PAROLE RUBATE

RIVISTA INTERNAZIONALE
DI STUDI SULLA CITAZIONE

PURLOINED LETTERS

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL
OF QUOTATION STUDIES

INDEX / CONTENTS

Speciale
ALIBI MEDIEVALI. IL MEDIOEVO COME LABORATORIO DI RISCRITTURA

a cura di Francesco Bonelli, Giulia Cacciatore, Filippo Fonio

MATERIALI / MATERIALS

BRANDON K. ESSARY

DANTE'S "INFERNO", VIDEO GAMES, AND POP PEDAGOGY

In 2010, Electronic Arts, an American video game company, released *Dante's Inferno* on the PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360 game consoles. The video game was popular, and sold 467,200 copies during its first month.[1] In many ways, Dante Alighieri's poem, *Inferno*, inspires the game story and informs the game's design: in naming the game's characters; in writing its dialogue; in constructing its settings; in designing its maps; in establishing the order and population of the various circles of Hell; and so on. This rewriting gives new life to the poem and introduces many aspects of Dante's work to a new generation of players, of readers, of students in a vibrant, interactive medium. The goal of the present study is to explore the ways that popular culture – *vis-à-vis* video games, in this case – can create a new interactive experience for medieval literature and can convey the themes and text of a poem. Video games are powerful

---

[1] See E. Caoili, *BioShock 2 PS3, Aliens Vs. Predator Jump into February Top 20*, web address https://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/118595/BioShock_2_PS3_Aliens_vs_ Predator_Jump_Into_February_Top_20.php.

teaching and learning tools both in how they engage players and in the increasingly serious – and sometimes academic – content they present to players. In order to substantiate these points, first, I will consider the teaching and learning power built into video games, as well as how understanding video games requires us to be aware of a unique sort of literacy. Second, I will study in depth a few examples of how the design and content of this game can be used to teach and talk about Dante's poem. Finally, I will offer some concluding remarks about the *Dante's Inferno* video game in the broader context of popular culture. In particular, I will argue that this video game is an excellent example of how complex and thought-provoking some video games as objects of popular culture have become. If we accept the challenge of studying them and teaching with them, we will learn that often these games can activate and do encourage – not deactivate and discourage – critical thinking in players. In doing so, they hold great potential to prepare students to study and analyze academic subject matter. When the game is inspired by and, to some extent, based on a work of literature, we have the chance to engage new and old readers of Dante in a way that the written word alone cannot.

1. *Video Games: Literacy, Engagement, and Learning*

A broad definition of literacy is key to understanding the usefulness of video games for teaching and learning about Dante's *Inferno*, literature, and popular culture in general. Nowadays, literacy is more than reading books and writing essays. We encounter multimodal texts on a regular basis, texts that present words, images, sound, music, and movement, as we interact with computers, smart phones, the Internet, hardware, and software to make sense of them. Take, for instance, a typical day's work in preparing this article and designing a new undergraduate course – "Dante's

Inferno: from Poem to Video Game" – for Spring 2017 at Elon University.[2] I begin by studying my annotations from traditional print resources, and type up an outline and the beginning of my article in a word processor on my laptop. In the evening, I begin recording game play from the *Dante's Inferno* video game. I turn on the smart TV, plug in my PlayStation 3 to it, plug in my video recording hardware to the console, and plug the video recorder into my laptop. I start to play, record, and store game footage with the recording software.[3]

We are entering into the world of a game in the "action-adventure" genre. The beginning of the game orients the player when a few terse lines appear on the screen in white against a black background. We learn that the game's protagonist, the player's avatar, is a Crusader named Dante. The camera pans over a bucolic Tuscan landscape and Dante the Crusader is shown in the woods, recalling the Crusade. He states: "At the midpoint on the journey of life, I found myself in a dark forest, for the clear path was lost". From then on, one witnesses three main stories unfold simultaneously in an intertwined manner: the main narrative of Dante the Crusader saving his wife Beatrice from Hell; the 'poetic' narrative between Dante the Crusader and Virgil which directly draws from and cites Dante's poem; and the episodes of the personal narrative of Dante the Crusader that erupt during game play as he enters each circle of Hell.

---

[2] See web address https://bessary.wordpress.com/cor-463-dantes-inferno/.
[3] See web address www.youtube.com/channel/UCd7SYLxM7isAEjyX QVZPVyQ.

Sandro Botticelli, *Dante Alighieri* **(1495)**   *Dante's Inferno*, **Dante the Crusader**

The player is surrounded by environments inspired by the descriptions of the various circles of Hell in Dante's poem. They are vivid, grim, and, together with the unnerving soundtrack, frightening places for work or play.[4] After about an hour of game play, I watch the videos, transcribe into a word processor the various dialogues that take place. I study the dialogues, the sequencing of the various narratives, and the game's environments, keeping a detailed record of the countless times Dante's text is referenced and brought to life in word and image. I keep at hand a hard copy of the *Inferno*[5] and a digital copy of Henry Longfellow's translation (1867)[6] – which the game designers used for the in-game citations and references – open on screen. With this description, one gets

---

[4] See H. R.Mitchell, *Fear and the Musical Avant-Garde in Games: Interviews with Jason Graves, Garry Schyman, Paul Gorman, and Michael Kamper*, in "Horror Studies", 5, 1, 2014, pp. 127-144.

