

Playing the Writing Game: Gaming the Writing Play

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Abstract

My studies consider the application of digital game theory to the instruction of writing in the first year composition classroom. I frame my argument through dialectic of representation and simulation and the cultural shift now in progress from the latter to the former. I first address the history of multimodal composition in the writing classroom, specifically noting the movement from analysis to design. In the third chapter, I examine several primary tenants of video game theory in relation to traditional academic writing, such as the concept of authorship and the importance of a rule system. My final chapter combines the multimodal and digital game theory to create what I term “digital game composition pedagogy.” The last chapter offers new ways to discuss writing and composing through the theories of video games, and shows how video games extend the theories associated with writing to discussions that coincide with an interest that many of our students have outside of the classroom.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

Press Start...

Picture this: Here I am, a senior in high school, strategically having secluded myself in my bedroom under a dim light, away from the bother and broken concentration that other peers would bring. The dim light flickers, continuously dancing in my dilated pupils while they each remain zealously focused on the work to be done in front of them. They twitch with each new piece that is fit into the composition I construct in front of me, the story slowly approaching its completion with each movement of my hands, gently grasping their writing tool. The story flows from synapses to fingertips, melding with the utensils of my composition to create a supremely personal narrative. *My story.* Immediately, with a brazen suddenness, it's over. The light stops flickering. My story has ended. My writing tool hits the ground as I quickly rise from my chair and vehemently chastise the last boss of *Final Fantasy 7* with, "OH MY GOD! HOW DID THAT SPELL KILL ME? I JUST CAST SHELL AND REFLECT ON MY PARTY LIKE 2 SECONDS AGO! THIS BOSS IS SO CHEAP!"

Video games embody the newest form of composition and storytelling in our culture. Many of them involve complex character development, multivalent storylines, and wonderfully rich themes. Such concepts have long found their place within literature and film discussion; however, games are slowly emerging as a medium necessary of such discussion as well. Yet, these aesthetic qualities alone are not what make video games a unique zeitgeist of postmodernity.

Rather, it is the level of responsibility that the player exhibits in the story construction that vastly differentiates video game from previous modes of discourse. As my eccentric anecdote suggests, I view the player of a video game in the same vein I think of the author of a novel. Although, video games (naturally) differ greatly from traditional forms of writing, they still involve many of the same roles, reallocated to new positions by new criteria. As a composition instructor, it is my intention to consider the various ways in which the numerous hours students spend engaged with video games encourages them to reconsider the practices associated with traditional academic writing, and the art of composition in general.

Video games have had difficulty casting off the myth that they are simply “little toys for little boys.” As gamers have grown up, so too have video games. They represent a billion dollar industry, one that surpasses the Hollywood box office in annual revenue. In his book *Trigger Happy*, Stephen Poole reports that “total video game software and hardware sales in the United States reached \$8.9 billion, versus \$7.3 billion for movie box office receipts; \$6.6 billion of the video game receipts were from software sales, retail and online” (Poole 6).

Additionally, games are no longer targeted to the adolescent male demographic as they were once touted. Instead, “the average age of videogame players is now estimated to be twenty-eight in the United States; one 2000 survey reported that 61 percent of all U.S. video gamers are eighteen and over...” (6). It is also of the utmost importance to remember that, “In 1999 in the United States, nearly 43 percent of gamers were female” (145). It is with these numbers in mind that I consider the pertinence of my theoretical endeavor. As video games’ presence

surges in our society, so too should insightful commentary and debate on their influence and lasting impact.

Creating a “game based pedagogy” will develop along several fronts that are necessary pieces of its construction. First, I will examine the history of multimodal composition theory and pedagogy in the writing classroom. Attention to this history and its development is vital for two reasons: one, it will chart the use of “alternative” texts in the composition classroom such as television, advertisements, and film, displaying how these have been used alongside traditional textbooks and literature to discuss writing. There is a movement toward recognizing the value of visually constructed arguments in addition to written ones, and the second chapter will discuss this progression over the past fifty years. Secondly, chapter two will situate video games alongside other forms of multimodal communication, and, hopefully, demonstrate to the reader how video games present particularly sophisticated and complex worlds through the use of written text, visual representations, sounds, active manipulation, and required reflexive thinking. While there is no lengthy study or discussion of using video games in the classroom as multimodal texts to analyze, I feel that that intersection between the discussed history of multimodal composition and video games is important for situating video games alongside the types of “alternative” texts that have been used thus far in the instruction of writing.

The third chapter will attend to the discussion of digital game theory that will be considered alongside the theories of multimodal composition in order to arrive at a “game based pedagogy” for composition studies. The theory behind

video game shows how the games' components operate both on individuals and through them. These theories will be set in contrast with theories of traditional modes of communication such as reading and, more recently, television. The primary difference that will be noted and discussed to a great degree is the slide between representation and simulation, two conceptions that greatly influence the ways in which a person approaches and considers art and its practices. In addition to placing digital game theory in regard to other artistic theories in the classroom, I will focus on the specifics of many games themselves in order to provide concrete examples of how these theories operate within a given context. This will also serve to demonstrate the ways in which video games adhere to and break from traditional writing practices. As the anecdote at the beginning of this chapter suggests, video games are clearly an act of composition, using specific tools and mediums to get particular points across. My examination of the theory behind video games also hopes to establish them as a medium with more to offer than simply entertainment.

Finally, after discussion of both multimodal composition theory and digital game theory, I will synthesize aspects of each in order to develop what I call a “game based pedagogy” for the composition classroom. This pedagogy will consider how we might use digital game theory in relation to the instruction of traditional academic writing. While much of the game theory deals with the construction of narrative in video games, I argue that the production of these storylines by the player renegotiates their consideration of composition as a practice. It is through the theories provided by both compositionists and digital game theorists that I postulate a way these two seemingly divergent modes of

communication can be reconciled and, subsequently, benefited from. A “game based pedagogy” will in time, I hope, dissipate some of the edification that academic writing has incurred over time in order to make the writing style more accessible to students. I will call attention not only to the theories I put forth, but to the classroom practices that embody these theories and can be put into practice with this pedagogy in mind.

Simulation vs. Representation

Representational thought has been the primary mode of understanding and interpretation of events, both real and fictional, throughout Western history. Classic representational thought means to think of images and words as exhibitions of the “things” to which they refer. Over time, the mode of thought that recognized these images *as* images and not as the thing in and of itself became more popular. Gonzalo Frasca offers a useful example of how representational thought operates:

Let’s start by taking a look at representation through a simple example. Here is Magritte’s *La Trahison Des Images* (The treachery of images). It’s a famous painting and many things have been said about it. I will simply mention that the image portrays a pipe but, as the text explains, the image itself is not an actual pipe but a representation. The word “pipe” is also a textual representation. In other words, it is not a real pipe, but an image with words. Representation has been the way of choice for humanity for depicting, explaining and understanding reality. The image of the

pipe tells us a lot about the actual object. We can learn about its shape, its colors, its materials and maybe even its size. The painting describes the pipe: it shows us some of its characteristics.

Obviously, representation is never exhaustive: there will always be some characteristics that will not fit into the painting. In other words, representation is always an incomplete task. (Frasca 1)

The characteristics that Frasca is referring to include how a pipe works and how one puts tobacco into the pipe. These are facets that, as Frasca suggest, are more adequately suited for simulative explanation.

Standing opposite of representation on the heuristic continuum is simulation. Where representation looks at things as unique, transcendental objects in their own right, simulation theory (born from post-modern modes of thinking) recognizes that those objects are only what they are based upon the constructs of a cultural system that designates what they are not. More specifically, a simulation is a system with rules that are designed to train the user's body to abide by them. To operate within these rules is to operate the simulation. As game theory has progressed in discussion, several theorists have offered varied definitions by which we might think about simulation. Espen Aarseth defines simulation as:

[t]he hermeneutic Other of narratives; the alternative mode of discourse, bottom up and emergent where stories are top-down and preplanned. In simulations, knowledge and experience is created by the player's actions and strategies, rather than recreated by a writer or moviemaker. (Aarseth, *First Person* 52)

Representation can be thought of as “top-down and preplanned.” This is true in many respects for freshman composition. We assign our students a paper with specific guidelines that must be met in order to pass the course. Our paper requirements set goals that they must achieve, imposing a restrictive form that they must reproduce in order to earn a good grade. The teacher-god then evaluates the student’s writing based upon how well they *represented* the instructions of the assignment sheet in their writing. The idea of emergent knowledge is stifled by the imposition of a hierarchical structure that designates the form that the student must write through. Writing, for students, then becomes a matter of filling in the blanks with the information that the teacher wants to hear.

In video games, it is the “knowledge and experience that is created by the player’s actions” that encourages players to remain engaged with the game. If students have grown more accustomed to engaging with this form of narrative, how do we use that to enhance the ways that they come to understand traditional forms of writing? When they sit down to compose a piece for our class, in what ways can we help them to think of writing more along the lines of a simulation rather than representation? We might begin by explaining to them that writing is a way of exploring the simulation of “the social” that our students are situated in. Rather than emphasizing writing as a way to develop new ideas and new knowledge, we might think of writing as a way of *exploring* the constructs within which our ideas are developed and offering new interpretations of cultural designations and cultural forms. If we show students how to wrangle writing from its high perch that seems obtainable only by a select few “good” writers,

then we might begin to consider the ways that we might help our students to explore their own ideas and how those ideas are made manifest.

