AN ANALYSIS OF TEXT BOX INTERFACES: CONNECTING GAMES WITH WRITING AND UNLOCKING THE RHETORICAL POSSIBILITIES OF SYSTEMS WITHIN MULTIMODAL COMPOSITIONS

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As more research observes how digital multimodal texts transform the activity of writing, one intriguing opportunity to explore is how interactive media, such as narrative-driven video games, shape in-game text through various forms of rhetoric within gameplay systems to create a compelling user experience. To better assess rhetoric in these interactive narratives, this article presents findings from an analysis of four computer role-playing games (RPGs) released through Steam, an online video game distribution service. As a common system used in games to display text and convey narrative to users, this article argues that text boxes demonstrate the rhetorical potential of video games and other digital compositions through their use of text, visuals, and procedurality. I propose that a rhetorical examination of each game's text box provides two interconnected, though distinct, possibilities for consideration in multimodal texts: 1) Text boxes act as their own compositions with intentional design choices that link forms of rhetoric to engage reader-response interactions from users; and, 2) Text boxes act as a cohesive part of a multimodal text by serving a video game's narrative and immersion. My arguments reveal that game designers employ writing by composing a narrative and designing the gameplay interfaces which communicate that narrative to users, along with showcasing that parts of a multimodal text can be assessed alone for their rhetorical features and in the broader context of what they achieve for their work.

INTRODUCTION

As scholars explore the emerging relationships between writing and computers, an interesting development has been the growth of interactive, multimodal texts made through computer programs and software. The proliferation of these digital compositions has led to much research on their applications of writing and how to assess their unique uses of multimodal rhetoric. The capabilities of computers have led to new rhetorical situations where unique applications of writing are taking place within these digital narrative texts. By researching and assessing computer-based, multimodal texts, scholars reveal how writing and rhet-

oric is being developed in distinctive ways in digital environments and how these recent developments may be taught to students and future writers.

This subject has piqued my interest in discovering, and more fully articulating, the rhetorical possibilities and considerations within digital multimodal compositions. One genre of multimodal text that particularly fascinates me are video games, which are games designed through computer programs and are displayed onto screens through electronic devices, such as a computer. For ease of discussion, I mostly refer to video games as just "games" throughout this paper, and they act as the main "multimodal compositions" that I assess throughout this essay. Games are especially interesting works to examine since the way they deploy various compositional modes leads to unique implementations of writing and rhetoric. My interest in games also stems from my extensive background in gaming. For much of my life, I have been a prolific gamer who has been immersed in the development behind making video games, so much so that I have even learned to program and design my own game projects. I believe there is a lot to delve into when investigating how writing is linked to the process of game development and how it shapes the experience of playing games.

When examining how this intersection of writing and design occurs, I was curious to look specifically at the role of narrative within games since it lends itself well to connecting writing and game development. The narrative of a game includes the text, dialogue, information, and story written for the game. On top of that, designers constructing a narrative must also consider the images that display and format the text and the gameplay systems which facilitate users to read through it. When investigating this topic, I questioned how writing became transformed based upon the gameplay interfaces that are intentionally designed to accommodate and shape a user's experience with the in-game text. This also made me question whether a part of a multimodal text, such as a text box, could be assessed both on its own as a composition combining various mediums and its relationship as to what it accomplishes for the game as a whole. To explore this specific relationship between writing and design and how designers build parts of a work to create a composition, I focused on the common gameplay interface known as a text box, which is utilized by many games to convey compelling narratives to users. This led to my research being developed around an analysis of the rhetorical features and design choices that appear within games' text boxes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

RHETORICAL POTENTIAL OF GAMES IN WRITING STUDIES

Interactive media, like video games, are a genre of multimodal composition that have been of interest to many writing scholars because they use various compositional modes to facilitate a compelling user experience and demonstrate unique implementations of writing. Alice J. Robison, a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology who teaches and researches digital media lit-

eracies, maintains in an article for the journal *Computers and Composition* that games have the possibility to be "the subject of writing, the catalysts for multimodal creative energies, and the rule systems for participatory communities" (360). This potential leaves a lot to explore in terms of the capabilities video games have to facilitate writing both through design and play. Games scholar Richard Colby, who lectures on the rhetoric of games at the University of Denver, writes an article for the same journal where he details his research of games' procedurality that expands upon Robison's idea of the potential of writing and rhetoric in games by explaining that video games are "media rich," meaning they require the use of multiple compositional modes, and as such, have a wealth of ways to analyze them (43). This refers to how video games implement visuals, sound, text, programming, procedural design, and many other modes within the finished product, which all interact with each other to create a cohesive experience. In her essay "All Your Font Belong to Us," included in the book *Type Matters: The Rhetoricity of Letterforms*, English professor Elizabeth Fleitz brings her own perspective on the relationship between text and gaming, which is that the combination of modes in games leads to a "remediating" of print and text by requiring players, and those assessing games, to be aware of how games are constructing their space and interpreting game mechanics (140). While Robison and Colby identify the complexity behind multimodal composing in game design, Fleitz's observations demonstrate that games can transform and redefine the conventions of text when adapted into a multimodal work and presented to players to create an engaging experience. Therefore, video games present an important point of interest for writing studies as creating and assessing them can teach writers to consider the wide range of ways that multimodal texts are rhetorically composed and to apply the strategies they notice across modes to their future writing.

