

FACTSHEET

Video games and their themes are more varied than ever

Do video games always portray the same tropes?

A common and persistent myth about video games many people still believe in is that their central themes are homogenous, always portraying the same tropes about quests to save a princess or a kingdom, win a battle, and earn riches and glory in the process. While there are certainly many games that do centre on these topics, if we take a larger view of the field, it is clear that video games today treat themes that are more diverse than ever.

Both indie games and games coming from major studios have branched out to cover various topics so that practically everyone can find a video game related to something they like. For example, today you can find games that allow you to explore literary texts and devices, experience the life of an immigrant or refugee, reinforce knowledge of scientific concepts, or test your communication and management skills, among countless other topics. As the examples in this factsheet will show, video games have much more to offer than one single trope, and there is surely a video game out there to interest everyone!

Literary video games

Elsinore

The game [Elsinore](#) is based on the Shakespeare play **Hamlet** and allows you to jump straight into the Bard's literary universe by playing the game as the play's main character, Ophelia. This way, not only do you get a more in-depth understanding of the literary world Shakespeare was trying to create in his play, but you also develop greater understanding and empathy for Ophelia's experiences and emotions, just as you would by reading the play. Other aspects of the game offer similar benefits to

literary study. For instance, the game helps develop your critical thinking skills by having you (as Ophelia) make decisions and then learn from their consequences, since the game puts Ophelia in a time loop that resets every time you die. Yet, you retain your memory, which will help you in your next attempt. The gameplay mimics the dialogue of the original play, since you must move forward by having conversations and choosing carefully what to tell, and to whom. Elsinore also features an in-game journal that keeps track of the characters you meet, and a timeline to track the events you have experienced, which are important elements of reading and interpreting literary texts in real life.



Source: <https://store.steampowered.com/app/512890/Elsinore/>

The Stanley Parable

[The Stanley Parable](#) is another literary video game, this time based on decision-making and narration. The silent protagonist, Stanley, must make choices to advance throughout the game, either in agreement with or in defiance of the game's narrator, who then builds these choices into his running narration. The game allows players to learn about first-person point of view, as well as other literary devices like tone, dynamic characters, and inciting incidents, among others. The game has a "choose your own adventure" feel and offers many possible endings before the player resets back to the beginning of the story, thus teaching players about cause and effect, as well as allowing them to exercise critical reasoning skills.

Video games about immigration and the refugee experience

Papers, Please

[Papers, please](#) teaches players about borders, immigration law and human rights. It instills empathy in players as they make hard decisions about immigration from within the system. In this game, you become an immigration officer whose job is to decide who may enter the fictional country of Arstotzka in 1982, during the Cold War. Just like in real life, your job is to prevent criminals from entering the country by examining their paperwork and questioning them in personal interviews. Moral situations arise, and you will have ethical choices to make, such as deciding whether or not to take bribes or allowing migrants to enter without the proper paperwork. The game also requires you to imagine how you will spend your salary: paying your rent, feeding your family, caring for sick relatives, etc. Thus, the game offers players opportunities to empathize with the migrants' situations, to practice critical thinking and interpretation skills, and to test the limits of following the law vs. moral imperatives when human rights are at stake.



Source: https://store.steampowered.com/app/607660/21_Days/?l=spanish

21 Days

The game [21 Days](#) offers a similar exercise in developing empathy and knowledge

about migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. This time, the player walks in the shoes of Mohammed Shenu, a Syrian refugee who lives in Europe. The player must take care of Mohammed's physical and mental health on a daily basis and earn money to send back to his wife and son every 3 days so they can join him in safety. This game explores both the practical and the emotional aspects of life as a refugee, as well as asking players to develop empathy and think critically about human rights, immigration, and the political conflicts that lead to these situations.

Video games about science

Thrive

The video game [Thrive](#) is one good example of how video games can be used to teach or reinforce scientific knowledge in an exciting and enjoyable way. Here, the player focuses on developing living cells with all their component parts, which must be created so that they can survive and reproduce in certain environments. Students learn not only the component parts of cells and their processes of growth and reproduction, but also how these microorganisms adapt to life in new environments with varied characteristics, such as various gases, temperatures, components, enemies, etc. in greater detail.



Source: <https://revolutionarygamesstudio.com/>

Video games to improve communication skills

Keep Talking and Nobody Explodes

In [Keep Talking and Nobody Explodes](#), players must communicate effectively and work together in order to disarm a bomb that is at risk of exploding soon. The players who serve as “experts” must consult a PDF manual to defuse the bomb and explain in detail—calmly, clearly, and quickly—what the single “defuser” must do prevent the bomb from exploding. This game requires players to cooperate, manage frustrations, overcome difficulties, and practice effective communication skills, either in their native languages or in English (for an extra challenge in English as a Second Language classes).



Source: <https://www.xbox.com/en-AU/games/store/overcooked-overcooked-2/9MZBLPRQLZ8G/0010>

Overcooked

On a similar note, the game [Overcooked](#) requires players to communicate clearly and efficiently not only to improve their communication skills, but also to practice the skill

set found in the AGILE philosophy of project management. In the chaotic context of a restaurant that is constantly receiving orders, players must cooperatively combine ingredients and prepare the dishes in the most efficient way they can think of in order to serve as many people as possible. Here, players learn the need to break down tasks into component steps, delegate tasks, fulfill their own tasks, work around obstacles, and much more—all skills that serve us well in everyday life and in the management of all kinds of personal and professional projects.

Conclusions

These examples show us that video games today explore a wide variety of themes and tropes apart from the classic quest in a mythical world that has long dominated conceptions of gaming. Whether or not games are created to be educational, a majority of these games may have widespread applications in educational settings, since they help players develop important overarching skills, such as: critical thinking, communication, interpretation and interpersonal skills, as well as more specific knowledge within many disciplines.

Literature, human rights and immigration, science, and effective communication and management are only four examples of the many subjects and tropes we can find in contemporary video games; the list of other topics out there is nearly endless since new games are created all the time.

We urge you to keep exploring both the world of video games and the [pedagogical sequences](#) we have created in the Gaming for Skills project to help you find new and exciting possibilities for games to learn from and enjoy!

REFERENCES

Games Referenced:

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Keep Talking and Nobody Explodes: <https://keeptalkinggame.com/>

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Papers, Please: <https://papersplea.se/>

The Stanley Parable: www.stanleyparable.com

Thrive: <https://revolutionarygamesstudio.com/>

The #Gaming4skills project has been funded with support from the European Commission. Its content and material reflect the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

Project code: 2020-1-FR01-KA201-080669

<https://www.gaming4skills.eu/>

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