

Lost in Translation: The Challenges of Adapting Video Game Narratives into Novels

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How to cite this paper: Rao, K. (2025). Lost in Translation: The Challenges of Adapting Video Game Narratives into Novels. *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, 13, 160-170. <https://doi.org/10.4236/jss.2025.133012>

Received: January 14, 2025

Accepted: March 9, 2025

Published: March 12, 2025

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Abstract

Converting video games into novels presents unique challenges, primarily due to the fundamental differences between the two mediums. Video games are interactive, engaging, and customizable, offering players a dynamic and immersive experience. In contrast, novels follow a fixed narrative path, which can lack the engagement and flexibility appreciated by video game enthusiasts. This study aims to explore the challenges and limitations involved in adapting video games into novels, with a focus on the impact of losing interactivity and player agency during the adaptation process. Drawing on literary and game studies, the research examines the structural differences between video games and novels, including interactivity, pacing, and the balance between action and storytelling. The study finds that the loss of interactivity is the most significant barrier in adaptation, along with pacing difficulties and visual translation. Video games allow players to set their own pace and choose events, while novels impose a predetermined narrative and pacing. This shift can make the novel appear less engaging and dynamic to those accustomed to the interactive nature of video games. The paper finally concludes that adapting video games into novels requires addressing the tension between interactivity and fixed narrative structure. Balancing the dynamic action of games with the linear storytelling of novels is critical to maintaining engagement and capturing the essence of the original medium.

Keywords

Video Game Adaptation, Interactivity, Player Agency, Narrative Translation, Visual Immersion

1. Introduction

Converting a video game into a novel has many challenges. The primary issue

faced during this process is the loss of interactivity. Video games are known to appeal to players as they are interactive, appealing and personalized. Novels, on the other hand, has a set path which can lead to lack of engagement and customizability for video game enthusiasts. “Unlike novels, films, or television, games were interactive, not passive and linear; they were oriented toward kinesthetic pleasures (jumping, running, flashing lights), not intellectual or emotional ones” (Hayot, 2021: p. 178). In video games, the pace is set and the player gets to decide which events they participate in. In novels, the author has already set the pace for the story. The author has also balanced the action and the story, which may therefore not appear as captivating and dynamic as video games.

Another challenge faced when converting video games into novels is character development. In video games, the player gets to adjust the character according to their will which makes the game feel more personalized. However, in novels, the protagonist is tailored according to the author which may not allow the reader to have the same personal connect. There are also visual, audio and immersive settings to help build that atmosphere compared to novels where the reader relies on description of words. These words often fail to build the same atmosphere and effects that are available through the dynamic audio visual nature of video games.

Lastly, in video games, there are usually multiple endings possible, depending on which path the player decides to take. However, in novels, there is always a fixed ending. This will therefore not be as engaging or exciting for a player who is used to exploring different outcomes. These challenges make it difficult to convert a video game into a novel, as there will most certainly not exist the same level of engagement and freedom. It is “as difficult to adapt a daydream to the cinema as it is a video game” (Baty, 2020: pp. 10-11). This paper is a study of the challenges one might face while converting a video game into a novel.

2. Loss of Interactivity

Interactivity is the basic feature that makes video games different from traditional media forms such as films and novels. Video games allow players to make choices to influence the structure of the narrative. However, in the case of a linear narrative, as is the case with novels, the player might feel that they are watching a movie instead of actively participating in the game. According to Ryan, “the more active and the less constrained the user’s role—in other words, the more lifelike” (Ryan, 2009: p. 44).

Dominic Lopes, widely known for his philosophical works highlights that the aforementioned interactivity changes the gaming experience. Video games are dynamic in a number of sense “they prescribe that the actions of [their] users help generate [their] displays”. Games like *Bioshock* depict a concept where the player determines the outcome of the game. However, in traditional novels, there is limited amount of interactivity, like interpreting the plot or engaging with the theme. “Someone who plays a video game such as *Bioshock* will influence what is true in the fiction and, hence, play a role in generating its display” (Robson & Meskin,

2016: p. 167). This loss of interactivity while adapting a video game into a novel, take away the unique advantage. This shift is therefore likely to lead to players' displeasure as there is lack of engagement and agency.

