

Exploiting the Boundary between Theatre and Video Games: A Critical Exploration of Death of a Salesman as a Video Game

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Abstract

This paper explores and compares Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman, where its elements are sifted out, akin to those of a video game. The selected play, being expressionistic in nature, is experimental with lighting, time, sound, and a narrative, as video games functioned on these as fundamental characteristics to be delineated as one. Similar to a video game, the play is centered on a tragic modern hero who instigates a series of unfortunate events shaped around his mental state and perspective. The study uses qualitative methods and textual analysis to undermine the boundary between theatre and video games, provided that these are diametric mediums. It attempts to boil down the superficial performative differences prevalent in these forms and probe into the intersecting primary components. The research employs an amalgamation of Aristotle's conceptions of plot, Richard Schechner's notion of time, and Mark J. P. Wolf's development of video game studies as a framework for this comparison. The findings revealed that similarities between the structure of theatre and video games are clearly evident in works like Death of a Salesman while performance serves as the foundation for both mediums, making their commonalities undeniable upon reflection.

Keywords: *Arthur Miller, modern drama, theatre, video game studies*

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Doi: <https://doi.org/10.54692/jelle.2024.0602223>

Introduction

Death of a Salesman, by Arthur Miller, depicts ill-fated Willy Loman, interposed between the adverse circumstances of financial turmoil and delusion. Published and staged in 1949 (Wikipedia, 2019), this dramatic piece is embedded with an economically revamped society in a somewhat rat race where Willy is terribly behind in the competitive market, especially with his old age and inability to confront reality. Shortly after a disastrous chain of events, in the course of a single day, the doomed Willy Loman meets his end by his own hand. What has been previously described here appears to belong solely to the stage. However, the elements of drama do indeed overlap with other platforms and mediums. One of them, unexpectedly, is video games.

In retrospect, comparing video games and theatre is highly unlikely and always overlooked. Given that video games are just as recent as the digital media world, theatre goes back thousands of years, stretching back to the classical Greek era. Nevertheless, in this research, it can also be considered that video games are almost a transmutation of theatre itself. Here, the literary and non-literary align on the basis of the unfolding of the plot and the inner clockwork of time. Not to mention the aesthetical facet, where lights exist more than just visual pleasure (but also as a device), while the sound operates in a similar manner, where its auditory role is interwoven with the characters and the dramatic atmosphere.

Research Question

The study is based on the following research question:

1. How does *Death of a Salesman* illustrate the interconnection between theatre and video games?

Literature Review

The paper aims to explore and discern the coinciding components in *The Death of a Salesman* and mainstream video games. It involves a conglomeration of angles in approaching this research concern and acting as an overall lens for analysis. Furthermore, this research will extend over to discuss analogous features of both of these two mediums, namely modern theatre and video games, laid on the same plane, using the selected text as a sample. The first video game was released in the 1970s as ‘Pong’ along with the first gaming console, the Atari, based upon the real sport of table tennis (Wikipedia, 2024). It relied upon two-dimensional graphics as well as little to no minimal visual experimentation in terms of colour. It’s simple and monochromatic interface corresponds to an equally straightforward aim of the game: play in a ping-pong manner against artificial intelligence, and whoever achieves the highest score wins.

Since this first milestone in the digital realm, video games have evolved and advanced for almost half a century. No longer are there only games that are oriented towards a single goal, nor are they flooded with jagged beeps; however, the earliest games were indubitably seminal works. As of now, they have progressed to becoming far more complex, with intricate and convoluted plot lines, three-dimensional characters, and an elaborate full-length soundtrack

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orchestrated to suit every pivotal event and level in the game. It has drawn itself closer to what we see in films, consequently almost blurring the line.

Currently, video games are divided into a multitude of elements, ranging from structure, time, ludology, world-building, aesthetics, and so on. Lighting is imperative to the grand structure of a video game. As mentioned before, it holds more than just a graphic position in this medium. It is a patchwork of colour, light, and shadows. In *The Routledge Companion to Video Game Studies*, it is stated in the chapter “Colour” that “the unique synthesis of light and colour that is implicit in computer graphics, as well as the linkage between game colour and gameplay emotion” (Wolf, 2003, p. 67). What is stated here is that the role of colour goes far deeper and is responsible for instilling certain emotions, which are dependent on a combination of colours. In other cases, colour palettes are used to create moods, act as an underlying theme to the gameplay, or function as foreshadowing instruments. Games such as *Limbo* and *Need for Speed Rivals* deploy polarising categories of palettes and lighting as shown in Figure 1 and Figure 2.

