

Video Games as Equipment for Living

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**Volume 13 Issue 3 (September 2011) Article 8**  
**Ronald Soetaert, Jeroen Bourgonjon, and Kris Rutten,**  
**"Video Games as Equipment for Living"**  
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**Contents of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 13.3 (2011)**  
**Thematic issue *New Perspectives on Material Culture and Intermedial Practice*.**  
**Ed. Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek, Asunción López-Varela,**  
**Haun Saussy, and Jan Mieszkowski**  
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol13/iss3/>>

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**Abstract:** In their article "Video Games as Equipment for Living" Ronald Soetaert, Jeroen Bourgonjon, and Kris Rutten postulate that with the emergence of new media there is need of a re-evaluation of all modes of communication and the ways in which literacy is conceptualized. Drawing on the concept of multi-literacy they suggest a rhetorical/ anthropological meta-perspective to describe human beings as symbol using animals and focus on particular symbol systems: narrative, drama, and video games. Specifically, they focus on the perspective of drama as a tool to analyze cultural artifacts in general and video games — as a new art form — in particular. They implement Kenneth Burke's notion of the pentad to illustrate their perspective in two case studies, the video games *Civilization* <<http://www.firaxis.com/>> and *Heavy Rain* <<http://heavyrainps3.com/>>. Soetaert, Bourgonjon, and Rutten illustrate how video games can be described as equipment for living because video game playing has become part of the many ways people create worlds and construct meaning and sense. Thus, they explore how new forms of media and art can be examined from the perspective of traditional disciplines such as rhetoric and anthropology and how rhetoric can transform itself in a digital world.

**Ronald SOETAERT, Jeroen BOURGONJON, and Kris RUTTEN**

### **Video Games as Equipment for Living**

For centuries books and printing have been the dominant medium in Western culture. Today we are confronted with major shifts: from paper page to digital screen, from writing and reading to the audio-visual-mode, from the older organization of texts to digital design and databases, etc. Dealing with this changing environment implies we need new perspectives on literacy because an autonomous, single literacy is replaced by multiliteracies (see, e.g., New London Group). We have to be literate "across a various and complex network of different kinds of writing and various media of communication" (Scholes 130). Apart from basic skills we also need to obtain "rhetorical techniques of interpretation that can be applied to a variety of cultural texts" (Bérubé 25). In this article, we suggest rhetorical perspectives and techniques to deal with ongoing changes in media, changes which affect both the cultural sphere and education. Above all, we have to be aware of the rhetorics of change. As far as educational discourse is concerned, the emergence of a new technology has always inspired newcomers to argue that education will be fundamentally transformed and schools would ultimately lose their relevance. As far as culture and the arts are concerned, some argue that new media will change all the cultural institutions (library, museum, concert hall, bookshop etc.), the function and practices of art and (cultural) habits. Debate about change is often organized and perceived as a dichotomy: conservative humanists warn about the dehumanizing effect of the digital revolution, while progressives promise a new world. A new emerging model of culture creates a debate between nostalgia and hype, between enthusiasm and resistance (see, e.g., Buckingham about new media and education). We argue that such a dichotomy neglects the fundamental links between "new" and "old" media: old and new forms are remixed continuously and create multimodal perspectives. Moreover, the prefix "multi" can be replaced by "inter": intermediality and interliteracy are concepts suggesting the need for a meta-perspective to overcome polarization. As far as art is concerned, the digital turn in art implies that new media art practices need their own grammar and aesthetics. To illustrate our argumentation, we will focus on computer games, "a new art form, one largely immune to traditional tools developed for the analysis of literature and film, video games will challenge us to develop new analytical tools" (Gee 58).

Focusing on youth culture is inspired by the idea that children are fascinated by computers (Papert, *The Connected Family* 80). Indeed, it seems that young people teach themselves new skills with greater ease than an older generation while also develop future genres and literacies differently from what the elders had foreseen: "Children are at the epicenter of the information revolution, ground zero of the digital world" (Katz 1). On the one hand, while student-centered education is of course not new, on the other hand some argue that today the roles between teacher and student have been problematized as never before. Especially, because we have the impression that the times are changing at a fast pace, a younger generation seems better "wired" to participate in a new emerging culture. It seems to be an advantage not to be hindered by prejudice nor tradition (De Kerckhove, *Connected Intelligence* vii). What we can learn from research and for teaching from this perspective is that a major technique for finding new knowledge and understanding new practices may be depriving us "of available knowledge in the search for new knowledge" (Burke, *Permanence and Change* 121). This is another way of stressing the fact that de-familiarization is essential to be open for change. Teachers should become researchers or — as Seymour Papert argues — anthropologists: "he or she needs to understand which trends are taking place in our culture. Meaningful intervention must take the form of working with these trends" (*Mindstorms* 32). Thus, training and educating teachers is about more than instructing them to teach since it is also about understanding what is happening in culture. For Clifford Geertz, the anthropological perspective implies a focus on interpretative models for gaining insight in the workings of human beings by making a distinction between thin description in which we describe what people are doing and thick description in which we try to describe the meaning on which behavior is based (see *The Interpretation of Cultures*). Geertz refers to the work of Kenneth Burke as a major influence mainly because of Burke's introduction of the notion of symbolic action (see Olson). Burke's *A Grammar of Motives* opens with a question: "what is involved, when we