Recent studies show that interactivity leads to fixation and flow which are important aspects for a good gaming experience. In video games that lack interactivity, the players become more of an observer rather than a participator which causes them to lose interest. Non-video game fictions such as movies like *Kinoautomat*, introduce immersive elements but the narrative remains the same within the predefined structure. However, unlike video games, the choices are limited and do not really give the sense of full agency.

To maintain the essence of gaming, the developer involved in adapting video games into a novel, must therefore prioritize interactivity. Players, or in this case, readers, should be able to choose options which impact the storyline, gameplay, and environment, thus making their actions purposeful. "The structured play of these social rules provides incentives and deterrents for an individual's response" (Patton, 2013: p. 38). The storyline should adapt to the player choices to make the novel feel more personalised. Novels with linear narratives risk losing the engrossing factor of the traditional video games. This can therefore lead to reader dissatisfaction and lack of engagement.

Player agency is the ability to influence outcomes of the game. "Each event introduces a change to the game world that the player responds to" (Clarke & Mitchell, 2013). It is an important feature to make the game a gripping experience. It connects with character development, as the games allow players to shape their game through decisions, actions, and interaction. However, compared to movies and books, which have a fixed narrative, video games have an ongoing narrative where the player controls the characters' growth, thereby making it more personally connected.

Significant character development also increases player agency. For example, In *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, player agency plays an important role in the captivating experience of shaping Geralt's adventure. As the main character, Geralt's story is influenced by different choices that the player makes through the game. The game's storyline divides based on the decisions that have resulted not only on Geralt's relationships but with other characters and the world around him.

The world changes according to the player's choices with various factions, NPCs, and characters changing their actions based on Geralt's actions, leading to unique experiences with each playthrough. An example of player agency in *The Witcher 3* lies in Geralt's principle choices. Geralt can choose between the different responses when confronted with problems like saving a child or larger outcomes that can affect the land. These decisions impact the character's layout, his standing in different areas and the final outcome of the quest. The game also permits players to develop Geralt's characters through expertise, potential, and how he forms relationships with others. This gives a sense of the character being custom built making Geralt feel less pre-planned and more of an extension of the user's choice

and character.

However, a poor application of player agency can have an outcome in what is known as mirage of decision. If the game makes it seem that the users choices matter when they really don't, it can lead to annoyance and disinterest. In *The Witcher 3*, though the narrative problems of decisions are often important, keeping players occupied and attached in Geralt's story. This evolving relationship between users' decisions and narrative progress exemplifies the possibilities of player agency in video games.

Another example is *Detroit: Becomes Human*. This game uses the idea of player agency to a different level, as it gives an engaging narrative driven largely by the decisions players make as they have power over three clear android characters. Every choice made throughout the game opens a diverse number of outcomes, from changing relationships between characters to control the fate of the entire android uprising. This game places importance on principle choices and outcomes, where the user constantly encounters questions regarding right and wrong and what it means to be human.

The game's storyline relies on a complicated web of interconnected storyline that changes based on the player's choices. For example, if the player decides as Connor, a police android tasked to hunt down rogue androids can form not only Connor's destiny but also the destiny of other important characters and the direction of the whole story. The choices made by the player can lead to characters living or dying, the result of an important event or even the complete shift of the society's structure. The game makes sure that every choice matters by visually showing how different choices impact the world, it provides a tactile sense of player agency.

In spite of the powerful reliance on player agency, *Detroit: Become Human* also faces the challenges of the choice of illusion of choice. Some commenters argue that even though the branching narrative, many of the choices do not remarkably make an impact on the overall storyline. The absence of real divergence can make decisions feel less relevant, weakening the submergence potential of the game. On the other hand, even with these limitations, the game surpasses in making players feel emotionally invested in their decisions, exhibiting the power of player agency in developing a profound, unique narrative experience.