This sentiment extends towards exploring narrative in games since an effective narrative must be achieved through composing across modes to complement the user's experience and immersion. By analyzing how narrative is transformed in making games, I could clearly observe how writing is impacted by the many facets in game design and how games with some form of a written narrative adapt their design to tell a compelling story through an interactive experience. To showcase this rhetorical design in my research, I decided to closely examine one of the most common text interfaces found in games and other digital media: the text box.

WHAT IS A TEXT BOX?

In video games, text boxes are interfaces that act as visual containers of text. They usually have a specific set shape and design which communicates to users the information about the game and the narrative being constructed within a game world. This interface commonly displays dialogue for characters in-game and progressively reveals text to users as they read through it during gameplay. Its use in interactive media can be likened to the interface of speech balloons or bubbles in comics.

In his paper analyzing the structure and relationships of speech balloons in comics, professional comics artist and theorist Neil Cohn describes speech balloons as interfaces that connect image to text through an emergent relationship where "the text is bound to some visual element, though it does not 'exist' in the image matter itself" (39). Cohn further details that the speech bubble links text and image by including the components of a "root" in the form of a character or object in the image that is providing text, a "carrier" that contains the text associated with the root within a shape, and a "tail" which points the carrier towards the root to connect them together (39). Similarly, text boxes act as an emergent interface in games, like speech bubbles; they do not exist literally in the game-world but can be described as linking text between modes of composition through the components of a carrier, tail, and root. The "root" in this case is a character or some element that exists in the game world, the tail can exist visually to connect the root and carrier or be inferred through procedurality, and the carrier is the text box itself which stores and displays the text. The tail is the most different when comparing speech bubbles and text boxes as the act of linking an element in the game world with a carrier of text can be inferred through gameplay or other means, while speech bubbles usually have a visual tail which points the speech bubble towards the root. The linkage of the root and carrier can occur through a procedural action in a game, for instance, such as pressing a button, or it could additionally rely on a visual, such as a direct pointer, header, or character portrait, that links the carrier of the text with

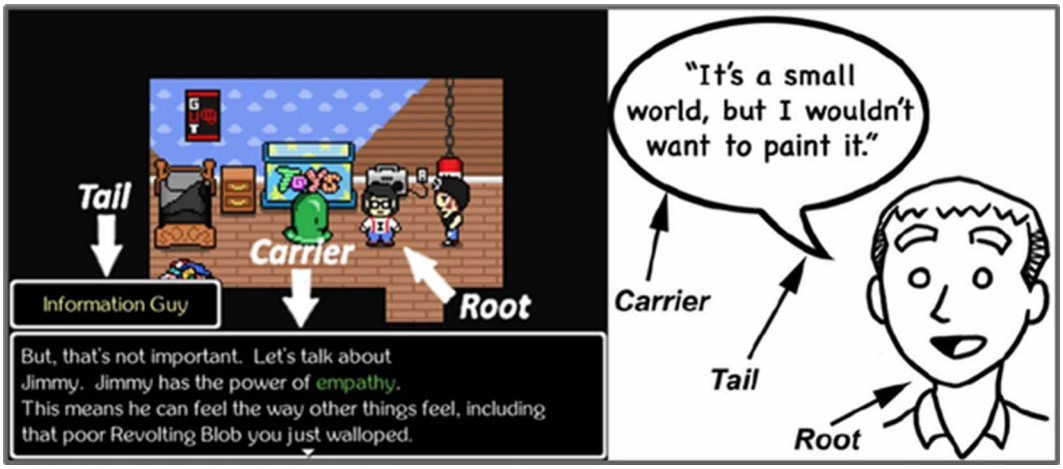

Fig. 1. Image depicting a screenshot of the game Jimmy and the Pulsating Mass on the left and a single comic panel with a character and speech bubble from Cohn's paper on the right. Both are labelled with arrows pointing to where the carrier, tail, and root components appear in each interface. Source: Jimmy and the Pulsating Mass developed by Kasey Ozymy in 2018.

an object in the game world. All of this is to say that, just as speech bubbles act as interfaces for linking modes within comics, text boxes also link the various modes of games, from its visuals to its gameplay to its writing (see Fig. 1).

Cohn's identification of speech bubbles' components lends itself well to similarly defining how text box interfaces interact with and are structured within multimodal texts like games. Still, there are many other researchers who have observed speech bubbles in comics under various lenses and even found different connections between how games adapt to the textual and visual language of comics. For example, in the book *Comics and Agency*, media theorist Hans-Joachim Backe observes "comic-game" hybrids, or games that heavily incorporate comic aesthetics, such as speech bubbles, to discuss the impact of rhetorical aspects of comics on player agency and how these aesthetics complement a comic-game's interactive narrative (283). However, my research is primarily informed by Cohn's definition of speech bubbles, which maps neatly onto the uses of text boxes as emergent interfaces and the similarities found when observing them as rhetorical devices in games. From this definition of text boxes, I felt that assessing the rhetorical choices behind their design could illustrate how game designers create text in their games and intentionally shape how this text is presented and conveyed. It also could demonstrate how elements of multimodal texts such as text boxes could be analyzed as their own compositions with their own persuasive power. To detail the depth behind this design, I focus on understanding the role of visual and procedural rhetorics within multimodal compositions to investigate how they are utilized and how they relate to the activity of writing.