An important distinction to make between representation and simulation is the notion of a procedural entity. Where representation is a comfortable perspective in our consumer culture (we absorb what culture feeds us), simulation theory shows us a culture that we both absorb and produce as we play it. Since video games constitute a substantial shift in art forms, Simon Penny notes the variant ways that we must analyze these new forms of discourse in relation to the old:

Our analysis of interactive media must therefore go beyond theories of representation in images. The image is just the target, the surface. The interactive image cannot be spoken of in the terms of traditional passive images because it is *procedural*. (Penny, *FP* 80, italics mine)

The video games that students are engaged with are procedural in that they require the manipulation of symbols, concepts, and rules to solve a task or a problem. Postmodern thinking suggests that no image is ever entirely passive when we look at it, but for a moment let us resist the urge to renegotiate our cultural history. The “procedural” that Penny refers to deals with the way in which people playing a computer game use their entire body to create the image in front of them. The player’s cognitive assessment of the game image, along with the physical act of holding the game controller in their hand (the sole purpose of which is to manipulate the game image), makes the game procedural. The player engages with the image on a physical level rather than only cognitive.

Representational thinking separates the body from the mind's interpretation of the image, suggesting that one's response has no effect on the other. However, as the two are intertwined in a simulation, we have no choice but to consider the implications that each one has on the other.

A key element of simulation theory is consideration of bodily training. An effective simulation immerses users so deeply that they do not realize the ways in which it cultivates their body as they become part of the simulation. In a simulation, body reflexes are trained at a level below that of consciousness. Each video game has its own set of manipulative devices that it uses to train the user. As players allow these devices of the game to colonize their body, they become better at playing within the simulated world the game provides for them. Some games, such as those of the notorious first-person-shooter genre, decrease the critical distance between the player and the simulation substantially. First-person-shooter refers to a type of game in which the player is placed directly in the role of the character they are playing by having the same point of view as the character in the game has, which usually includes starting over the barrel of a gun at whatever creature is about to be obliterated by the player's next button press. This level of immersion delves much deeper than say, *Super Mario Brothers*, where players watch the character they control on screen rather than existing inside of them. Simon Penny shows his apprehension toward computer simulated environments such as these when he notes that "computer simulated immersive environments are clearly an effective tool for bodily training" (Penny 74). While we should be wary of uncritical engagement with violent shooting games, Penny's statement becomes even more interesting when examined with

another insightful observation: “Social behaviors are often learned without conscious intellectual understanding” (Penny 74). With this in mind, we might begin to think about how students’ bodies have been trained to engage with their writing without their realizing it. Once we help the students to acknowledge that the very act of writing is a social construct itself, they may begin to redistribute their acculturated responses. For example, this semester I had my students draw their writing process on a piece of paper. After some moaning, they eventually began to work. After the exercise was over and they handed them in to me at the end of class, I noticed an interesting trend. Out of the 24 students in the class, 22 of them had drawn themselves sitting at a computer at a desk. Contrarily, no one had drawn themselves walking around in the woods, orally composing their writing in a Wordsworthian homage. This raises the question of how students’ bodies have been cultivated by a post-industrial culture to approach their writing. Writing has become a practice that students associate with sitting in front of a computer. In class, we used the students’ interpretations of their writing process to examine how the culture designates not only what they write, but the physical actualization of the process itself. At first the students responded with answers like, “Well, I like to write at the computer” or “I write best in front of the computer screen.” Ok, yes, perhaps that is so, but *why* do you like to write there or write best there? Eventually they came to examine how outside influences such as school or family had come to shape their choices. Through this exercise, the students were able to see one of the ways that culture acts a simulation, subversively training their body through a widely accepted, unquestioned practice—a procedure. This process shows a dissipation of the writer as subject

and the written text as object, suggesting that two have becomes parts of a system within the context of “writing.”

Literary Framework

Before I move into the chapters themselves, I want to frame my discussion of the literature in each by delineating why I chose to focus on the particular readings that I did, as well as how they pertain directly to my argument. This information is pertinent to the reader not only so you might understand the reasoning behind the selections, but also to see why certain texts were privileged over others.

Diana George, a leader in study of the use of multimodal texts in the composition classroom, offers a concise yet poignant discussion of how visual communication in the instruction of writing has evolved over the past 50 years in her essay “From Analysis to Design: Visual Communication in the Teaching of Writing.” Her commentary focuses the movement from simply utilizing visual texts as consumable goods for students’ analytical dissection to encouraging students to design their own visual texts so they might better understand how arguments work through alternative modes of communication (instead of the traditional academic writing they are accustomed to). In regards to my theoretical argument, this essay serves to display how students produce multimodal arguments through their production of gameplay in video games. By interacting with the game design, students/players compose a particular worldview that reflects certain ideologies. Granted, this worldview is one that is predetermined by the game’s conceptual constructs; however, the same can be

said in regards to any argument made in any discursive medium since our culture, through its production, attaches meaning to all symbols, from stop signs to a silhouette of a gun.

George's work needs to be framed through the work of the New London Group, a conglomerate of scholars who convened in 1996 to discuss the necessary reconsideration of how literacy is approached. They argue that literacy is a multivalent term that applies to any text—not only those in the written format. They suggest that there is a literacy for movies, a literacy for music videos, a literacy for video games, and so on. The New London Group's article, "A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Designing Social Futures," is thought of as the primer for current research in multimodal composition studies, thus the primary reason for its inclusion in my study.

One of the scholars whom I will continually refer to is James Gee. Gee is at the forefront of the discussion concerning video games' impact on students' learning and comprehension skills. He has written two books that pertain directly to the subject: *What Video Games Have to Teach Us about Learning and Literacy* and *Why Video Games are Good for Your Soul*. In his book *What Video Games Have to Teach Us about Learning and Literacy*, Gee traces a variety of learning principles that video games use while people are playing them. Gee argues that video games are not the waste of time that our culture encourages us to think of them as, but rather forms of discourse that require their own form of literacy and implement their own statutes of learning. Gee feels that video games encourage active learning, as opposed to the contemporary school system, which, he argues, are embedded in passive learning and teaching techniques. However,

Gee argues that video games take active learning a step further and stimulate critical learning as well. He says, “For learning to be critical as well as active, one additional feature is needed. The learner needs to learn not only how to understand and produce meanings in a particular semiotic domain that are recognizable to those affiliated with the domain, but, in addition, how to think about the domain at a ‘meta’ level as a complex system of interrelated parts” (23). Video games are understood by the players (even if unconsciously) as spaces to be manipulated (as is the case with any type of game—chess, basketball, golf, or *Doom*). These manipulatable spaces are made up of “interrelated parts” that must be moved, transposed, and physically altered in order for a “game” to take place. The critical learning that Gee is referring to depends upon the user’s recognition and analytical critique of the fact that they are operating within a *space*.

A space, as I am considering in this sense, is an area defined by boundaries that mediate the forms of relations that can take place within its perimeters. Gee recognizes the space situated within his notion of semiotic domains, which he characterizes as, “any set of practices that recruits one or more modalities (e.g., oral or written languages, images, equations, symbols, sounds, gestures, graphs, artifacts, etc.) to communicate distinctive types of meanings” (18). Effective and meaningful participation within one of these semiotic domains requires a particular level of comprehension of the modalities that are required of its members. Video games represent their own semiotic domain—both reflective of and separate from other spaces such as reading, television, and movies. Gee expounds on the concept of semiotic domain when referring to video games by

classifying them as “design spaces.” He writes, “the learner must see and appreciate the semiotic domain as a *design space*, internally as a system of interrelated elements making up the possible content of the domain and externally as ways of thinking, acting interacting, and valuing that constitute the identities of those people who are members of the affinity group associated with the domain” (40). There is a metalevel of reflection that takes place while playing a video game that is not often encouraged in academic classrooms. In video games, a player might attempt to defeat a particular enemy they run into for the first time. The first attempt at this enemy may result in defeat, requiring the player to restart from their last save point and try again. This retry will carry with it the knowledge immediately gained from the initial, lost battle. The player considers the enemy’s movements, attack patterns, and sound cues to indicate how it will move and attack. During this retry, the player is able to meditate on the mistakes they made the first time, try new items or weapons to defeat the enemy, and reflect on how the design of the enemy’s attack pattern can be exploited. More than simply playing the game, it is playing the system.

Gee’s principle claims are shown through the examples of a student in a high school science classroom. Throughout *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*, Gee postulates 36 learning principles that take place when one plays a video game. He argues that good video games incorporate these principles of critical learning in their design system, creating a context within which the fundamentals taught to the player are easily seen as useful and necessary to them within the game world. I intend to use several of Gee’ principles to assist in my development of a game-based pedagogy. Although Gee

discusses their potential within science classroom, I want to explore the ways that they may assist and reform the practice of writing instruction in first year composition classrooms.

On the digital theory side of my argument, I will be adapting arguments from a variety of scholars who have written about the ideological, social, and cognitive implications and impacts of video games. These theorists include Janet Murray, Espen Aarseth, Simon Penny, Jesper Juul, Celia Pearce, and Eric Zimmerman. Each has written perceptively on topics concerning the evolution of digital gaming culture and its dispersion into the mainstream of American society. Such topics include the use of narrative in a digital game format, the artistic shift brought forth through a genre that is interactive by design, and ethical entanglements associated with the medium. As a burgeoning field, digital game studies and the theories associated with it are still in their most elemental stage. However, with this in mind, I seek to apprehend and utilize the work done by these scholars in order to show how these theories can affect our classical pedagogies of composition in the same way that feminist and poststructural thinking has reshaped the discipline.

First stage completed!

My work revels in its interdisciplinary approach to the topic of composition studies. While the ultimate goal of the project is to provide a framework that writing instructors incorporate in their classroom or, at the very least, encourage them to consider just how video games are impacting their students lives and thought processes. An important aspect of this endeavor to

remember is that the sensory onslaught of video games immerses the player in an environment that consumes three of the five senses—to say nothing of the cognitive attention necessary to succeed at a video game. It is this extreme degree of preoccupation that is of particular interest to me.

The following chapter will establish a framework for video games as a multimodal text, as well as discuss how multimodality has been used in the composition classroom thus far. Following that chapter, a review of notable aspects of game theory will draw attention to the aspects of digital game culture that are forcing us to reevaluate how narrative and composition work in today's media saturated Western world. Then, I will create a hybrid of the two theories—multimodal composition and digital gaming—in order to postulate a “game based pedagogy” in the final chapter.

