

Playing to Survive, Surviving to Play: The Role of Games in Dystopian Young Adult Literature

Don Latham, School of Information, Florida State University
Jonathan M. Hollister, School of Information, Florida State University

Abstract: Dystopian young adult literature has become wildly popular over the past decade, and, interestingly, many of these novels employ games and gaming elements as major plot devices. Analysis of these books reveals a close connection between play and power. Using Trites' analysis of power relations in young adult literature and Rigby and Ryan's characteristics of engaging games as frameworks, we show that in four recent dystopian novels both protagonists and readers (albeit vicariously) build competency, exert autonomy, and relate to others as they learn to beat the game and negotiate the power dynamics of the dystopian systems they are in, whether real or virtual.

Introduction

Dystopian fiction for young adults has become so popular in recent years that it has garnered the attention of such mainstream publications as *The New Yorker* and *Wired Magazine*. Why the popularity? Interestingly, many dystopian novels for young adults involve games, either virtual or real, as major plot devices. In fact, much YA dystopian fiction mirrors the world of video games, a world where players must hone their skills, fight the system, fail, and try again in order to succeed. Conor Kostick's *Epic* (2007) and Ernest Cline's *Ready Player One* (2011), for example, employ virtual games, Veronica Roth's *Divergent* (2012) features guild-like factions and intense simulations, and James Dashner's *The Maze Runner* (2009) depicts a fiendishly designed physical game. How can we account for this connection between games and dystopian novels? The answer lies in the pleasures and functions of play—the thrill of competition and the joys of mastering the complexities of the game. The games in all of these books have a dual role, serving as a means for controlling and oppressing, but also empowering, their YA protagonists. In these books, playing the game is closely associated with negotiating power relations, and mastering the game is both a means of survival and a source of pleasure, one that young adults can experience vicariously through reading the books. Whether through slaying monsters, solving puzzles, facing one's fears, or finding one's way, young adults who read these books are thoroughly immersed in the games and, as a result, can gain a greater understanding of how games work, the skills they foster, and the connection between games and learning.

Playing Against the System

Trites argues that “teenagers are repressed as well as liberated by their own power and by the power of the social forces that surround them” (2000, p. 7). These books, then, serve to socialize young adults into the power relations within which they will have to function in adult society—power relations that are manifested in institutional discourses, various authority figures, sex, and death. Negotiating one's place in adult society is partly a matter of understanding the rules, just as becoming a successful gamer is partly a matter of understanding the rules of the game. Juul (2005) notes the importance of rules even within the fabricated worlds of video games. Regardless of the fictional nature of the game itself, the rules governing the game are quite real, and one must master them in order to be successful within the game. According to Juul (2005), a game is a “rule-based system with a variable and quantifiable outcome, where different outcomes are assigned different values, the player exerts effort in order to influence the outcome, the player feels emotionally attached to the outcome, and the consequences of the activity are negotiable” (p. 36). In video games, play entails the development of skills to overcome the challenges created by the rules of the system (Juul, 2005). Learning to operate within these rules and negotiate desirable outcomes, in fact, is a major source of pleasure for many gamers, according to Rigby and Ryan (2011). Specifically, players experience satisfaction if three criteria are met: they have the opportunity to improve their competence, they are allowed some autonomy within the game, and they are able to relate to—that is, interact with—other players. Additionally, Gee (2009) argues that playing games helps players learn the skills necessary to survive in the 21st century: “embodied empathy for complex systems; “grit” (passion + persistence); playfulness that leads to innovation; design thinking; collaborations in which groups are smarter than the smartest person in the group; and real understanding that leads to problem solving and not just test passing” (p. 4). Playing the game or fighting the system ultimately facilitates a mastery of skills needed to overcome challenges and push back against the system. The books under discussion here are so compelling for young adult readers precisely because they allow their readers to experience these satisfaction criteria vicariously as they watch the protagonists learn and master the rules of the game while also negotiating their place within the kinds of power relations Trites discusses.

Slaying the Dragon

Epic (Kostick, 2007) describes New Earth, a planet where everyone plays Epic, a virtual game used by the government to determine and control both the real and virtual qualities of life. The novel's protagonist and focal player, Erik Haraldson, creates as his in-game character a rare, charismatic female swashbuckler named Cindella, and sets off on a treacherous quest to slay a dragon in the virtual world and rescue his father from government-sanctioned exile in the real world. The only hope the citizens of New Earth have to lead somewhat successful lives in the real world is to excel in the virtual world of Epic. As a result, most citizens create safe and dull characters and avoid risky challenges. While death in many games means simply restarting from a nearby checkpoint, dying in Epic results in the loss of one's character as well as access to resources and services both in- and outside of the game. Erik, though, deliberately kills his characters as a means of gaining knowledge and developing his competence within the game. For example, by sacrificing several characters in training simulations, he is able to formulate a theory on how to defeat the Red Dragon, which eventually proves to be successful, a rare feat within the world of Epic.

