Super Mario Brothers, TwinBee, City Connection and many more were enough to satisfy my need for mental stimulation and since then, video games have embedded itself into my life. Being an experienced and avid gamer, I am curious as to why many adults and professionals are quick to dismiss and decry video game playing
and found out through personal experiences that playing video games does not hamper with my ability to study, cause moral decay, induce violence or even make me obese! Instead, I found myself and many other gamers around me, gaining creative and concrete knowledge through years of video game playing. Thus, it has shaped my personal beliefs towards the role of video games can play in mainstream education and to make a statement that video games are not just for fun and games, but, it can also be used to enhance students' learning experience. Capitalizing on such personal experience and beliefs, I will make an attempt, through this research, to look at video game narratives and how it can be explained within the narratives used in storytelling and its potential to be exploited in the ESL classroom.

1.2 Background of Study

Video games are a big part of the lives of students all around the world. Based on the yearly hardware sales statistics released by VGChartz.com, 28.4 million gaming consoles were sold as of July 2010 and 12% of the consoles were sold in the Asian region (excluding Japan). Additionally, The Entertainment Software Association (2010) estimated about 25% of worldwide gamers are below 18 years of age. By synergizing both statistics, it has become an undeniable fact that students below 18 years of age would have played some form of video game. This opened a well of potential where language-learning elements could be integrated into video games. According to Salisch, Oppl and Kristen (2006), educational games can improve a child’s knowledge in nearly all subjects including reading, speaking, listening and writing skills in the child’s native language. Thus, it could be said that video games play a significant role in enriching a learner’s writing ability as video game stories are usually narrative driven to immerse the player into its story.

Currently, we may find teachers in Malaysia who are still apprehensive about the usage of Computer Assisted Language Learning tools in the classroom, especially
among senior teachers (Yee, Wan Zah, Rosnaini, & Roselan, 2009). The failure of English for the Teaching of Mathematics and Science (ETeMS) is one of the testaments to this fact. Countless CALL courseware were developed but not fully utilized by the teacher. Teachers in Malaysia still prefer to use traditional teaching methods of 'chalk and talk' over technology-aided teaching methods due to the norm belief that schools should be a serious academic institution where teachers passes on standardized knowledge (Tan & Law, 2004). The true potential of CALL has yet to be fully tapped by English teachers in Malaysia. The ineffectiveness of current English teaching methodologies could perhaps be that the students, being technologically savvy, find the traditional lessons boring, uninteresting and not stimulating. Teachers who refuse to embrace the technological culture of the students such as the Internet and video games may have missed out on the various benefits these tools could potentially offer.

Most parents and educators often complained that kids nowadays are spending too much time playing video games. They felt that video games are not relevant to a kid’s academic progress and that time is better spent doing something more productive. These opinions stemmed from the fact that adults are simply reluctant to accept the emergence of new technologies and unwilling to break out of the traditional ‘safe-zones’ based on theories and methods which worked well over the years. Parents and educators alike needed to be informed on the potential of video games enhancing language acquisition and to be taught how to use this tool effectively. Once they learn to see through their child’s eyes, they will finally break the stigma that plagued video games for years.

In this study, I have used the third installment of a multiplatform Action Role-Playing video game series developed by the award winning developer, Bioware, the Mass Effect series. Consisting of three games released over the course of five years, the Mass Effect series has been dubbed as one of the best Science Fiction Action Role-Playing titles ever developed (Reiner, 2012). This game series featured dramatic in-game events that which made the player an active participant in the cinematic experience and gives the player the ability to select conversational dialogue choices which may alter
the outcome of the conversation and the plot of the game itself. This feature of the game made it unique and set it apart from all the other video games of the same genre.

This research seeks to address some of the pressing issues in the grey area of video games and language learning through extended interaction with a commercially available video game. What are the narrative structures used in the video game script? More specifically, this research is designed to examine how the text in the video game series structured to tell stories by evaluating an existing, off the shelf, commercially available electronic video game: *Mass Effect 3*. The game *'Mass Effect 3'* was developed to entertain, but can also be used to teach narrative writing due to its immersive game play experience and narrative structure.

### 1.3 Problem Statement

The teaching and learning process of narrative writing has always been a problem for many ESL teachers and learners in Malaysia. Apart from the common structural and syntax errors, students tend to create the same clichéd storyline and predictable structure in their narrative essays. Thus, there has been a shift in the methodology belief of the teaching of narrative writing in an ESL classroom, from product-based approach to process-based approach (Elbow, 1973; Brown, 2001). Even when ESL teachers are guiding students through the process of narrative writing, many ESL students still find it difficult to grasp the concept and the nuances of narrative writing.

