

# Beyond the Reader, Towards the Player: Reconceptualizing the Reader-Response Theory through Video-Games

Rachid Benharrouse  
Mohammed V University in Rabat, Morocco  
[r.benharrouse@gmail.com](mailto:r.benharrouse@gmail.com)

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**Abstract:** The reader-response theory valorized the reader; without the latter, the text did not exist and had no meaning. The reader is deemed as an interpreter of an already rigid text. This theoretical limitation is evidenced in the understanding of the player in video-games. The scholarship equates the player to the reader in their passivity. The players, through playing, are not the object of the process of signification. They constitute their narratives across video-game categories. Role-playing reinforces the player's identification within the game world beyond mere interpretation. The player's lived experience is no longer separated from role-playing. Lived experience is intertwined with the gaming experience, which establishes double-faceted contextualization; the player's lived experience shapes their gaming choices and vice versa. Hence, the players are not confined to being passive interpreters of an already assigned narrative; instead, they constitute their narratives, live within the game, and experience their video-games.

**Keywords:** *Video-Games, Player, Reader, Literary Theory, Cultural Studies*

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## INTRODUCTION

The centralization of the reader's importance emerged through reader-response theory. The shift from the author and the text has materialized a new critical itinerary. From the beginning, reader-response theorists attempted to explain the process of signification in literature. The author, the text, or, rarely, the reader was centered; this has effectuated a linear and predictable understanding of meaning-making. Louise Rosenblatt, in contrast, examined the "to-and-fro, spiraling,

nonlinear, continuously reciprocal influence of reader and text in the making of meaning” (Rosenblatt, 1995). The text is mere ink on paper; the reader, through reading, ‘finds’ and assigns meaning. Reading becomes an experience between the reader and the text within circulating contexts and discourses. “We still can distinguish the elements, but we have to think of them, not as separate entities, but as aspects or phases of a dynamic process” (Rosenblatt, 2005). The text is deemed unimportant until the reader assigns and reevaluates its meaning. Reading does not force meaning unto the text but allows meaning to come from it as a dynamic, contextualized process.

Rosenblatt also focused on the “reader’s stance” as a determinant that affects this dynamic process of meaning-making. The reader’s focus on aesthetics, facts, literariness, or wording changes the text’s meaning, yet this does not stop even when one reads the literary work. “[E]very time a reader examines a work ..., it is ... created anew” (Rosenblatt, 1995). Meaning is constituted through the dynamic process of reading. For her, there is no “single ‘correct’ meaning inherent ‘in’ the text” (Rosenblatt, 2005); rather, specific readings are more correct than others because the reader has better mastery of language, history, theme, etc. The authorial intent can guide the readers through their work, but no text is misinterpreted. She proclaims that commonalities between author and reader allow communication, yet meaning would not emerge without their difference. Each dynamic process of reading is irreproducible and irreversible.

Still, the interest in reader-response theory climaxed in the 1970s. Going against the New Critical principle of Affective Fallacy, the work should not be studied through its effect and praxis. Reader theorists furthered the reader as the critical constituent of any literary work. Accordingly, “we can say that the poem has no real existence until it is read; its meaning can only be discussed by its readers” (Seldon et al., 2005). Thus, the readers assign meaning as it befits their understanding and interpretation. The intentional neglecting of the reader and the reading process was viewed, until recently, as too apparent to state. Then, the reader has a mandatory role in making a literary work. Nevertheless, the reader remains ambiguous and challenging to define:

“The reader” is variously labeled, however, as the ideal reader, the informed reader, the implied reader, the narratee, the authorial reader, the hypothetical reader, the optimal reader, the intended reader, the competent reader, the super reader, the composite reader, the average reader, the encoded reader, the actual reader, the flesh-and-blood reader, and so on. (Fowler, 2001)

The plethora of notions have to be distinguished. The narratee is the receptor of the narrator’s story. The latter is a character within the narration. The text and the author control the ‘implied’ readers. However, these two have become classical because of their limitedness to the text. Their consideration of the reader as passive has issued debate in reception theory; Jonathan Culler’s *Structuralist Poetics*, for instance, developed the notion of “literary competence” to highlight the readers’ knowledge and activeness. Similar scholarship has effectuated the shift from the aforementioned readers. The intended reader is presumed through the context of

the text (Culler, 2002). The postulated reader perceives the text's meaning through the characteristics of the critic. The latter reader relies on neither text nor context. Stanley Fish theorizes that the "informed reader," a real reader versed in linguistics, semantics, and literary competence, can articulate a text's meaning outside what is personal (Fish, 1980). These readers' distinctions are not stark, resulting in their interchangeable use.

