

Writing the World: Personal Journals in Video Games

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This paper explores the remediations of personal journals and the processes of writing and reading them in the two titles *Red Dead Redemption 2* (Rockstar Games 2018) and *Season: A Letter to the Future* (Scavengers Studio 2023). As recurring features of video game storytelling, player-character notebooks appear in forms ranging from in-game artifacts with dedicated mechanics to elements of the HUD (Heads-Up Display), game menus, or collectible items scattered around game worlds. Despite their ubiquity, the potential of these ludonarrative devices to reflect on authorship, readership, and the mechanics of writing and reading within interactive media remains largely unexamined in scholarly discourse. By analyzing these two case studies, I argue that video game journals act as dynamic crossroads, where authorship, player agency, and cultural representation intersect, revealing the complex ethical and narrative processes of recording, preserving, and interacting with stories in video games.

Scholarly work on textual artifacts in video games has approached them from diverse angles, analyzing their role as remediations of print media (Bolter and Grusin 1999), integral features of literary games (Ensslin 2014), “ludex” or “paper machines” that merge narrative and mechanics (Milligan 2019), and components of “archival adventures” centered on discovery and documentation (Kagen 2020). Expanding on these perspectives, this study incorporates insights from literary studies and media studies to investigate how such artifacts are framed and function as journals and diaries within games. Scholarship in life writing and epistolary fiction is particularly useful in this context, as much of the discussion around diaries and journals, as literary genres as well as their representation in fiction, has taken place within these fields. In terms of gender, for instance, life writing perspectives can show us how representations of autobiographical writing in fiction have “feminized the diary,” (Steinitz 2011, 155) or how a *diary* may be perceived as more feminine and private than a *journal* (Carter 2020, 45; Gannett 1992, 105-107). Such cultural assumptions intersect with the representation of fictional authors within games, whose personal records are shaped by their specific ethnic and social identities, the contexts of the game worlds they inhabit, and the missions they undertake. Thus, the fictional contexts in which these records are produced raise questions about the politics of reading and writing. Moreover, analyzing these representations in video games can contribute to the ongoing evolution of life writing studies, which, as literary scholar David McCooey critiques, has traditionally centered a “universalized and limited”

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autobiographical subject—one that is “male, European, self-present, and autonomous”—while marginalizing and silencing voices such as those of “women, people of color, and Indigenous peoples” (2017, 277).

My first case study on *Red Dead Redemption 2*, an open-world action-adventure game set in the waning days of the American frontier, examines the player character Arthur Morgan’s journal as a narrative space that bridges the player’s actions and the character’s internal world. Although the journal evolves alongside the player’s decisions and moral alignment, capturing the player character’s experiences and psychological development through sketches, reflections, and recorded events, the process of writing in it takes place automatically and is not controlled by the player. Nonetheless, the journal complicates notions of authorship, as its content and length are shaped by player agency and Arthur’s branching character arc. Another notable aspect of Arthur’s in-game journal is that it transcends the game’s diegesis through fan-made replicas and an official companion app, which allow players to engage with the artifact in physical and digital forms outside of the game, with replicas satisfying fans’ “desires to own and read imaginary books” (Sezen 2023, 287).

The second case study focuses on *Season: A Letter to the Future*, an indie adventure game in which players assume the role of Estelle, a young Black woman voluntarily charged with documenting the fleeting beauty and history of a world facing an enigmatic transformation. Estelle’s journal operates as a scrapbook-like, customizable, and collaborative artifact, where players actively contribute by adding their own photographs, sketches, and audio recordings of the game world. Although players cannot freely insert text on the pages, they can choose which ones among several of Estelle’s reflections in each location to add to their journals. Thus, the interactive journal becomes a site of co-authorship and personalization. The game emphasizes capturing ephemeral moments and preserving fragile memories, transforming the acts of reading, writing, and chronicling into collaborative processes that invite players to reflect on their dual roles as readers and writers of the narrative.

As the game’s title suggests, Estelle’s journaling, unlike Arthur’s, is not merely personal but also aimed at preservation for an unknown future. She explicitly addresses an imagined archivist whom she hopes will one day read and share the information in her journal, making her process a deliberate act of recording for posterity. Thus, Estelle’s journey through deserted locations—implied to be abandoned due to environmental catastrophe—and her conversations with people forced to leave their lands can be read as both a process of cultural preservation and interference, or even a form of colonization.

Although *Red Dead Redemption 2* and *Season: A Letter to the Future* present vastly different themes and game worlds, comparing these two travelers and their methods of recording offers an opportunity to examine how video game journals negotiate the tension between observation, authorship, and the ethics of representation.

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