The current generation of ESL learners in Malaysia is growing up in an increasingly technologically advanced world. In a generation where traditional learning methods are becoming obsolete, teachers of ESL would need to shift their paradigms to accept modern teaching methods which revolved around technology itself. Over the past few years, research in Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) has been impactful and it has become an established fact that language acquisition through CALL
methods are very much successful in the current generation of ESL learners. However, proponents of CALL have yet to develop a method which specifically targets the narrative writing ability of an ESL learner. Researchers and teachers would agree that the narrative skill is the trickiest skill to teach in an ESL classroom as narrative writing required a high level of creative thinking. Thus, it has become standard practice to use the general narrative structure used in common literature to teach narrative writing to Malaysian ESL Learners (Sebastian and Roy, 2007).

But, many researchers failed to consider an important tool in their research: video games. Although numerous research have been done on the effects of video games on a child’s psychological development and learning, little or none have focused on its effects on an ESL learner’s narrative writing ability, especially in a local context. Because of this, video games are not fully exploited for their wealth in language teaching.

The general perception of video games in the older generation is that video games do not contribute anything to the educational development of a child. Video games are seen as distracting, un-educational, and unhealthy. It was often blamed for causing students to perform badly in their studies. These misconceptions are further aggravated by the numerous researches which seemed to connect video games and violent behavior in children. These factors caused video games to be stigmatized and overlooked as a potential language learning tool. However, recent studies concluded that there are no real correlation between playing video games and negative behavior development among children; some children even performed better than their non-game playing peers (Durkin & Barber, 2002). It would be interesting to study at the extent of linguistic improvement influenced by the video game and the factors causing it as current studies have yet to find a solid correlation between video game playing and narrative writing skill development.

Most ESL learners’ acquisition of an L2 from video games is accidental. This means, the games were not designed with language learning as its goal, rather, the game
was written with the sole objective of immersing the player into the story and making them forget that they are actually playing the game (Dansky 2007). This created a pseudo-immersion environment where the learner’s L2 (in this case, English) is used was the main medium of communication as the entire game is presented in English. Professional game writers are usually unaware of the fact that the narrative structure they applied in their game script are being subconsciously absorbed by players to develop narrative writing structures of their own. Since most Malaysian parents and educators do not play nor understand video games, they are not aware that video games are embedded with a rich narrative structure that could be transferred to its players.

There is also a continuing confusion between edutainment software and commercial video games. Edutainment software were designed in the 1980s and falls under type 2 of Communicative CALL. Communicative CALL is based on the communicative approach to teaching which was prominent in the 1970’s and 80’s and its main advocate is John Underwood. Underwood believes that Communicative CALL software should not replicate what a book can do and that it should use the learner's target language exclusively in an environment which feels natural (1984). Activities designed in type 2 of Communicative CALL relegated the computer's role to a stimulus (Taylor & Perez, 1989) and they are designed to stimulate students' discussion, writing and critical thinking. Many ESL teachers were either not convinced or unaware that edutainment software designed under the Communicative CALL phase is able to improve an ESL learner's language acquisition. Moreover, these software are often expansive and were highly dependent on increasingly improving computer hardware, thus, edutainment software had been shunned by the teaching community in general.

Now, with the emergence of commercial gaming, teachers of ESL will be able to exploit commercial video games to enrich their classroom. Hardware problems that plagued edutainment were made obsolete with gaming consoles and teachers no longer have to obtain a license to use the software in the classroom due to the Fair Use clause under the Digital Millennium Copyright Act (U.S. Copyright Office, 2009). ESL teachers would have to understand that edutainment software and commercial software
are separate entities and that commercial video games are just as educational as its edutainment counterpart (Klopfer, 2008). Besides, commercial video games have a greater potential of enhancing language acquisition compared to edutainment software as the majority of edutainment software focused on all subject but English. The very few English edutainment software such as the Reader Rabbit series and the Jumpstart series are still designed with drill and practice methodologies in mind; an outdated approach in the ELT world.