The debate amongst reader-response theorists does encapsulate not only the reader's definition but also the analysis perspective. Stanley Fish claims that meaning is contextual while denying the possibility of literal meaning. However, not all readers are in the same context; then, the critic debates the most appropriate context for the dynamic reading process. Culler claims the reading process is already contextualized in the shared cultural discourses of the academic entourage. Fish furthers the inexistence of a general literary competence while arguing for the different "interpretive communities" which set the context and the perspective through which the reader reads the text. Reading strategies are always part of an interpretive community; "These strategies exist before the act of reading and therefore determine the shape of what is read rather than, as is usually assumed, the other way around" (Fish, 1980). Norman Holland, especially in *Meeting Movies*, focuses on the psychological context of the hypothetical reader and the actual student through Freudian psychoanalysis (2006). Also, the historical context has been focalized; the reader reads the literature through a "horizon of expectations," which differs historically and shapes the views on literature. The reader's historical context foregrounds particular meanings of immediate importance in that period. In the context of gender, feminists argue the difference between female and male readers; the difference is not only in understanding the text but in producing meaning itself. Women from a specific socioeconomic background resist the readings of the canonical male academic critics. Then, the contexts within which the readers read the text affect the meaning of the text and even the perspective through which the critics analyze it.

Reader-Response criticism has various stands and approaches to the reader. The disagreement and criticism toward New Criticism might be the only commonality between the different perspectives. The notion of "right" or "wrong" reading has been discarded; it paved the way for other criticisms to further their critical theories, especially feminism. The emerging disinterest in the text as a provider of meaning has furthered the interest in the reader as the interpreter of meaning. Hence, none can definitively interpret a literary work; instead, interpretation became contextualized historically, politically, discursively, etc. Reader-response theory has helped deconstruct the canonical literary works from the 1970s and paved the way for new readings and literary works. Hence, the paper seeks to focalize and (*re*)conceptualize the notion of the player.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

This paper uses the Secondary Research Method to ground the paper within the scholarship and analyze the existing literature. Secondary Research, or Desk Research, involves collecting data from various sources that are already published. Although the Secondary Research Method uses secondary sources in general, this

paper focuses primarily on the theories, concepts, and literature. The exclusion of government papers, media, surveys, websites, reports, and statistics grounds the literature as unnecessary to this research because it is a theoretical paper. The latter are not fixated on a specific text but engage in the theoretical debate in reader-response theory. I use this method to analyze the already-done research on the player in video games, which presents the need for reconsidering the notion of player/reader in the game context. Also, this paper uses Content Analysis, which is a research method used to identify patterns, understand the implications of an individual or a group, discover propaganda and bias in media, reveal communication in different contexts, and analyze the consequences of media, especially audience responses and information's flow. The researcher will use this method to scrutinize the notion of the player as a reader and the game as text.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The print's limitation materializes in the reader's inability to go beyond "reading." To read a text and interpret its meaning is the extent of the reader; this, nonetheless, positions the reader in a passive position. The reader, accordingly, is subject to be an interpreter of a fixed text whose structure changes not. Since the Reader-Response theory has been dominant in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the possibilities of narration and reading might have been unforeseen. Yet, the digital medium allows the reader to be more than a reader; the latter becomes an active constituent of the text. Video games are no longer a means of entertainment but are "stages that facilitate cultural, social, or political practices; they are also media where cultural values themselves can be represented for critique, satire, education, or commentary ... In other words, video games make claims about the world, which players can understand, evaluate, and deliberate" (Bogost, 2008). Players go beyond the traditional notion of reading to engage the game. The players' choices within the game are not interpretations but the constitution of the narrative itself.

Since this paper considers the player as furthering the reader's notion, then, by necessity, the game should be considered as the text. Video games have had multiple theories since the 1990s as the gaming industry rose to prominence. At first, they were perceived as a novel way of designing literacy and multimedia (New London Group, 1996). The latter focused mainly on the multimodal design of games while their textuality was not focalized. The question of literariness in games began to be considered critically with the turn of the century; scholars posed the critical question of "Are games stories?" (Salen & Zimmerman, 2003). Games became popular fiction, especially since they are stories (Atkins, 2003). Still, critiques of the theorization of games as fiction mainly centered on the preconception that games "rely more on the attainment of a particular goal and a win/lose distinction rather than on character and thematic development" (Wolf, 2002). Another perspective considers interactivity in games as a conflict between the game's design and the player's immersion (Ryan, 2001). The consideration of the concept of reality has emerged as a central notion because of games' *simulacra* and mapping of the real (Rehak, 2003). Others have even considered the game an extension of the social realist literary tradition (McMahan, 2003). However, the dominant scholarship on

the notion of the player or the reader continues to be discussed as a passive receiver of the game's preassigned meaning.