say what people are doing and why they are doing it?" (xv). What kind of animals are we? For Burke, human beings experience their generic animality in terms of a specific symbolcity: "the symbol using and mis-using animal" ("Linguistic Approaches" 260). This statement highlights that human beings construct and understand reality and society through symbolic forms. Consequently, the role of criticism and education — and thus all reflection — can be summarized in another statement: we have to become symbol-wise (see Enoch; Rutten).

In the definition of the symbol-using animal Burke warns us not to overlook the animal: "man is to be described in terms of physical or physiological motion, as contrasted in the kind of terms we need for analyzing the realm of verbal action" ("Linguistic Approach" 282). The distinction between motions (objects, animals) and actions (humans) is gradual but also essential because actions are based on motives. Action for Burke requires an act done by an agent within a scene through some agency for some purpose (*A Grammar* xv). Act, agent, scene, agency, and purpose are the building blocks of Burke's pentad on which all human action is based. So the study of human behavior and relations in terms of actions is called "dramatism" — developed by Burke as the "dramatistic pentad" — in the sense that human life can be described as a drama. For Burke, drama provides a literal statement about the nature of human reality: being human implies being *homo dramaticus*. We treat other human beings "pragmatically" as if they were acting rather than merely moving (Burke, *Language* 53). To understand action we have to reflect on five questions: "what was done (act), when or where it was done (scene), who did it (agent), how he/she did it (agency), and why (purpose)" (Burke, *Grammar* xv). Burke regretted he had not added the element of attitude in the pentad focusing on the question in "what manner" and adding an affective and ethical dimension (see Anderson <<http://www.kbjournal.org/anderson>>). An important aspect of pentadic analysis is that for Burke human beings order pentadic terms in different relation to each other: for example, how does an agent "act" differently according to various scenes? How does the scene define the act? These pentadic ratios create a particular perspective on human action and such a perspective shapes how we describe and interpret human behavior. Such interpretations create terministic screens ("terministic" because they are constructed in language) prescribing "the range of acts that will seem reasonable, implicit, or necessary in that situation" (Burke, *Grammar* 450).

Burke's concept of dramatism is built on another widely held assumption: human actions are construed and interpreted as a narrative (see, e.g., Blakesley). We are symbol using animals but also story telling animals. Walter Fisher made a similar proposal suggesting the narrative paradigm as an alternative to the rational paradigm. He introduces a story telling frame as an extension of Burke's description of human beings as symbol using animals. And Alasdair MacIntyre describes a human being as a "story telling animal": "He is not essentially, but becomes through his history, a teller of stories that aspire to truth. But the key question for men is not about their own authorship; we can only answer the question 'What am I to do?' if I can answer the prior question 'Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?'" (256). The metaphor *homo narrans* has become a master metaphor suggesting that human beings tell stories to describe, interpret, and evaluate the world they inhabit. As far as the narrative turn is concerned we refer to the work of Jerome Bruner as one of the founders defending the importance of narrative as a mode of knowing. Bruner related two complementary modes of knowing: the "logico-scientific mode" and the "narrative mode" (*Actual Minds* x). The logico-scientific mode focuses on general and empirically tested truths. The narrative mode looks for the motives of human actions (what and why?) and the context in which these actions took place (where and when?). Bruner refers to Burke's pentad as a universal perspective on action and suggests to study narratives from this perspective. He added "trouble" as a new concept describing the imbalance between any of the five elements (*Acts* 50): for example, "an action towards a goal is inappropriate [when] an actor does not fit the scene" (Anderson <<http://www.kbjournal.org/anderson>>).