FORMS OF RHETORIC IN DIGITAL MULTIMODAL COMPOSITIONS

Visual rhetoric has already been identified as an essential part of the design and purpose behind digital multimodal compositions. While known for her collaborative research work with Michelle Comstock, writing scholar Mary E. Hocks states in an independently-authored journal article about assessing visual rhetoric in online documents and webpages that "because modern information technologies construct meaning as simultaneously verbal, visual, and interactive hybrids, digital rhetoric simply assumes the use of visual rhetoric" (631). This means it is expected that one analyzing rhetoric in new media must take into account visual rhetoric, identifying how a composer persuasively utilizes visual components such as image, symbols, typography, formatting, and other elements. Anne Wysocki, a writing scholar who studies emerging forms of rhetoric in new media, shares a similar sentiment in a chapter of the book *The Multiple Media of Texts: How Onscreen and Paper Texts Incorporate Words, Images, and Other Media* that any text on a page or screen incorporates visual elements and arranges them based on their genre, meaning they can be analyzed as part of the genre and the message of the text (123-124). These concepts demonstrate how visual rhetoric acts as a deeply embedded part of compositions across digital media and that various genres have developed and been recog-

nized in part from how they are visually arranged. This inherent involvement of visual rhetoric in multimodal texts has led to the development of several situated practices and features that mix visuals and text in digital compositions. Hocks, in particular, identifies three major features of visual rhetorics within digital writing environments, which she describes as follows:

> **Audience stance** refers to how an audience is invited to participate or interact with a digital work and how it shapes an ethos for certain kinds of procedural interaction from the audience (632).
>
> **Transparency** encompasses the strategies a digital work uses to draw upon established conventions of other genres, such as websites, film, graphic design, and more, to create a sense of familiarity that makes its writing clear to the audience (632).
>
> **Hybridity** is the way that a multimedia text combines visual and verbal elements to construct its argument, encouraging both authors and readers to take pleasure in the multifaceted identities made possible through digital composition (632).

These features encompass various ways that visuals influence writing and shape its composition within computer-based genres. Authors of multimodal texts, such as web designers, employ these features to effectively communicate the purpose of their works to a wide audience and to persuade them with specific choices. They persuade readers to engage visually with a given text, as digital spaces afford the possibility of manipulating images and other visual elements to pair them with writing and enhance its presentation. By better engrossing an audience and complementing an author's arguments, visual rhetoric plays an essential role in enhancing multimodal texts by allowing composers to present their work with a distinct format and structure.

Procedural rhetoric has also come to light as another important part of how multimodal texts, especially ones with interactive elements, convey messages to audiences and push them towards certain actions. When examining procedural rhetoric in his research paper, Colby defines procedurality as consisting of the various systems, rules, and operations that games are built upon; he further asserts that procedural rhetoric is when designers intentionally compose these components as "a mode of expression and persuasion" through interactive media (44). With procedural elements, designers can set up the rules of their game to present a certain message and lead users towards an intended thought process when experiencing gameplay. The procedural design of a game is at the very core of its development since the systems of an interactive experience frame the "fun" and compelling nature of the genre and leads to the making of meaning within the system's structure (Robison 360). The ability for interactive media to form rules that immerse and push users' connections to the text as a whole gives it a unique method to engage with an audience compared to other compositions. It is important to consider the intent in gameplay systems and to assess how the rules of the

game interact with its other facets to facilitate the user's experience.

HOW CAN THIS BE STUDIED?

Here, I study how these rhetorics important to the composers of multimodal texts are used in video games by examining text boxes and their impact upon a game's writing. I do that via a qualitative research method that includes analyzing four computer games with text boxes through an analytic framework. From this analysis, I explore the ways in which text boxes persuade and influence interactions by users, and how they complement the writing and interactive experience of these games. I also seek to establish conventions of text boxes by examining their similarities across all four games and observing how they apply features of other multimodal compositions. This approach reveals how writing is situated in the development of a game's narrative and how scholars can assess rhetoric within the design of video games and other multimodal texts.

METHODS

GENERAL OVERVIEW

My method of obtaining qualitative data found through this analysis involved choosing particular computer games, recording their gameplay in a single session, then using the recordings and screenshots from those sessions as artifacts to act as examples of text box interfaces across various games. The criteria for choosing which games to assess was first limited by whether I had access to the game to be able to play it, and that each game utilized text boxes as its primary way of communicating dialogue and other textual information. My availability of playing the game was determined by whether it was available on Steam, a video game digital distribution service, and if I had bought or gotten access to the game as part of my library on the service. Steam is one of the most popular digital storefronts specifically designed for users to purchase computer games and allow users to manage the games they own within their online library. The criteria were further narrowed to investigate four specific games and to see the effects of text boxes on their writing. The other limiting factors I included were that each game shared the same game genre of role-playing game (RPG) and was made under the same engine, RPG Maker. RPGs are a widely known game genre where a user's experience is heavily shaped by interacting with an immersive narrative inside the game's world. The genre is characterized by inserting players within a broader story as important characters with large influence on the plot, hence the 'role-playing' aspect. Some popular examples of the genre would be the *Final Fantasy* or *Pokemon* series of games. These limitations allowed me to better ground the relationships between the games and text boxes, knowing their writing and design were situated with the same engine and in the same game genre.