[5] See D. Alighieri, *The Inferno*, a verse translation by R. Hollander and J. Hollander, New York, Anchor, 2000.

[6] See web address http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/1004/pg1004-images.html.

the impression of how complicated and challenging it can be to study the transformation of a literary work into a video game. And not just complicated, but multifaceted and stimulating, by virtue of the many different disciplines and technologies we can utilize in reading and interpreting this rewriting of the *Inferno*: literature, game studies, art, communication studies, music studies, and so forth.

Thus, video games are a medium *par excellence* as far as interdisciplinarity and multimodal literacy are concerned. In many of today's games, a variety of disciplines converge to create immersive, compelling game worlds.[7] This is especially the case when trying to read and interpret a video game that is based on a literary text. In some ways, learning to read a video game is not all that different from reading a traditional printed text; for instance, in comparing the verbal interactions between the game's protagonist and Virgil with the poem's text. However, there is also the dimension of reading the maps and landscape of Hell meticulously created by the game's designers, of interpreting the transformation from text to image. In doing so, one can lead students to verify the extent to which the game's designers followed the text; which parts of the text they used; how the text is cited, adapted and/or updated; how they chose to visualize the text; and, finally, what meaning or value that design choice might hold. At the same time, the student begins to encounter and interact with the design grammar of the game. That is, students can be led to identify and analyze the fundamental principles and building blocks that give structure and meaning to the game; at this point one can encourage students to begin talking and thinking about the internal design of the game (and poem), and the same design as a complex system

---

[7] See J. P. Gee, *Good Video Games and Good Learning. Collected Essays on Video Games, Learning and Literacy*, New York, Peter Lang, 2013, p. 61.

of interrelated parts. This kind of critical meta-thinking offers a unique dimension to using games to study literature as they lead students to think "about the game as a system and a designed space. Such thinking can open up critique of the game. It can also lead to novel moves and strategies, sometimes ones that the game makers never anticipated".[8] And, fortunately, each one of those moves, strategies, and observations in the game world can lead to original interaction with and thought about Dante's poem.

Another virtue of video games as tools for teaching and learning about literature is the element of interactivity. This interactivity is most effective for teaching and learning with video games when active and critical play of the game or observation of play-through recordings take place. I define 'active' as taking action not only to achieve the win-state and consume without thought the fast-paced game narrative itself, but taking action also to pause and read the game as a text and compare it to its original. I define critical interactivity with the game as interaction based on the aforementioned active reading of the game as a text. Often, this level of critical involvement is achieved or enhanced with writing activities that require soliciting evidence from both the game and the poetic text. In this way, games can offer a medium through which students can experience a text through embodied experiences with the game's protagonist. They must solve problems amid those experiences. They interact with characters, text (written and spoken) from the original work, and, when properly guided, they can reflect on the details of a designed, imagined world based on a literary work, together with the real and imagined social relationships and identities in the game world. The student is immersed in this world and forced to be some version of Dante, to walk through some version of his

---

[8] Id., *What Video Games Have to Teach Us about Learning and Literacy*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, p. 29.

Inferno, and to make decisions on his behalf, all of which can be put in dialogue with decisions made (or not) by Dante the Poet, Dante the Pilgrim, or even Dante the Crusader.

Despite the many positive elements of playing the game along with reading the poem, inevitably the original story of Dante's journey through Hell is simplified, shortened, and altered to fit the needs of the video game medium and the genre chosen by its designers. This hack-and-slash type of action-adventure game requires very little thought from the player. When played on the easiest setting, one could beat the game, defeat Lucifer, save Beatrice and lead Dante the Crusader to the foot of Mount Purgatory by mashing the 'circle' button and moving the joysticks. That kind of game play can and often does lead to relatively thoughtless interaction. However, this process of simplification can also be helpful for learning complex subject matter, especially for students new to *the Comedy*.[9] Indeed in my seminar, in which the students read *Inferno* and watched the video game segments unfold alongside it, I surveyed the twenty students about their agreement or lack thereof regarding the following statement: "I learned more about Dante and his poetry by studying it alongside a video game than I would have learned if we had read the text by itself."[10]

---

[9] The course I taught at Elon University, for instance, was an interdisciplinary Core Capstone Seminar for third-year and fourth-year undergraduate students from a variety of disciplines (business, chemistry, communication, cinema, religion, political science, management), most of whom had little or no prior experience with Dante, the *Comedy*, or the *Dante's Inferno* video game.