Chapter 2

A Recent History of Multimodal Composition Pedagogy

“Writing is such a potent metaphor for culture in general, that the move in the current landscape of communication from the dominance of writing to the dominance of the image in many domains has given rise, understandably, to much anguish, soul-searching, and deeply pessimistic predictions about the future welfare of civilization”

-Gunter Kress, *Literacy in the New Media Age*

Stage 2...Begin!

Although multimodal composition has been present throughout human history, specific attention to the nature and complexity of its construction constitutes a recent phenomenon. This is not to say that communication across multiple medium has never been studied before, but the hierarchy of discursive modes in Western culture—writing being at the peak, with others such as sonic, visual, and gestural being shuffled somewhere below, the order determined by who you ask—has limited the degree to which it was considered a worthwhile and provocative venture. As Diana George notes, our culture has become more “aggressively visual,” making the need to theorize and understand the practice of reading visual texts imperative.

The term multimodal refers to the ways that meaning is made across various mediums at once. More specifically, multimodality speaks of:

...the increasing multiplicity and integration of significant modes of meaning-making, where the textual is also related to the visual , the audio, the spatial, the behavioural, and so on. This is particularly important in the mass media, multimedia, and in an electronic hypermedia. Meaning is made in ways that are increasingly

multimodal—in which written-linguistic modes of meaning are part and parcel of visual, audio, and spatial patterns of meaning. (Cope and Kalantzis 5)

In this chapter, I will discuss the history of visual communication and visually designed arguments in the composition classroom, beginning back in the 1940s with Dick and Jane books, discuss its marginalized position in the field, and look at the methods that several scholars, teachers, and theorists suggest for making it a more effective part of the contemporary composition classroom. While visually oriented arguments have gained momentum in the composition classroom, they still have not yet reached the same level of credibility as text-based arguments, although this probably has more to do with the privileged history of the written text and less to do with the visual arguments complexity and depth. Such complex arguments are readily seen in video games as well, augmented visually, textually, and aurally. The history provided in this chapter will, I hope, show how this multimodal composition within the classroom is also being utilized outside of academic walls by students as they play video games (amongst other activities).

Historical Usage of the Visual in the Composition Classroom

In her essay “From Analysis to Design: Visual Communication in the Teaching of Writing,” Diana George provides a detailed history of the use of visual mediums in the writing classroom over the past five decades. Additionally, her major argument within the essay, concerning the movement from simply having students analyze visual arguments, such as advertisements, to having them create their own argument through a visual design, provides a framework

for my later critique and analysis of video games as multimodal arguments and their potential impact on the composition classroom. Before addressing the use of visual media in her own classroom, George offers a rich history of visual literacy in the English classroom. Going beyond simply the college composition classroom (which is where my primary argument will focus), George examines the impact of visual rhetoric as it emerged from grades school studies and onward.

George notes that, “in 1946, the instructor’s edition of the popular Dick and Jane elementary reader series alerted teachers to the reality that teaching reading demanded attention to more than print literacy. It meant teaching students to read *pictures* as well as words” (George 15). The notion that students were “reading” their picture books long before they entered the school system suggested that a literacy is constructed before the children can understand words. Over the next five decades, this hypothesis arrived in many forms, urging English departments to consider their purposes with regard to critical and analytical thinking in addition to writing.

The arrival of television in the majority of American homes in the 1950s and 1960s evoked the belief that mass media was a threat to literacy education in English classrooms, the great fear being that television would hamper children’s learning ability. However, as George points out, the NCTE released a report by Neil Postman in 1961 that suggested “television was not only a proper subject for the English classrooms, but a necessary one...” (16). The report implored teachers to consider the visual devices within television’s form that duplicated aspects of traditional literary forms. The reasoning behind the report’s assertions

were: ““To the extent that their responses to television are *informed*, *discriminating*, and *creative*, we may be assured that our language and literature, as well as the lives of our students, will be enriched by contact with television. *But taste and critical judgment are learned habits of mind*” (qtd. George, 17, emphasis George). Television in and of itself was not a threat to children’s learning habits, but when it is introduced to a group which lacks the critical thinking skills, ability to artistically discriminate, and critique their own perception of the material, the fear that the passive reception would create a generation that is unable to discern the cultural implications of the mass media’s fabric it consumed on a daily basis. The English teacher’s job, then, as George notes, “is to foster ‘good taste and critical judgment,’ two qualities that lift the schooled above the unschooled” (17). So, rather than view television as an attack on literacy, the suggestion was that we expand the definition of literacy and what it means to be “literate.” Although the Commission on the Study of Television was not persuaded of the need for a new literacy, George points out that “its members did accept the challenge to extend the content of the English classroom to include a new literature—television as a literary text” (17).

Of course, the term “mass media” extends well beyond television. Newspapers, magazines, billboards, radio, movies, comic books, and websites are all mediums that disseminate information to the public via distributed outlets. Attention to these various forms (sans websites, naturally) was given in William Boutwell’s *Using Mass Media in the Schools*, published in 1962 by NCTE. Boutwell posits that these modes of communication often seem like a force beyond the manipulation and mastery of students, like messages sent down from

high the meager subjects of the king. The purpose of analyzing and critiquing them in the classroom was to return power to the consumers of the material, to recognize that these were not images that had to be unresistingly accepted. Yet, throughout this work, there was little suggestion that the students could be producers of mass media instead of simply victims of it (George discusses her own classroom activities that specialize in visual argumentation, which I will use as an example later). However, it was not until over 30 years later that this pedagogical strategy of visual design would be considered by a group of scholars in a small town in New Hampshire.

The New London Group

In September 1994, a group of scholars met in New London, New Hampshire to discuss the future of literacy instruction and how that future was being shaped by the rapidly changing techno-culture around us. The group consisted of academics including Courtney Cazden, Bill Cope, Norman Fairclough, James Gee, Mary Kalantzis, Gunther Kress, Allan Luke, Carmen Luke, Sarah Michaels, Martin Nakata, and Joseph Lo Bianco. According to the Bill Cope and Mary Kalantzis, the purpose of the meeting was:

To engage in the issue of what to do in literacy pedagogy on the basis of our different national and cultural experiences and on the basis of our different areas of expertise. The focus was the big picture; the changing word and the new demands being placed upon people as makers of meaning in changing workplaces, as

citizens in changing public spaces and in the changing dimensions of our community lives—our lifeworlds. (Cope and Kalantzis 4).

In addition, the group also included a consideration of the increasing awareness of lived differences depending on one's cultural positioning. As Cope and Kalantzis point out, “when the proximity of cultural and linguistic diversity is one of the key facts of our time, the very nature of language has changed” (6). I feel that an awareness of this aspect of the New London Group’s multiliteracies proposal is necessary for a clearer understanding of the numerous issues under debate at their meeting; however, for my purposes I will focus primarily on their first argument concerning the expansion of literacy and literacy pedagogy to encompass more than traditional reading and writing.

The New London Group’s manifesto, “A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Designing Social Futures,” was originally published in the *Harvard Educational Review* in 1996. A reworked and revised version of the piece was published alongside other works from individual members of the group in *Multiliteracies: Literacy Learning and the Design of Social Futures*. The premiere reasoning behind the essay’s position are the three areas of our existence that are morphing into a different shape than they have traditionally been considered: our working lives, our public lives (citizenship), and our personal lives (lifeworlds). Work has moved from the top-down, hierarchical structure that was made famous by Henry Ford, depicted in films such as Charlie Chaplin’s *Modern Times*, to what scholars have called “postFordism” and “fast capitalism,” involving a much greater reliance on informal, oral, and interpersonal discourse instead of clear and precise formal systems (qtd. 11).

Additionally, the New London Group argues that public life, through the collapse of homogenizing nation-states, has been left with a void that must be filled through what the group calls a “civic pluralism.” Civic pluralism recognizes that various identity markers come together to form the ways that we think about ourselves. Rather than espouse a single cultural and linguistic standard, civic pluralism arbitrates differences. Race, class, gender, sexuality—all of these have become markers that designate our personal experience in contemporary American society. Although we still recognize a set of dominant ideological constructs, we also know that it no longer adequately describes the majority of the population. Indeed, “civic pluralism changes the nature of civic spaces, and with the changed meaning of civic spaces, everything changes; from the broad content of public rights and responsibilities to institutional and curricular details of literacy pedagogy” (15). Thus, literacy has as much to do with understanding the uniqueness of the reader as it does with examining the text itself.

Finally, the group proposes that our personal lives—particularly those of children—are increasingly being defined not by our commonalities, but by our differences. However, the paradox of this situation is that the differences are homogenized by multinational corporations rather than a cultural heritage and belief system. The New London Group argues, “Despite all the subcultural differentiation of niche markets, not much space is offered in the marketplace of childhood that reflect genuine diversity among children and adolescents” (16). Thus, “the challenge is to make space available so that different lifeworlds can flourish; to create spaces for community life where local and specific meaning can be made” (16). The group’s primary goal is directed toward developing a variety

of literacies that allow us to talk about these emerging changes of our society and, to some degree, combat them.

With these social and cultural criteria in mind, the group moves on to examine the current state of schooling and what alterations can be made to accommodate student's learning within this shifting cultural landscape. There is the proposition that schools broaden their instruction of literacy, but also a recognition that schools can only do so much. With that in mind, the discussion progresses to consideration of what tenants a multiliteracy pedagogy would consist of. Their pedagogy of multiliteracies bases itself on the concept of 'Design,' a principle that emphasizes learning as "the result of the designs (the structures) of complex systems of people environments, technology, beliefs, and texts (20). This framework is based on a particular theory of discourse, one that sees "semiotic activities as a creative application and combination of convention that, in the process of Design, transforms at the same time as it reproduces these conventions."

