



# A Framework for the Creation of a Reading Video Game for Children

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**Abstract.** When children start to learn how to read in primary school, they are given children's books, collections of tales, to read in class or at home, but not all children enjoy books to the fullest, and worse, many do not like reading at all. The aim of this paper is to propose a method to adapt such books into video games, hence giving the possibility to read the same stories in a different, interactive medium. Children being familiar with video games, and being avid players, they may more easily enjoy a story through this medium rather than another. But as we work on the matter at hand, two main issues arise, which we will discuss further below. How to adapt from text, often illustrated, to video game? Considering the target audience of this effort, how are we going to make it understandable, legible, and accessible to young children? Said questions are meant to help developers and researchers understand better how to work with children's literature and children's games having always their audience in mind.

**Keywords:** Children's Video Games · Children's Literature · Video Game Adaptation · Video Game Accessibility

## 1 Introduction

What makes children better at reading and manipulating words is frequent engagement with written text. Lété has explained that the more they read, the more they unconsciously learn the implicit rules of language [1]. It does not matter which type of text they read. However, in primary schools, where the formal teaching of reading happens, children are more likely to encounter written text in the form of manuals, textbooks and short tales, often coming with illustrations. In other words, they will mostly read through a diverse range of books. Before my current work in research, between 2017 and 2020 I used to teach French and English to primary school and middle school children, and experience has shown me that it is getting harder to find children willing to read a book, sometimes, even a comic book. That experience is shared by a lot of teachers and researchers in education. Cunningham reports such testimonies, adding that forcing reading unto children does not help making them good readers, as it lacks motivation, a key attitude to enjoy reading [2]. Love and motivation are aspects shared by many others, such as Leland et al. [3] and Powell-Brown [4].

Powell-Brown has published in 2006 an article whose title is “Why Can't I Just See the Movie? Fostering Motivation in Children Who Struggle with Reading” [4], using

on purpose a sentence many may have heard coming from children and teenagers who would rather see a movie version of any story rather than its written form. Reading does not imply only reading books, and knowing that a part of our target audience does not enjoy reading books so much, why not give them an alternative? Enjoying a popular story in another form still means enjoying that same classic tale, and if the children Powell-Brown had to face preferred movies, maybe some others may prefer other media as well. Hence comes the main topic of this paper: turning classic tales for children into video games. Going back to Aarseth's definition of cybertexts as "ergodic literature", meaning "nontrivial effort is required to traverse the text" [5], or in other words, in the case of games, greater involvement from the player is necessary to play. Hodent describes games as "intrinsically gratifying" [6] Then, if games need a lot of effort to be played and at the same time are so popular and gratifying, it means that players feel genuinely motivated to play.

Several famous characters of children's literature have appeared in video games such as Cinderella in *Cinders* [7], the Big Bad Wolf in *The Wolf Among Us* [8] or Alice in *Alice: Madness Returns* [9]. However, these three games share a common point: they expand on the universes from the tales into their own thing, and are not adaptations of the written tales, and worse, the games are not designed for children, but rather for an adult audience, in the case of the latter two. Adaptations of children's literature into video games are nearly nonexistent. One could mention *Never Alone*, based on the traditional Inupiat tale "Kunuksaayuka" [10], to which we may add a few games with a structure akin to a fairy tale like *Child of Light* [11] and *The Cruel King and the Great Hero* [12], but the examples are only a few.

The 2023 statistics from the Entertainment Software Association state that 76% of American children under the age of 18 play video games [13]. Since the majority of children plays games, adaptations of classics of children's literature into video games is a relevant idea. In the following sections, we will propose a set of design methods that need to be applied to make such games a reality. The first questions that must be wrestled with are related to the needed transformations from the source text, and next, several issues of accessibility for children. The existing literature on such matters is scarce, Bernal-Merino mentioned a few issues on children's texts in games in relation to questions of video game translation and localization [14, 15] and Fisher wrote a book on important general guidelines for game design for children, but its contents lack specificity regarding the literary material we suggest using as a source [16].

## 2 Dealing with the Source Text

### 2.1 Issues of Length, Complexity and Violence

Some classic tales can be long, have complex syntax and vocabulary, and may involve gruesome events that would not fit well with the teachings we want to provide children with in 2023. Hence, the source text needs to be transformed into a controlled form adapted to children. Of course, depending on the age of your target audience, the level of transformation will change. The older the children, the more independent they are in their reading practice. Consequently, the focus of this work will stay within the scope of primary school children, aged 6–10, who have greater needs in terms of making text and

game accessible. Depending on the source text used, there may need more or less work. There can be as many games as there are tales, and it would be humanely impossible to count the number of folk and fairy tales that have been passed down through human history. Some are shorter, simpler and less violent than others. But in general, classic tales, as Hintz, Zipes or Bernal-Merino have shown, were not necessarily initially intended for children [15], they are socially backwards to modern audiences [17], children today may have a hard time relating to them [18]. To illustrate my words, we will use “Sinbad the Sailor” from *The Arabian Nights* as an example. As there are several versions of it available to us today, for the remainder of this article, we will use the classic 1885 version by Sir Richard F. Burton [19].