However, poor execution of player agency can undercut the experience as well. The illusion of choice occurs when a game makes it appear that a player's choices matter, but their choices do not influence the outcome. This can create mistrust between the game and players. For example, if a game states that it offers different storylines but leads the player to a singular conclusion, it effectively reduces the player's sense of control. This detachment can take away from the immersive potential of the gaming medium.

"In storytelling, films, and novels, the audience is traditionally an observer, and by necessity, a passive observer" (Homan & Homan, 2014: p. 169). Novels, therefore need to compensate for the absence of player agency inherent in video games

by employing alternative narrative techniques that leverage the unique strengths of the literary medium. These techniques engage readers in interactive and immersive ways, replicating aspects of player involvement. One such method is the use of nonlinear narratives, as exemplified by the *Choose Your Own Adventure* series. This format allows readers to make choices that influence the direction and outcome of the story, mirroring the branching paths often found in video games. Another approach is presenting the story through multiple perspectives, as in David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*. By offering varying viewpoints, the narrative encourages readers to actively piece together a cohesive understanding of events, evoking the investigative and exploratory aspects of gameplay.

The epistolary format is another effective technique, illustrated by Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. By telling the story through letters, journal entries, and other documents, this format immerses readers in the characters' inner thoughts and experiences while requiring them to interpret fragmented information, akin to uncovering lore in video games. Similarly, the use of unreliable narrators, as seen in Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl*, compels readers to question and reinterpret the narrative, engaging in a form of intellectual participation reminiscent of decision-making in games. Furthermore, experimental structures, such as those in Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*, utilize unconventional formats like erratic page layouts, nested footnotes, and embedded puzzles, creating a dynamic and interactive reading experience.

Through these techniques, novels can foster a sense of agency and intellectual engagement, offering an alternative to the interactive and participatory nature of video games. By adapting storytelling methods to mimic the decision-making and exploratory processes of gameplay, literature can provide readers with an equally compelling and immersive experience within its own medium.

Game designers therefore have an uphill task to balance the narrative structure with actual agency. Including dividing narratives, responsive characters and ethical dilemmas ensure that players remain involved. Furthermore, games allow players to explore different choices and face its repercussions, as this strengthens the emotional investment in the character's journey.

In the end, one may note that character development and player agency are interconnected elements. By allowing players to sculpt their in-game personalities and influence the story, developers can create a better and more fulfilling experience that advances video games as an art form. This is precisely what post structural critics like Wolfgang Iser and Roland Barthes advocate in the reader response theory, wherein they emphasise the reader's active role in shaping a narrative, thereby making it an appreciable form of art.

The process in which games handle endings and player choices impact the overall gaming experience, as these elements directly mirror the player's own journey and choices. A carefully crafted ending provides a validation of the choices made by the player throughout the game, thus offering a sense of ownership over the story. However, a poorly crafted ending will leave the player dissatisfied with the

narrative outcome. This factor, therefore, emerges as a major challenge in adapting a video game into a novel like narrative.

Separate narratives, which change based on the players decisions, is an important tool to produce effective endings. Games like *Mass Effect* and *Detroit: Become Human* display how players' agency can lead up to multiple endings, each reflecting special choices. These endings reward players for their involvement, making sure that their actions matter within the game world. However, the illusion of choice appears as a problem that weakens the interaction. When all courses lead to a similar outcome in spite of different choices, the player's sense of agency decreases, lessens emotional investment in the narrative. This is generally the impact of a novel. The reader may go through an emotional turmoil, making choices, siding with characters they most identify with, even identifying with some characters, but the lack of control over the ending, already predetermined by the author, makes the experience of reading less intriguing than playing a video game.