[10] The "had read text by itself" wording is misleading. I explained in person to the students that what was meant by that wording is reading the poem alongside other traditional print sources versus the poem, traditional print sources, and a video game.
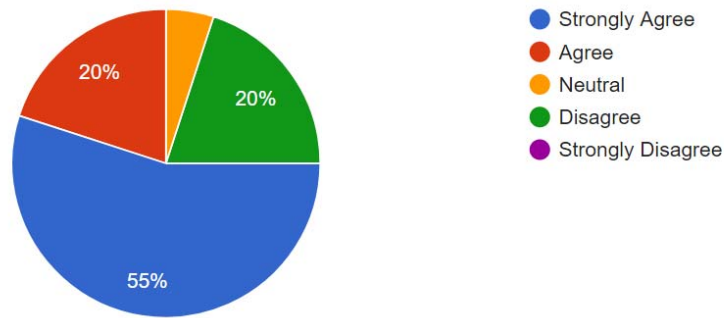
Interdisciplinary Core Capstone Seminar, student responses

The game acts effectively as a "fish tank".[11] It is a simplified version of a complex literary, ecosystem that focuses the player's attention on select critical variables that, when contextualized properly, say, in a carefully designed college seminar, can bring about problem-solving, critical thinking, and connections to the real world, popular culture, other texts, and other disciplines. Using these increasingly smart, challenging, and complicated games as teaching and learning tools, people of all ages are developing academic interests and learning academic content.[12] You can learn basic facts, yes, but you can also learn and practice systemic thinking about the game as a designed world, and that kind of thinking is useful in the study of literature and more broadly in real life. Games are deeply engaging, and offer countless opportunities to study not just content but also design principles such as coordinating time, intersecting goals, and open-ended problems.[13] The compelling world of *Dante's Inferno* is no exception. In this way, games are intriguing and thought-provoking

---

[11] See J. P. Gee, *Good Video Games and Good Learning: Collected Essays on Video Games, Learning and Literacy*, cit., p. 31.

[12] See K. Squire, *Video Games and Learning: Teaching and Participatory Culture in the Digital Age*, New York, Teachers College Press, 2011, p. 126.

[13] A fundamental tenant of the course and teaching and learning at Elon University is active student engagement. See A. Cook-Sather – C. Bovill – P. Felten, *Engaging Students as Partners in Learning and Teaching: a Guide for Faculty*, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 2014.

because of how powerfully and effectively they draw people in, encourage people to learn and experiment, and facilitate interest in connecting the game world to other related disciplines. Finally, training students to read and interpret complex games prepares them to do so when they encounter similar objects of popular culture in real life.

2. *Design Lessons in Practice*

I will now take a moment to show some concrete examples of how game design and its content lend themselves to teaching and interacting with the poem *Inferno*. Playing *Dante's Inferno* actively and critically in the context of a course on the *Inferno* requires the teacher and the students to utilize an array of tools, technologies, objects, reading and writing techniques, and each other's expertise and point of view to make meaning and discover knowledge in the poem and the game.[14]

The choice to design the game as a hack-and-slash, action-adventure title is both good and bad for the purpose of teaching the poem. On the one hand, this choice in genre minimizes the amount of thought and strategy necessary to play through, defeat, and observe the game play. To be sure, there are a few puzzles and challenging moments, but they rarely take more than a few minutes to figure out and a few minutes to solve. This uncomplicated, continuous, and direct play experience, allows the game to unfold and be read and observed like a fast-paced story.[15] On the other hand, it could be argued that one of the greatest stories ever told deserves more than a straightforward, button-mashing, demon-thrashing game play

---

[14] See J. P. Gee, *What Video Games Have to Teach Us about Learning and Literacy*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, pp. 221-227.

[15] See H. Brown, *Video Games and Education*, Armonk (NY), M. E. Sharpe, 2008, p. 10.

experience. The game is good, it has countless merits; however, I firmly believe that it could have been a great, not just good, game if these positive elements had been incorporated into the role-playing game, genre which allows for long, complicated stories and adventures to unfold over dozens (sometimes even hundreds) of hours of game play:

> "There are multiple ways to make progress or move ahead. This allows learners to make choices, rely on their own strengths and styles of learning and problem solving, while also exploring alternative styles."[16]

A good game's mechanics or design allow for this kind of flexibility. Unfortunately, the video game *Dante's Inferno* does not offer multiple routes to exploring Dante's poem. I would envision a historical-literary-period adventure role-playing game that fleshed out the characters, concepts, text and imagery of the poem. In the realm of Italian Studies and the Renaissance, something similar has been done in the action-adventure series of *Assassin's Creed*.[17] Why not make such a vast, open-ended, re-playable world for the *Inferno* or the whole *Comedy*, even?

In brief, we can start by looking at some common expectations of people who buy and play games in the action-adventure video game genre.

