



# The Ethics of Playing, Researching, and Teaching Games in the Writing Classroom

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*Edited by*

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*For Jaina, a Robloxian who makes us better teachers, scholars, and gamers every day.*

*—Richard Colby & Rebekah Shultz Colby*

*To KEJ, Khajiit at heart, who always enriched the gaming experience.*

*—Matthew S.S. Johnson*

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## Introduction: Playing with the Rules

*Richard Colby, Matthew S.S. Johnson,  
and Rebekah Shultz Colby*

Our first edited collection, *Rhetoric/Composition/Play through Video Games* (Colby et al. 2013), invited scholars to share how video games enrich rhetorical theory and writing instruction; it represented *new*, innovative practices and theoretical possibilities. It did so in 2013: in gamer parlance, “back in the day.” We hadn’t even heard of *Fortnite* (2017). But one expects that of the games themselves, given rapid industry movement and how speedily the latest titles are put on the shelves (posted to digital

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distribution services, we should say). To a classroom full of undergraduates eager (and perhaps still surprised) to discuss video games in higher education, revolutionary series such as King's Quest and cutting-edge titles such as *The 7th Guest* (1993), games that changed video gaming, likely mean nothing; *Baldur's Gate* (1998) means little more; and "Warcraft" sounds odd uncoupled from "World of," couldn't possibly have been just an RTS game, and whose "multiplayer" capacity couldn't ever have been short of "massive." Games move fast. Predictably so.

Since 2013, somewhat less predictably, so has the research—as if video game scholars had discovered vast repositories full of Potions of Speed and quaffed the lot. James Paul Gee's (2003) 36 learning principles from a case study of one seem facile when seen through the filter of the seemingly countless articles about gamification, game-based learning, game studies, and specifically, games in writing and rhetoric studies, just within the last few years. We now can claim with empirical and experiential evidence that, despite the critiques (Hung 2017; Bogost 2013), gamification is effective (Hamari et al. 2014), and that game-based learning shows the many educational benefits in community-based and generational learning (Romero et al. 2017), in teaching graduate students (Barr 2019) and topics across the disciplines (Boyle et al. 2014; Chee 2016; Ke et al. 2019), and as objects and means of assessment (Ifenthaler et al. 2012). We note in our specific subspecialty of rhetoric, composition, and game studies in recent years important works such as Jennifer deWinter and Ryan Moeller's (2014) collection on games and technical communication, Douglas Eyman and Andrea Davis's (2016) *Play/Write*, as well as the numerous dissertations and theses, monographs, articles, and special issues, many of which are cited in this current collection. We lament that we cannot read them all.

The game industry has also changed. The continued evolution and implementation of rapid development platforms such as Unity and Unreal Engine and of game design university programs has led to a large independent game development community which often experiments with game mechanics and genres; meanwhile, AAA developers continue to push the technological limits of graphics and gameplay even if they are often reluctant to push the envelope of story, setting, and mechanics to reach demographics different from that of the white male gamer. Ultimately, gaming's growing popularity (and diversity) set the stage for a culture clash. This clash was trumpeted by GamerGaters—a group whose majority is comprised of straight, white, male gamers who felt entitled to

the moniker “gamer” at the expense of anyone else who was different from them—as a call to arms against game journalists; independent game developers (especially women); and feminist academics fighting for more diverse inclusion in gaming (Chess and Shaw 2015). Who had a right to play games, design games, and talk about games became a virtual battleground that spread well beyond gaming, culminating in chilling outcomes. As a result, GamerGate sensationally brought to the surface the sexism, homophobia, and racism that had been circulating within game development and game communities for years. Even more sadly, this sexism, homophobia, and racism circulating within gaming culture has not gone away simply because GamerGate has long since been relegated to the back page.

Eight years later, we introduce another collection, one that shows how dramatically scholarship, gaming, gamers, and the industry have changed, growing both more mainstream and more specialized. In this moment, and as we think about the future of game-based learning, writing, rhetoric, and pedagogy, we think it important to consider how ethos, values, and ethics operate in gaming, academic, and public domains (and within the interactions between those domains): how are games taught, played, and researched? What are the ethical systems at play in doing so? These ethical questions are particularly important to examine as ethical, game-based pedagogies can combat the hate-filled prejudice within game communities.

To explore these ethical dimensions within the complexity of the game industry, we would benefit from a framework that encompasses games as they currently manifest—as ubiquitous, multifaceted, rhizomatic; thus, we consider the ethics involved in intricate game-related *ecosystems*.

Douglas Eyman (2008) explains the “benefit of working through an ecological metaphor,” where

agency can be seen in the interactions and interrelationships of any of the components of a given ecosystem. This is particularly important for digital game spaces, which feature both users and system agents (including nonplayer characters, the environments in which the actions take place, and the rules that govern in-game interactions). (p. 246)

Games lend themselves to examining ethics through an “ecosystem” lens because of the complexity of human and nonhuman interactions that

bring them into the hands of players, how those players act during game-play, and what effects those actions have in and beyond the larger gaming community.

Miguel Sicart (2009) considered the ethical component of gaming when he indicated that “computer games are ethical objects,” “computer game players are ethical agents,” and “the ethics of computer games should be seen as a complex network of responsibilities and moral duties” (p. 4). These claims, however introductory in Sicart’s text, are borderline quaint to scholars who immersed themselves in reader-response theory of the 1960s, but his application of ethics to gaming is important and, arguably, increasingly so as games infiltrate life of the everyday for many millions. We aim, in this collection, to complicate the seeming one-to-one interaction Sicart supposes. While Sicart writes, “The experience of a computer game is the experience of a moral object by an ethical subject” (p. 5), games and gaming are ethical ecosystems without linear relationships that would enable us to imagine them quite so simply. Beyond the gamer interacting with the game, players are culturally situated to be ethical agents *and* actors connected by games that have been designed (by developers made of a few or a few hundred people) to enact particular ethical experiences and also *respond to* players as ethical agents *and* actors. These developers *also* operate within an ethical ecosystem of the larger gaming community, one which *also* serves as agent *and* actor.

In examining games as part of ethical ecosystems, consider *Fortnite*. Among the most popular games in the world at the time of this writing, the game was not originally designed in its current iteration, but rather was a survival horror game at the time of its release. The objective was for players to cooperatively build a base in preparation for waves of zombies. The game added the primary mode players know as “Battle Royale” late in 2017, when developer Epic saw *PlayerUnknown’s Battlegrounds* (2017) gain in popularity. Both modes of *Fortnite* are derivative, and the game’s free-to-play delivery was an afterthought. As of March 2019, there were more than 250 million accounts, according to Sam Loveridge and Ford James (2019), which was up from 50 million not three months before, which they describe as “pretty healthy growth.” Quite. A system of microtransactions (through which players can buy in-game outfits) funnel millions of dollars into Epic’s coffers. This example (reminiscent of *World of Warcraft*’s trajectory from its humble beginnings) represents how nonlinear, how chaotic, the game industry can be. Just as there is no solitary author, there is not one simple ethical subject experiencing

a moral object. It is commonplace today for new games to be released with a Battle Royale mode—not because of careful design, but happenstance. *Fallout 76* (2018) serves as a representative example, a multiplayer roleplaying game for which a Battle Royale mode, *Nuclear Winter*, was introduced just seven months after the game’s initial release: the pleasures and frustrations of adapting an RPG and RPG game-engine for such a markedly different game mode is clear, fairly described, perhaps, by David Levy’s (2000) claim that “Chaotic systems exhibit strange attractors, elliptical or perhaps torus shaped orbits that, though never repeating themselves precisely, appear constrained to trace a particular pattern in phase space” (p. 70).

So many interrelationships in gaming ecosystems pose enormous challenges to game studies, particularly when studying ethics; however, a constant, if you will, is the ideological potential within each node of that game ecosystem. Games have always been sites of ideological struggle; even the fact that games are sites of ideological struggle seems an ideological struggle, as evidenced by our culture which often dismisses games as frivolous diversions while simultaneously positioning games as the cause of the intellectual and social stunting of youths (and their motivation to commit mass shootings). The contradiction is not surprising when we explore how games operate rhetorically: the act of playing a game often thrusts players into inhabiting a specific, ideologically laden ethos through the game’s representational layer of graphics and narrative. It also does so through the procedural, material habits the game’s rules, mechanics, and interface impose. These elements—graphics, narrative, rules, mechanics, interfaces—are all designed by ideologically laden development teams. Add to this a particularly thick additional, ideologically laden layer when considering the influence of the game community, writ large, and its ideological expectations, not excluding reviewers and scholars (coming from many different backgrounds and disciplines and having various preferences and areas of expertise), and the politics of our “real” world inevitably insinuates itself into our virtual worlds. It always does.

For all of these reasons, we have framed this collection as one about *ethos and games*. We are using ethos, first, in the classical sense, as Aristotle described it, as the character of the speaker. The speaker in this case is the player, the game, the developer, the student, and the community, whose ethos is constructed, invented, and created for specific circumstances and situations but whose ethos is also reputed, interpreted,

and remembered by the community in ways that remain emergent and unexpected. Second, we mean ethos to refer to the ethical situation, that of the dilemma or choice that a game presents, the choices of the players within gameworlds and gaming environments, the interactions of the players with other players, the game developers' available means of (inter/re)acting with players, the moments in the classroom with students, and the research and assessments of games and gaming by reviewers, analysts, scholars. Finally, we acknowledge that ethos was often synonymous with *good* in the classical sense of the term. However, we also acknowledge that the good within ethics is comprised of ideological, culturally situated values existing at the nexus of interaction, and not residing solely within the gamer, the game, or game developer.

Yet for the gamer, much of the ethical complexity of the system is invisible. Gamers certainly imagine themselves in a one-to-one relationship with the game if they are meta-conscious about the experience at all. Gregory Bateson (1976/2006) writes, "within the dream, the dreamer is usually unaware that he [*sic*] is dreaming, and within 'play' he [*sic*] must often be reminded that "This is play" (p. 321). Even when play is fantastical or ethically at odds with the values of players, they play unless the reminder is particularly loud, and avoiding judgments from outside the "magic circle" is as easy as claiming "it's just a game." Nevertheless, because games are immersive and require conscious input from players—actions players may or may not ethically agree with, but are necessary to continue playing—games can create feelings of guilt, of pride, of regret: sure, players commit their avatars to many actions they might not wish to commit outside of the game, leading to the myth that "games numb players to other people, stifling empathy and creating a generation of isolated, antisocial loners," but they also, as Katherine Isbister (2017) argues, "play a powerful role in creating empathy and other strong, positive emotional experiences" (p. xvii). Well-designed games pose powerful ethical questions to players—sometimes in unsettling ways.

Games are ubiquitous. Complicated. Multifaceted. Interactive. Nonlinear. Immersive. Emotional. Powerful. Ethical. Thus, we turn our attention to ethos and games, as ideologically laden performances can influence, and ideologically laden actions can become habits. And we know that the culture surrounding gaming is fraught with ethical problems, its nodes offering numerous examples of sexism, racism, homophobia, and other hateful, discriminatory, oppressive, and ethically suspect behavior. Such problems and behaviors have also been long addressed

within game studies scholarship in collections such as *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games*, which examined gender within games (Cassell and Jenkins 2000) long before GamerGate. Like all communicative media, gaming has always had these ethical problems, but they are currently amplified by the billions who now play. And despite this, or we argue because of this, we want to introduce games into the classroom to make apparent and combat these ethical problems.

## AN ETHICAL EXIGENCE WITHIN GAME CULTURE

In 2014, GamerGate became an example of misogyny, homophobia, and racism so horrific within game culture that it became blatantly obvious to even mainstream media. On September 12, 2014, Eron Gjoni (2014) wrote a 9000-word, jilted-lover blog post about his ex-girlfriend, game developer Zoë Quinn, with whom he had recently broken up; the post became an ember igniting the gaming landscape. The controversy became known as GamerGate, a conflagration engulfing liberal game journalists, women game designers (such as Quinn, who designed *Depression Quest* in Twine in order to explore her struggle with depression), and feminist academics fighting for more diverse inclusion in gaming. GamerGaters embraced the situation as an excuse for blatant misogyny (Chess and Shaw 2015), culminating with doxing, internet attacks, and death threats to Quinn and others, and forcing Anita Sarkeesian to cancel a talk at Utah State University. Sensationalist writers such as Breitbart’s Milo Yiannopoulos (2014) fueled the fires, describing feminist designers, academics, and journalists as “an army of sociopathic feminist programmers, and campaigners, abetted by achingly politically correct American tech bloggers, [who] are terrorising the entire community—lying, bullying and manipulating their way around the internet for profit and attention.” GamerGaters displayed their racism, too, by sockpuppeting—the act of a GamerGater posing as a woman or person of color (sometimes both) in an online forum to “prove” to others that the ideology behind GamerGate was not sexist, homophobic, or racist in an act of fraudulent tokenism that often also simultaneously mocked that person’s culture or gender, much as black face does (Thibault 2016).

While the initial controversy that was GamerGate gradually left the headlines, the underlying hatred fueling it did not. In the summer of 2019, the industry started its own #MeToo movement when female industry professionals came forward with abuse allegations. Independent

game designer Nathalie Lawhead and vocalist Aeralie Brighton accused famed industry composer Jeremy Soule of sexual misconduct (D’Anastasio 2019). That same week, Adelaide Gardner accused programmer Luc Shelton of assault (ohadelaide 2019). And Quinn accused Alec Holowka, a game developer for *Night in the Woods*, of sexual abuse after he trapped her in his home in Canada and refused to buy her a plane ticket home to the United States (Marcotte 2019). Holowka committed suicide a few days after Quinn’s allegations (Chalk 2019), his sister sharing in a tweet that “he wished the best for Zoë” (Holowka 2019). By the middle of 2020, a major studio, Ubisoft, made headlines when five senior-level creative and administrative employees were fired or placed on leave after dozens of employees (representing dozens more) came forward with “allegations of widespread sexual misconduct” (Schreier 2020, para. 1) and stories of how they were routinely ignored by human resources when reporting improper behavior. Clearly there is a long way to go.

To start examining some of the ethical problems within the ecosystems of game culture that led up to GamerGate, we begin with sexism. Although during the nascent industry of the 1970s and 1980s, some women—such as Roberta Williams, Anne Westfall, Carol Shaw, Jane Jensen, Dona Bailey, and Amy Briggs—designed and programmed hugely popular games along with men, *this was not the norm*. Shaw, in 1978, the first female designer Atari hired, recalled Ray Kassar (who was soon to replace Atari’s founder Nolan Bushnell as CEO) telling her, “Gee, now that Atari has a female game designer, she can do interior decorating and cosmetic color-matching games!” (as quoted in Lien 2013). Bailey, who signed on to Atari in 1980 shortly after Shaw left, described it this way: “I was hired as the only software engineer who was a female. It was a ratio of 30 to 1! And by the time I left, it was about 120 to 1” (as quoted in Alexander 2007). Almost 30 years later, Yasmin Kafai et al. (2008) documented how the Game Design Challenge for the Game Developers Conference (GDC) did not include a female designer until 2008. In 2011, Penny Arcade removed t-shirts of “dickwolves,” an offensive rape joke, from PAX, an important video game expo, but only after receiving feminist backlash (Salter and Blodgett 2012). Jennifer Hepler, a writer for developer BioWare, was sexually harassed online for suggesting that there could be a skip button for some combat scenarios in titles like *Dragon Age* (Amini 2012). Even more horrific, in 2012, Sarkeesian received death threats—and various forms of extreme sexual harassment such as having her wiki page defaced with porn—for starting a kickstarter

campaign investigating the portrayals of women in video games within the past few decades (Consalvo 2012).

As any intersectional feminist scholar knows (Davis 2017), such misogyny is often interconnected with homophobia and racism, as they all derive from the same dehumanizing ideologies and gestures of hate. Such is also true in game ecosystems: Bonnie Ruberg, game studies scholar and co-editor of the collection *Queer Game Studies*, definitively states, “[homophobia] will always be related to issues of sexism [and] issues of racial discrimination” (Nuemann 2014).

Sexism *within the games themselves* has always been a problem. Representation of women characters has been significantly less than that of male characters in video games and does not show signs of improving. A 2009 “virtual census” study of 4966 virtual characters across 150 games reported that 89.55% of main characters and 85.47% of non-player characters were male (Williams et al. 2009). Ten years later, writing for *Wired*, Sarkeesian and Carolyn Petit (2019) analyzed male representation compared to female representation for playable main characters at E3 from the previous five years and found that “the number of games that center women came in at just 5%—up from a low point of just 3 percent (two games!) in 2016 and below the high point of 9 percent in 2015” (para. 4). When women *are* the playable main characters, they are often portrayed in overly sexualized ways that tend to be objectified by the male gaze (Kondrat 2015; Gestos et al. 2018), as many have long complained of Lara Croft of the Tomb Raider series (Cassell and Jenkins 2000). Astrid Deuber-Mankowsky (2005) dedicates a book-length study to the question of Lara Croft, “at once pinup model and rebellious, man-repelling grrl” (p. 5). While independent developers are marginally better at representing women, they still tend to follow the same trends as AAA developers (Lima 2018). Even when developers add complex, non-stereotypical female main characters, they do so with apprehension, as Sony’s Shuhei Yoshida revealed about Aloy, the female protagonist in 2017’s *Horizon Zero Dawn* (Crecente 2015).

Representation of LBGTQ characters in games isn’t any better, indicating an underlying homophobia at play within game development. Adrienne Shaw (2015) started documenting LBGTQ characters’ *appearance* in video games; her research also indicates that many characters are recognized only for *potential* queerness, and many, especially in the early days, were represented through negative, derogatory stereotypes. Playable LBGTQ characters are rarer still: at the GDC in 2014, Manveer Heir, a



designer at BioWare, presented the findings of a study he conducted in which he found no playable LBGTQ characters in the top 25 games of 2013 (Neumann 2014). More recently, Blizzard Entertainment forced a gay *World of Warcraft* guild to change their name from “Gay Boys” to “Guild ZFXPK.” Activision-Blizzard evaded explanation, saying instead that they are “assessing the situation” (Sinclair 2019). And as with gender, developers suffer the wrath of entitled (white, male) gamers when they put significant gay characters in their games, as we see with Ellie in *The Last of Us* games (Tassi 2020).

And finally, representations of playable characters of color, even though their percentages approach the population at large (Williams et al. 2009), are mired with harmful stereotypes. There are, at times, options for playable characters of color in RPGs, but such representation is *only* in skin tone, a cosmetic choice that ignores potential cultural difference. In less fantastical games, when race is represented, it is often portrayed in dehumanizingly stereotypical ways such as the Asian character who must be unintelligent because he speaks broken English (Fussell 2013) or the black characters in the *Grand Theft Auto* games who are “glorified” as criminals, especially since many players do not pick up on the problematically nuanced main quest lines implying that these characters are caught up in a hopeless cycle of poverty and violence caused by institutional racism. And as with sexism and homophobia, we see gamer complaints and developer pressures in the few instances in which there are playable African American characters. Such was the case with Ubisoft’s *Watch Dogs 2*: player outrage erupted because the playable protagonist was Black instead of white like in the first game (Pulliam-Moore 2016).

Sadly, sexism, homophobia, and racism are not only connected ideologically but are also institutionally interconnected by problematic hiring practices and toxic work cultures within game development. When diverse employees are hired, they may feel isolated, especially if their work culture also circulates toxic beliefs about gender, sexual orientation, and race. A study by the International Game Developers Association (IGDA) found that only 1% of the respondents to an industry demographics survey identified as Black, African American, or African, and only 4% identified as Latinx (Weststar et al. 2018). Furthermore, these diverse hires are rarely promoted. If they speak out and try to educate their coworkers about diversity, they are often further marginalized and ignored; some may even lose their jobs (Francis 2014; Zaveri 2019).

Diversity issues are exacerbated by unethical labor practices in game development. Publishers push game developers to meet strict commercial deadlines to maximize sales despite games being complex art forms incorporating writing, music, graphics, acting, and programming: the skills and the talents of *many*. Unlike other media industries such as film and television, game studios do not have unions to negotiate fair labor practices (Dean 2019). Consequently, developers often exist within a culture of crunch (Consalvo 2008), spending 18-plus-hour days frantically working, feverishly debugging—which some developers have likened to a “death march” (Groen 2011), an uncomfortable metaphor and one to which we might take issue, yet also one that communicates volumes. Furthermore, game developers’ compensation is often not commensurate with workload or experience, especially if they are independent game developers funding their own projects. As a result, it is not surprising that three-fourths of game developers are white males (Weststar et al. 2018; Zaveri 2019), with enough economic privilege to live on the support of others as they are designing largely for passion and, consequently, making games for other straight, white males (Ruggill et al. 2016).

The overt, hurtful, negative ideologies of GamerGate are also fueled by an underlying capitalistic ideology—that the market produces games for white, straight, male audiences. Since the market *seems* to support them, GamerGaters feel justified in their ideology of hate. Yet the consumer base for games has always been more diverse and, with the inclusion of more online distribution hubs that can directly publish games as well as game design platforms such as Unity and Twine, there is more diversity in the types of games being designed and published. While early game magazines of the 1980s and 1990s constructed the gamer as white and male (see Braegger and Moeller in this collection), contemporary game review sites such as *Kotaku* can no longer do so (Forman and Nieborg 2016); and the enduring myth is becoming harder to maintain, given that a 2015 Pew study found that in the United States, women owned more consoles than men (42% to 37%), and Hispanics (45%) and Blacks (43%) owned more than whites (39%) (Anderson 2015).

## OVERCOMING THE ETHICAL CHALLENGES OF TEACHING WITH GAMES

*So, yes, we need to study ethos and games.* Researching games has revealed that they also can help us combat the ideologies and practices that we

outline above. Games constitute rich resources for teaching ethos within rhetoric and writing: “When people learn to play video games,” James Paul Gee (2003) argued nearly two decades ago, “they are learning a new *literacy*” and given that games represent thoroughly multimodal texts, they learn a “multiplicity of literacy (literacies)” (p. 14) in various semiotic domains (“any set of practices that recruits one or more modalities ... to communicate distinctive types of meanings” [p. 18]). Furthermore, the arguments games create are embodied through their interactive performativity as Gee (2003) has implicitly argued by showing how learning with games is embodied while Ian Bogost (2007), through procedurality, has laid out precisely how games are embodied rhetorically with the procedures embedded within their rules, mechanics, and interfaces. Scholars are now connecting these ethical dimensions of learning, procedurality, and rhetorical theory. For example, Steve Holmes (2017) has used procedurality to show how games, over time, create ethos as procedural habits related to Aristotle’s notion of *hexis*, as longstanding dispositions created through acts *and* situations (see Caravella in this collection).

Furthermore, as Henry Jenkins (2006) has shown with his theory of participatory culture, games are a valuable way for students to study the ethical complexity of ecosystems that games circulate within. As a result we can use games to teach students how to envision and situate themselves as ethical participants. Game cultures are networked not only through various games, but through their paratexts and metagaming—walkthroughs, FAQs, forums, and videos that inform gaming practices (see Reimer in this collection). Through paratexts, “average” gamers become rhetors (not just audience members) in gaming communities and even in the industry. In classes, by engaging in practices such as theorycrafting, students can see how research with and about games is also networked; they also can design and distribute their own games and paratexts, studying their uptake. The rich pedagogical opportunities games afford—the critical examination of diverse perspectives intertwined and mediated in complicated ways across the globe—can instill values of inclusivity and learning that may counteract negative, exclusive, oppressive ideologies. GamerGate did not happen in a cultural vacuum: yes, it was a culmination of toxic attitudes toward the Other within the gaming ecosystem (attitudes which are embedded within the narratives, interfaces, and game mechanics of many mainstream games). Given these ethical dimensions, Judd Ruggill and Ken McAllister (2013) characterize game-based pedagogy as a wicked problem: “the complexity of the medium and

its industry, politics, and cultures routinely work against apprehension and the effective deployment of games in the classroom” (p. 101). We argue that *teaching with games*, *teaching in games*, *turning a critical eye to the industry and its practices* can be used to thwart hateful ideologies, rhetoric, behaviors, traditions, conventions. Games themselves can be used to work against that which sometimes games have represented and communicated. We would characterize Ruggill and McAllister’s wicked problem as a call for further research, for pedagogical action—about and with (and in!) games. Our contributors offer innovative and intriguing methods we might employ to accomplish that.

### ARTICLES IN THIS COLLECTION

In the “Ethics of Game-based and Gamification Writing Pedagogy” section, contributors examine the structure of games and game development cultures, and how such structures can influence writing pedagogy, both positively and negatively. Mark Mullen scrutinizes “Early Access” games, and how the practice leads to games that are perpetually in beta (and the problems with that); thinking about the phenomenon, Mullen draws an intriguing parallel to students who see their drafts as perpetually in process, without the need to perfect them, put them in a declared, finished state. In contrast, Christopher Stuart argues that games can be a way for writing students to reconceptualize failure more productively, as a necessary part of their learning process, instead of a debilitating end state, allowing them to take risks in their writing and grow more as a result. Using game-based pedagogy, Marshall Saenz incorporates the idea of game lobbies into his classrooms, celebrating the meta-game discussion that happens *before* players actually play a game as it can be a way for students to freely discuss issues, ultimately enabling more effective pedagogy cater-made to a particular group of students. And John Alberti argues that writing teachers interested in gamification and game-based pedagogy should look at Freirean problem-posing pedagogies in an effort to avoid using games merely to “trick” students into learning; rather, teachers need to use games to critically ask political and ethical questions, particularly of what it means to build a better world.

The “Ethics of Play: Ethos, Design, and Player Agency” section examines how ethos is constructed in games through multimodality and procedurality, discussing writing and rhetoric pedagogies that ask students to construct and analyze ethos in games. Beth Caravella examines how

the judgments inherent in *phronesis* are proceduralized through *Night in the Woods*; her research involves survey results from students regarding their in-game decisions—during gameplay and after. Also thinking about gamers' decisions, Andrew Canino examines how agency is intentionally limited by the creators of *The Stanley Parable* with the express purpose of preventing gamers from avoiding meta-critique—of the ethos enabled and limited in *The Stanley Parable* specifically, and how agency is constructed for players in games more generally.

Sergio Figueirido and Jeffrey Greene investigate character creation, the first apparent step in ethos-creation in many games, arguing how rhetoric and writing students could use avatar design to engage in digital versions of *ēthopoeia*, a group of exercises in the *progymnasmata* designed to help students invent their own ethos and understand others' *ethea*. A student's individual ethos may be embodied by an avatar of a different race, gender, sexual orientation, or culture. The activity helps students to develop practical judgment needed in *phronesis* for their writing. Matthew Kelly also focuses on students exploring the perspectives of others: he connects John Dewey's ethical pragmatism to game analysis and student game development, arguing that an empathetic link can emerge, especially as a game's procedures and representations position perspectives in specific ethical and ideologically laden spheres. Kelly then outlines a pedagogy in which students design games about social issues: they explore the perspectives of others, even markedly different ones, allowing them to potentially critique their own biases along the way. To help his students—working class and minority students in particular—understand how game mechanics can promote particular ideologies within systems, Kristopher Purzycki discusses his “Procedural-Relational Power Analysis” heuristic: students use the heuristic to rhetorically analyze and then redesign game mechanics specifically to not only reinforce a different ideology but to understand how systems outside of games construct power relations. To close this section, Michael Mages considers the magic circle in which games operate, where “real” life is mimicked, yet the “out” is offered through the insistence that it is emphatically *not* “real” life: such a condition offers players—students—a way to have difficult conversations that are often too emotionally painful to have in “reality.”

The “Ethics of Scholarship: Researching Games, Gamers, and Gaming” section not only examines how text circulation in and around games constructs ethos within gaming communities, but how text circulation affects various forms of research with and about games. Victoria

Braegger and Ryan Moeller examine video game advertisements in video game magazines of the 1980s and 1990s, showing how numerous ads interpellated gamers as white, male, heterosexual, and sexist. Having conducted a qualitative and quantitative study and learned how players construct credibility in forums (for *The Elder Scrolls Online*), Wendi Sierra and Doug Eyman outline a pedagogy that makes use of similar ethos development in the classroom. Taylor Orgeron asks her students to research and then write about their findings to diverse gaming audiences often marginalized by mainstream games: women, gamers of color, queer gamers, and gamers with disabilities. Richard Colby asks us to consider how—and whether—game discussion forums are public discourse communities, ones that can be used as sites for research: using these resources without examining their complicated statuses poses a wicked ethical problem. Mary Karcher approaches game text circulation through archiving, examining ethical and immanently practical archiving strategies. Considering the way quantitative theorycrafting not only privileges itself as a player strategy above all others but how it feeds toxic gamer practices that exclude players of difference, Cody Reimer argues that gaming communities should also embrace qualitative forms of theorycraft. And finally, Rebekah Shultz Colby examines the writing of two Chinese students who conducted qualitative and quantitative theorycraft within *World of Warcraft* in Chinese and presented their research in English: she argues for teaching translingual practice strategies such as recontextualization, through which students learn to effectively communicate across cultures and decolonial research methods.

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PART I

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Ethics of Game-based and Gamification  
Writing Pedagogy



## Crash and Burn

*Mark Mullen*

### A SHORT FLIGHT SAFETY BRIEFING

March 2011 saw combat flight simulator enthusiasts feverishly awaiting the release of *IL2: Cliffs of Dover (CLOD)*, a game focused on the Battle of Britain and developed by 1C Maddox, the company responsible for the IL2 flight simulator franchise that had represented the state-of-the-art in simulation design for much of the previous decade. Fans had been waiting a long time—1C's next generation title was originally slated for 2006—but the trailers seemed to support the developer's claims that the title would raise the bar for visual and behavioral authenticity in flight simulator games. More importantly, many in the flight simulator community hoped that the game would resurrect a genre that was clearly in trouble.

In the 1990s flight simulation was a mass market genre. Dozens of innovative titles were released throughout the decade, covering all eras of flight but with a heavy concentration on WWI and WWII, and developed by companies who also published other genres of games (Microsoft,

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Microprose, Lucasarts, etc.).<sup>1</sup> The majority of these titles were also developed to be “full real” simulators; i.e., they were designed to be as realistic as possible within the limits of available technology.<sup>2</sup> By the early aughts, however, the picture was very different. Full real combat flight sims were now a niche genre catering to a rapidly aging—and almost exclusively white male—demographic, produced by a handful of specialized developers. The boxed sim world belonged to IC and the IL2 franchise (focused initially on the WWII Russian front but expanding to cover the entire conflict), and the MMO market had been cornered by *Aces High* (HiTech Creations 2002–2019).

Upon its release it was quickly apparent that *CloD* had indeed redefined not only the flight simulation genre but the larger field of digital games: at the time it was arguably the most disappointing piece of software for which players had ever been expected to part with real money. A game predicated upon historical fidelity featured aircraft with controls that operated in reverse and which did not even come close to replicating the performance characteristics of their real-life counterparts. More disastrously, even players with high-end PCs could not get the release version to run. The US release of the game was pushed back. And then pushed back again. IC tweaked and reworked and bug-hunted and optimized for over a year and eventually got the product into a state where the simulation part worked reasonably well most of the time. Then they abruptly announced they had no more money to put into the game and were ending development with the feature list radically incomplete and some of the core game mechanics still heavily compromised. A group of player volunteers who became known as Team Fusion took on the task of modding the game over a period of years to take it not just into a playable state but to improve and expand it. More than five years after the initial disastrous release, IC entered into a formal business arrangement with Team Fusion to continue development and add-on work on the game (Williams 2016). Unfortunately, most of the game’s target audience had long since given up in disgust and moved on to other games.

In what follows I look briefly at the player and reviewer responses to *CloD* and argue that the game’s reception was a harbinger of a fundamental shift in game development and consumption that now finds its fullest expression in the ubiquity of the Early Access game movement. Players and reviewers continue to idealize the “perpetual beta,” seemingly oblivious to the fact that Early Access development is underwritten by an unethical and exploitative innovation in capitalism that positions

players as, in effect, paying a company for the privilege of working for it. However, the Early Access marketplace can also be used as a lens to look at the way in which a broader cultural fetishization of open-ended possibility is shaping the intellectual context of our writing classes. To that end I focus on the disappearance of the concept of a “draft” and its replacement with a concept of “drafting,” an apparently innocuous shift that is not only an obstacle to our idealistic efforts to teach intellectually responsible skills of research and investigation but represents an impediment for even those concerns our students profess to bring to their writing (chiefly a desire for efficiency). Our challenge as teachers is that effective writing practices are increasingly at odds not just with our students’ everyday communication practices, but with a culturally valorized sense of self: like the seductive promise of the Early Access game, our students see themselves as “perpetual betas,” trying desperately to hold open that magic moment where they could become anything and everything.

### LET’S REVIEW

Paralleling the disappearance of flight simulators as a major commercial force has been their almost complete absence from the scholarly field of game studies. Emblematic is the flagship journal *Game Studies*. Of those scholarly articles that focus on analysis of specific game titles, there is not a single one in the journal’s 19-year history that has focused on a flight simulator; when articles do reference flight simulation it is usually as a category of games; specific titles are mentioned only in passing. What makes this even more surprising is that since Gonzalo Frasca (2003) first proposed simulation as a framework for game analysis, the concept has been a touchstone for the field; a text search of the *Game Studies* archive bears this out, with articles featuring hundreds of mentions of the term. There are also numerous instances when the subject matter of an article would seem to require a detailed analysis of specific flight simulators, but such analysis is absent.<sup>3</sup> For example, in considering links between simulation, simulacra, and nostalgia, Kathleen McClancy (2018) doesn’t even employ a simulation game as a case study but rather a roleplaying example. Focusing on the *Fallout* franchise makes sense thematically given McClancy’s examination of Cold War nostalgia specifically. But what interests me is why particular scholars choose the projects they do. Why, for example, would a general interest in nostalgia and simulation find its channel in an investigation of the Cold War and a real-time strategy game instead of

a flight simulator that covers, say, the Battle of Britain (a ripe target for analysis of cultural nostalgia, surely)?

Game studies has not paid sufficient attention to the fact that many of its practitioners are, to use a term borrowed from fan studies, “aca-fans”; scholarly work in game studies is overwhelmingly driven by the games that scholars enjoy playing, and very few of them fly the unfriendly virtual skies. There is nothing wrong with that unless it begins to distort work in the field. McClancy’s (2018) piece is also indicative of the ways in which the set of multi-disciplines that make up game studies have elided simulation and simulacra, folding the first term unproblematically into a discussion of the second. However, I suspect that it is also the case that there is a visceral reaction to the term simulation itself that people are unable to get past: modern culture puts extraordinary emphasis on being authentic and real; simulation by contrast connotes the fake, the stylized, the inauthentic, and the intentionally devious.

However, the decline in the simulator market and the lack of interest in the genre on the part of game studies have one shared cause: not all simulations are automatically games. According to Jesper Juul’s (2005) influential formulation of the classic game model, for example, simulations are borderline cases at best because they often lack quantifiable outcomes and valorization of those outcomes is often absent (p. 44). Indeed, the most common uses of simulation have nothing whatsoever to do with games and are instead typically focused on testing, training, modeling, and diagnostics. Some people will, of course, find these activities inherently rewarding to a degree that may even rise to the level of fun: most do not. Therefore, creating a realistic simulation does not automatically create a game. This was indeed a large part of the problem with *CLoD*. The developers went after the ultimate WWII aircraft simulator at the expense of a product that provided accessible fun. It is, however, the reaction to the game’s release that exemplifies two problematic trends in the larger video gaming world: the first is a culture of player credulity; the second is a culture of game reviewer culpability.

Astonishingly, a sense of justifiable outrage at *CLoD*’s disastrous release was the minority response. Many players on flight sim forums came up with every excuse under the sun to explain away the debacle (including, most fantastically, that the publisher, Ubisoft, had rushed the game into release).<sup>4</sup> The response of many video game reviewers mirrored the reactions of those sim enthusiasts who remained stubborn advocates for the game. Indeed, some of the reviews manifested the kind of craven



developer worship of which the entire reviewing industry has sometimes been accused. *PC Gamer (Russia)*, for example, had clearly been taking a leaf out of the old-school Soviet Ice Dancing judging manual when they awarded their countrymen’s non-working game 90/100.<sup>5</sup> Some game publications were equally not shy about calling something a steaming cow-pie once they had stepped in it; *Gamespot* gave the game an almost unprecedented 4/10 (VanOrd 2011). The majority view, however, was represented by publications like *IGN* that scored the game at 60/100—for a game that most players couldn’t actually play (Goble 2011).

In comparison with reviews of other media, game reviewing has remained stubbornly narrow in its focus and stultifyingly formulaic in its execution. In large part this is because, as Chuck Klosterman (2006) points out, game reviewing failed to develop as a species of criticism and has generally confined itself to offering what amounts to mere consumer advice. Klosterman acknowledged the difficulties in having a conversation that moves beyond what games are to what they might mean, in part because as branching structures for mobilizing choice, many games will not allow players to share the same experiential text. Therefore, he argues that one way for game reviewing to become game criticism is to explore what he terms “the significance of potentiality,” an attempt to try and make sense of experiential differences.

Some reviews for *CloD* demonstrated that far from exploring Klosterman’s “significance of potentiality,” game reviewing, in parallel to the game manufacturing culture whose values reviewers share, was now basing its evaluations on “speculative potential.” Gord Goble’s (2011) *IGN* review, for example, grants the game what amounts to an average score by, in effect, not looking at the game in front of him. He reviewed a heavily patched copy of the game, months after its initial release, and as even he is forced to acknowledge, by that point it was still not really playable. Yet he argues that we should not look at the game as it is but consider its potential: “there’s one hell of a game in there, trying to escape. And I think, given the responsiveness and the past track record of the development team and the plans that lie ahead in the next few months, that escape will soon occur.” This is not at all what Klosterman (2006) meant. Concentrating on the possibilities inherent in a finished and functioning game is very different from speculating concerning what an unfinished game might be like if it is ever finished. In summing up the game, Goble (2011) acknowledges that the game “should never, ever

have been released in the condition it was. Neither the developer or [*sic*] the publisher should expect forgiveness.” But what, then, is awarding an unfinished game 60/100 if not a form of forgiveness? In an age of easy multi-patching, especially for PC games, even the worst game has potential. I am sure that the “potential” that Goble had in mind was not that *CLoD* would ultimately preside over the demise of the team that built it, or that it would finally be hammered into a playable state not by the developers in whom he has so much faith, but by a team of unpaid player volunteers. Yet it is this insistence on speculating fantastically about what might be, rather than staring soberly at what is, that was capturing a fundamental change in gaming culture.

### PAY ME NOW AND PAY ME LATER

Recent trends in game design and marketing have made it very clear that what was once largely a dilemma facing developers of MMORPGs—where encouraging players to continue to play was synonymous with persuading them to continue to pay—has now become more widespread. Steven Boyer (2013) argues that mass media are increasingly moving toward trying to establish a consumer bond based on an ongoing relationship with a product or service (p. 185). One response has been low-level grumbling from players about the spread of a “free-to-play” (FTP) model, whereby a basic version of the game is offered and players are then asked either to pay for the additional features that are included as part of subscriptions and/or pay for additional “bonus” content (new cosmetic skins, consumables, and the like) through microtransactions. Many players fear that this is really a “pay-to-win” (PTW) system where throwing around wads of cash will allow wealthier players to dominate, supposedly at the expense of the truly skilled. The most problematic development trend, however, has been the emergence of what I call PTT: Play to Test.

Functionally, the distinction between a game in development and a finished game has ceased to exist and been replaced by a nebulous state of continual development that is referred to variously as “extended beta,” “soft launch,” or “early access.” In and of itself this might not be a problem if players were not routinely being asked to pay for the privilege of playing buggy, half-complete games. Moreover, as Mike Foster (2013) points out, players are now being asked to pay in order to perform the kind of Quality Assurance work for which game developers should be paying *them*:

Before this method became the standard, players paid money and received a game. It was a simple transaction. Now, players pay money to receive *the promise of a game* that will probably, eventually, be something worth playing, and oh, hey, wouldn't you mind testing it for us along the way? There's no finished product, just a series of never-ending updates.

The genius of this system is that it creates a level of plausible deniability for developers:

Publishers open the cash shop and line up the founders pack rewards, but at no point in the purchasing process is it ever established what “finished” actually means. .... players looking for the part of the EULA that outlines at what point they can see their investment considered officially returned are sure to be sorely disappointed. (Foster 2013)

*War Thunder* (Gaijin Entertainment 2012)—which began life as a combat flight simulator modeled on the arena-style combat of *World of Tanks*—is a case in point. The game announced an open beta in November of 2012. In the past this phase was usually relatively short and functioned mainly to load-test the servers and to generate additional word-of-mouth (or word-of-pixel) buzz. *War Thunder*, however, was still in open beta months later when I began playing it. It was still in open beta in March 2013 when the developers claimed to have attracted over a million players. When that number reached three million in July of 2013, the game was still in open beta, with new basic features being added. There was, in fact, never an announcement that the game had entered a “release” phase, but rather a steady series of updates and expansions to new platforms and distribution services. Yet, as soon as the game entered open beta in November 2012, the developers began charging players money to purchase upgrades and currency packs and they have been raking in the cash ever since for a game that has never officially been released.

Arguably the rot set in with the MMORPG genre which introduced the concept of a game that was never finished. The advent of online distribution services such as Steam eroded the distinction between release and development phases even further in that it was now possible for games of any genre or player mode to be “released” in a patently unfinished state and then to be patched easily and efficiently. The astounding success of Chris Roberts's (of *Wing Commander* and *Freelancer* fame) Kickstarter campaign to raise funds for his conjoined games *Star Citizen* and *Squadron 42* also seemed to highlight the promise of crowd-funding

to free developers from the tyrannical yoke of conventional publisher deals. Roberts raised more than \$2 million from an initial Kickstarter goal of \$500,000, and with the aid of ongoing fundraising, the development team has to date raised an amount that is thought to be around \$300 million in crowd-sourced funding alone—together with an undisclosed amount of venture capital, and an additional revenue stream from game-related merchandise (Parker 2017; Tassi 2020). But *Star Citizen* highlights a major problem with this type of game development. Cloud Imperium began work on the game back in 2011, and the original Kickstarter campaign targeted a late 2014 release date. As the amount of money increased, however, the release date was pushed back, and then back again. Cloud Imperium games is, nevertheless, still taking in, on average, more than \$30 million a year for a project that is still in alpha. Not surprisingly, concerns are mounting among a few players and some have even sued to get their money back (Parker 2017).

Crowd-sourced game funding is simply the logical extension of a practice whose goal has been explicitly to sell both “promise” and “hope” in relation to a specific title. Here again MMORPGs led the way: developers provide the requisite set of online forums, guild or clan website tools, a steady diet of developer diaries, articles on specific game features, “sneak peeks” and so on. Developers tread a fine line here: they must provide enough information to allow players to visualize the game but avoid being too specific or comprehensive. The central thrust of such “community-building” is always the same: “this is the specific game we are making, with X, Y, and Z features; nevertheless, *it can be any game you want it to be.*” Developers ruthlessly exploit the already inflated expectations of players and amp them up even further. This is nothing less than the provision of an exceptionally sweet and seductive Kool-Aid, albeit one whose toxic aftermath can take a while to kick in. Increasingly, our games no longer exist as a discrete product but rather as a perpetual process of becoming something. Possibly. Or not.

Early Access is only the most recent instantiation of a phenomenon that Tiziana Terranova (2004) has labeled “free labor” (p. 73). While capitalism has throughout its history sought to maximize profit by paying workers as little as possible, the new wrinkle that Terranova identifies is one where companies leverage customers’ enthusiasm for a brand or product in order to persuade them to perform essential services for free. This is in fact a model that some game developers have been exploiting for some time which is why Foster’s implicit contrast between the evils of our

current Early Access period and the good old beta-testing days—where players were routinely recruited to perform a service for the developer for free—rings a little hollow. Furthermore, players were also tacitly being recruited as what are now increasingly being referred to as “brand ambassadors,” product enthusiasts who, once the non-disclosure agreement was lifted, would be able to promote the game from a position of first-hand knowledge. What held the whole ethically dubious arrangement together was the fact that while players were not *paid*, most nevertheless felt they were adequately *compensated* by getting to spend more time with a game they desired and earning bragging rights by being able to do so before anyone else.

Implicit in Terranova’s (2004) analysis is that modern capitalism works by persuading workers, consumers, and pundits that there are domains of experience that fall outside the normal economic laws of profit extraction. Terranova notes that while the free labor model seems to be associated with industries that appear to offer services rather than products,

the disappearance of the commodity is not a material disappearance, but its visible subordination to the quality of labor behind it. In this sense the commodity does not disappear as such; it becomes increasingly ephemeral, its duration becomes compressed, it becomes more a process than a finished product. (p. 90)

Some of this is achieved by terminological jiggery pokery that helps mask the nature of the profit maximization strategies that are at work. An obvious example here is the use of terms like “gift economy” and “sharing economy” to describe the rise of industries that are built around labor-casualization, the elimination of benefit structures and the erosion of worker protections. Teachers are themselves no strangers to these strategies, encouraged from the earliest days of our training to see what we do as a “vocation,” a term of art that emphasizes self-sacrifice as the central professional value. It is a “privilege” to be able to “do what you love,” in return for which we will accept lower wages than our comparably educated peers in other professions and, increasingly, heightened levels of job insecurity and administrative oversight.

Early Access taps many of the same emotional investments as crowd-funding appeals in general: desire to be part of something big, achieving identity through brand identification, gaining bragging rights as an early adopter, and indulging in feelings of altruism. The new “perpetual beta”

approach to game development, however, embodies an additional mutation in late capitalism. Now, players are not simply content to work for their chosen game development company for free but are willing to pay the company for the privilege of being employed. This is a Wall Street Overlord's dream. Companies not only get free services for which they would have had to pay others, but they receive a guaranteed revenue stream before a product is even officially a product. The rise of the Early Access gaming model should, therefore, be of broad concern; historically, if capitalism finds a profit-extraction strategy that works in one sector of the economy, it will inevitably try to apply those strategies to other sectors.

Not a few Early Access games were outright scams. Several of these—*The War Z* (Hammerpoint Interactive 2012), *Spacebase DF-9* (Double Fine Productions 2014), and the later *Earth:Year 2066* (Muxwell 2014)—have passed into gaming legend because the level of deception was so extreme that their distribution platform, Steam, was forced to refund players' money. For every one of these examples, however, there were dozens more like Peter Molyneux's *Godus* (22Cans 2013), funded via Kickstarter, released in a radically incomplete state, and subsequently abandoned with many of the features promised in the campaign absent. It was this stream of scams and botched projects that led Luke McKinney (2015) to wonder why any player would be taken in by a strategy that ran so counter to basic logic:

Finishing things is hard. That's why we pay other people to do it. And that's why we pay them only *after* they do it, and when we know they've done a good job. Pay a stranger halfway through fixing your toilet and you'll soon see why we don't normally do that. And you still won't be dealing with as much s\*\*t as you do with the Early Access market. (para. 25)

The Early Access approach has produced some great games (*War Thunder* is evidence of that), has freed developers from what many see as the tyrannical and frequently uncomprehending oversight of game publishers, and, perhaps more importantly, has fostered the development of a number of games that would otherwise not have been made. Yet we are probably now at the point where we can ask: (a) at what cost? and (b) is this model producing a larger number of quality games on average than the old model? Early Access as a developer strategy is also so shamelessly

transparent—demanding people pay for the privilege of a job—that we need to ask why anyone in their right mind would consent to such an arrangement. Moreover, when we step back from the world of gaming hype and try to look objectively at the examples of abuse of the system, there’s a sense of wonder: developer after developer was allowed to take the money and run, leaving the distribution service to bail them out.

The examples I have cited all belong to what many regard as the bad old days of Early Access, when platforms and players were less savvy. Now the problem lies, in part, in sheer volume. As of February 2017, more than 30,000 game projects had been listed on Kickstarter (Parker 2017); around 15% of all Steam games fall into the Early Access category (Lin, Bezemer, and Hassan 2017). Many of these games never see the light of day or are released as buggy, incomplete messes. Players themselves are not, however, entirely helpless victims. Time and again they buy into the hype of hope, envisioning a game that an objective appraisal would suggest is often impossible. A case in point is *No Man’s Sky* (Hello Games 2016), the massively hyped procedural paradise whose disappointing release produced equally extravagant levels of fury (after two years of desperate patching, 51% of the more than 100,000 player reviews on Steam are negative). This time, given the scale of dissatisfaction, Steam denied refunds; numerous players instead lodged complaints with both the FTC and the British Advertising Standards Authority. There is a pretty clear case that the developers “strategically misled” or actively misrepresented the type of game they were going to be able to deliver. Yet not a few people have wanted to cut the developers some slack. Alex Perry (2016), for example, in an overview of the ASA complaint claims, “there’s an argument to be made that ‘No Man’s Sky’ has been put under an unfair microscope, as the game was made by a small development team, which inherently limits what the game can be.” If this argument sounds familiar, it is—because a similar logic was employed by Goble (2011) in his review of *Cliffs of Dover*: hey, they tried; give them a pass.

There are two very easy ways to avoid the temptations of the ethical morass of Early Access game development. First, if you are a small development team, don’t promise that you will be able to deliver a game that even a AAA development house has not yet been able to make. Second, for a player interested in a game in development, try not to act like a kid waiting up to catch a glimpse of Santa. There is an even more obvious remedy available to players: do not support any Early Access games until there are systemic mechanisms in place to hold developers accountable.

Unfortunately, renunciation and self-denial have never been core values of video game players. Yet, players are also up against a broader professional culture on the part of both developers and game reviewers that seems quite happy to overlook the fundamental ethical problems with the Early Access model. Cecilia D’Anastasio (2018) highlights many of the points I have made here, but also argues that the image of Early Access providing a necessary revenue stream for cash-strapped indie developers masks the reality of some games—most notably leviathan *Fortnite*—making tens, or even hundreds of millions of dollars while still in Early Access:

[This] indicates that their developers are not using “early access” as a funding model. They’re using it as a diversion tactic. .... What’s become apparent is that slapping the “early access” descriptor on any game is a great way to avoid the scrutiny of over-critical gamers. (para. 7)

D’Anastasio’s response to all this is to simply shrug and conclude that “Maybe the truth is that in 2018, all video games are early access,” (para. 21) and that is a positive thing because iterating a game to make it what players want is always a good thing. This evidences a breathtaking ability to overlook the exploitation inherent in asking players to pay to test your product, the mendacity in pretending a released game is not a game, and the large number of fraudulent claims saved only by players’ consenting to EULAs that legitimize fraud.