One more challenge that is faced is balancing narrative consistency with player freedom. While unpredictable structure allows for varied outcomes, they sometimes result in disconnected storyline if not carefully carried out. Game developers must therefore make sure that player-driven ending feel both significant and compatible within the game world and themes. Emotional Resonance is the main element. Even different endings should invoke a sense of accomplishment, whether through victory or loss, or moral complexities.

Games must also consider endurance. Multiple endings can motivate players to explore different paths, thereby increasing the duration of engagement with the game as well as influencing the player's interest. By tying endings to distinct player choices, developers can invent narratives that feel deeply personal, as though the player has co-written the story. This level of reader engagement is totally absent from traditional novels.

3. Actual Adaptation

Minecraft: The Island is written by Max Brook's. Max Brook was an avid *Minecraft* player and was determined to write a story that mirrored the experience of playing the game. The book retains the interactivity of the *Minecraft* video game through an engaging storytelling method that involves the readers as energetic users. Even though the story is written in first person perspective, the book addresses the reader directly. It imitates the user's choice making process. The characters get the hang of it through trial and error methods of survival like preparation, gathering materials and fighting hostile mobs just like how users can in the video game. This method encourages engaging experience for the reader making them feel as if they are finding the solutions with the protagonist. Furthermore, the novel highlights the open ended problem-solving where the protagonist has many different ways to address difficulties, such as hunger, crafting, and respawning into the story. Making sure that the narrative feels like an original extension of the game rather than a standard survival story. By motivating creative partici-

pation, the book invites people to visualise the minecraft world and reviving the protagonist's adventure. These methods make the novel feel more interactive keeping the essence of *Minecraft* player driven storyline, even though there are many limitations of writing a novel.

4. Pacing Difficulties

While converting a video game into a novel, another difficult part is managing the pacing. In video games, pacing is flexible and player driven. Players have the ability to be in charge of the speed at which they advance through the story, choosing when to take part in an action sequence, tour the game world, or even pause the game. This freedom allows the player to explore the story at their own speed, encouraging a customised and dynamic experience. Video game pacing is controlled by the players choices, creating a pattern that feels engaging and flexible to individual approach. "Gamers can simply skip the narrative elements of the presentation, and proceed straight to the contest without effecting the form or expression of the gameplay" (Jones, 2008: p. 28).

However, in novels, the pacing is fixed and fully controlled by the author. According to Hallman, "A videogame player's control of the speed at which events unfold is closer to the experience of a novel's readers, who can skip forward and backward in a sentence, a paragraph, a chapter, or an entire book" (Hallman, 2018: p. 104). However, for most persons, in a novel, the story advances in a straightforward manner, with each chapter and scene progressing as predetermined by the author. Skilled authors must therefore thoughtfully manage the order of events to keep the reader captivated. Unlike video games, where the player's choices decide the speed of the narrative, the pacing of novels must maintain momentum while balancing engagement, dialogue and description. This lack of choice afforded to the readers makes it tough to recreate the dynamic progression found in video games.

Additionally, video games often permit the players to spend time on optional missions, journeys, or character development, leading to pacing that can alter significantly. In a novel, this freedom is tough to show. The author must make a choice when to slow down for character introspection or when to increase the pace for action, without providing the readers an ability to stop or alter the narrative based on their choice. If the pacing is too slow, readers may become disengaged. If it is too fast, the reader may find it difficult to connect with the characters or the narrative world. The challenge lies in modifying the cooperative and flexible pacing of video games to a fixed, linear narrative novel. Authors must find innovative ways to maintain involvement and enthusiasm while sticking to the restriction of the novel form.