WHAT DOES THE CRITERIA MEAN?

RPGs are often defined not only by their heavy use of narrative and immersion, but also shared conventions in their gameplay systems that dictate how the user interacts with and progresses

through the game. During my research, I specifically narrowed in on computer RPGs when choosing games to assess with my analytical framework. Computer RPGs are RPG games that are played or accessed mainly through computer systems such as a PC or laptop. Apart from just being playable on the same platform, these RPGs also included similar conventions in their exploration, combat, and progression systems that are associated with computer RPGs. Although there is not a singular definition for RPG as a game genre, for the purposes of this research, I identified a computer RPG by adopting Zegal and Deterring's characterization of computer RPGs through a list of shared elements. I found from their list that the genre's main conventions, as they pertain to this study, were distilled through the following game elements:

- The player creates and governs the actions of one or more characters in a fictional game world
- A game is often played over multiple sessions
- In-game events are usually guided along a pre-planned plot through the extensive scripting of the game world (including non-player character actions) toward clear end points, but players may play open-endedly before, during, or after the conclusion of those plots
- There are extensive rules for combat resolution
- Player characters improve over time via systems for progression (38-39).

The last factor I considered between the games was them being developed under the RPGMaker engine, a program designed to facilitate development of computer RPGs. Despite the numerous updates RPGMaker has received over the years, most iterations utilize similar features and design capabilities for developers, including tools for designing the appearance and interactions of text boxes. Knowing each game was designed with RPGMaker helped to ground the context of each game's development with how they had to implement the same tools provided in-engine to design their text boxes and iterate upon the system's default options.

With these similarities between the chosen games, I examined how each game specifically employs text boxes for rhetorical and persuasive purposes in its writing and composition. The recordings for the games were performed by myself where I started from a "new game," or the very beginning of the game, and limited myself to playing only about 30 to 40 minutes of the game from that point. Screenshots and examples could only be pulled from this recording to be showcased and analyzed in this paper. This was to limit the examination of the text boxes and their designs to how they were used only in the beginnings of the games, allowing for my knowledge on each game to span only this duration and to not have one game's analysis extend far more than another. This method serves my field of research by providing enough examples through the recorded gameplay to establish a general understanding of each game's text box as an interface for dialogue and information and demonstrate how it

makes a rhetorical impact on the writing and the game as a whole.

In the end, I selected four games which matched my criteria for my research:

1. *Hylics*, released on October 2, 2015, and developed by Mason Lindroth
2. *Jimmy and the Pulsating Mass*, released on August 7, 2018, and developed by Kasey Ozymy
3. *LISA: The Painful,* released on December 15, 2014, and developed by Dingaling Productions
4. *To The Moon*, released on November 1st, 2011, and developed by Freebird Games.

For an in-depth explanation of each game's content and story for reference during the analysis, please refer to Appendix A.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

After collecting the examples, I used them to clearly define each interface through a framework based upon previous analyses of rhetoric in multimodal works but adjusted for assessing video games. I adapted Wysocki's rhetorical approach of analyzing multimedia texts which involved a three step process of: 1) naming the elements of the text, 2) defining the designed relationships between the elements, and 3) contextualizing or considering how those relationships connect to the context, audience, purpose, or argument of the work (137). My framework shifts this approach for assessing video games by also listing, defining, and considering procedural and dynamic elements that are used within the medium. My analysis first involved 1) naming the textual, visual, and procedural elements of the interfaces, 2) finding relationships between how the three modes were used, and 3) contextualizing their implementation in the game to create an encompassing description of the text box and how its system works. Then, in addition to my first step, I reapplied Cohn's definition of speech balloons to describe emergent components of the text box as the root, the carrier, or the tail within each game's system (39). Lastly, I used these thick descriptions of text boxes to assess them as multimodal interfaces and how they utilize the three features that Hocks identified (632). The data I collected through my framework analyzed how text boxes employed rhetoric through audience stance, transparency, and hybridity. By judging text boxes as multimodal compositions and how they display these key features, it revealed the shared effects and broader conventions of text boxes in video games. Moreover, I found many connections between how the specific design choices of text boxes impact the way audiences are led to engage with them, how they familiarize readers with their design and writing, and how they uniquely blend text within their digital software.

FINDINGS

OVERVIEW OF THE FINDINGS

In the following section, I have structured my findings through two progressive subsections that reflect the discoveries I made through

playing each game. In the "individual analysis" subsection, I detail the text box design of the four games separately by going through the first part of my analytical framework. This means describing the various components of the text boxes across several modes of composition and identifying the root, carrier, and tail of the text boxes as they work within the interface. A screenshot for each game displaying what the text box looks like in-game is included for further clarification. The next subsection, titled "Assessing Text Boxes as an Interface," builds off my individual analysis by examining text boxes as an interface across each game through the next part of my analytical framework. I examine the shared design properties and components across the text boxes to illustrate how they take advantage of audience stance, transparency, and hybridity as rhetorical features. The findings are organized in this way to highlight individual analyses of the games that show the depth of intentional design behind their text boxes and to then demonstrate an assessment of the shared rhetorical design choices across the text boxes.