Yet D’Anastasio’s shrug is not all that unusual if we accept Mike Monteiro’s (2019) argument that the tech sector as a whole has little interest in the ethical implications of the products it creates:

We’re strip-mining humanity for engagement and fracking the decency out of society because we’re working within a system of rewards that doesn’t give a damn about long-term effects, only short-term gains. Silicon Valley doesn’t care what the long-term effects of an eighteen-year-old being bullied on Twitter is as long as they’re discovered after the options vest and the stock is sold. (p. 124)

While Cennydd Bowles (2018) sees little utility in the remedies proposed by Monteiro (2019) (an ethical code of conduct for designers and certification by a professional organization as condition of employment), he agrees with Monteiro that many of the core assumptions of information technology designers lead to widespread ethical abuses—. “Lean [design] enthusiasts contend iteration is the best route to product-market



fit: experimenting with, and on, users is celebrated as a natural step in this process” (p. 39). Moreover, a belief that technology is simply a neutral tool and that it is apolitical (a fig-leaf that is ironic at best given the tech sector’s championing of “disruption” and enthusiasm for social engineering) means that “tech culture prizes intelligence but is doggedly anti-intellectual” (p. 5). Monteiro (2019) finds the roots of such anti-intellectualism in the tech sector’s belief in the universal applicability of its own worldview. Much of the reason for Twitter’s lack of safeguards concerning harassment, stalking, etc., was because “The prevailing wisdom of that era was that you built the tool you and your team wanted to use” (p. 72); the team in this case was made up entirely of privileged young men. This same attitude is endemic to the video game design community where designers proudly proclaim that “we design the kinds of games we ourselves want to play”; it explains why video games also have a dire history (and a marginally less dire present) when it comes to overlooking obvious workplace and in-game racial and gender disparities. Indeed, the professional norms in a variety of design fields emphasize that designers are sufficiently special that ethical concerns are irrelevant. On the contrary, Monteiro asserts that “Design is not about expressing yourself. Design is not about following your dream. Design is not about becoming a creative. Design is about keeping people from doing terrible things to other people (p. 63).

While the financial investment on the part of players makes this practice distinctive to the world of gaming, the *emotional* investment that players are required to make in fact charts a cultural territory that we have become increasingly familiar with over the last couple of years, in the United States especially. Tightly enclosed communities of fan(atic)s, whipping themselves up into a frenzy of expectation, prepared to overlook danger signs, resistant to logic and evidence, completely oblivious to the reality of anyone else’s vision except their own, above all determinedly focused not on the product as it actually is but what they want/need it to be. .... This is exactly the twisted logic that drives a partisan political reality in general but is the *sine qua non* of populism in particular. For too long the mass media was preoccupied with the specter of video games as a breeding ground for violent behavior and the research that explored these questions. This research looks even more quixotic now in terms of the ubiquity of gaming because it always, as John Sherry (2006) points out, failed a basic sniff test. If research into arousal had any validity beyond the lab then the massive increase in consumption of video games should have

led to a surge in psychopathic violence. Instead of focusing so narrowly on what is in essence a simplistic “monkey-see, monkey do” understanding of human behavior, researchers and journalists should instead have been focused on the rhetorical structures, communication platforms, and norms for debate and idea exchange (or refusal) that gaming—as an extension of the broader logics of the tech sector—was helping to cement in place. For example, the belief in a false universality of one’s own experience and an appeal to the self-evident nature of reality (no need to research anything when everything is common sense) that both Bowles (2018) and Monteiro (2019) discuss are, as Jan-Werner Müller (2016) points out, foundational elements in a populist worldview. Perhaps the most powerful social impact of video games, given the fact they are created by designers who are heavily invested in this same libertarian ethical black hole, has been to encourage the kind of ethical flexibility and moral lassitude necessary to the rise of a Trump, a Farage, a Duterte, or a Le Pen.

### THE NEVER-ENDING STORY

The core similarity between populist thought—itself something of an oxymoron—and the celebration of the perpetual beta is that both are species of magical thinking. Sadly, this connection is considerably less speculative now than when I originally charted it, since we in the United States are now living daily with the disastrous response to a global pandemic created by large numbers of people believing in the world as they want it to be rather than the world that is. However, I think we can see two very particular ways that a culture addicted to the “perpetual beta” is shaping the experience of our students as writers and researchers. Neither of them is any less discomfiting than the connection between the logic underlying Easy Access gaming and the rise of fascism. My first concern is the impact on a very specific writing practice, and one that is a cornerstone of many writing pedagogies: drafting.

The concept of a draft version of a piece of writing is now more common among the first-year students that I teach, although it is still hardly a universal takeaway from high school writing experiences that favor replication of formulaic packages to be deployed in standardized tests. It is also still the case that drafts tend not to be understood as conceptual waystations but rather as a “basically finished” version that just needs a little grammatical and syntactical polishing (and to be fair to my

students, a five-paragraph essay is hardly likely to need much in the way of conceptual refinement). However, Joe Mertens (personal communication, November 28, 2018), one of my former students, brought home to me the way in which the entire conception of what a “draft” is has changed for many, if not most of my students. In highlighting several of the things he had learned from the class, he noted,

Building on the concept of writing as a process, UW has also taught me that writing is never wasted. Meaning that anytime I wrote for an assignment, even if I completely scrapped it, that writing was worthwhile because it got me to where I ended up. Another way to look at this was coming into UW I foolishly thought the concept of drafts was antiquated. I felt like, in the age of computers, edits were constant and there was no longer such a thing as a draft, instead it was simply an ever-evolving paper. I could not have been more wrong. Once I began to accept that writing is never wasted this concept became clearer to me. I realized that I never knew when I might repurpose something from an old draft or prefer that wording to my latest attempt. Consequently, I now save each new draft of a paper individually.

I immediately felt stupid for having missed such a fundamental change: the fact that drafting is now largely a practice of over-writing, rather than versioning. Drafts no longer refer to discrete objects, but rather to the state in which a text happens to exist at a specific point in time. Feedback is received, thought is applied, rewriting happens, and the new version replaces the old, expunging all traces of the previous state.

Like many other writing faculty my age, my graduate education took place during the high water mark of post-structuralism. This change seems, by that light, exactly the sort of thing I should be celebrating. Perpetual deferral. Undermining of a master-text. The ceaseless play of possibility. However, I suspect I am not alone in finding my deep-dive into the waters of post-structuralism to have been bracing but ultimately frustratingly unsuitable for actually getting anything done in the world. The obligation of writing teachers is not just to help apprentice writers complete individual projects but to develop dispositions toward writing and research and a sound grasp of effective writing practices. The idea of a “draft” that is under-perpetual revision is built upon a simplistic evolutionary narrative that assumes writing is always a product of relentless forward progress and that progress equals steady improvement. (Recall Goble’s [2011] tacit assumption that a game’s “potential” lies in the

inevitability of its improvement.) By contrast, mature writers understand that moving forward with a project often involves having to go backward, to be willing to revert a project to an earlier state. An even more common situation is the one described by my student, Joe, who discovered that the latest version of a piece of writing suddenly needed something discarded from a previous draft. I still recall the panic on a student's face recently when I suggested to her that the heavily re-written current version of her project could now use a portion of a prior draft as the basis for an effective introduction. She had deleted that previous material, overwriting it in the current version. Moreover, the single file approach to writing works against an understanding of the complexities and opportunities that define the world of writing beyond a single class. A portion of an earlier discarded draft could become the basis for another project in another disciplinary context.

My second concern is the emotional impact upon students of a culture that celebrates Early Access and the perpetual beta. Mark Edmundson (2008) observes that his students “live to multiply possibilities. They're enemies of closure. For as much as they want to do and actually manage to do, they always strive to keep their options open, never to shut possibilities down before they have to” (para. 3). But it is this characteristic, he argues that is “part of what makes this student generation appealing, highly promising—and also radically vulnerable” (para. 4). Edmundson's analysis thus reinforces the fact that shifts in the video game marketplace are part of broader cultural shifts. He articulates several different modes through which this hunger to live in a non-foreclosed, perpetual present manifests itself: music practices, party protocols, hook-up culture, and a set of laptop-assisted classroom practices that we might euphemistically label “multi-tasking.” However, this “do everything, be everywhere now” culture exacts a high price: students holding themselves to impossible standards of achievement and workload and then flagellating themselves mercilessly when they almost inevitably fall short.

I have taught Edmundson's (2008) essay for a number of years, in large part because it is refreshingly free of the “get off my lawn” or millennial-bashing approaches so common in the news media. Most of my students have acknowledged that he has captured something about the pressures they find themselves under. The degree to which they are subject to the relentless marketing of possibility has many similarities to Andi Zeisler's (2016) analysis of the marketing of “empowerment”

feminism, in particular the way in which advertising's valorization of individual initiative vitiates collective action. Students have, however, been resistant—as have many of my colleagues—to the portion of his argument that indicts information technology as abetting a high stakes culture of unrealistic possibility. Edmundson (2008) certainly doesn't see this phenomenon as something restricted entirely to our age; for him, the quintessential multiplier of possibility is Byron, and Edmundson argues that students have in fact thoroughly absorbed what Nietzsche saw as the fundamental dictum of Romanticism: life is elsewhere. However, Romanticism has, he argues, found its ultimate vehicle in the modern laptop: a “multiplier of the possible” (para. 7), something that thins and attenuates both our attention and our experience, in contrast to activities that he refers to as “life thickeners.” Students in the past have greeted this assertion with mild skepticism and have responded to his solution—to ban laptops from his literature classroom—with everything from derision to hostility (“out of my cold, dead, hands ...”).

Edmundson (2008), however, is not some technophobe. His argument is fundamentally one about place: multiplying possibilities is dependent upon students actively inhabiting a variety of different places at one time (for example, imagine being with a friend in a sports bar, watching a game taking place hundreds of miles away, while simultaneously reading an assignment for next day's class on a tablet and talking on the phone with a friend at another college). Edmundson doesn't see this as an unmitigated evil—that is where he and I part company!—but he does ask us to consider what is lost when we do not fully inhabit a single place. What, he asks, might a literature class that dispensed with desiring devices teach students about new forms of desire that will only emerge when people stand still long enough to listen? This question is equally resonant for those of us in writing studies, perhaps even more so because so many writing teachers seem now to think that information technology has become an indispensable part of their practice. But, as Edmundson reminds us, “We're not here to help our students make their minds resemble their laptops, fast and feverish. We didn't get into teaching to make trains of thought run on time.”

My students *were* skeptical of the technology component of Edmundson's (2008) argument ... until a couple of years ago. It was then that I noticed classroom discussions surrounding this article change. In reflective essays students were routinely referring to using “Do Not Disturb” functions on their laptops, hiding their phones from themselves under

pillows in their dorm rooms or deep in their backpacks at the library (but never, ever contemplating leaving the phone behind). This shift coincided with the aftermath of the 2016 election and the realization of the many ways in which social media had fueled a toxic culture of partisan rancor. It is, however, noteworthy that it took an electoral disaster to wake up people who had ignored the doxing and harassment of the Gamergate troglodytes, the pernicious effects of cyber-bullying, the remarkable effectiveness of the Internet as a stalker's paradise, the marketing of online outrage, etc. Indeed, I think my students are now gradually registering what Adam Alter (2017), for example, has recently made plain: technological curmudgeons like myself have been wrong only in the fact that we misunderstood the level of malign intent underpinning the design of many of our applications and platforms. Silicon Valley designers are, he argues, in many ways better versed in the psychology of attention than we ourselves (p. 9). They know how to design notification systems, achievement structures, and bottomless scrolling feeds in ways that keep us dwelling in possibility, always looking elsewhere, responding automatically to alerts and symbols that relentlessly pull us away from the here and now.

I am hopeful that the current generation of students may gradually be starting to push back against the impulse to become what I have described as a “digital hero,” a person who is in touch and “connected” to everything and everyone all the time. Some students are reluctantly beginning to consider that the constant stream of data causing their phones to jiggle and twitch like a squirrel with Tourette's is having an effect not dissimilar to the “old-fashioned” nightly news broadcasts from ABC, NBC, and CBS: it makes them feel as if they are informed, while not actually informing them of much of anything. Many of them ruefully acknowledge, for example, that they rarely read beyond the headline of most news stories that come their way, and with so much information to process, even a decision to read in more “depth” inevitably results in skimming. Our culture is encouraging our students to see themselves as the human equivalent of that single saved file, a draft perpetually being over-written in the direction of a glorious future of constant possibility, a desperate headlong rush over thin ice that only works, as Edmundson (2008) points out, if a person keeps moving with desperate speed.

## NOTES

1. For example, *Red Baron II* (Dynamix 1997) set a standard for dynamic and immersive single-player campaigns seldom approached by subsequent titles. *Rowan's Battle of Britain* (Rowan Software 2000)—re-released as *Battle of Britain II: Wings of Victory* (A2A Simulations/Shockwave Productions 2005)—combined realistic flight-models with an impressive scalable strategic layer. *B17 Flying Fortress* (Vektor Grafix 2009)—remade as *B17 Flying Fortress: The Mighty 8th* (Wayward Design 2000)—featured a complex, aircraft simulation that also allowed players to switch from a first-person to third-person view where they could order crew members to attend to battle damage or injured crew members.
2. The term “full real” is in only occasional use in the flight simulator community, its usage most closely associated with one of the three major modes in *War Thunder*. Nevertheless, I prefer it to the more usual term, “hardcore,” because it both avoids some unfortunate gender exclusivity but also because it more fully represents the goal toward which many of these games and their players aspire.
3. For example, Adam Chapman’s (2016) analysis of WWI games and memory starts with a numerical breakdown of commercially available WWI titles that reveals that WWI flight simulators are the largest category by a wide margin, a rather singular finding given the unpopularity of the genre as a whole, but a fact which receives no further analysis.
4. This attitude was still evident years later. For example, see the excellent fan-made film, *The Beginning of the End* (2014), whose opening credits not only falsely shorten *CloD*’s known development timeline (claiming the developers started working on the project in 2008) but attribute the game’s botched release to “commercial pressures.”
5. The score and a fragment of the review only are preserved at *Metacritic* (2011).

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## From Actuality to Possibility: Reckoning with the Ethics of Failure in Pedagogy

*Christopher Stuart*

When I first started teaching composition as a master's student in 2014, I found that the template syllabus I was working from neither engaging enough, nor did it sound supportive of my students' work. Given the procedural language of course policies, my students ignored the nuances of language, making assumptions of the course based on high school and college classes previously taken. As the semester progressed, I added elements to the assignments that would make students be more open to nuance and *kairos*, but they ignored feedback and tapped into rote learning habits to generate (what they thought to be) standard college work. It became clear in their reflections that students were afraid to take risks or didn't see the benefits of doing so. Several students didn't understand why the minimum requirements weren't "A" worthy and also stated they didn't learn much in the class.

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I was concerned, having found myself in a classroom of first-year writing students who seemed motivated to write only because they had to—because of teacherly expectations or the threat of a poor grade—and not because they had identified exigencies of their own. I turned to more experienced colleagues who clearly empathized completely. In these conversations, phrases such as “avoiding failure,” “fear of failure,” and “wasting time” were repeated. Students felt vulnerable and thought if they put the time into be creative, it would all be for naught because it deviated from instructor expectations. Colleagues offered strategies to bring attention to transferrable skills which would motivate students to engage with the assignments in a more nuanced way. Student work definitely showed improvement, but students still didn’t seem invested in it.

After teaching two first-year composition courses, I reflected on my own education and what propelled me to do better and try new methods. I struggled in K-12 education because of the standardized approach to all subjects. My gut told me to take a risk and deviate from the instructions to make class more fun or interesting because of the exploratory approach I took to learning at home. I excelled at playing and modding games outside the classroom. I remember renting the infamously difficult Disney adaptations on the Nintendo Entertainment System and Super NES and modding games and making maps in real-time strategy games. I would spend hours on the same level, studying every possible strategy and then find new challenges. I attribute my work ethic and determination to gaming habits because gamers set goals, come up with creative solutions, and move to other challenges. This reflection drove me toward game-based learning because I wanted to instill the same excitement and dedication in my students as I had for learning outside the classroom. This is when I came across Lee Sheldon’s (2011) book, *The Multiplayer Classroom*, which talked about his similar journey and how he gamified the class to inspire his students to be better game designers. It was then that I realized play and failure were so important to the classroom.

This chapter explores how to establish a rich ethical dimension of failure to position our students to be more inventive composers. First, I explore what a rich ethical dimension of failure is and how it can transform approaches students take toward learning. Then, I apply this concept to course design that transcends the composition classroom. Finally, I show ways I facilitate this in my first-year and advanced composition classes through a culminating project and presentation.

## TOWARD AN ETHICAL DIMENSION OF FAILURE

Managing expectations and weighing outcomes of a task is difficult to do, especially when the stakes are high. Students set their own expectations through previous experience, course documents, and how instructors respond to their work. It is easy to get stuck in a reality based on projected limitations which are often defined by previous failure. I quickly affirmed my mentors and colleagues' sentiments that most students struggled with confidence in their ability to write coherently due to past failures but were more open to innovative and persuasive methods of communication if they believed they had the ability to learn it. Students were fighting against boundaries they set for themselves and wrestled with their projected capabilities or limitations—just like I did in school. I wanted to bridge principles of gaming and education to help students break this projected limitation by specifically talking about possibility and failure.

Possibility and failure are key concepts in game studies and teaching students about them in the context of rhetoric and composition felt like important work. John Poulakos (1994) explains the rhetoric of possibility through three positions: actuality, ideality, and possibility. To Poulakos, actuality is what is observable and obvious: the now. He explains the actual position as “the way things are in the world,” or “what is believed to be known and understood about reality” (p. 67). Actuality is the position of our convictions, how the world works, and why. Students content or who become complacent with their situations are stuck in an actuality position. Standardized testing and rote learning have pushed us into this position, taking away imagination and possibility from many pre-higher education rationales. The second position, ideality, is what ought to be or unattainable perfection. Poulakos specifies that “ideality is what is envisioned and known about a world that can never be made actual” (p. 68). Ideality is a tricky positionality to strive for because it is not attainable but is the perfection that we are told to aim for. Poulakos offers possibility as the in-between: what is not but could be. The possible is typically seen as something that may lie just outside our immediate grasp which “underscores the fluidity, the elusiveness, and the malleability of human experience,” which makes it a more meaningful pursuit than ideality (p. 68). This differentiation is important to understanding our positionality in our own learning because, as Poulakos (1983) explains, “Rhetoric is the art which seeks to capture in opportune moments that which is

appropriate and attempts to suggest that which is possible” (p. 36). I propose that the way to move from actuality to the possible is play.

The adaptability of play is the means to attain the skills needed to move into the realm of the possible. Play, for Greg Costikyan (2015), is uncertainty and unpredictability, two concepts that cannot exist in the realm of actuality; if they could, we would not want to engage in play because it would no longer be a challenge. He criticizes Roger Caillois (1961) for only seeing play and games as binary: win or loss. Costikyan expands play into the realm of the possible through uncertainty, breaking the binary and leaving a third space of continual play. It is through this continual play—the oscillation of thought through actuality, ideality, and possibility—where creativity and persistence reside. Managing the fear, stress, and preconceptions of failure when the stakes are higher (like for a grade in a class)—is how we get toward a rich dimension of ethical failure.

Jesper Juul (2013) expands on this fear of failure through what he calls the “paradox of failure” (p. 2). He describes how we have a fundamental desire to succeed and to feel good, but gamers constantly “have chosen to engage in an activity in which they are almost certain to fail and feel incompetent, at least some of the time” (p. 2). Juul proclaims that video games are “the singular art form that sets us up for failure and allows us to experience and experiment with failure” (p. 30), understanding failure as part of the process of learning: “Failure then has the very concrete positive effect of making us see new details and depth in the game that we are playing ... we come away from any *skill*-based game changed, wiser, and possessing new skills” (p. 59). Students discuss feedback and critique in their written reflections as a lack of skill or knowledge—sometimes articulated as a failure in line with what Juul articulates. If we represent writing or editing as skills to hone, students can work toward overcoming the sense of failure they may feel from a last draft or assignment. It is important to articulate failure in ways that don’t instantly assume the total failure that is typically articulated in games, sports, and assignments, but instead as an opportunity for reflection and improvement. Juul postulates failure as freedom once we accept the responsibility of failure: “failure also concretely pushes us to search for new strategies and learning opportunities ... failure reveals strategic depth” (p. 116). This is immensely hard to do because humans do not like to admit to a lack in skill, and students especially, because they are vulnerable and already (often) full of self-doubt.

Students in my first-year and junior-level composition classes are required to conduct peer reviews throughout the semester in different ways: from the typical paper review to presentations with Q&A sessions. This exposure leaves many students feeling vulnerable, especially when they read from their work or showcase the alpha version of their game. David Riche (2017) sees humans as rhetorical beings inherently vulnerable because “life is contingent, perpetually exposed, and always subject to the effects of language” (p. 85). Students are constantly calculating risk and managing expectations, and some students are more vulnerable than others due to their previous experiences. Justin Hodgson (2013) discusses the circumstantial footing players have in games, much like students have in classrooms: “many players begin on unequal terms because of their backgrounds, gaming experiences, skill sets, and so on” and even though players may start with the same in-game resources, “skills, available time, and access to gaming resources (all particular gaming affordances)—radically skew not only how [players] start but also their playing conditions more generally” (p. 47). This is an important observation about games in the classroom: due to financial and social backgrounds, students are not on the same level of expertise.

Acknowledging a student’s vulnerability and discussing ways to work toward a successful learning experience is paramount to game-based learning, especially when there are technological expectations. If instructors intend to bring technology into classrooms, they need to consider the support students will need to engage with it. There should be a balance between the content of the lesson and its delivery methods to avoid overwhelming students or adding additional disadvantages. Riche (2017) uses Alexander Reid’s (2014) explanation of rhetorical positioning through “risk management” to better explain student vulnerability. Reid discusses the writing process and rhetorical engagement as “risk management” because students constantly calculate what risks they need to take to get an “A” (or other desired grade). Reid makes the point that students use risk aversion, playing it safe to get a “B” instead of taking the risks needed to get an “A.” He assigns “B’s” to assignment completion to take the anxiety of failure away and promote risk taking for those students who want to get “A’s” (pp. 192–193). I use a similar tactic in my classroom to promote risk taking, but the risk assessment needs to consider technology, gaming mechanics, and previous gaming knowledge.

I want my students to embrace a gameful mindset that promotes risk taking by pushing the boundaries of assignments and working toward

the possible. Gameful thinking is typically understood as bringing the mindset of a gamer—confidence, creativity, curiosity, flexibility, and determination—to non-game challenges (McGonigal 2011). Yasmine Kafai and Kylie Pepler (2012) expand on gameful thinking, teaching what they call “gaming fluencies” (p. 355). Kafai and Pepler define gaming fluencies as an “intermix of technology and gaming practices” where the student “can become fluent not only in game design but also in the creative, critical, and technical aspects of working with new media” (p. 355). Gaming fluencies promote gaming literacy (mechanics and genre knowledge) along with technology fluency by teaching students about coding, modding, and critical problem solving. This mindset is how I construct my composition classes: it not only engages the technical side of composition, but also its potential playfulness.

To promote playfulness, I use gaming terminology to instantly break their expectations and introduce uncertainty. Assignments and projects are known as adventures and raids, groups are identified as guilds, and grades are converted to experience points. The first adventure the students complete is called “Hello, Avatar,” inspired by Beth Coleman’s (2011) book of the same name. Students recreate themselves by choosing an avatar and handle which connects them to the class and, possibly, across other networked media through agreed upon hashtags, assignment titles, and other levels of engagement. The students then take a simple Myers-Briggs test to get their four-letter personality description that corresponds to “character specializations” in class. The specializations are a way of talking about strategies for learning, creating meaning, and collaboration. Each specialization is linked to a composing strategy: *warrior*, requiring higher word counts or more coding; *ranger*, requiring additional research requirements; *mage*, often requiring transmediation into multiple modes; *bard*, tapping into graphic design, drawing, or another traditionally creative composition; and *builder* (a specialization only accessible after the *Minecraft* module is completed), building three-dimensional representations in *Minecraft: Education Edition*. Students are required to stick with their Myers-Briggs specialization until the conclusion of the first raid but can then adventure out and cycle through all the specializations throughout the semester. These specializations give them the opportunity to take risks (as Reid [2014] discusses) and add nuance to the composition because the assessed work from the specialization only accounts for 10% of the grade. This flexibility promotes play and takes some pressure off failing. The specializations guide students to take risks

on the adventures and raids, risks that ultimately produce compositions in which they are invested and more confident in showcasing to others of the same specialization (from whom they get feedback). This modifying behavior motivates students to think beyond words on a page to the “text” as a problem that needs to be solved. It also shows, like in most games, that there is no one way to solve a problem and they can learn from one another to reach their goals. Such student engagement is adaptable outside of academia.

The aforementioned theories and pedagogical strategies work toward an understanding of failure and its place in the classroom, but metacognition is the bridge needed to adapt and learn through failure. Failure is a process that everyone needs to work through to hone their skills, a process which is articulated in the rhetorical concept of *metanoia*: “an active emotional state in which reflection, revelation, and transformation occur and thus expand the opportunities available in the concept of *kairos*” (Myers 2011, p. 2). *Kairos* may be a fleeting moment easily missed, but *metanoia* “can be engaged in as a process, one in which reflection leads to recognition” of the missed opportunity, resulting in probable change (Myers 2011, p. 8). This process, what I call metanoic reflection, is more than simply recognizing what went right and wrong; it is the recursive process of moving from recognition to action until there is success. This process is transformative because it builds knowledge through failure while also lessening the pain. Like in gaming, not all strategies will work, but to recall Juul (2013), “we come away from any *skill*-based game changed, wiser, and possessing new skills” (p. 59). Kelly Myers (2011) explains that “If *kairos* is seized, a person is carried down the path of that particular opportunity, but if the moment is missed, the path(s) of *metanoia* remain—paths that bring opportunities richly variegated with reflection, regret, transformation, and repentance” (p. 11). Without the ability to reflect on what did and didn’t work, students revert to risk aversion, instead of formulating new plans.

The biggest apprehension students have is when they have to present their work to a larger audience, face-to-face. When students make multimodal compositions or work through the alpha and beta stages of their games, they feel very vulnerable and are afraid to present to their peers. Jared Colton, Steve Holmes, and Josephine Walwema’s (2017) ethics of care “recognizes moral value in the reciprocal and singular relations of caring between individuals that ensures one another’s well-being” (p. 60). Part of the equation in the ethics of care is determining if the action or



situation is wounding to or caring for an individual, but it isn't a simple binary:

These terms offer a set of fluid ratios to allow us to characterize the totality of relations of those affected by a given tactical action, and, in turn, to attribute ethical behavior which, in some cases, will involve wounding certain individuals to help ensure our collective ability to ensure an ethics of care for the most vulnerable. (p. 60)

To ensure the most vulnerable are part of the conversation about ethics, we discuss the range of specializations, how to approach compositions in a nuanced way, and, most importantly, create guidelines for actionable, respectful feedback. For instance, the warrior is not better or worse than the bard, but the expectation is to show growth in students' specialization and potentially choose another to challenge themselves further. Students of the same specialization will often challenge one another and push themselves to further their skills and knowledge of the medium they are working within, whether that be video editing, photo manipulation, or technical writing. It is through these conversations and presentations that the volunteers (less vulnerable) open more critical conversations and become mentors to the more vulnerable students.

The varying levels of interaction in the class—instructor to class, instructor to student, student to class, and peer to peer—all require conversations about ethics of care and *phronesis*. *Phronesis* is understood here as practical intelligence or learned knowledge through practical application, but not necessarily through rote repetition (Holmes 2018). To develop a *phronetic* understanding, students engage with an assignment or project to fundamentally understand the rhetorical situation it is situated in and the tools they need to reach a desired outcome. I add to the *phronetic* development by subverting student expectations through game-based learning—such as the specializations or using different design software—combined with metanoic reflection after peer review and group projects give different perspectives on their work. Jennifer deWinter (2014) sees the value of this embodied play in her study of tutorials and how players learn the systems they engage: “While players ‘play around’ in the game ... they are learning the underlying rule structure for both gameplay *and* community participation” (p. 70). However, when students are taken by surprise and do not learn the system immediately,

they engage in metanoic reflection which builds their knowledge base, moving them closer to success and transformation.

### DESIGNING AN ARENA OF PLAY

An ethical dimension of failure encompasses failure, possibility, vulnerability, and the process of turning failure into *phronetic* knowledge, a value system I promote in my classroom. As already established, play is about uncertainty and possibility. Miguel Sicart (2005) talks about play as “reambiguating the world” by making it “less formalized, less explained, open to interpretation and wonder and manipulation” (p. 28). To bring play to the forefront of the classroom means to bring new critical lenses and exploratory learning that poke and prod at the boundaries of student knowledge and expectations—without the fear of failure. I introduce play as an invention technique for conducting research and when students are introducing themselves or pitching their project ideas. Sicart (2005) believes context is how we establish and recognize play: “Context comprises the environment in which we play, the technologies with which we play, and the potential companions of play. Context is the network of things, people, and places needed for play to take place” (p. 7). Putting play into different contexts is why Hodgson (2013) says instructors are course designers who should be thinking about their students’ game experiences which “are not just processes of building rules (syllabi), selecting content (course material), and determining function of the game (pedagogy)” (p. 47). Hodgson believes we should move toward what John Alberti (2008) calls an “arena of play,” a playful and game design oriented way of thinking about how writing functions and the motivations behind it more than the grammatical form in fixed text (p. 268). Playing is not easy; it requires us to maintain persistence that is managed by “egos and interests, of purposes and intentions” (Sicart 2005, p. 3). One must be persistent to constantly explore the possible and wonder.

There are other examples of a *phronetic* approach to learning and game-based learning but not always in such an explicit way. Kafai and Quinn Burke (2016) do not use the phrase *phronetic* knowledge, but they demonstrate a similar pedagogical approach in game-based learning showing how K-12 students learn coding through Scratch and modding games using *Minecraft*. Kafai and Burke explain how their students develop problem solving and communication skills through a ludic approach of game design, coding, and troubleshooting with other

students which is continually evolving with new technology and platforms. I explain ludic invention to my students through the concept of the rhetorics of possibility, essentially a space between ideality and actuality (Poulakos 1994) or what Collin Brooke (2009) calls *proairesis*—invention without end. These rhetorical theories support what Tracy Fullerton (2019) calls the “playcentric design process” which “focuses on involving the player in your design process from conception through completion” (p. 12). The playcentric design process is a recursive design model that keeps the audience in mind at every stage of development. This manifests in my classes in peer review and class presentations with opportunities for feedback from both instructor and students. This process, when embedded in the course, once again alleviates fear of failure and diminishes the consequences of students’ risk.

The playcentric design process embraces the idea of creating affinity spaces in the classroom and showing students how to engage with them outside of it. James Paul Gee (2013) advocates for the use of affinity spaces because it creates a community that supports play and failure. Gee explains affinity spaces as comprised of

multiple tools, different types of people, and diverse skill sets [that] are networked in ways that make everyone smarter and make the space itself a form of emergent intelligence. The sum is more than its parts; the collective is smarter than the smartest person in it. (p. 174)

This is essential for my classroom, inspired by constructionist pedagogy, because it helps students connect to larger audiences and ensures students don’t feel isolated and alone. Kafai and Burke (2016) practice “connected gaming” to connect game-based pedagogy to Gee’s affinity spaces. They use a building metaphor to analyze software, to find a good fit for a task: low floors, high ceilings, wide walls, and open windows. They describe low floors as a tool that is intuitive enough for all users to learn; high ceilings as a program that can add layers of complexity for more nuanced designs; wide walls as a tool that allows the user experience to flatten out and bring in their previous knowledge and experiences to create recognizable genres; and open windows which allows users to share, collaborate, and get feedback on their compositions (p. 107). This framework has proven useful to students when they are trying to decide what tools would be best for their projects, but also as a method of analysis of the limitations and affordances of software. Open windows links to Gee’s (2013)

affinity spaces and Fullerton's (2019) playcentric design process because it engages with the public and looks for feedback loops to promote learning. This is a valuable process for the "Tanked Presentations" project discussed in the following section.

In my advanced composition classes, we spend the first several weeks exploring what it means to be playful, the ethical dimensions of failure, and how we can use or design games to help us learn about the learning, composing, or professional skills that translate well to other classes and working environments. This theoretical foundation helps ground some of the more complicated aspects of game-based learning and leads to conversations about course outcomes and the skills and knowledge gained with each project. The final section of this chapter explains the "Tanked Presentation" project and how game-based learning helps instructors create individualized experiences through these arenas of play. The classroom still needs structure, but it is play that gives us "free movement within a more rigid structure" (Salen and Zimmerman 2003, p. 304).

### PLAYING WITH SHARKS

Game scholars Juul (2013), Costikyan (2015), and Fullerton (2019) contributed book length projects to game design and embracing a fail mentality. Rhetoric and composition scholars Rebekah Shultz Colby and Richard Colby (2008) explain that students would explore and learn more if they had environments to safely fail in. And education scholars such as Constance Steinkuehler, Kurt Squire, and Sasha Barab (2012), Kafai and Burke (2016), Gee (2003), and many others have also discussed failure in pedagogy through specific projects and activities. Hodgson (2013) states, "Learning is also not an efficient practice; it is sloppy, messy, and radically individualistic" (p. 53). Starting with the final six weeks of the semester, I take all of these theories and practices that we have worked on throughout the semester and apply them to a prolonged collaborative project which gives students the opportunity to work together on designing a game using *Minecraft: Education Edition*. In addition to their game, they also create a full marketing campaign for it and a highly structured pitch to imagined gaming executives in a "Shark Tank"-style presentation inspired by the NBC show. This presentation model, which I call "tanked presentations," also became the title of the project by student request.

I designed a junior-level, advanced composition class called “Composing in Digital Environments” to build student confidence and help them develop marketable skills using design software. In this course, we spent a lot of time designing posters in Adobe Illustrator, making videos in Adobe Premiere Rush and Adobe Premiere Pro, designing manuals in Adobe InDesign, and manipulating photos in Adobe Photoshop. (At Clemson University, the Adobe suite of programs is made available to all students, faculty, and staff.) The course used the playcentric design process and information design theories—students were not limited to these programs and were welcome to use open source software and other tools. I also provided several iPads to students whose laptops could not run the programs efficiently. We also spent time using *Minecraft: Education Edition* and the associated Make Code service to practice transmediation, collaboration, spatial reasoning, problem solving, and coding. By the time we get to the culminating project, students are well-versed in these programs and have had plenty of opportunities to play with them through weekly reflections.

The Tanked Presentation is split into three parts: pitch, distribution of media and technical documents, and Q&A with the executives. Unlike the television show, all students are in the same room, so they can watch and support their peers. The typical presentation goes something like this: students introduce themselves as gaming company representatives and give a two-minute pitch on what their game is, their motivation behind it, the social issue they are addressing, and a few quick mechanics or plot points. Students then pass out business cards, treatment sheets, game box art, and advertising posters, and provide a link to their company website. Finally, the sharks get up to eight minutes to ask questions about their process, game, materials, and design choices behind them. In total, the students are in front of the room for no more than 10 min. The previous six weeks leading up to the presentation are all documented in a 15-minute development diary that is recorded, edited, and produced by the students. There are a lot of components to the project, but the scaffolding throughout the semester and the collaborative space we cultivate make for a positive experience.

The specializations that students use for their weekly “adventure logs” and small quests help students discover their strengths, interests, and weaknesses in design applications. The students determine their roles in their “guild” based on which specialization they were interested in throughout the semester. We started calling them guilds or raiding parties

because, like in roleplaying games, the guild is a collective of students of diverse skill and ability working toward a common goal. I found that calling them guilds also inspired some friendly competition and companionship I did not expect. When I first implemented the specializations and roles for the guilds, I thought most students would just choose the warrior because it seems a lot easier, but I found that students were generous with their skills and offered to take on tasks that they knew would be challenging from the start. The roles shifted in name from warrior to technical writer, ranger to project lead, mage to game specialist, and bard to media specialist (builder stays the same). Not all specialists are those who feel the most comfortable in those roles, but they are willing to rise to the challenge and push themselves. One of the media specialists was terrified of getting in front of the camera for the development diary, so they shot multiple interviews each week with their guildmates. A technical writer who doubted their skills most of the semester wanted to make the manual in InDesign and design the website. To bolster their abilities in their roles, I run micro workshops at the front of the room on each component of the raid which only the students that need it or want to attend take part in it. Every semester I find that the more we experiment with technology and talk about our vulnerabilities, failures, and successes, the more students want to take on more challenging tasks.

I found that the development diary and different iterations of alpha and beta testing have also produced more inspired work. The development diary is a newer addition to the tanked presentation raid which requires students to shoot footage each week, edit it together, and do some post-production work on the sound and video to produce professional quality. This video works as an accountability measure for all involved because the project lead makes sure there is an even distribution of labor and deadlines are being met. Some students have conducted numerous interviews, learned effective interviewing practices, and learned how to compose an effective clip. Other students work on company ethos by producing motion graphics, introductions, and even commercials. This accountability works in tandem with the alpha and beta testing because they need to be recorded and edited into their videos.

The alpha and beta testing is nerve-racking for students—like any peer review or presentation—but I wanted to give students multiple opportunities to showcase their work in different ways to get actionable and constructive feedback based on the playcentric design process. Some groups struggled with managing the project in the beginning which

caused them to miss the alpha deadlines, but they readjusted and prepared for the next testing. The alpha testing is conducted like a focus group or standard peer review: the main coder stays with the game and the rest of the guild goes to another to offer feedback while playing. The guilds have to create surveys to gather feedback and write up full reports on the feedback by the next class so they can create a plan to get to the next stage. The beta test is a presentation to the class that is half walk-through and half showcase with a Q&A for their peers and instructor. During the Q&A, the technical writer is recording the presentation and taking notes to write the beta report for the group. The coders ask the most questions and, even though it is a competition, they work with one another to debug and solve complex coding issues. Before and after these reviews/presentations, we talk about what actionable feedback is, how we are all vulnerable, and what we can learn from our failures. Most students come away from the testing invigorated and eager to work on revisions. I discovered that many students did additional testing with friends outside the classroom and made it an extra credit opportunity.

After the entire raid is submitted and they celebrate on the last day of class, I assign a debrief and ask for a metanoic reflection about division of labor, collaboration, and how they worked through failures individually and as a guild as their final submission for the class. One student said they were “skeptical at first with the *Minecraft* thing, but making a game with my team that my son can also play was an amazing experience.” Another student focused on the difficult but rewarding experience:

This was the hardest, but most rewarding class I have ever taken. I wish I had this as a freshman instead of as a graduating senior. The shark tank thing sounded terrifying, but it was my favorite presentation in college. I feel like I finally know what it’s like to work on a team.

Not all the reflections are positive, but most of them, even if some are out of frustration, talk about obstacles they had to overcome and a sense of accomplishment at the end. One student joked that they did more design work and had more design files in my class than they did in their engineering design class. Finally, I had a student who struggled in my class and complained the entire way through, but then sent me an email six months after taking my class:

Kinda random, but I just had to tell you that I am so glad that your class taught me a lot of technology skills because they are EXTREMELY useful for my marketing internship this summer! Also I have gone back and looked at some of your tutorials on your website, so thank you so much for keeping those on there, lol they saved my life. I just thought I'd let you know that what you taught me is awesome and I really appreciate having that knowledge!

I've read time and time again that we won't ever engage all of our students and that they aren't all going to learn what we want them to in our classrooms. I know this to be true. However, when students mention failure, *metanoia*, playfulness, and the technical skills they learned in class for their final reflection, it demonstrates how a gaming fluency inspired game-based class can engage students on a deeper level.

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## Waiting for Players: Rooms, Lobbies, and Hosting Experiences

*Marshall Saenz*

Designing ethical, game-based practices and activities that organically fit classroom goals can be difficult and frustrating because the teacher-designer must often balance learning outcomes with experiences students find authentic and engaging. Likewise, reading about games alone as a pure textual practice may not automatically elicit buy-in from students or some profound “aha” moment. Jonathan Alexander and Jacqueline Rhodes (2014) use games as a multifaceted way to explore literacies with students. They add, “Turning our attention to gaming, then, gives us a significant opportunity to examine complex rhetorical work in action” (p. 129). For my own classes, I have made games *for* students and examined whether or not these students met outcomes based on their actions; however, I never considered making games *with* my students and examining how *we* worked together in action to collectively meet outcomes.

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Instead of being the sole designer, I enabled students to exercise their own agency to co-design. I was then also a player in what we created together. This is our “lobby” work, a term referring to the many online lobbies or rooms where players set parameters for games they are about to play.

In our multiplayer lobbies, we considered how we must bind our “play” to an objective that is both meaningful for the concept we wish to teach and relevant for us to examine in an invested way. In this way, I do not spring parameters on the students; we discuss and create them before play. Students note where our design seems confusing, too abstract; where our available means and tools seem to be lacking; or even ways in which the subject of the game itself feels irrelevant. The activity takes patience, willingness to adjust, and courage to allow our games to become a “Frankenstein’s monster” of mixed ideas.

Most teachers admit there is no one way to teach or learn, but the lobby notion—where students and teachers work together—enables participants to be active developers in our games. We imbue our designs with additional ethos by representing our ideas, thoughts, cultures, and interests. The concept is not entirely new: teachers wanting additional connections between play and non-gaming practices need only look at the long history of active participant pedagogy that exists in composition studies. It is a subject all its own, but two brief snapshots may provide some context to ground the development of lobbies and games, to make them tangible.

First, game development has shifted. What was once a team of designers working on games to sell to players now is a team of designers embracing players’ input: the industry actively brings players into the mix, allowing them to create lobbies where players can customize rules, objectives, items, difficulty levels, and map features. Spend a few hours in *Dota 2* or *Counter Strike: Global Offensive* and the amount of custom functionality becomes apparent. Developers are also inviting players to join their ranks. Tools such as the Steam Lobby Kit allows users to make customized lobbies for myriad titles. As a writing course designer who espouses student-centered activities, I understand that each class has its own ecological dynamics; thus, I invite students to join the creative process of design. The inclusion constitutes a moment of ethos-building, where the class itself cultivates its own ecology.

## LOGGING IN OR “X”ING OUT

Game lobbies require the player-designer to login, to think about the parameters of the game to make it function and be enjoyable—participants do not just jump in. Likewise, whenever teachers consider adopting an unfamiliar pedagogical strategy (such as game-based approaches often are), a skeptical-but-open approach—with experimentation and a willingness to engage—is valuable. The lobbies discussed here must be similarly sorted out if one is to move forward.

Mathew S.S. Johnson and Richard Colby’s (2013) “Ludic Snags” grapples with the issue of tensions and possibilities involved in videogame pedagogy. As they reveal, games in the classroom are often neither intended to be “fun,” nor have they statistically proven to have won the hearts and minds of students, let alone writing departments. But as Johnson and Colby add, “In addition, when teachers are not familiar with games, predictably they run the risk of making assumptions” (p. 94). The lobby metaphor examined here is “*a different way*” and not *the* way to look at ethos in play, a claim I make in alignment with one of Johnson and Colby’s key takeaways regarding gaming pedagogy. “Lobbies” will not convert the masses, but the approach will offer teachers a *different* perspective that considers students as part of the design process of a class in the same way multiplayer spaces connect hosts and players via the lobby and room.

The fact that gaming practices don’t and can’t claim a perfect blueprint may prove to be valuable for the types of rooms and lobbies we might envision. In my mind, this means we have great flexibility over design. Those anxious that using games might require a complete pedagogical overhaul may take solace in that there is no hard rule defining how deeply we must use gaming practices in any activity, discussion, or project. Games don’t become an all or nothing endeavor, but rather an *augmentation* to coursework that we might expand, change, or even delete. For example, some players in multiplayer games finely tune customizable features for a specific scenario. Others might just alter one or two elements. Designers aren’t necessarily changing the whole game, but they are augmenting the experience. Although content may vary, each room we build must carry a certain ethos in order to offer a sense of importance, participation, and necessity for students.

## EARLY PROTOTYPES AS WAY TO SOURCE-CODE DESIGNS

Wayne M. Butler and James L. Kinneavy (1991) present a scene in a university basement where students and faculty assume pseudonyms such as “God” and “Donald Duck” as a way to communicate more freely and define the work they do in class. It provides a clear picture of roleplaying characteristics and a sort of online lobby. Butler and Kinneavy could easily have used the space to lecture to retain full authority, but they gave students the opportunity to exercise their own agency, to chime in as they wished, and to discuss augmentations that helped course design.

Additionally, the “Active Learning in the First-Year Writing Classroom” resource at Dartmouth’s Institute for Writing and Rhetoric (2015) lays out a comprehensive set of principles and methods for academic learning that coincides with the lobby mindset. One principle lays out the following advice:

Active Learning asks instructors to transfer to students some portion of the authority that has traditionally been theirs. Students, in turn, take increased responsibility for their writing educations. Transferring authority requires instructors to shift their focus from setting standards to diagnosing problems, from giving direction to facilitating learning, from focusing exclusively on product to supporting process. In the Active Learning classroom, instructors, like students, remain actively engaged. (para. 2)

The principle readily applies to lobbies when the host, or teacher, moves from a “my game” mentality to an “our game” approach. Every classroom is different, but my fear in transferring some of that authority from giving an activity to co-creating one actually garnered a higher ethos because we all seemed to share in making it more credible—we shared a stake in the work we wanted to accomplish. The Institute for Writing and Rhetoric asserts that students should become active participants in assignment development and assessment. The lobbies discussed here widen this notion to include activities, scenarios, and games we may use.

Relevance is not a holistic or static concept, but a shifting set of exigencies and values. Participating in many multiplayer lobbies and scenarios in video or board games reveals that players are attempting to unlock features, gain experience, master skills, and so on. On the one hand, we might say they are simply after “things” as a matter of relevance, but, ultimately, achieving goals in these scenarios is about gaining some control

in their lives, control over each failure, and control over recognizing failure strengthens character, moves one toward understanding, toward gaining agency in the world. How can we persuade students that this perspective on failure operates in our writing classrooms? Paying attention to issues students feel strongly about—in part by enabling them to help create the very assignments in which they’d express those feelings—may lead us to create a lobby designed to elicit these responses.

### MOVING FROM LOBBIES TO THE LOBBY METAPHOR

Halfway through one semester at my university, many teachers already have started developing courses for the next, tinkering with activities aimed at better-engaging their students. Somewhere in this organized chaos of promoting course sections and checking enrollment numbers, it struck me that we abstractly resembled players-turned-hosts/designer in game lobbies, and I could almost see the “waiting for players” box blinking over our office doors.

No, it’s not exactly the same in the gaming worlds, where roles and tweaks to the system can be changed on a whim. There are power dynamics, assignment and participation grades, and sometimes concern that integrating games might stray too far from the department’s vision of writing practices. Will students see us as forcing games on them? Should these classroom games be graded, and if so, how? Will students make meaningful connections with writing through these activities? To what extent does the department encourage or discourage such practices? In many cases, the designer will independently make all decisions about a course well before the semester begins.

Despite how hard I tried to package and introduce new activities as collaborative designs, there’s an underlying “here’s my game/activity. We’re going to play” feel. If it goes well, great; however, I struggled with what to do when students didn’t engage or when a seemingly good activity veered off course. I could either continue with the activity, abandon it, or try to get the runaway train back on the rails. Apparently, I’m not alone. At conferences, in workshops, and at conferences, I’ve heard similar stories, even by those who didn’t teach with games. Despite my advocacy for exploring games and play, I had overlooked the fact that a lot of multiplayer online games give players some degree of control over their experience, even *design* control in the case of lobbies. The lobby

metaphor reframes such delivery: “Here’s my game/activity. As we play, can you help me make it better?”

### PROTOTYPING A PARKING GAME SCENARIO

After reading what seemed like a 1,001 papers in which my students vented about the parking situation on campus, I nearly banned the topic outright. On the one hand, I empathized with student frustrations over limited parking spaces, high ticket prices, and the struggle to commute around campus. On the other hand, my eyes glossed over as I read the same kind of arguments over and over. I felt terrible because many students seemed invested in the topic, but I had to do something about the redundancy of papers that really put forward more rants than solutions. Rather than coming to class and shutting the topic down, I decided to get it out of their systems with a 15-minute open forum. This turned out to be one of the livelier discussions of the semester, and I learned that I could have made a huge mistake by not listening to the “lobby talk.” As I listened to their comments, the sort of “what if they [university] considered...” or “I can’t do anything about it, but if it was up to me, I’d...” the designer in my started taking this lobby talk into account as I began to think of a scenario that invited student agency. I had considered myself student-centered. But I had been building activities without releasing authority to the students.

The next class period I created the first iteration of *The Parking Game*, a short scenario that attempted to engage the class in rhetorical work centered on the kind of parking problems many noted in our lobby talk. Development wasn’t easy. I struggled with how to effectively translate our lobby talk and how to stitch it to coursework without ignoring other course goals—and I have been to enough conferences at which teachers or writing program directors questioned how games might move away from, or even threaten, fundamental writing goals. Although so much of that debate is about point of view, I saw the ethical implication to make sure course learning goals were transparent through play. But how?

In order to integrate the learning goals, I turned to the literature. First, David Bartholomae (1995) offers a foundational way into the conversation. Bartholomae recognizes the importance of roles and traditions in the writing classroom using contact zones as a way to move toward a “frontier” concept: teachers must consider the “sites, possible scenes of writing, places real and figurative, where writing is produced” (p. 65). His interest

was not just in how writers use spaces, but also in the authority given to student writers and their authentic ownership of it for the purpose of critical thinking. “Lobby talk” is not about developing a game that gets students to reach a specific conclusion about parking. Its intent is not to convert class sessions into something other than a writing class. Rather, it is a scene in which, as Bartholomae notes, “critique is worked out in practice, and for lack of better terms I would call that writing, academic writing” (p. 71). Essentially, the lobby gave me ideas about how students could use and experiment with writing and writing goals to critique and solve problems they were invested in.

Second, moving lobby talk to actual play that grants functional scenarios draws heavily on Johan Huizinga’s concept of a boundary between the real and fictional spaces in games and play. Eric Zimmerman (2012) recounts how he and Katie Salen came to formally coin the “magic circle” term as a place of social exchange and meaning making that occurs at those described real and gaming boundaries. Rebekah Shultz Colby and Colby (2008) detail the magic circle in the context of the classroom as gamespace. My interest in the magic circle for praxis is in understanding how the real student and the imagined scenario lead to creating purposeful work in the classroom. My serendipitous stumbling into that first lobby talk session presented a point on that circle boundary which speaks to ethical implantation of games and play into the class. In the lobby, we talked about why campus parking mattered and how it was relevant to our work. Essentially, we were setting the parameters of the problem and what we would do if we had the administrative power to make changes. The students were not particularly surprised when I introduced *The Parking Game*; moreover, they seemed more dialed into the expectations of the game because they participated in both the boundaries of a composition course and the game state of the circle.