5. Visual and Environmental Translation

One of the most important challenges when attempting to adapt video games into novels is translating the visual and captivating environment of games into a me-

dium that relies completely on text. Video games use a blend of audio, visual, and environmental interactivity to make an enchanting world that grabs the attention of the player on a sensory level. Players can connect with their surroundings, hear background music, see dynamic changes in the environment, and feel the stress through visual signs. These components work together to build an atmosphere that helps players form an emotional relationship to the story and characters. “Entertainment and Education have merged into what has been referred to as *edutainment*” (Parks, 2008: p. 237). The visual events in games often serve as a bypass to narration, giving the player instant entry into the game’s mood, tone, and context. “The explosion of creative possibilities in videogame design seems to force a re-evaluation of the conceptualization of narrative creation and its constituent elements: temporality, space, and presentation” (Jones, 2008: pp. 20-21).

In comparison, novels must rely completely on descriptive language to convey elements, which can be a challenging task. The lack of direct visual elements, in spite of detailed visual descriptions means that authors must be experts at using words to invoke imagery and atmosphere. For example, instead of a player seeing a dull, rain soaked alley in a game, an author must express the scene in such a manner that the reader can envision the unease of the atmosphere, the iciness of the air, and the dark water pooling on the ground. While words can sketch vivid pictures, they often lack the approach and kinesthetic feeling that the visual and audio cues in games provide.

Furthermore, the environmental interactivity in video games gives players the freedom to shape the narrative and submerge themselves deeper into the world. They can explore, crack puzzles, or take part in combat, all of which provide their grasp and connection to the setting. In a novel, this degree of interactivity is absent. The reader must depend on the author’s narrative to envision the world, making it harder to maintain a similar depth of engagement and player participation present in video games. In the end, the issue of translating visual and environmental components lies in balancing vivid, expressive descriptions with words to keep the atmosphere and emotional depth at a level that can be comparable to a video game.

6. Significance

The obstacles of converting a video game into a novel is not equally important across all types of games. Each challenge, loss of interactivity, character development, player agency, visual and environmental translation, handling ending, and pacing difficulties changes its impact depending on the game’s structure. Loss of interactivity is important in the open-world and role-playing games. These games depend on the player choices and to form the story compared to linear games that already have a fixed scenario. Character development is difficult in games where users are allowed to tailor the protagonist. The tailoring cannot be duplicated in a novel. On the other hand, games with fixed characters face few problems in this area. The challenges of multiple endings is the most noticeable in narrative games,

such decision based experience where each path leads to a different and unique conclusion. These challenging storylines are difficult to compress into one narrative without losing the importance of player agency. Games with one fixed ending are less influenced by this issue. Pacing is another area where challenges are different. Open world narratives allow users to decide the pace of the exploration and story progression making it tough to reproduce their dynamic pacing in a novel. However linear games which have a set pace adapt more easily into novels. Lastly, visually rich games rely mainly on audiovisual elements for engrossment and face more problems in creating the same atmospheric description than it will be for simple visual games. Descriptive gaps often exist but differ widely between different types of games.

7. Successful and Unsuccessful Attempts

A famous successful adaptation is the Halo series written by author Eric Nylund, Joseph Staten, and others. The success of these books come from the ability to extend on the Halo universe in a way that goes with the original video game series while making a standalone narrative that attracts both fans of the game and newcomers both. Eric Nylund's *Halo: The Fall of Reach* is especially noticeable for giving a backstory to the protagonist, Master Chief, and explores the emergence of the Spartan program. The novel has a fascinating storyline and is well paced storytelling giving admirers a deeper understanding into the incentive and battle of the characters. It also establishes themes of surrender, responsibility and survival of the characters. Giving information attention to world-building and character growth, Nylund ensures that *The Fall of Reach* would stand on its own as a part of science fiction.

An important reason for the success of the Halo novels is their ability to maintain the original quality and myths of the games. For example, Joseph Staten's *Halo: Contact Harvest* adds depth to the myth by touring humanity's first contact with the Covenant. Staten is one of the original creators of the *Halo* story, flawless gaps between the games and novels, offers exciting action and lavish world-building. The focal point is on similar characters such as Sergeant Avery Johnson makes sure reader are engrossed in the story even if they're not aware of the games.