1.4 Purpose of Research.

The purpose of this research is to explore the nature of the narrative structure used in the Mass Effect 3 video game and describe it within the typical narrative structures used in the video game, movie and conventional literature industry. Apart from that, this study also attempts to explain how the text in the Mass Effect 3 video game is structured to tell stories. This study will also offer a better understanding towards video game-based learning to the learners and teachers of ESL in order for them to effectively learn and teach narrative and English in general.

1.5 Research Objectives.

There are three objectives in this research. It aims to:-

1.4.1. to identify the narrative structures used in the Mass Effect 3 video game
1.4.2. to identify the similarities and differences of Mass Effect 3's narrative structure and conventional narrative structures
1.4.3. to examine the suitability of video games to used as a teaching and learning tool in an ESL classroom
1.6 Research Questions.

The following are the research questions that I have looked into:-

1.6.1. What are the narrative structures used in the Mass Effect 3 video game?
1.6.2. How does the Mass Effect 3 narrative structure differ from conventional narrative structures?
1.6.3. How are video games suitable to be used as a teaching and learning tool in an ESL classroom?

1.7 Scope of Research.

This research was done on the third installment of the Mass Effect video game series; Mass Effect 3. Textual and narrative analysis of the game scripts of this game have been extensively transcribed and analyzed to investigate the narrative structure used in the game. This research will examine the type of narrative used, how it is present and its presentation medium. I will also look at the similarities and differences of video game narrative and the conventional narrative structures used in film and literature. Besides that, this research also examined the effects of the game on the current narrative writing skills of 5 gamers, aged from 13 - 19 years old.

1.9 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of the research tries to demonstrate the basis of conducting this study by identifying the elements of the literature review in order to attain the objectives of the study. Figure 1.1 shows the conceptual relationship between the theory of experiential learning with Krashen’s affective filter hypothesis, language
games in classrooms, the narrative discourse of video games, film theory and video game narrative theory. It also illustrates the central focus of the study, which is the narrative structure used by the game developers and how through the conceptual relationships bring about its learning in the classroom.
Figure 1.1: Theoretical Framework of the Study
1.10 Significance of Research.

As per KBSM's objectives, English teachers would have to encourage students to be creative in using the English language. In teaching narrative writing, English teachers will need to stimulate the student to think creatively in both content and how they write their narratives. Studying the narrative structures of video games will be able to bring teachers and students closer to the goal of being creative in the teaching and learning of narrative writing. Video games often contain unique narrative structure which sets itself apart from the conventional narrative structures seen in common literature such as novels, short stories, etc. Through this research, I seek to bring video game narrative structures into the teaching mainstream, thus, enabling teachers and students of ESL to borrow some structures used in video games to be applied in their narrative. This will greatly increase the narrative variation which students and teachers of ESL can explore within the narrative writing context of the English language.

The impact the research may bring is that in the future, professionals from both the academic and video game industry may be able to clearly distinguish between edutainment games and commercial video games. An avenue of future collaboration to produce a game which is both enjoyable and written using pedagogical theories of language learning could be done to sublimely integrate language learning pedagogy with commercial video games. Fusing both the gaming industry and the academic industry would open up an ocean of learning opportunities for both professionals to further innovate in their fields. Game designers would be able to design a game which still held true to the game design philosophy of making games fun, engaging, interactive and cinematic and at the same time, making the game a well of language teaching resources for language practitioners. Language teachers may also benefit from future collaborations with game writers as they will be able to impart their narrative writing knowledge to be taught in schools.

Apart from that, hopefully from the fruitful nature of this research, teachers of ESL would realize that playing video games are not just a waste of time. Teachers could
harness the potential of video games to incorporate a video game into the classroom by having the students writing reflective journals to chronicle their gaming experience and that written and oral assignments could be given based on the played game. Learners of ESL would no longer find English as a boring subject to learn as video games would stimulate their interest and their acquisition of L2 may be hastened with the background knowledge activated. Teachers of ESL could also experiment with the different genres of commercial video games available in the market to find new dynamic resources to develop teaching materials and lessons. These endless possibilities would essentially remove the stigmatization of video games among teachers of ESL in Malaysia to further exploit the full potential of video games as an interactive language learning tool.