The first prototype of *The Parking Game* was rough, but fruitful. Maybe this is my way to say that calculated experimentation is okay. As the session started, we spent five minutes individually noting problems 25 students had experienced with parking as a way to represent many possible voices—a mishmash of freewriting and simulated survey. Afterwards, they worked in groups as a “student subcommittee” to develop a proposal for solving one parking issue. The possible solution had to contain one citation, use a rhetorical appeal, and pose a thoughtful counterargument to the current rules in place. Writing didn’t cease because we played a



game. Instead it became a process of developing an artifact to accomplish our goal. And writing skills and techniques weren't glossed over. Students looked up information, analyzed the arguments of the parking service website, and referred to course readings to apply ideas and appeals. We presented our arguments as if we would take them to the university at an official meeting. Afterwards, we reflected on how we came to our decisions and discussed what to improve. It's a game without winners or losers. The point was to create the best argument that we could.

To my surprise, my students wanted to do it again and several offered ways to make the game better. One student suggested the game would be more credible if we polled students outside the class or made observations about parking at different times. Another student agreed that parking wasn't great but felt it only right to get the other side of the story, and so she proposed having parking services talk to us or do a ride-along with them. They were essentially adding explorations of ethos to this kind of play. The issue was relevant to them and I saw rhetorical writing processes and writing at play without either denying topic or forcing it through a specific essay prompt. As a designer, the *so why* for me was that it gave me a fresh way to get my students actively *experiencing* rhetorical exigencies and invention through a subject that directly affected them or someone they knew. Stephanie O. Fleischer, Susan A. Wright, and Matthew L. Barnes's (2007) comment on gaming's role in such development:

Understanding the role of gaming in the identity formation and literacy development of young people, then, appears not only important but also vital to teaching students those literacies that will enable them to attain a greater degree of participation in and power over their lives, learning, and community in an increasingly complex technological world. (p. 144)

We developed *The Parking Game* as a way to help first-year students (although I believe such practices can extend beyond first-year students) develop agency and ethos by selecting various student and university roles to explore. The *so what* is that this game built on concepts in the readings and course discussions about rhetoric; it also allowed for transferrable knowledge about student experiences with university parking and student life from outside the classroom. The students knew they didn't, and wouldn't, have the power to change parking policy through this activity, at least not as a class project; however, it gave them a moment in time to

explore through various perspectives what they might do—and a reflective and analytical model for an upcoming rhetorical analysis project. It also offers a different way to approach topics that teachers may see as cliché (such as campus parking). Our game centers on parking at our university, which involves the spaces, people, rules, and social cultures we encounter every day; and explores the custodianship of our own communities and what agency we have to use writing to move in and out of the magic circle.

### MISTAKES WERE MADE

Some time has passed since the first iteration of *The Parking Game*, and I still cringe at some mistakes I then made. To improve the activity, I sought more immersive situations, roles, and rules. James Paul Gee's (2007) *What Video Games Have to Teach us about Learning and Literacy* made an impression with its "36 Ways to Learn a Video Game." Diving into that book and other gaming scholarship, I suspected that I had cracked some sort of code, discovered some new ethos, that would enable me to positively engage my students. I constructed new rules, goals, and even a plan to determine a winner. Essentially, I left the lobby and assumed the next set of students would have the same or better experience.

During the semester that followed the original *Parking Game*, I announced that we were going to play a learning game and quickly divvied out roles, rules, and a worksheet filled with questions. This time, some represented irritated students and others became employees of Parking Services. I should have picked up on the silence and shooting glances they gave one another as they squeamishly found their groups. It took some time to explain to them what they had to do before I settled into my role as mediator, answering questions or keeping groups on task. Near the end of the class, we determined a winner and ended with a discussion about what we had learned. Some students found the project useful, but many were confused by the experience. Several said they weren't sure what we were doing or how it worked into their future projects. Others lamented that they just weren't gamers or didn't want to compete against each other. Admittedly, I was shocked because I had spent so much time making this version of the game "better." Following that catastrophe, I nearly abandoned the game altogether and seriously questioned if the first game was a fluke, or if it miraculously only appealed to students that one semester.

I was confused because parking was still a hot topic. When asked, most students made clear that a problem existed. Some may have just not been interested in the topic, but many others were more than willing to offer their opinions. I realized that I had ignored key tenants many games use to immerse players. I attempted to create a vast multiplayer scenario solely based on what I read from others; I had to own the fact that I never tried to engage with multiplayer games myself. Johnson and Colby (2013) find the mark when they note, “*first-year writing teachers interested in integrating games into their classrooms should play more video games*” (p. 91). In playing these games, I focused on flashy graphics and learning hotkeys and button combos—in lieu of trying to understand why and how players engage. I used my “teacher’s eye” rather than a gamer’s perspective. Through this interaction, I learned a lot about grafting concepts to projects that might make for more meaningful experiences.

Many successful cooperative games have intriguing storylines, rich environments, multiple modes of participation, and a variety of win states. As I played multiplayer games such as *Destiny 2* and *Final Fantasy XIV*, I noticed none of them began by stating, “This is a game.” Instead, they opened with a narrative that laid out the general context, purpose, and backstory of the action I was about to take part in. Even in the lobby and rooms of these games, players chatted, put together teams, and developed strategies for the scenarios they might encounter. As I revised *The Parking Game*, I developed a backstory about a fictional university (much like ours) that suffered from myriad parking issues and introduced Non-Player Characters (NPCs) made up to represent students, faculty, and parking staff. Each had written statements about how to solve the parking issue, replete with their own rhetorical appeals and situations.

Alas, they could not come to a conclusion and needed the assistance of outside consultants who would consider some of their affordances and limitations in helping solve the problem. Part of the problem stemmed from over-designing the second iteration without involving the students. I had failed to get student input the second time around, assuming one session of co-creating with my students would be enough. In hindsight, we needed that lobby talk to understand the activity, to consider what mattered, and to make the game meaningful for *this* class. I had closed the magic circle, skipped the lobby, and said, “here’s my game. Let’s play.”

## RETURNING TO THE LOBBY

The third iteration went much smoother. My class soon became aware that they were to become these consultants and we entered into a fruitful conversation about parking on our campus, our “lobby” talk, before I created the statements and goals for each NPC. From previous semesters, I had built up a bank of arguments and counterarguments Parking Services or other services might offer. Because these consultants needed to provide well thought out, researched proposals from often imperfect and possibly slanted statements by these NPCs, I was happy to offer advice, possibilities to explore, or challenges to oversimplified answers. But I allowed them to be the players and experts.

This time, my students were eager to discuss, articulate, help, and even productively vent. Because the propositions were their own, they seemed more adamant about backing them up and deconstructing the arguments of the NPCs—so I scrapped the worksheet: they were mere chores, disrupting action, as if I was having students press pause every other minute of gameplay. We used something like a map and compass (which often feature in multiplayer games) to quickly check that we were always headed toward objectives. For instance, the class always used Parking Services rules as a way to position their arguments; however, one student halted action to bring up the critical point that Parking Services only lists situations where tickets can’t be appealed without giving any clue as to what constitutes an acceptable appeal. Another student jumped in, asking others to form a group to address this problem. For a moment, I panicked because impromptu subcommittees weren’t in the original programming. Essentially, they had located something new on this “map”—and they intended to explore it. They were exercising their ethos as both committee members and concerned students. In this case, they ran with their own line of inquiry and I made no attempt to quash their initiative. A part of me was also curious what they may find, and how it might improve the game’s design. We discussed each group’s proposition, including the impromptu subcommittee. We later returned to the lobby for discussion and reflected on how the objectives of rhetoric, credibility, argument, and counterargument synced with real world situations. This was also the moment to ask students how to improve, to allow them to co-create, and to provide their much-earned ethos.

*The Parking Game* continues to improve with the assistance of my students in the lobby who work with me to find new patches and modes

of experience. Shyness, where participation is concerned, is still an issue, and maybe we need more “lobby” time with quiet students—instead of taking off points or simply accepting non-participation as a given. Instead, we might reach out and ask such students to help us understand better forms of communication that grant them agency. At the very least, we can experiment and extend them the opportunity to assist when they feel comfortable doing so. What they say may patch the game for the better or create new relevant “games.” As with most multiplayer games, more play is required to better host and serve my student co-collaborators. And it’s not to say *The Parking Game* is *the* game. Other teachers and their students will find different topics better suited for their work or local contexts. For as many semesters as I have worked to refine *The Parking Game*, I realize future generations of students may want to address a different topic. The vignette offered here presents just one example of a low-tech, game-based activity that explores what immersion means: students and teacher exercising agency and ethos toward a common goal.

### EXTENDING THE METAPHOR

Although the lobby metaphor may offer a *so what* or *so why* for one particular class, a question still remains as to the extent immersion might play with the rules enough to reach a larger population, and if so, is it really necessary or even logistically possible with a class of 30 students? The theoretical framework I offer for *The Parking Game* poses such scenarios as always in conversation with the magic circle, a conversation that includes students in the lobbies that create such experience; moreover, it frames collaboration in developing such games as sharing authority and experience. Teachers must decide if they want to try such lobby talk and if they are willing to experiment with it, if gaming will play any part in their work.

Many scholars seem to indicate that it is part of their work. Johnson and Colby (2013) mention Ian Bogost’s comment at the 2011 CCCC conference: “that with everything else we as writing teachers are doing, why are we also trying to take on games in our courses?” (p. 86). It’s a valid question, and one that Bogost (2015) himself might have started to answer in *How to Talk about Video Games*. Bogost analyzes *simulators* that “signal a disruption between the realism of commercial situation and the abstraction of video games” (p. 112). He offers evidence that even caricaturized simulators speak to very real circumstances—one answer to

the *why take on video games* question, where the simulated experiences of classroom rhetoric and writing activities move beyond the page and the classroom, even into immersive and potentially embodied activities.

But what of the distance between classroom activity and the world beyond? Once a game-based activity or simulation reaches its proverbial “game over,” is immersion broken and neatly packed away? Kristine Blair, Jen Almjed, and Robin M. Murphy’s (2014) “Gaming Worlds” postulates gaming worlds as real worlds insofar as the humans within simulative worlds bring in and extract information learned, experienced, and shared (p. 183). In *The Parking Game*, for example, many of the students raised critical questions regarding social dynamics such as castes between seniors and first-years, power dynamics of student versus faculty parking, ableism issues in certain zones, economics and feasibility, and much more than the original game asked them to consider. In our play, these questions became about what is ethical for campuses to do, and, given the power provided by their roles in the game, challenged students to make decisions about how to develop plans that spoke to such ethics. This sort of play closed the distance between the real and simulated as the students wrote their justifications. In all of this, writing remained a persistent force: they put to paper analyses and arguments happening in real time. Many students felt that their writing was *doing something* at that moment, miles away from whatever abyss seems to swallow student essays after they are graded.

Many students exited the activity with the idea to persuasively write how these, and similar, issues affect other parts of their “real” world. Blair, Almjed, and Murphy (2014) give credence to such moves by clearly acknowledging, “In writing, winning means using all available means to reach our audience and share with them our vision” (191). If an argument that game-based pedagogies offer a *different* and immersive theory that tethers experiential learning and writing together for designers wishing to use these rooms and lobbies, how might students become part of the ethos of such immersion?

## RISK AND STAKES

One answer to how students can develop ethos through immersion might come from a particularly clever anthropology professor. Michael Wesch uses gaming as the centerpiece for his cultural anthropology classes; for example, “The Marshmallow Wars” world game simulation engages

courses with some 200 plus students in a gaming scenario that spans the semester. This is undoubtedly an ambitious undertaking that raises the stakes of using extended play. Will the students buy in? How will using such play affect the structure of the course? How might these sorts of activities influence grades? These are all questions we could ask of play in our own courses.

Certainly, some teachers wonder what stakes game-based designs place on their students and what designs might best suit their situations. In short, there's not an easy answer because play is best understood through experience. Stakes often need to be high within play in order to keep participants engaged, but classroom stakes cannot be too high as to be intimidating. Games do this quite well. Players may fail but can respawn many times in one session. *Dark Souls* is notoriously difficult, but it isn't "game over": it lets players try again and again until they succeed. The games we might create in our classes need not be on the *Dark Souls* level of difficulty, but the stakes can be meaningfully high with low risk of grade impact—for me, this is ethical pedagogy. Students can't fail from failing at *The Parking Game*, but I don't sacrifice rigor just because we're playing a game. Such games help students learn about communication, rhetorical exchange, and making meaning through transferrable knowledge. In this regard, I'm more interested in learning about the experiences that led to success, failure, and new meaning, and students' reflection on their decision-developing and making processes.

## HOSTING A GAME

For those interested in lobbies and creating play around them, one advantage of gaming theories is that they allow for multiple perspectives and approaches to engage problems in experiential ways. Observing our course designs as a multiplayer room waiting for players is one way to productively contemplate agency and ethos when using playful activities and moments to encourage learning opportunities. It also attempts to frame our designs as experimental spaces where we can toggle and add play to augment our work, not replace it. Bogost (2016) discusses "play" and "fun" as integrated into work:

Play is not an act of diversion, but the work of working a system, of interacting with the bits of logic in it. Fun is not the effect of enjoyment

released by a system, but a nickname for the feeling of operating it, particularly of operating it in a new way, in a way that lets us discover something within it, or to rediscover something we've found before. (p. 114)

In some ways, the lobby metaphor used here is a way for us to “operate it” with our students as we learn alongside them. It will likely take practice and tuning, as with many other designs we create. Johnson and Colby (2013) recommend playing more games as a way to learn more about games; I might add that we learn by creating and experimenting with lobbies, where hosting and playing hints at collaborative design concepts that we affix to our practices. It’s food for thought as we stroll down our hallways and lobbies lined with offices that blink “waiting for players ...” between each semester.

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# Playing Games with Our Lives: What Critical Pedagogy Can Teach Us About the Ethics of Games in the Writing Classroom

*John Alberti*

The use of games, games theory, “serious games,” and the foregrounding of play and fun have been positioned as radical challenges to theories of learning and teaching in general and the teaching of writing in particular, but do they constitute a radical pedagogy? Do (or should) game-based and ludic writing pedagogies share a core set of ethical or ideological beliefs? If, as Jane McGonigal (2011) famously argued, games can “Make Us Better” and “Change the World,” do game-based pedagogies agree how to define “better” or what the direction of that “change” should be?

First, a question and an anecdotal example: the question, of course, is just what we mean by “game” or “game-based pedagogy.” Game studies has matured to a point where literature reviews now regularly invoke a

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canon of theorists (e.g., Huizinga, Caillois, Bateson, Csikszentmihalyi, among others) to indicate a range of possibilities for considering concepts of game and play, just as composition studies by the 1980s had formed a canon of process theory to equally signify the transition of a revolutionary moment into an enduring intellectual movement. For my own purposes, I still find Alice Robison's (2008) definition both precise and capacious enough for considering gaming in/as the writing classroom: "games are designed, interactive, rule-based and achievement-bound systems that reflect and inspire rich literacy and learning practices" (p. 361).

Part of the capaciousness I admire in Robison's (2008) definition is that it allows for considering both games as subjects of instructional practice and instructional practice as games, which brings me to my anecdotal example from the pre (or really, nascent) digital world of the mid-1970s, when "video gaming" meant the release of *Pong* to the home market, and the roleplaying tabletop game, *Dungeons & Dragons*, was equally brand new. Meanwhile, in my high school social studies class, a group of our teachers involved us in what I now realize was a pedagogical experiment: learning through participatory gaming. This experiment was part of an explosion of interest in and commodification of using simulated games in the classroom in the late 1960s and 1970s, as exemplified by Clark Abt's (1970) *Serious Games*. The interest in the use of these roleplaying games in the classroom has continued to this day, where it is most famously associated with Mark C. Carnes's "Reacting to the Past" project at Barnard College.

Rather than the more conventional (at the time) classroom experience of textbook reading, film watching, worksheets, and lectures, we were organized into teams that moved through a variety of experiential games: farming, the Constitutional convention, playing the stock market, the debates over slavery and abolition. In each unit, we were tasked with solving various problems (Robison's [2008], "achievement-bound systems"): keeping a farm afloat in spite of the vagaries of weather and the commodities markets, managing a stock portfolio, forging a new nation, avoiding or starting a civil war. Our teachers acted as our Dungeon Masters, introducing each round with a new set of calamities and opportunities (a sudden drought, a market collapse, a political crisis over the expansion of slave labor).

These achievement-bound systems involved a mix of assimilation and critical questioning: we had to play the stock market game (there was no opting out of the market, and the market equally defined the farming

game) and we had to (or were supposed to) stick to our appointed roles: representative to the convention, abolitionist orator. Yet over and over instances of challenging the premises kept arising, especially in the Constitutional convention game, and not always (or even mostly) for what might be considered intellectually and rhetorically polite reasons. Boredom, a desire for attention, our vexed adolescent relationship to teacherly/parental approval—all figured in the subversive mix I count as “challenging the premises.”

Instead of undermining the experiment, however, our toggling between trying to solve a problem within the defined procedures of the game and challenging the premises of these procedures and definitions of these problems (our not always taking these games “seriously”) only made them all the more “realistic”—and effective—in highlighting how ego, insecurity, and social status affect and shape these “real world” games (including the game of the high school classroom). Three takeaways for me from this pre-*Oregon Trail* educational gaming experience: important career lessons (never, ever go into farming); the profound impact of the dramatized writing and speaking practices we engaged in that essentially constituted the games, especially an appreciation for the power of pathos and ethos; and finally, how this one class remains easily my most memorable (official) pedagogical experience of high school, one I am still thinking through 45 years later, certainly one definition of what Robison (2008) means by “rich literacy and learning practices.”

In this chapter, I examine this dialectic between playing the game as following the rules and breaking the rules as playing the game by layering the revolutionary Brazilian educational activist Paulo Freire’s (1990) model of problem-posing pedagogy onto the “rule-based and achievement-bound” problem-solving procedural model of gaming to explore the ethical challenges and highlight the radical possibilities of game-based pedagogy—specifically, issues of agency and manipulation that McGonigal warned about: “I don’t think anybody should make games to try to motivate somebody to do something they don’t want to do. If the game is not about a goal you’re intrinsically motivated by, it won’t work” (quoted in Feiler 2012, para. 12).

What it means to “motivate somebody to do something they don’t want to do” elicits a more fundamental question: what exactly did we as students “want” to do in our high school social studies class? One answer is that the question never really came up. Although history was and remains an enduring and profitable subject in nonfiction publishing

and visual media, the learning objectives for our high school social studies class—then as now—involved little or no student input (and the situation is little different for most college classes and curricula). Instead, I suspect part of the teacherly motivation for our class experiment followed the logic of an entry in *National Geographic*'s Education Blog aimed at K-12 teachers with the bracingly honest title, “5 Ways to Trick Students into Learning with Pokemón [sic] Go” (Modafferi 2016). While the methods listed in the article suggest a gaming approach to learning, in truth the pedagogy mostly follows a model of using *Pokémon Go* as the center of more traditional kinds of assignments. For example:

Stretch students' mapping skills.

- Using Google Maps alongside the Pokémon Go app, view the area around your school. Ask students to draw a map with the walking route they'd like to take to visit the most nearby Poké Stops.
  - Add some math practice by giving students a time limit for the length of the walk. If it takes 20 minutes to walk one mile, how many miles can their route be?

There is nothing particularly “game-like” about this assignment, and in terms of what students want, there may be some motivation in a classroom activity that can be used to plan a *Pokémon Go* excursion, but nothing about this lesson plan gets at *why Pokémon Go* is so compelling an augmented reality game that students apparently don't need to be “tricked” into wanting to play. Instead, the author, quite sensibly in an article meant to provide some useful options for elementary educators, uses the language of learning deracinated and unmotivated “mapping skills” as both goal and motivation for this assignment.

For many writing teachers, the critical pedagogy of Freire (1990) provided the most resonant metaphor for a model of learning defined as the acquisition of abstracted “mapping skills” (or “writing skills”), one that combined cognitive theory with a critique of the larger economic and ideological forces that shape education (and of course the gaming industry): the banking model of education. At the college level, of course, composition theory and pedagogy have moved well beyond the days of a late 1960s first-year composition syllabus I discovered doing research in the 1980s that designated an entire week to “The Semicolon” (an example, perhaps, of “stretching punctuation skills”).

Still, even the carefully crafted and progressive “Principles for the Post-secondary Teaching of Writing” drafted by the CCCC (1989; revised 2013 and 2015) and NCTE’s “Standards for the English Language Arts” (1996; reaffirmed 2012) reflect an ongoing rhetorical game of developing educational outcomes that speak to multiple institutional and political constituencies. Similarly, many of us involved in developing and gaining institutional acceptance of learning outcomes for local college writing programs also found ourselves walking the same tightrope between the politically “neutral” and the potentially subversive, as in the careful mix of skills-building and canny use of parallelism displayed by the CCCC writers in an outcome like the “development of productive writing practices and habits of mind that are critical for success in different contexts, including academic, workplace, and community settings” (CCCC). Just what is the relationship between “writing practices and habits of mind” that are “critical for success” and writing practices and habits of mind that students want? “Success” as defined by whom and in what terms?

In framing these ethical questions of how gaming pedagogy intersects with questions of motivation, learning outcomes, and helping students “do what they want to do,” revisiting the pre-digital roots of critical pedagogy can help define a political and ethical basis for gaming pedagogy as an intervention in the persistent institutional and political pressures to commodify writing skills and effective communication as faux-neutral versions of “problem solving.” In this version of the “learning equals acquisition of skills” model, the writing situation can become one version of a rhetorical game (whether the classroom explicitly uses game-based pedagogy or not): a set of challenges within a constraining context of “designed, interactive, rule-based and achievement-bound systems,” the object being successful persuasion and influence, with the ethical question of “persuasion to do what?” bracketed as no more essential to effective writing than the question of “but should we even want to capture the king?” is to chess, or why we want to capture all of these wild Pokémon to begin with.

In asking us to revisit Freire’s (1990) own model of problem-posing (rather than problem-solving) pedagogy, I want to posit more than a question about how a pre-digital understanding of pedagogical ethics can inform the conversation engaging the ethics of serious gaming. In good dialectical problem-posing fashion, I also want to ask how game studies can provide a new perspective on critical pedagogy by considering

dialogic, problem-posing pedagogy as itself a different kind of revolutionary rhetorical game, one rooted in ethos and political commitment. In this way, I want to put into conversation the ethical questions of coercion that McGonigal (Feiler 2012) references with Freire's (1990) older warning about the ongoing threat of manipulation in a class stratified society: "Through manipulation, the dominant elites can lead the people into an unauthentic type of 'organization,' and can thus avoid the threatening alternative: the true organization of the emerged and emerging people" (p. 145).

The similarly contested cultural status of both "games" and "rhetoric"—"empty rhetoric" as a form of mere "game playing"—can play (both literally and figuratively) into ongoing debates about the ends, ethics, and even identification of what we mean by "gaming pedagogy." On the one hand, understanding the Freirean (1990) dialogic model of problem-posing as a kind of revolutionary game can tie into developing a critical awareness of the constructedness—and thus the availability for reconstruction—of social reality. This version of "playing with reality" links with longstanding concepts within radical and critical pedagogy such as code meshing and even the process of "inventing the university" (Bartholomae 1985). The metaphor of discursive activity as "code meshing" is especially rich in connecting language play with game play, and with a critical analysis of the politics of game engines, whether those used to build video games or social institutions.

On the other hand, the excitement and hope piqued by the radical possibilities of gaming pedagogy have resulted in roiling debates about not only how to define just what we mean by "gaming pedagogy" but, *pace* McGonigal, how to differentiate and define "good" uses of games versus "bad." One result is the classic academic game of defining terms (and by referring to this activity as a "game," I mean not to trivialize it; the fact that I feel compelled to include this disclaimer even in an essay about gaming indicates my own concern with definitions and implications). "Serious games?" "Gamification?" In their introduction to *The Gameful World: Approaches, Issues, Applications*, Steffen P. Walz and Sebastian Deterding (2014) observe that "these language disputes ... (sometimes intentionally) conflate descriptive and political, normative levels ... they generalize and position 'good' = well designed = ethical *serious games* or *gameful design* against 'bad' = poorly designed = unethical *exploitationware* or *gamification*" (pp. 6–7, emphases theirs).

My particular goal here is less to separate “descriptive” and “normative” levels (although that is a useful enterprise) but to emphasize the ethical impulse that drives the conflation Walz and Deterding refer to. If the distinction between “what the player wants to do” and “what someone else wants the player to do” defines one axis of this debate (the “doing something they don’t want to do” and “manipulation” that McGonigal (Feiler 2011) and Freire (1990) refer to), the other might be the pleasure and pain axis, or “play” versus “work” (distinctions that also threaten to conflate the descriptive and the normative). The question is not only what did I want to do in my high school social studies class, but whether I had fun in that class (spoiler, dear reader: I did), and whether the students being (playfully) “tricked” into developing their “mapping skills” through *Pokémon Go* will derive pleasure from the experience.

This second axis also brings us back to the question of learning outcomes and objectives from a different angle. In the NCTE/IRA Standards for Language Arts, reference to any kind of pleasure appears in only one word (in parentheses) within standard number 12: “Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, *enjoyment*, persuasion, and the exchange of information)” (emphasis mine). It is in relation to these two axes that I want to reconsider Robison’s (2008) definition of games as “rule-based and achievement-bound systems” in relation to the Freirean (1990) distinction between “problem posing” and the seemingly more politically neutral ideas of “problem solving” and skills acquisition. One way of understanding the rhetorical dance involved in crafting learning outcomes for writing classes—and by extension defining the ethical context in which gaming pedagogy plays—is to consider that claims for the “seriousness” of gaming pedagogy echo longstanding justifications for the “seriousness” of writing instruction, and in so doing how they both negotiate a Freirean opposition between games built on “learning-as-knowing” (the banking approach) and “learning-as-learning” models, the latter indicating the potential for writing and/as gaming to, in the words of Thomas J. Yannuzzi and Bryan G. Behrenshausen (2010), “allow more critical reflection upon the self one chooses to become and the social worlds he/she participates in constructing” (p. 87).

In *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Language and Learning*, James Paul Gee (2004) makes explicit this connection between seeing games as trivial and seeing learning as the acquisition of abstract skills,



and conversely (and correctly, in his view) of taking games seriously and therefore seeing learning as transformative and critical:

Passive learning—rather than active, critical learning—will not lead to much power and empowerment in the contemporary world, however much it may suit one for a low-level service job. Mastering literacy or math as a set of routinized procedures without being able to use these procedures proactively within activities that one understands and for the accomplishment of one’s own goals will not lead to learners who can learn quickly and well as they face new semiotic domains, as they will throughout their lives. (p. 69)

Gee (2014) has explicitly acknowledged his debt to Freire (1990) in his evolution away from his own early instrumentalist view of literacy in “Language and Literacy: Reading Paulo Freire Empirically,” an essay that validates Freire’s (1990) radical pedagogy in terms of contemporary developments in cognitive psychology. At the conclusion, Gee (2014) affirms the implication that the goal of “active, critical learning” leading to “power and empowerment” is inherently political and hence ethical as well: “And, in choosing my political position, I am both ‘reading the world’ and, for better or worse, transforming it. That, too, long ago, I took to be Freire’s point” (p. 72).

“In problem-posing education, men develop their power to perceive critically *the way they exist* in the world *with which* and *in which* they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation” (Freire 1990, pp. 70–71, emphasis his). Freire’s now canonical invocation that to read and write the world is to change it implies that what we take to be reality is itself a social construct, maintained and enforced through power, persuasion, and manipulation. An equivalent corollary in game studies theory may be the distinction between “learning to play the game”—developing the technical, rhetorical, and discursive skills to be a successful player without necessarily challenging or critiquing the rules of the game—and seeing any game as precisely that: a game, meaning a contingent and historically evolving collection of social negotiations. Playing the game from this perspective involves the choice between playing *with* or *against* the game. Playing against the game necessitates confronting the procedural logics that constitute the game, and, just as important, confronting the ethical

implications of those procedural logics, including and maybe especially what it means to “succeed” at the game.

Of course, much actual game play involves both sides of this binary, whether challenging the authority of the umpire, the longstanding practice of adapting the board game *Monopoly* according to local rules and practices, or the inevitable rowdiness that accompanied the social studies learning game from my high school experience. In fact, these last two examples share much in common, as both *Monopoly* and, say, our playing the stock market game rest on the “achievement bound” system of market capitalism. In both games, players are confronted with the prospect of bankruptcy and poverty, whether their own or their fellow players’, often resulting in socialism on the fly, as the “richer” players transfer wealth to the poorer out of a complex mix of sympathy and the simple desire to keep the game going.

In redefining “serious” games as “persuasive games,” Ian Bogost (2007) places the ethics of gaming front and center and questions the technocratic descriptors that find their way into game studies theory—such as the aforementioned “procedural logics.” Instead, he exposes the seemingly neutrality of “procedural logics” by recasting them as “procedural *rhetorics*.” As with Gee (2004), Bogost’s (2007) ultimate goals recall Freire (1990): “I argue that videogames’ usefulness comes not from a capacity to transfer social or workplace skills, but rather from their capacity to give consumers and workers a means to critique business, social, and moral principles” (p. x). Yannuzzi and Behrenshausen (2010) likewise see a Freirean potential for understanding the potential of gaming as radical critique

as “sites of fun,” video games present an opportunity for the playful negotiation of their logics. Here exists exploration, reiteration, arbitration, and deprecation as players probe rules, test boundaries. To play video games is to toy with codes, to structurate. (p. 88)

The phrase “to toy with codes” brings in the radical potential of fun and play in gaming theory as forms of ideological critique with what can seem the more austere approach of classical radical pedagogy in ways that recall Bakhtin’s (1984) idea of the “carnavalesque.” In less grand theoretical terms, “sites of fun” describes the anarchic impulse literally at play in our high school learning game. As we learned the “rules” of the stock market game, we simultaneously recognized them as just that: the

rules of a game, contingent rather than absolute. In popular terms, this is the strategy of Bart Simpson, the class clown whose “misbehavior,” or refusal to play the game according to the rules, offers a radical challenge to the rules of the “serious game” of formal education. More theoretically, this liminal space defines what Mark Taylor (2001) calls “the edge of chaos,” or “the interplay between order and chaos at work in dissipative structures” (p. 121).

The notion of games as “dissipative structures” captures what is most inherently subversive and transformational in gaming. But if Bart Simpson is one form of this kind of anarchic game player, then so too might be Donald Trump, whose own transactional world view lays bare the unavoidable ethics of all “game playing,” including technocratic “problem solving” models of gaming. One of the cornerstones of Trumpian rhetoric is an appeal to its own specific kind of “fun,” as in the provocative improvisations of his rallies. However well-meaning the intentions, however anodyne the learning outcomes, the ethics of “5 Ways to Trick Students Into Learning with Pokemón Go” are inherently transactional as well, even if not quite Trumpian. Still, the idea of “tricking students” (voters?) is assumed to be ethically justified and even beyond discussion, since the worthiness of the goals is taken to be self-evident.

The larger point here, however, is not really about trickery: it is the recognition that the self-evident is anything but, and Trumpian rhetoric, with its disdain for “rule-based systems,” has itself brought into focus the “edge of chaos,” the radical contingency of all democratic practice as serious political game as well as the underlying bugs in the specific game engine of the electoral college. In fact, one of the remarkable aspects of Trumpian rhetoric is that it combines constant disruption with a dearth of persuasive efficacy. While the “rule-based systems” of conventional politics are subjected to attack and even contempt, public opinions about the president have remained—at least through mid-2019—historically consistent, complicating the whole question of just who is tricking whom in this game.

In *Gamer Theory*, McKenzie Wark (2007) recognizes this potentially “dark side” to utopian models that posit gaming and fun as forms radical critique, arguing that gaming and play have already been co-opted as new foundational elements of late capitalism:

Play no longer functions as a foil for a critical theory. The utopian dream of liberating play from the game, of a pure play beyond the game, merely

opened the way for the extension of gamespace into every aspect of everyday life. While the counter-culture wanted worlds of play outside the game, the military entertainment complex countered in turn by expanding the game to the whole world, containing play forever within it. (para. 016)

Linking the exploitation of gaming as means of military and corporate training brings us back to McGonigal's (Feiler 2012) ethic of not trying "to motivate somebody to do something they don't want to do," and Freire's (1990) warnings about "manipulation" within social organizations, forms of social gaming that work to hide their very existence as games. As I suggested above, the "extension of gamespace into every aspect of everyday life" even anticipates the fragmenting political discourse post-2016, as social media, forms of discourse that emerged as kinds of rhetorical games, have upended older gamespace models predicated on distinctions between the serious and trivial, formal and informal.

Still, even Wark's final position stops short of complete despair: "The game might not be utopia, but it might be the only thing left with which to play against gamespace" (para. 024). Or just as Freire's (1990) older model did not posit Utopia outside of social organization but instead invoked the idea of a "true" organization, Wark's attenuated ("might be the only thing left") vision can be reinterpreted not as a search for a world of play outside the gamespace but the creation of utopian gamespaces, "utopian" in the political sense of anticipating/working toward a "better" world, a world by definition none of us have ever lived in before (hence, a literal "u-topia").

These utopian gamespaces include both those games that fit McGonigal's (2011) vision of using the power of gaming as problem-solving to address real world problems at the social (as in the 2007 game *World Without Oil*) or personal (the *Superbetter* project) levels. But we can also think of the utopian in terms of what Frederick Jameson (2005) calls the "utopian wish," or "a utopian impulse detectable in daily life and its practices" (p. 1). This "wish" or "impulse" can oscillate between the conscious and unconscious, complicating the question of "what we want to do," or "what we should want to do," as in my high school self's simultaneous attraction to the McGonigalesque (2011) utopianism of our learning games and anarchic "impulse" to disrupt the rules. This "wish" or "impulse" can exist at the crossroads of the "what I want to do/what

someone or something wants me to do” and the fun/work axes. It might be another word for “play.”

For example, in my own prior work (Alberti 2013) I examined Facebook (in what I would now call its formative stages) as a form of rhetorical gaming, one less focused on “winning” than on the pleasures of rhetorical play, an understanding of writing and rhetoric with potentially radical implications for the traditional “problem solving,” goal-directed writing classroom. But Facebook has been turned into another kind of game as well, the game of harvesting and selling user data through gamification. My earlier analysis of Facebook started with the observation that students wanted to “play” Facebook, an observation that connects the idea of gameplay as a means of commanding attention with gaming as compulsive behavior, as in both the *Candy Crush Saga*-style games that advertise themselves on the basis of their addictiveness and in the search for “addictive” educational game strategies that can “trick” students into learning.

Problem solving lies at the heart of both the gaming and utopian impulses; we can see Freirean (1990) pedagogy as a meta version of gaming by taking problem-posing as the questioning of questions, of what the “real” problem to be solved—or that we want solved—might be. For example, the very real problem of declining college enrollments has led to models of gaming-based pedagogy as technocratic problem-solving involving the use of badges and other intermittent “rewards” as a means of promoting student engagement and persistence by allowing students to acquire multiple forms of credentialing as they proceed through a curriculum (see Fain (2016) for a fair overview of the use of badges and other alternative credentials in higher education).

To be sure, the use of badges in higher education is a complex phenomenon, complex in its various motives and its relation to the question of student/player autonomy at the heart of the ethics of gaming. The utopian program and utopian wish are easy to discern—so is a theory of learning as compulsive behavior triggered by these badges and other intermittent “rewards,” a form of capitalism as game, as in the stock market game I played in high school. And, of course, the use of education as coercion is not new; it lies at the heart of the Freirean (1990) critique.

Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and the other evolving and emerging forms of social media are clearly as much persuasive rhetorical games—and energized by various manifestations of the utopian wish—as any older forms of sanctioned political and economic discourse. In fact, students

now increasingly see the creation and maintenance of an online identity as critical, if not more so, than a well-crafted resumé. Part of the turbulent and ever-shifting landscape of social media stems not just from the “inevitable” progress of technological innovation but from the desire Wark (2007) describes to find a new online rhetorical space of fun and play, now that Facebook and Twitter function as mandatory components of a “web presence.” Thus, Facebook and Twitter become coercive games, “tricking” us into play by becoming unavoidable components of the serious games of work and politics. It has become a commonplace that younger players now see Facebook as a space for their parents and grandparents; in Wark’s terms, the gamespace has encroached into the former playspace of Facebook, its former players fleeing to Snapchat and then Instagram, with the gamespace in hot pursuit (and, in the case of Instagram, corporate capture by Facebook, Inc.).

All of these examples finally point us to the what may be the heart of Freirean (1990) problem-posing: its radical specificity. While *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* often operates at the level of macro social theory—“[i]n this historical phase, manipulation becomes a fundamental instrument for the preservation of domination”—the strategy of problem-posing insists on the importance of starting with the lived experiences of the learners/players, of exploring the problems and contradictions they see in negotiating the procedural rhetorics of the specific gamespaces, macro and especially micro, in which they find themselves constituted as players: “The task of the dialogical teacher ... working on the thematic universe revealed by their investigation is to ‘re-present’ that universe to the people from who he first perceived it—and ‘re-present’ it not as a lecture, but as a problem” (p. 101).

And the study of rhetoric itself is always particular, always located at the nexus between general strategy and the specificity, the *Kairos*, of any particular rhetorical situation, as Bogost (2007) affirms in his own investigation of gaming rhetoric: “rhetorical positions are always particular positions; one does not argue or express in the abstract” (p. 241). The “gamespace” posited by Wark (2007) is not different than Freire’s (1990) “thematic universe”; the social organization of Facebook is as real as the social organization of the criminal justice system. I am arguing that we can view Freirean problem-posing as its own type of game, one founded on the premise that all games—whether Facebook or the system for funding a college education—can be interrogated in the form of the procedural

rhetorics that constitute them. Problem posing is the game of interrogating games. Like other forms of artistic experience, “[v]ideogames do not just offer situated meaning and embodied experiences of real and imagined worlds and relationships; they offer meaning and experiences of *particular* relationships” (Bogost 2007, p. 241, emphasis his). This experience of a particular relationship is a *real* experience, and these particular relationships can form the basis of problem-posing as gameplay.

For example, Yannuzzi and Behrenshausen (2010) follow Freire in arguing that “[p]ractitioners of critical pedagogy might therefore ask how to foster recognition of the ways in which subjects are both constituted and positioned in spaces governed by the digital logics of contemporary informatic systems” (p. 88). Similarly, in her overview and analysis of how and at what levels of procedural awareness college writing teachers use gameplay in their classes, Rebekah Shultz Colby (2017) affirms that “the mechanics and procedures the players enact to play out the game story not only make players identify with a certain subjectivity, but the game mechanics and procedures make players enact and, thus, embody these subjectivities as well, forcing players to live through them” (p. 64). In the case of social media like Facebook and Twitter, those subjects are constituted and positioned in terms of likes and hits, of the endless pursuit of attention and approbation, of insisting that these constitute (or more accurately, *should* constitute) the ultimate endgame of all rhetorical play, whether we “like” it or not.

Now, this contradiction, this “problem” at the heart of how we are constituted by dominant social media, will come as no surprise to most of us (and certainly not to anyone who has seen the 2016 “Nosedive” episode of *Black Mirror*), but the naming of the problem, of the crack in the procedural rhetoric of Facebook, is only the first step. The next stages in the game—the strategies for addressing, exploring, confronting this contradiction—range, as in all games, from the tactical to the global. There is the strategy of leaving social media, of going dark online, which is certainly a valid choice, even though it’s telling that this choice already carries with it a felt imperative to justify such a decision to others, let alone the perceived potential damage to one’s career prospects. But is leaving Facebook really “leaving the game?” The larger game of data mining includes and extends beyond Facebook to games that don’t seem like games—or rather, as with the credit score industry, games that consciously repress their status as games, in spite of using gaming terminology such as “score.” Such games demand our play whether we want to or not; indeed,

many of us are playing without even knowing it, as famously exemplified when Cambridge Analytica used demographic data from 50 million Facebook users to create voter profiles for sale to political organizations, including the Russian government (Confessore 2018). The social logics of the rhetorical games of social media both derive from older media structures of ratings and attracting eyeballs and, more and more, inform our understanding of political and social discourse.

The game of Facebook, for example, can be compared to the game of public opinion polling, or more specifically the game of public opinion polling analysis and big data, the realm of FiveThirtyEight.org, RealClearPolitics.com, and other poll aggregation sites. Here the game becomes more complicated: the choices are not between “believing” or “not believing” polls: this game is played at the level of meta-analysis, of interrogating what forms of information and thus social knowledge are constituted by polls. We can even subsume all of these games under the game of voting; as Thoreau (1993) put it almost 170 years ago, “All voting is a sort of gaming, like checkers or backgammon, with a slight moral tinge to it, a playing with right and wrong, with moral questions; and betting naturally accompanies it” (p. 5). For Thoreau, the gaming metaphor is an accusation, but I argue that the “slight moral tinge,” as he dismissively called it, is exactly the point of critical pedagogy as game.

“In problem-posing education, men develop their power to perceive critically *the way they exist* in the world *with which* and *in which* they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation” (Freire 1990. pp. 70–71). The outdated gender references notwithstanding, Freire’s description of the power of problem posing from 50 years ago has even more resonance for an online reality that constantly reinforces its status as always “in process, in transformation.” Or as Yanuzzi and Behrenshausen (2010) argue, “the binarisation of everyday life by systems of control indicates the need for pedagogies that cultivate awareness of ways in which self and other are constituted, managed, and negotiated in technological and social systems whose logic is becoming increasingly gamic” (p. 95).

Combining a Freirean critique of gaming pedagogy with a gaming approach to problem-posing, we can open a space for writing teachers and pedagogical theorists to approach gaming, fun, and play not merely as means to various educational ends, not as a way to “trick” students into learning, but as ends themselves rooted in the fundamental ethical and political questions of what it means to make a better world and to



play games with our lives. This combination is at the same time the recognition of a return, a return to an understanding of pedagogy as game and play. Looking back, I can read my experience with a learning game in my 1970s high school classroom less as an encounter with a radically new way of teaching than with a teaching practice that opened up the inherent gamefulness of culture, politics, and learning, whether that was a part of the official learning outcomes or not. Recognizing the notion of the “gameful world” as a/the radical Freirean insight creates a playspace where students can leverage their own experience and expertise in game-play and game procedurality into an awareness of “how their interactions with part of the system or model affect their interactions with the whole of the simulation” (Shultz Colby, p. 63). In this way, game and play become the ground for the ultimate ethical question of what it means to do something we want to do.

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PART II

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Ethics of Play: Ethos, Design, and Player  
Agency



## Procedural Ethics and a *Night in the Woods*

*Elizabeth Caravella*

Concerned with the ethics of computer games and their players, Miguel Sicart (2005) turns to virtue ethics to explore the habituated dispositions that players cultivate. These dispositions change through the procedurally encouraged and socially constructed ethical world an online environment creates. According to Sicart, players make moral decisions based on the mechanics they execute and the virtual worlds they inhabit while playing. These rule systems, then, not only make claims about the system within the game itself, but also require players to operate within a proceduralized ethical argument, something especially true for gamefully designed games. Unlike gamification, gameful design focuses on tapping into players' intrinsic, rather than extrinsic, motivations for playing a game. In part because of this, the scaffolded tasks offered in video games that are gamefully designed do not merely build players' habits within the game itself, but also suggest the potential for video games to influence players' disposition, or moral character, outside of the game. Relying on pre/post-surveys and follow-up interviews, this chapter examines the role

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*hexis* plays in influencing player dispositions through proceduralization of the ethical arguments embedded within the ethically complex game *Night in the Woods* (NITW). The findings ultimately illustrate that such procedural ethics, when implemented through *hexis*, have the potential to alter players' moral dispositions both within and outside of the game itself.

## HABIT, HEXIS, AND VIDEO GAMES

In *Procedural Habits: The Rhetoric of Videogames as Embodied Practice*, Steve Holmes (2017) establishes that video games build mundane habits through repetition, arguing that “many commercial video game genres increasingly use sophisticated interface design mechanisms to produce habits in ways that exceed a player’s conscious perception or creation of any textual or narrative content on the screen” (p. 5). He further articulates that scholars need to pay attention to how video game design, even in its most mundane form, builds repetitive habits in players, and in some cases, habits that continue beyond the game itself. Rather than positioning these habits as trivial, Holmes joins Shannon Vallor (2016) by positioning these habits as transformative, ultimately arguing that habits can actually allow and make space for creativity and nuance, rather than merely reinforcing mindlessly repetitive behaviors. In other words, Holmes and Vallor, drawing on Aristotelian virtue ethics, argue that these habituations change disposition, or *hexis*. Video games offer a space where, through *hexis*, players can develop new understandings and practices both in the games themselves, and the habits that they cultivate outside the game, leading to a change in disposition.

Examining *how* games reinforce procedural habits through gameful design provides the opportunity to explore how even the mundane, perhaps even mechanical, gaming habits have the potential to develop and even *change* players' dispositions. Because video games are embodied arguments (Sicart 2005; Karhulahti 2015; Shultz Colby 2017), exploring how these design elements shape these dispositions grants the opportunity to examine how one might proceduralize an ethical argument through game design with the goal of influencing disposition. According to Holmes (2017), more often than not, responses to the habit-shaping design elements of video games “seek to immunize video game rhetoric from embodiment” (p. 10). However, as Holmes and others have suggested (Grosz 2013; Vallor 2016), because playing a video game is an embodied act, we cannot separate the mundane, repetitive, habit-forming

game mechanisms from our understanding of how video games construct their arguments, and this is especially true in the case of proceduralized ethics.

As previously mentioned, such habit-forming mechanisms can be seen most readily in gamefully designed games. Similarly, these mechanisms further develop players' affective commitment to the game and its characters, reinforcing the idea that we need to understand how games "can influence empathy, emotion and social connection" (Isbister 2017, p. xviii). Through a combination of narrative and mechanics which influence players' affective commitment to a game, and because playing a game means taking part in an embodied argument, *hexis* becomes a means through which players can practice morality in a virtual, fictional space. Further, because of this practice space, ethically complex games can provide a place for players to cultivate their own virtues, such as McGonigal (2014) alludes to through her conceptions of gameful design. While this change in disposition is not limited to only players, they are the focus of this particular study. The development of video games (as with other media) requires an exchange of feedback between the industry and its audience: players are not only at the receiving end. Whether consciously or not, the relationship they share with the industry is *reciprocal*.

### ADVENTURE GAMES AND NITW

Narrative is a key component in many video games (Lindley 2005; Simons 2007). Narrative generally refers to a game's overall story; however, unlike film or print narratives, video game narratives are designed "so that play has meaning" (McRae 2017). As video games require interactivity, game writers, or, "narrative designers," as Edwin McRae calls them, must always consider players' likely and unlikely behaviors and potential responses and reactions to a game's story so that they may create a believable world for the player to inhabit. In most cases, narrative designers do a large part of their storytelling and world-building through action, as "the player isn't there to read or listen. The player is there to play." Adventure games emphasize the game's story over its gameplay mechanics, even often privileging reading and story over active gameplay; in other words, the narrative becomes a mechanic itself. Most adventure games encourage players to speak to many non-player characters (NPCs) in the game-world, often keep a slower pace, and use simplistic gameplay mechanics. Despite the slower gameplay, because these games usually focus on a

particular characters or in-depth narratives, they provide excellent examples to examine how players make ethical decisions in these often morally complex games, and how the games themselves encourage and influence a player's morality through simple, repetitive mechanics. For example, *NITW*, released on computer and console platforms in 2017, provides a complex, progressive moral narrative which players must navigate, one which requires players to develop and reinforce habits in decision-making, exploration, and moral assessment—through *hexis*.

As Karen Schrier (2016) mentions when discussing *Fable III*, as players spend more time playing a game, they become more considerate of the needs of NPCs in that they begin to “imagine and think through the consequences and implications of their behaviors and decisions and consider ones even beyond the effects simulated in the game” (p. 64). However, in games like *NITW*, players are required to make increasingly complex ethical decisions that put certain NPCs (as well as the player character) in questionable light. By proceduralizing ethical decision-making, the game encourages players to reflect on their choices and the associated consequences and rewards them for doing so more quickly as the game progresses. That is to say, because the game's mechanics themselves require players to make increasingly complex decisions in progressively shorter time limits, playing the game habituates the judgment process (Sicart 2005), requiring players to expedite the decision-making process if they want to progress the story. In this way, *NITW* proceduralizes ethical decision-making, acquiring habits through *hexis*, because the decision-making process is scaffolded in the game itself. As such, playing the game requires players to create their own heuristics for the ethical decision-making it requires, and repeatedly puts them into practice over time. The development of such heuristics, then, occurs through the building of habit, which can eventually change players' disposition due to the sheer number of judgements required.

*NITW* uses simple mechanics when the player character interacts with others: arrows appear within Mae's speech bubble when the player can make a choice that will affect others' responses, and it is up to the player to scroll through the options and decide which response Mae will provide. In some cases, none of the provided options are particularly satisfying, but the player *must* choose a response to progress, which encourages players, through a mundane design mechanic, to make increasingly complex decisions within a relatively limited set of options. In addition, as the game progresses, the expectation is that players will be able to scroll through

and make these decisions more and more quickly, reinforcing the need for moral judgment within its particular (albeit virtual) social-semiotic system (Sicart 2005). Such scaffolding marks this game as gamefully designed, meaning it relies in part on *hexis* to reinforce these habits. Thus, *NITW* habituates ethical decision-making by requiring a response, even in instances when none of the available options are particularly appealing.

### *The Characters and General Story*

Mae Borowski, the game's protagonist, is introduced as a troubled college drop-out returning to her hometown of Possum Springs. Though the player controls Mae throughout the entire game, the narrative purposefully masks the reason Mae abandons her college career until the player is already well invested in her as a character. From the very beginning of the game, other characters in Possum Springs treat Mae with general distaste and/or suspicion, but because the player only discovers why near the end of the narrative, initially it appears that the entire town is critical of the fact that she had the opportunity to go to college, something most others in Possum Spring do not, and wasted it. As the game progresses, some of the townfolks' disdain for Mae magnifies, with certain members of the Possum Springs community even referring to her as "Killer" should the player interact with them, albeit without telling the player why, and so while Mae herself clearly already knows, the player does not until the middle of the game.