---

[16] J. P. Gee, *What Video Games Have to Teach Us about Learning and Literacy*, cit., p. 223.

[17] *Assassin's Creed II* (Ubisoft, USA, 2009) and *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood* (Ubisoft, USA, 2010) take place in the late fourteenth century and early fifteenth century in Italy. In both games, the main character is Ezio Auditore da Firenze, an assassin devoted to foiling the evil plans of the Templars. The plot is fanciful and too complicated to explain in detail. However, the cities of Florence, San Gimignano, Venice, Monteriggioni, Forlì, and Rome are beautifully reconstructed by the game's designers. On his various missions, Ezio interacts with numerous historical figures. In the game world, Ezio and Lorenzo de' Medici are 'friends'. At times, Ezio is at odds with historical personalities. For instance, one of Ezio's missions is to assassinate Girolamo Savonarola and restore order for the Medici in Florence. Finally, the ultimate goal of the game is for Ezio, a member of the Assassin order, to assassinate Alexander VI, who, in the game, was a member of the evil rival faction to the Assassins, the Templars.

According to Quantic Foundry, a game analytics consulting firm that explores gamer motivation through social and data science, approximately eighty percent of action-adventure gamers are male.[18] Another of the firm's studies posits that the top-two motivations for male gamers are "competition" (14.1% of respondents) and "destruction" (11.9% of respondents).[19] *Dante's Inferno* delivers on both counts. The protagonist is a Crusader that competes and fights against a number of forces in an effort to save Beatrice, his damsel in distress : his sins, Satan, the demons of Hell. And, in the process of overcoming these forces, the player engaged as the Dante Crusader avatar blazes a path of destruction. It is likely that Electronic Arts Games made this design and marketing choice in order to compete with the *God of War* video game series that was popular at the time.[20] If that were the case, they made what I as a player of games see as a relatively safe choice. On the one hand, they did something revolutionary by adapting a classic of Western literature into a video game narrative. On the other hand, that choice was also risky since 'story' is not as common or as powerful a motivator for male gamers, at only 6.3% according to the aforementioned Quantic Foundry study. The designers balanced the unorthodox decision of basing the story on a literary classic by picking a genre that was popular at the time and, in their eyes, still likely to sell and make money. Nonetheless, the game's executive producer made clear that bridging "the gap between games and literature" was also an explicit goal

---

[18] See web address http://quanticfoundry.com/2017/01/19/female-gamers-by-genre/.

[19] See web address http://quanticfoundry.com/2016/12/15/primary-motivations/.

[20] Statements made by designers of *Dante's Inferno* indicate that they were concerned with differentiating *Dante's Inferno* from the contemporary *God of War III* video game (Sony Entertainment, 2010). Paul Gorman directed the audio for *Dante's Inferno*, and made this concern apparent: see H. R. Mitchell, *Fear and the Musical Avant-Garde in Games: Interviews with Jason Graves, Garry Schyman, Paul Gorman, and Michael Kamper*, cit., p. 139.

of the game.[21] And, that design choice makes the game a formidable teaching and learning tool.

Another negative aspect of this genre choice is a relatively weak "Identity Principle": the learner has not so many choices in developing his virtual identities and no "ample opportunity to mediate on the relationship between new identities and old ones".[22] Finally, the "Probing Principle" could be much stronger in the game as it is designed, or if it had been designed in a different way:

> " […] a cycle of probing the world (doing something) […] reflecting in and on this action and, on this basis, forming a hypothesis; reprobing the world to test the hypothesis; and then accepting or rethinking the hypothesis."[23]

This sort of probing is necessary in the game, but only in a superficial way, usually having to do with movement within the game world (how do I reach that cliff, access that bonus item, extinguish the flames in my path?). It would be fascinating to see probing in the game that would require players to interact with Dante's poem: solve riddles based on the *terza rima* rhyme scheme, match a passage from the text with a sinner discovered in a certain circle in order to be able to speak with that sinner, require completion of key passages of the poem to access a given level or

---

[21] Interviewing the executive producer of *Dante's Inferno* Jonathan Knight, Matt Casamassina voices a question that must have been on the gaming community's mind: "I think the question you're going to be asked a lot is, why should gamers choose *Dante's Inferno* over *God of War III* or *Bayonetta*?" Knight provides three reasons: the explicit goal to bridge "the gap between literature and games", the distinct "Christian mythos" and "facing sins as you go through the levels", good gameplay and mechanics. See M. Casamassina, *"Dante's Inferno" Interview*, web address www.ign.com/articles /2010/02/03/dantes-inferno-interview.

[22] J. P. Gee, *What Video Games Have to Teach Us about Learning and Literacy,* cit., p. 222. There are some choices for developing one's virtual identity as Dante the Crusader in the game: the main one is choosing whether to condemn or absolve shades, which in turn awards 'unholy' or 'holy' points for development of the character's offensive and defensive battle skills.