INDIVIDUAL ANALYSIS OF EACH INTERFACE

Jimmy and the Pulsating Mass' interface draws upon the traditional look of text boxes through a carrier which is designed as a black rectangular box with a white border. It also includes a small header box with a similar design above the top left corner of the main carrier. The text contained within the main carrier is colored white to contrast with the black color and to be clearly readable for users. The "root" of the text comes from an object or character in the game world that is interacted with by a user or that is shown to be speaking in a cutscene. The visual interface is linked with this game element through the connecting "tail" of a button interaction or a cutscene. The header in the top right also acts as another "tail" by providing further identification of where the text is coming from. Visually, the design of the carrier and the text inside takes up quite a bit of space in the bottom part of the screen. These elements of color and size in the carrier serve to bring prominence to the interface and to clearly indicate to users to read out the text contained within it.

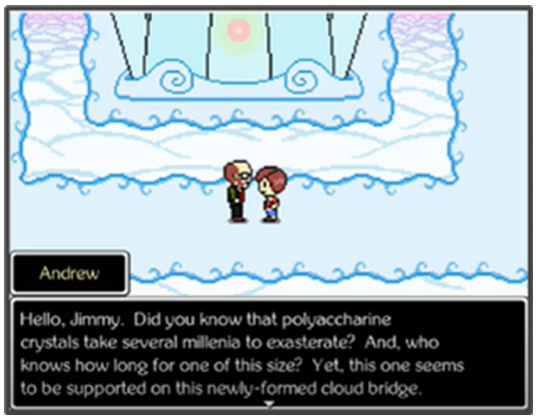

Fig. 2. Cropped screenshot of Jimmy and the Pulsating Mass that demonstrates an example of its text box in the game. The image presents a scene from the game where Jimmy is speaking to a character named Andrew, whose dialogue is shown in the screenshot through the game's text box. Source: Jimmy and the Pulsating Mass developed by Kasey Ozymy in 2018.

The interface has a few procedural elements that give users options on engaging with the writing and how the designer intends the writing to be read. In active gameplay, the text is animated to progressively scroll across the carrier, with each letter being generated one at a time to create this effect. The game will stop generating the text after a sentence or one line is generated, then it waits for user input to move on to the next line that will also be shown within the text box. Text usually only clears if there's an event that happens between text boxes; the dialogue switches to another root in the scene, or there is not enough space in the carrier for the next line to fully generate without clearing the text. There is also an option of pressing a button to instantly make all the text in a line appear, instead of waiting for the scrolling animation to end. One other procedural element is a visual indicator at the bottom of the text box that appears after all the text is generated in a line. It is there to communicate to users that they can move on to the next line of dialogue or end the system if that was the last line of the writing at that moment. This design reflects many elements of text boxes that will be found in the other examples and demonstrates how this system can be utilized to frame writing within a game. In this case, the system of generating each sentence complements the longer pieces of dialogue that characters speak in the game. In general, the system also pushes a user towards reading out the text as it scrolls and to pay attention to the game's lengthier dialogue through the large space that the interface takes up.

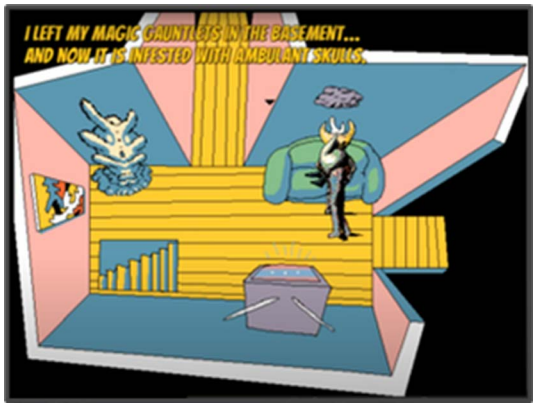

Fig. 3. Cropped screenshot of Hylics that demonstrates an example of its text box in game. The image presents a scene from the game where multiple characters are in the house of Somsnosa, who is the character speaking the dialogue that shows up in the text box. Source: Hylics was developed by Mason Lindroth and released on October 2, 2015.

Hylics uses a text box interface that has no visual shape for the container, or carrier, of the text, although text does stay contained within a static field that appears to resemble the same space as the usual text box found in RPGMaker. The text takes up a decent amount of space to be noticeable with its size, but not enough to overpower or cover much of the scenery of the game. When the interface is activated through a button press or cutscene involving a game element as the root, the dialogue is animated as scrolling text that can only be skipped by inputting a button. Once all the text appears in the container, a triangular indicator appears at the bottom of the text box, indicating to the user that they can press a button which will either end the system or move on to another