Similar to Mae, all of the main characters in *NITW* become increasingly complex as the player moves through the narrative, with some of the more seemingly innocent characters becoming more sinister, and vice versa. Despite this movement, none of the characters are presented as either wholly good or evil, but complex individuals responding to specific contexts. The player sees this early in the game, such as when Mae's mother snaps at her for refusing to tell anyone why she dropped out of school after an especially hard day at work, despite previously being very supportive and understanding of her daughter. For this reason, this particular game works especially well to measure a change in players' disposition. It also enables us to analyze how the interactions between the game's rule system (made by the game designers) and the social-semiotic system represented in the game influence players' moral development and habituation of their ethical decision-making. My study of pre- and post-play ethical responses by student participants



playing the game as part of a Video Game Rhetorics course demonstrates the ways in which designers structure and foreground ethical decision-making through emotional affect. It reveals that how players think about emotions carries a concrete impact—regardless whether they change their minds.

## THE STUDY

The IRB approved study detailed below was guided by the following research question: to what extent do morally complex games such as *NITW* cultivate and/or influence embodied habits that lead to changes in players' dispositions? Overall, the goal of the study was to examine, through data-driven means, how *hexis* operates through narrative and decision-making mechanics in gamefully designed games like *NITW*.

### *Methods*

Data was collected from two separate sections taught by different instructors of a Video Game Rhetorics course at a large research university. After playing 20–30 minutes of the game in class, participants were asked to take the online pre-survey via Google Forms. Roughly two weeks later, when participants should have completed the game according to both course syllabi, they took the survey in class a second time. Though 26 participants completed the pre-survey, only 24 completed both the pre- and post-surveys. Data from the two participants who only completed the pre-survey were thus removed, leaving a total of 24 participants. Participants included both graduate and undergraduate students.

The survey itself recorded participants' initial feelings about the game's main characters, the town of Possum Springs, and the kinds of decisions that they had to make in the game. In addition to recording the number of hours participants had spent playing the game and how many times they had beaten the game, the survey consisted of 13 other questions, listed in Table 6.1 in the Results section, and measured using a 7-point Likert scale, with 1 being “strongly disagree,” 4 being “neutral,” and 7 being “strongly agree.” The survey questions measured the amount of time players spent in the game, their affective commitment toward the game and its characters, their current tendency to self-reflect, and the extent to which the game influenced said self-reflective tendencies.

**Table 6.1** Pre- and post-survey means with associated *P* values

<i>Survey statement</i>	<i>Mean scores (pre)</i>	<i>Mean scores (post)</i>	<i>P value</i>
I am fond of Mae Borowski	5.375	5.5	0.7676
I have developed a strong bond with the characters	3.79	5.54	0.0001**
I am emotionally attached to at least one of the main characters	4	6.08	0.0001**
I am invested in uncovering the game's story	5.38	6.21	0.0068**
I am invested in uncovering the game's side and/or optional stories	5.38	5.54	0.4615
I think Mae is treated unfairly by some of the characters	4.125	4.25	0.7579
I find at least one of the main characters morally dubious	4.17	4.25	0.0013**
I sometimes question the way others do things and try to think of a better way	4.54	5.54	0.0237*
I often reflect on my actions to see if I could have improved on what I did	5.13	5.83	0.0289*
I find it difficult to make some choices in <i>NITW</i>	3.83	4.42	0.1097
As a result of playing, I think about morality differently	2.88	4.42	0.0011**
While playing, I discovered faults in ideas I previously thought to be right	2.79	3.29	0.2281
When I am making choices while playing, I can make them without thinking	3.79	3.38	0.4096
As a result of playing this game, I think more about my own choices	3.08	4.25	0.0044**

Note *P* values marked with \*\* were statistically significant

Though the survey alone did not address *hexis*, or how the game developed habits in its players, its goal was to record any changes in disposition that occurred as players progressed through the game. The pre- and post-survey results were then compared using a paired t-test to note any statistically relevant relationships between items (displayed in the Results section, below). Finally, focusing on Sicart's (2005) argument that "computer game players are moral beings that evaluate their actions and the

choices they make” (p. 15), the survey asked for participants to score their own judgments of the characters in the game as well as their overall tendency to self-reflect and make moral judgments outside of the game. For example, despite the beginning of the game illustrating Mae as a “questionable” youth, most players either “Agreed” or “Strongly Agreed” that they were “fond” of her in both the pre- and post-surveys, forcing participants to make the same kind of judgment Sicart argues games have players make all the time. Similarly, in response to a later survey statement, “When I am making choices while playing *NITW* I can make them without thinking about what I am doing,” most responded in both the pre- ( $M = 3.79$ ) and post-survey ( $M = 3.38$ ) with either “disagree” or “neutral.” As Sicart suggests, then, players do evaluate the actions and decisions they make within the game, rather than making them arbitrarily.

While there are a number of implications for course design that could be gained from the survey results alone, coupling these results with qualitative interview data provides further insight as to how elements of the game’s design in particular influenced these changes. The interview questions also paid special attention to the sorts of habits the players developed in gameplay through both the narrative and mechanics, and how practicing these judgments through *hexis* lead to a change in disposition. Participants were contacted via email after the pre-survey data had been analyzed requesting that they complete a brief electronic questionnaire aimed at uncovering why and how the game’s repetitive design scheme and choice-making mechanics influenced the changes in disposition indicated by the survey results. Though the interviews were semi-structured and follow-up questions were also asked, all interviewees were asked at least the following questions:

1. What elements of *Night in the Woods* (if any) influenced the amount of time you spent playing the game?
2. Did you spend time completing the available side quests in addition to the main storyline? If so, what, if anything, led you to do so?
3. To what extent did playing the game influence your current tendency to self-reflect? What aspects of the game, specifically, attributed to this influence?
4. Did playing the game cause you to develop certain habits, as related specifically to gameplay? If so, please describe them.

Of the initial 24 participants, 12 responded, providing qualitative data to further explicate how the game's reliance on *hexis* helped to instill the kind of "intrinsic" motivations (such as creativity, a love of learning, perseverance, and curiosity) McGonigal (2014) argues develop when players play games that rely on principles of gameful design. Relying on such conceptions of gameful design, then, these questions aimed to discover the key elements of the game's overall design and mechanics that influenced a change in disposition; that is, the questionnaire was designed to help uncover *how* the game proceduralized ethical decision-making through an interplay of both its narrative *and* mechanics, and thus were exploratory in nature. Unlike the survey, which sought to record both players' original and changes in judgment, interview responses were coded after the fact, allowing for generative coding categories, the results of which are discussed in more detail below.

### *Survey Results*

Results from the initial survey illustrated that of the 24 participants, only 1 had previously played *NITW* prior to the course. However, none of the participants reported having previously beaten the game in the initial survey. Subsequently, all 24 participants reported that they had beaten the game at least once at the time the post-survey was distributed, with all participants indicating that they had spent seven or more hours playing the game at that point. According to *How Long To Beat...*, a website where gamers come together to log and determine the average length of time it takes to beat a particular game, *NITW* takes an average of 8 h and 41 min to beat for players who only complete the main story, and roughly 12 hours for players who complete both the main story and extra side quests/plots, indicating that most participants most likely completed a number of side quests and other activities/plot lines in addition to the main storyline.

Though one may assume that a player's likelihood to invest in side quests and plot lines outside the main story would increase as they continued to play the game and further develop their affective commitment to both the main and side characters, participants already reported a high level of investment with regard to playing through the game's additional/optional storylines after only playing for 30 min or less, as indicated by the pre-survey mean of 5.38 on a 7-point scale for item 7, "I am invested in uncovering the game's side and/or optional stories."

Further, this investment did *not* increase as they continued playing the game, as the mean score for item 7 of the post-survey was 5.54, a statistically insignificant change, whereas the increase in investment in uncovering the game's main story (from a mean score of 5.38 to 6.21) was especially statistically significant ( $p = .0068$ ), as indicated by the responses to item 6, "I am invested in uncovering the game's story." This indicates that though participants already had a high degree of investment in discovering both the game's main and side stories after only playing a maximum of 30 minutes, they became significantly more invested in the game's main story over the side stories as they spent more time playing.

Table 6.1 provides the mean scores for both the pre- and post-survey results for each of these, as well as the calculated  $p$  value after performing a paired t-test to determine if the change was statistically significant.  $P$  values marked with a \* (items 10 and 11, "I sometimes question the way others do something and try to think of a better way," and "I often reflect on my actions to see whether I could have improved on what I did," respectively) were found to be significant at the  $p < 0.05$  level, meaning that it is less than 5% likely that the change happened by chance, and  $p$  values marked with a \*\* (items 4, 5, 6, 9, 13, and 16) were found to be significant at the  $p < 0.01$  level, meaning it is less than 1% likely that the change occurred by chance.

It becomes clear from the difference in mean scores—scores that support Jamo Laaksolahti, Katherine Isbister, and Kristina Höök's (2009) claims about affective commitment—that the more time spent playing the game, the more likely participants were to form attachments with both the protagonist and other characters in the game. Of the six questions aimed at examining participant's affective commitment, three were found to be extremely significant (items 4, 5, and 6) with  $p$  values less than .01 ( $p = 0.0001$ ,  $0.0001$ , and  $0.0068$ , respectively). Items 4 and 5 measured participants' bond and emotional attachment to the characters in Possum Springs, and item 6 measured participant's investment in completing the game's main storyline, indicating that as participants spent more time playing the game, players became increasingly attached to the characters and increasingly invested in finishing the game (though, as previously noted, this investment increased *only* for the main storyline, not the side storylines). It should be noted that all of these  $p$  values, but especially the two values of  $0.0001$ , indicate that it was the game itself that built this affective commitment, illustrating the need to point the

follow-up interview questions toward the elements of the game's design and narrative that produced such a significant level of investment.

In addition to increased affective commitment toward the game and its characters, all three of the questions aimed at measuring participant's self-reflective tendencies (items 9, 10, and 11) were found to be statistically significant, both at the 0.05 (items 10 and 11) and 0.01 (item 9) level ( $p = 0.0013$ ,  $0.0237$ , &  $0.0289$ , respectively). These mean scores increases indicate that as participants spent more time playing the game, their tendency to self-reflect increased. Finally, two of the five questions aimed at measuring whether or not the game influenced how participants thought about morality and/or their own choices (items 13 and 16) were significant at the .01 level ( $p = 0.0011$  and  $0.0044$ , respectively). Though neither of the mean scores increased above a "neutral" level (2.88 to 4.42 for item 13, and 3.08 to 4.25 for item 16), the change from the initial survey illustrates a significant shift from "disagreeing" that the game influenced participants' ideas of morality and their self-reflective tendencies, to at least being aware of how the game influenced their thinking, both inside and outside of the game. This is reinforced by the fact that all three of the questions measuring participants' introspective tendencies also increased at a statistically significant level, suggesting that *NITW* had an impact on players' disposition.

### *Questionnaire Responses*

Responses to the questionnaire established the following themes with regard to participants' investment, motivations, and reflections concerning how the game influenced their thinking both within and outside of the game:

1. *Atmosphere*: Of the 12 respondents, 10 reported that it was the "look and feel" of the game that made them decide they wanted to know more about the main and side stories. 6 participants noted that the game's use of "cutesy" animal avatars seemed to contradict the more somber tones of the decrepit town of Possum Springs, with 3 specifically noting that the game's initial conversation with the Janitor indicated that there was "more than meets the eye" with regard to both the town and the game itself, motivating them to discover that "more" from the first few moments they spent playing. In addition, 2 of the interviewed participants noted that the game let

them speak to each character every day, following the same pattern, and they were “worried” that not talking to every character each day would make them miss something. In other words, the repetitive nature of the game’s tasks and setting encouraged them to continue interacting with the environment even as they grew familiar with the town and its inhabitants, establishing habit.

2. *Lack of Consequence*: All but 1 of the 12 participants noted a lack of consequence when asked how/why the game encouraged them to invest time in uncovering the main and side stories. “What’s gonna happen if I go up on the roof and fall, exactly? On the one hand, possibly nothing, but also, maybe something!” noted one response. In addition, another participant wrote that “This game doesn’t even have a health bar, so if you’re not supposed to be there, it won’t let you get there,” going on to describe in more detail how “even the houses are set up so you can jump across them,” and noting how the game’s environment encourages players to explore more than just its main buildings. The environment becomes one meant to be both explored and manipulated through play, cuing players to always be looking for new areas or similar areas with slight changes that may affect gameplay.
3. *Potential for Reward*: All 12 participants mentioned something about the potential for reward when asked about why they took the time to either explore non-essential areas and/or speak to the numerous side characters. As one respondent noted, “I was worried that if I didn’t talk to *everyone, every day*, I would miss something cool” (my emphasis). In addition, even when the game did not provide a reward for exploring, such as when Mae steals pretzels to feed baby rats she finds in an abandoned part of a building and the only result is increasing the number of rats, participants still enjoyed the experience, with one in particular noting, “I mean, it wouldn’t be fun if you got something for *every single thing* you do[;] the idea that you may or may not get something good *is what makes you want to try everything!*” (my emphasis). By offering such rewards within the established environment that habitualized exploration, this mechanic further reinforces the need for players to consistently engage with (and thus make judgements about) the other characters in Possum Springs. Players develop the habit of engaging in moral

judgments by choice, repeatedly, and are often rewarded (and thus reinforced) for doing so.

4. *Ethical Complexity*: At least 9 of the 12 participants pointed directly to *NITW*'s refusal to "tread lightly" on ethically complex and/or controversial topics as a key element of the game that encouraged them to explore and invest in the characters, main story, and side story, and this was also the most frequently given reason for how/why the game influenced participants' thoughts and ideas about morality. One of these responses indicated that Angus, the character who seems the least "morally questionable" of the main characters, actually has "a really complex and heart-breaking backstory" which "makes his reserved demeanor so much more meaningful." In this description, the participant noted that Angus's backstory is "completely optional" to uncover, making the responder realize "that sometimes you don't know who's got what going on, so maybe everyone is more complex than we think." In addition, two more of the participants seemed to imply the character's ethical complexity as a driving force behind their own self-reflective tendencies, with one noting that "I really related to Mae, like immediately, and then when I found out what she did that worried me" and the other describing their mixed feelings for the character Gregg after playing the "Stabbing Game," where he and Mae try to stab one another while standing on a log: "I mean, that's not how I spent my time, but I was thinking about it and I liked Gregg and he was with Angus and Angus is good, so he must be too, even if he tries to stab his friends, I guess?" Only one of the respondents did not reference this complexity when asked why/how the game changed their thoughts about morality and/or their tendencies to self-reflect.
5. *Mechanics*: A smaller influence, 7 of the 12 participants mentioned the game's mechanics in some way when describing how the game influenced their motivations to uncover the main and side stories. Most of these responses revolved around the fact that the game itself is narrative driven, with the choice of dialogue options as the main gameplay mechanic. Most participants noted their own assumption that "the game wanted me to go talk to people and say stuff...so I did." These responses often overlapped with the more prevalent motivation of the potential for reward, as most participants noted that they didn't want to "miss" or "lose" something because they



did not take the time to talk to other characters in the game. Finally, 5 of the respondents made direct commentary about the game's "jump" function, and of these 5, 3 noted that despite Mae's aunt explicitly telling her *not* to jump and walk on the town's power lines, as well as an old man who angrily shakes his fist at Mae when the player walks across the power lines anyway, that "clearly, this was how the game was telling you to CLIMB UP THERE AND GET SOME or else no one would have mentioned it." Here, the game's narrative and the mechanics diverge. Even though the narrative clearly positions Mae as a "troublemaker" for climbing on the powerlines and the repairman references "idiots" who frequently make him have to do more work, the player must decide to ignore these warnings in order to explore that section of the map and must do so multiple times throughout the game.

6. *Personal Motivations*: Only 1 participant noted the potential for reward and their own personal motivations with regard to how/why the game encouraged them to uncover the main and side stories. Referring to themselves as "a game perfectionist," this participant explained that though they certainly wanted to collect all available rewards, they "always have to [complete] 100% [of] every game," and that their personal need to fully complete all gameplay includes games they play for a course, as "a game ... for class ... still counts." In addition, this participant also noted their ability to be "already a pretty morally complex thinker" so the game's ethical complexity "did not move" them, despite admitting that "for others who don't always think like that though, I guess the game could make you do it more, at least while you're playing and have to make the choices to keep going."

As indicated by both the quantitative and qualitative results, the more time spent playing this morally complex game, the more likely participants were to begin reconsidering their own moral agency and increase their tendency for introspection. Furthermore, though responses to the questionnaire did not refer to *hexis* by name, the key elements of game design elicited from their responses (especially the lack of consequence, potential for reward, and overall game mechanics) help to illustrate how the changes in disposition recorded by the survey results coincide with the habits that develop by playing the game itself. Based on this data, it

becomes clear that games such as *NITW* proceduralized moral decision-making through repeated tasks and gameful design, providing a means for both gamers and game developers to create and experience worlds that allow for the development of virtue when executed accordingly.

### HEXIS, ETHICS, AND GAME DESIGN

*NITW* follows the same pattern through each level: Mae wakes up; goes downstairs and talks to her mom; walks through town, visiting with townsfolk; chooses to hang out that night with either Bea or Gregg; returns home; checks in with her father; goes to bed; has a nightmare; and then wakes up to start the process over again. Players go through this process at least four times as they progress through the game, yet despite the repetition, this design still encourages players to explore and rewards players for exploring the same chain of events that occur in the same settings, level after level, rather than forcing them mindlessly through the same motions. This pattern serves as an illustration of Elizabeth Grosz (2013) and Holmes's (2017) understanding of habit as a means of progression. The habits players develop through this repetition helps them stay engaged with the game, alternating them between the "repetition and captivity" noted by James Ash (2013), and simultaneously deepening their understanding of Possum Springs's history, the townspeople, and the player character. In addition, the narrative *and* the game's mechanics work together to reinforce this repetition, encouraging players to repeatedly engage with the same characters and voluntarily partake in moral decision-making when they do. Such decision-making is complex. In short, the habitual considerations, the decision-making required by the game, and the consequences each decision produces not only make a moral argument, but also rely on *hexis* to help players think in more complex ways as they make more and more decisions that have lasting outcomes within the game—as seen in the example of Mae jumping across power lines.

As one participant noted that the houses in the game are also close enough to one another, with varying heights between them, that it's quite obvious that Mae could jump between them: *NITW* gives its players strong visual cues that *break* their usual habits in order to indicate something new has become available. Without previous levels pointing to the power lines, players may overlook the instance when the repairman finally leaves the area, opening the opportunity for Mae to jump from the stairs

to the line. *NITW* relies on *hexis* to develop players' procedural habits (Holmes 2017) so that when something changes, it's more obvious than if the player did not have that repetition in the previous levels.

## LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSION

In addition to the relatively small sample size, this study was also limited by the available participants. Though participants were recruited from two different versions of the course (I was instructor for one course and substituted for a handful of classes in the other), it is possible that the instructor-student relationship influenced participants' responses. In addition, as both courses examined and discussed the game as participants were playing, these discussions may have also influenced both the survey and questionnaire responses, especially with regard to how often players tended to self-reflect. That being said, this case study still provides a necessary starting point to help, through data-driven means, not only illustrate Sicart's (2005) claim that video games have the potential to alter one's disposition, but also to illustrate how the combination of a game's environment, core mechanics, and narrative can work together to provide a space for players to *practice* the kind of moral decision-making Aristotle linked to the development of virtue through *hexis*. Games like *NITW* can serve as blueprints for designers and/or players to create these kinds of spaces, as well as illustrate some of the ways in which video games encourage and even facilitate ethical decision-making through the procedural habits they cultivate. In short, the kinds of habits games like *NITW* develop are not trivial or mundane, but ethically complex and nuanced responses that move beyond the game and into the outside world.

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## “To See You Made Humble”: Agency and Ethos in *The Stanley Parable*

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Based on the 2011 source-mod of the same name, Galactic Café’s *The Stanley Parable* (*TSP*) made quite an impact when it was first released on Steam in 2013. Players are cast as the titular Stanley and are tasked with navigating Stanley’s dull, company office. Throughout the game, players are largely dictated to by a disembodied voice known only as The Narrator, who dutifully instructs players about what they are supposed to do, even down to the most laughably simple commands: enter this doorway, push this button, walk to this location, ride this elevator, and so on. In smaller doses, such handholding may not be out of place in a video game. Rowan Tulloch (2010) emphasizes how, throughout video game history, “players have unquestioningly (with some exceptions) learnt to follow the pedagogic mechanisms offered in order to succeed” (p. 35). But *TSP* stands out from its peers for two main reasons: (1) the aforementioned hand holding is deliberately *un*-subtle and (2) at any point

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in the game, should players get irritated with The Narrator, they can simply *not listen* to him. If players are told to enter a door on the left-hand side of a room, there's a door on the *right-hand* side that players can *also* enter. If players are told to go *up* one staircase, there's another staircase next to players that goes *down*. Dozens of these opportunities exist for players to (seemingly) resist the rhetorical elements of the typical "video game formula," where players are told to perform a task and then do so unquestioningly. And while these choices available to players are ultimately illusory—as players are never truly "free" to do *whatever* they want—the fact that *TSP* includes such choices reveals a primary message about video games: namely, that while players have freedom to make certain choices, such freedom is never unlimited.

This exposure of illusory choice in *TSP* was no accident—it was very much what William Pugh and Davey Wreden sought to highlight when they created the game. In a talk at a 2014 Game Developers Conference, Pugh and Wreden (2014) explain that one of their guiding questions when creating *TSP* was whether or not a video game could feature meaningful choices if those choices did not have a perceivable narrative reward. Pugh and Wreden insist that such a game would be possible but with one major caveat:

the choices would have to be inherently expressive. The choices on their own would have to give you something – like, as of you making that choice. Not because it's going to something else, but literally at the moment that you make that choice, you're getting something out of it. You're expressing yourself. You're learning something. You're growing. And [we] think that this can be every bit as compelling as a choice that exists to serve a bigger challenge. (4:22-4:52)

While these expressive choices are certainly available to players of *TSP*, what makes them stand out from choices in other video games is the tension that exists between players' freedom to make choices that affect the narrative outcome and the inherent limitations of the medium of games. Game critics were quick to notice this tension as well: Aaron Poppleton (2011) writes that the only "true" choice that players seemed to have access to was "the freedom to fail to tell the story, either by dying and having to start over, or by quitting and not playing anymore." *Polygon* also noticed this tension inherent in the game's design: Philip Kollar (2013) writes, "The narrator is self-aware that this is a video game

and that there are limits to what you can do and what he – as the storyteller – can offer. The never-ending conflict with game narratives as a whole is written clear and obvious [*sic*] here: Do you have control, or does the designer?” This concern with player choice is also reflected in academic scholarship, as when Bradley Fest (2016) notes that “*The Stanley Parable* questions whether there is really any difference between digital labor and play, and if anything like a real ‘choice’ can exist – and if thus a real ‘action’ – within the algorithmic confines of a video game” (p. 10). With both critics and scholars alike highlighting this tension between freedom and control, one must wonder *why?* *TSP* is far from the first game to feature meaningful choices, and there are plenty of games which offer players *many more* choices than *TSP*. But while other games—for example, *The Walking Dead: Season One* (2012) or *Mass Effect* (2008)—give players numerous ways to make choices that result in narrative or gameplay rewards, the choices available to players in *TSP* often have very little lasting effect, because if The Narrator grows too irritated with players’ decisions, he can simply reset the game and make the players start the story all over again.

This tension between the will of players and the will of the game leads many to interpret *TSP* not just as a game about a man named Stanley, but a game that speaks to *other* games—a technique that Fest (2016) calls “metaproceduralism.” Unlike other games which prioritize immersion and narrative diegesis, *TSP* instead “draw[s] productive aesthetic and procedural attention to [its] status as [a] videogame” and “relish[es] in the specific material processes of [its] medium, drawing metatextual attention to the uniqueness and formal possibility of videogames” (p. 3). So, when players navigate Stanley’s office, disobeying The Narrator at every turn, they aren’t doing so for some upgrade to their player avatar or for a boost to their combat statistics. They are doing so simply for the fun of seeing what the game will *actually* let them do. This tension is further emphasized by *TSP*’s own promotional materials which promise players that *TSP* “is breaking ground by allowing the player to do literally anything” (stanleyparable 2012). Players, critics, and academics alike were quick to see through this misdirection, with Fest (2016) noting that “to ask for an unbounded videogame, a game in which any and all actions are possible, is to fundamentally misunderstand the materiality of a medium, or indeed, of any medium” (p. 12). Therefore, what makes the choices in *TSP* noteworthy is that they intentionally allow players to

grapple with the rules of the game. When The Narrator's intrusive hand-holding is exaggerated to such an annoying extent, players have no choice but to question the ethical dilemmas posed by *TSP* overall. Do players find it ethical to mindlessly follow The Narrator's orders, simply because they know that's what they're supposed to do? Or do players think it's more ethical to rebel against The Narrator's tyranny, upending his plans at each and every possible moment? Is rebellion and meaningful choice even *possible* in *TSP*, when every choice available to a player pre-exists before a person begins playing? *TSP* offers no easy answers to these questions, but this lack of closure is what makes *TSP*'s underlying metacommentary so effective: by building the entire gameplay experience around this central ethical question—to obey or to rebel—*TSP* creates a direct relationship between perceived player agency, and the ethos of the game. By exploring their ability to make choices, players aren't just interacting with the gameworld for the fun of seeing what happens when they choose—they are exploring and testing the very rules and systems which constrain their ability to express themselves in digital spaces. In this way, the players' ability to make meaningful choices is directly related to their personal feelings about being an ethical subject in the game. While the number of choices that players can make is ultimately finite, each time players are asked to make choices, they are providing their own answer to the central ethical question of *TSP*: are they the kind of player who wants to follow The Narrator or break the rules?

### DEFINITIONS: AGENCY AND ETHOS

Before analyzing specific moments from *TSP*, some definition is needed for some of the theoretical concepts I utilize in this chapter. The definition of the first key term, "Agency," I borrow from Janet Murray (1997) who defines it as "the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices" (p. 126). Because so much of *TSP* relies on players' ability to make (and see the results of) choices, it's easy to see why Murray's definition is useful. Crucial is also how Murray differentiates between agency and interactivity: "the pleasure of agency in electronic environments is often confused with the mere ability to move a joystick or click on a mouse. But activity alone is not agency" (p. 128). Therefore, while something like a tabletop game of chance may be *interactive*, and allow players to make choices, "players may be kept very busy spinning dials, moving game pieces, and exchanging money,



but they may not have any agency” (p. 128). This distinction between interactivity and agency is important to keep in mind in the case of *TSP* because the game has no interest in offering players a definitive answer on whether or not their choices are meaningful ones or merely interactive ones. Instead, the entire effectiveness of *TSP*’s metacommentary is to create scenarios in which players must repeatedly pose the question: are players’ choice meaningful in the world of *TSP*, or are all their attempts at rebellion utterly futile, because The Narrator can take away player agency at a moment’s notice?

These recurring scenarios are the primary ways that the game invites players to critique its ethos. “Ethos” in this chapter largely derives from Miguel Sicart’s (2009) *The Ethics of Computer Games*, in which he defines ethos as “a system or set of moral values, and the tools for analyzing those values” (p. 4). Sicart insists that computer games are moral objects and that players take the role of ethical agents in gameworlds. Sicart’s conception of ethos is useful in thinking about *TSP* because the primary tool available for players to analyze *TSP*’s ethical values is the players’ agency, their ability to make meaningful choices and to deliberately go *against* what The Narrator expects them to do. When players interact with *TSP* for the first time, there is no perceivable narrative reward for disobeying The Narrator’s instructions. As mentioned previously, Pugh and Wreden wanted players to take pleasure in the act of making meaningful choices without (necessarily) being concerned with getting “The Good Ending” (should it even exist). Pugh and Wreden therefore make every meaningful choice not just a narrative question, but an ethical one. Do we, as players, obey The Narrator’s instructions, thereby fulfilling the role that is expected of us? Or do we defy the game’s expectations, and refuse to cooperate with The Narrator’s intrusive handholding? Unlike in other games, *TSP* players aren’t simply being asked to make a judgment between which choice brings them to The Good Ending or The Bad Ending; rather, players’ choices are opportunities to reflect on their role as ethical agents in the gameworld. In this way, the “story” of *TSP* isn’t about a man named Stanley who works at a dull corporate office—at least not exclusively. Instead the *meta*-story (if you will) is about whether you, the player, will provide a personal answer to the ethical quandary of freedom or obedience.

To explore exactly how *TSP* urges players to use their agency to grapple with the ethos of the game, I use Foucault’s (1977) “Docile Bodies” as a framework. Players often inhabit the “bodies” of their

avatars, and therefore their level of control is restricted those avatars' ability to impact the gameworlds in which they operate. Foucault writes that power is inscribed on the body itself, and that there were "three great methods" of manipulating bodies: the imposition of occupations (what a body is allowed to do), the establishment of rhythms (how long a body can do something), and the regulation of cycles (how many times a body will do something) (p. 149). In video games, avatars function similarly—they are only allowed to perform certain actions (often) for a defined amount of time, and they (usually) cannot repeat the same action forever. For example, while a player could theoretically boot up World 1-1 from the original *Super Mario Bros* (*SMB*) (1985) and jump up and down in one place forever, doing this isn't a rebellion against the game's intentions so much as it is an outright refusal to play. While some may argue that the refusal to play a game can still have meaning as an ethical choice, such a play style doesn't really have any connection to the actual content of *SMB* because there is no narrator intruding on players' experience, instructing them, dictating what they are supposed to do. In other words, refusing to play *SMB* doesn't ask players to grapple with any system of rules or values that players are supposed to hold dear.

*TSP*, on the other hand, constantly forces players to reflect on their role in the game world by continuously making decisions about whether to meet the expectations of The Narrator. This is made clear in the game's introductory sequence, where *TSP* exaggerates its Foucauldian manipulation of players to near absurdity. The Narrator describes Stanley's (equally absurd) job at his company:

[Stanley's] job was simple: he sat at his desk in room 427 and he pushed buttons on a keyboard. Orders came to him through a monitor on his desk, telling him which buttons to push, how long to push them, and in what order. This is what [Stanley] did every day of every month of every year, and although others might have considered it soul rending, Stanley relished every moment the orders came in, as though he had been made exactly for this job, and Stanley was happy. (The Stanley Parable 2013)

Not only do we see Foucault's three great methods of manipulating bodies present in this narration through Stanley's job, his reception of job interaction, and the designated timeframe, but we can also see how the game indicates that Stanley may be an analog to the players themselves, who (according to this introductory metaphor) sit in front of screens and

mindlessly obey instructions until they reach a win-state. The fact that this metaphor simplifies the overall experience of playing video games appears intentional—almost as a way of daring players to test the rules of the game. After all, many genre-savvy players would resist the idea that their role in video games is that of a passive consumer, following orders. Scholarship also reflects this position: Alexander Galloway (2006) insists that unlike music or film, which can be passively listened to or watched, video games are primarily based in action, that “to understand video games, then, one needs to understand how action exists in gameplay, with special attention to its many variations and intensities” (p. 3). Marcus Schulzke (2012) also insists on the active role of players, advocating for what he calls a “centrist view” of agency in response to one-sided theories of player agency such as determinism (p. 11). Matthew S.S. Johnson (2018) shares a similar view of players’ active role in video games, writing that “agency is constantly in flux” when it comes to the complex interplay of player, avatar, designer, and game (p. 3). The fact that *TSP* presents players with an incredibly restrictive game design where their actions (supposedly) mean nothing serves to critique the very rules that *TSP* later encourages players to break. In other words, the primary way that the game communicates the meta-story—the story in which players have to reflect on their role as ethical subjects—is by taking away so much of their agency, that there are only two options left to them: follow directions or break the rules. Foucault is useful for better understanding this relationship between player agency and ethos—not just in *TSP*, but in other video games as well.

### “HE ENTERED THE DOOR ON HIS LEFT”: AGENCY AND ETHOS IN THE STANLEY PARABLE

One noteworthy example of *TSP* using player agency to critique its own ethos comes in the form of the Explosion ending. To reach this ending, players must disobey The Narrator when given the choice of whether or not to turn off a mind control machine in Stanley’s office building. Should players disobey him and turn the mind control machine back on, The Narrator scolds the player: “Oh Stanley, you didn’t just activate the controls did you? After being enslaved all these years you go and try and take control of the machine for yourself, is that what you wanted? Control?” (The Stanley Parable 2013). Determined to teach the player a lesson about wanting too much control in the game, The Narrator

activates a bomb in the control room; a large timer on the wall begins counting down, indicating how long players have to disarm it. However, when players attempt to disarm the bomb, The Narrator turns especially hostile, cloyingly asking, “Oh dear me, what’s the matter Stanley? Is it that you have no idea where you are going, or what you’re supposed to be doing right now? Or did you just assume when you saw that timer that something in this room is capable of turning it off?”. Later in this monologue, The Narrator reveals that there is in fact *no possible way* to disarm the bomb, and that players are doomed to die in a fiery explosion no matter what they do. Therefore, as the timer slowly counts down, players are confronted with their own helplessness as The Narrator gleefully watches every moment of the players’ powerlessness, emphasizing how much joy he takes in “see[ing players] made humble” (The Stanley Parable 2013). Part of what makes this commentary such an effective critique of *TSP*’s ethos is that players, attempting to reclaim their agency (by pressing the wrong button), only have it stripped from them when The Narrator sees their greed. In a Foucauldian way, players are limited by the imposition of occupations (they are unable to save themselves), as well as limited by the establishment of rhythms (players are given a time limit). While The Narrator never utters the phrase “docile body,” it’s clear that this subtle manipulation of the player is The Narrator’s intention. Because players made the ethical choice to break free from The Narrator’s control, it is now The Narrator’s job to “humble” the player—to make the player a docile body, complicit in the mechanisms of the game-world. In other words, if the player won’t obey The Narrator by *choice*, then The Narrator will make the player obey by *force*. This restriction of player agency not only punishes players for bending the rules too far, and thinking they could act outside of them without punishment, but also serves as a tool for players to continuously question the overall ethos of the game, and by extension, their role as ethical subjects. Every time The Narrator interrupts players to instruct them on what is supposed to happen, players are given the repeated opportunity to make an ethical choice for themselves.

Nevertheless, not all of *TSP*’s ethical quandaries are at the expense of players. For example, while the Explosion ending makes a commentary on the ethical role of players, the Confusion ending turns this commentary in the opposite direction by focusing on the game’s ability to function as a moral object. To reach the Confusion ending, players must satisfy a litany of narrative prerequisites where they continuously perform disobedient

actions which span multiple resets of the game. Should players satisfy these prerequisites, they will watch *TSP* turn its critique onto itself. When they reach the Confusion ending, players discover an empty room with a large wall. Written on this wall is every action that The Narrator has taken in this iteration of the game (as well as every action he will take in the future). When players discover this wall, The Narrator incredulously asks, “You’re telling me... that’s what this is? It’s all just one giant ending? And we’re supposed to start the game... what... eight, *eight times*? That’s really how all this goes? It’s all... determined?” (The Stanley Parable 2013). Upon realizing that his (perceived) agency is being restricted by an unseen force, The Narrator—like the player—attempts to reclaim control by refusing to do what is expected of him. The Narrator fails, however, because he, too, is restricted in the same Foucauldian way as the players. The wall in the Confusion ending restricts what The Narrator can do by the imposition of occupations (as he can only do what the wall says he can), and he is also restricted by rhythms (because The Narrator is also being timed). The absurdity of the situation is exacerbated by the fact that The Narrator isn’t even a real person, but simply a set of sound files and procedures which are programmed to run in a particular order to give him the illusion of being real—of being a character who could make the ethical choice to rebel if only he “wanted” to. Despite how illusory The Narrator’s rebellion may be, what makes this moment so significant is that—just like in the Explosion ending—agency (or rather, the lack thereof) is the primary tool that is available to critique *TSP*’s ethos. Once The Narrator is made aware that his (supposed) agency is being restricted, he (like players) begins to critique the expectations that he’s being made to meet, as a character in a video game.

*TSP*’s critique of itself is pushed further when players discover The Baby Game. In this portion of *TSP*, players are stripped of nearly all agency and placed into a room where they have one task and one task only: push a big red button over and over again to prevent a baby from crawling into a pit of fire. While players do this, The Narrator insists on the sincere meaning of their actions, as the game he’s created is “all about the desperation and tedium of endlessly confronting the demand of family life” (The Stanley Parable 2013). As players continue to interact with The Baby Game, The Narrator shares his hopes about his new creation, saying that he hopes “the art world will really take notice” of The Baby Game, but that players won’t likely understand its artistic significance until they’ve pressed the red button for “about four hours.” If players

actually commit themselves to pressing this button for four hours, The Narrator periodically cheers the player on, congratulating them for not being concerned with the narrative reward, but with “the art! For the endlessly spiraling pointlessness and despair! Yes, this is what drives your every action! Keep clicking that button! For hope! For freedom! For science! For love! Don’t ever, ever stop!” (The Stanley Parable 2013). Once again, we see players’ agency restricted to a binary, ethical choice—players can either press the button to save the baby or let the baby crawl into the fire pit and die. But this small-level agency stands in direct opposition to The Narrator’s interpretation of the players’ actions. Because players’ agency is so restricted by virtue of what they can do, where they can do it, and for how long, players are continuously forced to ask: are their actions really having as big of an impact as The Narrator says, or are they simply being toyed with? While one could imply that the “choice” of whether to play The Baby Game has no meaning, seeing as The Narrator can simply reset the game any time he finds the players’ actions too bothersome, I maintain that these choices are still choices of ethics. The agency available to players may not have permanent narrative incentives (as the narrative is constantly being reset), but *TSP* does encourage—even expect—that players take issue with its overall system of ethical rules with the only expressive option available to them: making choices. By fashioning player agency as the primary method in which players make ethical decisions about their role in the gameworld, *TSP* emphasizes a direct relationship between players’ ability to make choices, and the overall system of ethics being communicated by the game itself.

“‘FAREWELL STANLEY’, CRIED  
THE NARRATOR”: LIMITATIONS  
AND CONSIDERATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

As this chapter closes, it’s helpful to address some limitations of this research. First, while I’ve argued that *TSP* creates a direct relationship between player agency and the game’s ethos (by having choices be the primary way that players question their own role as ethical subjects), I don’t wish to imply that this relationship is true for all video games. Many video games don’t function in this way at all; in fact, researching how

games ask players to grapple with ethos through something other than player agency could easily be the subject of a future project.

Second, readers who are deeply familiar with *TSP* may notice that I only analyze a small handful of the endings that players can discover. Because of *TSP*'s numerous (nearly 20) endings, covering every possible ending in detail simply falls outside the scope of a single chapter. Additionally, while this chapter was being written, a new expansion for *TSP* was announced—The Stanley Parable: Ultra Deluxe. By the time this chapter is in print, there will (inevitably) be content that it fails to address. Despite these limitations, *TSP* has much to teach us about how player agency and a game's ethos can be put into conversation with one another, and how players can use their agency to make ethical choices about whether they personally want to meet the expectations the game has set forth for them. Moving forward, it may be useful to explore how this relationship is at work in other video games to see what similarities and differences exist.

While skeptical players may scoff at *TSP*'s seemingly ordinary and uninteresting design, prolonged interaction with the game reveals a complex web of negotiations between ethical players and the world of Stanley's office. By using Foucauldian limitations of agency to call attention to its own set of moral and ethical rules, *TSP* demonstrates a nuanced understanding of how agency and ethos can influence one another, and how those varying degrees of influence can fluctuate when players begin to interact with the game. While certain pedagogic handholding has always been an aspect of video games, *TSP* teaches us just how much is possible when video games are designed in such a way where the primary choice for players is not one with moral or narrative implications, but ethical implications.

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# Dromopoeia: Teaching *Ēthopoeia*, Prudence (*Phrōnesis*), and Ethics (Well-Being) with Avatar

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This chapter updates the teaching of ethics and decorum by connecting contemporary multiplayer game environments to rhetoric's Western tradition, particularly by examining avatar construction through the *ēthopoeia* (characterization) exercise found in *progymnasmata* (preliminary exercises) textbooks by Aelius Theon, Hermogenes, Aphthonius the Sophist, Nicolaus the Sophist, and Quintilian. In traditional approaches to rhetorical pedagogy, assigning the *ēthopoeia* exercise guides students toward mastery in inventing an ethos (for particular situations); over time and with sustained practice (for social ecologies), this invented ethos can lead to a situated ethos (Crowley and Hawhee 2004, pp. 412–418). Still, as

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Eric Detweiler (2018) notes, the pedagogical histories of *ēthopoeia* focus on practices of mastering and appropriating the voices and experiences of others, particularly with respect to women’s voices being appropriated by men in the classical, medieval, and Renaissance eras (p. 52). Detweiler proposes that approaching the exercise through the practices of “unmastery” offers an opportunity to “attune [students] to the rhetorical and ethical limits of speaking for and as others” and emphasizing “students’ responsibility to these voices” (p. 52). Building on Detweiler’s work, we propose a method of teaching *ēthopoeia* (an avatar ethic) that further complicates concepts of a stable *selfhood* (practices of individual identity formation) and has the potential to cultivate an ethic of collective well-being (responsibility to others) through participation in social games, virtual worlds, and other online social environments.

Our point of departure comes from Gregory Ulmer (2012), who notes that traditional rhetorical exercises like *ēthopoeia* concern “the management of ‘voice’ in writing” and proposes that teaching the digital “equivalent of ‘voice’ is not just [about] ‘image’ but [about] ‘avatar,’ with the difference being that avatar is an expression you receive, not one that you send” (pp. x–xi). Avatar, like *voice* (concept), is a part of an embodied ethic, one that includes the dimensions of meaning experienced as attitude and persona(lity). Casey Boyle (2016) describes this sort of ethic as a serial practice in which one adopts “a style of engagement, an ethic in developing the capacities for becoming affected by others as much as affecting others” (p. 548). For Ulmer (2011, 2012), the function of this (avatar) ethic is to “understand action from the position of communal well-being” (2011, n.p.) by mediating “between the ‘I’ and ‘We’” (2012, p. 217). Briefly, avatar adds to speech, language, and image the dimension of serial performances designed to cultivate an ethic of collective well-being “as an ongoing series of mediated encounters” (Boyle 2016, p. 534).

Our first task in updating the traditional *progymnasmata* exercises of characterization and personification (*ēthopoeia*, *prosopopoeia*, *eidolopoeia*) is to trace the evolution of the avatar-concept as it has been treated in-game design and game studies. As we demonstrate, while common and popular references to *avatar* often imply a visual representation (object) of an/other self in video games and/or an alter ego (identity) in virtual worlds (Porter 2009, pp. 212–213), many game designers now view *avatar* as an embodied, performative, and collective experience, much in the way Ulmer (2011, 2012) and Boyle (2016) describe an ethic of collective of well-being in an age when digital technologies, media, and

networks are transforming how individuals encounter each other in public (social) spaces. Following this overview, we offer perspectives from a game designer, Celia Pearce (2009), who has adopted the view that *avatar* is best framed not as a representation but as a practice and experience of a persistent relationship (p. 19) that is engaged in, what we would argue, is an ethic of slow circulation (Bradshaw 2018). What we see emerge from the evolution of the term and its use in-game design reflects a shift in how contemporary theorists of rhetoric have come to frame mediated encounters as a social practice of playfulness that disrupts situated and individual practices of well-being (Sicart 2014). Finally, we propose a pedagogical exercise derived from the material covered in previous sections. We call this practice *dromopoeia*, a portmanteau of *dromos* (speed) and *poeia* (poetics), to refer to an exercise in which players practice an ethic of collective well-being that moves beyond the sort of appropriation found in traditional *ēthopoeia* exercises.

### AVATAR, A CONTESTED TERM IN GAMES AND INTERACTIVE STORYTELLING

Part of working with avatars in the classroom is defining the term with students. The word “avatar” originates from the Sanskrit word “*avatara*” which translates to “a god in earthly form” (Banks 2015, para. 1) or “descent” (Waggoner 2009, p. 8)—essentially a manifestation of godhood in the physical world. Casey Hart (2017) offers a basic definition of avatars for the world of video games and interactive media as “the means by which individuals can interact with the game environment” (para. 5). This definition is often coupled with ideas of identification, embodiment, and attachment to a graphical entity that represents the player in a virtual space (Alton 2017; Banks and Bowman 2016; Gazzard 2009; Waggoner 2009).

Historically, there have been many milestones in our development and understanding of the player-avatar relationship. The earliest identifiable player avatar comes from *Spacewar!* (1962), a competitive, two-player space shooter developed by research assistants and former students at MIT (Graetz 1981). In *Spacewar!*, two players are represented by rudimentary spaceships on a CRT (cathode-ray tube) display. The players attempt to destroy each other by maneuvering, shooting, and taking advantage of gravity from a central star in the middle of a two-dimensional star field.

Although *Spacewar!* is significant for breaking ground as an early, functioning video game, Taito's *Basketball* (1974) is notable for the first use of sprites to represent *humanoid* characters.

In the early 1980s, Richard Garriott (1985) used the term "Avatar" to represent his protagonist in *Ultima IV: Quest of the Avatar*. Garriott chose the word after studying "religious texts, parables, and moral philosophy" and because of its implications in terms of a player incarnation in the game world. Origin Systems attempted to copyright the term later, but "avatar" would eventually pass into the parlance of modern computing and gaming to represent a player's "embodiment in [a] computer game" (Critical Path 2016, 1:36).

The term would later see prominent use by Chip Morningstar and F. Randall Farmer (1987) for LucasArts' *Habitat*. *Habitat* is notable for being one of the earliest online attempts at a large, multi-user virtual space, a precursor to modern virtual worlds such as *Second Life* (2003) and massively multiplayer online roleplaying games (MMORPGs) like *World of Warcraft* (2004). Players in *Habitat* designed their avatars as representative embodiments in this virtual world; although expressive, customizable, text-based avatars had already been commonplace in multi-user dungeons (MUDs) since the early 1980s, *Habitat* is significant for being the first game to place user-designed avatars in a "graphical online world" (Olivetti 2015, para. 10).

This concept of a visual, highly customizable avatar in an online world would later be popularized by sci-fi novelist Neal Stephenson (1992) in his influential novel, *Snow Crash*. Stephenson's vision of an avatar as an embodied player object, inextricably linked to a networked, communal platform has been influential in popular culture, but game studies theorists have continued to refine the term in response to emergent technologies, genres, and platforms.

In "The Avatar and The Player: Understanding the Relationship Beyond the Screen," Alison Gazzard (2009) offers a nuanced and expansive definition of an avatar in an attempt to reconcile the differing points of view (first person, third person, etc.) experienced in many video games. Gazzard details four characteristics that all avatars contain: locus (an avatar's place in the gameworld), agency (an avatar's ability to affect the gameworld), empathy (a relationship between the player and their agency within the gameworld), and a player-character (an understanding of what the character is meant to represent) (p. 191). Gazzard concedes that "[n]ot all avatars will have the same levels of each characteristic but to be

an avatar, they will be constructed of all these qualities” (p. 191), which of course broadens the definition of avatar considerably, but it is particularly useful in its expansiveness. Specifically, Gazzard makes allowances for all manner of points of view or “altered positions” (p. 192), even in games where little or no visual representation of an avatar is displayed. By Gazzard’s definition, a simple screen cursor in an adventure game or the first-person view of a character’s hands or armament (such as in the Call of Duty series) could indeed be an avatar. Yet with such a broad definition, what *wouldn’t* qualify as one?

Zach Waggoner (2009) attempts to define a “true avatar” (p. 12) by referring to Athomas Goldberg’s distinction between “avatars” and “agents” (p. 9). To refine these two concepts, Waggoner posits a difference between a graphical avatar that a player may embody—and indeed identify with—versus an agent that exists merely as an “on-screen embodiment of semiautonomous software” (p. 9) serving only as an interface apparatus for the user. Waggoner draws this line based upon the player’s ability to customize, create, and evolve the visual embodiment, using player-constructed characters in games such as *Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* (2006) and *Fallout 3* (2008) as examples of true avatars, and labeling static characters such as Pac-Man, Mario, Frogger, and Sonic the Hedgehog as agents (pp. 9–10).

As Waggoner (2009) notes, creativity and customization are often important components of player embodiment in the game world. Game designers have a great degree of control over what customization options are offered to players and this can inherently be both a barrier and a facilitator for inclusivity. Nintendo’s *Animal Crossing: New Horizon* (2020) typifies this issue with players noting the lack of “Black hair options” for player avatars (May 2020). Without an ability to mod their avatar’s hair, players have instead lobbied Nintendo directly with an online petition to add more inclusive hairstyle options. Similarly, Robbie Fordyce et al. (2018) describe how Ubisoft’s 2017 release, *South Park: The Fractured but Whole*, perpetuates white privilege through their avatar options, writing: “The player is asked to choose a skin color for their avatar using a slider, which goes from white to shades of brown to black. The default setting is white, and as the slider is moved away from the white default toward a black avatar choice, the game’s difficulty increases from “easy” to “very difficult” (p. 232). On the other hand, the designers of *The Sims 4* (2014) responded to limited gender options by coordinating with GLAAD to develop a free gender customization update for the title. The

result was a multi-tiered system of gender customization options that “reflected choices a transgender player might want to make when creating Sims” (Schmider 2016).

Although attempts to drill down into the nature of an avatar are useful, Waggoner’s (2009) definition seems too limiting and clearly focused on specific, open-world roleplaying games. Creativity and customization can indeed enhance a player’s bond to an individual avatar—but it’s only one of many aspects that influence the avatar-player relationship. Moreover, Waggoner’s definition doesn’t consider how taking on the role of an established, static character might heavily influence this relationship regardless of customization.

As an example: Waggoner (2009) explicitly defines Lara Croft of the *Tomb Raider* series as an agent, yet Chris Alton (2017) describes how understanding Croft’s unique character, backstory, and history may influence a player’s embodiment and synthesis in the game. Alton moves us away from avatars as interface apparatus or graphical representation and toward a focus on the performative elements of taking on a character through “virtual embodiment” (p. 215). Alton defines this virtual embodiment as “the notion that a player can inhabit these avatars on a phenomenological level” (p. 215), exploring the idea of “body/mind synthesis” (p. 222) between player and avatar. This concept prompts important questions in-game studies and for our students in the classroom. For the purpose of this essay, the question that we aim to answer is how we might cultivate what Phill Alexander (2017) calls *epiphany*, an active form of knowledge that collects “wisdom on-hand when something unexpected pops up” (p. 7).

Alton (2017) describes myriad ways that *Tomb Raider*’s manual and box art prime the player to take on the role of Lara Croft by providing information about her character (her previous history, abilities, and background) (p. 218). Alton further details how Croft, as a character, remains a distinct entity even during the synthesis process, providing several examples through character animations that occur while the player is not actively controlling the avatar [such as “Croft dusting herself off and kicking dirt from her heels” (p. 218)]. The implication here is that game designers are not simply handing the player an avatar as an interface apparatus or a representational object, but rather preparing the player for a “player/avatar relationship [that] can instead be identified with a modified form of theatrical performance” (p. 224).