Last but not least, this research would open up new possibilities and means of providing meaningful and engaging content through an electronic medium, hence, broadening the scope and implementation of Computer Assisted Language Learning in Malaysia. CALL’s development in Malaysia boomed with the government’s English for the Teaching of Mathematics and Science (ETMS). But, it is again put on a stagnant hold as the government reversed the policy in 2009. This research would be able to kick start CALL’s development in Malaysia and possibly launch Malaysia into video game design. Once the teaching community recognized the potential of commercial video games, game developers in Malaysia would gain the motivation to produce high quality games which are suitable to the Malaysian context, retaining the very aspects which made commercially successful video games fun and engaging, at the same time imbued with educational goals as stated in the National Education Philosophy.
1.11 Definition of Terms

1.11.1 Action Role-Playing Games

Action Role-Playing Games combine elements of their two component genres, action and role-playing. Typically featuring long-term obstacles that must be overcome using a tool or item as leverage, as well as many smaller obstacles almost constantly in the way, that require elements of action games to overcome. Action Role-Playing games tend to focus on character development, story plot and character leveling. In this research, Action Role-Playing Games refer to the Mass Effect trilogy games, specifically the Mass Effect 3 video game, which is the focus of my research.

1.11.2 Mass Effect 3

Mass Effect 3 is an action-adventure role playing video game developed by BioWare and published by Electronic Arts (EA) Inc. It was released on 6 March 2012 as a multiplatform game and is the third and final game in the Mass Effect trilogy. It follows the story of Commander Shepard as he tries to save the galaxy from a mysterious entity known as the ‘Reapers’. In this research, Mass Effect 3 refers to the video game software used to conduct this research.

1.11.3 Narrative

A narrative is essentially a story that is created in a constructive format that describes a sequence of fictional or non-fictional events.
In this research, Narrative is the method of storytelling used by the developers to advance the story in Mass Effect 3.

1.11.4 Narrative Structure

Narrative structure is the structural framework that underlies the order and manner in which a narrative is presented to a reader, listener, or viewer. Generally, the narrative structure of any work can be divided into three sections, which is referred to as the Three-Act Structure: setup, conflict, resolution.

In this research, Narrative Structure refers to the narrative components within the Mass Effect 3 video game which encompasses plot, story, character development, frequency and delivery methods.

1.11.5 Video Game Narrative

Video game narrative is the component of storytelling within the video game’s script. It serves as a method by which the story materials are communicated to the audience.

In this research, Video Game Narrative refers to the general narrative structure used by the video game industry as a standard for video game script writing.
1.11.6 Immersion

Immersion encompasses two perspectives: in ESL learning and video game design. Immersion in ESL learning referred to the natural and immersive nature of the environment where the main medium of communication is the target language and in video game design referred to the state where players lost track of self-awareness and time and were completely focused on the task presented by the game. This study explored such immersion by examining the narrative elements and how it factored to the overall immersion of the game.

1.11.7 Story

In video game design, the story is what actually happens in the course of the game which can be differentiated from its game mechanics and be translated into a narrative.

In this research, the Story refers to the overall video game narrative which includes events prior to the main events of the game, back-story and the history of the video game universe. This research will also refer to the Story as 'Fabula'.

1.11.8 Storytelling

Storytelling, traditionally defined as a way to convey a series of events (usually a narrative) through images and/or words. In this research, storytelling refers to the method which the developers of the Mass Effect 3 video game used to convey its narrative.
1.11.9 Back-story

The back-story details the history prior to the events of the game and it provides the answer to the question “What happened previously?” and “What caused this situation to happen?”

In this research, the Back-story refers to the events within the Mass Effect 3 universe which happened prior to the events of Mass Effect 3. This includes story from the previous two installments of the Mass Effect trilogy, the history expanded from Mass Effect comics, novels and spin off games.

1.11.10 Cut Scene

A short movie presented to the player at specific points in the game. Cut scenes may be in-engine or FMV.

In this research, the Cut Scene refers to the delivery method used by BioWare to advance the plot of Mass Effect 3. It is a cinematic sequence where player control is temporarily taken away.

1.11.11 Teaching of ESL Narrative Writing

Teaching of ESL narrative writing refers to the teaching of English narrative writing to non-native speakers of the English language, thus, defined as second language learners of the English language. In this research, teaching of ESL narrative writing refers to the methodology employed by teachers to teach English narrative writing to non-native/second language speakers of the English language.
1.12 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have highlighted the problems surrounding the teaching of narrative writing to ESL students in Malaysia and the misconception towards the usage of video games in education. I have also stated my research questions, objectives, scope and the significance of my research. Besides that, I have also defined several key term which I have used in my research. In the following chapter, I will discuss the literature review regarding video game narrative, key concepts related to video game-based learning and language learning theories.