piece of text. Most times, the writing within the text box contains only a sentence or short statement, with lines being separated by the length or punctuation of the text. This game mostly uses a procedural "tail" to connect the carrier and root by a button press or interaction. Interestingly, the game also includes character portraits as visuals in the text box, but only in a few specific instances. Character portraits are a commonly used tail in text boxes that directly connects a root and carrier by showing an icon or depiction of the root within the text box that shows who or what is providing dialogue. However, this iteration of the convention subverts its usual use by oddly using it for cases that both seem appropriate or inappropriate. At times, a character portrait is shown for when a character important to the story or a party member is speaking dialogue, which adds suitable significance to their text. Then, there are moments where a character portrait pops up for insignificant elements like cats or bugs that the player can talk to, which weirdly puts emphasis on their text despite it not adding much to the grander story or world. In many other moments, no character portrait shows up at all, no matter whether the text is related to the main story or a part of a minor character's dialogue. The visual elements, or lack thereof, in this interface and the shortness of the dialogue indicates there is less importance in the presentation of the game's writing which correlates with *Hylics*' purposefully vague narrative and world. It seems it purposefully tones down the interface's presence to draw more attention towards the game's unique art style than attempting to create a verbal narrative that engages a player. The text box system also behaves in strange ways dynamically and procedurally in the context of the game. The position of the text will shift a lot during certain cases in the game, going from the top, middle, and even bottom parts of the screen. It mostly seems to go from the top or bottom space, in which it appears to pop up top when speaking or looking at a character, while bottom is for cases when Wayne, the user's avatar, interacts with certain objects and gains items for his inventory. Still, these contexts do not always act in the same way and can seem to vary just case by case. This inconsistency in the rules of this system and the overall design of the interface appears to intentionally relate back to the absurdity of the game and how it defies conventional logic when designing traditional RPGs and games in general. It leaves users more fascinated by the game's unique systems as they interact with the text, adding to its abstract and dreamy charm.

Fig. 4. Cropped screenshot of LISA: The Painful that demonstrates an example of its text box in game. The image presents a scene from the game

where two characters, Brad and another character named Terry, are conversing. Dialogue that Brad is speaking to Terry pops up in the screenshot through the text box. Source: LISA was developed by Dingaling Productions and released on December 15, 2014.

LISA: The Painful has an interface where the carrier is a rectangularly shaped container with rounded white edges and a black background. This visual design clashes against most of the colors of the game world to separate the box from the matter in the game and to show it exists on a separate plane. It takes up only a small space in the visuals of the game itself, but enough to be noticeable. It dynamically shifts its position when activated or used in a cutscene so it remains aligned with the same area as the element or character where the text is being spoken from. This acts as its tail that links the carrier's interface with the root of the text in addition to the player's procedural interaction with a character. Its position also usually appears in spots of the game scene where there is empty space in the area, such as the sky or a barren part of the background. This design choice complements the game's unique side-scroller perspective where more empty space can be found in the environment compared to the usual environment of a top-down perspective. The text box dynamically shifts its size as well to the amount of text being generated. The way the system is designed to shift the position and size of the writing makes it more active in the game scene and further emphasizes each line of text as it appears. The text box also implements scrolling text and the option of inputting to skip it in a similar manner as the previous examples. The combination of these elements makes this system suit the dialogue in the game's narrative as characters will have back-and-forth conversations where the text box is able to dynamically appear and communicate where dialogue is coming from as scenes shift between two or more characters.

Fig. 5. Cropped screenshot of To The Moon that demonstrates an example of its text box in the game. The image presents a scene from the game where multiple characters are in a bedroom and one character, Lily, is speaking dialogue that is appearing through the text box. Source: LISA was developed by Dingaling Productions and released on December 15, 2014.

To The Moon implements an interface that's similarly dynamic as *LISA: The Painful*'s text box by shifting its container's size based on the text's length and moving its position on the screen to relate to the root. The main container is a rectangular box that is colored with a slightly transparent brown tint. When dialogue is being spoken by a character, the

interface also includes a header box as a tail to display the name of a character speaking and even adds a visual tail, akin to speech bubbles, which points towards the character acting as the root. Dialogue is also indicated through quotation marks in the text. The game includes another carrier, not pictured, that represents the player character's internal observations and thoughts of objects in the game world. This container is colored with a bluish gray tint to make it distinct from the carrier used for dialogue. This other carrier doesn't include any quotation marks in the text, has no header, and has a lighter blue border. It also does not include any visual tail like the previous carrier as it does not represent dialogue being spoken by a character. The tail connecting the carrier and root in this case is solely procedural, as the internal dialogue is implied to be rooted from whichever character you are playing as and is relating to whatever object is interacted with in the game world. The changing visual elements indicate the separate contexts between dialogue in game and investigating objects during gameplay. The text boxes take up quite a bit of space in game scenes, so their transparency allows them to be notable while not completely covering parts of the environment. Procedurally, it has, once again, a very similar system of scrolling text that can be skipped over with player input. The aforementioned dynamic system replicates a similar experience as *LISA: The Painful* where much of writing involves active conversations between characters, especially since there are two main playable characters, which the system accounts for by using the changing visual elements of the text box to communicate what character is speaking as the dialogue progresses.

ASSESSING TEXT BOXES AS AN INTERFACE

With all the systems clearly defined, I found that text boxes as multimodal interfaces applied many persuasive and rhetorical effects through the use of audience stance, transparency, and hybridity as key features in its design.