Once we understand the importance of performance and roleplaying to many aspects of the player-avatar relationship, we can start to recognize the phenomenological events associated with a high level of player-avatar synthesis. Quoting Diane Carr, Alton (2017) notes some common experiences for highly embodied players such as when a player “flinch[es] when an avatar bangs its head ... [or] recoil[s] when an avatar plunges over a cliff” (p. 224). With this phenomenon in mind, it’s interesting to consider not only how the player influences the avatar, but also how the avatar influences the player.

Nicholas Merola and Jorge Pena (2010) explore this concept by considering what effect avatar appearance may have on player behavior in a social game environment. They present avatars as “virtual clothing” (p. 4) and liken the experience to “donning a Halloween costume ... the way one appears to outsiders is different, the ability to be personally identified is hindered, and, as a result of a hidden identity and wearing the costume itself, behavior changes” (p. 9). Using the Metal Gear Solid series as an example, Merola and Pena describe that when players adopt the role of the titular character Solid Snake, a stealth operative in a specialized sneaking suit, they may feel influenced to behave in a sneaky manner and “skulk around” (p. 4). They further suggest that adopting other avatars with distinct appearances, backgrounds, and physical mannerisms may inform “how we should behave ... [by] decod[ing] the avatar [and] connecting its cues to our broader social knowledge” (p. 4). With this in mind, we can see that avatars can be a valuable tool for exploring rhetorical ethics.

The lesson we learn from these scholars is the importance of having a working definition of *avatar* to guide students toward understanding the responsibilities one has to collective well-being. With a definition in place, perhaps constructed with or by students, we complicate that definition by having students engage in the experience playing *with* (not *as*) avatar to develop greater capacities for ethical (and prudent) action.

### AN AVATAR ETHIC: THE CASE OF CELIA PEARCE AND ARTEMESIA

This history of *avatar* has led game designers to increasingly emphasize the ethical dimensions of the social environments they create as experiments in what Miguel Sicart (2014) calls playfulness’s role in disrupting (unmastering) and revealing “the seams of behaviors, technologies, or

situations that we take for granted” (p. 29). Shedding *avatar* of its associations as a “representation” of an individual (avatar-as-object) emphasizes the embodied practices experienced as both individual and collective action: the player communes with avatar, joining in a collective experience with avatar while maintaining a sense of selfhood. Take, for instance, how Pearce (2009) describes her fluid and ongoing encounter(s) with Artemesia, her adopted in-game avatar:

When I log off these worlds—when I untransform, or retransform, from Artemesia to Celia—Artemesia pops off the screen. [...] The real world of Celia haunts the virtual Artemesias, and vice versa. Even when Artemesia rests, when *all* of her selves are at rest, asleep somewhere, nowhere, but present in memory and impression, dormant, asleep, in a dream state. Perhaps my life as Artemesia is contained within Celia’s dream, or vice versa.

Even so, I, as Artemesia am also present to others when I am not in-world. I am in their memories, remembered, referred to, imagined; thus, in some sense, I remain “real,” even when I am not present, for those who have seen and played with me online. (pp. 216–217)

We find in this description the rhetorical and ethical limits and seams of the relationship among the player (individual) and avatar (collective) relationship. Pearce does not speak for or as Artemesia, just as Artemesia does not speak for or as Pearce; rather, both are engaged in an ongoing series of mediated encounters. Pearce and Artemesia teach us that an avatar ethic is one that emerges from these series of mediated encounters, building our capacities for becoming affected and affecting. We learn that an avatar ethic moves us beyond the traditional aims and focus of the *progymnasmata* and *ēthopoeia* (mastery and appropriation).

The relationship between Pearce (2009) and Artemesia serves as a microcosm of a general avatar ethic characterized not by the appropriation of an/other voice but the adoption of an attitude, a state of mind (e.g., playfulness; Sicart 2014) of collective well-being, which may sometimes call for disruptive encounters with the limits and seams of those attitudes in the pursuit of collective well-being. As Pearce (2009) puts it, to encounter one’s avatar in the way she encounters Artemesia teaches us how to “hold multiple identities both within ourselves and in our conceptions of each other” (p. 217). This relationship is an ongoing series of encounters in and out of the game between the individual self and the



collective avatar. Like Pearce, when we avatar, we go beyond the limits of “self” to understand action as a part of collective action.

The ways in which Pearce (2009) and Artemesia move from “self” (representation) to avatar (collective action) and back again offer us opportunities to reconsider how we and students understand both work (writing) and play (performance) as engaging in two different styles of rhetorical ethics and decision making practices. In the former (self, mastery, traditional *ēthopoeia*), we have a situated event characterized by an expedient understanding of another’s voice (an individual); in the latter, we have an ecological series of events (collective, unmastery, digital *ēthopoeia*) characterized by a persistent sense of an ethic of co-performance. One way to consider the different style of rhetorical ethics is in how Jonathan L. Bradshaw (2018) describes the differences between two styles of civic engagement: the viral or expedient and the slow, “persistent rhetorical effort to maintain a presence” (p. 485) through a collective well-being. They write,

As two differing (although not necessarily opposed) rhetorical ethics, they drive different types of rhetorical decision making. The *viral circulation* model privileges very visible “events” with high impact as its desired effect. The *slow circulation* model calls us to attend to the persistence of rhetorical elements over time, arguing that this persistence is just as culturally relevant to the work of rhetors as are their transformations in public discourse. (p. 481)

Pearce and Artemesia present an example of this shift, demonstrating that an avatar ethic is persistent, taking account of a series of encounters (slow circulation, long view) that cross in- and out-of-game experiences rather than a situated event (viral circulation, short view) that we can learn to master through repetition (eventually becoming little more than a habit). As Bradshaw (2018) puts it, slow circulation “is less about the production of individual texts and more about assemblages of texts and discourses [as a] *strategy for civic intervention*” that is less susceptible to “remixing and negative appropriation” (p. 485). If “self” functions at the level of creating an individual text/voice, avatar functions at the level of an assemblage of encounters and co-performances through which we begin to learn responsibility for other voices and avatars.

Updating traditional *ēthopoeia* exercises begins by asking students not to write an essay or speech in, with, or through another voice but to

develop a capacity for understanding how performative encounters with avatars demonstrate an ethic of collective action and well-being—for ourselves, our avatars, our civic communities, and other social, cultural, and political institutions. The practices we address above are exercises in *dromopoeia*. Drawing from Paul Virilio’s (Armitage and Virilio 2000) neologism *dromosphere* (“the logic of speed” opened up by digital technologies and instant communication), *dromopoeia* exercises call on students to take detailed accounts of their goals and choices during their engagement and performance with avatars in their immediate rhetorical contexts, learning how those goals and choices persist across time (past, present, and future). In a *dromopoeia* exercise, the task is not to master a voice (one’s own or others’), but to participate in the guiding scene and method of the persistent dynamic in the “*player with avatar*” (Ulmer 2011) relationship. Through these kinds of exercises, we can teach students (player avatars, individuals, and collectives) the ethic(s) we embody in the style of engagement we bring to a particular situation, all while drawing on past experience to make a prudent decision (*phrōnesis*). *Dromopoeia* exercises emphasize active participation and engagement rather than appropriation and mastery. The styles of engagement we bring to these exercises serve as relays for cultivating our capacity for contributing to our collective well-being and our individual roles in and responsibility for cultivating these capacities in our communities. A *dromopoeia* is an exercise that invites students to enter the *dromosphere* in order to experience a sense of collective well-being through the practices of avatar.

### TEACHING *DROMOPOEIA* WITH AVATAR

With this complex understanding of avatar, we propose an example, multi-part unit designed to foster in students the affective domains of avatar and the capacities for practicing *dromopoeia*. Our first task is to present a version of the complex histories and theoretical treatments of avatar, the goal being to present *avatar* as something other than a representation of a player—not a second self, but a character and space with whom we engage in collective action. To emphasize the dimension of community embodied in *avatar*, we ask students to study two or three cinematic treatments of *avatar* and reflect on the experiences of the characters as though they were in place (a version of *ēthopoeia*). Finally, we

end with an active exercise in which students experience community in an online world.

In the “Histories and Theories” section of the unit, students are first introduced to the concept of *ēthopoeia* with an excerpt from Sharon Crowley and Debra Hawhee’s (2004) *Ancient Rhetorics for Contemporary Students*. Using this framework, we ask students to begin thinking through the process of creating an avatar as an independent being, not as a representation of the student/player. We might prompt students into reflective thinking by asking them a general question such as, “What ethical considerations must you consider when creating a new being and/or community?” As a class, we collectively come up with a tentative list of ethical criteria that we all must consider when we reach the final section of the course. Over the next three class meetings, we assign one or two texts to further refine our list of ethical considerations. For instance, we might assign the following texts:

- Julian Dibbell (1998) “A Rape in Cyberspace”
- Celia Pearce (2009) “Being Artemesia: My Life as an Avatar” in *Communities of Play*
- Katherine Isbister (2017) “Social Play: Designing for Multiplayer Emotions” in *How Emotions Move Us*
- Tracy Fullerton (2014) “Developing a Reflective Design Process”
- Gregory Ulmer (2011) “Avatar Emergency”
- Zach Waggoner (2009). *My Avatar, My Self*.

At the conclusion of this unit, students write a statement addressing their individual approach to avatar design. The statement may either explain why a student agrees with the class-composed list of ethical considerations, why a student disagrees with the list, or something else entirely. The list is not prescriptive; rather, it serves as a starting point for students to examine their own values (*ethics*) in- and out-of-game.

The second section of this course unit presents students with two or three cinematic treatments of *avatar*. For instance, we might begin by showing students *Wreck-It Ralph* (2012), *Ready Player One* (2018), and *Avatar* (2009). *Wreck-It Ralph* offers students an opportunity to further reflect on the lives of characters when a single-player game is turned off, *Ready Player One* on the virtual-world communities that players

construct with one another, and *Avatar* on the possibility of transferring one's consciousness into a new community. *Avatar* is a particularly useful example as it connects to the readings in the previous unit and demonstrates the complex process of learning and acculturating to an ethic of collective well-being while maintaining a sense of an individual self. Jake Sully, the protagonist, showcases the process through which we experience an ethic of collective well-being. We ask students to reflect on Jake's experience from their own individual positions: "What does Jake Sully's experience of transferring his individual human consciousness to a Na'vi body teach you about the responsibilities we the ethics of collective well-being (e.g., justice)?"

In the final section of this unit, we ask students to develop a character that embodies a particular ethic that supports collective well-being and relationship with a community. Using a voxel-based sandbox game such as Mojang's *Minecraft* (2011), we offer students a space to engage in developing this avatar ethic. The discussion of ethics could begin even as the instructor sets up the dedicated server. Students can collaborate, deciding what world they want to play in by employing the various server properties which decide difficulty, game mode (creative, survival, adventure), seeds, world size, etc. Even these seemingly innocuous settings can branch out into discussions of collective values and ethical actions.

Next, students start developing their avatar appearance (through pre-generated skins and mods) before composing detailed character backstories offline. Once online, students engage in a communal activity such as building a significant shared structure (a village, house, etc.) before logging off to reflect through reflective writing exercises on their avatar's life while they are away. A dedicated *Minecraft* server (which may be hosted with Mojang, the *Minecraft* development company, using Minecraft Realms) allows for asynchronous play, so that students can freely enter and leave the world—transitioning their consciousness from the avatar to the real world—much like Pearce's (2009) experience with Artemesia or Jake Sully with the Na'vi. Through inter-player/avatar interaction, students begin to develop a system of conduct that they feel is appropriate (ethical) for the world they're developing in *Minecraft*. Questions such as "What behaviors are best for me, as a player?", "What behaviors are best for my avatar/for other avatars?", and "How might I foster in my collectives the capacity for an avatar-ethic?" can be starting points for further inquiry, complex analysis, and experiential learning.

These questions are not meant to be *answered* prescriptively, but to be *experienced* as a relationship in play.

As students move through each section of this unit, they should be prompted to reflect on and discuss their goals and choices with the rest of the class both informally and formally. Collective reflection on individual decisions and approaches to avatar design can reveal unknown (and known) biases, as well as focus attention on the game design process, particularly with respect to the options available to players designing avatars and how those options only allow for certain kinds of player-avatar relationships. Building on these exercises, we begin to ask students to consider how other texts, communities, institutions, and cultures construct barriers for inclusivity, and to develop methods to interrogate and modify those barriers. Most importantly, the collective reflections on individual decisions and choices offer students opportunities to revisit those choices, make adjustments to their existing perspectives, and come to greater awareness about how individual action contributes to or detracts from collective well-being. Such a reflective process has the potential to demonstrate to students that well-being emerges from a series of ongoing events and performances through mediated encounters.

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# This Isn't Supposed to Be Fun: Using Game-Based Writing Projects as a Form of Pragmatic Ethical Inquiry in the Composition Classroom

*Matthew Kelly*

## DEWEY'S PRAGMATIC ETHICS

Throughout his philosophical works, John Dewey rejected a dogmatic understanding of ethics that attempts to prescribe ideal notions of what is “good” to difficult, real-world scenarios. Instead, Dewey believed ethics to be historically contingent and situational insofar as humans exist as inherently social beings conditioned to act and react through cultural practices or traditions. Dewey (1980) writes that “life goes on in an environment; not merely *in* it but because of it, through interaction with it. [...] The career and destiny of a living being are bound up with its interchanges with its environment, not externally but in the most intimate

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way” (p. 13).<sup>1</sup> It is only through personal experiences with our historical circumstances and social scenarios that we are taught to take up culturally inscribed habits and thought processes (Dewey 2015, p. 294). By extension, collective value systems are an aggregation of the habits and thought processes that emerge in response to a particular environment; culturally specific conceptions of proper etiquette (even the symbolic significance of certain foods) are all vertical slices of value systems that seek to teach individuals how to properly act, react, and think amid specific socio-historical contexts. In teaching individuals how to respond in these contexts, collective value systems maintain a certain degree of cultural stability amid ever-shifting material conditions.

A primary concern for Dewey was that as historical circumstances change, the value systems that were originally in dialogue with these circumstances fail to adapt. This, in turn, leaves us in a position where our values (and the habituated methods of acting/reacting/thinking they cultivate) might be out of sync with the real-world scenarios surrounding us. Hence, it is imperative that we continually reflect upon the evolution of our own value systems to ensure that no dissonance exists between the criteria we use to interpret the world and the actual nature of the situations we are in. Refining and updating our value systems in accordance with historical developments demand a method of inquiry that is scientific in nature—a method of inquiry that emphasizes the ability to examine concrete scenarios for the sake of open-ended speculation and deliberation regarding how/why socio-historical conditions promote or prohibit individual actions. Examining our value systems by emphasizing speculation, deliberation, and analysis of concrete scenarios (as opposed to grand gestures toward metaphysical ideals) constitutes Dewey’s pragmatic approach to ethical inquiry; ethical inquiry does not mean ruminating on what “ought” to be done amid problematic or morally gray situations. Instead, ethical inquiry is an instrument for dissecting the complex nexus of social, cultural, and material variables that influence collective value systems, then analyzing how said value systems imbue individuals with culturally contingent ways of acting or thinking.

One consequence of Dewey’s argument is that ethical inquiry requires us to sympathetically (rather than correctively) engage those who hold differing worldviews. Kalle Puolakka (2014) clarifies the sympathetic underpinnings of Dewey’s theories, explaining how ethical inquiry “requires a grasp of the other’s situation and *how things look to a person in such a situation* [emphasis added]” (para. 23). In other words, we should

seek to understand how collective value systems influence an individual's perception of their surroundings and instill a form of cultural logic that can be used to justify one's actions. This means that the *relationship between external circumstances and internal perception* should operate as our primary focus when conducting ethical investigations. Hence, Deweyan ethical inquiry is a mode of analysis that straddles the material and psychological dimensions of collective value systems. On the one hand, ethical inquiry requires us to diagnose the material and historically specific circumstances that shape, influence, and reinforce collective value systems. On the other hand, this method of analysis encourages us to speculate how value systems implicitly or explicitly teach individuals to inhabit a particular worldview that can be used to rationalize their actions and interpretations of their surroundings.

Scholars have begun exploring the connection between Dewey's ideas and video games. However, this research tends to focus on applications of Dewey's aesthetic theory to first-hand gameplay experiences (Bratkowski 2010; Deen 2011) or the use of game-based educational practices as a means of reinforcing Dewey's argument about the importance of applied learning in modern institutions (Waddington 2015; Chee 2014). Granted, many of the same themes inherent to Dewey's pragmatic ethics resonate with his concurrent theories about aesthetic experience and progressive education, but sustained examinations that focus specifically on the connection between Dewey's ethical framework and video games are still in their nascent stages.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, this examination will demonstrate how the process of analyzing and designing video games can offer one outlet for further evolving the unique material and psychological elements of Dewey's pragmatic ethics. In doing so, this examination will reveal how video games are not just potential objects of examination for applying Dewey's ideas but can function as vehicles for undertaking innovative forms of ethical inquiry.

To achieve these goals, I will first examine the ways in which games can represent and critique socially inscribed value systems via their rulesets and gameplay mechanics. Then, I explain why the imagined experiences of prospective players are an equally important component that must be considered when articulating the critical value of video games. Analyzing video games requires us to speculate how their structural features create experiences that condition players to act, react, and think in ways conducive to reinforcing an underlying argument. Balancing the structural features of video games with the speculative experiences of

potential players resonates with the unique material-psychological dimensions of Dewey's pragmatic ethics; in much the same way that ethical inquiry investigates how material historical circumstances influence value systems that condition individuals into particular ways of acting/thinking, analyzing video games encourages us to explore how their structural features (which can represent socially inscribed value systems) habituate players into undertaking certain actions and thought processes. I conclude by applying these ideas to my own teaching experiences wherein students were tasked with designing critical video games that explored contentious, real-world issues. In analyzing a student-designed video game, I illustrate how game-based writing assignments can encourage students to analyze the cultural logic and socio-historical influences underlying problematic issues without resorting to over-simplifications or universal claims about right versus wrong. To begin, I discuss the connection between video games and real-world value systems.

### VIDEO GAMES, RULESETS, AND IMAGINED PLAYERS

Many critical game scholars have examined how video games reflect the socially contingent value systems underlying contemporary economic, political, and cultural practices via their rulesets and gameplay mechanics (Kirkpatrick 2013; Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009; Grimes and Feenberg 2009). From a structural perspective, video games exist as an intricate collection of rule-based procedures that influence player behavior by encouraging some actions and outcomes at the expense of others (Bogost 2007). As Alexander Galloway (2006) argues, the rule-based nature of video games can “render social realities into playable form” in the sense that the logic which structures a game's ruleset can mimic or mirror the cultural logic that governs contemporary practices (p. 17). Video games can translate abstract value systems which privilege certain ways of thinking or acting into a set of rules that prioritize key actions or objectives in a virtual gamespace. By extension, the experience of navigating a virtual gamespace and manipulating rulesets in order to achieve in-game goals can function as an allegory for navigating and manipulating the value systems that are represented by a game's mechanics (Yee 2014). This is not to say that video games simply reaffirm or reify contemporary value systems without critical reflection. Quite the opposite, as Ian Bogost (2008) argues that video games can “expose and explain the hidden ways of thinking that often drive social, political, or cultural behavior” (p. 128)

by using virtual gamespaces to simulate the unintended or unforeseen consequences of participating within a given ideological paradigm. Hence, the interactive, rule-based dimensions of video games can both embody *and* critique the overlooked or unexamined value systems underlying real-world practices.

While Bogost (2007), Galloway (2006), and others demonstrate how video games' rulesets enable us to critically engage with their surrounding historical conditions, one risk of over-emphasizing games' structural features is the potential instrumentalization of players: if we locate a game's critical significance only in its mechanics, then the player is simply an instrument whose role is to initiate a set of predetermined processes in order to uncover the larger argument hidden within a given set of rules (Sicart 2011). Richard Colby (2013) tempers this risk by clarifying how frameworks which focus on video games' rule-based nature necessarily require a speculative imagining of player experiences. Procedural approaches to games, according to Colby, envision the player-audience as "a mental construct and not an actual responsive audience" (p. 214). This means that game mechanics must be created and analyzed in relation to how an imagined player could potentially interact with their structural features in such a way that enacts, supports, or even complicates the larger argument being exhibited through a virtual gamespace (while still recognizing that these interactions are non-determinate and speculative in nature). Eric Zimmerman (2009) further elaborates on the relationship between open-ended player experiences and the affordances created by game mechanics. Speaking from the perspective of a game designer, Zimmerman characterizes the act of creating an interactive game as a

process by which a designer creates a context, to be encountered by a participant, from which meaning emerges. [...] As a game unfolds through play, metaplay, and transformative play, unexpected things happen, patterns that are impossible to completely predict. In this way, design is not about the creation of a fixed object. It is about creating a set of possibilities. (pp. 28–29)

Gameplay mechanics are capable of habituating players into undertaking unique thought processes or embodied actions that allow them to participate in meaning-making practices within virtual gamespaces (Holmes 2017). In "creating a set of possibilities" for meaning-making to emerge, then, game designers are put in a position where they must speculate how

players might manipulate flexible rulesets while simultaneously considering how gameplay mechanics might condition players into acting or thinking in deliberate ways.

These authors demonstrate how the critical and artistic integrity of video games lie in the interaction between imagined player experiences and structural features which create the conditions for meaning-making practices to emerge. Consequently, analyzing a game requires us to couple a design-focused perspective (i.e., understanding how a game's rulesets re-envision real-world value systems as a set of functional mechanics) with a player-focused perspective (i.e., speculating how a game's rulesets can potentially manipulate player experiences in such a way that channels their actions toward new meaning-making practices). We begin to see parallels between dominant trends in video game scholarship and the twofold material/psychological features of Dewey's pragmatic ethical inquiry. From a material perspective, video games can translate abstract value systems into a set of mechanics that condition players to respond to gameplay scenarios in deliberate ways just as Dewey claims socially inscribed value systems teach individuals how to rationalize their interpretations of, and reactions to, their surroundings. From a psychological perspective, unpacking the critical argument within a game requires us to speculate how gameplay scenarios encourage players to inhabit new perspectives which allow them to derive significance from their in-game actions and justify the strategies they use for achieving in-game goals. Similarly, Deweyan ethics requires us to create a speculative connection to others when exploring how collective value systems fundamentally shape the logic individuals use to rationalize their worldviews (worldviews that may be radically different from our own). Hence, the process of crafting and analyzing an interactive digital game can mirror the same features of Dewey's ethical inquiry, resulting in a similar sympathetic connection to others while remaining cognizant of the material conditions and first-hand experiences that imbue individuals with socially contingent value systems.

Identifying parallels between Dewey's claims and contemporary game scholarship does not mean that all game creators need to frame their design practices through a discourse of ethics nor must all games necessarily tackle difficult, real-world issues in order to have critical value. Instead, I am proposing that video games, as interactive media that fundamentally require player participation, can undertake a Deweyan ethical inquiry insofar as the process of designing and analyzing games invites us to consider how gameplay experiences, mechanics, and scenarios

can instill value systems in players. Below, by analyzing a student-designed game created in a writing seminar, I demonstrate how video games can function as a medium for ethical inquiry. I also illustrate how the process of crafting gameplay experiences for prospective players encourages students to examine and critique the material, social, and psychological dimensions of real-world issues in a nuanced, complex manner.

### CRITICAL SYMPATHY

During 2015–2016, I designed and taught several upper-divisional critical writing seminars dedicated to video game studies and the use of games to critique real-world issues. For their final project, small groups of students were tasked with creating their own video game that engaged a current issue or event they found important. After deciding on their game's topic, students composed a Design Portfolio, which was a collaboratively written document that explained the player experiences they were hoping to elicit via their gameplay mechanics and the underlying argument these games were trying to express. These Design Portfolios were not evaluated based on “fun” or “streamlined” rules, but rather how well students rationalized the interrelation between their game mechanics, the potential experiences of other players, and the ways in which intended gameplay scenarios could provide others with a nuanced understanding of their game's main topic.

One student group wanted to create a game that critiqued the rise of anti-immigrant rhetoric emerging throughout the American and European political landscape at the time.<sup>3</sup> They eventually agreed to design their game, entitled *Them*, as a twin-stick shooter where players would take control of a blue square and either attack or avoid differently colored squares while navigating procedurally generated dungeons. The game was designed to include an adaptive AI system that would cause other squares to respond to player actions, such as increasing their overall aggression if they are continually attacked. These students also added a novel-yet- nefarious feature: fellow blue squares would deliberately lie to players and tell them that all differently colored squares were violent (even though some squares, regardless of color, would be docile until assaulted). This feature could lead to players unknowingly contributing to misleading or misguided impressions about the titular “them” (meaning, those deemed different or unfamiliar). In their Design Portfolio, students rationalized these decisions by stating that people often develop “preconceptions

based on something they experience or hear. Over time it may become justification for using that preconception in every instance. To that person their preconception is not wrong because they feel like there is evidence to prove their thoughts.” In short, the combination of misleading advice given by blue squares and their game’s adaptive AI system would demonstrate how easily we rationalize and validate a particular worldview (i.e., some squares are inherently dangerous) when given a limited set of biased information and partial experiences.

In designing *Them*, students needed to balance the structural features of the game with a critical awareness of how players would perceive and navigate an interactive gamespace. More specifically, students speculated how they could create scenarios wherein the player would be encouraged (but not forced) to interpret the advice of blue squares as objective and neutral. In discussing the opening levels, students described how blue squares would inform players about the basic controls of the game (i.e., which buttons are used to move, shoot, and interact with objects). Eventually, a blue square would tell the player that red squares are dangerous and should be shot before they have a chance to attack. Students explained that having blue squares offer objective instructions for the game’s controls and false information about other squares was designed to show how “preconceived notions are as much implanted by the people around us and who we choose to believe in. The player would not think of the red square on level 1 a threat until the blue square tells them to.” Considering scenarios that would make the player amenable to the advice given by blue squares allowed these students to think of the larger circumstances that may lead someone to passively receive information without further investigation into its validity. Students anticipated players trusting blue squares, seeing as these non-player characters (NPCs) would begin by helping players navigate the virtual gamespace, thereby establishing a level of trust and confidence in these NPCs as outlets for objective information. Players would be conditioned to overlook this manipulative sleight-of-hand, thereby revealing how easily we can be misled when presented with false information that disguises itself as objective fact.

Explaining and rationalizing the manipulative dimensions of *Them* reveals how these students were undertaking a Deweyan form of ethical inquiry in multifaceted ways. In detailing how a player might be led to draw false conclusions about the violent nature of red squares, students were using the relationship between material circumstances (i.e., a set

of dynamic mechanics which structure a virtual gamespace) and a player's psychological process of navigating said circumstances to explore the dangerous precedents set by coupling misleading information with confirmation bias. In doing so, students forged a sympathetic engagement with potential players because they were envisioning how gameplay situations might appear to another person and how player input could be used to actively illustrate the underlying argument of *Them*. This sympathetic connection to prospective players was further reinforced when students speculated how players themselves would create their own interpretations of the significance underlying their gameplay decisions which could lead them to actively participate in discriminatory practices. For example, they noted that fellow blue squares would also tell the player that green squares are violent. Attacking non-violent green squares would cause them to retaliate, and

[f]rom this experience [the player] may form a preconception that all green squares are hostile and the next time they encounter the green squares they may shoot all of them first. This is our narrative in action, deep prejudices forming from singular experiences that are then applied to the whole.

Just as Dewey was skeptical of super-imposing a value system onto problematic scenarios independent of historical or cultural context, these students critiqued the process of applying singular experiences to the "whole." My students' ethical inquiry was enacted and explored through the actions or reactions of players as they traversed the virtual gamespace; in "creating a set of possibilities" for players (to echo Zimmerman's [2009] language), students were able to use the gameplay experiences of another person as a means of investigating the circumstances and scenarios that implicitly teach individuals how to act, react, and think in discriminatory ways. Students used gameplay scenarios to diagnose the socio-cultural circumstances that bolster a xenophobic value system as they demonstrated how burying highly biased sentiments within objective information can shape the perspectives of individuals. Furthermore, students illustrated how value systems can teach players to use cultural logic to rationalize their actions and perceptions of the world (i.e., differently colored squares are supposedly dangerous and, by extension, should be met with force at first sight). Thus, the sympathetic connection students forged with potential players was not simply used to design captivating gameplay scenarios or refine the underlying mechanics



of *Them*. This sympathetic connection was also the vehicle through which students simultaneously interrogated the external circumstances that support corrosive forms of real-world prejudice and analyzed the internal reflections or experiences of individuals who are positioned within these circumstances.

Despite the intricacies of this game's mechanics, an ongoing issue throughout this group's design process was considering how players would come to realize they were being misled by other blue squares. They needed to ensure that players would be capable of being manipulated in subtle ways *and* eventually recognize the impact of these manipulations as the game progresses. This group came up with the idea that, at a point late in the game, the player will begin "to encounter more and more aggressors that look like him or herself: other blue squares. These encounters force the player to rethink their ideas of what characters can/cannot be trusted." The hope was that the sudden betrayal by other blue squares would encourage players to question the legitimacy of previous, and most likely false, claims made by these supposed allies in earlier levels. Students discussed this late-game twist during an end-of-semester presentation. However, several classmates were concerned that players might simply think that all squares are now violent as opposed to considering a larger argument about preconceived notions and personal biases.<sup>4</sup> After a brainstorming session, this group determined that players would need to escape a collection of once-friendly blue squares and stumble upon a hidden camp filled with squares of all colors. These squares would provide statistics on the number of non-violent squares which had been killed by the player to this point. If the player had been particularly aggressive, these squares would attack players and eventually chase them out of the encampment.

Designing the late-game stages of *Them* in this way allowed players to acknowledge the cumulative impact of their violent tendencies and would reinforce "the idea that the actions that individuals take in response to his or her judgments do, in fact, have an impact on society at large." That is to say, students wanted to move beyond simply showing players how easily they can be manipulated by misleading information or illustrating how other individuals might rationalize their participation in systems of discrimination. Instead, they sought to demonstrate the dangerous, self-fulfilling prophecy wherein misguided fears about the threat of violence could cause people to inadvertently elicit aggression. The final stages of *Them* culminated in players being encouraged to reconsider their own

biases while speculating how other people may unintentionally support the very actions the game critiqued. Players themselves could then also undertake the ethical inquiry exhibited by the game's designers.

Although my class did not read scholarship that discussed race in video games, *Them* resonates with criticism which explores how gameplay experiences might potentially reinforce prejudices against marginal/minority communities. As Erin Ash (2016) notes in her review of scholarship surrounding racial representation in virtual gamespaces, when players take control of an avatar with discernible racial features they may “infer appropriate behavior through the use of stereotypes about the avatar’s identity and social group” (p. 425). This means that playing as a racialized avatar or interacting with racialized NPCs can potentially lead individuals to unconsciously anticipate and perform stereotypical traits associated with an ethnic group (Dill and Burgess 2012; Groom et al. 2009). Furthermore, embracing stereotypes in a virtual gamespace can entrench cultural prejudices because players may be rewarded for proliferating or presuming caricatured traits. If a player acts violently because their avatar belongs to a social group that is deemed violent by popular culture (or if a player treats NPCs as a threat because they belong to a community that is viewed as dangerous), then gameplay successes stemming from a player’s actions could potentially be used to justify stereotypical characterizations. *Them* was unique insofar as it avoided attributing racial features to the player’s avatar and NPCs in order to exploit the tendency to “infer appropriate behavior” when interacting with those seen as different. In using simple squares to represent in-game characters, gameplay scenarios would steer players’ attention toward the internal psychological processes through which prejudices and confirmation biases are cultivated rather than focusing on particular prejudices toward specific racial or ethnic groups. Limiting the ability for players to project real-world presumptions or prejudices upon their avatar and NPCs allowed students to highlight how latent biases can cause supposedly neutral individuals to act in such a way that supports the perpetuation of negative stereotypes. Hence, *Them* illustrates the ways in which game-based writing projects can respond to issues, problems, or trends diagnosed by contemporary scholarship while also providing students outlets for undertaking new forms of critical ethical inquiry.

## ACKNOWLEDGING VULNERABILITY

As discussed in the introduction of this examination, Deweyan ethics seeks to diagnose the socio-historical circumstances that influence collective value systems while refusing to prescribe a streamlined, one-size-fits-all method for remedying problematic situations. Such ethical inquiry attempts to spur ongoing deliberation about how we might continue to revise our value systems in accordance with historical progress. Despite the critical emphasis on socio-historical circumstances, Deweyan ethics is also deeply personal and introspective; examining how collective value systems are affected by material conditions is an implicit acknowledgment that we are historically and socially contingent beings who are vulnerable to influences beyond our immediate control or comprehension.

Using Dewey's theory of ethics to frame my students' projects underscores the critical and introspective dimensions of game-based learning experiences. In terms of the critical work demonstrated by *Them*, students were not offering a tidy checklist for recalibrating our own internal biases or simply identifying the possible contradictions and faulty logic within alternative worldviews. Rather, they extracted what they believed to be the most important variables surrounding a current issue (namely, how deliberating misleading information can foster racial or ethnic prejudice) and then translated these variables into a set of coherent gameplay mechanics. In terms of introspection and self-reflection, *Them* motivated players to rethink how external forces beyond one's recognition can fundamentally shape individual perceptions of the world. By exposing and rationalizing how one might be encouraged to harbor prejudiced sentiments, students highlighted our own susceptibility to certain ways of thinking or acting as opposed to simply lambasting those who support particular worldviews. Recognizing our own capacity to be manipulated by external influences resonates with David Riche's (2017) notion of "rhetorical vulnerability," which is a pedagogical framework that invites students to examine how one's vulnerability toward discursive and material influences might be mitigated or exploited across varying rhetorical situations. Riche argues that creating writing projects which encourage students to explore current issues via an emphasis on one's vulnerability to external variables, values, or general ways of thinking can help students better understand our enmeshment in a complex web of socio-material relations that both enhance and limit individual agency. Approaching student writing through a discourse of vulnerability can "prompt compelling discussions

with our students about what it means to be affected by the communicative actions of others” (p. 91). In a similar fashion, the games created by my students revealed the ways in which our own agency (both in terms of how we perceive our surrounding circumstances and the types of actions that are afforded to us) can be vulnerable to the unannounced biases of outside influences. Acknowledging one’s own vulnerability enables one to empathize with those who hold differing perspectives *and* critique potentially dangerous precedents set by any value system.

In designing video games, students engaged in ethical inquiry that coupled a critical understanding of how external circumstances influence collective value systems with a speculative, reflective understanding of how value systems can shape the perspectives of others. More specifically, designing *Them* to demonstrate the process through which individuals are conditioned into certain ways of thinking/acting provided players with experiences (not definitive, prescriptive actions) which could be used as an intellectual compass for further navigating ongoing issues. Creating dynamic gameplay scenarios that channeled player agency in deliberate ways helped students understand how others may rationalize alternative worldviews and provided an opportunity to analyze the corrosive tendencies lurking within a specific value system. My hope is that the theoretical connections and teaching experiences I have discussed have demonstrated how game-based writing projects can encourage students to critically engage with real-world issues while bypassing over-simplifications or easy generalizations.

## NOTES

1. The connection between experience, ethics, and aesthetics is an ongoing trend throughout much of Dewey’s work, and a conversation of one topic can easily transcend into a conversation about the others. While this quote prefaces Dewey’s discussion of art and aesthetics, it also provides the foundation for ethical inquiry via personal experience. For the sake of focus and specificity, I will primarily examine the situational form of ethics that emerges out of Dewey’s argument about the “living being’s” experience with its environment.
2. The material and psychological dimensions underlying Dewey’s ethical inquiry appear throughout his work. From his conversations about the self-modifying nature of our encounters with aesthetic objects in *Art as Experience* to his political philosophy in *Democracy and Education* which

- traces a general outline for establishing progressive forms of civic participation, many of Dewey's theories stress the impact that one's socially inscribed circumstances can have on their perspectives and actions.
3. There was growing anxiety about the mass influx of refugees fleeing the Syrian civil war and immigrating to different countries throughout Europe. Additionally, the 2016 presidential primaries were enmeshed in debates about "sanctuary cities" and the alleged threats of violence posed by undocumented immigrants.
  4. All groups composed an end-of-semester presentation that introduced their games and allowed classmates to provide feedback or pose questions. The commentary students received during these presentations would be used to revise the final draft of their Design Portfolios.

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# Procedural-Relational Power Analysis: A Model for Deconstructing and Intervening in Everyday Games

*Kristopher Purzycki*

Critical engagement with texts is among the principal challenges faced by first-year writers. Researchers at the intersection of games and writing studies (some of whom are contributing to this volume) have advocated for games' capacities for helping students develop sound critical methods. Rote rhetorical analysis—the theoretical foundation of many composition courses—falls short of addressing some of the distinguishing trademarks of games, however. How do first-year writing students negotiate simple game mechanics, such as the rolling of dice for example, within the all-too-familiar ethos/pathos/logos framework? Once applied, how does the analysis produced help develop recognition of the *purpose* of these activities? Undeniably, current scholarship into games' potential as teaching tools has greatly expanded our rhetorical toolkit. But as I plan my writing

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or technical communications courses, I find that much of this scholarship focus on games that are computer or table-top titles. These games present several issues for many college classrooms due to the strained resources of many students (and departments).

I have discovered that the most fundamental, simple, and even banal games provide a solution that still offers the level of complexity required to suit our pedagogical needs. In this chapter, I share several in-class workshop experiences in which students critique everyday games as an exercise in deconstruction, information design, critical inquiry, collaboration, and public demonstration. Inspired by an activist approach to narrative renegotiation, the model I provide here helps parse out various components of the simplest games to reveal overlooked and forgotten complexities. Students gain a better recognition of how everyday activities contribute to dominant narratives of power and control.

Using games to evoke the inequities and privileges of these systems is an ideal activity for the writing classroom. But there are issues that threaten to exacerbate, rather than address, the inequality we hope to reveal. Access to technology and reliable network connections, for example, prevent the use of video games outside of the classroom. Unfamiliarity with certain titles may also inhibit engagement, a problem with many contemporary board games. My experiences with low-income, first generation students has, most importantly, given pause: as leisurely activities of the privileged, games increasingly feel out of place in classrooms occupied by students who are sacrificing income and stability to attend college. I confess that, for now, this is an unfounded, gut-level response and further research is needed. For now, for my classes, games are restricted to limited time, in-class activities where everyone can participate, regardless of experience or means.

To accomplish this, I have developed a Procedural-Relational Power Analysis (PRPA) rubric (see Fig. 10.1), a simple activity to help guide students through the process of analyzing systems to uncover dominant values. In addition to providing a concise framework for engaging games in a critical way, the PRPA is designed to assist groups in effectively and thoughtfully reconstructing simple games in a way that prioritizes the values of those groups. By *intentionally* remixing games at tactical, identifiable points, student re-designers not only identify but confront prevailing powers.



<p><b>PART ONE   Deconstruction:</b> Brainstorm as many elements as you can, placing each in one of the categories below. You can always add more later but if you have extra time, feel free to consider elements that are more loosely connected to the game (for example, a pencil used to draw the grid).</p>	
<p><b>Components</b> (visual, structural, spatial)</p>	
<p><b>Rules</b> (Constitutive &amp; Implicit)</p>	
<p><b>PART TWO   Reconstruction:</b> From the list you created, select 3-5 elements from at least two different categories that are connected in some way. Draw out the relationship between those elements. Label each element and briefly describe the relationships and process between them.</p>	

<p><b>PART THREE   Intervention:</b> In the first row, list three elements that are part of the relationship diagram you created above. If you have more than three, list three that seem most important to your diagram.</p>	
<p><b>STEP ONE: Choose which element will be changed. Which one will make the biggest impact?</b></p>	
<p><b>STEP TWO: Brainstorm a short list of 3-4 ways you could change this point.</b></p>	
<p><b>STEP THREE: Describe how this change impacts the relationships to other elements</b></p>	
<p><b>STEP FOUR   Invention:</b> On another sheet, describe a new version of the game that uses the change you developed. Be prepared to demonstrate your new game and discuss the difference between the original and your version. If you have time, think about what assumptions are made with this new game.</p> <p>Does this new change prevent certain people from playing? Are these players able to play the original version? Why or why not? What else does this new game reveal about what ideas are privileged by the original? How do the procedures of the game favor some players and strategies while inhibiting or preventing others?</p>	

Fig. 10.1 The procedural-relational power analysis rubric

## THE INTERSECTION OF GAMES AND PEDAGOGY

Although games scholarship goes back several centuries, the growing sophistication of digital and analog games has, of late, made for a burgeoning field. Mia Consalvo and Nathan Dutton (2006) describe the focus of the embryonic field of game studies as being limited to either the player or the game itself. However, scholarly interest in games, which has accelerated in the last 20 years, has contributed to the development of more expansive scope of critical methodologies and analytical approaches as well as a broader recognition of games' signification of social phenomena. Jesper Juul (2011) reflected on the limits of the field's trajectory, pointing out that player experience is not constrained to the space of the game but expands far into the world beyond (pp. 11–12). As the discipline of game studies has matured, the scope has expanded to include game design itself and the ethical implications therein (Sicart 2009).

One of the shortcomings, as Jesper Juul (2011) points out, is that games and/or players are rendered as socially and culturally discrete objects—the residue of computer games' roots in engineering perhaps. Early play studies contributed to a perception of play and games as being outside social spheres. Johan Huizinga's (1971) “magic circle” is perhaps the most familiar concept used to illustrate that games create “an act apart” from the world (p. 10). Arguing that games are entwined with social dynamics, Roger Caillois (1958) claims that games “sustain permanent and refined structures, institutions of the official, private, marginal, and sometimes clandestine character” (p. 41). Brian Sutton-Smith (1997) reinforced this social foundation, articulating an array of rhetorics associated with playful behaviors. This richer understanding of play has led some contemporary scholars to advocate for games as tools for influencing social change (Flanagan 2006; Mariani 2016).

Mary Flanagan (2009) has written extensively on this subject. Drawing from Sutton-Smith (1997), Flanagan proposes a method of critical play that can assist designers in creating games that amplify underserved voices. Simply put, Flanagan's criteria for critical play involves a flirtation with taboo (“unplaying”), subversive roleplay (“re-dressing”), or the creation of alternative narratives (“rewriting”) (pp. 33–34). Flanagan and Helen Nissenbaum (2014) expand on the role of ethics in game design in *Values at Play in Digital Games*: “All games express and embody human values,” and have emerged to “tell stories embedded in *larger systems of*

*belief*” (p. 4, emphasis mine). At a time when global, far-right powers are dominating news cycles, discussions about how games perpetuate discriminatory belief systems have been amplified. Kishona Gray and David J. Leonard’s (2018) *Woke Gaming* assembles research into the ways games and game development can evoke overlooked perspectives.

But while these scholars provide us with a rich foundation for design principles and discuss how games can be used to impart value systems that explore and confront social injustices, they neglect to provide us with tools for deconstructing these systems. These methods are wonderful guidelines for evoking hidden narratives and perspectives through the design of new games. But how do we speak to those dominant narratives? How might we look at games as systems that participate in building and maintaining power? More importantly, how do the games we play continue to exclude and disenfranchise?

## GAMES IN THE CLASSROOM

In addition to Flanagan’s (2009) approach to critical play, the PRPA also draws inspiration from Patrick Reinsborough and Doyle Canning’s (2017) “Narrative Power Analysis” (NPA), a social justice toolkit used to reconfigure dominant narratives. Based on the notion that audiences are more easily persuaded by stories that align with their own values, Reinsborough and Canning’s method exposes dominant narratives, the social bonds reinforced by these narratives, and how those relationships are key to both supporting prevailing ideologies as well as subverting them (pp. 20–22). Cultural connections, for example, reify certain perspectives of the world that can strengthen bonds with like groups but also exclude others that are unfamiliar with or even hostile to those values.

As I will describe, the PRPA sets aside this focus on story to isolate various components and the relationships between them without regard for linearity. This is not to say that there is not a story worth unpacking. But to be compelled by story is to anticipate certain narrative elements—such as a satisfying conclusion or a cohesive arc. For our more austere purposes here, one must be open to the unanticipated, the strange, and even the inconclusive.

In addition to laying out the PRPA framework, this chapter offers some potential immediate and extended learning outcomes. Some of these outcomes include clearer understandings of design and process-oriented approaches. By parsing out the elements and processes that sustain a

larger system (a wicked problem, for example), the PRPA offers a simple yet cohesive method for extraction that can make analysis more accessible. I conclude by reflecting on the deployment of the PRPA and with remixing everyday games in two different classrooms: one, a first-year writing course, and the other, a mixed-level technical communications course aimed at science and technology majors. In both, I used the PRPA to produce a variety of remixes of the simplest of everyday games, *Tic-Tac-Toe*.

My teaching experience is comprised of various first year writing, introductory English literature, and technical communications courses at both two and four-year institutions. I have taught various first-year writing, introductory English, and technical communications courses at both four and two-year institutions in a mid-size Midwestern American city. In these courses, I have used play and games for in-class activities and, to a lesser extent, assigned games scholarship to be discussed and critiqued. Among the earliest pedagogists to examine video games, James Paul Gee (2003) promoted them as rich “semiotic domains” (p. 19) containing myriad learning principles that echo those of the writing classroom. Using games as hands-on vehicles for developing critical thinking and communication skills has been fruitful. In my experience, it has been especially helpful using games as systems models that can be deconstructed and analyzed. When using digital games, however, I began to have numerous concerns regarding technology accessibility and pedagogical efficiency.

So-called serious games that I had used, such as *Endgame: Syria* (GameTheNews.net 2012) and Molleindustria’s meta-game *Phone Story* (2011), are relatively accessible and offer multiple ways to play both online and off. These games were selected because they are available for free on multiple platforms. My own assumptions about accessibility to reliable, secure, and available computers (or smartphones that could play games) revealed my pedagogical naivete. This was most profound at the two-year community college where computers were limited and several of my students had only used them a handful of times, relying on smartphones whenever possible. More importantly, many students on this campus were sacrificing resources to empower themselves through their education. The classroom, for them, was an austere place for hard work and not where games were played. Much of the playful curriculum was shortly scrapped—I simply felt uncomfortable playing games in this environment.

In more advanced English courses at the four-year university where I currently teach, accessibility was complicated in other ways. When considering digital, text-based games as literary works, for example, most students found the coding underneath to be confusing. Students in an Introduction to English Studies course played through Porpentine's *Cyberqueen* (2015) before creating their own games in Twine, a platform for creating hypertext games. Without adequate time for students to experiment with simple programming structures using Twine, it was difficult to provide an adequate hands-on critique of hypertexts.

Students in our first-year writing courses have shared additional concerns which tested my fledgling pedagogy. Opinions shared in class and in end-of-semester evaluations revealed that some felt that that serious games like *Endgame: Syria* simply were not fun. Fair enough! As I have discussed elsewhere (Purzycki 2015), lack of fun can open wonderful discussions about the rhetorical value of pleasure and pathos. What do we make of a game that is not designed to be enjoyable? If a player is not *playing*, what are they doing instead? More importantly, if the serious game is being used to communicate a message, what *language* is the game using to do so? Little wonder why some students found it difficult to work through the lack of fun.

But what about games that *were* fun for them? For a short writing assignment about games and sports that they play, some students withheld these privileged activities. Instead of writing about games they enjoyed, these students chose to look at those they were interested in but not actively playing. One student, for example, shyly admitted to being an enthusiastic player of *Minecraft* (Mojang 2009) and offered a profound reflection: she simply did not want to mix work and play. *Minecraft* was a sacred place that was distinct from the demands of the classroom, home, and workplace. This sentiment continues to resonate with me and has made me especially wary of how labor is increasingly being conflated with play. This has been a growing concern, especially as gamification, or the “use of design elements characteristic for games in non-game contexts” (Deterding et al. 2011, p. 13), has become such a powerful marketing tool for platforms like Amazon and Google which profit from data and information culled from players using Twitch and Stadia services (see Srnicek 2017).

Because games are compacted simulations of larger, far more complex, systems that exist in the world of flesh-and-blood, they have found fertile ground in my technical communications courses. In these classes, students

use various methods of systems analysis to explicate complex problems that demand engineering, biomedical, or computational solutions. The goal is to use their analyses to understand the impacts these innovations have on diverse populations. This focus on the social quality of technology also plays out in intrapersonal communication in groupwork. Students in these classes typically have access to suitable technology and are familiar with games (some are experienced in making games already).

The challenges for these students emerged in the description of processes and procedures they (as upper-level STEM majors) no longer perceived as complicated. What was missing from their system analysis projects was the minutiae, those actions and properties that had been routinized and taken as fact. Although I had determined that the deconstruction and remixing of everyday games would greatly assist my instruction, I felt I needed a more cohesive methodology that these students could easily use—to make the most use of our short time and ensure that everyone would also have a chance to practice their public speaking skills.

### EVERYDAY GAMES AND THE PRPA RUBRIC

Using simple, non-digital games provided a solution for these concerns. Accessible to anyone with paper and pen, simple games like *Tic-Tac-Toe* and *Dots-and-Boxes* are typically considered to be children's games. Young adults no longer find these compelling, especially when more entertaining games can be played on mobile devices, computers, and gaming consoles. In their ordinariness, however, the simplest games mimic commonplace social, economic, and cultural systems. Just as many of these systems harbor longstanding values of injustice and discrimination, so too do the games that have emerged from those systems.

Because these simple games embody value systems, they are rich sources for experimentation and discussion. For clarity, *Tic-Tac-Toe* was the most obvious choice to experiment with new pedagogies. In addition to addressing most of my concerns, it revealed a surprising model for how complex research questions can be extricated from the simplest sources. Drawn in the sandbox, a match conceals its position as the one of the first games that impart strategic thinking. Using the “Tick Tack Toe Test” created by Robert Kozelka at Williams College, Sutton-Smith et al. (1971) concluded that this simplest of games is not only the first game of pure strategy Western children play (p. 489)—it is

“deviously implicated in the lives of its players” (p. 496) and capable of informing players with powerful perspectives on competition, ethics, and sportsmanship. *Tic-Tac-Toe* also enjoys international appeal. According to *Scarne’s Encyclopedia of Games* (1973), *Tit-Tat-Toe* and its British predecessor, *Noughts and Crosses*, also have a Japanese cousin called *Gomuku*. This slightly more sophisticated alternative features 19 horizontal and vertical lines and players must connect five Xs or Os to win the match (pp. 583–584). With a satisfactory game now determined, a process for methodically deconstructing and analyzing the relational, process-oriented rhetorics of simple games was now required.