[23] Ibidem, p. 223.

part of Hell. One might worry that such design choices might make the game feel 'didactic'. However, there are countless precedents of popular video games that require players to solve tough problems with texts, words, numbers, even clues from works of art.[24] As it is, the written text is passively present in the game when the Dante Crusader and Virgil speak and briefly on screen when the character dies.

3. *Dante the Crusader in the Fifth Circle*

We can proceed by looking at how the game interacts with the original poetic text to create memorable, and sometimes beautiful, teaching and learning moments.[25] Dante the Crusader's path through the Fifth Circle of Anger and Sullenness demonstrates effective design and narrative connections to the poem *Inferno*.[26] As he descends deeper into Hell, from

---

[24] For a classic example, one might recall puzzles from one of the greatest role-playing games of all time, *Final Fantasy 7* (released by Square on the PlayStation in 1997). At one point in the game, the player must solve a puzzle by consulting the titles, words, and letters of books in an archival library. In the realm of games that treat Italian matter, *Assassin's Creed II* is yet again a wonderful example. Some puzzles in the game require the player to study closely and find clues in actual famous Renaissance art works. In the same game, written texts are essential to completing many missions. Often, Ezio, the game's protagonist, must enlist the help of his 'friend', Leonardo Da Vinci to decipher encrypted messages.

[25] At several junctures, including in the Fifth Circle of Anger described below, *Dante's Inferno* succeeds in creating these "memorable moments". See K. Squire, *Video Games and Learning: Teaching and Participatory Culture in the Digital Age*, cit., p. 89.

[26] I have selected this excerpt from the game, among many good alternatives, for a number of reasons. First, there are many direct references to the poem in the dialogues between Virgil and Dante the Crusader. The reader can get a good sense for just how present the text is in the game world. Second, the design of the landscape in the game world – Styx, the marsh, the submerged souls – is very well done and gives the player a strong sense that the poem was studied meticulously as the art and landscape design for the game were developed. Third, for all the fidelity to the poem found here, this segment also presents one of the most interesting reinterpretations in Phlegyas who is transformed into a gigantic, fire-breathing minion of hell that Dante the Crusader must fight at first. Then, the player gets to pilot the beast, and, it's a *really* fun part of the game experience. The player has the chance to enter Dis with a bang as Phlegyas

the heights of a cliff, the Crusader sees stars and the headwaters of Styx flowing downward. When he reaches the bottom of the precipice, the word "Anger" momentarily appears on the screen, indicating that the player has arrived in the next circle and game level of Hell.

***Dante's Inferno*, Dante the Crusader in the Fifth Circle**

Virgil is there to prepare the reader for what awaits: "See the souls over whom anger has prevailed. In the warm bath of the sun they were once hateful; down here in the black sludge of the River Styx do they wish they had never been born".[27] Dante the Crusader begs of Virgil: "Poet, will I be

---

punches through its gates; breathes fire and stomps the ground to deflect the demons that stand in the way. In sum, this part of the game, like others, demonstrates the respect and refinement with which the designers treated the poem as a source of inspiration and the countless ways it influences the game world. At the same time, they still maintained an enjoyable game experience, sometimes taking the license to redesign aspects of the original story.

[27] See *Inferno*, VII, 118-123.

undone?"; and Virgil reassures him: "Do not fear, for no one can take from you this passage, but such a one it is granted you".[28]

As he crosses the river and makes his way through the surrounding environs, the angry souls grab at Dante, constantly threatening him (though, ironically, they cannot actually harm him; only falling into the river can kill the avatar at this point). Their irascible rejoinders demonstrate the anger being punished, and remind the player of the caustic exchange in the poem between Dante and Filippo Argenti.[29] Hell's minions continuously impede the Dante Crusader's path, and he must destroy them with his scythe and magic spells to move forward.

After solving a simple puzzle (moving a heavy block onto a piece of land that sinks into the river and opens a path), Dante moves toward the Stygian marsh and finds Virgil again who comments on the condition of the sinners here: "Souls indignant! How many up there now count themselves kings, that here shall lie like pigs in the mire, leaving their condemnations far behind".[30] Dante the Crusader asks, "What does the distant tower mean? Whom does it signal?"; to which his guide succinctly states: "Across the foul marsh, a raft ferries the damned. Look for

---

[28] See ibidem, VII, 100-105. The video game dialogue typically presents references to the poem in the correct order. Sometimes, as in this case, the game's writers cite cantos out of order, but cite from the appropriate circle. In yet other cases, the text is cited even further out of its original order (Charon's character in the game speaks the written words form the Gate to Hell: "Through me the way to the city of woe. Through me the way to everlasting pain. Abandon all hope, ye who enter here").