A text box invites and engages users with **audience stance** by using clear visual cues and a simple procedural system that presents the text to be read in a certain way, while still giving users the option to read through the text on their own. The usage of scrolling text across all of the examples demonstrates audience stance through making the text appear in such a way that users are invited to read along with it as it generates and can more easily follow along than if a whole block of text just popped up at once. However, users are not bound to read this way if they so please. While the interfaces in these games do pause users from performing any actions outside of the text box, users are still given the agency to decide whether to skip through the text by inputting a button to skip the scrolling and to then go to the next line. This allows them to either choose to read the text at their own pace instead of following the scrolling text or just repeatedly skip through every line of dialogue. This option of skipping through the interface is balanced by the fact the rules of the game make it so a user has to tediously press a button to get through the text. While this might seem less engaging for an audience, it does showcase

that the text is meant to be experienced as part of the game and users will be more encouraged to actually read through it if the option to skip it feels tedious or unsatisfying than engaging with the game's narrative. *Jimmy and The Pulsating Mass*'s use of this scrolling text feature by generating text line by line instead of just generating it all at once helps invite users into the game's lengthier dialogue through reading each line at once instead of a whole block of text. Other games like *To The Moon* and *LISA: The Painful* take a different approach through applying dynamic elements of reshaping and repositioning their text boxes to add emphasis on every line of text and showcase how conversations between characters progress and shift. Another aspect of audience stance in text boxes is the accompanying indicator that each game shows once a line is finished being generated. This little indicator, usually visually shaped as a downwards triangle or arrow, invites a user to interact with the game so it can progress to another part of the text or end the system to return the user back to gameplay in the overworld, the space where players explore and interact with the game's environment. These various elements show that text boxes utilize audience stance through procedural and visual rhetoric to make users want to engage with the writing of a game's narrative and to lead them through the intended experience and immersion that designers want to accomplish.

Transparency is built into text boxes by their intentionally simplistic design, along with borrowing conventions from video games and other multimodal texts. The design of a simple shape for the carrier, such as a rectangle, immediately makes it recognizable towards users and the use of simplistic colors and outlines paired with the interface's design creates text that is easily communicated to the audience. By choosing to represent basic principles of text and visuals in the design of text boxes, users familiarize themselves with the interface by relating it to previous digital works they have read as both employ shared aspects of design. As mentioned before, text boxes can also be seen as drawing their design elements from other visual interfaces in multimodal works, such as speech bubbles in comics. The resemblance in functionality that text boxes have to those interfaces makes them further transparent to players as it allows an audience to make similar connections between the text and visuals if they are familiar with devices like speech bubbles. Procedurally, many of the elements previously mentioned as part of the system, such as scrolling text, indicators, and inputs to skip text, all stem from common conventions involved in interactive texts, such as other video games and software, that heavily incorporate text or dialogue within their user experience. The designers draw upon these traditional features not only to improve the readability and pacing of dialogue, but to also use procedural elements that are familiar to gamers and fans of the RPG genre. One unique use of transparency from one of the games can even be seen in *To The Moon* which writes dialogue with quotation marks that implements familiarity by resembling how dialogue is normally written with quotations in printed text and novels. The other games do not convey their dialogue in this way, but they do employ other familiar

facets like headers that clearly tell readers who is speaking at a given moment. In the case of *Hylics*, it does not use headers but does employ character portraits as another familiar element to many RPGs. This is in order to better represent the characters or elements that the text is rooted from and even subvert the expectations of character portraits through their inconsistent appearances. Transparent features are prevalent within the design of text boxes to facilitate a clearer presentation of the text that is integral for telling the game's narrative and which is quick to read and understand when it's introduced to new users.

Text boxes make use of **hybridity** in many cases where modes combine and link under the dialogue system crafted by the game's designers. In the design of a text box, it obviously already combines visual and verbal elements as it uses an image to act as the container for which text is stored within. This visual composition of the interface also interacts with the game environment itself, as its position can be determined by where designers see it fitting best with the rest of the image of the game. This is shown in the multitude of ways that text boxes appear within the four games. In *Jimmy and The Pulsating Mass*, the text box has a static position which is carefully chosen to be the bottom part of the screen, where there are fewer visually significant elements and because important parts of the environment will be situated around and above the player's position. The text box of *Hylics* is designed in such a way that it moves to various positions on the screen and has fewer visual elements to complement the game's detailed environments to be shown more prominently, along with adding to the game's general absurdity. Both *To The Moon* and *LISA: The Painful* have interfaces that interact with the image of the overworld by adjusting its position and size to accommodate where text is rooted and the space it covers in a scene. All of these interfaces are further combined with interactive elements, in which users can interact with the dialogue system by progressing through it with inputs. Players even have to use an input to initiate the interface by interacting with an element in the game environment or starting a cutscene by progressing through the game itself. These cases shape the interface as a hybrid of the various modes of compositions in game design to have them connect in ways that communicates clear information to the player and conveys the narrative as an important part of the game's interactive experience.