Figure 1

Screenshot of the bleak and disconcerting atmosphere in Limbo



The game such as *Limbo* deploy polarising categories of palettes as shown in Figure 1. The lighting creates its own respective atmosphere. The hopelessness and eerie mood are encapsulated through the experimentation with grayscale and multiple shades of black and white. The characters, as silhouettes with minimal detail, mirror the terror and ambiguity.

Figure 2

Screenshot of the criminal right before the cops arrive in Need for Speed Rivals



The game such as *Need for Speed Rivals* deploys lighting as shown in Figure 2. *Need for Speed Rivals* demonstrates the usage of blues, neon red, and blacks to create an unsettling atmosphere, foreshadowing the cops who will eventually chase after the player's car. On the other hand, lighting is employed as an eye. It guides the player to focus on the crucial elements in their peripheral vision, such as collectable clues and sudden attacks from villains. This is manifested in *Need for Speed Rivals* in night mode when the lights of the car are used to navigate through the darkness.

Going back to the roots of lighting, it stems from the theory of art itself. In “Practical Investigations with a Visual Study of Light and Dark Based on Tenebrism and Chiaroscuro Theory”, it is a concept related to the action of light and darkness and refers to the progressive tones of a work of art to represent volume and stimulate the mood (Rafee, 2012, p. 1). When it comes to the concept of time in video games, it must be noted that time conforms to the event instead of the other way around. For Schechner (2003), time is typically trifurcated into "event-time," "set-time," and “symbolic time” (Schechner, p. 8), as stated in ‘Performance Theory’. He explains that event time, when the activity itself has a set sequence and all the steps of that sequence must be completed no matter how long (or short) the elapsed clock time. Examples: baseball... set time, where an arbitrary time pattern is imposed on events—they begin and end at certain moments whether or not they have

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been “completed.” There is an agonistic contest between the activity and the clock. Examples: football; symbolic time, when the span of the activity represents another (longer or shorter) span of clock time; theatre; rituals that re-actualize events or abolish time (Schechner, p. 8). These major features run parallel to those that are prevalent in theatre.

According to Fernández-Vara in “Play's the Thing: A Framework to Study Videogames as Performance”, the connection between the dramatics and video games is substantiated, bringing forth the link between performers and the audience as the common denominator (Fernández-Vara, p. 1). Diel, in his thesis, *Theatre/Games: The Poetics, Ludology, and Narrative in Video Game and Dramatic Structure*, provides an angle to a similar aspect where he brings the concept of immersion. He defines it as ‘the ability of a story to engage its audience, to make them feel as if they are a part of the fictional world’ (Fernández-Vara, 5) in the context of video games. While theatre primarily involves ‘engaging the audience as a spectator by drawing them in as observers to the event’ (Fernández-Vara, p. 5), although the immersive experience for the audience and the player is concrete in their nuanced ways, they are unified in terms of their ‘illusory’ (Fernández-Vara, p. 5) trait, where ‘the player advances the story but does not fundamentally create it’ (Fernández-Vara, p. 5), and in theatre, the story is already pre-set and the actors are manoeuvring themselves through the written dialogues and stage directions.

Delving into more similarities, the behaviour of time is also touched upon in Fernández-Vara’s research. On the other hand, they both share ludology, as they are heavily dependent on games and their outcomes. Other choices do not exist except the available ones, which are fixed and predetermined. It discusses the narrative structure, bearing resemblance to what a story has with a ‘dramatic arc’ (Fernández-Vara, p. 1), also known as the climax in both plays and video games. The narrative structure in mainstream video games is most similar to Aristotle’s ideal structure of the plot.

In this study, the selected text abides by the Aristotelian model as well, knitting modern drama and video games closer together. Referring to his treatise, *Poetics*, it encompasses the tragic hero diseased with hubris, only to be led to their own doom. Along with this comes the progression of events and the unity of time and place. Its very structure follows a mountain,

where the peak is referred to as the climax and is exhibited in *The Death of a Salesman*. This paper is an attempt to map out the traces that contain resemblances in Arthur Miller's dramatic piece using video games as a framework. In addition, this research is in the hope of paving new paths for studying modern drama, as well as theatre, from other artistic movements for future **video game adaptation**.