[29] See ibidem, VIII, 31-63. Dante's interaction with the shades is one more missed opportunity in the game to strengthen the identity principle between the player and the game's protagonist. Each shade repeats a brief script describing its fate. The Warrior grabs the shade, permits the player to read information about it, and condemns or absolves it based on the player's input. It would be interesting to see these exchanges based more closely on the poetic text and the Pilgrim's actual dialogues with the shades.

[30] See ibidem, VIII, 49-51. Unlike in the *Comedy*, the Virgil character of the video game does not physically lead or guide the Dante character. Virgil appears often and at key moments of the game to explain to Dante the Crusader and the player using the words of the poem what is going on, who is being punished, why, and so on. However, he always appears as a stationary hologram with a disembodied voice.

Phlegyas, the boatman".[31] In this case and in others, Virgil's words to the protagonist pique curiosity, and leave the player wondering what or who comes next.

***Dante's Inferno*, angry souls submerged in the Stygian marsh**

What follows is a description of one of the most moving segments of the game. It combines harmoniously, powerfully, the artistic license and talent of the designers, the beauty and power of Dante's poem, and the cosmic scale of the journey through Hell. The player throws a switch, signals for Phlegyas, causing fire to pour forth into the darkness from the mouths of what appear to be two gigantic statues of angry sinners. We see a raft without a boatman eerily float from Dis to this side of the Stygian marsh. In the distance and through the dark air we begin to see the iron walls of the damned city, complete with statues of the Furies, and to

---

[31] See ibidem, VIII, 7-18.

perceive the incredible scale of the underworld, even as the funnel continues to narrow into nether Hell. Virgil reassures Dante the Crusader, just as he does the poem's Pilgrim, explaining the inexplicable, and arming the player through his or her Dante the Crusader avatar with the understanding of what awaits, and a glimmer of hope to succeed.

Dante's Inferno, **Virgil admonishes the Crusader**

Rare notes of hopeful music – some sort of sacred, liturgical chorus of voices – play as Virgil's booming voice admonishes with gates of Dis over his shoulder in the background: "Now, my son, the City of Dis draws near, housing its condemned citizens within. The eternal fire that blazes there makes the mosques show red, in this nether Hell".[32] The stage has been set well with the music, the setting, and the shrouded view of Dis in the background. One feels a genuine sense of identification with the game's protagonist, and shares in his curiosity to know more about this epic quest

---

[32] See ibidem, VIII, 67-75.

of which he is a major part. Dante the Crusader asks: "Has any soul ever descended to this depth from the circles above?"; Virgil responds: "Seldom, but once before I was conjured down by Erictho. Shortly after my death, she sent me down to draw forth a soul from the circle of Judas". Dante the Crusader puts into spoken words a question that no doubt was on Dante the Pilgrim's mind, too: "Which circle is that?"; and Virgil ends their conversation: "The lowest, blackest, and farthest from Heaven. Well do I know the way".[33]

***Dante's Inferno*, the frightening city of Dis**

The mysterious, unpiloted raft seen before turns out to be the crown of Phlegyas' head, the giant demon who was submerged in the marsh. In one of the most entertaining and dramatic parts of the game experience, Dante the Crusader takes control of the monstrous Phlegyas. The demon lumbers slowly from the Styx bank towards the gates of Dis. And with each step the camera pans out to reveal the horrible reality of what lies beyond

---

[33] See ibidem, IX, 16-30.

and below. Dante the Crusader narrates passionately, paraphrasing Dante the Poet's description:

"We moved toward the city, secure in our holy cause, and beheld such a fortress. And on every hand I saw a great plain of woe and cruel torment. Bitter tombs were scattered with flame, made to glow all over, hotter than iron need be for any craft. And such dire laments issued forth as come only from those who are truly wretched, suffering and forever lost."[34]

4. *Inaccuracies and Teachable Moments*

So, one can see that there is a continuous, meaningful interaction between Dante's *Inferno* and *Dante's Inferno*. This selection from the game showcases how the poem is used here and in other places to infuse the story between Dante the Crusader and Virgil, and simultaneously with the game's player. It's the easiest connection to demonstrate because it draws specifically on the accuracies between Dante's original writing and this digital re-writing. However, there are also some totally new additions to the story, as well as inaccuracies in the expropriation of the original text, that must be addressed. These are weaknesses when we view the game bluntly in terms of accurate or inaccurate reference to the poem. However, even in being at odds with Dante's original text, both accuracies and inaccuracies still can offer teachable moments.[35]

For instance, one feature of the game that comes directly from the poem is the presence of sinners with whom Dante the Crusader can choose to interact. Often, they speak out loud, piquing the player's interest by making some statement about why they are condemned. Typically, these

---

[34] See ibidem, IX, 106-123.
[35] See K. Squire, *Video Games and Learning: Teaching and Participatory Culture in the Digital Age*, cit., p. 28; H. Brown, *Video Games and Education*, cit., p. 119.