Human minds, Bruner argues, function according to shared interpretive systems which are culturally situated and that these systems — "prosthetic devices" — enable individuals to organize the symbols of everyday experience into meaningful narratives (*Actual Minds* 34-35). The importance of narratives is stressed by Bruner as something more than decoration, namely as an essential part of human culture: "It is only in the narrative mode, that one can construct an identity and find a place in

one's culture. Schools must cultivate it, nurture it, cease taking it for granted" (*The Culture of Education* 42).

Describing narratives as tools can be compared with Burke's argument that literature should be treated as "equipments for living, that sizing up situations in various ways and keeping with correspondingly various attitudes" (*The Philosophy of Literary Form* 304). The metaphor of equipment also inspired an ethical turn in literary theory, criticism, and in pedagogy. Wayne Booth described all texts as essentially rhetorical acts: authors invite readers into a conversation and this interaction has ethical qualities. The experience of reading is compared with the development of a friendship. This "neglected metaphor" (Antczak 1) is also repeated by Martha Nussbaum who declares novels as her best friends or "spheres of reflection" (*Love's Knowledge* 11). Nussbaum stresses the potential of literature to stimulate reflection about major themes in/of life. This can be related to Rorty's statement that there is a shift "against theory and toward narrative" (Rorty xvi), combined with the fact that the concept of "texts" should be broadened to include "texts" of all kinds and including songs films, and videos. Bary Brummett also suggested to broaden the concept of "equipment" because popular culture "can serve an audience as symbolic equipment to help them confront certain real life problems" ("Electric Literature" 247).

With regard to our argumentation to employ video games for scholarship and pedagogy, we refer to Jim Gee in his work who re-introduced the concept of "equipment for living": "as a new art form, one largely immune to traditional tools developed for the analysis of literature and film, video games will challenge researchers to develop new analytical tools and will become a new type of 'equipment for living'" (58). By introducing video games as a potential equipment for living, we suggest to add another metaphor about human nature and culture, namely *homo ludens* as introduced by Johan Huizinga. He describes playing video games as a way to transcend reality in order to enter a fictional world where the rules do not have the same consequences for "real life." Playing games seems an essential human characteristic and computer games — as Kirsten Pohl suggests — "although this determination of games applies as well to computer games they are more than just games, more than mere distractions from 'real life'"

(<[http://opus.kobv.de/ubp/volltexte/2008/2465/pdf/digarec01\\_05.pdf](http://opus.kobv.de/ubp/volltexte/2008/2465/pdf/digarec01_05.pdf)>). Computer games are cultural artifacts that comment on life in a specific way comparable to how literature, theater, and cinema function as "equipment." To study a culture's games is to learn about its understanding of reality, its values, its ways of thinking, its goals" (Cowlshaw

<[http://www.intelligentagent.com/archive/Vol4\\_No4\\_gaming\\_cowlshaw.htm](http://www.intelligentagent.com/archive/Vol4_No4_gaming_cowlshaw.htm)>).

The study of video games in scholarship is still very much in its infancy and overlooked for many years because "traditional games have always had less academic status than other objects, like narrative" (Frasca <<http://www.ludology.org/articles/ludology.htm>>). However, the last few years the study of video games has become a multi- and interdisciplinary field with scholars from a multitude of disciplines such as computer science, psychology, sociology, anthropology, arts and literature, media studies, communication studies, etc. We suggest to add the field of rhetoric as a perspective to study culture in general and game culture in particular. In the following, we introduce and discuss two video games, *Civilization* (Meier <<http://www.firaxis.com/>>) and *Heavy Rain* (Cage <<http://heavyrainps3.com/>>), to illustrate what we can learn from a rhetorical perspective in general and a dramatic narrative approach in particular (on this, see, in particular, also Bogost).

Sid Meier's *Civilization* is an example of a turn-based-strategy game, also described as "one more turn" game because of its appealing and for some addictive character. Apart from being a popular game, *Civilization* is also described as an example of how the genre is evolving and maturing based on the experience of the designers, critics, and players. *Civilization* has been around for almost two decades and recently *Civilization V* has been launched <<http://www.civilization5.com/#/information/>> with version in the U.S., Germany, Italy, France, Spain, and Japan (a version of the video game is also available on Facebook). The game consists of an approximate replica map of earth, the names of the civilizations, and historical periods and figures are based on situations we are familiar with in history texts. Thus, the historical content is only used as a background, which does not mean it cannot be foregrounded to learn something about history. The game focuses foremost on the aesthetic and rhetoric of play. Building an empire is the ultimate purpose of the game. *Civilization* allows the player to