Research Methodology

The study is based on a constructivist paradigm, which views reality as a socially constructed phenomenon and emphasizes understanding individuals' subjective experiences and perspectives within their cultural contexts. This paradigm guides the data collection methods, which aim to gather rich and detailed information about the variables of the research. The study employed qualitative methodology with content analysis research design in order to challenge the perceived boundary between theatre and video games, recognizing these as fundamentally different mediums. The goal is to distil the superficial performative differences and examine the intersecting core components. The research integrated Aristotle's concepts of plot in *Poetics*, Richard Schechner's notion of time in *Performance Theory* (2003), and Mark J. P. Wolf's contributions to the development of video game studies as a discipline. The collected data is then analyzed to identify and explore common themes and patterns.

Data Analysis

In the selected play, the major strand pertinent to shed light on is the structure of the plot in comparison to a video game. This involves the sequence of events and the use of the tragic hero. Aristotle's *Poetics* defines the plot as 'the arrangement of the incidents' (Aristotle, p. 6). Indeed, *Death of a Salesman* functions through a progression of catastrophes in a domino-like manner. Like *Oedipus Rex*, the onset was struck with a cataclysm, in dire need of a solution. Therefore, the journey from ignorance to painful enlightenment takes its course. As the chain of events unfolds, it finally reaches its peak, the climax, the change in fortune (for the worst), comes face-to-face with reality, and suffers the consequences as a denouement (Aristotle, p. 6). Typically, in video games, one is required to complete a mission, while drama involves the protagonist in the entanglement of a problem. Nevertheless, these aims are interchangeable, as shown in *Oedipus Rex*.

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Dissecting the *Death of a Salesman* with *Poetics*, it does classify as a Greek tragedy. Willy Loman is the modern tragic hero in this play; however, not in a conventional manner, since he does not have an iota of heroism inside him but undergoes the same journey as a traditional tragic hero. Although Willy does not display any traces of hubris, this tragic flaw does exist in video games; however, not in a character but in the player, who is in charge of the control button. The misunderstanding of passing a certain level in their first go clouds their judgement, making them prone to making human errors in an assigned task. Failing a level is a confrontation with reality, and their flaw went against them inevitably. Willy's tragic flaw is his delusion. He is a doomed case, as he has pushed his own sons away from seeing the truth and brushing his days of infidelity under the carpet. His ever-increasing hallucinations make him lose touch with surroundings completely. Willy first loses his job, and as the ultimate climax, he is confronted with reality when Biff tells him that they will never be great men, shattering whatever fantasy he had drawn up for himself as a coping mechanism. Shortly after, he commits suicide.

Aristotle emphasizes both the unity of place and time. In this play, this unsettling sequence of events occurs within a single day, with a mix of his memories and hallucinations, much like *Oedipus Rex*, save for the expressionism in *Death of a Salesman*, since that refers to how the narrative and the events around him shaped Willy's frame of mind. This means that the encounters with the brother occurred because the play is being portrayed from Willy's point of view. As mentioned before, time lies within the common region between video games and modern theatre.

Discussion

With reference to Schechner (2003), *Death of a Salesman* adheres to the model of symbolic time, which is seen in video games. This is where time acts according to events. When the play is performed or read out in front of an audience, instead of a day's worth of events taking place in roughly twenty-four hours, the entire performance and reading take only three hours. Similarly, in games like *Fifa* and *Grand Theft Auto*, clock-time is disobeyed, and what might be a day inside these games could be only an hour in real-time used by its player.

In terms of sound, Tavinor (2009) posits that the aesthetic aspect of video games comprises “the naturalism and rich detail of its environments, the evocative nature of its music” (Tavinor, p. 59). One example is the usage of soundtracks in *Bioshock 2*. The unlikely brother-sister duo of a terrifying robot and a little girl share a moving and heart-wrenching journey throughout the game. Listening to *Bioshock 2 Theme: Pairbond*, it begins with the layering of violins playing a sorrowful symphony, delineating the painful moments in their sibling bond (Shenton 00:00–00:30), in the storyline of this game.

On the other hand, Miller has also assigned music that acts as a soundtrack to the beginning of each act. This is similar to the overwhelming music that plays during the narrative or right before a level starts in the pause menu. It is stated that ‘[it is capable of depicting events and spaces beyond the confines of the screen to a greater extent than an image]’ (Wolf, 2023, p. 117). Sounds in games are split into diegetic and non-diegetic sounds. Grimshaw later postulates that ‘diegetic is used to describe those sounds arising out of the internal logic of the game world, whereas non-diegetic refers to all other sounds’ (Wolfe, p. 117). In a nutshell, diegetic sounds are those whose sound is visible on stage, for instance, characters and objects in the form of sound effects and dialogues.