shades are found in the same circles and in the same order as they are found in *Inferno*. However, in the game segment described above, in which Dante the Crusader encounters a total of three shades, this is not always the case. Two of the shades did not appear in Circle Five or as shades anywhere else in the poem: Boudica and Hecuba. Boudica lures the Crusader to her, shouting cryptically, "We have been stripped and desponded like a murderer's victims". If the player chooses to interact with this or any other shade, Dante the Crusader grabs the shade by the throat, makes more information about their sins appear in writing on the screen for the player to consider, and decides (with the player's input, naturally) whether or not to absolve the soul and send it to heaven or condemn the soul to remain in Hell. The following information is provided by the game regarding Boudica: "After she was flogged and her children raped, the Vengeful Queen of the Iceni Tribe tried to set fire to the City of Rome with a bloody revolt". As the player reads this information, often the shades will plead for mercy with Dante the Crusader (and the player) giving more details about their story. In this case, the Crusader condemns Boudica, and ends the exchange: "Be damned sinner!" Clearly, Boudica does not appear in Dante's original text, and that should be pointed out to students. However, the game designers' choice to place her here could lead to an interesting discussion in class. Who was she? Does her sin constitute the kind of anger being punished in Circle Five? What is Anger anyway? Does she merit condemnation or forgiveness? Why or why not?[36] Hecuba's shade appears next. This time, she is referenced in Dante's poem, although the Pilgrim

---

[36] With regard to Boudica's fabricated appearance as a shade, we may note the syncretism typical of popular culture products, video games included, since she is an exotic Celtic queen who allegedly revolted against the Roman Empire. See Tacitus, *Agricola*, 16, 1; Id., *Annales*, XIV, 31, 35, 37; Dio Cassius, *Romana historia*, LXII, 2-7.

does not interact with her.[37] The third and final shade encountered in Circle Five belongs there and is that of Filippo Argenti. Upon interacting with the shade, the following text appears on screen: "Filippo Argenti: Angry politician who opposed Dante's return to Florence. Their families were bitter rivals, and Argenti stole from Dante's family after he left Florence". Argenti provides a few more details verbally when he refers to his own biography: "My life has been spent in anger, now it ends in shame…"; "They were all plotting against me". The Crusader avatar in this case is made by the player controlling him to condemn the shade, shouting, "Disgraceful phantom!"

Another category of teachable moments comes from the narrative fabricated by the game's designers. During the game segment in Circle Five, an unseen Satan taunts Dante the Crusader: "I've got your Beatrice…". After crossing the Stygian marsh, this narrative is propelled with a cinematic cut scene involving Satan, Beatrice, and Dante the Crusader. Finally, some detail is provided with regard to the deal to save Dante's life to which Beatrice refers at the game's outset. Satan explains: "She wagered her soul that you would be faithful. Her faith in you was very touching, so I thought: 'Just the girl for me'". Beatrice lost the wager because Dante the Crusader betrayed her, committing the sin of lust, with a Saracen prisoner. Now, Beatrice is transformed into Satan's mistress, and he taunts Dante ("Who can deny my rights?"), kisses Beatrice, and flies away with her deeper into the *Inferno*. That synopsis leaves little hope for meaningful dialog with Dante's poem. Unfortunately, most critics of the game stop here, and ignore or fail to see the meaningful dialogue taking

---

[37] See *Inferno*, XXX, 13-21.

place elsewhere in the game.[38] In this narrative strand, Beatrice has unfortunately been infantilized, sexualized and stripped of her heavenly power to save Dante.[39] But, that does not mean we should dismiss the game or imply that the medium is of no use to studying the *Inferno*. Instead, we can use this questionable design choice as a laughable, hyperbolic teaching moment to reflect on Dante the Poet's original design and the reasons for and value of that design, as well as dialogue with another discipline, in this case, gender studies and the representation of women in video games.[40]

I'll conclude by looking at the personal sin narrative of Dante Crusader in *Dante's Inferno*. In Circle Five, just before the Crusader climbs the tower and signals for Phlegyas, he is overcome by a memory of his own sinful anger during the Crusade in which he took part in the game's story. In a cinematic cut scene, we see graphic scenes of Christian knights slaying Saracens, and of the dead and wounded from both sides on a blood-stained battlefield. The scene of Dante the Crusader's anger then unfolds. He chides a fellow soldier: "We came here to kill these heretics! Since when are heretics worth a Christian life?" It ends with the irate Dante Crusader slaying what appears to be an unarmed prisoner. Clearly, this story is a fabrication created by the game's writers, and in its details has very little to

---

[38] See D. Itzkoff, *Abandon all Poetry, but Enter Hell with an Attitude*, in "New York Times", 30 January 2010, p. C1 (the author quotes Christopher M. McDonough, an associate professor of classical languages at the University of the South in Sewanee, Tenn.); T. Barolini, *An Ivy League Professor Weighs in: Expert View*, in "Entertainment Weekly", 26 February 2010, p. 79.