The principles of this Design-based pedagogy include Available Design, Design, and the Redesigned. Available Designs are the resources of Design, consisting of the grammars of a particular semiotic system—film, language, video games, photography, etc. These Available Designs are then taken by their respective areas of interpretation and put to use in order to produce a (hopefully) meaningful experience. This Designing activity simultaneously works on and with Available Designs, producing a new construction and representation of reality. Thus, through this system, Redesign emerges. The New London Group writes, "As the play of cultural resources and uniquely positioned subjectivity, the

Redesigned is founded on historically and culturally received patterns of meaning” (23). While this is an extremely brief overview of the group’s theoretical basis, the primary aspect to recognize is that a particular medium always has conventions that it must conform to in order to be recognized as such.

Analyzing and interpreting the meaning of much media today based solely on written text present in the message is not enough. Magazines and newspapers employ carefully spaced text, utilizing a visual grammar in order to designate importance, usefulness, and a variety of other implications to categorize articles and news stories. The spatial arrangement of the text on this page indicates certain values and privileges through its display.

After the New London Group met for the first time and released their manifesto, the individual scholars involved with the project published their own scholarship and articles embedded with the ideas that were cultivated at the initial conference. There has been an enhanced focus on examining the ways that multimodal texts, their analysis, and their construction can be put to use in various types of classrooms (George 2002, Kress 2003, Gee 2004). In “From Analysis to Design,” Diana George considers multimodal arguments for the composition classroom in lieu of the traditional position paper, a suggestion that makes us reconsider (once again) exactly what the first-year composition classroom should do. In order to help propose and frame an answer for this question, I turn to Gunther Kress’ *Literacy in the New Media Age*, a book that will illuminate—more specifically—exactly how multimodal media is entering our lives and the skills that we must cultivate in order to be active consumers rather than passive.

Gunther Kress' and Multimodality

In his book *Literacy in the New Media Age*, Gunther Kress, one of the original members of the New London Group, examines how the screen has replaced the page as the dominate communicative medium in our culture. Looking at the social, economic, communications, and technological factors, Kress provides a framework of principles for understanding these changes and their effect on the future of literacy.

Kress' main argument throughout the work revolves around the movement from strictly written meaning-making to the way in which the screen requires as much attention be given to the spatial arrangement of text as to what is being said. There is also the distinction made between the blurring of high and low culture, writing typically being the most distinguished form of communication among the cultural elite, images more often considered "less than" by the same group. Kress writes,

After a long period of the dominance of the book as the central medium of communication, the screen has now taken that place.

This is leading to more than a mere displacement of writing. It is leading to an inversion in semiotic power. The book and the page were the site of writing. The screen is the site of the image—it is the contemporary canvas. The book and the page were ordered by the logic of writing; the screen is ordered by the logic of image. (Kress 9).

As this shift continues, it is quickly—and perhaps unnoticeably in many cases—altering the ways that students read, write, and respond to texts. While Kress does not delve deeply into the cognitive possibilities, he insists (and I agree) that the cultural immersion surrounding the saturation of the image has changed our approach to traditional literature and reading. This change results in a constant feeling of instability framing our approach to the world, one that cannot be explained with the theories of the past developed for a world of stability. As our modes of communication mutate and expand, so must our possibilities of interpretation that accompany them.

In order to shape his discussion, Kress addresses the concept of mode in his writing. He writes, “mode is the name for a cultural and socially fashioned resource for representation and communication” (45). These modes are the forms through which communication can take place. The available modes a culture presents each have their own materiality as well, whether it be papyrus for print, a canvas for a painting, or a CD for a song. Modes designate an allowance for understanding through a particular medium. Considering mode through Kress’ definition, video games are understood as one of the more complex modes available within our culture. Parents and critics alike have made the broad claim that video games are dumbing-down the children of this generation, turning them into mind-numbed zombies of these digital game machines. Anyone who has ever tried to talk to an eight-year-old while they are playing a game demanding a high level of concentration and skill will know what I am talking about. While there is no evidence to support this generalization, there is also no evidence that necessarily refutes it; however, I would argue that

rather than transforming the children into media-saturated zombies, video games make them hyper-sensitive to the various modes of communication utilized by the games. Because game players are actively involved in the production of the game through use of the game system's controller (joystick, keyboard, mouse, gamepad, etc.), they are required to be much more attentive and alert while engaged with the game than when engaging with other media such as television or movies.

While I wholeheartedly agree with Roland Barthes' theory of the reader/watcher as a participant of the text and responsible for active engagement with the work in order to "produce the text," I would argue that the video games differ from previous media in that they not only need someone to produce the text, but to produce the work as well. A television show will run whether or not someone is watching it or not. A movie will run whether or not someone is in the theatre to see it. A video game cannot play itself. It requires a user for the work even to exist.

Kress writes, "Communication—whatever the mode—always happens as *text*. The 'stuff' of our communication needs to be fixed...in a mode: knowledge or information has no outward existence other than in such modal fixing" (47). Considering multimodal composition means considering the cultural positioning of the modes that will be involved in the communicative process. Each mode uses registers that the listener/viewer/reader/player recognizes as a mode for a particular sensory interpretation, and, through the process of interpretation based upon one's knowledge, experience, and cultural coding (race/class/gender/etc.), meaning is made. Because any form of communication

has no inherent meaning embedded within it, the level of coherence is a result of social action. This social action is called the “text.” Kress uses the same definition of text that Roland Barthes developed in “From Work to Text.” He says, “Text is the result of social action, of work; it is work with representational resources which realize social matters” (47). The concept of text is essential for understanding multimodal communication since the synthesis that takes place among the various modes in one piece of communication can only be understood at their intersection, never through only one mode alone.

One of Kress’ frequent points throughout *Literacy in the New Media Age* is that the screen has replaced the page as the dominant canvas for writing. In his discussion of reconsidering the definition of literacy, Kress proclaims that the screen has altered the way we read and compose in two ways: “first, the screen and whatever appears on it is treated as a *visual entity*.” Even when the content refers to words, the letters and punctuation are still ‘laid out’ in a way to enhance their aesthetic credibility. “Second, a significant organizational feature is that writing, whether on the screen or on the page, is accompanied more and more by image, whether as ‘picture,’ diagram, or map” (65). The principles of placement required by the combination of text and picture matter because of what Kress terms “visual grammar.” Visual grammar—like written grammar—suggests that information conveyed through visual elements is organized in a way that is coherent and understandable by the “reader.” I will return to visual grammar later as my discussion moves into digital games and narrative.

Kress discusses the notion of genre throughout his critique and propositions concerning multimodal communication. We traditionally have

thought of genre in relation to the arts, a method through which we can categorize movies, music, and books. Kress uses genre to describe categories of communication that function through stimulation of one of the senses. The question most engaging for Kress is whether or not “the category of genre [will] remain important, useful, [and] necessary [and if] it becomes more or less important in the era of multimodal communication?” He answers this question by insisting that “genre is essential in all attempts to understand text, whatever its modal constitution” (107). Genre, in this sense, functions as a categorization that allows for the recognition that text is dependent upon genre. Thus, video games’ interpretation is founded on both their interaction and their content. The interactivity of the games designates that in order be successful, one must be consciously engaged. A passive game player will not produce a victorious outcome against the opposition of a particular game. Such genre requirements can easily be applied to school and the traditional composition classroom, the essential aspect being to call attention to the similarities between composing an academic paper and interacting with a video game. While this may still seem abstract at this point, my later chapters will clarify the pedagogical design of which I speak.

A pedagogical design that follows Kress’ arguments about multimodality focuses on the recognition of textuality among and between texts. Students need to be taught the recognition of meanings between meanings; that is, understanding multimodal texts means analyzing the argument as a whole, not its individual parts. Kress writes:

Literacy and communication curricula rethought in this fashion offer an education in which creativity in different domains and at different levels of representation is well understood, in which both creativity and difference are seen as normal and as productive. The [students] who experienced that kind of curriculum might feel at ease in a world of incessant change. (121)

Shifting back to George and her examination of multimodal communication, she offers concrete pedagogical examples of this shifting dynamic of representation. Her classroom activity described in “From Analysis to Design” that I previously mentioned operates within the pipeline of Kress’ theory, encouraging students to approximate an argument that functions between multiple genres. Her work primarily focuses on the intersection between the visual and the written, but the example remains highly beneficial to examining how multiple genres could work in the instruction of argument-based writing.

George describes the assignment she gave to her students that involved their development of a visual argument about the book *King Leopold's Ghost*. In one example, George discusses the work of her student, Deirdre Johns, and the method through which she approached the assignment. George writes how Deirdre shows the class a remaking of Leopold of Belgium’s Congo Free State flag:

Like the original, her redesign features a bold yellow star in the center of a deep blue field. She tells the class that in her research she learned of the reasoning for the design: the star was to signify that light of Europe being brought in to the Dark Continent. In

Deirdre's flag, the blue field is now covered with images of precolonial African art. The gold star is covered in images of slavery, faces of explorers, photos from the rubber and ivory trade.

(George 12)

George's student's example encroaches upon the theory of genre bending that Kress speaks of. In order to understand the work, the "reader" must contextualize it through both *King Leopold's Ghost* and the Free State flag of the Congo. While it seems like only a simple parody, the implications of signifying on multiple genres through the project indicate a mixing of genres to create an argument that would otherwise be impossible. While the project itself is all visual, George describes a two page write up to go along with the redesigned flag to help clarify the meaning behind the design decisions that were made. This adds another dimension of interpretation for the viewer/reader to contend with, one that could potentially reduce or multiply the multitude of interpretations available to the viewer of the flag if we consider the remixing of discursive modes within one piece of art.

Stage 2...Completed!