CONCLUSION

EXPLORING RHETORIC IN TEXT BOXES AND OTHER FACETS OF MULTIMODAL TEXTS

Through assessing the rhetorical aspects of text boxes and how they reflect key features in multimodal compositions, I found that they demonstrated extensive use of procedural and visual rhetoric to effectively communicate the game's writing. Each of the games utilized text boxes as part of their visual and procedural rhetoric to accomplish this very task of presenting their text and transforming the interface to suit the message and argument of each specific work. This showcases the many unique factors writers need to consider in the genre of video games and when presented with an interface that will shift the way their writing conveys meaning outside of just its verbal

or textual structure. Writing scholars investigating game design should recognize that, in addition to composing text for the purposes of gameplay and narrative, game developers are afforded the ability to design the specific ways they want their text to be displayed and to interact with the procedural capabilities of the genre. Overall, the various interfaces I used as examples showcased how the design of text boxes acts as a persuasive element in the game which constructs a visual for text to be read from and procedural system that users interact with whilst immersing themselves in the game's narrative. This also illustrates that text boxes act as their own compositional genre with their own conventions that are within the greater context of a game. Designers and writers developing a game must learn to construct text within this genre and effectively show that text to users. My observations display text boxes as being an interface that interactive texts engage with in designing and composing to transform the presentation of their narrative and writing. I further believe my findings show that, as writing scholars attempt to understand and explore rhetoric in new media, it can be just as important to discover how writing is situated through rhetorical features and choices in parts of multimodal compositions along with how it affects the composition as a whole.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBILITIES FOR FURTHER RESEARCH?

This approach to assessing the individual interfaces and systems of games could be further expanded to look at how other interfaces and features of games and multimodal texts are intentionally designed and how writers adjust to them. Other researchers could observe the way menus or an inventory system in a game are intentionally written and designed to influence the interactions of users. More games from other genres could be looked at under a similar framework or other modes of compositions in games could be assessed in conjunction with the ones I observed in this paper, such as examining how sound is involved in text boxes. Other narrative systems in games, such as captions, dialogue trees, or other procedural actions, could be analyzed like and compared to text boxes to find out how writing is situated in the context of their design and how it differentiates in various games. These narrative systems present worthwhile opportunities to expand the understanding of how writing is facilitated within game development and learning how they utilize rhetoric to improve user experience. The concepts I have developed here could be applied or assessed in academic settings by possibly observing how students would construct a text box for a game to gain more knowledge on the processes involved in the interface's design. I think further integration of games as texts composed and assessed within writing curriculums would be beneficial for future writers to become familiar with employing a wide range of rhetorics in multimodal texts, especially in regards to the visual and procedural possibilities that are commonly afforded by writing in a digital space. There are many possibilities in games and other multimodal works to identify the intricacies of their design and reveal the rhetorical impact upon their greater work.

APPENDIX A: WHAT ARE THESE GAMES ABOUT?

HYLICS

Hylics was released on October 2, 2015 and developed by Mason Lindroth. In the game, players take control of a character named Wayne, whose head shape resembles a waning moon, goes on a quest to defeat the evil King Gibby, who possesses a head shape resembling a gibbous moon. As Wayne, players traverse a claymation game world where almost all the assets are pieces of clay art made by Lindroth. The gameplay is similar to most RPGs, where the overworld is shown in a 2D top down perspective, and battles then transition to a new screen where the player makes combat choices for their characters that play out in a turn-based sequence. The game intentionally leans into its abstract and unique art style to create a universe and story that is both unusual and nonsensical.

JIMMY AND THE PULSATING MASS

Jimmy and the Pulsating Mass was developed by Kasey Ozymy and released on August 7th, 2018. It centers on a young eight-year-old boy named Jimmy, controlled by the player, who goes on adventure inside his dream to save his family and his dream world from an alien entity called the Pulsating Mass. Its art style uses a very colorful and cartoonish version of pixel art and involves a top-down perspective for traversing the overworld. When in battle, the gameplay shifts to a turn-based combat system reminiscent of many traditional RPGs. It attempts to capture some of the quirkiness of retro RPGs with its presentation. Its setting within a child's dreamscape also leads to a generally fantastical tone and lots of absurd imagery with cartoonish antics and characters.

LISA: THE PAINFUL

LISA: The Painful was first released on December 15th, 2014 and developed by Dingaling Productions. The game focuses on a post-apocalyptic world called Olathe where society fell apart after an unexplained phenomena seemingly caused all women in the world to disappear. Players take control of Brad, a man living in this ruined world who has dealt with traumatic family issues in his past. Brad's mission across the game's story is to find his kidnapped adopted daughter who he was trying to keep secret from the harsh and depraved residents of the wasteland. The overworld of the game uniquely uses a 2D side-scroller perspective where the player can only move left or right and elevates through climbing or jumping to higher places. In combat, the game utilizes a turn-based system that mixes in several complexities, such as making inputs in battle to decide attacks and making special 'combos' to deal special effects or more damage. The narrative focuses on dark subject matter as Brad grapples with memories of his abusive childhood and has to make hard decisions that affect the lives of others, while also having some moments of comedy through making fun of the flaws of masculinity and introducing several absurd characters and storylines.

TO THE MOON

Lastly, *To The Moon* was developed by Freebird Games and released on November 1st, 2011. It takes place in a world where the peoples' wishes can be granted through an operation of going through their minds to change their memories and create an imaginary timeline where they fulfilled their biggest desires. The game follows two doctors, Dr. Rosalene and Dr. Watts, who are tasked to do this operation for Johnny, an old man who is dying and wants to fulfill his dream of going to the moon. Gameplay involves controlling Dr. Rosalene and Dr. Watts at various times to explore the game environment by using the mouse to click where to go and what to interact with. The two doctors have to solve puzzles and find important items to progress through Johnny's memories and grant his wish. The game takes on quite a serious tone as it explores the mysteriousness behind why Johnny wants to go to the moon and slowly reveals his somber past over the course of the memories that the doctors traverse through.

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