[39] In the game, Beatrice has the power to judge Dante the Crusader: she makes him confront his sins and acts as an impediment to his journey if he does not follow her rules. This situation is not dissimilar from that of Beatrice the judge-confessor in the Earthly Paradise in cantos XXX-XXXI of *Purgatorio*, who strikes fear into the heart of the Pilgrim, makes him face his sins and confronts him aggressively for turning away from her and the "diritta via". Finally, the video game's Beatrice in the end plays a role, albeit less active and direct, in the Crusader's salvation.

[40] See *Beyond Barbie and Mortal Kombat: New Perspectives on Gender and Gaming*, Edited by Y. B. Kafai, C. Heeter, J. Denner and J. Y. Sun, Cambridge (Mass.), MIT Press, 2008.

do with Dante the Poet or Dante the Pilgrim. However, its fundamental purpose is not all that different than some goals of Dante's poem: reflecting on evil, how it connects to the sins being punished in *Inferno*; and, with hope, turning away from sinful behavior after witnessing the consequences in the afterlife.

On the one hand, video games are a *de facto* source of learning with regard to a variety of academic disciplines. From lessons of geography and international diplomacy in *Making History: The Calm & The Storm*,[41] and city planning and urban design in *SimCity* franchise[42] to Renaissance history in *Assassin's Creed II* and *Assassin's Creed Brotherhood*, popular games offer learning opportunities to an increasingly wide range of players.[43] Increasingly, major video game titles – including *Dante's Inferno* and *Assassin's Creed* – also offer players around the world the chance to play them in Italian, offering an amazing language learning opportunity. At the same time, I hope to have shown how some video games indicate the complexity of popular culture, challenging the assumption of many people regarding popular media and a motif that underlies much of the shallow and questionable criticism of the *Dante's Inferno* video game:

> " […] the dominant motif is one of decline and atrophy: we're a nation of reality program addicts and Nintendo freaks. Lost in that account is the most interesting trend of all: that the popular culture has been growing increasingly complex over the past few decades, exercising our minds in powerful new ways."[44]

---

[41] See *Making History: The Calm & the Storm* (Strategy First, USA, 2007) and H. Brown, *Video Games and Education*, cit., p. 128.

[42] See *SimCity*, Electronic Arts, USA, 2017.

[43] Entertainment Software Association statistics show the demographic diversity of game players, which goes well beyond the stereotypical teenage boy: 63% of U.S. households have at least one person who plays three hours or more a week; the average game player is thirty-five years old. 59% are male, 41% are female; women age eighteen or older represent a greater portion (31%) than boys age eighteen or younger (17%). See web address http://essentialfacts.theesa.com/.

[44] S Johnson, *Everything Bad is Good for You: How Popular Culture is Making Us Smarter*, New York, Riverhead, 2005, p. 13.

In popular American TV shows, from classics (*Dragnet*, *Starsky & Hutch*)[45] to more contemporary titles (*Lost*, *The Sopranos*),[46] there is a shift from a straightforward narrative (few main characters, unequivocal beginnings and end points) to a norm of shows with multiple and complex narrative strands (a multitude of primary and secondary characters, episodes with indistinct beginning and end points).[47] Video games, too, can be placed along a continuum of increasing complexity. We've gone from the humble beginnings of *Pong*[48] with two paddles and a ball bouncing across the screen, and my 8-bit childhood quests with *Mario Bros.*,[49] to games that, when well made require thought, dedication, and literacy and that reward patience, persistence, and intense study. The *Dante's Inferno* video game, though not the best-made video game with regard to these criteria, is an engaging, interactive way to keep Dante relevant and to engage actively students in the study of his life and works.[50]

---

[45] See J. Webb, *Dragnet*, Mike Meshekoff – Jack Webb, USA, 1951-1959; Id., *Dragnet*, Dragnet Productions, USA, 1967-1970; *Starsky & Hutch*, Aaron Spelling – Leonard Goldberg, USA, 1975-1979.

[46] See J. J. Abrams – D. Lindelof – D. Lieber, *Lost*, ABC Studios, USA, 2004-2010; D. Chase, *The Sopranos*, Chase Films, USA. 1999-2007.

[47] See S. Johnson, *Everything Bad is Good for You: How Popular Culture is Making Us Smarter*, cit., p. 70.

[48] See *Pong*, Atari, USA, 1972.

[49] See *Mario Bros.*, Nintendo, Japan, 1985.

[50] See A. Lee, *We Have Always Taken Liberties with Dante; The Divine Comedy Speaks to the Frightening Uncertainties of Our World, which is Why It Inspires Novels, Video Games, and Films*, in "The Daily Telegraph", 31 March 2013, web address www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/9962192/We-have-always-taken-liberties-with-Dante.; D. Damrosch, *World Literature in a Postliterary Age*, in "Modern Language Quarterly", 74, 2, 2013, p. 162.