While multimodal composition remains in transition within the composition classroom, the recognition of more and more multimodal texts within our culture at large stimulates the need for a greater critique and understanding of such communication. There remains the debate as to whether or not the composition classroom is the appropriate place for this, but the

movement by many scholars to explore the potential of multimodal discourse in this realm indicates a clear connection between the composition classroom and a richer comprehension of multimodality. Diana George notes, “Teachers who have been interested in using the visual in writing classes have generally limited their discussion to analysis because there were few ways of doing otherwise” (George 32). As technology availability increases within school systems, the potential for exploration of diverse constructions of multiple modes into one argument increases, promoting an understanding of multimodality not only through analysis, but through development and self-reflexive concern with the visual as well. The movement of multimodal composition pedagogy from strictly critique and examination to development and design highlights not only the shift in values of communicative forms in our culture, but an increased awareness of the possibilities that arise through the intricacies of text that takes multiple forms.

Since so much of the media consumed today is multimodal, awareness of how that media acts upon and through the consumer must be stressed. In the following chapter, I address the digital theory behind the multimodal text of video games, one of the most prominent modes of discourse among middle class, college-bound adolescents, and their bombardment of storytelling components that take place during the player’s composition of the game’s structure.

Chapter 3 Digital Game Theory

Stage 3...Begin!

I can't believe this. Two hours. Two hours of my life spent trying to send this half-human, half-demon twin brother of mine over the edge of this waterfall. It can be done. I *know* it can be done. I've done it before. But this 'Dante Must Die' difficulty setting is simply absurd. Did the game designers think this would be fun in some way, watching Dante being smacked into oblivion by the last boss within a matter of seconds? I mean, I'm doing everything right. My sword slashes are deft and accurate, shaving chunk after minuscule chunk of health from Vergil's life bar at the bottom of the screen; my impeccably well-timed dash evasions create attack openings that I've been capitalizing on; my use of power-ups has been conservative and strategic, utilizing my Devil Trigger (think of it as Clark Kent turning into Superman) at exactly the appropriate moments to counter Vergil's own Devil Trigger. My skills are awe-inspiring.

But this two-hit combo nonsense that takes off half of my life bar has to stop. How can I compete with that? My sword attacks barely tickle him. I mean, I'm good, but I can't help but imagine that the game's programmers only included the 'Dante Must Die' difficulty setting in order to see how many mental breakdowns might be attributed to attempting to finish *Devil May Cry 3* on its hardest difficulty. The enemies do more damage, your character does less damage, and items are few and far between. The game essentially does its best to reduce the player's spirit to a crippled, dilapidated shell of its former incarnation.

This rule system...,this rule system is ridiculous.

Games are by no means a new mode of expression in our culture, or any culture for that matter. People have been creating and playing games for centuries. While I certainly do not have the space to detail the rich history of games here, I will briefly examine some of the some of the overarching necessities for any game—no matter its origin. As Celia Pearce says, “a game is mostly described as framework for structured play” (Pearce, *First Person* 144). Every game exists on a contingency, manifesting itself through the competition of two or more opposing sides. Now these sides need not necessarily both be human, such as in Solitaire, but there must be an attainable goal that these opposing forces are working towards. The rule system of any game designates the accepted means that the player(s) can use to achieve the goal, although these rules can occasionally be bent or broken, as anyone who has taken liberties with the stacks of cards in a game of Solitaire knows. Creative winning strategies aside, rule systems are the foundation of any game, limiting the space in which “play” can occur and establishing the boundaries that players must exist within in order to be recognized as a participant.

Video games have juxtaposed narrative with these game facets, creating a complex hybridization between two cultural systems. Whereas a game of basketball does not have a story mapped over its contest (although media outlets may attempt to do so in order to create dramatic tension), many video games, such my earlier example *Devil May Cry 3*, include stories that act as a framework for the gameplay itself. Much debate has arisen among scholars of this new digital media phenomenon over which came first—the story or the game.

Theorist Janet Murray uses the term “cyberdrama” to classify emerging form of storytelling, melding the two aspects into a story-game. She places prominence on the story aspect of video games, suggesting that the rules are then designed based upon the impending outcome of the game’s narrative. Conversely, ludologists like Markku Eskelinen and Espen Aarseth seek to develop a theory specific to digital games and unattached to the theories of other art forms. Their assertions suggest that the discussion “story” in the debate of game theory is a red herring. Ludologists would prefer to separate the two terms, focusing on video games strictly in “game” terms. Although lines have been drawn in the colonization of this budding academic field, each side must still consider the various characteristics that separate video games from other mediums of communication.

This chapter will examine several of the most significant of these concepts, including the idea of authorship, input and output interaction, the notion of play, and further explication of a “rule system.” Each of these concepts is not inherent to the medium of video games, but has been substantially altered because of them. I will explore how they have been changed by video games and mutation that the concepts have undergone through their relationship with/in the gameplay of video games. This is not meant to be a full exploration of contemporary digital media theory by any means, but a look at some of the most pronounced and important points of consideration within the field, particularly when considering the effect of video games on our conceptualization of students’ writing.

Reconfiguring authorship

The substantial amount of video games that students are playing unquestionably has them thinking, while perhaps not consciously, very differently than previous generations about their role in the composition process. In much the same way that the traditional role of the author has been problematized by poststructuralist literary theory, so too does its position become blurred in new media discourses. Video games, each one developed by multiple programmers and artists, require a user/player to function as a complete “game.” The game needs a player to engage its system before it can establish itself as a game. The players, in this sense, then become the author of that particular game’s narrative. As they play the game, the players author their own individual story within the context of the game’s constructs and rules. Game theorist Celia Pearce believes that the game designers “are not so much storytellers as they are context creators...” (Pearce, *FP* 153). The developers of the game simply provide the context for which the game’s story may be told, while it is up to the player to author that story. Pearce further explicates this position as she discusses the popular video game *The Sims*. *The Sims* is essentially a capitalism simulator. The players design their character, build a house for them to live in, fill that house with various gadgets, gizmos, and furniture, help their character make friends in the neighborhood, and set their Sim character up with a job that they must attend everyday. There is no overarching “story” to tie all of the occurrences of the game together as the player completes them. Rather, the story

is mapped onto the game as the player acts out various events of the game.

Pearce explains:

Part of why it is interesting to look at the *The Sims* in terms of narrative fiction overall is that it represents an abdication of authorial control, or, perhaps more accurately, a shift in the definition of “author.” The creation of meta-stories and story systems has become a new form of authorship that is a sort of author/ nonauthor role. (Pearce, *FP* 151)

As students play more and more video games, their sense of authorship shifts from its traditional connotation. They become accustomed to experiencing control over the story that they write into the game’s context, unconsciously reconfiguring how they think about traditional, pen-and-paper academic writing. The experience of the game becomes extremely personal, as much as a book does to certain readers or a song to certain listeners. Ken Perlin further discusses how, “In a sense, the player is asked to take on some of the traditional role of author—*The Sims* itself is more of a simulator toy than a game. By playing with this simulator, the player becomes a sort of author” (Perlin, *FP* 16). It is not only *The Sims* that asks players to assume this authoring role, but *all* games to varying degrees. The simulation aspect of video games forces players to adhere to the (albeit somewhat bendable) rules designated by the structure. As they learn to play the simulation, they become able to manipulate its rule system to author their own individual story.

One might argue that my discussion up to this point has dealt only with the authorship of a story in games, a form of composition that perhaps we do not ask our students to attempt in first year writing courses. Even though the students do write a story when they play a video game, I argue that this also alters the way they approach analytical writing. If, when playing a video game, the students are positioned in the cultural context of the game's world, then we might use this idea to confer to them the ways in which they are always already positioned in an argument based upon the delineations such as race/class/gender/sexuality/etc. that culture establishes for them. When they analyze a text, the students deconstruct, reconstruct, and reaffirm the boundaries that culture has provided for them through their analysis. We might use this approach to demonstrate the ways in which writing is not some divine inspiration delivered from a higher being, but a method by which students might explore the ways that culture positions them in distributed relationships both physically and psychologically. These distributed relationships are made up of the social markers that I mentioned earlier, as well as individually manufactured ones such as hobbies and fashion, that separate us from one another and from other collectives.

It is this spatial relationship that is constantly being reinforced as students play video games. Games foreground objects' spatial relation to one another. Even in a game such as basketball, success is based on how the players are positioned with one another. The offense attempts to effectively space themselves out around the goal so that they might have a higher percentage of making a basket, while the defense attempts to disrupt this spatial relationship by

guarding the players or moving into the ball's passing lane. While playing a video game, the spatiality between the player's character and the rest of the game environment is of utmost importance. As Henry Jenkins points out, "Game designers don't simply tell stories; they design worlds and sculpt spaces" (Jenkins, *FP* 121). As students enact their story inside of the game world, the game space bends and conforms to their interaction with it. The game's story is authored in relation to the way in which the player interacts with the game world's elements, whether they be fire-breathing dragons or falling blocks to be set in a line. The players' existence in the game world is validated through the spatial interactions that they have with the objects of the game.

With this mode of spatially delineated thinking occupying such a great deal of students' time, to have them think about such relationships in their own lives would not be an abnormally large leap. For example, we might have students analyze the ways in which they are situated in the classroom, drawing attention to who is sitting where and how they are positioned in relation to the teacher, as well as who is *not* in the classroom. Having the students envision the classroom as a limited game space, which only promotes interaction with certain types of people, offers students the chance to become more aware of how cultural delineations position and affect them. It raises an awareness of the notion that we are not fully autonomous individuals, but operate in accordance to the environmental relations in which we are placed. Understanding this paradigmatic reconfiguration of authorship is paramount when considering the ways that video games are currently impacting and will in the future impact students' writing.

