
Aesop for a digital age

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Biography

The author is an organizational development practitioner, speaker, blogger and podcaster on the topic of life and leadership lessons that can be learned from video games. He is currently writing a book and developing a training curriculum for business professionals who also enjoy video games.

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I have been an avid reader my whole life. When I was in elementary school, my parents bought me a great collection of “classic” novels – books like *Treasure Island*, *Moby Dick* and *Robinson Crusoe*. I loved the sense of adventure, danger and excitement; and I would often stay awake late, even after my parents had gone to bed, so that I could keep reading. I remember one type of story in particular that was very interesting to me: the allegory. Works like *Pilgrim’s Progress*, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *Animal Farm*, *Don Quixote* and *Aesop’s Fables* captured my imagination, as I enjoyed trying to find the parallels between the story and the intended representation in reality. I have also found myself drawn to science fiction movies (often based on books) that offer symbolism and analogy in their storytelling narrative. Some of my favorites include: *The Wizard of Oz*, *Blade Runner*, *Lord of the Rings*, *Fight Club*, and *The Matrix*.¹⁻¹³

What I find most interesting is this idea that individuals can be taught and even spurred into thinking about things in new ways through storytelling and allegory. Books offer a self-paced experience, where the reader can pause and reflect, revisit and re-read, or even skip around within the story. I am one of those individuals who scribble notes in the margins of my books, ruining them for future readers, but capturing my own ideas as I consume the material. Books can actively engage the imagination as the writer describes the world and events contained within, but the reader overlays their own interpretation through their mind’s eye in a way that creates a unique experience for each reader.

Movies can build on the strengths of the story, and provide another layer of experience through compelling visuals, and a heightened experience with a masterful soundtrack. While movies can intensify the experience, the time limitations of the format cause many details from written sources to be lost, and thus remove much of the imagination’s engagement for the viewer. When we watch the 2013 film adaptation of *The Great Gatsby*, we are not afforded the opportunity to imagine the appearance of Nick Carraway and Jay Gatsby. Instead, we see the faces of Tobey Maguire and Leonardo DiCaprio. The soundtrack for this movie is also an element under criticism. The decision to include many modern rap songs as part of the soundtrack, jarringly removes the work from the

context in which it was depicting and forces it in into modern context in a way that reveals the challenge of the passive nature of the medium. Movies remain a popular form of entertainment that provide us with moving experiences, but for the most part remain limited by several of the previously mentioned strengths.¹⁴

Compared to books and movies, video games offer a great opportunity to combine the advantages of both within the same media. Storytelling, written word, visuals, audio, self-directed pacing, and active engagement all exist within the media of video games. There is great potential in this area to develop amazing works of art that can also provide instruction and self-paced learning, while prompting and engaging creativity and imagination. Video games have historically been dismissed as a child's game - immature, addictive - or even the inspiration behind horrific violent acts. To easily dismiss video games in this way is a great mistake and a denial of their true potential.

Valiant efforts have been made to create learning games, or "edutainment", but too often these "games" miss their mark. Early attempts like *Reader Rabbit* and *Mathblaster* were too focused on the learning, neglecting the elements that make video games compelling. The challenge with many educational games is just that. You start playing with the expectation that the game is designed to teach you. Already it sounds less like fun and more like work.^{15, 16}

Yet the opportunity to truly leverage video games as a teaching tool cannot be missed. In many ways, video games are all about teaching. By way of example, consider the following list of names: Roy Campbell, Jill Valentine, Chris Redfield, Leon S. Kennedy, John Marston, Professor Herschel Layton, Gabriel Belmont, Gordon Freeman, Sam Fisher, Genjuro Kibagami, Ken Masters, Chun Li, Shang Tsung, Sonya Blade, Nathan Drake, Elena Fisher, Cloud Strife, Tifa Lockhart, Dr. Wily, Lara Croft, and Sarah Bryant. These individuals are people who I know personally. They also share one thing in common: everyone listed is a video game character.

I think about all the information that I have stored in my brain that is tied to, or learned from, video games, and the possibilities are staggering. To prove my point, just ask any video game player to: (i) list the names of video game worlds or towns they have visited; or (ii) describe classes of characters; or (iii) discuss statistics that are game-related; or, (iv) recite complex combinations of buttons presses for special moves and combinations in fighting games. The learning mechanism's success is difficult to deny. It is the relevance of the information that is the issue. What if these towns were real world locations? What if button combinations represented steps in a scientific or mathematical formula? What if the historical events told in the tales of epic quests were actually a re-telling of our own history? Consider all the learning that has taken place in the over 6 million years of actual in-game play time recorded in the game *World of Warcraft*. Also consider that so far, I have only mentioned the possibility for rote memorization. This is not a breach on topics such as creativity, systems thinking, or innovation.¹⁷

Taking the idea a step further, consider that video games actually engage the user in a multisensory experience that can span significant amounts of time. I recall playing *Final Fantasy VII* to the point that the in the game the timer hit 99 hours and 99 minutes, and then stopped. That is time I chose to spend, learning, working, and solving the problems of a fictional world. What if, during all that time, I had been playing a game that was an allegory, or if you will entertain my own terminology, 'allegamy'? Imagine a video game designed with a secondary interpretation that reveals a lesson that can have real world applicability.¹⁸

An allegamy is not a simulation. When I think about the possibilities of simulations, the sobering concepts within science fiction works like *Enders Game* and *War Games* come to mind. In both works individuals are engaging in what they think is a video game or simulation, only to learn that their

activity in the game has real world impact. While simulations have the ability to build self-efficacy in many tasks, their limitation is that their effectiveness is directly tied to their verisimilitude to reality. Simulations are the antonym of stealth learning.^{19, 20}

I believe that others share my vision for what can be. Thought leaders and authors like Jane McGonigal, Aaron Dignan, Dr. James Rosser, and James Paul Gee have some practical and compelling visions about how video games contain elements that can drive the future of learning, business and problem solving. These visions are grand in scale, and require significant change in how the general public views video games and how games are used. I would like to propose that allegamy is a generally unexplored opportunity along the way. I see allegamy as the low hanging fruit that can enable video games to leverage their inherent strengths as a teaching tool, in a way that is simple to implement.

I am convinced of the potential for the method of game-based learning when I reflect on the impact that both allegory and video games have made on my learning and thought processes. This reflection is what inspired me to write about life and leadership lessons learned from video games, using the aforementioned concept of allegamy. This approach is backward engineering at best, and requires a significant amount of knowledge about existing video games and leadership, productivity, and success principles - not an easily scalable approach.

A more practical and pragmatic approach would be creating a video game that is fun and engaging, but that is designed to include core concepts in a fashion that is allegorical. This is a significant opportunity for stealth learning that could be just as compelling as any storytelling video game. I am noticing a trend of independent video game developers working toward this particular approach with an increasing number projects that focus on 'Empathy Gaming', where the goal is to develop a sense of empathy for others by creating a simulated experience for the player. Games like *That Dragon, Cancer* exhibit a maturing of how we think about what a video game is, and how we can understand and connect with the human experience, and even matters of faith, though this relatively young medium.²¹

Music and literature have the benefit of hundreds of years of refinement, and even the motion picture industry has existed for over a century. By comparison, video games are still very much in their infancy, yet their progress in such a short time is quite impressive, surpassed only by the potential to become an even greater vehicle for human communication and interaction than they are today. I believe that an approach like allegamy can further establish video games as a powerful tool that can be used for tremendous growth and development while being enjoyable in a capacity that is unrivalled by any other format currently in existence.

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