“Sinbad the Sailor” is a series of seven adventures collected in the sixth volume of *The Arabian Nights*. They portray Sinbad, a young man from Baghdad who dilapidated his family inheritance, seeking adventure in faraway lands. He reaches the port city of Bassorah and embarks on a voyage. In each of the seven tales, he ends up shipwrecked and stranded on an unknown land. Through his wit, sheer luck and a bit of magic, he always manages to get back to Baghdad richer than he was before. The origins of the Sinbad stories are unclear, but may date back to the 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> century [20]. Henceforth, the set of morals and ethics therein differs from those of today, and will need to be adapted to better fit our current society. To deal with all the problems mentioned above, the text will have to be adapted through three main means: reduction, deletion and gameplay.

**Reduction.** Reduction is the process of making the text shorter while keeping its meaning intact. Sentence length, syntax and vocabulary may become an obstacle for the comfortable reading of young children. The first of the seven adventures of “Sinbad the Sailor” amounts to 3500 words. Turning such a tale into a video game would make it, given the different sets of signs making up a video game, an interactive illustrated story. Since there’s a dominant visual element to video game stories, we will compare them with picture books, which are often given as reading items to children, facilitating reading and comprehension thanks to rich, beautiful and detailed illustrations. However, since their audience are children in the process of learning to read, the amount of words is precisely calculated depending on the age of the intended readers, with a standard amount of words being between 500 and 600 words [21]. The initial amount of words should strive to be reduced to make it closer to the amount found in picture books (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Reduction example taken from the first adventure of “Sinbad the Sailor”.

Source text extract	Suggested reduction
“My father was a merchant, one of the notables of my native place, a monied man and ample of means, who died whilst I was yet a child, leaving me much wealth in money and lands and farmhouses.”	My father was very rich, and left me with all his wealth after he died

**Deletion.** Deletion is the process of deleting entirely a part of the text, which implies a loss of meaning. As mentioned earlier, a lot of stories can be gruesome, violent, and inadequate for a young audience in the 21<sup>st</sup> century [15, 17, 18], and because of that, excerpts from the source text may need to be deleted. In the seven adventures of “Sinbad the Sailor”, the main character is at times murderer, owner of slaves or concubines, or the husband in a forced marriage. It is part of the continuous life of folk and fairy tales to be retold in a new manner befitting of their new context [22]. Such elements must then be deleted. Sentences or paragraphs containing such events can need both reworking through reduction and deletion, as shown in the example below (Table 2).

**Table 2.** Reduction and deletion example taken from the 1<sup>st</sup> adventure of “Sinbad the Sailor”.

Source text extract	Suggested combined reduction and deletion
“Reaching the city in due time, I went straight to my own quarter and entered my house where all my friends and kinsfolk came to greet me. <b>Then I bought me eunuchs and concubines, servants and negro slaves till I had a large establishment</b> ”	I got home and all my friends and family came to greet me

For both processes, the choice of words is important, it is required that the vocabulary be as understandable as possible for children. To that effort, I recommend using frequency dictionaries as the one published by Davies and Gardner [23], which is based on the Corpus of Contemporary American English Davis designed, or the frequency list developed by Snauwaert which can be found online [24], based on a corpus of 6 million words taken from 12 popular American TV shows including *The Simpsons*, *Friends*, *The Office* and more.

## 2.2 Gameplay

A video game is a narrative construct made of different signs including not only text, but also visuals, sound and different kinds of interactions. While a great deal of the source text will be adapted through reduction and deletion, a big part of the text will have to be adapted into gameplay and interactions with the audiovisual environment of the game. The choice of interaction will vary depending on the genre of game being designed. In the case of “Sinbad the Sailor”, the story follows the motifs of the fantasy adventure, traveling being one of the main elements of the tales [20], so a game adapted from this very tale could be an adventure/RPG hybrid in the vein of the *Legend of Zelda* series, which is what I am currently developing as part of my research project.