Input→Output Interaction

One of the key elements of interacting with a video game is the immediate response that players receive after inputting a command into the keyboard or game controller. The players press a button, and immediately see the effect their choice has on the game's environment through their digital avatar. Through this feedback, they react appropriately and enter a new command to, again, manipulate the newly established presentation of the game's elements, or game state. The game state is a derivative of the computer science term "state machine," which is "a system that can be in different states; it contains input and output functions, and definitions of what state and what input will lead to what following state" (Juul, *FP* 133). Thus, a video acts as a type of state machine, changing states with the various input commands from the player. This instant response to the player's choice from the game visually establishes the player's agency in the game world. This agency, a clearly definable, easily understandable influence on the culture of the game, empowers the player and encourages more input. The immediacy of the feedback, be it positive (their choice avoided an enemy's rocket) or negative (their choice led the game character to its demise), is a crucial aspect of this interaction. Stuart Moulthrop expounds on the allure of such continuous interaction: "Games—computer games in particular—appeal because they are configurative, offering the chance to manipulate complex systems within continuous loops of intervention, observation, and response" (Moulthrop, *FP* 63). Again we return to the importance of configuration in video

games. The “continuous loops of intervention, observation, and response” allow players to visibly and physically determine the impact their presence has on the game state. As they interact with the finite set of loops provided by the game, the configuration process grants them the ability to tailor the writing of the game-story to their personal experience.

It is this lack of immediate feedback through their personal configuration that distances many students from traditional academic writing. My argument extends beyond reductive impulses to simply diagnose so many students today with Attention Deficit Disorder, in order to think about the ways that video games have provided a ground that allows students to experience more agency in their work than any traditional method of writing instruction has. As a composition instructor, I want to consider the ways in which evaluative feedback on students writing can be more directly linked to the feedback they experience when manipulating a game world. When students play a game such as *The Sims*, they are able to see their influence on the game state through the game’s reaction to them. But how do we help students to see the ways that their traditional classroom writing manipulates the cultural zeitgeists around them? If we analyze students writing as resonant pieces of the culture in which they are immersed, we might begin to help them see that when they write they are manipulating the cultural constructs provided to them through both dominant cultural ideologies and personal experience.

Play in writing

It goes without saying that play is of utmost importance in games—video or otherwise. A game of any nature cannot exist without its respective form of play. When we play a game, we agree to abide by its established rules and regulations in order to achieve the most desirable outcome the game provides. In order to do this, we “play” the rule system of the game, manipulating it as best we can and to the extent that it allows. Eric Zimmerman defines play as “the free space of movement within a more rigid structure. Play exists both because of and also despite the more rigid structures of a system” (Zimmerman, *FP* 159). Video games can act as the system to which Zimmerman refers. They provide the player with a limited structure in which they have only certain options available to them. Through the use of these available modes of interaction, the player utilizes the free space of movement provided by the game’s rigid structure in order to beat the game.

Play and rules are codependent on one another, existing either simultaneously or not at all. The two correlatives seem contradictory in a sense, as it is not common to associate the idea of “play” with the reliance upon rules, but rather that it is a space that allows us to do as we please. However, this relationship is based on the mutually exclusive goals. A player plays a game in an attempt to accomplish specific goals, while rules exist in order to prevent those goals from being attained. Zimmerman assess that “play is the opposite of rules. Rules are fixed, rigid, closed, and unambiguous. Play, on the other hand, is uncertain, creative, improvisational, and open-ended” (Zimmerman, *FP* 161). At the intersection of these opposites, rules and play, emerges a story. As a player plays a video game, the agency allowed to them through the game controller is

the tool that creates that intersection. Button presses “play” their character through the defined rule system of the game world. As the player moves though these various allowances of the game, their chosen path along the game’s “play continuum” determines the form of their story in regards to the game. Celia Pearce explains that the result of this interaction “is an emergent narrative, a story that evolves over time as a result of interplay between rules and players” (Pearce, *FP* 149). This returns to my previous point that discusses the reconfiguration of authorship in a digital game era. The “play,” both experienced by and a result of the player, redirects the antiquated model of top-down, inspirational writing and acknowledges writing as a “play” within the langue that has already been predetermined by the culture.

Understanding the rule system

For students to understand the concept of play available to them through their writing, they must also understand the rule system that delineates that play. Students have been working within rule systems their whole lives, whether they realize it or not. Playing a video game, that rule system becomes even clearer. As I’ve noted, any game is manifest through the acknowledgement of its rule system. Once someone begins to play a game, the rules will eventually limit them in a way to remind them that they are, in fact, participating in a restricted subtext. Rules of the digital medium encompass a much more apparent role in the creation of meaning. Janet Murray describes video games as:

A new medium of expression allows us to tell stories we could not tell before, to retell the age-old stories in new ways, to imagine

ourselves as creature of a parameterized world of multiple possibilities, to understand ourselves as authors of rule systems which drive behavior and shape our possibilities (*Murray, FP* 8).

Video games foreground the rule systems among which players are allowed to “write.” Many games include a tutorial that a player may watch before actually beginning play in order to learn the various do’s and do not’s of the game. Pressing a certain button results in a specific action on screen, limiting the use of that button to its designated function(s). The game itself may set up levels, characters, enemies, obstacles, or puzzles through which the player must navigate. To each of these elements belong certain interactions that are available to the player as established by the game’s rule system. The limited interactive possibilities “drive [the player’s] behavior and shape [their] possibilities,” as Murray suggests. If “play” is the manipulation of a rule system, then it is truly understanding how best to bend the rules—rather than simply knowing that they exist—that creates an interesting gaming experience. Cyber-theorist Espen Aarseth finds that “the real aesthetic quality of these games is in the design of the rule system, rather than in the design of the game world,” suggesting that immersion relies more heavily on how well a game regulates a player’s position in its environment than on the graphical representation it presents, as so often thought by those who are enamored by the near-lifelike graphics of many games today (Aarseth, *FP* 52). If the rule system of a game determines its aesthetic value, we might think about how that alters the way that students perceive the aesthetics of a good piece of traditional writing.

To understand any rule system, one must first place the rules in the context of the system that they create when operable. Language works on a restricted, but flexible contingency of specific information codified through words. As much we would like to dissociate traditional theories of rhetoric from new-age digital media theories, the two are quite analogous with one another.

John Cayley postulates, “digital characterizes any system of transcription with a finite set of agreed identities as its elements” (Cayley, *FP* 212). In the same way that a computer program works through its understanding of these “agreed identities,” so too does language communication. If students understand that writing operates through both writer and reader agreement, then they may begin to explore the ways that this agreement can be exploited and manipulated. This awareness could involve practice with irony or satire, some of the “higher” forms of writing. However, neither of these forms of writing works without the understanding of the rule system that they are subverting. Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman reminds us that:

Meaning is emergent. When we use language, as when we play a game, we are playing within the limits that the rules allow. To speak a sentence is to play with words—but only in ways that the rules of language permit. A paradox of meaning is that although simple rules shape every utterance, the total number of potential statements is nearly infinite. Both language and games represent complex emergent systems.... (Salen and Zimmerman 366)

The rule system of a game is a fixed form of control. However, despite their rigid structure, the rules of a system remain bendable. For example, a

player might “abuse” the save game function of a video game, continuously reloading the game in order to progress past a particularly difficult area of the game after a trial-and-error exploration of the various completion strategies. Much like irony and satire in the way they use the rules of language against themselves, the manipulation of the save game feature by the player is a method of rule bending in order to achieve the desired outcome of the player’s game-story. It is this conscious and willing manipulation and power of language’s rules that I wish to impart to students, to make them aware that their rhetorical choices are always operational within a rule system that may be finessed. I am not suggesting that students be deceptive and misleading in their writing, but that they practice using language in various contexts and connotations so that they are able to use and recognize it as a means to an end, instead of simply thinking of it as an arbitrary system to which they are subject (although it is that as well). As Stuart Moulthrop states, “since configuration requires active awareness of systems and their structures of control, this turn allows us to resist the assertion of invisibility or transparency in communication systems...” (*Moulthrop, FP* 57). In order to configure the rule system of language through writing, students must understand the preconfigured position through which they are doing so, noting how we are integrated into a cultural design by way of our identity markers. One way to help students see this is to discuss how language reflects dominant ideologies through its available modes of constructed discourse. Discussion of the symbolic hierarchy that culture assigns to language can reveal the rule system that hides among it. Even looking at a single word, such as “war,” can provide a basis that leads to discussion about how such a word

exists through its relationship to other words, forming the abstract yet governing rule system intertwined amongst and on the outskirts of language.

The operational inclusion of the body in the writing and reading process of digital literature adds another dimension in the consideration of its impact on established mediums. Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan qualify the interaction of body and text through digital mediums (computers, video games, web pages, etc.) as “writing [that] becomes as much about the design of the interaction and textual recombination processes (which will determine the units that appear and what relation they have to the readers’ body) as it is about the composition of the units fed into the system” (Wardrip-Fruin 207). The process of recombination relies on the awareness that words, figures, and symbols include residual meanings as we use them, making the job of the writer to essentially configure them in the appropriate manner in order to clarify their argument/story/discussion/etc. Again we return to the existence of spatial relationships in game interaction. The “textual recombination process” that the authors refer to repositis the idea that information is always already existent; meaning is the responsibility of the author/reader. Games present the player with a discrete amount of recombinative options that they are responsible for structuring in a way that is useful and meaningful. Through both cognitive processes and physical manipulation, the player acts out a performance that pivots in the relations between the textual and spatial.

Stage 3...Complete!

Much in the same way that video games act as an emergent system, the theory surrounding them is in the process of emerging into a fruitful and significant field. Undoubtedly, the dialectic between game and story will remain unsettled, providing rich debate (and job opportunities) for years to come. While the concepts I have discussed here are far from any sort of final word on the subjects, they provide a glimpse into several of the more interesting and important interpretations of several of the facets of this field. The field obviously includes many more subjects of discussion, including online multiplayer games and the establishment of virtual communities, as well as how game character persona development is a hybridization of both the character's and the player's personality. That said, these theories of digital games and gameplay usher us into the final chapter, where an appropriation and restructuring of them will lead us to a varied and unique understanding of academic composition in the writing classroom.

