

This is a pre-print version of the Elizabeth J. Fleitz's webtext "Video Game Review: *Type:Rider*," published in *Kairos: A Journal of Rhetoric, Technology, and Pedagogy*, 22(1), available at <http://kairos.technorhetoric.net/22.1/reviews/fleitz>

Elizabeth J. Fleitz
Lindenwood University

Review of *Type:Rider*

Type:Rider is a video game available for iOS, Android, and Steam. It was released by Cosmografik, a French company, and developed by Bulkypix in 2013. I played it on an iPad, but the video here is from the Steam version, and this Steam version I would recommend as having the better controls. So, it's a pretty straightforward platformer game in which you control a colon—yes, that's right, that punctuation mark present in every single academic article title—that can roll around and jump as you navigate the gamespace. Basically, the main goal of the game is to collect items—actually, the letters of the alphabet—that you find in levels to put together pages in an ebook that chronicle the history of typography, all the way from its origins in cave paintings to the present day. Each level focuses on a different typeface, with the exception of the first Origins level that moves quickly through ancient history. The levels include Gothic, Garamond, Didot, Clarendon, Futura, Times, Helvetica, Pixel, and there's even a hidden Comic Sans level, and I think we can all agree that the best place for a Comic Sans level is hidden. Each level situates its titular font within its historical context—so, for instance, Clarendon sets its level in the wild west, and Times is set within the industrial, modernist world of the 1930s. But the most interesting thing about this entire game is the gamespace itself—the levels are constructed out of typefaces. For instance, in the Gothic level, you have to carefully jump and roll over Gothic letters, being wary of getting stuck on a serif or falling down in the space between letters, which causes the level to restart from the last checkpoint. The ability to collect pages for the ebook and other items, such as each letter in the alphabet, is an extra feature of the game but is not necessary to completing the level. So, in that way, the written text is secondary to its visual component.

What is so interesting here about this game is really not what the developers had in mind—they wanted to make an educational game about the history of typography, in which players would go through each level, collecting items as they went to put together at the end to read about each typeface's history. You can even pause the game to read the individual page you've just collected, which really poorly interrupts the game and is the last thing I want to do when playing a platformer. So it seems the developers didn't realize what fascinating thing they had hit on here—the fact that they use the typeface as an obstacle to navigate in order to complete the level—letters now become the gamespace itself.

Jay David Bolter (2001) has explained that we are living in "the late age of print" (p. 2). However, he points out that print is not dead, instead it is being remediated into increasingly digital forms. When we play this game, today, in the late age of print, we play a remediated text: in a less interesting way, we play to get rewarded with an ebook, but really we play with the typefaces themselves—we jump on and around each letter, trying to keep our balance and move on to the

next screen. In this game, we need more than just literacy of a written text in order to play; we need literacy in the video game. This gamespace disrupts traditional written literacy, unmaking the meaning of the letter “R” to a tricky object to jump over.

This game is deconstructing print by taking it out of its familiar context of the page and putting it into a gamespace. This helps us rethink the function these typefaces have, as it defamiliarizes us with the subject while also allowing us to see it in a completely new way.

According to Graeme Kirkpatrick (2011), what is unique about the video game is that it stimulates us into action—it insists that we must participate. Kirkpatrick says that “form is the only way to understand the pleasurable nature of its process.” Thus, in a video game, form is privileged over content—or, form is content.

However, with the game *Type:Rider*, arrangement isn’t really equivalent to content; in fact, the content meaning is unmade through the act of placing these typefaces in a gamespace. So, in order to understand the gamespace, arrangement is superior to content. A, B, C, and D are no longer the alphabet—they are now cliffs, valleys, surfaces, and pits to navigate.

My experience playing this game initially on the iPad was entertaining—for the majority of the game, the levels are decently short and the rewards sufficient to encourage the player to continue. Collecting all (or even most of) the letters and pages in each level isn’t necessary, and is probably only relevant to completionists. The first level (which doubles as the tutorial) is organized well and is easy to follow. The iPad controls are simple, with just two buttons (really, unmarked areas of the screen to touch)—one for forward and one for back—and hit both at the same time to jump. Like any platformer, the early levels are quite easy and progressively get more challenging, particularly when there are a series of timed jumps to make. Fortunately (for game design as well as my sanity), when you miss a jump, the level sends you back to a previous checkpoint, which is usually not far. Also, like any platformer, there is at least one part of one level—usually towards the end—that is infuriatingly difficult. While I did not throw my iPad across the room in defeat, many expletives were uttered, to no avail. I wasn’t able to complete the Pixel level, the last level of the game before the hidden Comic Sans level, because of the nearly impossible controls. Once I switched to the Steam version in order to record the video, the controls are much easier—left and right directional buttons and space bar to jump—and I was able to complete the game and get to about halfway through the Comic Sans level. I didn’t complete it, once again, because I enjoy keeping my sanity, and the music and colors in that level were grating on me.