The following example is drawn from Sinbad’s fourth adventure, in which he becomes stranded in a faraway kingdom that welcomes him with open arms. He befriends the local king, who gifts him in marriage the nicest woman in town. She eventually falls ill and dies, after which Sinbad learns of a local tradition: when someone in a couple dies, the other is buried alive with them in a giant cave below the city where all couples

are eventually buried. Each person buried alive is given a few pieces of bread and a bit of water, allowing them to survive for a while before their inevitable death. Sinbad eventually finds his way out through a crack in the cave and escapes, but before he does, to survive, he kills every living person that gets thrown in the cave to steal their bread and water. In this tale, we have two big issues that need to be solved, first the issues of forced marriage and then the issue of murder. Some of this will require the use of deletion, but the events there are central to the plot of the tale and cannot be entirely erased, which means that something needs to happen, albeit in a different manner. The adaptation has to be multimodal, transforming the source text at the same time in regards to words, visuals, interaction and gameplay which implies recreation and rewriting. Find below a possible solution taken from the murder scene in the cave (Table 3).

**Table 3.** Deletion of violence and rewriting into new gameplay elements in “Sinbad the Sailor”

<b>Source text extract</b>	
“Then I took the leg-bone of a dead man and, going up to the woman, smote her on the crown of the head; and she cried one cry and fell down in a swoon. I smote her a second and a third time, till she was dead, when I laid hands on her bread and water [...]. I carried the vivers to my sleeping place in the cavern-side and ate and drank of them sparingly, no more than sufficed to keep the life in me”	
<b>Issue</b>	<b>Solution</b>
Violence	Deleted
Means of survival: Food	Sinbad finds mushrooms growing in the cave as well as nuts left by animals from the outside
Means of survival: Water	Sinbad finds a small stream of clean water in the cave

In this new version of the tale, Sinbad meets a woman in this faraway kingdom, they eventually fall in love and marry, but she dies of illness. Sinbad learns of the ritual in which they bury alive the spouses of the deceased and is thrown into the cave with some bread and water. That being not enough, he looks for sustenance elsewhere. In the source text, he eventually finds his way out through a crack, which means there is an opening to the outside world, so small mammals could store seeds, fruit and nuts in the cave that he could eat. Within the cave could grow edible mosses and mushrooms that the player would have to collect to stay alive. While searching for food, the player would eventually find a small stream of drinkable water, which will lead him to the exit of the cave as well. To sum up, the player will have to explore the cave, and to delete any violence from the source text, we have added to the scenery a few edible elements and a stream of water, allowing us to keep the central plot point of the burial and consistency of the story.

Up to now, we have mainly focused on textual matters and how to adapt the text using reduction, deletion and recreation into gameplay. However, that is not sufficient to create a video game for children. The processes the text have gone through are already a first step towards accessibility for children, but there are many other design issues that must be taken into account when designing a game for children.

## 3 Video Game Accessibility for Children

### 3.1 Accessibility Issues

According to Grammenos, video game accessibility is “used to describe a situation in which a person is able to play a game even whilst having “diversified needs”, or whilst playing under “limiting conditions” which may include permanent and temporary physical, sensory and mental disabilities” [25]. This includes as well the limitations of children, which vary depending on their age, among which we find motor skills, that develop and grow more and improve throughout childhood [16], as well as the lack of experience with games, since while most children play video games, a very young child could be playing a video game for the first time or could be playing a specific genre of game for the first time and not know its conventions. Also, when it comes to reading, while theory wants children at any given age to have received the same instruction and thus have the same level of literacy, in practice, that is not the case, as some children will learn faster and others slower, depending on many social, economic, cognitive and family factors that go beyond the scope of this article. One very frequent reading impairment that needs to be taken into account, however, is dyslexia, which according to the Yale Center for Dyslexia & Creativity, “affects 20% of the population and represents 80–90% of all those with learning disabilities” [26]. The following subsections will focus on three main accessibility points: fonts, visuals and sounds.

**Fonts.** Dyslexia potentially affects a fifth of the population, and causes difficulties in learning how to read associated with a developmental delay and difficulties in the automatization of language skills [27, 28]. Rello and Baeza-Yates have studied the impact of fonts on reading performance for dyslexic people. Different fonts have different shapes and some, like Helvetica, Courier, Arial or Verdana, their findings show also that writing for a dyslexic audience should favor sans serif, roman and monospaced fonts [29]. Aside from a specific type of font, the British Dyslexia Association also recommends using a bigger font size, at least 12–14 point, or possibly more depending on the reader [30]. Bigger letters also makes reading more comfortable for young readers and adults alike, so this is an improvement for everyone, especially on text-heavy digital media [31]. The International Game Developers Association and Game Accessibility Guidelines both recommend using bigger fonts to improve readability with enough contrast in the background of the text box [32, 33].