The *Halo* novels also succeed by noticeable a balance between action and self analyses. The game highlights combat and gameplay mechanics, the novel dives deeper into the themes of war, ethics, and human perseverance. The ability to complement rather than duplicate the source material solidified their place as one of the most successful video game-based book series.

Assassin's Creed: Forsaken by Oliver Bowden is an example of a poorly executed video game to novel adaptation. The book tries to explore the backstory of Haytham Kenway the main character in *Assassin's Creed III*, who disappoints in many areas leaving fans and readers disappointed. An important flaw of *Forsaken* is that it didn't capture the engrossing element of the *Assassin's Creed* games. The series is famous for its historical settings, maze-like plot, and energetic gameplay

which gives permission to players to explore worlds. *Forsaken* decreased this experience and made it into a boring storyline that required more involvement in the game. The novel concentrated on Haytham's personal experiences, while offering a new perspective that felt disconnected and boring. The absence of captivating narrative makes it difficult for readers to focus and get engaged with the characters or his journey.

Another problem is the absence of historical engagement. The *Assassin's Creed* games are known for their careful attention to these historical details. They capture eras like the Italian Renaissance and the American Revolution to reality. *Forsaken* wasn't able to capture these strengths. The novel wasn't able to capture the historical event properly and it felt too peripheral and wasn't able to engross the reader into that era. The lack of originality decreases the charm of the narrative making it feel too common and unoriginal.

The personalization is another part where *Forsaken* hesitates. Haytham Kenway, a moral depth and interesting character in the game, has been converted into a shallow figure in the novel. The book's dependence on journal entries makes it lack engaging interactions and emotional depth. The main relationship such as Haytham's bond with his dad or his disillusionment with the Templars haven't been further discussed which makes it lack emotional impact. Furthermore, the novel has pacing issues. The broken structure lacks appealing subplots making the narrative feel rushed. Unlike the game which has an equal amount of action, exploration, narrative. The book isn't able to catch up to the book's level leaving the reader disconnected and uninterested.

The most critical issue with *Forsaken* is that it's not an enthralling storyline. *Forsaken* needs background knowledge leaving newcomers who are not aware about the franchise confused making the book less appealing.

8. Conclusion

One can therefore see that adapting a video game into a novel presents a number of challenges. This is in general due to the differences between the two mediums. Video games are dynamic, engaging experiences that provide players with a high level of control, custom made characters, and numerous narrative outcomes. Whereas, novels follow a fixed, linear storyline, thus maintaining the narrative control fully in the hands of the author. This change can lead to a loss of involvement for a reader who is used to the freedom and flexibility that a video game provides.

The lack of engagement in novels disconnects the player's capability to shape the story, making the experience less personal and captivating. Likewise, the change from specialised characters in games to fixed, author-defined protagonists in novels may hamper emotional relationships for readers. Visual and environmental transfer further makes the process complex, as video games leverage audiovisual elements and interactive settings to create an atmosphere, while novels depend fully on descriptive language, which may lack the immediateness and sensory depth of the gaming experience. "A narrative must be reconsidered in light of

technologies that blur or configure the standard spatial/temporal distinctions, and the traditional divide between authorship and readership” (Jones, 2008: p. 20).

Pacing is another important challenge. While video games allow players to be in charge of the tempo of the journey, novels require careful balancing by the author to maintain such engagement. The lack of flexibility can lead to a diminished sense of agency and immersion. “The ability of games and other interactive media to be incredible modes of expression is quite profound, but the audience needs to be aware, not just of the phenomenologically ‘here-and-now’ but of the underlying message within” (Jones, 2008: p. 32).

To address these problems, authors must create narratives by combining vivid description, dynamic pacing, and an emotionally resonant narrative. By incorporating immersive storytelling methods, such as moral puzzles and character-driven arcs, novels can save some essence of the gaming experience. Eventually, while video games and novels are essentially different, creative transformation can bridge the gap, presenting new methods to involve audiences across mediums.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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