Non-diegetic sounds are an external manifestation, namely, soundtracks or theme songs. *Death of a Salesman* and video games are both shown to have a heavy usage of non-diegetic sounds. An example of non-diegetic sounds in the play is clearly heard at the beginning of the first act: ‘A melody is heard, played upon a flute. It is small and fine, telling of grass and trees and the horizon...’ (Miller, 2019, p. 4). A user on YouTube reimaged the flute tune based on this aforementioned description in ‘Willy’s Theme, Pt. 1 (Intro) (From the *Death of a Salesman*). It is also laced with yearning intermingled with a rustic, almost primal nature. (Topic 00:00–00:35). It is raw, just like the unhealed wounds in Willy’s mind. It goes back to what Wolf discusses in relation to how music has the ability to evoke music and create an intricate environment. Similarly, in the second act, it begins with “Suddenly mucous music is heard, and a red glow rises behind the screen at right” (Miller, p. 71). This sets a rather disconcerting and ominous atmosphere during this scene in the play, foreshadowing the commotion while eating out with his sons.

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The way lighting is employed is no less profound than the other devices. As lighting is typically used to emphasise, Miller tackled the issue of multiple people occupying the same stage space with a spotlight. In video games such as ‘Resident Evil 3: Remake’, lighting was solely used to navigate through the dark and spot monstrous creatures to annihilate. Miller also used lighting effects to cast impressions over the stage. In the line, ‘...a red glow rises behind the screen at right’ (Miller, 2019, p. 71), the angry and roaring shade of orange is intrusive as a colour, emblematic of sheer aggression and foreshadowing of the havoc. The first act deploys a slightly different set of colours while embodying the same intrusion, symbolic of Willy’s mental state: ‘Only the blue light of the sky falls upon the house and forestage; the surrounding area shows an angry glow of orange. As more light appears, we see a solid vault of apartment houses around the small, fragile-seeming home’ (Miller, 2019). Without world-building, both theatre and video games feel rather hollow since there is not a plane to support all the other elements.

This is not to say that it is impossible to exist without worlds and settings; however, they partake in the narrative structure of a dramatic piece or a video game. Contrastingly, novels, poems, and other forms of fiction commence with either a dialogue, the existence of a character, or a ‘tunnel-visioned’ view of a certain scene. Consequently, the world is slowly pieced together throughout its progression. In video games, the setting and surroundings are built first, normally through sound, which immediately approaches the visual. *Limbo*, *Rayman Legends*, and *Little Big Planet* are unable to hoist themselves as video games without the aid of a dedicated world constructed for them.

According to Wolf and Perron (2023), the worlds are defined by the objects and events that compose them. This is to say that a mere sheet of grass may affect the underlying meaning of a story. The need for speed rivals is defined through pit stops and abandoned houses for repair and money storage while the criminal is escaping from the police. In the context of *Death of a Salesman*, Willy’s mediocre house conveys his failing as a travelling salesman. It is further explained that despite the several years devoted to the same house, the mortgage was not paid off until after his death. From this, it can be determined that physical stagecraft was always a priority for Miller. He created the world's first through objects, sound, and music, until he moved onto the characters and their dialogues.

Conclusion

The commonalities existent in the overall structure of theatre and video games are prevalent in examples such as *Death of a Salesman*. With performance acting as the very foundation of these two spheres, the similarities are, in actuality, unassailable and palpable. The characteristics of this selected play run parallel, beginning with the protagonists, who are also fated to fail at the end of their storylines. It is prevalent that this play and video games in general follow the Aristotelian model of the plot. The use of light both partakes in the narration of the upcoming events. This also includes music, acting as tools of foreshadowing, and the creation of moods and atmospheres. Furthermore, the staging directions act as a major thread in world-building, which is reflective of the priority Miller (2019) gives since the stage descriptions begin each act before moving on to the appearance of the characters and their dialogues. Both platforms have time to function according to the event, with the former holding the reins and the latter in control. In other words, the movement of the events indicates how much time has passed. This unlikely comparison does indeed show that they can be painted on the same canvas.

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