**Visuals.** Video games allow for beautiful, complex and detailed graphics, whether in 2D or 3D. While graphics improve immersion, they have to keep a sense of purpose. Part of this is representing the universe of the game, its nature, animals, people, as well as a wide range of elements the player can interact with. Kress and van Leeuwen, in their *Grammar of Visual Design*, explain that in any visual medium, what is important stands out [34], drawing from Gibson’s “Theory of Affordances” [35]. In a video game, it means, as Hodent said, that “form follows function” [6]. Sharp explains this concept further as “qualities of an object or being that suggest its use or abilities” [36]. Just the same as we all know that on computer software the floppy disk is synonymous with saving, we are made to understand in video games that elements that stand out might do so for a reason. The vines growing on the walls of the *Legend of Zelda* games invite you

to climb on them to progress to new areas, a crack on a wall can imply that said wall can be broken, and luckily, our avatar earlier found bombs, which means they must be usable to tear down that wall. While such mechanics will seem obvious for seasoned players, they might be less natural for children who would not know as well the conventions of the games they are playing. As such, visual cues can be bigger, strong contrasting colors can help make elements stand out better, and other visual cues can be added to important elements that can be interacted with, such as the sparkling lights above the grass in *Pokémon* games that tell the player there is a rare shiny Pokémon to be found there. All these visual cues must be associated with clear tutorials to explain the player how they can interact with items and elements in the landscape of the game.

**Sounds.** Music, voice acting and sound effects also play a big part in the immersion of players in video games in any subgenre, as have discussed Bessel and Burke on action-adventure, FPS, horror, sports games and RPGs [37, 38]. Music and sound effects, apart from ambience, can serve as cues in the same way as visual clues. A specific music plays on a boss battle, which means the player knows they are in for a rough time. When the player picks up an important item, a special tune plays for a few seconds, or when they press a switch, a sound effects hints at the unlocking of a door somewhere. A combination of sound effects and vocal and textual cues can help make sure the information was properly given in different sets of signs. When the player hears the sound of the door unlocking, a text should appear saying so, reflecting the thoughts of the in-game character, which should also be dubbed to allow for the player to hear and read the words of the character at the same time. Dubbing is extremely important for children. While good voice acting is expensive [15], games for children should strive to be entirely voiced, especially when the game is associated with reading practice. Video games present a story that makes children readers of this specific type of interactive text. One way children first experience stories at school or at home, through professors and family, is when they are read to. Leland et al. confirm that reading aloud to children helps them progress in their mastery of literacy [3], which is why video games for children should be wholly voiced, as the game will provide written words on screen but also will vocalize this text to help with comprehension and the association of graphemes, syllables and words with their pronunciation.

### 3.2 Testing with Children

Any game has to be player tested during its development, and time should be given to the testing of accessibility issues, with enough iterations to adjust any accessibility issues arising during and after the collection of testing data until a final product ready for release is obtained [39]. If a game's target audience is children in a specific age range, it has to be tested with children of the corresponding age group. Testing with children can be more complex for various ethical reasons, but is however mandatory as they are at the heart of the design process of the game. The data collected from children can be subject to several biases, such as wanting to please the adult they are with and thus telling them what they want to hear rather than what they really think. Knoll adds that researchers should avoid leading questions and keep their language neutral, as well as inviting the children to talk aloud about what they experience [40]. He also mentions that

children, especially the younger they are, can have spontaneous, unexpected behaviors compared to adults [40]. Adult playtesters are doing their job and getting paid for it, whereas children testing games are just playing and having fun, so it is best, as Fisher explains, to set short test sessions of an average of 30 min to avoid boredom, give power to the children in their practice by making them feel at home and in charge of their playing, and also allocating time for them to simply play the game, and possibly play around with something else and rest if needed [16]. They are children and it is in their nature, especially when they are very young, to be very energetic and require different activities to stay stimulated. Keep in mind that they need time to simply be children.

## 4 Conclusion

Making video games for children is a complicated process that requires the application of numerous accessibility rules in many design aspects, whether it is text, visuals and sounds. Such rules already exist, to some extent, but were not necessarily designed to be applied for children, and further work is needed to properly establish an accessibility guide for game design for children that could be used in the video game industry. It is an even greater challenge when working with literary material to find exactly how to adapt the text into a video game for a younger and modern audience, but the processes described in this article, reduction, deletion and transformation into gameplay, are already a solid basis to continue working in that direction. More work needs to be done in adaptation studies, which have left video games out of its spectrum for too long a time, with only brief mentions of video game adaptation in the works of Hutcheon [41], Stobbart [42] or Martin [43]. Video games can be an entertaining new way of reading classic stories on an engaging medium that can motivate children to get involved in their reading practice. Children's classics are only waiting to be retold in video game form, as they have been in movies before. The more classic stories will be available as video games, the more children will have opportunities to experience them in different ways. Such games do not intend to replace books, of course, but to be an adjacent medium that some will enjoy more, or at least differently, than the text. We can only hope that if they enjoy the story they read through a game, they might want to move to the original book or tale. The objective of these games is, just like storybooks, to nurture the love for reading.

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