Enter the PRPA, which is influenced by a core component of Reinsborough and Canning’s (2017) Narrative power Analysis: the concept of “points of intervention,” which are “specific places in a system where an action can effectively interrupt and influence the narrative of that system and build momentum for change” (p. 67). This concept is closely related to that of “leverage points” or, “those places within a complex system (a corporation, an economy, a living body, a city, and ecosystem) where a small shift in one thing can produce big changes in everything” (Meadows 1999). Though rooted in systems analysis, “leverage” has also found potentially fertile ground in writing and rhetorical studies. Explicitly recalling influential systems theorist and environmentalist, Donella Meadows, Steve Simpson (2012) describes strategic intervention as an effective method for writing program development. Though not as overt, Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa Kirch (2012) argue how emergent feminist rhetorical practices, as part of a model for critical inquiry, can illuminate leverage points in enormous social systems (p. 148). In my own classroom practice, I also refer to leverage points to help develop strategic reading skills and literary interpretation.

One of the pedagogical leverage points that is encountered in the first-year research writing classroom is the set of critical inquiry methods. As a core requirement of critical inquiry, the reexamination of assumptions, particularly for first-year writers, can be especially challenging. This often results in tepid papers that take on complex, wicked problems that are well beyond the scope of a short paper. As one of the more nebulous points of intervention within the NPA, “Point of Assumption” asks audiences to imagine a better future through a reconfiguration of what is taken at face value to be true. Students in my first-year writing courses are responsible for generating questions that are relevant to their own everyday experience. Observing their immediate surroundings—their favorite places,

homes, and haunts—I tell them will offer surprising fodder for good research questions. Part of this comes through asking oneself *why?* each time we encounter a familiar object, person, or place that has seemingly always been there.

Observation is, therefore, the first half of the PRPA—a rubric that supports a scaffolded exercise that takes students through the process of critical inquiry and invention using a systems analysis methodology. During this initial “Deconstruction/Reconstruction” stage, the priority is reducing the subject of inquiry to its component parts, tactically selecting a small portion of those elements, and recombining them into a distinct substructure. This portion of the PRPA urges students to devote conscious, intentional thinking about the subject to produce a library of elements that comprise it. After breaking down an everyday game, myriad qualities and ingredients are revealed that are surprisingly complex. This is followed by “Reconstruction” wherein a small subset of components is recombined into an isolated structure. These components are selected based upon their relationships to one another. Drawn out and labelled accordingly, the substructure of the larger, more complex text is more easily managed and digestible.

The second half of the PRPA, “Intervention,” engages students in identifying leverage points within the isolated structure and considering what small alterations can produce large impacts on the entire game.

### *Anticipated Learning Outcomes*

Using everyday games as subjects of engagement yields a wealth of long-term learning goals that address the core of the Council of Writing Program Administrators (2014) criteria of desired outcomes:

#### *Rhetorical Knowledge*

Games contain strata of rhetorical power and challenge students and instructors alike in the new ways these interactive works persuade. As a complement to the classic forms of rhetoric, this hands-on method demands that students *make* rhetoric.

#### *Critical Thinking, Reading, and Composing*

By engaging a mundane, everyday game, students are better able to focus on individual components and the extracted procedures of a text. The PRPA is at its heart an exercise in methodical and intentional composition.



*Processes*

In the reconstruction of small portions of the game, students must visualize elements and invisible relationships between them. When conceptualizing a substructure, for example, students do so recursively, identifying elements they may have overlooked and the nuance of rules. For first-year writing courses, this provides a subtle introduction to more complicated forms of systems analysis. For upper-level courses, these evoke some of the ethical, humanist considerations we desire from our students.

*Observational Skills*

As described, developing one's ability to see through the fog of the quotidian is vital to critical inquiry. As a simple framework for extracting more complicated questions out of the everyday, the PRPA urges students to take time, pause, and mindfully take in their surroundings.

*Rhetorical Analysis*

Although procedural rhetoric is a significant principle of the PRPA, other rhetoric concepts are reinforced and can be folded into it. In seeing the whole game within its constituent substructures, for example, an opportunity to introduce synecdoche is presented.

*Interdisciplinarity*

The PRPA is applicable to other forms of analysis due to its grounding in a systems analysis approach. Because first-year writing classrooms tend to accommodate an array of backgrounds, one of the initial benefits seen with the PRPA is the way it appeals to a variety of career interests. A criminal justice student, for example, expressed how the PRPA mimics the forensics report by encouraging focus on details and how they connect to the big picture.

*Collaboration*

Working together, students must cobble together a comprehensive list of components and agree upon an interesting substructure to intervene. In the invention of a simple game, groups agree upon an alternate that represents their work and, most importantly, is fun to demonstrate to the rest of the class.

### *Obstacles and Opportunities*

Because of its simplicity and malleability, the PRPA presents few obstacles for use in class. There are always considerations and opportunities for further development:

#### *Time*

Time can easily slip away during this activity. This activity has all the immediacy of an ice breaker, so be sure to watch the clock.

#### *Dense Theory*

Using a simple game helps keep dense theoretical terms manageable. Yet complicated concepts like “leverage points,” “systems analysis,” and “process-relational power” can overwhelm and complicate the session if not explained clearly and illustrated beforehand.

#### *Different Games*

I focus primarily on *Tic-Tac-Toe*, although there are other simple games that the PRPA can accommodate. The nineteenth-century French export, *Dots-and-Boxes* is akin to *Tic-Tac-Toe* in scope but may be unfamiliar to students. *Snakes and Ladders* is a more multinational game that has religious significance to those of the Jain faith. *Mancala* may yield fun interventions with the board and pieces if enough students know how to play. As I will discuss later, students in upper-level courses may favor some of these more complex games. But as a short, in-class activity, it is difficult to identify a game that provides *Tic-Tac-Toe*'s level of immediate access.

### ILLUSTRATIVE CASE STUDY: *TIC-TAC-TOE*

Early in the spring semester of 2015, I tasked students in my Research Writing course at University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (UWM) with an in-class activity. They were to deconstruct the simplest game, *Tic-Tac-Toe*, using the PRPA, identify at least one point of intervention, and create a new version of the game by substantially manipulating the element identified. Afterwards, the class reconvened so that each group could demonstrate their new game. The discussion that followed involved identifying the point of intervention and how manipulating that point impacted the game. Most importantly, students focused on how this change highlighted a way in which the original game prioritizes aptitudes,

capabilities, or perspectives. There are three stages to this exercise, so a full session of approximately one-and-a-half hours is ideal. For shorter class sessions, the first stage (Set-up) can be shortened, but ample time should be given to students to visualize the structures relevant to the Procedural-Relational Power Analysis. If assigned as a take-home group assignment, instructors may eliminate the second stage and split the first and third into separate course sessions.

### *Initial Set-up*

A brief activity to prime students to the conditions of this exercise may be helpful to provide the most interesting responses at each stage. As the session prior was a reading and response to a chapter of Paulo Freire's (1968) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, students were asked to freewrite through a five-minute observation of the classroom. This observation could include objects, people, arrangements, sensory inputs, and internal feelings about the room and our place within it. Students were asked to reconvene as a large group and share their thoughts which were immediately written on the board for everyone to see. As would be expected by more seasoned instructors, this turned up a few insights among the other more cool and guarded ideas (discussed later).

Even the more tepid responses are fruitful for the exercise, however, and can be used to build relationships with other objects, ideas, and events. As more complex networks are formed, more concrete processes began to take shape. In producing a process that could be analyzed as a rhetorical subject capable of generating unique questions and ideas, students were for the most part able to better grasp a simple method that could be expanded to larger projects (like a research essay).

One example involved the lone wall clock affixed to the back wall of an otherwise unornamented room that is typical to the older part of campus. A student mentioned the clock and another mentioned that it faced the instructor, not the students. This was so that I could keep an eye on when class was over, a student replied, an idea that was added to the board. Plus, we cannot see it, another student added. Primed by our earlier discussion of Freire's "banking model of education," students were quick to connect the clock's placement to the overall arrangement of the room—which supported a hierarchical structure that prioritized my position over theirs. Once the object-process-structure was sufficiently analyzed, interpreted, and critiqued, we were ready to move on.

Students were placed into groups of three to five and supplied with a large sheet of blank paper and a marker. I handed one person in each group a copy of the PRPA rubric. They were tasked with recording the ideas from the rest of the group. Just as they had thoughtfully considered the dull classroom and extracted several substantial, meaningful questions from their observations, they would now be required to do the same with *Tic-Tac-Toe*.

To help springboard the activity, I first demonstrated a few ways *Tic-Tac-Toe* could be manipulated. Students walked me through the process of setting up the grid, which I carried out on the board. Next to the grid, I wrote the sequence of steps taken to get to the point currently represented. One horizontal line, then another, followed by a vertical line, then another ... this may seem tedious but stopping at this point can help model identification of various elements and processes. With only the three-by-three grid, there exists the four drawn lines, the empty spaces between them, the board on which the grid is drawn, the marker with which it was drawn, and me (the player). For brevity's sake, let us assume that the next step is to place an X in the center square as per my own frequent strategy. But what if I remove the grid, rendering the prized center square obsolete? This absurd intervention has an enormous impact on the game, and any learned strategies are immediately eliminated.

What does this grid signify? Student responses culminated in recognizing how the everyday *Tic-Tac-Toe* reinforces our preference for going first to have an upper hand over an opponent. If going first no longer offers any significant advantage, how does this impact our strategy? With this single action identified, we can see how *Tic-Tac-Toe* holds sway over behavior and contributes to an ideology of competitiveness. When using this example, students in my course claimed that the game was now broken. Many interventions may result in "bad" games or games that are "no fun." It is worth encouraging students not to eschew their progress if they get to this conclusion. Why is the game broken? Is it no longer enjoyable without competition? Why not? Was *Tic-Tac-Toe* fun to begin with? Using their primed observation skills, they may be apt to celebrate the "failure" of this activity as several of the examples from stage three will illustrate.

## WORKING THROUGH THE PRPA

Student groups now take on their own deconstruction of a simple game. Each group starts by brainstorming various elements that are part of the game and gameplay, which the recorder (if chosen) will list on the PRPA rubric.

### *PRPA Part One: Deconstruction*

The first portion of the rubric, which focuses on elements and rules, should be exhausted first. In my experience, students often need a prompt to push their survey beyond the limits of what is actually “in game.” I suggested that they use the large paper (or board) to draw out the game to help point out elements. If students begin to list patterns, strategies, and assumptions, I suggest they refocus on the individual pieces of those structures before moving on.

#### *Components*

Lists generated by student groups in my first-year writing course started identically and focused on obvious, surface-level components. After mirroring my example, many of the groups stalled after lines, grid, Xs, Os, and spaces between lines. This was expected and inquiring about players prompted further explorations. After a couple minutes, I suggested that they begin writing out the rules—as this can take a substantial amount of time.

#### *Rules*

It is advisable to allow a bit more time for students to write out clear, yet comprehensive rules. Before continuing, describe the difference between operational, “constitutive,” and implicit rules as put forth by Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman (2004) in *Rules of Play* (p. 130). These can help students consider rules that exist outside of the game itself.

#### *Operational Rules*

Our typical conception of rules include limits and structures imposed by the designers of the game that limit and standardize play. They are often found “in the box.” In the example of *Tic-Tac-Toe*, “players take turns placing their pieces on the grid” is an operational rule.

*Constitutive Rules*

These are the more informal logics and physics that orchestrate patterns and strategies. In the case of *Tic-Tac-Toe*, a player must line up three of their markers to win. Therefore, players must be able to count to three to play.

*Implicit Rules*

The mutually agreed upon “unwritten rules,” these make up the expectations and etiquettes of the game. These intersubjectively understood rules are most affected by social, cultural, and political contexts that are in place. A “common sense” example for *Tic-Tac-Toe* might be to not quit before the end of the game or not take more than a few seconds to make a mark (neither condition is covered in the “rules” of the game).

***PRPA Part Two: Reconstruction***

After a designated time has passed, groups may now take on the lower portion of the rubric that considers more complex concepts related to the game. To effectively make use of time, the class should receive a brief definition and description of each concept. Using one of the group’s lists to demonstrate the next procedure is also helpful. The priority at this time is not to create another list but to start building from the list of elements already created.

Each group should begin focusing on a relationship between three and five elements that come from at least two rows. One group (“Group One”) in my class, for instance, was especially focused on the tripartite relationship between two players (components) and the table on which the board was placed (arrangement). Another group (“Group Two”) took on the implicit etiquettes of which player should go first. Group Three, taking an easy route, dissected the two-by-two grid into its four individual lines and center space.

***PRPA Part Three: Intervention***

To experiment with how small changes can create huge impacts, students now alter the substructures they isolated and create a new variant of the game from this change. This form of “critical play” (Flanagan 2009) is an intentional act to create a work that speaks to some aspect of the human condition (p. 6). Following the steps below, students should easily be

able to invent a new variant of their everyday game to prepare for the final demonstration and discussion. Prior to launching into this phase, introduce or reiterate the concept of “leverage points” for the class. At no point in this stage should groups get overly concerned about creating a viable, working game. The more absurd, the better!

*Step 1: List Three Elements and Highlight the Element to Be Changed*

Referring to their illustrated substructure, students decide together which element will be changed. Identifying which leverage point will be changed may require students to reiteratively expand and refine their scope. Group Three selected the center space as the most interesting component to change.

*Step 2: Brainstorm a Short List of Three to Four Ways You Could Change This Point*

Student groups come up with a few ways to change the leverage point to make the most significant impact. Group Three, for example, transformed the center square from a two-dimensional space into one that was three-dimensional.

*Step 3: Describe How This Change Impacts the Relationships to Other Elements*

One step prior to recreating a whole new game, students start by thinking about how this will impact the entire substructure. In the case of Group Three, the three-dimensional center square (now cube) made the grid behave in strange ways, rendering it almost meaningless.

*Step 4: Invention*

Students now imagine how this change has a ripple effect on the rest of the game, although they should be reminded not to get bogged down in creating a legitimate, working game. In attempting to describe their 2D grid/3D center cube concept, Group Three sketched out their vision from several different points of view before giving up.

***PRPA Part Four: Discussion***

The class then reconvenes for a demonstration of variants and a follow up discussion. The class also shares their component lists, compiling a large list for everyone to see.

In sharing games, each group describes how they came to the version being demonstrated. After describing the substructure that the group chose to focus on, the group then reveals the new game they created. This is followed with a description of the difference between the original and alternate versions and what this difference reveals about the perspectives and values inherent in the original. Student groups are not required to share what assumptions their new games revealed—in fact, they may not be away of them until the rest of the class has seen it.

Follow up questions can include: how far could they go before the game could not be broken down anymore? What components and rules did they overlook? How does playing the games of other groups point out these oversights?

Group One, which focused on the arrangement of player-player-board, created a new version of *Tic-Tac-Toe* in which players would have to stand at thirty feet away from the grid and throw their pieces onto it. Inspired by one student's affinity for darts, what this new version lacked in originality was made up for in the subsequent discussion. A lot of games, the students described, assume certain physical capabilities. In making the player stand farther away from the gamespace and making the game more challenging, the group saw how the new game not only privileged arm strength and hand-eye coordination, but the original relied upon one's sense of vision.

This initial foray provided some surprising returns in the first-year research writing course. What began as an in-class activity aimed at providing some fundamental research sensitivities revealed an unexpected level of accessibility and inquiry. Some of the more sophisticated interventions displayed what Flanagan (2009) argues is conducive to critical play, a “shifting of authority and power relations more toward a nonhierarchical, participatory exchange” (p. 256). Because students were familiar with *Tic-Tac-Toe*, deeper critique and risky forms of intervention revealed new (and, yes, sometimes fun) games. More importantly, these riskier interventions formed more inclusionary, accessible versions of the game that highlighted how these ideologies become convention. But as a pedagogical tool, I desired a more formal model that could be easily doled out, both to students and colleagues. In a later, distinctly different course, I would get this opportunity.



## STUDENT FEEDBACK

In the Spring of 2019, students in my “Writing, Speaking, and Technoscience in the twenty-first Century” course used the PRPA as part of our section on network analysis and visual mapping. This course, a requirement for engineering and computer science majors at UWM, is often taken by upperclassmen to help develop ethical considerations of wicked problems and designed solutions before entering the field. As with my first-year writing courses, we played *Tic-Tac-Toe*. For this course, however, students made use of the current, formalized iteration of the PRPA as a rubric for taking notes and identifying those elements associated with each category.

Following the in-class exercise, student feedback was voluntarily and anonymously provided using a questionnaire. Prompts inquired about which aspects of network analysis the PRPA helped clarify, which concepts were left unclear, and what aspects of the assignment were unappealing. More explicitly, students were asked about the use of *Tic-Tac-Toe* as an example.

Most students responded positively to the exercise and how the deconstruction phase helped illuminate some of the complexities of network analysis. Nodes, actors and actants, and leverage points were among the most often cited elements that were clarified.

More importantly, the interconnections between elements were more easily identified as students began manipulating the game. Identifying relationships and connections were highlighted as components of the play experience that enabled students to focus on the ecology in which the game is played rather than on the game and/or players as discrete objects. “Using TicTacToe [sic],” one student elaborated, “shows how you can’t really change it without a drastic change. Which then brings up other questions such as if it is still TicTacToe.” Out of approximately 50 students who responded, only one took umbrage with the use of games in the class and their irrelevance to “class/major/world problems.”

Student feedback indicates that *Tic-Tac-Toe* may have been *too* simple of an example. This is understandable given that most of the students were eager to graduate and take on new challenges. Suggestions for possible replacements included *Reversi*; *Sudoku*; *Rock, Paper, Scissors*; and *Chess*. Many students, however, picked up on the deceptive simplicity of the game and the irony of uncovering long-overlooked ideologies of privilege. Many suggested that this simplicity helped them better see the

game as a system embedded within a larger social ecology rather than as a discrete pastime. More importantly, the commonplace experience of *Tic-Tac-Toe* seemed to provide greater accessibility for intervention and critique. Several students commented that it was easier to experiment with changes and seeing what impacts (“ripple effects”) they had.

## CONCLUSIONS

Despite my extensive discussion about the rubric and austere focus on reducing games to their not-so-fun components, the PRPA privileges the collaborative spirit of social play. This exercise, employed early in my most recent semester at a local community college, was foundational for many students throughout the semester but particularly when it came time to compose a research essay. With few exceptions, students presented projects that were personally significant and, in some cases, they were passionate about. One student cited how she used the PRPA to reflect on how important the refrigerator was to her family. By reiteratively expanding the scope of the substructures she produced, she discovered (and wrote about) how the introduction of refrigerators to developing nations has enormous ramifications for local farmers.

Another student, hoping to become a corrections officer, wrestled all semester with the concept of leverage point and systems analysis. Inspired by the recent trial of a close family member, her project used these concepts to identify those points at which the Milwaukee judicial system could change to expedite due process.

Both students explicitly stated that the activity was useful in their coming up with research ideas. Other students presented final projects that addressed questions that had emanated from their own observations and identification of various leverage points. Ultimately, the PRPA is an awkwardly named method for finding the means to reclaim power from the everyday machinations that affect our outlook. By using a child’s game like *Tic-Tac-Toe* to reveal how power relationships are pervasive, we also uncover how it exerts itself over us from the earliest age. As part of a curriculum dedicated to self-empowerment and community advocacy, the PRPA not only illuminates the obstacles to social justice but uncovers new ways we can collaborate and build new communities.

Using such simple, familiar games provides an opportunity to cut through the fog of the everyday. Because a game like *Tic-Tac-Toe* is

immediately accessible, analysis reveals surprising complexity. Assumptions about privilege, for example, are exposed by reconsidering who can play and who is left out of the game. In this way, the remixing of simple, everyday games can lead to intentional forms of what Jan Rune Holmevik (2012) regards as “inter/vention,” and the marriage of “play and reflection, ludology and literacy” (p. 3). This capacity for reflexive play will be crucial as our entertainment media increasingly becomes usurped by data-driven industries that benefit from creating players and generating information based on their activities and behaviors.

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## Surfacing Values in Difficult Conversations: Game-Based Training to Lower the Stakes on Challenging Topics

*Michael Arnold Mages*

When confronted with a difficult conversation, college students may be in a context where support systems they used throughout their younger life may be unavailable or difficult to access. Campus mental health professionals provide important support structures for these students, but many difficult situations never see the office of the professional counselor. Resident assistants (RAs) and orientation counselors (OCs) at times play the role of informal counselors for a range of issues. At Carnegie Mellon University, The Office of Diversity and Inclusion contributes to the training of RAs and OCs. As a part of that training, I helped these students think through having these conversations and learn by playing through their participation in these conversations.

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To that end, I developed and implemented a game-based training activity to help students prototype approaches to challenging situations using reflective thinking, long-term (or strategic) thinking, and negotiation. This game was collaboratively developed over a series of playtesting sessions with undergraduate and graduate design students. This chapter offers a precis of the originating research, details aspects of the development process, and explains critical rhetorical aspects of the game design that emerged during development and playtesting.

### WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO PLAY WITH DIFFICULT SITUATIONS?

In this particular case, the game offers students the opportunity to reflectively examine responses to other students' difficult issues in a context that is relatively consequence-free and is additionally safe as it is framed as play. The goal for the students' play is to discuss a range of responses to problematic situations and, through engaged participation, hear and discuss others' responses to the same problematic situation. The game materials prompt players to use a limited range of responses that originate from the principle of beneficence—doing no harm. Through a collaborative exploration of the possibilities in different difficult situations, players get the unique opportunity to have a semi-structured discussion to evaluate a variety of responses.

### WHAT IS A DIFFICULT CONVERSATION?

When confronted with particular topics, one's concept of self may induce feelings of vulnerability, which can prevent listening or otherwise interfere with meaningful participation in a conversation. Strategies for approaching difficult conversations lie principally in careful listening, empathy, adopting a learning attitude, and thinking reflectively when responding (Stone et al. 2010).

### THE CONVERSATION GAME

People may be challenged by conversations in which their concept of identity is interrogated. Thus, I created a set of cards with the idea that confronting a person with a reflective question might help people cope in these situations. Within the sandbox of a game, transgressive behaviors

are more acceptable (Suits 2014), uttering challenging remarks can be delegated to objects (Akrich 1992; Dean et al. 2015; Brooks 2016), the surprise of the moment of confrontation can provoke creative behavior (Cocker 2010), and roleplay permits comparative safety (Elkonin 2005). In the game, my cards act as moderators in difficult conversations and explicitly offer participants the opportunity to move into “creative mode,” which prompts mental simulations and helps players to understand and interrogate their own roles. By transforming the experience of the difficult conversation into a game-like scenario, stakes are lowered and the performance of a conversation is prototyped outside of a real scenario.

The resultant *Conversation Game* is a card game with several ways to play, the most common of which is similar to card-matching games such as *Apples to Apples* (Kirby and Osterhaus 1991). The deck contains two types of cards: scenario and question. Twenty-four scenario cards contain brief descriptions of situations in which a person might engage in a difficult conversation, where one or more participants is “at risk”—typically feeling vulnerable in relation to an aspect of their own identity (Stone et al. 2010). The scenario cards depict the player and another in close relationships (five cards), acquaintance relationships (ten), or as strangers (nine). The situations themselves are written to be highly (five), somewhat (thirteen), or mildly provoking (six). Here are examples of a highly provoking situation with a close relationship: “A trusted friend shares your sensitive personal information”; a moderately provoking situation: “On a date, your companion constantly checks their phone”; and a mildly provoking situation: “A person cuts the line at the grocery store.” The card distributions keep the number of difficult experiences low and focus on events that are more likely in everyday college dorm life. Question cards contain different types of questions that a player may ask in response to being presented with a situation.

These question cards contain a range of prompts. Twenty questions are written in a reflective style using principles of nonviolent inquiry drawn from the work of Marshall Rosenberg (2015). Eight cards use negotiation-based approaches, four use long-term thinking, and four use roleplay techniques. Generally, a round of play will include some responses of each type, but most are directed toward reflective thinking.

## GAME-FACILITATED CONVERSATIONS: CREATIVE CATALYST

Brian Eno and Peter Schmidt's (2001) *Oblique Strategies* cards were influential in creating *Conversation Game*; their cards serve as *creative catalysts* that prompt reflection and new approaches to art—or music-making situations. In *Oblique Strategies*, users think of a problem or challenge and then draw a card at random. Some cards contain statements like “Remove specifics and convert to ambiguities” or “Honor thy error as a hidden intention.” Part of the experience of *Oblique Strategies* is the moment of surprise and confrontation the card may elicit. In an interview, Eno comments on materiality as a function of use:

I would go into the studio with a list of ideas I wanted to remember. [...] They were difficult to use in a list, because you tended not to be so surprised by them. You would just go to the one that was least disruptive. Whereas I found [if] I put them on cards, and I found if you pulled a card out, and you said to yourself “I’m going to do whatever this card tells me,” then you would get somewhere interesting, because it would break you out of your rut. It would push you into a kind of behaviour that you wouldn’t normally make, and sometimes that was very productive. (Cocker 2010)

The deck is treated as an oracle, delivering godly wisdom to the supplicant. The challenges of the creative act often depend upon move-making within an incomplete information field that results in an uncertain outcome. The open ended, almost poetic nature of the statements are effective in a wide range of creative scenarios. Unlike other games that use cognitive dissonance as a function of play (e.g., absurd mismatches in *Apples to Apples* (Kirby and Osterhaus 1991) or *Cards Against Humanity* (Dillon et al. 2017)), the *Oblique Strategies* cards contain few specific directions or concrete images and instead evoke responses from users’ knowledge and associations to resolve the creative act.

Like Joseph Weizenbaum’s (1966) *ELIZA*, *Oblique Strategies* is functional because of a narrow scoping of the possibility space wherein responses are given. *ELIZA* attempts to simulate a Rogerian therapist while *Oblique Strategies* promises to offer abstract creative direction. Neither of these objects offer a complete conversation, but rather leverage the intelligence of the user and the clever framing (Dourish 2001) of a limited context to make the object appear smarter than it is. Aleatoric suggestions and evocative reflective statements offer the users access to



their own reflective mode of thinking. Asking *Oblique Strategies* for advice on tactical matters—directions to the local grocery, advice on contract law, making health care decisions—could result in the absurd, nonsensical, or dangerous. It is the scoping of the narrow situation—provisioning poetic advice on users’ creative problems—that provides compelling and rich applications.

*Oblique Strategies* was composed by two creatives for the purpose of solving creative block; it might even be thought of as engaging in a creative direction conversation with Eno and Schmidt (2001) speaking to you from the past, through the medium of the cards. When a user envisions the creative dilemma using the framing given by the deck’s instructions card, the replies received are read as situated in response to the need. While *ELIZA* algorithmically reflects statements back to the user, *Oblique Strategies* prompts the player with novel challenges from Eno and Schmidt.

*Oblique Strategies’* messages sometimes read like the last line of a Zen Koan: “Gardening, not architecture,” “Be less critical more often,” or “Remove specifics and convert to ambiguities” (Eno and Schmidt 2001). Such messages serve as advice for rethinking creative dilemmas in nearly any media which speaks directly to *Oblique Strategies’* design (emphasizing processual and relational thinking). While the game does not provide lengthy, complex conversations, it does share effective responses for the specific contexts of the creative dilemma.

Some of the cards seem to give highly specific directions like “Take away the elements in order of apparent non-importance” (Eno and Schmidt 2001); however, this still requires the reader apply the directions to a current work. For instance, if one is working on music, *elements* could be interpreted as instruments, melodic ideas, harmonizing orchestrations, or rhythmic embellishments. If one is working on software design, the same *elements* might refer to interface components, available affordances, visual stylings, or application screen states. Never mind how “apparent non-importance” might be defined or what the various processes for “taking away” might imply for the ambiguously indicated *elements*—the point is to reassess the creative process, to reflect on making.

Another way to approach these cards is to dismiss them as linguistic hocus-pocus, in the way that psychologist Bertram Forer (1949) dismissed his students’ interpretations of their horoscope-like personality profiles as fallacious. In the experiment that engendered what is now known as “The Barnum Effect” (or “The Forer Effect”), Forer gave his

students a personality test, then returned a week later with customized personality profiles for each student. On a five-point scale with five being the most accurate, all students rated these profiles as quite accurate save one, who rated the accuracy at three. Unbeknownst to the students, all the personality profiles contained the same, relatively generic information: a mix of mostly positive and some mildly negative characteristics. Later experiments found similar faith in the accuracy of horoscope-like writing, so long as the writing remained generally positive.

While it might be easy to see the Forer study as representing gullibility, it would be more precise to consider it as demonstrating the importance of framing. *ELIZA* was meant as an experiment to show the limits of computers, and Weizenbaum's (1966) initial paper about the program argued that once people understood how it worked, it would be moved to the shelf "reserved for curios, fit to be discussed only with people less enlightened" (para. 1). However, users of *ELIZA* gained insight from it because they *expected* it to offer insight, much like with a horoscope or personality test. *Oblique Strategies* relies, similarly, on the framing (the specific context or situational use of the cards). The cards are useful if the user wants them to be. The success or failure of these experiences depends upon whether the interaction catalyzes reflective thought.

### PROTOTYPING A WAY FORWARD

While developing the game, I ran several prototyping sessions with design students which proved more revealing and insightful than the actual tests of the game. As the game was developed, it became evident that its objects had a powerful capacity to script behavior and the experience could steer players toward constructing positive mental simulations of difficult conversations.

In the first prototyping session, the main goal was to examine several phenomena and how they related to a processual, or game-structured conversation that was facilitated by objects. My foremost consideration was maintaining the moment of confrontation that Brian Eno emphasized for *Oblique Strategies*. It is essential that the cards create a degree of cognitive disruption.

I was also interested in the phenomenon of people reinterpreting writing with an open nature, vis a vis the ambiguous horoscope-like text created by Forer (1949) and the poetically diffuse *I Ching* (1967). I leveraged these concepts to help the participant evoke a meaningful response;

however, the concern remained that the open and vague nature of the writing that I had developed would create a dull, unengaging experience. Following Eno's suggestion, rather than deal out question cards and allow choice, cards were kept face down, and each player would choose one of the responses after thinking of a difficult conversation.

My initial idea was that, alone or in a small group, people could think of a difficult conversation that they might need to have, draw a question card, and ask that question as a prompt to roleplay, or as a prototypical approach to their problem. A diverse group of graduate students helped test the game. After thinking of their own difficult conversation, one of the students chose the question card, "What if nothing helps, then what?" With noticeable fluctuations in the student's voice, they reported having thought about starting a difficult conversation with a relative engaged in addictive and self-harming behavior. That student reported that at the moment they read the card, they felt free to have the conversation; an intervention might not help, but it was better than the alternative of letting the person continue the behavior. The next student refused to draw a question card, later reporting that they were afraid to draw a card after they thought about their own difficult conversation: they were afraid of what the card might say to them. Another student chose the card "What have you learned?" They revealed little other than they learned that having these conversations was difficult, intimidating, and took a lot of effort. Working this close to players' challenges—and real fears and consequences—is engaging; takes place in a deeply challenging environment; and is not conducive to mental simulation, prototyping, or risk-taking behavior.

In a separate prototyping session, I included scenario cards to lower the stakes for the participants. To begin the gameplay, players are dealt a small number of question cards, and scenario cards are shuffled and placed in a small pile, face down. Scenario cards are then drawn and read aloud. Each player chooses a question card and plays it in response to the scenario. Players use the card to frame that response, and, using their history and experience, ask the question to frame their own response.

The addition of scenario cards created an experience that was simulation-focused which allowed participants to speak to how they might handle a difficult conversation in an abstract sense. Playing the game together gives all participants the opportunity to respond to the same scenario and hear a variety of responses, any of which could inform their own approach to a future challenging moment. Here, the turn-taking

aspects and the material of the game enforced discipline, and because the stakes were lower (less personal), all participants responded to the scenario.

Gameplay was smoother and less dramatic using the second-round prototype. In this playtesting session, students would at times touch cards that others had played, rotating them to see the text more clearly as a person was speaking. Overall, the participants seemed engaged, focusing on the person speaking, at times verbally encouraging and indicating appreciation for each other's contributions. Twice, participants related personal experiences similar to those proposed on the cards. When drawing the card, "On a date, your companion constantly checks their phone," a student wryly shared that they had been on *that* date, which prompted laughter from the other students. The stakes never rose to the level of exposure I witnessed in the first group: no one revealed intensely personal information, and there were no fearful moments. After one round ended, one student mentioned how several of the situation cards reflected ignorance of Asian culture: some of the cards discussed parent and adult-child relationships where there could potentially be confrontation ("A parent does not respect your personal boundaries" and "A parent enters into a relationship you think is inappropriate, and asks how you feel"). In that student's experience, adult children would never confront parents in any fashion. Thinking about this kind of problem—that the game may represent a certain cultural perspective—is a challenge that may be possible to reduce, but no game is perspective-free. Yet, the goal of the game is for players to share their own perspectives on approaches to these difficult situations. In the context of the game, or life, the response of non-engagement is a legitimate choice in many contexts. Here, the situation is read and responded to from a different perspective, which enriches the players' perspectives.

After several months of playtesting, the power of Eno's moment of confrontation was made clear, from students' refusal to draw cards out of fear to the occasional facial grimaces or intakes of breath when cards are drawn from other playtesters. Humans place great faith in oracles. The practice of drawing from a hat, that moment of the draw-and-reveal (as in Tarot) has an almost supernatural significance. For groups whose members may be emotionally vulnerable to one another or unwilling or afraid of potential embarrassment, I recommend drawing a small hand of cards and looking for matches. For players in relationships characterized by trust, I would recommend dealing out all the question cards to the

entire group and using a “moment of confrontation” between the card and the player as a creative catalyst to approach the different challenges contained in the situations.

## CONCLUSIONS

In this study, framing gamespace proved to be among the most powerful concepts. *ELIZA*, *Oblique Strategies*, and the *Conversation Game* are successful because of the aleatoric feedback that the object provides and the limited scope of their responses. Frame *ELIZA*’s nonsensical responses as everyday language, and the Turing test fails. It quickly becomes apparent that we are not speaking with a human, but a radically limited AI. Within the tighter scope of the highly stylized conversation of Roge-rian therapy, however, *ELIZA* can sustain a dialog for some time. A user of the *I Ching* sees an artifact/process whose scope is vast. Thus, a satisfying response necessitates diverse output.

Frame scoping is also active during roleplay in ludic spaces. Because these behaviors are framed as “roles to play” or “just a game,” participants are more willing to accept unorthodox behaviors. Objects are one important way to understand that frame. Johan Huizinga (1950) writes of the role manifest in the costumes of bewigged and berobed judges: at the end of the workday, they can literally divest themselves of that role. Yet, games and objects offer a more subtle raiment for roleplay. If designers are thoughtful about a user’s anticipated scope of frame and the resultant set of interactions, they can deliver aleatoric (or even directed) responses that are stunningly compelling.

Eno’s account of the surprise he received when turning over a card is a second key concept. This moment of surprise can come from the game itself but also from the actions of other players. Playing a game whose content is completely created by the players—*1000 Blank White Cards* (Conner 2002), for instance—I frequently found myself laughing at a particularly apropos joke or being surprised at the turn of events when one of the other players played a card that I had not seen before. This moment of surprise can have a powerful, dramatic effect.

As any avid consumer of fortune cookies knows, the fortune is always applicable. It may take a moment or two to know how to apply “Alas! The onion you are eating is someone else’s water lily,” but it is not difficult for anyone to find applicable interpretations. Humans are powerfully adapted to recognize stimuli as meaningful pattern (Foster and Kokko 2009). The Forer effect and the output from my *Conversation Game* and *Oblique Strategies* indicate that people will do the work to make aleatoric stimuli

meaningful; it becomes a prompt for player action and encourages new thinking. If that stimuli are presented with a cleverly scoped frame, it is all the more compelling.

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PART III

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Ethics of Scholarship: Researching Games,  
Gamers, and Gaming





## The Hardcore Gamer Is Dead: Long Live Gamers

*Victoria L. Braegger and Ryan M. Moeller*

In this chapter, we tell the story of what can happen when a group loses its perceived ethos, or its claims to credibility. In this story, computer games were marketed and sold to young white men under the guise that if they bought and played enough mainstream, AAA-titled games, they

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Our title playfully refers to Leigh Alexander's (2014) discussion of the #gamergate controversy in her *Gamasutra* article titled, "Gamers' don't have to be your audience. 'Gamers' are over." She writes: "'Gamer' isn't just a dated demographic label that most people increasingly prefer not to use. Gamers are over. That's why they're so mad."

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could achieve the rank of “hardcore gamer.” This mystical and elusive title would give them the rights and privileges of the most sought after and powerful consumer demographic in the consumer electronics industry. Faced with the rise of independent game developers and the growing awareness that they did not have the entire industry catering to their desires, they felt their influence and credibility as hardcore gamers slipping away. Their resulting actions became known as #gamergate.

We posit that #gamergate was not just caused by the lack of diverse representation or gender *in* games—not that this isn’t a problem; it is. As Kishonna Gray and David Leonard (2018) note, “Video games have the power to perpetuate injustice” (p. 5) across physical and virtual communities, especially in regard to Black communities who have not only been purposefully left out of the discussion, but have had their culture and bodies commodified. But #gamergate was also a problem created by what Ken McAllister (2004) called the “computer game complex” (CGC), all the forces—educational, technological, industrial (including forces levied by the military-industrial complex), cultural, and economic—that focus on a singular purpose: selling more games. Several scholars working at the intersections of rhetoric and game studies have noted how the CGC interpellates players within capitalistic systems of activity. Kevin Moberly (2008) argues that the CGC constructs in-game success and victory in such ways “that a player’s triumph over the game, if it comes, is empty—the promise, perhaps, of a sequel, and desire, in the meantime, to purchase another game and repeat the cycle ad infinitum” (p. 297). The CGC’s advertising contributed to these empty promises by constructing the subjectivity of the hardcore gamer as someone who consumes mass quantities of information about the latest hardware and game releases, buys the latest *commercial* games and hardware (often as soon as they are released, if not before), and devotes hours upon caffeine-fueled hours of time “getting good” at games. The CGC created and maintained this ethos for the hardcore gamer to give purpose and credibility to a very expensive, highly repetitive pastime that trained players to accept an industry-constructed identity that, as Jess Marcotte (2018) notes, “is, by default, violent, misogynistic, and exclusionary on many levels.” David Golumbia (2009) argues that computer games have the ability to “not merely resemble the capitalistic structures of domination, [but] directly instantiate them and, in important ways, train human beings to become part of those systems” (p. 194). Christopher Paul (2018) echoes this sentiment, arguing many games operate in self-replicating meritocratic

structures, teaching players that “if you work hard enough, if you are good enough, you can follow a straightforward path to power, wealth, and resources” (p. 6). The rest of this chapter will look at one strategy of training that the CGC used to sell games: constructing the identity of the hypermasculinized, hardcore gamer through advertising.

## RESISTANCE TO DIVERSITY OR A LOSS OF ETHOS? A SELECTIVE HISTORY OF #GAMERGATE

#gamergate has been studied largely as resistance to the diversification of cultural representation in the gaming community. During the height of the controversy, Leigh Alexander (2014), then editor-at-large for *Gamasutra*, asserted that the game industry had failed to cultivate a gaming culture, resulting in a vacuum where a “vocal minority that’s not representative of most people” were fed a host of empty promises by developers and marketers. Torill Mortenson (2016) argues that the ethos of the hardcore gamer identity was constructed by two groups: political value-conservatives who vilified the identity as harmful to family values and developers who pandered to the identity (p. 12). The hardcore gamer came to believe that he owned the gamer identity and was due all the rights and privileges that came with it, including the ability to shape the industry and be the sole arbiter of gamers’ cultural values. Those who identified as #gamergaters and claimed the hardcore gamer identity convened in internet relay chats (IRCs) to discuss the “downfall of gamer culture” and the driving forces behind it. In the #gamergate IRC #burgersandfries, Pico (2014) laid blame on “casuals,” or those who minimally invest time and resources into playing games, stating, “SJWs [social justice warriors] and casuals are clearly on the same side, who do you think invaded the game culture in the first place? casuals. . . SJWs are just trying to put the final nail in the coffin [*sic*].” The phrase “filthy casuals” or “fucking casuals” is used multiple times within the IRC’s record.

According to Alexander (2014), by 2014, the hardcore gamer had already been killed off:

It’s clear that most of the people who drove [game] revenues in the past have grown up—either out of games, or into more fertile spaces, where small and diverse titles can flourish, where communities can quickly spring up around creativity, self-expression and mutual support, rather than consumerism. There are new audiences and new creators alike there.

Traditional “gaming” is sloughing off, culturally and economically, like the carapace of a bug.

Cherie Todd (2015) described the backlash to this “sloughing off of traditional gaming” as a “fight against the diversification of gaming culture” (p. 66). Todd framed #gamergate as a response to a cultural shift in the gaming community, a shift influenced by recognition of the culturally embedded portrayals of sexism and misogyny in games and the game industry. We disagree, somewhat, with this characterization. We think it went something more like this: with the rise of independent game developers offering thousands of non-AAA titles, the next generation of hardcore gamers and a few hangers-on suddenly saw the thin but shiny veneer of an empty ethos falling away and panicked. A small subset of the gaming community retaliated with an orchestrated online harassment campaign against already marginalized developers, players, and game critics for their “radical ideas” of representation in games.

#gamergate began on August 16, 2014, when Eron Gjoni (2014) publicly accused his ex-girlfriend, Zoë Quinn—an independent game developer—of engaging in romantic relationships with journalists in exchange for favorable reviews for her game *Depression Quest* (2013). His accusatory blog post, “thezoepost,” was nearly 9,500 words long and included personal emails, texts, and chats with Quinn. Within six hours, the post was shared on 4chan, where users accused Nathan Grayson, a journalist at Kotaku, of favorably reviewing *Depression Quest* after sleeping with Quinn. Grayson had never reviewed *Depression Quest*.

Initially, game journalism websites refused to report on the issue, stoking the fire and leading to claims of corruption in game journalism. On August 27, 2014, Adam Baldwin (2014) tweeted two videos about the “Quinnspiracy” and tagged them #gamergate. The group stuck with the hashtag on Twitter and organized on Reddit, 4chan, 8chan, Tumblr, and YouTube. In a little less than a month, the hashtag had been used in over a million tweets; the single-event scandal implied by the—gate suffix was clearly not going away. The group defined itself on the “official wikipedia [*sic*] of #gamergate and #notyourshield” as “a *consumer revolt* against unethical practices in video game journalism and entertainment media, including (but not limited to) corruption and conflicts of interest, collusion, and the censorship of ideas and discussion” (emphasis ours, “Gamergate”).

Within two months, #gamergaters launched Operation Disrespectful Nod, a coordinated campaign against game journalism websites such as Kotaku and Gamasutra by demanding that advertisers such as Intel and Adobe pull their ads. What these websites had done, according to #gamergaters, was publish a series of articles now known as the “Gamers are Dead” series in which authors questioned the validity of the hardcore gamer identity and critiqued it for being exclusionary and not representing the actual diversity of people who played games. #gamergate attacked the series’ authors and anyone else whose critique of games smacked of feminism or identity politics because they didn’t account for gaming’s supposed primary audience—the hardcore gamer, a young, white, cisgendered, heterosexual, and hypermasculinized male. This demographic, Anastasia Salter and Bridget Blodgett (2017) argue, is “the face of the mainstream industry and the face of the AAA game” (p. 94).

We argue that through a process of interpellation, the hardcore gamer accepted the credibility promised by the games industry (CGC) through numerous, carefully targeted advertisements. Louis Althusser (1971) described interpellation as the “hailing of a subject” (p. 119). As an example, he describes a police officer yelling, “Hey you!” after someone on the street. When a person—any person—turns and acknowledges the call, they are transformed into a subject by the ideology, by the police officer in this example, who hailed them (p. 118). The key is that upon acknowledging the hail of their own free will, the subjects identify themselves as subjects, and signal their subjection to the conditions of the call (p. 123). “Hey, you!” the CGC calls, “You need to show your friends that you’re the most hardcore gamer by pre-ordering *Call of Duty: Black Ops 4!*” or “You need to play Rockstar Games’ *Red Dead Redemption II* in order to truly appreciate your television’s 4 K clarity!” or “Upgrade to a PS4 now in order to take advantage of Sony’s exclusive PS4 content for *Destiny 2!*” Consumers who responded to the CGC’s marketing by ostentatiously consuming game platforms and games (waiting in long lines to be among the first to purchase Microsoft’s Xbox One or the latest release of *Call of Duty*, for example) were—at least in part—acknowledging that hailing. It is possible that consumers purchased pre-released games and hardware because they were passionate about a gaming hobby; however, Kotaku’s editor-in-chief Stephen Totilo explained in June of 2014 how the industry’s focus on the future of gaming had ignored actual gamers’ consuming and gaming behaviors in favor of telling those gamers what

upcoming, future releases they should be buying: “For too long gaming coverage has focused on the vague future, the preview mindset of possibilities and maybes. And when it’s involved the present it has been drenched in the dreary falseness of empty interviews, bland producer-speak and executive-hype” (para. 4). From Totilo’s perspective as the editor-in-chief of a major gaming news outlet, the CGC explained consumers’ actions of pre-ordering or upgrading as them having heeded advertisers’ calls. Judd Ruggill and Ken McAllister (2011) noted that interpellation is imprecise and scattershot; it’s “more nuanced, partnering coercion with coaxing, summons with wheedling, inquiry with agreement, and hope with chance” (pp. 36–37). And yet Ruggill and McAllister argue that industry advertising is insistent, demanding players prove their worth, their abilities, and their masculinity by buying more and more games. The credibility that #gamergaters were promised included demonstrable proof of masculinity, sexual prowess, social standing, and a modest influence over future game releases. Hardcore gamers—those had taken up advertisers’ calls—were all too willing to describe their ethos or credibility using the very terms that the industry used to hail them across Reddit and Twitter: they positioned themselves against “filthy” or “fucking casuals” and “social justice warriors,” most of whom didn’t consume enough of or the right games and just wanted to upset the CGC’s status quo.

Credibility, or ethos, has been a part of western rhetorical traditions going at least as far back as Aristotle, who defined ethos as “character, especially moral character” (Kennedy 1991, p. 37). More recent work on ethos characterizes it as a dwelling place. For example, Michael Hyde (2004) emphasizes ethos’ “primordial meaning”: “one can understand the phrase ‘the ethos of rhetoric’ to refer to the way discourse is used to transform space and time into ‘dwelling places’” which “define the grounds, the abodes or habitats, where a person’s ethics and moral character take form and develop” (p. xiii). Recently, digital humanist and game studies scholar Carly Kocurek found a particularly revelatory letter to the editor of *Computer Gaming World* from 1995. Kocurek, working in the archives of the Strong Museum of Play, found the letter written by 76-year-old and self-described “hard-core gamer” Octavia Reed, who, “[loved] video games but [was] frustrated by the magazine’s coverage” of games that were “so sophomoric that they are boring” (Reed qtd. by Kocurek 2019). The magazine’s editors responded that, “what we should have said was that four-year-old girls and 70-year-old women are not our ‘target’ audience. [. ..] persons outside that target group

may be unamused at occasional generational references or humor and may become impatient with what may appear to be a sophomoric tone” (Kocurek 2019). In short, the CGC was saying through the editors of *Computer Gaming World* that “We’re happy that you are buying and playing games, but we’re clearly *not* targeting 70-year-old women” (interestingly, Reed built her own ethos on owning and playing “over 150 games” and having purchased about 24 titles the year prior to penning the letter). Surrounding this exchange were surely advertisement-after-review-after-advertisement aimed at a younger generation of scatalogically humored and sophomoric males.

In the capstone chapter of Hyde’s collection, Carolyn Miller (2004) cautioned that “moral virtue, the goal-setting locus of intentionality that ultimately defines the identity of a character or a community, is largely absent from [the ethos of computational systems]” (p. 213). Computer games are computational systems, and many of the online discussion forums surrounding computer games strip players of the characteristics that might help identify them as moral agents, relying on players’ gamertags or gender as the only identifying marker. Thus, the character or the ethos of the hardcore gamer could not have come from playing games themselves; it had to come from somewhere greater and more conspicuous than a singular gameworld. That being our position in this chapter, we do recognize that current trends in producing and consuming recorded gameplay (often including gamer commentary) may be creating spaces for gamers to demonstrate moral virtue in connection with their gameplay, but we do not address those spaces here.

To expand Hyde’s (2004) notions of discursive dwelling places, Thomas Rickert (2013) uses Heidegger’s notion of dwelling to include “compartments that emerge from life as it is lived, from what we do, say, and make” (p. 223). Further, Rickert argues that “character and credibility themselves emerge from a way of life that is itself already embedded within locations, communities, societies, and environments and [are] spoken by them even as we create and transform them” (p. 222). This complex notion of a dwelling place that is already situated in the materialities of life, even before we act on it, is what Althusser refers to as the category of the subject: “you and I are *always already* subjects, and as such constantly practice the rituals of ideological recognition” (p. 117). Indeed, for the CGC to have been able to hail (appeal to or call to) the hardcore gamer to consume massive quantities of games and game-related hardware, the character, credibility, and subjectivities of the hardcore

gamer had to have already been available to those who accepted the hailing. In the next section, we will show how the hardcore gamer identity was created through interpellation by carefully targeted advertisements.

### PORNSTARS AND OTHER SEXUAL OBJECTS: WHAT CGC ADVERTISING PROMISED MEN COULD PLAY WITH

Unfortunately, there is a wealth of examples we could have chosen. We could have chosen the 2012 ad for the PlayStation Vita created by ad agency TBWA Paris. It depicted a woman with breasts on her chest and back, challenging players to “Touch both sides. Twice the sensations.” A 1995 ad for the Sega Saturn displayed a naked woman lying seductively on blue satin sheets, her breasts and pubic area covered by screenshots of games you could play. The text on the ad suggests that the games look so good and are so engrossing that the person viewing the ad might have not even noticed the woman. The 2005 ad for *Narc* displayed a woman with ample exposed cleavage leaning into a man’s car with the tagline, “A big bust is about to go down,” referring by way of synecdoche to the woman by her breasts (big bust), the theme of the game (drug busts), and a colloquial term for a sexual act that also means that something is about to happen (to go down).

We could have chosen any number of different advertisements, and we could go on at length about the ads we didn’t choose. For this chapter, we selected ads that span time (1981–2013), medium (print, video, and an email campaign), and platform (arcade machines, Sega Genesis, Sony PlayStation, and Microsoft Xbox One) in order to demonstrate the CGC’s insistent hailing of the hardcore gamer across time and space. Below, we describe and analyze the print ads for *Moon War* (1981), *Davis Cup World Tour* (1992), and the Sony PlayStation (1995); the video ads for *Juiced* (2005) and *Guitar Hero 5* (2009); and the default template for a customizable 2013 email advertisement campaign for the Xbox One.