Video-games' interactivity establishes the reader/player as "the author" of their narrative. The players 'read' the story while simultaneously constructing it; of course, video-games already set different stories available to the reader, but the player may constitute a narrative dissimilar to other players. The latter's ability to interact with different NPCs (Non-Playable Characters) might unlock stories that others might not access. They have to move through the world while constituting their text. The player affects the beginning and end of the game, changing from player to player. "While a reader of a typical text can become lost in the world of the book, he or she is ultimately powerless to control the narrative and can only be a spectator. In video-game narratives, however, an effort is required of the reader" (Ostenson, 2013). This effort, I forward, is the ultimate centralization of the reader beyond the author/text authority. The author's intentions no longer matter to the player while the narrative awaits the player to be constituted. "[P]layers always perform as an Other on the screen – whether as *Pac-Man*, *Mario* or *Lara Croft* in an arcade and console games; heroic soldiers in First-Person-Shooters such as *Call of Duty*, or particular classes, races and characters in MMORPGs from *World of Warcraft* to *Runescape*" (Lars de Wildt, 2014). The otherness of the player argued above situates the player as fragmented and ambivalent. I do not argue for the utter unity of the player as a subject of the process of signification, but I do argue for the situatedness of the player's experience within a socio-political and historical context(s). Hence, the character on the screen is not a fragmented other, but is a continuation of the player's identity and, accordingly, constitutes a narrative based on their lived experience. The character becomes a fragmented continuation of the self, itself. For instance, Bethesda Games Studios' *the Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* positions the player based on sex, race, and appearance, mainly because the game gives total control over the character. Beyond the appearance, the player chooses to join the Imperials (soldiers that serve the Empire) or the Stormcloaks (the revolution that seeks to overthrow the Empire) in the tutorial. The player's identity and experience necessitate their choice before the game begins. When the player finishes the tutorial and emerges from the cave, she can travel and do whatever she pleases in the world of Skyrim. Although there is a main quest, the player becomes a bandit, a merchant, a soldier, a mage, etc., based on their identity politics.

The player does not only constitute the narrative. The playable character of the player is directly effecting/affected by the game's world. In interacting with the game and constituting the player's story, the player becomes an active part of their narrative. The immersive narration techniques materialize the players' continuous interaction with the world. One is "invested in a character and his or her choices ... [because] you are the character making the choices and dealing with the outcomes (even if those consequences are virtual)" (Ostenson, 2013). The juxtaposition of the character with the player allows the latter to move through the game world in non-linearity. The reader in the print, the traditional text has to follow a specific linear narrative, yet video games' hypertextuality allows the player to interact with different narratives simultaneously. The latter further the players' ability to construct the narrative beyond the cutscenes. The most direct way of storytelling in video games is through cutscenes, but they are often not activated until the player

chooses to pursue the main story. Unlike the reader, the player does not follow causal events because they effectuate causality. “With the networked structure of hypertext, its fragmentation into recombinant units, and its rejection of the linearity inherent to chronology and causality, interactivity has contributed to the postmodern deconstruction of narrative” (Ryan, 2009). The player’s figure deconstructed the assumed readers’ agency while still subject to the text’s linear, causal narration. Interactivity establishes the player as a constituent of the story, not only an interpreter of the text. In Bethesda Gaming Studios’ *Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*, the player is considered another character unless they want to be the world’s savior. Like *Skyrim*, *Oblivion* allows players to roam and choose a race, God, sign, and class to constitute their narrative beyond what the developers or authors intended. The role-playing experience allows players to assume their character while assimilating into the game world.