Chapter 4

A Digital Game Composition Pedagogy

Final Stage...Begin!

Video games are the lowest common denominator of entertainment.

Video games are too violent.

Video games will make you stupid.

The rote criticisms of video games are well known to anyone plugged into the news media. Rarely do we see the topic of video games arise in the mainstream press unless it is to demonize them for having a hand in another tragic school shooting or talk about the upcoming Christmas season's "must-have" toy. While these are certainly valid observations concerning the impact of video games on our society—both socially and economically—they present a very narrow perspective of video games' role in the development of the upcoming generation.

Of course, this idea of a "generation" also gives a very narrow perspective of exactly *who* is playing video games. As I noted in the first chapter, video games sales have dwarfed movie box office receipts in revenue. Stephen Poole reports that "total video game software and hardware sales in the United States reached \$8.9 billion, versus \$7.3 billion for movie box office receipts; \$6.6 billion of the video game receipts were from software sales, retail and online" (Poole 6). Far more women play video games than the myth would have one believe as well. However, the point of utmost concern regarding the consumption of video games is to recognize that they are a product of and for the middle class. Although the

prices have fallen as the medium has become more popular, between buying a game system, controllers, memory cards, and the games themselves, becoming a member of the video game culture is not cheap. That said, the digital game composition pedagogy that I am proposing will be much more beneficial in classrooms where the students are more representative of this demographic. Not to say that it would be entirely useless in another type of writing classroom, as the theories and activities that I postulate still apply to writing, but it may certainly be received with less enthusiasm.

My primary focus will be on a particular type of video game, namely, those that include what would constitute a “story.” Not every game in existence, although many of these games do share inherent “game qualities” that are present in all human games. The games I am talking about here are the types that one finds on the multiple video game consoles available on the market today. These systems include Sony’s Playstation 2, Microsoft’s X-box, and Nintendo’s Gamecube. When I use the word “game” here, I am referring to the games available on these systems that include an embedded narrative in their game design. These games feature a form of narrative in their gameplay. For example, *Halo* has an embedded narrative—the Covenant aliens have apprehended the Halo space station and, as the human space marine, the player must eliminate them and reclaim the space station. This story is a key aspect of the game, providing both motivation and context for the events that unfold before the player. On the other hand, a game such as *Tetris* does not have an embedded narrative. The player can assume that the falling blocks in *Tetris* are going to fall whether they are there to control them or not. The “storyline” of *Tetris*, then, is

not provided by the game itself, but instead added after the fact by the player when he or she narratizes it: “I dropped this block here, and then I dropped this block here, then I messed up and put this one here...” There is some degree to which this occurs *Halo* too, however: “I shot this alien on the bridge, then I moved forward and unlocked the door.”

The primary difference between *Tetris* and *Halo* though is *Halo*’s inclusion of scenes, or as many gamers refer to them, “parts”: “Hey man, I just got to that *part* in *Halo* where you meet Cortana for the first time. That cut-scene was awesome!” The term “part” indicates a collective moment that anyone who plays *Halo* can share with anyone else who has played it. Conversely, *Tetris*’ game design is not reliant upon a storyline where “parts” happen, instead devoting the player’s focus to gameplay moments that may or may not be part of the collective experience. In *Tetris*, an assortment of seven blocks drops in a random order, creating “parts” that occur for each *Tetris* play session, but making it impossible to share these experiences across a collective *Tetris*-playing community.

The pedagogy that I propose will draw from two major points. One, it will talk about how the learning process required for each video game embeds the learning process in the goal oriented, manipulatable cultural context. Along these lines, as I suggested in chapter two, video games interactivity require that students become producers as well as consumers in order to engage with them. Secondly, the pedagogy will draw from the digital theory of the previous chapter in regards to concepts such as agency and “play” to reconfigure how we have our students write and think about writing.

To help me formulate digital game composition pedagogy, I draw upon the scholarship of James Paul Gee in particular. His books *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy* and *Why Video Games are Good for Your Soul* both discuss the potential for video games as learning tools and how players engage with and “read” the game in order to play it. The books present learning principles that demonstrate why students are so often more engaged by these games than by the school work that we ask them to complete. Gee presents 36 principles of learning in *Learning and Literacy* that do not pertain exclusively to writing, but can be effectively used to study the contrast between learning writing in the writing classroom and learning within the context of video game play.

The pedagogy that I formulate is designed around several of these principles. I begin with a discussion of Gee’s work and how he arrived at his conclusions. I then move onto situate his principles of learning alongside the digital game theory discussed in chapter three, using the combination of the two in order to promote new writing practices in the composition classroom. These activities may not be entirely exclusive to this digital composition pedagogy, but at the very least will be recontextualized and given a new discourse through which the activities can be discussed.

Video Games and Learning

James Paul Gee’s books *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy* and *Why Video Games are Good for Your Soul* examine the microcosmic impact of video games on the player. His first publication,

Learning and Literacy, studies the learning done in video games alongside of the learning that is done in schools. Gee's argument revolves around his point that video games offer a much more engaging learning environment for children because they embed the user in the cultural context where the skills learned from the game can be directly applied. He writes:

But basic skills can be learned by playing the game—and not through decontextualized skill and drill—because the games are well designed in the ways in which they construct their training modules and early episodes and in the ways in which they order cases and concentrate their samples early on. Neither players of games nor children in school can learn by ‘playing’ (i.e., immersion in rich activities) if they are forced to operate in poorly designed spaces. (Gee 137)

We return to the concept of video games as cultural entities that include spaces where the set of actions that that player can perform are all directly related to manipulation of the game world. The immediacy and relevance with which players learn the skill sets of a video game encourages the player/student to continue engaging with the game in order to hone their abilities. Gee's theory translates to the learning principles that he calls “Explicit Information On-Demand and Just-in-Time Principle” and “Transfer Principle.” In the former, Gee calls attention to the ways in which video games provide the user with the proper information by a particular time so that the player may have access to the full range of required actions.

In contrast to this embedded learning, Gee presents the example of learning in traditional public schools. Games present contextualized training modules where players are given “safe” environments that still exist within the game’s culture to practice their skills. Conversely, schools and their classroom environments decontextualize the learning process from its “natural” place. Gee cites the example of a biology classroom, noting how experiments practiced within them are often simply read rote from a lab book without a clear connection to the implications within the “real” world. This factor is especially problematic in composition classrooms, since students will frequently have difficulty connecting estranged academic writing to anything other than their grade for the class. When we have our students analyze a short story for example, it is not uncommon to receive commentary that regards passages from the story as “random” or “pointless.” Of course, it is important to remind the students that they are discussing pieces of art that have been carefully constructed (ideally) and the author included these passages to make a point.

Nonetheless, the failure to connect the art and writing to the outside world reflects a place where the writing classroom lacks the immediate impact on the world that video games provide. My goal here is to change this perception. To do this, one must create a malleable “world” that the students can play with—in this case, the writing classroom. The papers are their tools and the classroom setting is the game world. Such a pedagogy is not one that can be implemented at will, but one that needs to be set up at the beginning of the semester and constantly reinforced. The students essentially become both player and participant, molding and shaping an identity for themselves through their writing

assignments of the classroom. One method to show students with some immediacy in their writing is by having them do a brief in-class writing on a subject, but without having them put their name on the paper. After they are finished, collect the papers and redistribute them randomly amongst the class. At this point, the students will now react to the paper they have in front of them by answering a series of questions such as: how did this piece make you feel, were you influenced by it at all, or what assumptions do you make about the writer? The focus of this exercise is on the content of the piece and the author rather than mechanics and structure. After the reaction by their classmates, take up the papers and return them to the original writers (this may take a bit of time since there are no names on the papers) and have the *original* writers react to the comments. After they are finished, choose a volunteer to share their writing, the reaction, and post-reaction writing. The goal with this exercise is to generate discussion about how each student's original decision in their writing led to subsequent reactions and (hopefully) disagreements. This can lead to a wider discussion of how their choices in writing, reflective of unconscious decisions predetermined by cultural constructs, affect various readers of their work. The manipulation of ideas viewed through the lens of these predetermined cultural constructs, including dominant ideologies of race, class, gender, shows students that there is more at stake in their writing than merely paragraph structure and a good grade.

This returns us to Diana George's argument that students can be producers as well as consumers of visual media when she writes, "only rarely do we encounter a suggestion that students might become producers as well as

receivers or victims of mass media, especially visual media” (George 18). While we might not consider writing “visual media,” video games would certainly qualify as such. However, what if we consider the classroom itself as visual media (media is perhaps the wrong word, but in the interest of consistency...), or, to borrow the digital theory term, as a design space? The classroom mimics a canvas where the writing impacts its physical appearance and spatial arrangement. For example, the writing for the class might be centered around the classroom itself, focusing on what sort of changes they might like to see based upon their perception and analysis of the class’ current set-up. The driving force behind this analysis would be the drive for change, alteration if you will. Encourage the students to propose the most bizarre and seemingly outlandish revision to the classroom design they can propose. However, this is not simply a matter of arbitrary tirades against teachers and schools, but rather a moment when students have the opportunity to critically consider the impacts of classroom design decisions. Additionally, this is not an exercise that is to be performed once, but multiple times as various points throughout the semester. To make it even more effective and game-like, one might even implement the notion of identity construction that is so prevalent in contemporary video games.