#### *Print Game Ads Promised Sex, with Some Objectification on the Side*

In 1981, the arcade game *Moon War* ran an ad under the tagline, “The Ultimate Moon Shot.” This ad represents a double hailing: the subject is called forth as being both a potential hero of space travel and a conqueror of women. The first subject position, a space-traveling hero, comes from the arcade cabinet’s graphics and title. The phrase “the ultimate moon



shot” was taken from Apollo 11’s spaceflight that put men on the moon. Colloquially, *moon shot* refers to an ambitious, almost impossible-to-achieve feat—much like putting man on the moon. The second, even more gendered and problematic subject position involves the objectification of the model in the ad. The ad depicts pornographic film actor Stacey Donovan, a thin, blonde woman, leaning over the machine suggestively. She is positioned in a way that her body obscures half of the arcade cabinet, including the TV monitor and the game’s controls. She is wearing very short shorts, and her t-shirt—depicting the *Moon War* title—is pulled up, exposing her lower back. She looks coyly over her shoulder and directly into the camera, calling to the observer. The game isn’t the object of the ad at all; Donovan is, and she beckons the observer to come and play. Donovan’s position in the ad—obscuring the cabinet’s game interface and enveloped by the arcade cabinet as if she were the game—invites the hardcore gamer to play with her: she is the ultimate moon shot, an unattainable sexual object that the ad promises is attainable by playing the game.

Appeals to a specific demographic via print advertisements persisted beyond arcade cabinets. In 1992, Tengen released *Davis Cup World Tour*, a Sega Genesis (or Sega Mega Drive outside of the United States) game based on the annual men’s tennis event that crowns the World Champion team. A magazine advertisement for the game parodied Martin Elliot’s 1976 Tennis Girl poster, in which a female model faces away from the camera, holding a tennis racket in her right hand while her left hand pulls up her skirt, revealing she isn’t wearing anything underneath (Brown 2011). The *Davis Cup World Tour* ad is nearly identical to the original poster, with one important change: the model is holding up her skirt with a copy of the game. The scene plays out under the tagline, “Take advantage with...” in a single line of bold text at the top of the image, the tagline a creepy and sexually predatory double entendre: the use of the ellipsis asks the subject to both take advantage in a tennis match, meaning to need one point to win the game, and to take advantage of the model. This advertisement ran in English, French, and German game magazines (“Davis Cup Tennis”), hailing young heterosexual males to demonstrate their sexual prowess by *taking advantage*, presumably in the game, but the screenshots depicting actual gameplay are significantly smaller than the model is. Moreover, the ad suggests that all that is needed to take advantage of the model is the game hardware that she is holding in her left hand. It’s significant to note there is no sexually explicit imagery in

the *Davis Cup World Tour* game whatsoever. Players play the game as a male tennis athlete and have the ability to customize their tennis experience down to the material the court is made out of (hard, clay, grass, and indoors). Thus, much like *Moon War*, the sexual objectification of the model in the advertisement has little to do with the game itself (in fact, there are no women in the game); rather, it is a strategy for selling games.

Shortly after *Davis Cup World Tour*, Sony introduced one of the early mascots behind the first PlayStation: Sofia from *Battle Arena Toshinden* (1995). In the ads, Sofia was depicted as a sexual dominatrix, wielding a whip to submit the viewer to her wishes. Standing on a PlayStation, Sofia wears a black sleeveless leotard, leg warmers, arm warmers, and high heels and begins to play a game with the viewer based on the game *Simon Says*, titled (appropriately) “Sofia Says.” She begins the game by commanding the viewer to spend their money on the latest hardware and to spend money at their local game store. Then the advertisement throws a curveball: “Now give Sofia a kiss.” However, Sofia didn’t say, “Sofia says,” and therefore the viewer must be punished.

The “Sofia Says” advertisement represents an almost perfect example of hailing the hardcore gamer. By using a dominatrix (a role in which a sexual partner tells the other player what to do—usually a humiliating, subservient task like getting on one’s knees and barking), Sony was able to use the imperative voice and, as one reviewer of this chapter suggested, subjugate gamers to a fictional dominatrix whose only power comes from the limited rules of the game, *Simon Says*. Sofia commanded players to take the requisite steps to becoming a hardcore gamer: pre-order the latest hardware, spend “the” money at the video game store immediately, and be enough of a “man” to take the hurt Sofia is about to give you (er, we mean demonstrate your masculinity by purchasing the game).

### *Video Didn’t Kill the Print Porn Star*

If there were any doubt that the CGC’s ideal gamer was and may still be male and heterosexual, game trailers leave little room for debate. In 2005, the marketing campaign for the racing game *Juiced* appealed to the heterosexual male gaze. The ad begins with two young men playing the game in a car when a young, red-headed woman appears, framed by the car’s window. As the players change the car’s color in the game, the woman’s shirt changes color to correspond with their selection. The

players notice this, and as they begin to realize that their controllers are somehow linked to the woman's appearance, they begin to play with greater interest and intensity, pointing their controllers at the woman. She is reduced to an in-game object to be controlled and played by the young men. The players use their controller to spin her around, enlarge her breasts, and remove her clothes. The two men gawk and laugh. The woman is distressed, trying to cover her body and looking around to see how to get out of the situation, but the boys continue to play. In the end, she is literally branded with the *Juiced* logo: she has become the property of the men in the ad and ostensibly by the men buying the game. Though the marketing for *Juiced* relied upon the objectification of women to sell games, there are no female characters in the game. It is strictly a street racing game with no player-character avatar and no female non-playable characters. The objectification of women was a marketing strategy, designed to appeal to a very specific audience, and maintained the hardcore gamers' claim to their ethos: games were for young, heterosexual men to play, and women who appear in the games (or ancillary to games) were playthings.

The advertisement campaign for *Juiced* was pulled and ultimately banned from the air. That didn't stop other objectifying advertisements from being aired, however. In 2009, *Guitar Hero 5* aired an advertisement parodying Tom Cruise's character in the movie *Risky Business* (1983). Instead of one person sliding into frame to the sound of Bob Seger's "Old Time Rock 'n' Roll," eleven Playboy Bunnies slide in and begin dancing, Guitar Hero guitars around their necks, their hair varying shades of blonde, brunette, and red. Twenty seconds into the ad, the camera pans out and shows the women dancing around Hugh Hefner, relaxing in his red bathrobe and armchair, smoking a pipe. As the camera pans back in, Hefner states, "What? I like variety?" and immediately, the point of the ad is revealed: the game includes 85 playable songs by 83 artists. The Playboy Bunnies represented the variety of songs available in *Guitar Hero 5*. This ad hails the viewer to be like Hugh Hefner—a man with enough sexual prowess to have nearly a dozen women pining for his attention—and to accomplish that goal, the first thing to do is appreciate variety. *Guitar Hero 5*'s ad came out nearly 30 years after *Moon War* but still enforced and maintained the promises of credibility made to the hardcore gamer: games were for heterosexual young males, and collecting and playing a variety of games could be likened to collecting and conquering a variety of women.

*A Return to a Familiar, if Stereotypical, Dwelling Place*

The gaming industry held to its ideal image of the hardcore gamer—a young, heterosexual male—long after consumer research showed that nearly as many women play games as men do. In 2008, the Electronic Software Association reported that 40% of gamers were women and that women over the age of 18 “represent a greater portion of the game-playing population (33%) than boys age 17 or younger (18%).” The proportion of women playing games has steadily risen from there (currently at 46% in 2019), and the second fact—that adult women represent a greater percentage of the game-playing population than boys—hasn’t changed. Despite these statistics, the industry continued—almost as if by habit—to target young men with their ads.

Microsoft released the Xbox One in November 2013 and tried to build consumer interest for the holiday gift season by revealing a do-it-yourself (DIY) email advertising campaign entitled, “We got your back.” The ad encouraged men to send an email to their female partners with a singular goal: to buy them an Xbox One. What fascinates us about the email is that Microsoft lays out an ethical appeal for the hardcore gamer, complete with what Rickert (2013) called the dwelling places, compartments, and ways of life that have emerged from ad after ad that hailed the hardcore gamer into being. The language of the default email template assumed several things: the sender is male, the recipient is female, and they are in a heterosexual relationship; also, based upon these bodily compartments, the sender is a gamer, and the recipient isn’t. The sender’s list of hobbies has been socially constructed as masculine: watching football, working toward abs he has “always dreamed of,” and slaying zombies. The letter begins, “Hey, Honey,” before using feminine stereotypes to describe what the recipient prefers to do over playing games, such as knitting, dancing, and talking on Skype to the recipient’s “favorite sister.” The ad ends with the line, “p.s. Did I mention how beautiful you are?” Near the beginning of the sender’s plea, he states, “I know, I know. You’d rather knit than watch me slay zombies, but hear me out on this. Xbox One is actually for both of us.” The sender acknowledges that the recipient doesn’t like watching him game since she would rather be knitting (Wilhelm 2013). The email reveals the hardcore gamer’s dwelling place: men play games, women watch men play games, or they knit, dance, or talk with their sisters.

The email also uses the hallmark tone of the hardcore gamer—sarcasm—to downplay the self-centered, egotistical plea for a \$500 gaming system that’s for “both of us.” Sarcasm also signifies that the hardcore gamer never takes things too seriously, except games. The sender promises that the Xbox One will benefit both of them “together and apart, but mostly together,” and recognizes that the recipient has been encouraging him to “play with others.” The final line of the email demonstrates the hardcore gamer’s sense of sarcasm: “p.p.p.s. Long story short: I really, really, really want one for the holidays—y’know... for us.” The sender’s displays of affection for the recipient are tempered by sarcastic hedgings that focus on the sender’s desire for an Xbox One. (Cuz, y’know... being hardcore means *speaking* hardcore. Y’know?) Ultimately, in order to score an Xbox One, the sender needed to appeal to the receiver’s more feminine sensibilities. The sender emphasizes the woman’s would-be ability to play arcade games on-demand versus watching him play *Dead Rising 3*, watch movies versus watching football, and to have exercise software available at her fingertips versus the console only allowing her partner to play games. He also needed to promise that the long nights of watching him play games or knitting were over without really taking any steps to make those promises a reality.

Microsoft’s DIY email campaign symbolized the embodied hailing of the hardcore gamer. It materially manifested what Jared Colton and Steve Holmes (2018), drawing on Rickert, called the ethical “compartmentments, habits, [and] dispositions” made available to him: “one way [that] we can evaluate the ethics in object-oriented and material rhetorics is to analyze how the given technology alters the characters and habits of the people who use it or are affected by it” (p. 48). The underlined words and phrases in the advertisement represented areas that the sender could alter slightly by choosing from a predefined list of options. These options allowed the consumer to embody the persona of the hardcore gamer through the “We got your back” ad and to articulate key aspects of that persona—not so much in terms of improving their relationships or recognizing the needs of their romantic partners, but in terms of buying games and game hardware.

## MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING

Would-be hardcore gamers and #gamergaters need not have panicked. There are still plenty of AAA-game titles and annual installments from

the Call of Duty franchise to play. Game critics like Todd (2015) called for developers to create a “more inclusive and diverse culture” (p. 66) that would improve in-game representation for marginalized communities in response to #gamergate. However, Adrienne Shaw’s (2015) findings debated the immediate importance of such representation. Shaw conducted an ethnographic study of marginalized players who didn’t necessarily identify as gamers (but who still played games) in order to investigate the impacts of the general lack of gender representation and cultural diversity in games. She found that her participants did not need to identify with in-game characters in order to keep playing a game. In fact, they did not need to see themselves represented within the game to enjoy the experience. Shaw referred to this as players’ general “disinvestment in the characters” of “solo, offline” games: “although a game experience *might* produce an indexical player-avatar relationship, [...] assuming this is something good games simply do ignores a wide variety of game-play experiences” (p. 96). Shaw’s participants did not need to identify as hardcore gamers, or even as gamers for that matter, to play games.

Shaw’s finding is echoed in a 2015 Pew research study that found 48% of women play games, while only 6% described themselves as “gamers.” Though statistics surrounding game consumption and identity shouldn’t be surprising—after all, a multi-billion-dollar industry couldn’t have been sustained by young male consumption alone—the statistics often are surprising. Carly Kocurek (2015) notes in *Coin-Operated Americans: Rebooting Boyhood at the Video Game Arcade* that “Increasingly, statistics about video game players and video game sales bear out the notion that gendered and age-based perceptions of video gaming represent cultural biases more than they reflect who is actually participating in gaming as day-to-day practices” (p. 198). Samantha Blackmon and Alisha Karabinus (2016) found perception of audience and cultural bias key, noting, “Many people believe that [the lack of character build options] is because the main audience is still white, male, and only interested in certain body types. That’s the perceived audience of today.” What these findings suggest to us is that the persona of the hardcore gamer did not come from the socio-cultural activity of playing games at all, although the activity did not discourage some of the more problematic behaviors #gamergaters displayed. Rather, the persona was constructed by the CGC as a strategy for selling games and game-related hardware. And it worked, not only as a strategy for selling games (though surely not the only strategy), but in

developing an identity based around a highly specific demographic that were led to believe that they were *the* gaming demographic.

The desire to maintain one's sense of ethos and credibility is a strong motivator for action, no matter how minimal the perceived threat. #gamergate exposed the fact that some thought the promised benefits of becoming a hardcore gamer—of answering the industry's "hey, you!" call—were worth protecting. The would-be hardcore gamer realized a difficult truth during #gamergate: the ethos promised by the CGC was a just another consumer identity, constructed solely to sell them games. The shiny veneer of the promises made to the hardcore gamer—masculinity, sexual conquest, and a romantic partner who lived to knit and watch them "slay zombies"—cracked and wore away. The hardcore gamer is dead; long live gamers.

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## Ethos and Interaction in *The Elder Scrolls Online*

*Wendi Sierra and Douglas Eyman*

In our previous work (Sierra and Eyman 2013), we examined player interactions in *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*) (Blizzard Entertainment 2004) to better understand how ethos, authority, and credibility work in massively multiplayer online roleplaying games (MMORPG). In that study, we theorized ethos as a rhetorical attribute that is co-constructed via the interaction of player, audience, game mechanics, and game environment. One of our findings was that players placed great stock in skillful use of external sources (game-related paratexts). This approach to ethos matches contemporary approaches that foreground appeals to authority that draw on external sources (a shift that we trace to the influence of John Locke’s approach, as detailed in “An Essay on Human Understanding”), but this

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is precisely the opposite of the classical approach of Isocrates and Aristotle, for whom such external sources were considered of secondary importance at best; for these classical rhetoricians, ethos resided within the rhetor.

To better understand ethos in online roleplaying games, we turned to *The Elder Scrolls Online* (*ESO*) (ZeniMax Online Studios 2014), which launched April 4, 2014. We theorized that there would be relatively few paratexts available to players for a new game, and therefore the construction of ethos would likely follow the classical model, as demonstrated through clarity of language and demonstration of knowledge about the game. We captured chatlogs from the first two weeks of play and analyzed the posts via statistical methods that helped us see how grammatical correctness and message length relate to both the response rate of queries and the perceived ethos of respondents. In essence, we took a snapshot of interactions at the outset of the game because it represented a rhetorical situation distinct from a longer running game with established supporting external resources and a more developed culture of player interaction.

In our findings for this new project, we see that rhetorical style, reflected in message length and grammatical correctness, appears to play a role in the relative responsiveness to queries in these early days of play. Using qualitative coding schema coupled with statistical analysis, we found that the majority of interactions focused on task-related communication (as opposed to conversations about lore, opinions about the game, or theorycrafting, the latter of which appeared in much lower proportions for *ESO* than it did in our study of *WoW*). Guild recruitment messages represented the most formal entries in our dataset, and requests for assistance were proportionally more grammatically correct than answers to those queries. Our findings suggest that players read the rhetorical situation of requesting information as distinct from various other types of interactions they might have in chat; also, that measures of grammar and word count, when compared against a message's topic, demonstrate critical awareness of audience and purpose, particularly when engaging in a highly persuasive rhetorical task.

## GAMES AS SITES OF COMPOSITION

Over the last few years, there has been a steady increase in research on the relationship between writing and games (as opposed to the longer standing interest in games and education more broadly), from analyzing writing ecologies related to games to seeing gameplay itself as an act

of composition (Eyman and Davis 2016; deWinter and Moeller 2014; Colby and Shultz Colby 2016). Our project looks at accessible writing that users engage while playing multiplayer games, focusing on the direct player-to-player communication that occurs in built-in chat. Given the constraints of the game—the difficulty of building an individual reputation in a world that generally does not record the histories, arguments, and actions of the players, and the inability to construct texts beyond very brief elocutions within the in-game chat feature—we wondered how players could effectively demonstrate ethos, and whether such demonstrations would follow similar patterns as those we analyzed in our work with *WoW*. Our initial reviews of the data suggested that players crafted queries and statements with a wide range of levels of formality and message length, and that these features of discourse could be seen as a proxy for ethos in the players' interactions.

We embrace Terry Harpold's (2007) definition of gameplay as “the expression of combinations of definite semiotic elements in specific relations to equally definite technical elements” (para. 1)—which is also an apt definition of writing, if the semiotic elements equate to ideas, and the technical elements represent allowable forms of expression. Playing games that feature narratives within which the players operate (like the MMORPGs that we study) is like participating in a great collaborative form of participatory composition: each play-through represents player choices as they interact with the games' procedural rules (the underlying code, not accessible to the players) and the game environment (which includes both visual design and the physics engine). Examining games through a writing studies lens (rather than a cultural studies or literary analysis approach), allows us to examine more closely the active construction of meaning that happens in the player–game and player–player interactions.

## INTERACTION-BASED ETHOS

For our previous study (Sierra and Eyman 2013), we used a two-step process of data collection. Over a period of three weeks we recorded conversations from trade chat in *WoW*, looking specifically for discussions in which players were asking for advice and receiving responses; these texts were then presented to our interviewees for evaluation. This stage of data collection involved six players, all of whom had at one point been in guilds with one or both of the coauthors and who varied in experience

in/commitment to the game. Our *WoW* study found three attributes were repeatedly mentioned as signs of authority: specificity, extra-game research, and experience, with references to external sources representing the strongest form of ethos. In the current study, we examine how players develop ethos in the absence of elaborate and well-recognized external sources (such as those that were frequently referenced in our *WoW* study). Like the previous study, our data consists of captures of chatlogs from the main chat function of the game, but instead of focusing on a game with a long history such as *WoW*, we had the opportunity to collect data from the initial release of a new MMORPG, *ESO*, providing access to a very different rhetorical situation.

Although there are many wikis and other online resources devoted to Elder Scrolls as a franchise, at the time *ESO* premiered (2014), there were relatively few paratexts that specifically aimed to help players. Tamriel Foundry, a user community and forum site devoted to *ESO* specifically, was started in 2012; at the time of the game's official release, there were about 100 active community members (compared to 49,000 in December 2018), and relatively few forum posts (many of which focused on starting an in-game guild). The subreddit */r/elderscrollsonline* was created early in 2012 and was mostly populated by beta testers before the official release; there were relatively few subscribers (compared to 300,000 in August 2020), and activity was not robust. At the time of release, there were three wikis that players could turn to for information: The Unofficial Elder Scrolls Pages wiki was the most updated and comprehensive, adding an *ESO* section at the outset of the beta test, but like the other wikis, it was continually being edited as information about the game was divined through gameplay to make updates to the beta test information. The Gamepedia Elder Scrolls Online wiki in April featured many stubs (not fully developed pages) and was missing several pages in the categories of Quests and Combat skills (among others). The Wikia *ESO* wiki was least developed of the three, with no new updates during the first two weeks after launch. (There is currently an IGN wiki devoted to *ESO*, but it wasn't started until 2015.) At the time of our study, the landscape of external resources and paratexts was still under development, and vastly fewer resources existed for *ESO* than were available for the much longer running *WoW*. In our dataset, we found only four references to external sites (two references to reddit and two references Tamriel Foundry forums):

*Message 3559*: what level should I head to Deshaan at?

*Message 3563*: np, tamriel foundry told me msg

*Message 6916:* IF you want a vamp bite there is a group on reddit offering them free...

*Message 7072:* i dont think any one is crying... the most emotional ones are the people who are defending the game

*Message 7073:* You should see the forums.

*Message 7077:* you should see reddit. It's a tribal lovefest.

Without access to extensive external reference materials, players need different means for representing knowledge and authority; we were fortunate to collect data at this point in the game's development. In the absence of paratexts, we turn to an analysis of rhetorical style, which follows the classical Aristotelian mode of representing ethos through well-constructed discourse.

## METHODS

### *Playing the Game*

In their discussion of using games in the teaching of composition, Johnson and Colby (2013) argue that teachers need to play games themselves in order to develop the expertise needed to effectively use them for teaching—we would expand that argument to video game research as well. To effectively analyze elements of a given game, the researcher must become deeply familiar with the game's mechanics, environment, and the discourses of the player community. Too often have we seen attempts at game-based research fail because the researcher assumed a light engagement with the game would be sufficient in understanding how it works (in general); this is the equivalent of attempting a serious close reading of a literary text by only reading the first few pages. As previously mentioned, the game lore and even much of the geography for *ESO* is drawn from previous entries in the main Elder Scrolls franchise. Collectively, we have played several hundred hours of previous Elder Scrolls games, giving us a comfortable level of familiarity with the game world via its predecessors. Indeed, this expertise in Elder Scrolls lore would become an important requirement for effective analysis of the chat data we collected (discussed more fully below). In addition to extensive engagement with previous games, both authors played the game throughout the data collection process in 2014 and intermittently over the next several years. Thus, we had direct experiences that mirrored some

of conversations of players experiencing the challenges (and bugs) of a just-released game and continued our engagement with the gameworld and community concurrent with our work on this project.

### *Data Collection*

We recorded a total of 28 hours of in-game chat posts between April 5, 2014 and April 18, 2014, the first two weeks following *ESO*'s official release. It is, however, important to note that the game had several "open beta" weekends prior to launch and offered a five-day early access to any player who preordered the game. Thus, while these recordings were drawn from the earliest days of the game's full release, there were nonetheless players who had been playing anywhere from a week to a few months already. Messages were recorded between 6:00 and 8:00 Eastern on weekdays and between 2:00 and 4:00 Eastern on weekends with the expectation that these times would capture high activity from a broad spectrum of players. This method netted us over 8000 lines of player conversation with thousands of players represented. This analysis looks at two days' worth of chat data, April 10th and April 16th, which together comprise a total of 1622 messages by 470 users in 632 different conversational threads.

Unlike other MMORPGs, which often require external modification to record chat messages, *ESO* has in-game commands that allow any player to record chat channels and publish these logs to a .txt file at the end of their play session. All chat was recorded from the general zone chat in a Davon's Watch, one of the early major cities for the Ebonheart Pact faction. Recording city zone chat has benefits and drawbacks—players aren't typically completing quests in a main city, and so they may be more talkative. Players often return to main cities throughout their time in an MMORPG, whether it be to stock up on goods, to empty their bags, or to logout in an area that will give them bonus experience points. Thus, major cities are usually filled with more players of differing experience levels than other zones, which will normally only have players completing specific quests.

### *Coding Categories*

This analysis utilizes both quantitative measures and qualitative coding of chat messages to explore the shape of general chat and consider how

players develop communicative practices in response to highly fluid and evolving rhetorical situations. The quantitative measures recorded for this dataset include the timestamp, message length, and number of unique participants. We also have used content analysis to parse these conversations with three qualitative coding dimensions: grammar/punctuation, type of communication, and topic of communication. As Margaret Sandelowski, Corrine I. Volis, and George Knafel (2009) argue, this quantification of qualitative data offers significant benefits. First, content analysis as a method for ordering and analyzing chat data helps “to facilitate pattern recognition or otherwise extract meaning from qualitative data, account for all data, document analytic moves, and verify interpretations” (p. 210). Sandelowski, Volis, and Knafel contend that outside of “manifestly numbered entities such as age, duration of an event, and laboratory values, there is no purely quantitative data collection per se even in health, behavioral, and social sciences research commonly referred to as quantitative” (p. 212). The code for type of communication is drawn from Robert Freed Bales’s (1950) Interaction Process Analysis (IPA), a schema that has been used extensively to understand computer-mediated communication (CMC). IPA focuses on the perceived goal of communication, and splits messages between two purposes: social orientation and task communication. These dimensions are explained in Tables 13.1, 13.2, and 13.3.

The first six coding categories in the IPA dimension describe messages in which players are conveying socioemotional statements, positive and negative (see Table 13.1). These range from simple response-type messages that include solidarity or disagreement to messages that more directly engage other users, either through support or antagonism. Jorge Peña and Jeffrey T. Hancock’s (2006) study of user interaction in *Jedi Knight II: Jedi Outcast* found a preponderance of socioemotional communication, suggesting that these are a critically important part of recreational CMC environments. Peña and Hancock’s study presents game communication as an outlier when compared to Bales’s (1950) original small group findings and to other studies of non-recreational CMC use, both of which find an overwhelming proportion of task-focused communication over socioemotional communication.

Bales’s (1950) delineation of negative socioemotional responses into disagreement, tension, and antagonism, do in some ways flatten the complicated communicative effect of trolling behavior. Claire Hardaker’s (2010) research on CMC communication defines trolls as users who



**Table 13.1** IPA coding for socioemotional statements

<i>Code</i>	<i>Category</i>	<i>Title</i>	<i>Description and example</i>
2.1	Positive Socioemotional Statements	Solidarity, Pleasantries, or Friendship	Messages that show general support, general positive responses, respect, etc. <i>Example:</i> [For research is it in-game hours, or rl hours?// rl hours// ] Thanks
2.2		Tension relief, Jokes, Laughs, Dramatization	Messages that attempt to lighten a mood or respond to such attempts. <i>Example:</i> [Anyone here Christian enough to give me a whole bunch of gold?] lmao, thats not christian
2.3		Agreement, Understanding	Messages that affirm another's post, acknowledge another's feelings or struggles, or request the same. <i>Example:</i> Six-tails is right, go north
2.4	Negative Socioemotional Statements	Disagreement, Passive Rejection	Messages that <b>directly contradict</b> another post or a general opinion, messages that generally rebuke other players. Specific denouncements of particular players should not be coded here <i>Example:</i> Saying someone is wrong, disagreeing with someone's opinion
2.5		Tension	Messages that express <b>general feelings</b> of unease or distress, messages where the user conveys their own negative emotional state <i>Example:</i> group finder sucks tried it a few times never get a full group before ppl leave

(continued)

**Table 13.1** (continued)

<i>Code</i>	<i>Category</i>	<i>Title</i>	<i>Description and example</i>
2.6		Antagonism	Messages clearly meant to provoke, challenge, or anger a <b>specific user</b> . Antagonism should not be used if the segment is direct disagreement with a particular point or message or if the segment is a general rejection of groups of players or ideas. <i>Example: Why don't you just shut up</i>

construct “the identity of sincerely wishing to be a part of the group in question ... but whose real intention(s) is/are to cause disruption and/or to trigger or exacerbate conflict for the purposes of their own amusement” (p. 237). Hardaker’s study analyzed chat messages in which users debated whether other users were trolls and if particular messages were trolling. This reflective commentary on message purpose and user motivation from the community allowed Hardaker to explore how the community she studied defined trolling behavior. Our dataset contains little to no meta-commentary on the chat itself or the users therein, and we did not interview or directly address any members of chat, making it impossible for us to determine “real intentions” of negative socioemotional posts. Nonetheless, Bales’s taxonomy allows us to observe where negative responses are directed (at specific users, at particular opinions/posts, or as general unease or distress).

While socioemotional communications are important for any community, and clearly are an important part of developing the character of that community, much of the present research is concerned with the messages coded in Bales’s (1950) second dimension, task communications (see Table 13.2). This set of codes includes messages that make specific requests of other players and provide responses to such requests. While classic IPA splits these categories into asking for/receiving (1) information, (2) opinions, and (3) suggestions, we have modified these categories slightly to fit the game environment we are analyzing. Our first set of

**Table 13.2** IPA coding for task communication statements

<i>Code</i>	<i>Category</i>	<i>Title</i>	<i>Description and example</i>
2.7	Task Communication Asking/Requesting	Asking for an Opinion or Suggestion	Messages that ask what other players think, feel, or believe about a particular topic. In general, if a message asks for <b>evaluative information</b> , it should be coded here. <i>Example: has anyone tried a medium armor mage?</i>
2.8		Asking for Task information	Messages that ask how things work, what things are, or where things are, and messages asking about bugs in the game. In general, if a message asks for <b>descriptive information</b> , it should be coded here. <i>Example: how do i access my mount inventory</i>
2.9		Asking for Additional Help	Messages that ask other players for help that goes <b>beyond a text-based response</b> . Examples include guild ads, group requests, or begging. <i>Example: can anyone help me out with a horse or some stuff to get me started ...</i>
2.10	Task Communication Responding/Replying	Giving an Opinion, Suggestion, or Command	Messages that convey what the poster thinks, feels, or believes about a particular topic, or what the poster thinks others think, feel, or believe about a topic. <i>Example: [has anyone tried a medium armor mage?] idk if that would work</i>
2.11		Giving Task Information or Orientation	Messages that explain how things work, what things are, or where they are. <i>Example: [how do I access my mount inventory] mount inventory = your inventory</i>

(continued)

**Table 13.2** (continued)

<i>Code</i>	<i>Category</i>	<i>Title</i>	<i>Description and example</i>
2.12		Responding to Requests for Help	Messages that respond to requests for non-text-based in-game help, regardless of whether they are on topic or not (asking for clarification on a group request or guild ad should be coded here, NOT as asking). Responding to grouping requests and guild ads. <i>Example: [templar dps/heals LFG Fungel] let me empty inventory and i'll heal for grotto</i>

**Table 13.3** IPA coding for other, modified for MMORPG chat analysis

<i>Code</i>	<i>Category</i>	<i>Title</i>	<i>Description and example</i>
2.13	Other	Grammar Corrections	Message that correct typos or grammar errors in a previous message, whether it is the poster's own or another. <i>Example: [that's geart!] I mean great...</i>
2.14		Commerce	All buying and selling announcements.
2.15		Unclassifiable	Any message that does not fit into the above categories. If this category is used, please leave a note as to the assumed goal of the message

codes, asking/responding to requests for opinions and suggestions, indicates players seeking evaluative or subjective material. Our next set of codes indicates players receiving and sharing purely descriptive information: questions and responses that have direct, objective answers. Our final set of codes, the most distinct from Bales's original typology, represents

players asking for a response that goes beyond text-based communication. This ranges from players asking for help with various tasks to players begging for money.

Like all taxonomies, this distinction between socioemotional messages and task-focused messages is imperfect. Indeed, this is one of the strongest critiques of IPA, as messages may accomplish both of these purposes, or even other purposes entirely (Walther 1992). However, given the features of general chat in an MMORPG, which include brevity of messages and the general impermanence of participation, this seemed like a minor issue for our study, and we added additional clarifications to the original IPA taxonomy to help us develop a more fine-grained schema. For responses, we addressed any discrepancies in category by focusing on whether the message furthered the request in any way. In general, Positive statements that did not request help or respond with information were coded as some element of Positive Socioemotional Statements (Codes 1–3). For example, while “thanks” is technically a response to a previous statement, it does not further add to either the request or the response. Thus, a response message that merely read “thanks” would be coded as 1—Solidarity. Similarly, negative messages with the same characteristics (neither a request nor a response with specific information) were coded as one of the Negative Socioemotional categories.

All requests were coded into one of the Task Communication: Asking/Requesting category, regardless of any solidarity or antagonism that may have accompanied the request. Likewise, all responses that add to or build on the initial request by providing specific information, opinions, or offers of help were coded as Task Communication: Responding/Replying. Responses that are simple pleasantries or digressions could go in either Positive Socioemotional or Negative Socioemotional, depending on content.

Bales’s (1950) IPA taxonomy includes a general “Other” category, which is equivalent in nature to our code 15, unclassifiable (see Table 13.3). However, given the nature of communication in an MMORPG, we elected to add two additional categories to the “Other” dimension. First, because we are interested in how grammatical correctness is demonstrated and perceived in the game environment, we created a separate code to look at grammar corrections. This category made no distinction between self-corrections and corrections by another player. We also included a commerce category, something particularly notable in *ESO*.

### *Topics*

While the IPA category was drawn from previous research into CMC and online gaming environments, the topics category was created using an open coding process. Researchers went through the first 100 lines of messages, compiling a list of common message topics along the way. This initial list of topics included 12 distinct categories and an “other” category. As we reviewed our first pass at organizing the data, we realized this initial list lacked a fair amount of granularity, collapsing some of the above distinctions. For example, the first draft of our topics list collapsed categories 12–14 into one “references” category. As we explored our dataset, we felt it would be worthwhile to differentiate between when players referenced other games in the Elder Scrolls series, other games in general, and real-world events. Similarly, topics 1–5 provide a very detailed look at when players are talking about the gameworld. While it would be easy (and perhaps even useful) to collapse all these categories together into “game” conversations, the connection between this coding dimension and the IPA dimensions allows us to look at which types of game-related conversations generated particular requests, responses, and socioemotional statements. The final list of 20 topics was generated prior to intercoder reliability testing, and no new topics were added thereafter:

1. Bug: The chat message describes or asks about a bug or potential unintended event caused by the game system. *Example: divine favor bugged?*
2. Game World Location: The chat message asks for either a description or location of a place in the game world. *Examples: Where is this place? What happens at this place?*
3. Game Function/Mechanics: The chat message asks questions about the game system that are not about bugs or about character skills/ability/theorycrafting. *Examples: How do I unsheathe my sword? How do I fish?*
4. Game Theorycrafting: The chat message asks for information about how to best optimize a character. This may include questions about specific abilities, skills, armor, weapons, etc. *Examples: Can I use heavy armor as a sorcerer? Which weapon is best for a templar?*
5. Game World Info Other: Any other question or response related to the game world that does not fall into the above.

6. Term Definition: Messages that request or respond to clarification of terms. *Example: What does WTB mean?*
7. Looking for Guild: The message is from a player looking for a guild not in response to a posted guild ad. *Example: any trading guilds yet?*
8. Guild Ad/response to guild ads: The message is either a player posting a guild ad or a player responding to a guild ad that has been posted (simple looking for guild comments should be assigned 2.7). *Example: <Archangels Of Valor> is recruiting! We are an incredibly friendly guild looking for like-minded players to adventure and grow with us!*
9. Grouping Request: A player looking for additional players to complete quests or dungeons—may be labeled LFM (looking for more) or LFG, as long as the G refers to group, not guild. *Example: Need a tank for BC.*
10. Commerce: The message is either a player trying to buy something or trying to sell something. *Example: WTS[Iron Ingot] × 69 for 400 g*
11. Game-related Announcement: A general announcement for other players' information, including announcements about game events. Note: the section should be coded here if the player is not requesting assistance, but rather simply stating an occurrence. *Example: dreugh boss is up*
12. Intertextuality: Any segment that references other media EXCLUDING other Elder Scrolls games. *Example: now i need to go back and play dark souls*
13. Lore Reference: Reference to any other Elder Scrolls games. *Example: go back to morrowind*
14. Real-World Reference: Reference to real-world religion, politics, or events (excluding references to other media). *Example: That's not Christian.. that's liberal*
15. Source Reference: An explicit reference to a source of information other than personal experience. *Example: check reddit, theres a post that lists the skill shrine reset areas*
16. Begging: Request for gold or items from other players. Note, requests for information or groups should not be categorized here. *Example: please im homeless. anything helps*
17. Affective Response: Pleasantries, expressions of general emotion, etc. (including Lol). *Example: ha*

- 17a. Simple agreement or simple disagreement (with no other topic).
- 18. Grammar Correction: Correction of the grammar of a previous post.
- 19. Unclear: The topic of the chat message fits in none of the below or the topic is indeterminate.
- 20. Other

### *Grammar and Punctuation*

Finally, our grammar and punctuation category made distinctions between when messages were fully incorrect (with regards to capitalization and punctuation only), partially incorrect, or fully correct (again, in terms of capitalization and punctuation only). We also included categories for other grammar errors and nontraditional uses of punctuation:

- 1. Fully incorrect: All capitalization and punctuation absent or incorrect.
- 2. Correct capitalization/incorrect punctuation: The capitalization is **complete** and **correct**, but the punctuation is not.
- 3. Incorrect capitalization/correct punctuation: The punctuation is **complete** and **correct**, but the capitalization is not.
- 4. Mixed capitalization/punctuation: There is some capitalization or punctuation, but it is either not complete or not correct.
- 5. Fully correct: Both capitalization and punctuation are complete and correct.
- 6. Other grammar error: There is another grammar error in the segment (spelling, subject/verb agreement, etc.). Segments with other errors are coded here regardless of capitalization/punctuation.
- 7. Nontraditional use of punctuation: The message includes nonstandard (but not incorrect) punctuation. This may include things like using equals signs, slashes, nonstandard ellipsis, etc. in messages and/or emojis.

### *Coding and Analysis Process*

An undergraduate student familiar with both the Elder Scrolls series and *ESO* itself acted as a second coder for this project. This familiarity proved



crucial, as the chatlog contains a number of oblique references to other games and events in the Elder Scrolls franchise. For instance, at one point a player admonishes, “Remember to yell ‘AAAAAAIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIII!’ as you land”<sup>1</sup> in response to another player announcing, “well im falling through the sky again.” While a coder unfamiliar with the franchise might not recognize this exchange as much more than a joke, it is in fact a reference to a memorable moment in *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* (Bethesda Game Studios 2002). Indeed, the chat continues for several lines after that to reference this moment from the older game, all of which could easily be misread without the context.

The second coder was trained on the coding schema by working through the first 100 units of analysis with the researchers. Following this training, the second coder and one researcher coded the next 100 units independently. After this process, the second set of 100 units was compared. All three of our coding categories had good to excellent inter-coder reliability using Krippendorff’s Alpha, supporting the reliability of the coding scheme. Our first category, Grammar and Punctuation, had a 98% agreement ( $\alpha = .977$ ). Our second category, Interaction Process Analysis, had an 84% agreement ( $\alpha = .815$ ). The final category, Topics, had a 79% agreement ( $\alpha = .755$ ).

A fourth category, Sentiment, was also coded at the stage, but proved too challenging to reach agreement, with only a 40% agreement ( $\alpha = .355$ ). The goal of this category was to look at the overall positive, negative, or neutral sentiment of chat messages, with a hope of being able to describe chat as a whole and compare sentiment by message type and topic. Unfortunately, the overwhelming preponderance of sarcasm in the game chatlogs made this challenging. No further units were coded for Sentiment and that category is not included in this analysis. Future research projects will take up this question in more detail. Following the intercoder reliability test, minor clarifications were made to the code definitions for game-related “Topics,” and the remainder of the data was coded by one researcher.

Once all segments were coded the data was brought into R Studio, an open source, integrated development environment for R, itself an open source program for statistical computing. Bringing the data into R Studio allowed us to both summarize and compare the various categories in our data.

## RESULTS

### *Topics Summary*

In our previous project, we found the strong influence of secondary sources as important means to prove or explain one's position. Out of 1622 messages in this dataset, only five messages in three conversations mention outside sources (code 15, Table 13.4). Of those, only two messages from a single author and conversation were about theorycrafting, something that was substantially more important in the *WoW* study. This paucity of outside source references reflects the general lack of theorycrafting discussion, with or without sources. While 631 messages (or 39% of messages in the dataset) referred to some element of the game system (codes 1–5, Table 13.4), only 53 messages (or 3% of the dataset) included discussion of theorycrafting (code 4, Table 13.4). In

**Table 13.4**

Distribution of messages  
across topics

<i>Topic</i>	<i>Total Messages</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Commerce	249	15.35
Game	248	15.29
Function/Mechanics		
Game World Info (other)	196	12.08
Grouping Request	184	11.34
Intertextuality	112	6.91
Guild Ads	92	5.67
Other	88	5.43
Bugs	76	4.69
Affective Response	61	3.76
Game World Location	58	3.58
Game Theorycrafting	53	3.27
Real-World Reference	43	2.65
Lore Reference	41	2.53
Game-related Announcement	33	2.03
Unclear	28	1.73
Grammar Correction	23	1.42
Term Definition	19	1.17
Begging	12	.74
Source Reference	5	.31
Looking for Guild	1	.06

general, player conversations in chat were more concerned with questions of simple game function (248 messages, 15% of chat, code 3, Table 13.4) or other general gameworld information (196 messages, 12% of chat, code 5, Table 13.4). The remaining 134 messages about the game system were from players conversing about bugs or errors in the game program (76 messages, 5% of chat, code 1, Table 13.4) or asking for help finding specific gameworld locations (58 messages, 4% of chat, code 2, Table 13.4). These results suggest that while discussion of game function, mechanics, and issues are an important component of the in-game general chat, most players at this stage in the game's life cycle were questions that did not require or suggest the need for additional paratextual sources, or, alternatively, that the lack of robust paratexts discouraged players from referencing them.

The next largest grouping of topics in the dataset were commerce and guild/grouping messages (codes 7–10, Table 13.4). These messages, which very rarely elicited responses, comprise 32% of the chat messages, a total of 525 messages. Commerce messages, players posting with requests to buy or sell items, were the largest group in the entire dataset, comprising 249 messages or 15% of all chat messages (code 10, Table 13.4). Unlike *WoW*, *ESO* has no public auction house for players to trade goods, meaning that public selling via the chat function is an important part of the game economy. Grouping messages (that is, requests to form groups to carry out in-game tasks), the fourth most common category behind game function and game information messages, include a total of 184 messages or 11% of chat (code 9, Table 13.4). Finally, guild messages amount to 92 messages, 6% of chat (code 8, Table 13.4). In some ways, the preponderance of these topics highlights one of the limitations of recording only the public chat channel. The majority of these messages go unanswered in public chat, but this is not entirely unexpected. For commerce posts, one can easily imagine players directly responding to the seller about an item, rather than posting publicly. Indeed, at one point following a guild announcement, the original poster commented, “If i missed inviting you to the <Black-Market> shoot me another tell :)”; this post implies that the player's initial guild announcement got several private responses, though no responses to this guild ad were posted to general chat.

### *IPA Summary*

The majority of chat in *ESO* during the period of this study was comprised of task-related communication (44.08%, all ask and reply codes Fig. 13.1). Of those categories, requests for help were the most common ask, accounting for 14.67% of all in-game communication and 63.13% of requests. Despite the relatively large proportion of chat devoted to requests for help (defined as a request asking for engagement beyond text-based replies—assistance defeating a boss, grouping requests, begging, etc.), replies to requests for help were the lowest category of all communication types (.92%, Fig. 13.1). While we have gathered no data to suggest this, it seems logical to assume that, as with some of the topics mentioned in the previous section, these requests were replied to in private messages (and thus not captured in this dataset). Requests for help often follow a simple format: players announce either their own role or the role they were looking for and what world boss, dungeon, or delve they required help with: “LF Healer or dps for Grotto.” While these particular requests for help rarely get public responses, they did occasionally spark follow-up information questions: the question “What is the average level for Fungal

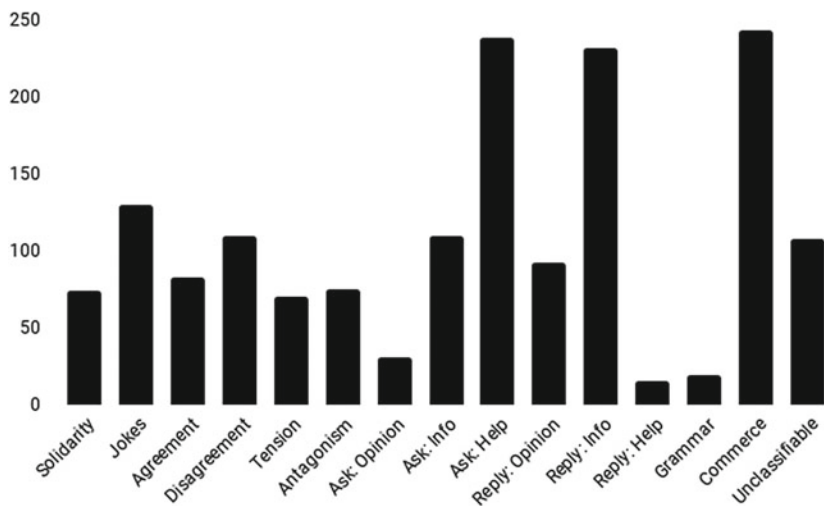


Fig. 13.1 Task communication in all messages

Grotto?” was posted to chat approximately a minute and a half after the request for previous help.

Despite the generally large proportion of chat devoted to players asking questions and receiving answers, very little of this conversation has to do with asking opinions (1.85%, Fig. 13.1). Of the 30 messages devoted to opinion questions, only eight related to theorycrafting. These threads were also not particularly long—the longest theorycrafting discussion started by an opinion question begins with the following question: “are you supposed to block a lot?? I feel like I never block. just swing on fools.” This question initiated a two-and-a-half-minute exchange of nine messages between two players about whether blocking was useful in the game. Other opinion questions include things like “do you guys like this better than WoW?” and “did anyone else make there character attractive? Everyone else i see is ugly.” A follow-up study to this project could interrogate whether this lack of theorycrafting questions is characteristic of game chat in general, or if some of this is influenced by the early stage at which this data was collected (when many players are asking how to use the game interface, where to find things in the gameworld, and for various kinds of help and support from other players).

### *Levels of Formality*

#### *Guild Messages*

Like many MMORPGs, the chat window in *ESO* is a multipurpose communicative tool and a player’s only real opportunity to reach other players outside their immediate social circles. In this dataset we see a variety of levels of formality, assessed via both message length and use of punctuation and correct grammar. This variety in message composition suggests that the idea of ethos and context play an important role for players as they compose their chat messages. There is a stark distinction both in length and in grammar/punctuation between messages of different purposes and topics.

<BLIND ASSASSINS> is recruiting Casual and crazy members for our guild of misfits. We are a small guild right now but working toward guild store and will be doing end game stuff when we get there. We have vent, gbank. Come join us for some fun and be a part of our CRAZY family if you dare. We will make your adventure more fun.

Guild messages stand out as far more formal than other messages in the dataset as a whole, as illustrated in Fig. 13.2. While grammatically correct messages made up only 8% of chat as a whole (135 out of 1622 messages), they made up 23% of guild messages (21 of 92 messages). Perhaps even more interesting, messages with no capitalization or punctuation made up the highest proportion of messages in general chat: 23% or 420 messages. However, in guild messages this category made up only 13% of the chat, a total of 12 messages. The lack of fully correct messages suggests that guild messages are composed with more care and attention to detail than other types of messages.

Similarly, guild messages had the highest average word count of any topic (Fig. 13.3). Across the entire dataset, the median word count was six words.<sup>2</sup> As the boxplot in Fig. 13.3 demonstrates, word count across total messages was significantly skewed toward shorter messages, with a long tail of infrequent lengthy messages. Indeed, the upper hinge for word count across the entire dataset was just 10 words; thus, only a quarter of messages posted to general chat were longer than 10 words. In guild messages, however, the median was 13 words, higher even than the upper hinge for all messages. Indeed, the *lower hinge* for guild messages was

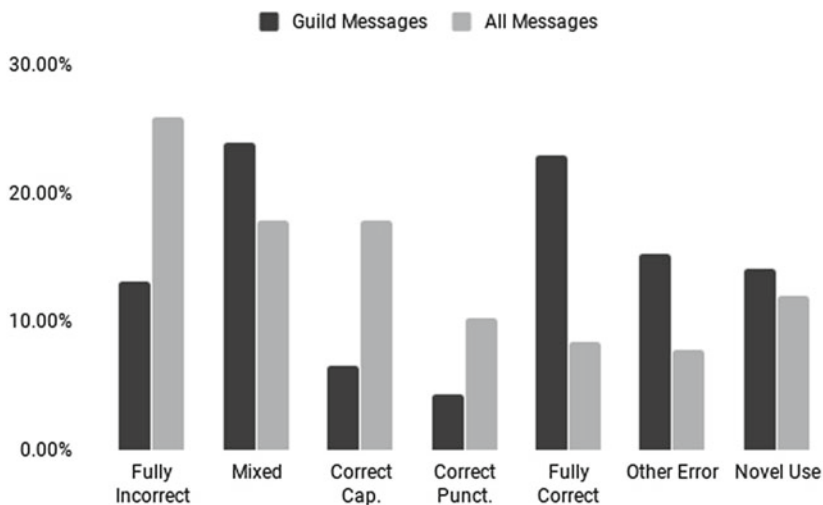


Fig. 13.2 Correctness of grammar and punctuation in guild messages vs. All messages

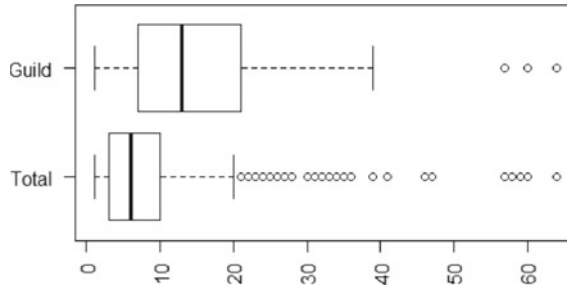


Fig. 13.3 Boxplot of total word count and guild messages

seven words, meaning that three-quarters of all guild messages were above the average message length in the rest of the dataset. The upper hinge was also substantially longer, at 21 words, and the longest message in the dataset (at 64 words) was a guild post.

These two factors, grammar and word count, when compared against a message's topic, demonstrate a critical awareness of audience and purpose, particularly when engaging in a highly persuasive rhetorical task. In MMORPGs, guilds play an important role in the social character of the game, something that has been extensively studied (Williams et al. 2006; Johnson 2008; Chen 2009). This importance is further underscored in *ESO*, which has no central auction house, thus requiring players to depend even more heavily on their in-game networks to trade for goods and services, which may explain why guild messages are both more verbose and more correct than other types of messages in chat.

### *Game Mechanics*

*Message 4092:* Yeah, so I just got out of the tutorial. Hit me up with how I power through and get some nice loot.

*Message 4094:* this isn't wow. there is no "powering through"

*Message 4095:* Thankfully.

*Message 4096:* go... do the things... see the stuff. Experience things.

If guild messages were fairly atypical of chat messages, varying substantially in length and in grammar, messages about game mechanics were somewhat more representative. As discussed earlier, much of the

knowledge-seeking occurring in the game chat data was centered on functional types of questions and discussions—how to access certain materials, when to enter various zones, and how specific key bindings function in the game. Interestingly, messages about mechanics were more often wholly lacking in punctuation and capitalization than in any other type of message. 37% of messages about mechanics are fully incorrect, compared to only 26% of all messages. However, the distinction gets even more interesting if the topic is split into message purposes: only 16% of *questions* about mechanics were fully incorrect, while 47% of answers about mechanics were fully incorrect. As with the earlier discussion of guild chat, this suggests a dramatically increased level of formality between how a question was asked and how a question was answered. Perhaps equally interesting, while questions have only a slightly higher margin of fully correct segments (10% compared to 8% in the full dataset), there was a substantially higher occurrence of fully correct punctuation—40% of all mechanics questions compared to only 8% of all messages. Even when using clearly interrogative language, askers were still particularly careful to include ending punctuation, something not common in most other kinds of messages.

