ENHANCING NARRATIVE WRITING SKILLS THROUGH ACTION-ADVENTURE VIDEO GAMES

JOSEPH PANG KOK BING

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ENHANCING NARRATIVE WRITING SKILLS THROUGH ACTION-ADVENTURE VIDEO GAMES

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A report submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Bachelor of Science with Education in “Teaching English as a Second Language”

Faculty of Education
University Teknologi Malaysia

May 2011
I declare that this thesis entitled “Enhancing Narrative Writing Skills through Action-Adventure Video Games” 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.

Signature : ......................................................
Name : Joseph Pang Kok Bing
Date : .............................................................
I dedicate this thesis to my late grandfather,

Gramps, I did it!
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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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 link commercial video games with the teaching and learning of the English language, specifically, narrative writing. Therefore this research aims to: (i) identify the elements in the narrative structure used in action adventure video games in relation to general ESL narrative and (ii) examine the influence of action adventure video games in learners of ESL’s narrative writing ability. This research utilized a pre-experimental research design without a control group on 4 respondents using the Sony PlayStation 3 gaming console and Naughty Dog Inc’s UNCHARTED 2: Among Thieves video game. The results of the research show that there are several narrative elements in the video game which differs from the standard narrative structure used in an ESL classroom and these elements were transferred to the respondents who played the game, as evidenced in their post-experience narrative essay. The Three-Act Narrative Structure, Double-Climax feature and the existence of the Orientation proves the positive influences of the video game on the respondents’ narrative writing ability. From the results of this research, 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.
ABSTRAK

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

KBSM – Kurikulum Bersepadu 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
Introduction

It is an undeniable fact that narrative writing is one of the most difficult concepts to teach in an English writing class. 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”. 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 but 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. In this
research, I will be looking at how playing a specific genre of video games will influence the narrative writing skills of a Malaysian ESL learner.

1.1. Background of Problem

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, teachers in Malaysia are still apprehensive about the usage of Computer Assisted Language Learning tools in the classroom. The failure of English for the Teaching of Mathematics and Science 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. 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.
In this research, I will be using the action-adventure video game developed by the award winning developer, Naughty Dog Inc., entitled ‘UNCHARTED 2: Among Thieves™’ exclusively for the PlayStation® 3 gaming console. This game has been dubbed as one of the best action adventure titles ever developed for the PlayStation® 3 console. According to Arne Meyer (2010), a Community Strategist of Naughty Dog Inc, ‘UNCHARTED 2: Among Thieves™’ has sold over 3.8 million copies worldwide and has won numerous Game of The Year award. This game featured dramatic in-game events that will make the player an active participant in the cinematic experience and its gaming engine, designed specifically for the PlayStation® 3 console, successfully captured human emotions for in-game portrayal. 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. Can playing a video game really help students in acquiring certain language skill? More specifically, this research is designed to examine learning from games by evaluating what teenagers in Form 4 learn by playing an existing, off the shelf, commercially available electronic video game: ‘UNCHARTED 2: Among Thieves™’. The game ‘UNCHARTED 2: Among Thieves™’ was developed to entertain, but can also be used to teach narrative writing due to its immersive game play experience and narrative structure.

1.2 Problem Statement

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. This structure is most commonly seen in typical literary work and was adopted by Sebastian and Roy (2007) in their book, *Model Compositions and Summaries For SPM 1119 English*. They illustrated the standard narrative structure using the figure below:

![Figure 1.0: Standard Structure of a General ESL Narrative Essay](image)

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 which could be transferred to its players.
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 which plagued video games for years.

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. 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 which 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 (DMCA). 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. 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 and it is still designed with drill and practice methodologies in mind; an outdated approach in the ELT world.
1.3. Purpose of Research

The purpose of this research is to identify the elements in the narrative structure used in action-adventure video games in relation to general ESL narrative. Apart from that, this study also aims to examine the influence of action-adventure video games in learners of ESL’s narrative writing ability.

1.4. Objectives of Research

There are two objectives in this research. It aims to:

1. identify the elements in the narrative structure used in action adventure video games in relation to general ESL narrative.
2. examine the influence of action adventure video games in learners of ESL’s narrative writing ability.

1.5. Research Questions

The following are the research questions that I will look into:

1. what are the elements in the narrative structure used in action adventure video games in relation to general ESL narrative?
2. how would action adventure video games influence an ESL learner’s narrative writing ability?