Ian Bogost, in his 2007 work *Persuasive Games*, elaborates on the concept of procedural rhetoric as “the art of representation through rule-based representations and interactions rather than the spoken word, writing, image, or moving pictures” (p. ix). This kind of rhetoric, he says, “makes a claim about how something works by modeling its processes in the process-native environment of a computer” (Bogost, 2011, p. 14). He brings this up to say that video games, of all computational artifacts, are the most procedural. In the video game, “persuasion and expression are inexorably linked” (Bogost, 2007, p. 44). James Paul Gee (2007), in his work *What Video Games Have to Teach Us about Learning and Literacy*, also notes that the meaning of a video game comes through its use of embodied experiences. Bogost goes further, saying that playing video games is more than an embodied experience, it is an active, procedural experience—the act of playing a game creates meaning; the process of playing is what constructs the game and its message. It’s

only a game through its playability. Unlike visual rhetoric, which doesn't account for procedural representation, in video games "image is subordinate to process" (Bogost, 2007, p. 25). This goes along with what I was saying earlier about the arrangement of the typefaces as the gamespace deconstructs their traditional written meaning and creates a new meaning out of these objects. In *Type:Rider*, the game is more than just seeing and learning about typography (which is something that the developers have seemed to miss); it is the act of playing through these typefaces that creates the meaning and the experience. It's that procedure that creates the meaning in the gamespace. In an interview about the game's release, one of the designers of the game explained that they wanted to create a game to educate people about the history of typography, which is something that is "an old and invisible art"—in this creation, however, this art is made visible not just through the actual printed pages of the ebook that the gamer collects and then reads outside of the game, this art is made visible through its placement in a game context, deconstructing its written meaning and made into a visual, procedural meaning.

I'd say this is also a flaw in the game, too, even though teaching the player about typographic history is a main intent of the platformer. The pages one collects through the levels that creates an ebook chronicling the history of each selected font is an isolated component of the game, and could be ignored completely during a playthrough. Also, it seems like rather weak motivation for the player, telling them their goal is to collect ebook pages. You could easily enjoy this game without paying attention to the ebook and without learning much about typography, other than the names of some fonts and the shape of the letters. For instance, I am very familiar with the Gothic typefaces, as I struggled to avoid getting stuck on every serif.

The game designers have stated in interviews that their intention is to educate the public on the history of typography. "We're not trying to teach people to be experts in type in *Type:Rider*, but I think it's important to know that it is a complex art with a long history," says the designer. "Our hope is that after playing *Type:Rider*, players will choose their next font with a little more experience and knowledge than they would have before" (as cited in Brownlee, 2013). To these designers, content still remains superior to form, which indicates that they don't realize just how transgressive this gamespace is, unmaking and remaking meaning in its context.

In terms of using this game in the classroom, it would for sure be a fun way to introduce the history of typography to students, as the levels do well with situating the typefaces within a specific cultural and historical moment. Even if the player doesn't read a single page of the ebook (confession: that's me), the historical context is clear and memorable, and playing through the levels is a great illustration of how the typeface reflects the cultural moment. The levels would also be a useful way to start discussion on the ways in which typefaces convey meaning—historical, cultural, situational—beyond the alphabetic.

Like with typefaces in general, in *Type:Rider*, form is privileged over content. It is this procedurality of the gameplay that allows us to make meaning from the typefaces, deconstructing their meaning in written literacy and remaking them into gaming literacy. It defamiliarizes us with these typefaces as a way to learn about them; it uses process as a way to actively make meaning from typeface.

References

- Bogost, Ian. (2007). *Persuasive games: The expressive power of videogames*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Bogost, Ian. (2011). *How to do things with videogames*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minneapolis Press.
- Bolter, Jay David. (2001). *Writing space: Computers, hypertext, and the remediation of print* (2nd ed.). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Brownlee, John. (2013). "Type:Rider" is the ultimate video game about typography. *Fast Company*. Retrieved June 5, 2017, from <https://www.fastcodesign.com/3019584/typerider-is-the-ultimate-video-game-about-typography>
- Cosmografik/Bulkypix. (2012). *Type:Rider* [iOS game].
- Gee, James Paul. (2007). *What video games have to teach us about learning and literacy*. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press.
- Kirkpatrick, Graeme. (2011). *Aesthetic theory and the video game*. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press.
- SciFi [mp3 file]. Retrieved January 4, 2017, from <http://www.bensound.com/sci-fi>