Pedagogical Tetris Blocks

Mixing digital game theory and composition theory serves to benefit students writing through several pedagogical theories:

Writing as Play

An overarching ideal behind the “digital game composition” pedagogy, the notion of writing as play maintains import as the key element behind the subsequent pedagogies listed here. While we have all studied and read the post-structural theory of Derrida and Foucault that discusses the theories of semiotics, our students (most likely) have not. Thus, contextualizing writing as a game to be played is paramount for framing a game-based pedagogy. More than only semiotics, however, the idea of writing as play here takes on the form predominantly within the context of a game form that students are familiar with. It should emphasize the fact that writing is always full of choices—word choice, format choice, structure options. The pedagogy should not, however, suggest that writing is only a matter of play and is of no consequence. The word choices, format choices, and structure options that they select reflect certain qualities about their character and about the nature of the writing that we ask them do perform. Particular ideological structures are perpetuated by traditional academic writing. Through a digital game pedagogy, we can have students utilize these dominant ideologies (such as white/male/heterosexual/Christian/married/etc.) as the “rules” within which they are expected to “play” their writing. How does their writing reinforce and break from these structures? This leads to the reexamination of authorship that digital game theory calls into question as well.

Preconfigured Authorship

Whereas students are typically taught that they are the sole author of the paper that they write, a “digital game composition” pedagogy associates them as only *one* of the paper’s contributors. Just as a video game has (for our argument)

one player and numerous designers and producers, an essay has one writer (player) and an incalculable number of designers and developers. The student makes manifest the end result (the essay) of these cultural designers and developers the same way that a game player actualizes the “game” provided by the game’s designers. The theory of operating within a design when writing directly relates to the concept of the spatial. Design is always concerned with space, from interior decorating to web page layout. Understanding culture as a design space and the relationships created by its format can reveal ethnographic, economic, and subcultural affiliations that, before, were only implied by a student’s essay.

Design Spaces/ Spatial Relationships

Using writing to explore spatial relationship among members of the class and the classroom setup can be a good start for discussing spatiality. From there, move on to address more complex social relationships such as class and gender and explore how architectural designs uses space to convey meaning. Have the students analyze a building on campus for such a project.

Timing is Everything

Game time is directly related to players’ input. Players press a button and something happens on screen right away. Writing usually has a prolonged effect on its surroundings, although instant messaging and email conversations follow the suit of video game interaction more than they do that of academic writing. Although writing of the academic variety will never (and is probably not meant to) have the immediate call-response that video games do, there are some ways

that we can formulate ideas within our students using this basic principle. For instance, we could ask them to do an in-class writing where they write briefly until we tell them to stop. Afterwards, explain to them that this writing will dictate what will be discussed in class that day. Not only will students feel a sense of agency within the classroom, the impact of their writing will be immediate and clear.

Competitive Design

A game must have some degree of conflict within its structure. When writing, there is not only a struggle with one's own ideas, but a conflict of outside ideas and influences as well. The writer must compete with the culture's perception of writing and the format that it should take. Since academic writing is a form itself, characterizing the writing process as a "competition with form" could serve useful for students.

Screen Reflects Actions/ Manipulations

Just as the screen serves as the canvas upon which manipulation of a video game reaffirms the player's existence, so to does the paper reflect the writer's participation in the world. Students should see their essays and ideas as active productions of their engagement with the world around them. Their papers show a critical and visceral attempt to manipulate their knowledge, understanding, and interpretation of their cultural experiences. Regarding their papers as more than simply "an essay" that exists in and of itself leads to the recognition of how they are manipulating the culture around them in their paper.

Metawriting

Video games are filled with self-referential information, all of which directly applies to improving the player's skills at the game. Many games include tutorials that instruct the player on how exactly the controls of the game work and affect the game's environment. The players then takes the knowledge and applies it to the game as they play. Often, these tutorials feature only the most basic information about the game, allowing the players to discover how they can best be applied to the game world. Conversely, rarely do we have our students write about writing itself or the instruction of writing in a substantial way.

Coinciding with this assignment is James Gee's "regime of competence" theory. He argues video games give the player just enough information to make tasks challenging, but not undoable. To explore this, we might assign our students an essay, but then also have them write an appendix to the essay in which they analyze their technique and style of the original essay. A workshop of the paper might be even more useful if it accepts the "regime of competence" described by Gee. The ongoing self-analysis serves to each student needs and personalizes their writing for them, and yet also provides the opportunity for them to see where their weaknesses are by allowing them to specifically address them in their analysis.

So You Want to be a Half-Blood Demon...

Identity is of paramount importance in video games. Gee proposes that there are three intersecting identities that are present when playing a game of a story-based nature: virtual, real, and projective. The virtual identity is "one's

identity as a virtual character in the virtual world..." (Gee 54). In my example at the outset of the previous chapter, my virtual identity would be that of Dante—including all of his brash, cooler-than-thou attitude, in addition to his myriad of attacks and fighting techniques. Dante has goals embedded in his character design that I must assimilate in order to play and complete the game. If I find myself ideologically opposed to Dante, I cannot change the type of person he is inside of the game in order to cater toward my belief system. The virtual identity of video games is unalterable (although in certain role-playing games allow the players to build their character, once the character has been set-up, it remains essentially unchangeable to a certain degree).

Gee goes on to explain that the second identity at stake is a “real-world identity.” This is the identity that I bring to a game, which, of course, is an amalgam of many separate identities at any given moment. I am a graduate student, a Caucasian male, an avid hip-hop music listener, a member of the middle class, a book reader, a student of martial arts, and so on through numerous other identities. When I control Dante, as Gee suggests, “these identities become relevant only as they affect and are filtered through my identity as a video game player playing [*Devil May Cry 3*]” (55). During the course of the game, these identities will affect the way that I use Dante as a tool for progression through the plot. For example, Dante has four fighting styles available to him, one of which is entitled “Trickster.” Trickster focuses on evasive, agile maneuvers, encouraging a hit-and-run style of play instead of a focus strictly on brute strength. When playing the game, I personally had greater affinity for this particular style, due to one or more of these identities—the most dominant one in

this case most likely being my former training in martial arts. These identities manifest their relevance in different ways as I interact with the game, but the important aspect to recognize is that they are the reasons that we respond to the embedded experience of a video game in a particular way.

The final member of the Gee's video game identity trinity is perhaps the most important of the three. He calls this the "projective identity, playing on two sense of the word 'project,' meaning both 'to project one's values and desires on to the virtual character' and 'seeing the virtual character as one's own project in the making, a creature whom I imbue with a certain trajectory through time defined by my aspirations for what I want that character to be and become'" (55). This identity represents the fusion between the player and the game character. The avatar might inherit the player's poor spatial abilities and gets lost in a maze or is exceptionally quick thanks to the player's astute hand-eye coordination. The projective identity is the embodiment of one of video games' greatest appeals, essentially allowing the player to intertwine their own persona with that of another entity.

Implementing these variations of identity in the writing classroom would provide new avenues that students might explore through their writing. Consider the possibilities available if students were given the opportunity to write not thinking of themselves as the author, but through the persona of another person entirely. The classroom is a stage where these identities can be acted out, pitted against one another even. Eliciting a level of competition within their writing would play off the cultural codes that are inherent to games, signaling a winner and a loser in a way that could spark the drive to write by many of the

competitive nature. Although the active creation of conflict in the classroom might seem adverse, the use of projected identities in their writing would potentially soften the metaphorical blows. This is not a design of violence, but a new interpretation of Socratic debate. Again, the relevance of this endeavor would have to be framed through the “classroom as design space” paradigm so that the identities would be adequately contextualized. In this regard, as Gee puts it in *Why Video Games are Good for Your Soul*, “learning is a form of extended engagement of self as an extension of an identity to which the player is committed” (Gee 112).

This proposition might seem inane if one argues that writing’s purpose is to get in touch with the “inner self.” However, having the students assume an alternate identity can lead them to an understanding of how they read and interpret the motivations of others, leading to better understanding of how outside cultural influences are reflected in analytical process. The mapping of a game design onto the writing classroom allows for a space where identities can be assigned and dissipated at will, and in turn lets the students explore a simulation of the teacher’s choosing without the consequence of a bad grade.

Final Stage...Completed!

Through the development of this pedagogy, I hope to encourage composition instructors, at the very least, to recognize the potential for video games and video game studies within the writing classroom. We can use the theories and constructs behind video games to reaffirm writing’s place in our students’ lives. Although the metaphor will undoubtedly be lost on some, I

believe, for the most part, that an integration of this pedagogy will frame writing as an endeavor that mimics the playing of video games that engages much of their time. James Gee's principles of learning assist in reminding us of how video games' learning potential is under-tapped in the world of academia.

Of course, even after all of my fuss, writing and video games are not the same thing. They each remain their own genre and, if ludologists such as Espen Aarseth and Markku Eskelinen had their way, never the twain would meet. But we do live in a world where forms can speak to one another and using the work of digital theorists to examine composition leads to productive, positive results. A "digital game composition pedagogy" is based not only the idea that video games are a pervasive influence on our students' lives, but also the familiarity that it would provide for students new to college composition courses.

As the New London Group states, "Any successful theory of pedagogy must be based on views about how the human mind works in society and classrooms, as well as about the nature of teaching and learning" (Cope and Kalantzis 30). The view of the mind that I have posed here is one that is attached to the design of video games. I have not adequately addressed the social aspect of video games and how we might take such into the writing classroom in this article; I will leave that for future postulation and research. However, the fact that video games are areas that include a great deal of learning—*engaged* learning—remains. My purpose here has been to find the understated areas of learning that players assimilating—authorship, design, and so forth. These are the values that embed themselves in the player's interpretive and cognitive processes, providing them with the ability to alternately consider their learning strategies. Digital game

composition pedagogy is the means to bring this redesigned thought to maturation within the composition classroom. I hope that this will not be the last that we hear from this discussion; indeed, I have only begun to scrape the surface of a discussion with the potential to significantly affect our modern composition classrooms. With that in mind, I leave with a call to further academic pursuit:

“THANK YOU MARIO, BUT OUR PRINCESS IS IN ANOTHER CASTLE!”

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