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Are these the 5 best literary video games of all time?

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The Last Of Us: 'it develops deep, complex characters and explores complex themes and the moral ambiguity of choice and societal values'

Analysis: Literary games appeal because they present the player with a radically new type of storytelling

Literary games combine digital technologies, play and storytelling to create expressive works which are, technically, videogames. However, these games rely on narrative techniques which are inherently literary, heavily reliant on text and crafted for the purposes of poetic experimentation, socio-political criticism, or some moral concern.

Literary games appeal because they present a radically new type of storytelling. Readers become active participants in sensorially immersive stories, traversing settings and controlling characters. These games span what academic Astrid Ensslin calls the "literary-ludic spectrum". Some games are quite "ludic" as they highlight play and are "game-like", while others are more reminiscent of forms like poetry and the novel.

What Remains of Edith Finch Review



From IGN, review of What Remains of Edith Finch

Famous examples of literary games include interactive fiction like *Zork*, a text-based choose-your-own-adventure story developed in 1977 for the PDP-10, an early computer; and *What Remains of Edith Finch*, a more recent title from 2017, which brings its players (or readers) through a character-driven anthology featuring comic strips, journal entries, and internal monologues.

While most literary games fall into the indie category, you could argue that some blockbuster games developed by major studios might also have a place on the literary-ludic spectrum. *Starfield*, for example, is heavily reliant on character-driven narrative techniques and text-based dialogue, but it's also about building spaceships and battling terrormorphs.

It's difficult to distinguish between literary games, story-driven games, and games which just feel like literary classics. Such debates are no different than those which have long surrounded that thing we call literature. Strict classification doesn't really matter, the important thing is that we value such works—whatever we call them—as pieces of art, as acts of cultural expression and creative writing. These days, to quote *The Guardian*, "being culturally educated about video games is as important as going to museums or learning about opera."



Video Games

From RTÉ Radio 1's Brendan O'Connor show, Sarah Maria Griffin on the biggest selling video games of all time

So what are the all-time great literary games? It's a timely question. While it appears that the golden age of videogames is over, it seems as though indie genres are having a moment. This is partly because developing blockbuster videogames is increasingly prohibitive, but also because advances in game and asset engines have made it easier for independent studios and artists to enter the market.

A list of great literary games should only include works that emphasise *play*. The broader field of digital fiction has given much to admire—say, *Patchwork Girl* (1995) or *Pry* (2014)—but these literary fictions aren't quite games. While any list of great literary games will be far from exhaustive, here are five that should certainly be included in any such conversation.

***Façade* (2005)**

Created by Michael Mateas and Andrew Stern, *Façade* is one the earliest experiments in using Natural Language Processing (NLP) and Artificial Intelligence (AI) to craft a complex digital story, or what the authors call "interactive drama".

Façade is a Psychological Horror AI Game now



From RTGame, Façade was championed as the future of gaming in 2005 so let's check back in 19 years on....

Long before anyone had even heard of ChatGPT, *Façade* allowed players to engage with its characters—a troubled couple named Grace and Trip—by typing whatever they wish. By many scientific standards, *Façade* was a limited implementation of NLP and AI, but it pioneered an approach to interactive storytelling that will become increasingly prominent in the coming times.

Dear Esther (2012)

Dear Esther, developed by The Chinese Room, belongs to the "walking simulator" genre. Walking simulators emphasise place and atmosphere, while more traditional gameplay mechanics—defeating enemies, overcoming obstacles, collecting items—are typically absent. Set on a Hebridean island, *Dear Esther* uses fragmented letters and environmental storytelling to explore themes of loss, grief, and the line between reality and imagination.

The Stanley Parable (2013)

The Stanley Parable began life as a "mod" (as did *Esther*) and was first created in 2011 by Davey Wreden, who would later join with William Pugh to produce a more polished version released for Windows in 2013. Players control Stanley as they explore the protagonist's deserted workplace. *The Stanley Parable* explores themes of choice, free will, and predestination, questioning the illusion of choice encountered in videogames, the tension between the role of the player and that of a game's creators.



The Last of Us

*From RTÉ Radio 1's Arena, David Hanratty reviews the TV adaptation of the grounding video game **The Last of Us***

***The Last of Us* (2013)**

The Last of Us will undoubtedly be the most well-known entry on this list thanks to its HBO adaptation. It may also be slightly contentious to include what might reasonably be considered a blockbuster title on this list, but *The Last of Us* is a great example of how a traditional action-adventure videogame with lots of obstacles and enemies can also rely heavily on the literary.

The game features a well-crafted narrative that uses techniques such as foreshadowing and flashback. It develops deep, complex characters and explores complex themes and the moral ambiguity of choice and societal values. It also features a post-apocalyptic setting with attention to detail that parallels the comprehensive world-building found in genres like speculative fiction.

***This War of Mine* (2014)**

Developed by Polish company 11 Bit Studios, *This War of Mine* is inspired by the siege of Sarajevo during the Bosnian war. Players control a group of civilian survivors confined to a makeshift shelter in a city under siege. The gameplay involves gathering resources, crafting items, and making difficult decisions to keep the group alive.

While *The War of Mine* is a game, we still see the literary. The storyline and mechanics work in tandem to explore the psychological and emotional toll of war on individuals, and players engage with the narrative in a way that is introspective and reflective. The sombre tone and theme are complemented by a distinctive charcoal-stylised aesthetic. *This War of Mine* fails to

present a path to a "happy ending", reminding, just as *The Stanley Parable* does, that any agency on the part of the players is only assumed, that it is the author who retains ultimate control.

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