Erik's tempting of his virtual fate and bucking of trends not only allow him to exercise his competence, but also his agency and autonomy. As mentioned before, most citizens of New Earth opt for safe and dull characters; in Epic points associated with beauty and aesthetics are not considered helpful for success. Erik challenges this norm by not only creating the most beautiful character possible, but also choosing a relatively unheard of player class, the swashbuckler. These choices allow Erik to express himself and explore Epic in new ways. The beauty of his character and the charisma of the swashbuckler class allow Erik to tactfully outwit his opponents and ultimately change the fate of New Earth by shifting power away from the government.

Erik's journey, however, is not a solo one. He is unable to defeat the dragon without his friends: an elven fighter, a healer, a warrior, and a witch who also happens to be Erik's love interest. Moreover, Erik's own quest bears resemblance to the trials that his father endured during his own glorious and mysterious past adventures. Erik is able to relate to and benefit from his friends and family when it matters most, defeating the dragon, challenging the government, and, ultimately, changing the fate of Epic itself. In the company of allies, Erik is able to act out his own unique role in the game and use his skills to shift the power from a few corrupt government elites to the players and citizens of New Earth.

Solving the Puzzle

Ready Player One (Cline, 2011) also takes place primarily within a virtual world. The novel tells the story of Wade Watts, who escapes the bleak reality of a world decimated by a Global Energy Crisis by playing games in the sprawling online world of the OASIS. The crux of the novel involves Wade trying to solve a series of virtual puzzles created by the recently deceased OASIS founder, in order to find a special Easter Egg and thus gain power and fortune. Wade's real-world reality is bleak indeed, but his life in the OASIS, he says, is simple: "*It's just you against the machine. Move with your left hand, shoot with your right, and try to stay alive as long as possible*" (Cline, 2011, p.14; italics in original). Through his avatar Parzival, Wade is able to gain competence in the virtual world by playing a variety of games over and over and also indoctrinating himself in the popular culture trivia that the OASIS founder loved and incorporated into the puzzles he designed. In his quest, Wade competes with many other players, but his most formidable opponent by far is a mega-corporation called Innovative Online Industries, or IOI for short. For all practical purposes, IOI is the only government in this society, at least the only one with any real power. As Trites observes, government politics is one of the institutional power structures that dominate and repress young adults, although young adults can also exert influence on those power structures. Recognizing his competence, IOI tries to get Wade to join them in their quest to take over the OASIS. When he refuses, they try to kill him by blowing up his aunt's trailer where they think he is living. It is through his increasing competence, however, that Wade is able to survive and ultimately defeat IOI's efforts.

In addition to competence, Wade also experiences autonomy, for within the rules of the games, he has a variety of choices. What he gains from having agency within the OASIS transfers to his experiences out of the games as well. For example, in one particularly inspired move, he creates an alternate identity for himself, gets himself indentured to IOI outside of the game, and then reprograms their computer systems so that he can escape his servitude and more easily defeat IOI within the game.

Finally, Wade experiences relatedness within the OASIS—and ultimately in the real world as well—by befriending and teaming up with other players, including Artemis, on whom he develops a serious crush, and Aech, his best friend. These relationships, aside from helping Wade defeat IOI, also highlight the power structures concerning identity politics and sex. The power of identity politics is evident in Aech's in-game and out-of-game identities. Wade has developed a deep friendship with Aech within the game, and is somewhat surprised, then, when he

meets Aech in real life and discovers that “he” is actually a she. While her avatar is a white male, she is in reality an African American female. Wade learns that Aech’s mother encouraged her to mask her race and gender precisely in order to have more power within the world of the OASIS. The power of sex is evident in Wade’s crush on Artemis. When they break up for awhile, Wade purchases a virtual sex doll, but later discards it “out of a combination of shame and self-preservation” (Cline, 2011, p. 193). As Trites notes, “Sex leads to disaster for many adolescent characters” (2000, p. 93). But knowledge of sexuality can lead to a sense of empowerment (Trites, 2000, p. 96). Wade avoids disaster, and, furthermore, he gains a sense of empowerment by learning more about sex as well as himself. Shortly after this experience, he dedicates himself to working out, getting in shape, and preparing for the battle that is to come. The most important benefit of the relationships Wade develops within the OASIS is that they provide comrades with whom he can team up to defeat IOI, locate the Easter Egg, and gain fortune and power for himself and his friends.