Certain video games negate narratives. Through many examples, critics establish the nonexistence of narratives. “the stories present ... just facades pasted over the gameplay, and that trying to understand video games using the tools of narrative theory is a category mistake” (Suduiko, 2017). The dismissal of narration for play materializes the player’s centrality in constituting their narrative since the game has no preset story. The reader without a narrative cannot be a reader, while the player constitutes their stories because of intertextuality (Benharrouse, 2019). The *Multiplayer Online Battle Arena* (MOBA) games allow two teams to battle against each other; the map is static, and there is no narrative that the player should follow. The game begins the same for all players to defeat the other team. Riot’s *League of Legends*, Valve’s *DOTA 2*, Garena’s *Arena of Valor*, and others have no stories or quests which the player ‘should’ follow, but the player spawns into the game with freedom of choice. “All characters in a MOBA game start a match with two common actions they can perform: walking and basic attack. Walking lets the character move where the player wants to go, as expected. The basic attack can happen whenever a player chooses to attack an enemy without using any of their skills” (Cannizzo and Ramirez, 2019). The player then creates their own stories within the games. Even cooperation with other team players is a choice, not a requirement. MOBAs focus on the player constituting their narrative while neglecting a rigid, linear storytelling narration. The infamous *League of Legends* does not have a plot or a quest that the player has to follow; instead, it requires the destruction of the enemy’s nexus for the game to end either in victory or defeat. Yet, *LoL*’s intended linearity is already deconstructed because the player has infinite choices between movements, skills, champions, routes, and positions. Hence, even when the game is intended to be linear, the player still has various routes dissimilar to others.

The latter extends beyond the MOBAs towards the entirety of the video-games industry, from Battle Royal to Role-Playing Games (RPG). Battle Royal games have gained momentum in the gaming industry because of their accessibility on phones, tablets, computers, and smart gadgets. The lack of narrative in these games, notably Garena’s *Free Fire*, PUBG Corporation’s *PUBG*, and Activision’s *Call of Duty: Mobile*, presumes the reader’s focalization on the play; the act of “reading” for the player continues even if no story exists. The players spawn on the map to be the last standing. The means and tools used to achieve this goal do not matter. In *Call of Duty: Mobile*, when the player wins a game, the game presents them with their itinerary

on a map with the number of kills, assists, milage, and if they were respawned. Even with no prescribed storyline, the player continues within the game world. The players' ability to choose from their character customization to the weapon and item used articulates the limitedness of the reader. The choices are better exemplified in RPGs since the player has many choices: Bethesda's *Elder Scrolls Series*, Capcom's *Dragon's Dogma*, Lionhead Studios' *Fable*, BioWare's *Dragon Age*, etc. These games allow the player to create their race, character, and interest, while in the game, the player can choose between factions, skills, places, and so on. For instance, In *Elder Scrolls Series*, the player can do whatever they like, from pursuing the main story to killing all the NPCs in the game. Each player's experience in this game differs from another in the means and character choices. The number of choices grounds the limitations of the reader-response scope, whose utmost interaction with the text was interpretation.

Playing, then, is a critique of the reader-response theory. It merges the text and the player; the other, the avatar, becomes the self, the player. Richard Bartle forwards, "You are not role-playing as a being, you are that being; you're not assuming an identity, you are that identity; you're not projecting a self, you are that self. If you're killed in a fight, you don't feel that your character has died, you feel that you have died. There's no level of indirection, no filtering, no question: you are there" (Bartle, 2004). This is furthered since playing is a self-identification that furthers the player's immersion as the avatar. Blurring the self and the other allows the possibility of experiencing more than one identity, worldview, and perspective. In TaleWorlds Entertainment's *Mount & Blade Series*, the character's history and features constitute the character. The player is thrown into Calardia, the continent on which the game takes place, to make their narrative. Beyond a brief tutorial, there is no central story or narrative to which the player should adhere. Instead, the player's choices exemplify the idea of self-identification. As Paul Gee articulates, "games can show us how to get people to invest in new identities or roles" (Gee, 2003). The outcomes within the game rely on the players' skills, choices, and knowledge of the game since the game merges strategy and RPG components. Because the game does not have a rigid class system, the player could have different identities within the same game. This merging of the avatar and the text centers further on the theoretical limitations of the reader-response theory.

The playing merging of the player and the avatar is not decontextualized. The player is already part of a specific context that structures their experience within the game. The choices and possibilities within the game are subject to the player's previous lived experiences in the real world. This does not adhere to a top-down model in which only the player affects the video game; instead, the effect goes in both ways. Further, the player negates the top-down model toward a contextualized understanding. "The possibilities offered by the ludic universe of simulation games are much broader than some critics seem to recognize" (Chávez, 2010). Hence, the research should understand the methodological particularities of the medium; the game as a simulation allows the player to be within/without the text. This does not excuse the theoretical limitations of the reader-response theory and its ready-made use on different mediums.