become the leader of a tribe who can take control of the world. The agent-player has to compete with other tribes for land, resources, power, technology, culture, etc. He/she has to act and this implies he/she has to select particular agencies: military action or diplomacy, economy or art, religion or science, kingdom or republic, democracy or autocracy, and more recently ecology or capitalism. These different perspectives can be described as agencies used in a particular scene (creating an attitude embedded in a terministic screen). The story line and the game are based on these choices which are confronted in oppositions: do I provoke war or do I try to maintain peace? How much war or peace is good for the game? What role does culture/art/religion play in particular historical situations? What kind of political ideology is the best choice? How do these choices influence the game?, etc. These questions can be answered from different perspectives: from a particular ideology of the gamer, from specific decisions embedded in the story line or the rules of the game, and from understanding the logic created by the game designer or the logic of the software. The fun of playing a game also seems to be about learning something about different codes. This fascination can be described as part of the fact that human beings are language-using animals. Language, games, and stories are codes: society, civilization, history can also be described as a code. So understanding or breaking the code is the key to success as Meier states in an interview: "feeling that "I'm better at this game than I was yesterday, and if I play a little more I'm going to get even better" (Meier qtd. in Edwards <[http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/1523/the\\_history\\_of\\_civilization.php?page=8](http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/1523/the_history_of_civilization.php?page=8)>).

Part of the fun is the human fascination to play and learn something about the relation scene and agency, as Bruner summarizes Burke, "drama is created when elements of the Pentad are out of balance 'lose their appropriate 'ratio'" ("Self-Making" 31). Gamers learn something about this balance by experimenting with different ratios. What exactly they should learn by playing and replaying is summarized by a participant in "Tips on Getting Started" on the website of *Civilization V*: "Never forget that Civilization is a game of balances. A large army will get you nowhere if you didn't keep their sticks the pointiest by researching and upgrading them to more advanced units. Similarly, all those wonders you're building will do great things for your neighbor who will come wipe you out unless you defend yourself. Know your focus, but keep in mind that focusing on one thing doesn't mean forgetting everything else; rather, you want to use the other areas to support your main goal" (derivative <[http://www.bukisa.com/articles/362478\\_civilization-5-tips-on-getting-started](http://www.bukisa.com/articles/362478_civilization-5-tips-on-getting-started)>). Myers reviews *Civilization* from a similar perspective: "After a civilization advance had appeared, a pacifist player might be forced to adopt a more aggressive position; or an expansionist player might be forced to devote more time and attention to local city maintenance; or, more radically, a player with a previously unassailable position might realize that her newly transformed position was suddenly hopeless and be forced to start the game anew" (Myers 100). In other words, players can become aware of the screens, stories, symbols... they have selected. In a research and educational project we analyzed the reaction of gamers discussing about and reflecting upon the game (on this, see in more detail Soetaert, Bourgonjon, Rutten). Some gamers have interesting and complex ways of interpreting and evaluating games and we agree with Kurt Squire's suggestion that "teachers and researchers alike can learn a lot from the skills they have developed growing up with gaming"

(<<http://website.education.wisc.edu/kdsquire/dissertation.html>>). Squire argues that the idea that the world may be governed by a simple set of rules should be overruled or discussed in education. He problematizes this uncritical acceptance by arguing that "it is important to note this kind of understanding emerged from a game-based learning environment. If such an understanding is more than an anomaly, then perhaps Marshall McLuhan is right and the medium itself is the message here" (Squire <<http://website.education.wisc.edu/kdsquire/dissertation.html>>). We concur with Squire that game criticism and education can and should play a major part in game culture. At the same time, as far as research and pedagogy is concerned we suggest that a rhetorical perspective would prove essential upon what kind of equipment for living games like *Civilization* can be.

As our next example, we discuss *Heavy Rain* (Quantic Dream) introduced as a new kind of game: "You don't have a gun, you don't jump, you don't drive cars, you don't solve puzzles. You make decisions, and those decisions have consequences on the way the story is told ... With *Heavy Rain* we try to make you feel an empathy, make you smile, and make you cry. We try to make you feel what the characters feel, even if it's discomfort" (Cage

<<http://www.computerandvideogames.com/231546/interviews/heavy-rain/>>). *Heavy Rain* tells the story about a serial murder mystery involving the "origami killer" who leaves clues on the scene of the murder. The story of the game is told through the perspective of four characters: father, photographer, private eye, and FBI agent. These characters have their own motives, but they share a common goal to prevent the serial killer to strike again. Players have to identify with the characters and situations the game shows in film fragments creating empathic attachments. The action in the game is dependent on decisions players make based on this process of identification. These decisions and actions have consequences and eventually lead to different endings for all the characters (although the killer remains the same).