Facing One’s Fears

While *Divergent* (Roth, 2012) does not involve video games per se, it does involve a series of intense simulations that serve as training exercises for the main character. The novel is set in a post-apocalyptic Chicago, in which society has been divided into five factions based on people’s dominant personality traits—Abnegation, Amity, Candor, Dauntless, and Erudite. The protagonist, 16-year-old Beatrice (or Tris) Prior, is initiated into the Dauntless faction, a process that involves a grueling series of training sessions. The novel depicts governmental power relations in that it is the government that has determined that society should be divided into factions and that, when young people turn 16, they must choose the faction to which they want to belong. Identity politics are evident not just in the connection between one’s chosen faction and one’s identity, but also in the fact that people who do not fit neatly into one faction or another are considered “divergent,” a trait that can be punishable by death. Power relations surrounding parental authority are also evident, especially for Tris who, in choosing Dauntless, is going against her parents’ faction of Abnegation. And the power relations surrounding sex are evident in Tris’s relationship with her instructor, a handsome boy who at times seems to be an ally, at times a stern mentor, and at times a competitor.

The novel also depicts the three aspects of player satisfaction, as described by Rigby and Ryan. The simulations that Tris and the other initiates undergo are designed to allow them to develop competence in various skills that will help them to overcome their fears. A final fear landscape simulation, a final exam if you will, requires them to draw on all of the skills they have developed in order to defeat their basic fears. The society itself allows some degree of autonomy in permitting young people to choose which faction they will apply to. Of course, this is not complete autonomy, as there are only five factions, and there is a high price to pay for failing to pass the initiate training: a person who fails becomes factionless, which essentially means homeless. Relatedness is provided in the relationships formed among the various initiates. Some of the people in Tris’s cohort become fierce competitors with her, while others become her friends and allies. No doubt, Tris’s success in the training is due in part to what is at stake, but it seems equally likely that her adeptness at training stems from the fact that she experiences a degree of satisfaction in developing competence, making choices, and forming relationships with other members of her cohort. This satisfaction not only helps Tris in negotiating the power relations in which she finds herself, but also provides satisfaction, and perhaps a measure of recognition, for young adult readers who are also negotiating the power relations in their own lives.

Finding the Way

The Maze Runner (Dashner, 2009) does not involve video games or simulations, but it does illustrate the same principles of game design and player satisfaction traits as seen in the other books. In the novel, a group of teen-aged boys are trapped in a gigantic, shifting labyrinth patrolled by vicious techno-beasts called Grievers as part of a torturous grand experiment conceived by a group called WICKED. The story follows Thomas after he is brusquely deposited into the Glade at the center of the Maze, where he struggles to regain his memory and solve the pattern of the Maze, while avoiding the excruciating death promised by the Grievers.

Trites notes that one of the hallmarks of young adult literature is that death “is a threat, an experience adolescents understand as a finality” (2000, p. 118). The threat of death and the fear created by it coerce Thomas and the others into the Maze. Trites (2000) goes on to argue that the acceptance of losing others and the awareness of mortality “serve in the power/knowledge dynamic to render the adolescent both powerless in her fear of death and empowered by acknowledging its power” (p. 119). Knowing full well that he might die, Thomas voluntarily stings himself on a dead Griever, something that, if he survives, can unlock his memories. This action illustrates Thomas’ autonomy in that he clearly does have the agency to make this difficult choice.

Thomas experiences relatedness as he interacts with some of his fellow Gladers. In order to survive, the Gladers assign people to different roles. Thomas is immediately drawn to the Runners, an elite group dedicated to exploring and mapping the Maze, but he is not allowed to join them until the Keeper of the Runners sees potential in him after he saves two other boys from a near disastrous incident in the Maze. By running each day through the Maze in order to map it, Thomas and some of the other boys develop the competence needed to survive and ultimately outwit the game makers. With help from the other Gladers, Thomas is able to break the code of the Maze and win the game, but not without the loss of several of his friends, suggesting that progress is not achieved without sacrifice and that the rules of life often exact a steep price.

Conclusion

The elements of play—specifically, games and gaming—employed in these young adult dystopian novels help account for their popularity because they offer another way for young adults to directly access compelling stories and connect with characters whose needs resonate with their own, all while experiencing the challenges and pleasures of learning through play. Regardless of whether the games in these novels manifest as virtual or “real” in the eyes of the protagonists, they eventually succeed by developing and applying their competencies, exerting their agency and autonomy, and relating to others in meaningful ways. The young adult reader, by extension, vicariously satisfies these needs by identifying with these protagonists and gaining a deeper understanding of the connections among games, skills, and learning—an understanding that can extend beyond the virtual world. As Juul (2005) argues, games are not only a combination of rules and fiction, but also the experience of the player interacting with and operating in both the game and the real world. While games and young adult dystopian novels may be fictional, the rules and themes depicted therein are all relatable to the real world, in which young adults are characters in their own very real, and sometimes dystopian, stories.

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