Dominant stereotypes about gender, race, religion, etc., are readily reproduced in most video games which the player experiences through their lens. "Games may

feature morally questionable actions, but their open structures frequently allow for a great deal of variation in the ways a player can respond to those possibilities, thus creating space for the player to act” (Penix-Tadsen, 2013). The centralization provides “both the opportunities for the articulation of outsider identities and also the means through which existing normative meanings around gender and race are circulated” (Dovey & Kennedy, 2007). The representation of normative meaning does not limit video games but furthers their simulation since the world is culturally contextualized. The player accordingly would experience not only a ‘culturally bound’ setting but also a reproduced discursive structure that is already existent within the world. In *Fable 3*, the player is the kingdom’s prince, yet it reproduces the same discursive framework of power relation in almost every sovereign power. The plot begins with the kingdom of Albion entering the industrial age with a new tyrannical king, Logan. The player assumes the prince’s character who escapes with Jasper the Butler and Sir Walter Beck the Mentor. They start a journey of opposing sovereignty through resistance from the bottom-up and uniting the already divided tribes in the content of Albion. The plot reproduces different normative meanings: first, the hero is always a male, white person who goes to liberate faraway places although he is the brother of the tyrannical king Logan; second, women are perceived as a subject with which the character can boost their flirting skills, but they are not active members of the community; third, the notion of working hard is readily applied, especially since without working hard the prince will never be king; fourth, the idea that the leaders of the resistance become those whom they resisted. When the player becomes the king, the tyrannical choices are more rewarding than the just and ethical choices. Hence, the player has been deemed to repeat the same cycle.

Accordingly, the player furthers the virtuality of lived experience itself. Real-life experience is no longer rigidly separated from the virtual world but is continuously infused with it. The virtual informs one’s lived experience because the player is already grounded within the game’s narrative and contexts. Video games allow players to merge with their virtual identity beyond the simplified textual representation. Grant Tavinor reflected, “One of my most vivid recent memories is riding my horse into Mexico for the first time in the open-world video-game *Red Dead Redemption*. It was late in the day, and the sun was hanging low in the sky over the San Luis River, reflecting distant mountains and rock formations on its rippling surface. The landscape was one of the flowering cacti, bleached white sand, and brilliant orange rocks” (Tavinor, 2011). Tavinor as a player, already felt the virtuality of his lived experience; yet, virtuality does not mean unreal but a mere distinction between the digital and non-digital. That is, Simulation video games prove an adequate example of the blurring between virtuality and reality of lived experience. The player can fish, hunt, drive, farm, etc., which is the extension of their identity and, at the same time, further their lived experience in one of the aforementioned activities. For instance, when one hunts in video games, one becomes knowledgeable about guns, prey, winds, habitat, and ammo without actually going to hunt. Yet, the virtuality of the hunting simulation informed and grounded the player’s lived experience virtually in an already real context. The game, then, allows the player to experience while not experiencing. The negation of experience becomes its affirmation; the virtual becomes real, and the real, virtual.



This formulation grounds the game beyond rigid text and the player beyond the reader.

## CONCLUSION

Reader-Response Theory has gained momentum because it defamiliarized the meaning-making process. The reader has become considered the sole interpreter of the text, irrespective of the author's intentions. A text does not exist unless a reader interprets its meaning. Yet, in considering video games as a new medium of narration, the reader/player is not a passive interpreter of an already set narrative; instead, the player is a constituent of the process of signification. Hence, confining the reader's role to an interpreter would dismiss the possibilities arising from the new narration forms. The player can create their narrative within the video game. They are not confined to a particular story but can move through the game world and create their own stories, especially in RPGs and MOBAs. Through playing, the player constitutes the text. Role-playing is dominant because the player adapts the character's identity. This does not mean decontextualization but two-fold contextualization: the player's lived experience, perception, and ways of life affect their gameplay experience; the game's lore and world affect the player's perception and lived experience. Still, there is an urgent need to consider the player, and video games, through literary studies, especially in notions of race and gender. That is, although gender is considered in the current dominant literature (Kneer, Franken, & Reich, 2019; Grieve, March, & Van Doorm, 2019; Ong, Vorobjovas-Pintas, & Lewis, 2020; Reich, 2021), there is a pressing need to consider the gaming experience effect on the player rather than vice versa. Also, the player must be theorized to further the reader-response theory to encompass the emergent new storytelling medium.

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