*Heavy Rain* is announced as an interactive movie or/and graphic novel or/and "drama" entrenched in the film noir genre and for some reviewers the game even links to the modern novel (the concept of multiple narrators or multiple perspectives or parallel stories and multilayered drama). Interestingly, a film adaptation of *Heavy Rain* has been announced recently (see McNary <<http://www.variety.com/article/VR1118030985>>). Thus, *Heavy Rain* represents an example of intermediality, because media borders are trespassed, problematized, or blurred (see Armstrong <[http://technology.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/tech\\_and\\_web/gadgets\\_and\\_gaming/article7039682.ece](http://technology.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/tech_and_web/gadgets_and_gaming/article7039682.ece)>). The dichotomy of the two media — film for watching and video game for playing — is too powerful to overcome: "cinematic creations sacrifice their power in allowing interaction and games lose their focus when the narrative leaves the players' control. A dead end, leading, at best, to brave failure and, at worst, ignominious farce. Until now. Until *Heavy Rain*" (Freeman <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2010/feb/21/heavy-rain-sony-quantum-dream>>). But what is different? *Heavy Rain* uses player input in particular scenes. The participant has limited control of the character and has to perform certain actions (requiring the player to hit and handle the buttons), and has to decide particular reactions in language. *Heavy Rain* has numerous branching story lines resulting from all players' input. All major characters can die for example owing to the players' decisions and actions. So the player has to read the dramatic scenes and his/her interpretation of the scene leads to different outcomes in the plot.

Reading such criminal situations is the purpose of what is called in police work "profiling." In "A Rhetorical Journey into Darkness: Crime-Scene Profiling as Burkean Analysis" Jennifer MacLennan begins with the definition of human beings as symbol using animals and focuses on the concept of motive to understand the behavior of people involved criminal action. Such are not just motions, but are based on choices or motives. MacLennan argues that that this technique "of interpreting the symbolic 'text' of the crime scene is essentially a rhetorical method that employs — with different names — the elements and ratios of Kenneth Burke's dramatisic pentad" (<<http://www.kbjournal.org/node/61>>) and refers to FBI profiler John Douglas: "everything we see at a crime scene tells us something about the unknown subject ... who committed the crime" (Douglas and Olshaker, *Mindhunter* 13-14). These clues, when carefully analyzed by an experienced profiler, can be the basis to construct a profile of the likely suspect. Douglas and Olshaker describe profiling as a form of applied psychology and liken it to medical diagnosis (*Anatomy* 18). MacLennan adds rhetorical criticism because these perspectives focus on analyzing, interpreting, and evaluating the symbolic products of human action. The profiler reads the scenes in the same way a scholar and critic study texts: "These patterns can be unearthed through a systematic investigation of key elements of what, where, when, and how, which in turn lead to answers to the questions that most elude us: Why? and ultimately Who?" (MacLennan <<http://www.kbjournal.org/node/61>>).

In *Heavy Rain* one of the four characters is Norman Jayden, an FBI profiler sent to support the police force with their investigation of the origami killer. Jayden possesses a set of experimental reality glasses called an "Added Reality Interface" that allows him to investigate crime scenes and to analyze evidence rapidly. Jayden is the professional profiler, but also the other characters have to do similar work: analyzing the scene in order to make the scene speaks to an experienced profiler: "the crime itself begins to talk to you" (Douglas and Olshaker, *Journey into Darkness* 19). But also the gamer has to figure out how to interpret words, situations, and actions. Sometimes one can select a particular attitude and a terministic screen from which the particular actor acts: for example, one can interact aggressively, ironically, etc. *Heavy Rain* illustrates how game developers play with the central

idea that humans use symbols and how games can be described as equipment for living because they stimulate gamers to decipher meaning and teasing out the motives of behavior. *Heavy Rain* also explores the idea how empathy is based on a search for motives and how players can identify and feel empathy for more than one character.

In conclusion, with the emergence of new media we argue that there is a need for the re-evaluation of how literacy is conceptualized. Specifically, we postulate that introducing a dramatic perspective can enrich the game-play because games are based on rule-based representations and interactions. In pedagogy video games can be studied as a new form of art together with literature, film, television, theater, graphic novels, etc. These media can be treated as symbolic acts and can be analyzed as rhetorical texts. Such a perspective allows to focus on the potential of all cultural artifacts to function as equipment for living. The main question for future research is how video game studies can benefit from a more general rhetorical perspective and how rhetoric can transform itself, as James P. Zappen puts it, to proceed from "the old rhetoric of persuasion into a new digital rhetoric that encourages self-expression, participation, and creative collaboration" (320).

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