Comparing the word count per message for game mechanics messages against the overall dataset was somewhat less dramatic than the comparison between guild messages, but nonetheless notable (Fig. 13.4). While mechanics messages were generally in line with the total dataset in terms of median and upper and lower hinges, questions about mechanics were slightly longer across the board. The median message length for mechanics questions was nine words, much higher than chat's general median of six words. Similarly, mechanics questions upper hinge was 13 words, again moderately higher than general chat's upper hinge of 11 words. As Fig. 13.5 demonstrates, this distinction did not hold true for mechanics answers, which remained in line with chat as a whole in terms of length.

These distinctions in both word count and grammar/punctuation between questions and answers specifically about game mechanics (as opposed to general questions) again suggests players read the rhetorical situation of requesting information as distinct from the various other types of interactions in chat. Like guild messages, questions about mechanics tended to be both longer and somewhat more correct, particularly with a focus on avoiding fully incorrect messages and including ending punctuation. Mechanics answers generally did not adhere to these conventions



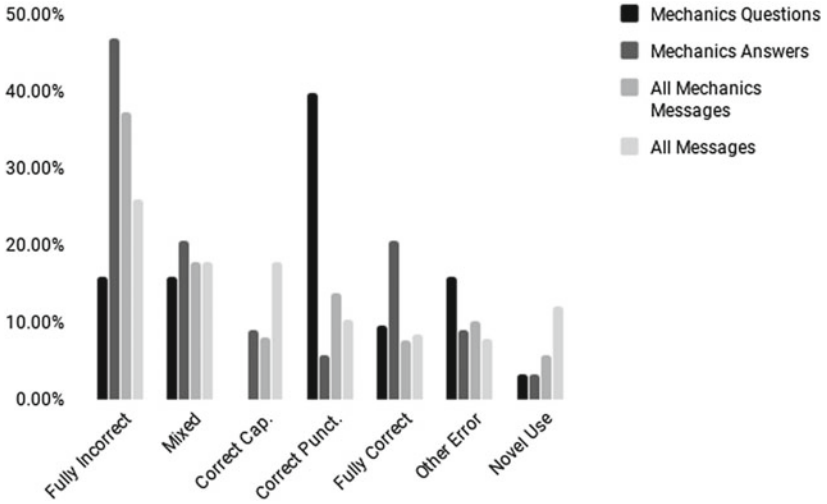


Fig. 13.4 Grammar and punctuation in mechanics messages and all messages

Word Count in Mechanics Questions, Mechanics Answers, All Mechanics, and All Messages

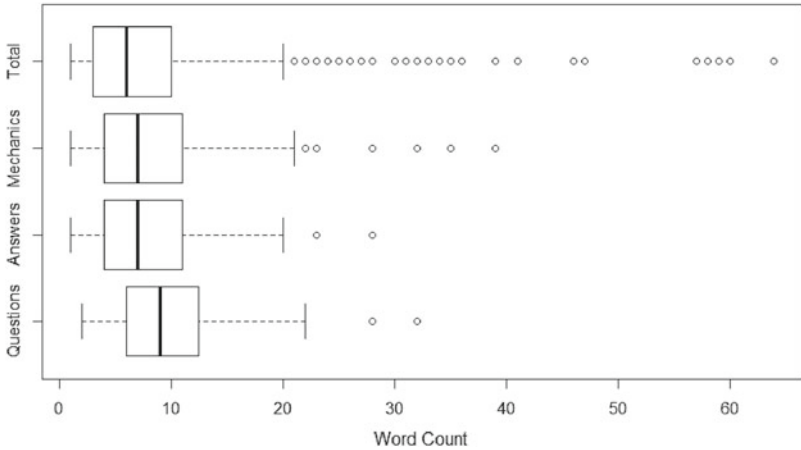


Fig. 13.5 Boxplot of word count in mechanics questions, mechanics answers, all mechanics messages, and all messages

and had distributions generally similar to the dataset as a whole both in terms of grammar and word length. However, there is a small subset of mechanics answers that dramatically break from the conventions of general chat: a remarkable 21% of mechanics messages display fully correct grammar and punctuation, a percentage more than double that of either chat as a whole or mechanics questions. This certainly suggests that, at least for some players, composing a fully correct message is an important part of signaling their authority and credibility in this arena.

### *Initiating Conversation*

In addition to looking generally at the style of chat, as we have done above, we were curious to explore what conversations sparked chat and to consider if there were any notable distinctions between messages that led to extensive discussion versus those that failed to garner any responses. In the dataset as a whole there are a total of 632 unique conversations. Of those, 493 were messages that receive no response (30% of all messages and 78% of initial messages). However, while this may make chat seem unresponsive, we would suggest that quite the opposite is true, for two important reasons: First, as mentioned above, many of these messages may elicit private response. Commerce, guild, and grouping messages are all examples of this type of communication, and they represented a significant proportion of unanswered messages. Second, while it was true that 493 messages remained unanswered in the public arena, this means that 1129 messages, or 70% of chat, were in conversations that included at least one response.

In general, messages about the game initiated a substantial number of both short and long conversations. We identified short conversations as being those with at least one response and as many as eight responses. 116 conversations fell into this category. The highest proportion of first message topics in short conversations was game function/mechanics, with 19 messages (16% of short conversation starters). Messages about the game in general (topics 1–5) accounted for 45 first messages, initiating 38% of short conversations. The importance of game messages was even more evident in long conversations, those lasting for more than eight responses. Of 27 such conversations, 16 (59%) were initiated by messages relating to the game itself (topics 1–5). Moreover, 10 (37%) of those initial messages were on game function/mechanics.

## DISCUSSION

We had the good fortune to be able to collect our research data right at the official release of a new MMORPG, which allowed us to see how a new community of gamers<sup>3</sup> would encounter and interact with a new set of game mechanics and new game environment—while also allowing for comparison to more established gamer–mechanics–environment interactions addressed in our previous work.

For this new project, we also shifted from solely qualitative methods (content coding and interviews) to a mixed-method approach using content analysis and statistical analysis. This approach has helped us to see patterns in the data that aren't as readily apparent to qualitative methods, but still allows us to make judgments about the rhetorical practices and capacities of the players in our dataset. In light of our analysis, we argue that rhetorical style (evidenced in message length and grammatical correctness) is one representation of ethos that is deployed by gamers in their player-to-player interactions.

We see ethos represented as multifaceted in these data: while style and grammar represent, possibly, a more traditional rendering of ethos via the rhetors' *eloquentia* or “art of expression” (cf. Quintilian 1921), we note that expertise and degree of helpfulness as types of invented ethos were also represented. We also note that the majority of individual player-to-player interactions (aside from commerce and group-to-player guild recruitment messages) focused on tasks rather than social communication, which reinforces the notion that ethos in these contexts is closely related to the underlying procedural rhetorics (Bogost 2007) of the gameplay.

If ethos in game environments is indeed connected to procedurality, and if games are articulated as writing platforms, then it may be possible to teach alternative forms of ethos development than the traditional modes used in composition courses (such as the overreliance on external sources). Our data from this study also suggest that teaching rhetorical style as a means of building ethos may be particularly effective in game contexts (whether students are tasked with posing queries, answers to queries, or crafting guild recruitment announcements. Of course, this project presents just a snapshot of a particular moment in the development of this game; more work is needed to develop a more robust understanding of how players develop and use ethos and the relationship between ethos construction, the procedurality of game mechanics, and the design of game environments.

In this chapter, we have focused on the kind of insight that quantitative analysis affords; in our continuing research on this project, we will turn to insights from qualitative rhetorical analysis, which provides evidence for patience and specific instruction as representations of ethos in player interactions, as in the following conversation:

- Message 1001:* Does fishing not work? Says I don't have bait - but I have a LOT
- Message 1002:* Hold e and select which bait you want to use
- Message 1003:* read what it says
- Message 1004:* READ
- Message 1005:* Are you holding E first to select the bait?
- Message 1006:* RTFM
- Message 1007:* hold E to select the bait first
- Message 1008:* once selected hit E to fish away

Additional work will focus on intertextuality and ways that experience of prior games in the Elder Scrolls franchise are used to represent game-world knowledge and expertise (such as one player's announcement that "I found the talking mudcrab"—a callback to *Elder Scrolls: Morrowind*). And, as noted in our methods section, we'll consider refining methods that may allow us to conduct sentiment analysis on a dataset that is rife with sarcasm, non-sequiturs, and statements that don't provoke any kind of response from other community members. Finally, new work in the function of the chat interface itself (Gallagher and Holmes 2019) suggests an additional avenue for research as we consider the ways in which this interface is enmeshed in both game mechanics and environment as it supports player interaction.

## NOTES

1. All errors, misspellings, and nonstandard uses of language and text in quoted material have been preserved.
2. The mean of all word count messages is 7.73, with a standard deviation 7.06. However, as the boxplot demonstrates, the chat data does not follow a normal distribution, and instead is heavily skewed by outliers. Thus, in this section, we report the median and quartiles as a better representation of the shape of this data.

3. We should note here that while there was an existing community of beta testers who had been playing the game prior to release, the majority of the players we encountered were encountering the game for the first time at release.

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## Writing to Gaming Audiences: A Case Study

*Taylor Orgeron*

In the spring of 2018, I taught a sophomore-level composition course titled “Why Video Games Matter: Identity, Representation, and Community.” In designing the syllabus, I experimented with centering the course content on the larger media ecology of video games—specifically, the course emphasized an analysis of gaming communities alongside the video games themselves, considering the rhetorical situation of these games more broadly. By critically analyzing the course’s successes and failures, this chapter adds to the conversation surrounding video games as pedagogical tools in the writing classroom, especially as we consider what ethical engagement with video game-focused pedagogy looks like. Ultimately, I argue that a course focused on gaming audiences, especially those underrepresented in gaming spaces—women gamers, BIPOC gamers, LGBTQ+ gamers, and gamers with disabilities—allows students to think about writing in a way that more closely aligns with composition course expectations. I suggest that through an audience-centered approach that pays specific attention to video game audiences, students

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are able to better analyze the purpose and impact of video games as media artifacts; students may then produce written work that shows effective consideration of texts' rhetorical situations, while each student contemplates their own status as rhetor.

The course was offered at Louisiana State University through its Writing Program, which encompasses two required courses: English 1001, primarily consisting of first-semester students, and English 2000, usually taken by second-semester sophomores. As Louisiana's flagship campus, Louisiana State University has a total enrollment of 25,444 students, 90% of whom enroll in one of our writing courses some time in their college career. Our two main courses are sequenced to allow students to explore concepts of critical thinking and writing in the twenty-first century, including specialized forms of writing genres applicable to their specific disciplines. This latter mode of thinking and writing is especially emphasized in English 2000 for which instructors may choose to focus on a special subject. I originally chose "Why Video Games Matter" as my course theme because it allowed for critical analyses of video games, a medium with which many university students have experience. It is my belief that considering video games as historical and cultural texts enables students to think critically about the ideologies and rhetorical situations they encounter daily, while also providing them with the means to respond to these encounters academically, professionally, and persuasively through the conventions of various writing genres.

The course was designed around two main pedagogical ideas: first, that ethical engagement with video games in the composition classroom necessitates foregrounding games as cultural artifacts created by humans and subject to the same sociopolitical biases as all other media. For David Leonard (2008), the refusal to engage critically with video games has "dire consequences" because of their oft discussed existence as a particularly persuasive representational medium which enables "a larger discursive and organizational response to persistent injustice. We need to talk and teach about video games since these representations are teaching so much about us and them" (p. 252). If we follow Leonard's suggestion to "develop a complex level of media literacy as part of an antiracist praxis and ideological formation" (p. 251), then it is vital that we encourage students to view video games not as texts meant solely for entertainment purposes, but as sociopolitical artifacts that reflect and affect real world identity politics.



The second pedagogical idea is Mark Mullen's (2013) explanations of successes and failures which outline defamiliarization as a goal for writing courses and especially for a specific assignment: the game review. Despite students helping to create the assignment requirements, Mullen explains that their papers were nevertheless archetypal game reviews that ignored the basic assignment goals. Reflecting on the ways in which the assignment failed, Mullen writes that he "had not in fact pushed the defamiliarization strong enough" (p. 79). Although Mullen suggested for future courses an assignment revision that would change the *type* of games reviewed (perhaps by limiting the assignment to indie games which deal with serious sociopolitical subjects), I instead chose to change the *type of gaming audience* to which my students were writing. While Mullen indicates that he also designed his course around questions of audience, encouraging students to "think about how they would adapt an academic argument for a specific public audience," I wondered how far I could go in defining a specific audience for students (p. 78). As Rebecca Pope-Ruark (2011) argues in her study of audience-based pedagogy, "Students often struggle to write for an audience other than the instructor," since the instructor is the only audience students have spent their entire educational careers critically assessing (pp. 1–2). To ask students to write to specific audiences, then, requires that significant class time be spent learning about the needs and wants of that audience. It means more than suggesting, as I had done in the past, that students simply *write to an audience of their gaming peers*.

The reason for this approach's proclivity for failure becomes obvious when students are directly asked about gaming audiences: students have clear misconceptions about the audience to which we are asking them to write. Every student enrolled in my course had at some point played a video game, and during the first week of the course, 88% of students when surveyed responded that they played video games at least once a week. However, only 65% of students said that they felt comfortable describing themselves as "gamers." While 100% of white, male-identifying students considered themselves "gamers," only one female-identifying student out of seven total female-identifying students thought of themselves as "gamers," and only three students of color out of eight total students of color considered themselves "gamers." In course discussions, it became clear that most students had particular ideas about the people who are permitted by "gamer culture" to call themselves "gamers," as well as for whom games are made, who makes games, and which games

count as “real” games that would enable players to refer to themselves as “gamers” for playing. For example, one student unintentionally paraphrased Anna Anthropy’s (2012) assertion that “videogames are about men shooting men in the face” (p. 3) when expressing her reluctance to see herself as part of the gaming community: “Even though I play games on my phone all the time, that’s not the games that real gamers think of. Their games are basically one guy shooting other guys ... That’s not fun to me.”

To combat this problem, I designed my course around critically engaging gaming authors and audiences, a focus reflected in the course’s subtitle, “Identity, Community, and Representation,” and course description:

Students will discuss, analyze, and compose argumentative essays about video game industry related topics, exploring both the *communities created from video game culture*, (including let’s players, cosplayers, and “gamer” culture) and *the communities creating and using video games as cultural artifacts* (including games which feature characters with disabilities, indigenous characters, non-binary and/or queer characters, etc.).

Our class recognized that the AAA gaming industry still has significant strides to make regarding its insular and homogenized nature. Therefore, we spent the first two months of the course hearing from and critically analyzing various subcultures within the larger gaming community, including the Queer Gaming Scene (or Gaymers), the feminist games movement, the #INeedDiverseGames movement, and the lives and experiences of gamers with disabilities. Additionally, I included a service learning component that asked students to use their skills in writing for the betterment of the gaming community, both hypothetically and actually. The goal was attempted through two separate assignments. First, students were asked to write accessibility-based game reviews for the community of gamers with disabilities which are frequently published on the gaming review website, Unstoppable Gamers, run by the AbleGamers Foundation, “a nonprofit charity that aims to improve the overall quality of life for those with disabilities through the power of gaming” (“Our Services”, n.d., para. 1). Second, students were asked to pitch a game created for an underrepresented group of gamers. Both assignments asked students to consider their rhetorical situation and critically engage the material in ways they had not before considered, in the hopes that this

defamiliarization might produce mature insights not only about video games themselves, but about the communities creating and playing them.

In the first week of the course, we uncovered what our class already knew about games and gaming communities. Students came from various majors, including Computer Science, English, Psychology, Sociology, Business, and Mass Communication, and each had various levels of familiarity with games and game cultures. The first unit of the course, in addition to a general introduction to rhetoric and the writing process, focused on rhetorically analyzing texts across media. We also defined exactly what we mean by “video game,” and discovered how video games make arguments. But even in these early discussions, we focused on game developers and audiences. For example, when we played Alexander Ocias’s flash game *Loved*, we discussed as a form of anti-trans violence its technique of misgendering the player as a different gender than whichever one they selected when starting the game. Students wondered if the game’s creator was transgender—and read commentary by Ann Ashford (2016), who saw the game’s confrontational narrator mirroring “emotional abuse” (para. 7), forcing them to reflect on their past relationship experiences. Student response to these early audience-centered analyses of games was positive. One student, in their weekly reflection on our course’s blog, wrote, “I’ve never thought this in-depth about why video games matter before. I like how this course touches on various subjects that I would’ve never thought about while playing games.” In reply, one student wrote, “This is a great topic for a writing course because of the options that are available to be written about. Every game is unique and every game has a different reason as to why it is relevant to society,” while another responded, “I like that I’m able to write about games I’ve played that can be applied to real issues.”

The stakes of our critical assessment of gaming audiences were raised when we completed the service learning assignment, the accessibility-based game review. Students were tasked with evaluating a video game of their choosing, grounding their review not only in the game’s entertainment value, but also in the game’s accessibility features (or lack thereof). Before delving into the requirements of the assignment, our class necessarily spent time getting to know the needs of gamers with disabilities when it came to accessibility features in video games: the need for features like closed captioning, control remapping, controller sensitivity adjustment, colorblind settings, and difficulty adjustment became apparent for games to be considered accessible. We watched videos and read articles

provided by the AbleGamers Foundation, listened to YouTube gamers with disabilities talk about their experiences with gaming, and examined the “Game Accessibility Guidelines” (a “collaborative effort between a group of studios, specialists and academics, to produce a straightforward developer friendly reference for ways to avoid unnecessarily excluding players, and ensure that games are just as fun for as wide a range of people as possible” [Ellis et al., n.d., “About the Guidelines”, para. 1]). Not only did students express through their essays and blog posts a newfound view of accessibility in gaming, but in the discussions that followed, students shared their own experiences with accessibility and the limitations of the spaces and technology that they interact with daily, showing that uncovering injustices for one group in one space can reveal the limitations unfairly imposed on other groups in a variety of spaces.

Still, discussions of audience awareness don’t immediately transfer to improved essays. For example, one student’s first draft of his accessibility-based game review was largely a summary of the game’s mechanics and features; he fell into the trap of generic review-writing as Mullen (2013) describes. On peer review day, the student’s partner struggled to explain why his paper wasn’t working as the critical review it was meant to be. After both students relayed their miscommunication issues to me, I asked if they personally read game reviews and if so, why? One student responded, “Because I want to know what the game is like, and if I would like it.” I reminded him that the gamers with disabilities he was writing to were also *gamers*. They know the language of game mechanics the same way all gamers do—in fact, many of them know more about game design through their experiences with specially designed controllers: “You have to tell them what it’s like for *you*, and what you think it might be like for them. Because they are gamers, too, and they want to know if it’s worth *their* time.”

After this bittersweet moment of revelation—in which the student finally realized what kind of work he should be producing and how much revision he had to do—the student ultimately produced a highly effective review that displayed critical awareness of the game and his readers in ways that acknowledged and confronted the complexities of interacting with media objects: the type of critical computer literacy that Stuart Selber (2004) argues should be the domain of English studies (p. 3). The student recognized that video games and other digital objects are, as Selber writes, “physical products [that] must be studied, yet [whose] social backdrop should not be overlooked” (p. 92). Furthermore, the

impact of the student's newfound understanding of the purpose of writing *to an audience with a specific need for information* is clear when looking at the following excerpts from his draft and final paper (mechanical errors preserved):

Draft: [A match in *Brawlhalla*] starts fast, and it moves even faster because of the range of mobility that each legend has. For starters, every legend has the ability to “triple-jump”, the ability to perform three consecutive jumps without touching a platform. [...] The camera focuses on the entire map, and does not follow the player too closely, this is important because you need to know what's going on around you at all times.

Final essay: *Brawlhalla's* mechanics are indistinguishable from legend to legend. There are multiple legends available to choose from, but they don't really feel all that different when you use them. [...] In *Super Smash Bros.*, I felt like Kirby whenever I would engulf live people or fly around gasping for air, but I have not felt that feeling of being a character much at all while playing as any of the legends of *Brawlhalla*. Every legend has the same controls: heavy hit, quick hit, dodge, throw, and move, which can be remapped in the game's setting menu. However, if this was a game like *UFC*, it would make sense that everyone punches, kicks, and grapples in a similar fashion, because all of the characters are human; but these are intergalactic assailants, beasts, warriors, undead, monks, pirates, vikings, and more. I think *Brawlhalla* had some good ideas for legends, and they definitely all look like individuals. The problem is that they are all the same person: just wearing a different costume.

In the first draft, the student spent more time explaining the mechanics of the game and gaming terminology than evaluating those mechanics, as he assumed that his audience needed these explanations. However, once the student remembered he should be writing to a gaming audience that would not only be familiar with his vocabulary, but also the conventions of fighting games, he realized he could eliminate the redundant clauses and discuss what actually mattered: how the game performed, its accessibility, and how it compares to other games in the genre.

This first assignment served the practical purpose of directly aiding a charity foundation; the second audience-focused assignment was more abstract, asking students to conceptualize and pitch a fictional video game in hopes that their group might receive funding from the equally fictional “National Endowment for Underrepresented Peoples” (NEUP). To qualify for NEUP's funding, their games had to meet the following

criteria: (1) Show engagement with Ian Bogost's (2007) theory of procedural rhetoric (which we discussed earlier in the semester). (2) Follow Jane McGonigal's (2011) assertion that video games have the power to channel positive change (the game had to attempt to make the world a better place). (3) Create the game for a specific community that lacks widespread representation in gaming (a criterion directly related to the high stakes of representation in video games made clear by Twitter hashtag campaigns such as #INeedDiverseGames and through the work of scholars like Megan Condis [2018], Malkowski and Russworm [2017], and Gray and Leonard [2018]). Working in groups of three to four, students were asked to prepare a ten-minute presentation for the NEUP board in which they cover the content of the game and explain how well it exemplified NEUP's criteria through the game's plot, mechanics, characters, and rhetorical moves. Students were also required to use some kind of multimedia tool in their presentation (PowerPoint, Prezi, Google Slides, etc.) and submit their proposal in written form (for board members who couldn't attend their presentation).

This wasn't my first delve into assignments outside of the standard essay in the composition classroom. Previously, I asked students to adapt a written work into an interactive fiction game using the Twine engine, and in another class, had students create a music video which juxtaposed music with images to alter the meaning of their chosen song's lyrics. In both cases, students produced work that went above and beyond my expectations. To be clear, I never questioned their talents or abilities; rather, I simply doubted their commitment to the assignment beyond fulfilling the minimum requirements, the same way I am surprised when a student turns in an 850-word essay for a 650-word assignment. But even with these prior forays into nontraditional assignments, I was still impressed by the work my students produced for their video game pitch presentations. One group made multiple posters, each featuring one of the main characters; another made a playable demo of their game in Unity and had a volunteer explore their gameworld; and almost all groups included logos, character art, and data about the game's production timeline and sales projections. Each project displayed the culmination of group members' various skillsets and their research into gaming audiences. Many of their imagined characters expressed intersectional identities through their race, ethnicity, gender expression, sexuality, and/or disability status. But the component that really made me especially proud of their work was each group's written proposal, all of which included the accessibility features

of their games and used the same language from the accessibility guidelines previously covered. I hadn't made this a requirement. In fact, I hadn't mentioned the accessibility guidelines since the post-review discussion. Yet they decided that these earlier discussions about accessibility in gaming were important enough to include in their pitches.

This course wasn't perfect. In our daily meetings, we often struggled to stay on task, preferring instead to discuss whatever piece of gaming news was dropped the night before. As in most classes, there were days when no one wanted to participate in the discussion—days on which my questions were met with blank stares, or when half the class decided to skip because it was the day before a holiday weekend. There were times when certain students were clearly uncomfortable with the topic of discussion, even expressing hostility toward me, especially when those topics centered on sociopolitical subjects like LGBTQ+ gamers, racism, and sexism in the gaming industry. We also struggled with being on the same page when it came to gaming terminology: some students were well-versed in the language of game studies and clearly spent time reading academic articles and critical reviews about video games, while others had solely interacted with games as entertainment.

These latter issues point toward our class's ongoing struggle to combine knowledge from our various discourse communities in order to reach common ground. Although we spent time in the classroom discussing the needs and wants of various gaming audiences, we did not spend much time reflecting on the ideas of audience itself. It was clear that some students struggled with understanding the discourse practices of the gaming audiences we discussed, and that students did not necessarily consider that some audience members might belong to multiple discourse communities. For example, even within the community of gamers with disabilities there exists numerous aspects of intersectional identity including race, ethnicity, sexuality, and gender expression all of which also affect an audience member's expectations and needs for accessible gameplay, preferences for fictional representations, understandings of precedence in game evaluation, and opinions about how games and information should be made available. In retrospect, I might have followed Anne Beaufort's (2007) suggestion for teaching the concept of discourse communities, since, as she argues, "The concepts of audience and purpose can only take students part way toward understanding how social contexts influence writing and writers" (p. 37). Rather than emphasize a broader

idea of audience, discourse communities might stress specialized vocabulary, genre awareness, and adaptability when composing texts. Without a discussion of discourse communities and critical reflection on how course assignments engage with various discourse communities, students may leave the course believing that the genre styles assigned are universally applicable—or worse, that there *exists* a universal standard for communicating ideas across disciplines and communities. Furthermore, I might have included more attention to distinguishing the functional (computers as tools), rhetorical (computers as hypertextual media), and critical (computers as cultural artifacts) literacy modes of video games with students as Selber (2004) calls for when asking students to meaningfully engage with technology. For example, there were times when students felt the need to push back against the idea of procedural rhetoric, preferring instead to view mechanics as something outside of human influence. In this case, derailing the planned daily objective to consider the ways in which code is never neutral might have led students to a more complete awareness of sociopolitical topics as they relate to video games.

However, many of these obstacles eventually led to productive discussions and generated mature and insightful observations from students orally and in their in-class writing concerning ideas of identity and gaming audiences. As one student explained in their course evaluation, “I really enjoy the topic of this course, because in recent years, the term ‘gamer’ has become increasingly exclusionary and elitist. Dismantling those ideologies in a classroom setting is pleasant.” Ultimately, the outcomes of the course suggest that ethical engagement with video games in the composition classroom can be effectively reached through a thematic centering on video game developers and audiences, and a critical engagement with the makeup and desires of that audience—rather than solely on the media objects themselves. Specific attention to audience as a dynamically evolving discourse community, rather than a static group, can help students situate the stakes of these media objects as cultural artifacts and their own role as scholars of them. Analytical and pedagogical practices which do not take into account various cultures and their responses to gaming objects may leave students confused about to whom exactly they are writing, and in worse cases, imply that video games are somehow above sociopolitical critique all together. By foregrounding gaming audiences in the game-centered composition classroom, we can provide students with the analytical tools they need to think through not just what these texts are, but how they come to be and what they are



doing. At the same time, an audience-centered approach to games asks students to consider how the final product of all writing, including their own, is a result of the conversation between the audience, the writer, and the social frameworks both subjects bring to the text.

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## The Ethics of Treating Online Gaming Forums as Research Data

*Richard Colby*

As a scholar of games and gaming communities, I am interested in community rhetorical practices that manifest in online discussion forums. For twelve years, I taught an introduction to academic research course that used *World of Warcraft (WoW)*. Students routinely participated in the online forums dedicated to the game. However, in the last few years of teaching the class, I shifted how I talked to my students about collecting data for their research projects. Given the age of the game, and the thousands of forum posts that have been written about it, I introduced opportunities to use existing forum posts as data for research. Through a process of keyword searching and scraping, students could capture more data than they could possibly sift through in the limited time of the ten-week term I taught in.

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Take, for example, a common research question that students had: “Is there a relationship between character class selection and player personality?” Students could pose the question on the forums as a means of active inquiry, creating a fictional “interested player” persona, and gather their 10 or 100 responses. This limited data is not very interesting. In contrast, there are over 20,000 forum posts related to the topic already on the forum, posted across multiple years, filled with personality tests, peppered with outside sources, and teeming with earnest responses, including examples of trolling and flaming, as well as moments of nuanced insight. In other words, the community has already responded to that student researcher question. The problem in the students’ eyes, even as it is a benefit to my teaching goals, is that this data is messy, untidy, and perplexing—in other words, it is real research data.

Online gaming forums—in which community participants post game strategies, observations, and bug reports; or ask questions, troll the community, or offer up other miscellany—are evidence of gamer engagement and rhetorical practice, but they are just one community among many producing vast records of engagement. The Internet has extended and connected communities throughout the world, and some communities exist almost entirely online. These communities produce text, video, and audio of their rhetorical practices which, in turn, offer scholars community engagement data (CED). This data pool is constantly growing. There are three million blog posts per day on Wordpress sites (Posting Activity 2020), and Wordpress is the technology behind 37% of all websites (W3Techs 2020). There are 500 hours of content uploaded to YouTube every minute (Hale 2019). Reddit, the fifth most visited website on the Internet, has 430 million monthly users (Reddit 2020), and they host 2.8 million comments per day (Grigonis 2018). There are an estimated 100 million posts per day on Instagram (Aslam 2020), 500 million tweets per day on Twitter (Twitter Usage Statistics 2020), and the 2.7 billion worldwide Facebook users (Facebook 2020), on average, “like” 10 posts, make four comments, and click on eight ads per month (DataReportal 2018). There are countless websites that invite comments: news sources (*The New York Times* moderates 12,000 comments per day [Etim 2017]), companies, organizations, and institutions. When we turn specifically to video game content, to date, reliable statistics about video game-focused CED is difficult to find, and may be a topic for future research, but such use is great enough (and presumably costly enough) for two developers of the currently most popular games, *Fortnite* and *League*

of *Legends*, to shut down their official forums and offload the hosting and moderating to the gaming community via Reddit (Forum Sunset 2019; Mooglez 2020).

It is tempting to imagine the research possibilities with so much data representing everyday rhetorical engagement. However, with any research endeavor, there are a host of ethical considerations, foremost of which is the degree to which something is considered public. Let's consider some examples. Is it appropriate to compare comma errors in "niche" gaming forums such as those about *WoW* to those in comments people make on a newspaper of record website, such as *The New York Times*? Such aggregate data might not pose too much a concern, no matter the forum. What about case studies of individual forum posting behaviors at a subreddit about *Fortnite*? Does analysis and reporting of such individual behaviors, even though it is just a game forum, respect the participants? What if we wanted to do similar case study research at the *ISurvivedCancer* subreddit? Or at the *SuicideWatch* subreddit? Beyond these examples of "public" data, we have algorithmic manipulation based on such data, where individuals are not doing descriptive or inferential research for the public good, but, instead, are designing algorithms to nudge participant behavior, as we saw in Cambridge Analytica's questionable use of 50 million Facebook accounts to shape political marketing in 2015 (Isaak and Hanna 2018).

It has been 20 years since Paula Klemm and Marie T. Nolan (1998) asked medical researchers to honor the trust of patients when interacting and studying online cancer support forums. In that same year, James Porter (1998) asked those of us in rhetoric and composition to recognize the ways that classical ethical principles of print do not always apply to online environments. What has followed since are many articles, books, and white papers providing guidance on ethical online research (Buchanan and Ess 2009; Consalvo and Ess 2011; Ess 2002; Flicker et al. 2004; Kozinets 2010; Markham and Baym 2008; Markham and Buchanan 2012; Sixsmith and Murray 2001; Walther 2002). Heidi McKee and James Porter (2008, 2009a, b) have been stalwarts for rhetoric and composition internet research, formulating a nuanced and layered means of assessing our ethical responsibilities as researchers, arguing that we approach each instance on a case-by-case basis and with the best intentions: to invite participants in "as co-makers of knowledge, communicating agents who can interact with the researcher and influence the design and dynamic of a study-in-progress" (2008, p. 726). These

sound principles, and the scholarly discussions that have surrounded these issues, influenced the Department of Health and Human Services in 2013 to add to the Committee on Human Research Protections information about conducting online research. However, when considering CED, such as online forums, blogs, or videos, they write the following:

If individuals intentionally post or otherwise provide information on the Internet, such information should be considered public unless existing law and the privacy policies and/or terms of service of the entity/entities receiving or hosting the information indicate that the information should be considered “private.”

By this measure, this discussion (and this chapter) about the ethical issues in using online discussion forums as research data should not exist. However, these are guidelines, not policy. This is understandable because, as McKee and Porter (2008) point out, “no ethical conduct policy can possibly address each and every type of situation that researchers may encounter” (p. 720), an argument echoed by the Association of Internet Researchers (2012) ethics committee: “We advocate guidelines rather than a code of practice so that ethical research can remain flexible, be responsive to diverse contexts, and be adaptable to continually changing technologies” (p. 5).

With explicit policy for collecting and analyzing CED absent, scholars are left to balance their goals with those of the community whose data they are researching. Some scholars continue to produce well-intentioned scholarship that sets an ideal for online research ethics, some of whom wring their hands at the conundrums of collecting, interpreting, and broadcasting online interactions, especially in medicine and social sciences (Sugiura et al. 2017; Sharkey et al. 2011) and often advocate in the strictest sense adherence to the Belmont Report’s principles of respect for persons, beneficence, and justice (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research 1979). As a teacher of students who are engaged in their (often) first forays into fieldwork research, I emphasize with a certain degree of reverence the importance of informed consent and autonomy, fairness, and protection of participants from harm—whether physical, social, or mental. Accordingly, working with our Institutional Review Board (IRB), I wrote ethical research teaching guidelines for our department so that students in our first-year writing courses would be permitted to conduct field-based

research and thereby learn to ethically conduct observations, interviews, and surveys.

That said, when it comes to CED, I think scholars have worked themselves into a corner bound by idealism. In this chapter, I cover some of the ethical concerns that have painted us into that corner, with some discussion that is meant to ease our ethical suffering. I then offer ethical guidance and practical means of researching online gaming forums.

## RESEARCH POSSIBILITIES AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Online discussion forums represent authentic dialogues because the participants are often not thinking about their message beyond the immediacy of the forum itself. That is to say, the discussions are earnest and personal, what some researchers call natural (Holtz et al. 2012; Seale et al. 2010; Sharf 1999), even when the participant's purposes are tangential or nefarious (i.e., to troll or attack somebody). Online forums, then, are a record of a conversation, in context, and offer researchers data for anything from descriptive linguistic analysis to rhetorical analysis to content analysis. Nevertheless, online forums were not a consideration when the National Research Act of 1974 led to regulations for ethical research, and while addendums and revisions as with the 2013 Considerations and Recommendations (Department of Health and Human Services) have offered guidance, they have not provided a strict ethical path forward to using online discussion forums in research (see Hudson and Bruckman 2004; Holtz et al. 2012; Humphreys et al. 2000; Im and Chee 2006; Zimmer 2010). Are discussion forum posts public? Mostly. Are they authentic? Probably. Do the participants forego research protections when they hit the "post" button? Perhaps.

### *What Are the Ethical Considerations of Researching Online Forums?*

It is easy to assume that everything posted on the Internet is public. If it appears in a Google search, why can't it become data in a study? There are problems with this thinking. First, while many people are concerned about online privacy (Raine 2018; Nissenbaum 2010), not everybody understands their own online privacy settings. A forum poster might not understand when, and to what extent, a post is public (Holtz et al. 2012). As researchers, should we give forum participants agency in asking

whether they know that or not, or whether we can use their post in research?

The second, related problem is the nature of communities. Conceptually, it is easy for people to forget that even when they are in an online community, it is connected to the Web-at-Large. Community participants might feel they are sharing personal observations with friends, not recognizing that what they say can be decontextualized. Imagine a participant on a *Doki Doki Literature Club* subreddit sharing that they thought that the yandere character, Monika, was justified in her narrative actions. Within the context of the community conversation, fans of the game can have a lively debate. Now imagine a researcher looking at how gamers identify with characters, using this post as a CED exemplar in a published study. It can get amplified in a potentially hurtful way, such as a loss of reputation or public ridicule. Even if as researchers we anonymize the identity, a simple online search can reveal the origins of the post and certain elements of the poster's identity. This can happen a lot in online communities, in what danah boyd (2014) calls "context collapse" (p. 31).

The third problem, and this is addressed somewhat in the Committee on Human Research Protections response, are the license agreements that users have agreed to when participating in an online forum or virtual space. Of immediate concern is that most forum participants do not read license agreements or spend very little time considering them (Böhme and Köpsell 2010). Many online forums use similar language to assure posters that they own their own content but give permission for the companies to use that content (Chee et al. 2012). Recognize that there are two agents represented in these license agreements—posters and the forum/game corporation. There are no rights afforded to "random internet researcher," or, for that matter, any reader to use that content.

### *How Can We Ethically Use Online Forum CED?*

Research ethical idealists would favor informed consent before using any such data. While informed consent is one way to be sure that any information that researchers get from persons on the Internet is used with their permission, in many cases it would be logistically impossible to procure, and it would often negatively impact the research. For one, those who post on the forum might rarely check the forum (or may have stopped participating altogether), so any attempt to ask their permission might be



seemingly ignored. We cannot track down everybody, nor should we have to.

Adding outsiders to a community, whether stealth or active, can also negatively impact the research and the community. Most notably, announcing that one is a researcher can annoy a community (Holtz et al. 2012) or change how they act. In a study from Lisa Sugiura et al. (2017) on the ethics of internet research, the researchers followed Robert Kozinets's (2002) guidelines for ethical online research: They announced that they were researchers on the forum despite the moderators asking them not to—for fear of negatively impacting the community. The result was that some community participants “posted abusive and suspicious comments in response to researcher posts” (p.190). Online gaming communities might also disband if some members support the use of their participation while others might not.

Additionally, while a site's rules or license agreement might build in special acknowledgment to its users that their posts are considered public and might be used for research, this could disrupt or make reticent community participation (even though, as I have indicated, many might not read these rules).

But we should not stress over informed consent in these instances, despite these concerns. As I have shared, the Committee on Human Research Protections currently considers online forum content “public,” which means researchers can safely use it as data (Department of Health and Human Services 2013) without announcing their intentions or getting formal informed consent. The guidelines do clarify that any site that requires approval to enter or participate should be considered private, and researchers should not use that data without seeking permission. That said, save forum rules and license agreements, most use of online forums as research data is acceptable. However, to avoid collapsed contexts, scholars should also ask themselves whether the information they are looking at was posted with a reasonable expectation that it was public, and how sensitive it was. McKee and Porter (2009b) describe how researchers should consider a post that they wanted to use as data on two continuums: public/private and sensitive/not sensitive. Consider the following examples:

- A post about a strategy for a battle in a particular game (less sensitive, public).

- A post about a family member who recently committed suicide and how the game community helped them cope (more sensitive, public).
- A post that linked to private memos revealing sexual harassment at a game company (more sensitive, private).

The more sensitive and private a post, the more important it would be to acquire informed consent. These questions are reasonable to ask and do not cause a researcher too much concern.

### *What Ethical Questions Should a Researcher Ask?*

Here's how to translate the previous analysis into practical advice. A researcher should ask the following questions:

1. How public is the information? Did it appear to be posted with a reasonable expectation that it would be just for those within the site? Does the site require a password to enter? Is the site moderated? If it is public, it is safe to use as data.
2. How sensitive is the information? If it is not sensitive, it is safe to use as data.
3. What are the rules governing the site's use? What licensing agreements are in place?? Does the site forbid the use of posts for research? If there is nothing forbidding use of posts as data, it is safe to use.
4. How much data is being collected? Is the collection a reasonable amount of data that would not disrupt the functioning of the site?

## RESEARCH TECHNIQUES

### *What Types of Research Can We Conduct?*

Online communities lend themselves to many sorts of research questions. Consider a common forum post: a response to changes in a game after a patch (and the discussions that follow). Researchers could do the following:

- Rhetorical analysis of the discussion, looking at how participants attempt to persuade each other (and the developers) whether changes to the game are good or not.
- Quantitative analysis of the length of posts and their relationship to some other variable, such as demographic markers the forum affords. For example, on official game forums—such as *WoW*'s—poster game avatar information is displayed. Many forums also show engagement markers (posts with responding comments, or how long the poster has been a member) which can be used as variables. In this example, length of posts based on the level of agreement or disagreement with the original poster can be studied, as well as discussion persistent rates (i.e., does a particular topic in the post get more words than other topics? Does a topic spread?)
- Qualitative coding of the engagement—in other words, how are people reacting to changes in the game? Are they angry, happy, sad?

Given the diversity of data available, online communities lend themselves to mixed method research; that is, researchers can conduct qualitative, quantitative, and hermeneutic research with online forums. For example, a researcher could scrape 200 forum posts, and do a corpus analysis of gendered pronouns (quantitatively), a coding of gendered assumptions in each post (qualitatively), and a rhetorical analysis of how gender is positioned in the posts (hermeneutic).

Another type of CED can come from active inquiry. In other words, researchers can ask a question of the community and see how they respond. While we can ask new questions of a community, my representative student example about personality and character class in *WoW* demonstrates that most communities have had many questions asked of them already: we can search for those questions (which is the method I now put into practice). In fact, it is important that before researchers ask anything of a community, they should search whether that question has been asked before (much as we would when conducting a literature review for a study).

Researchers need to begin by asking what they want from the community: Is this an observation of common community activity? In other words, are they coding what a community normally talks about? On the one hand, observations allow researchers to ask questions about normal practice without interference; on the other, researchers might actively inquire into the community's attitudes or behaviors.

### *How Can a Researcher Collect Data?*

#### *Scraping*

There are many ways to collect data from online communities—too many to cover here; however, the most common way is “scraping,” the process of copying online posts and pasting them together. It can be as simple as doing just that—copying and pasting into a document; but larger datasets often require potentially expensive services or specialized tools to scrape data from the Internet. However involved the process, “scaping” is an appropriate research term for methods sections (e.g., “scraped 100 posts from the /r/leagueoflegends subreddit”).

Scraping data is important because the Internet is dynamic: people remove, edit, and change posts constantly. One might find an important discussion only to discover it deleted the next day. Advanced scraping can also help researchers organize data, allowing for word counts, stylistic analyses, and the easy sorting of poster names or dates (it is not always an easy process, which is why professional companies may charge hundreds to thousands of dollars for the service). However, data is easier to analyze when it has been scraped.

The Social Media Research Toolkit at the Social Media Lab at Ted Rogers School of Management at Ryerson University maintains a list of over 60 applications (free and commercial) for performing web scraping (link on the references page), although a simpler way to begin is by printing from a browser a forum to Adobe PDF and then combing assembled PDFs into a single document. Rudimentary analyses using the search function can be adequate, especially when conducting a small-scale or pilot project.

#### *Active Inquiry*

When collecting extant community conversations, the ethical considerations are light, and scraping posts, whether 100 or 10,000, inductively follows from that data collected to answer the research question. By contrast, active inquiry forum research involves participant observation in the community, meaning that the researcher would participate in its interactions, and ask specific questions of the community. Participant observation shifts researcher responsibility somewhat as it is interaction with participants, and subject to research ethics rules. Clearly, deception and questions about personal topics on a public forum are unacceptable and would most likely get researchers booted from the forum. In many

cases, the researcher should submit such research to their IRB. However, IRB boilerplate often asks researchers to identify themselves, which can lead to the problems indicated earlier (see Sugiura et al. 2017). Nevertheless, participant observer inquiry can still be conducted ethically as long as the researcher is posting as a typical participant might. For example, if a researcher were interested in community participants' preferences for certain narrative-defined relationships in a game, such as those offered in the *Mass Effect* or *Dragon Age* series, one could ask, "I was wondering, how did you all choose who to romance in *Mass Effect Andromeda*?" The discussion that follows becomes the data for analysis. What a researcher would not want to do is the following: "Could you answer these ten questions in a post: What is your age? What is your gender? On a scale of 1-5, would you rate romancing PeeBee? On a scale of 1-5, would you rate romancing Jaal?" In fact, in the good post ("how did you choose"), we would generate a longer discussion (and get more data) if we prime the audience with our own response. While this does impact the data, ethnographers and anthropologists have long acknowledged that we are participant observers when we conduct research in non-virtual life (Wilner 1987; Shah 2017).

### *What Data Should Researchers Collect?*

Researchers should start by recording the URLs and then move to scraping the data so that there is a permanent record. In looking at a post, researchers should record the date/time, engagement markers (likes/emojis, comments, shares, retweets), name, and any other markers (how long they have been a member, how many posts they have made, their level) or site-specific demographic markers (character class, achievement scores). Researchers should also capture the breadcrumbs or forum hierarchies (most forums are not just a single place but are organized into various levels or rooms. For example, the official World of Warcraft forums have a General, Support, Off-Topic, and at least a dozen other categories). As with any type of research, one never knows what will be important later.

### *How Representative of the Community at Large Is Online Data?*

In reporting online community forum data, it is important to note that community posters do not represent the whole; posters only represent a

fraction of the total users. Jakob Nielsen (2006) and Trevor Van Mierlo (2014) estimate that generally only 1% of a community actively posts online. Thus, even a sizeable, random sample of posts does not necessarily represent a community consensus.

### SUBJECTS, DATA, AND ETHICAL PRAGMATISM

I have been careful to name forum posts as data. I share Elizabeth H. Bassett and Kate O’Riordan’s (2002) position that the Internet is a “form of cultural production” (p. 235) and can be studied as such: we would not, by comparison, ask an author permission before writing a lengthy analysis of their negative assumptions about gender roles in a novel they wrote, even though such an analysis could have negative consequences on them (e.g., hate mail), greater than what they would encounter in daily life (an important stipulation in formal research ethics). However, for many internet ethics scholars, seeing the Internet as a cultural product is erroneous. As Kozinets (2010) describes it, “the internet is not really a place or a text; it is neither public nor private; it does not simply contain data but digital doubles of our identities and selves” (p. 139). The Internet replicates live human interaction and experience more than it represents a static library of books. To be fair, I am not arguing that we treat all of the Internet as big data (although, certainly, most companies today do); rather, researchers can use game forums as CED as long as they are mindful of the issues I have raised in this chapter.

Yes, we could approach CED as an ethical idealist: We might cautiously use forum data by first posting a response to a thread we, the researchers, wanted to use that outlined how we were going to use participants’ public forum posts and ask them to indicate whether their contributions could or could not be used in the way described. After all, even though these spaces are public forums, the participants might not view them as public, but instead directed at those in, for example, the Blizzard and *WoW* community. The problem, of course, is that the ethical idealist researcher problematizes the authenticity and validity of the data. Asking permission is bound to lead to flaming, trolling, and/or other general condemnations and disruptions of the community. While such condemnations, whether feigned or not, could be an indicator that there is an ethical concern and a potential for harm, the concern is more often than not just a topic of social interaction. However, the discussion is just another turtle in a

long line of turtles, and really does not get the ethical idealist closer to representative forum data.

I hope this chapter has made a case that it is best to be an ethical pragmatist. For one, it acknowledges that our cultural production is public. As Joseph B. Walther (2002) points out, “It is important to recognize that any person who uses publicly-available communication systems on the Internet must be aware that these systems are, at their foundation and by definition, mechanisms for the storage, transmission, and retrieval of comments” (p. 207). To translate that for students, I point out that algorithms and programmers at Google have already scraped, sorted, and indexed information from the Blizzard forums—of course Google did not ask permission of each poster whether they could be included in such an index. This learning moment is an explicit reminder that what students post on the Internet is public. As researchers, this is the recognition that we should ask new ethical questions about privacy, data use, and license agreements rather than dwell on rules written for different contexts. Acknowledging these issues, we can free ourselves from concerns that would have prevented studies such as Soroush Vosoughi et al.’s (2018) analysis of three million Twitter users sharing 126,000 stories in order to understand how fake news travels faster and farther than real news. If they had to DM three million participants whether it was ok to use their tweets for the dataset ... well. Similarly, Marilyn A. Walker et al.’s (2012) Internet Argument Corpus, consisting of 390,704 forum posts on political topics, would be impossible for the ethical idealist to use, and would most likely end up skewing the data to the point of uselessness.

I do not wish to dismiss wholly the continued and important questions we ask of ethical research practice (whether that is deciding on the levels of interaction, quoting individuals versus reporting only aggregate data, or delving into charged or sensitive topics with the same approaches we would in asking whether druids in *WoW* are OP). We should continue to examine these new ethical concerns in online research. We should also use our better judgments when looking at how and when to use data. I am also not suggesting we all become strict consequentialists in our practice, that the greater good always outweighs individual protections; rather, I want us to recognize, as the Committee on Human Research Protections has argued, that online discussions are public, and CED that appears on the Internet can be ethically collected, curated, and interpreted. After all, the algorithms and ecologies of online communities are already sorted, coded, and interpreted everyday despite our learned ethical concerns.

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# So, You Want to Start a Research Archive?: Ethical Issues Researching and Archiving Video Game History

*Mary C. Karcher*

In 2009, the International Game Developers Association's (IGDA) Game Preservation Special Interest Group released a white paper assessing the state of digital game preservation, calling for more attention to be paid to the preservation of electronic and video games. In the decade since, many scholars have rallied to find ways to preserve and archive these games and their history (cf. Bachell and Barr 2014; Barwick et al. 2011; Galloway 2011; Holmevik 2012; Kraus and Donahue 2012; Lowood 2011; Winget 2011). Many have pointed out ethical issues surrounding video game history preservation; however, few have attempted to offer solutions to the questions that they raise, or to focus specifically on the ethical problems presented by video game history archives (VGHAs). It is the purpose of this chapter to address that omission. Like any archival project, the

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ethical choices made at each stage of the process can have a significant impact on what and how history is remembered.

Copyright law is at the heart of many ethical choices faced when establishing a VGHA because all video games are digital, falling under the Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA), a law that “criminalizes any use of software or tech to get around copyright protections” (Kaser 2018). Copyright poses challenges for archivists in many ways, most obviously where they make copies of digital content as part of the archival process. Thus, the choices faced by these individuals are situated, complex, and constructed by contexts. In response to these initial concerns, in 2006, the United States Copyright Office in the Library of Congress entered into the federal register a final rule, the “Exemption to Prohibition on Circumvention of Copyright Protection Systems for Access Control Technologies.” In it, they specifically mention games and archiving, writing as exempt,

Computer programs and video games distributed in formats that have become obsolete and that require the original media or hardware as a condition of access, when circumvention is accomplished for the purpose of preservation or archival reproduction of published digital works by a library or archive. A format shall be considered obsolete if the machine or system necessary to render perceptible a work stored in that format is no longer manufactured or is no longer reasonably available in the commercial marketplace.

For this reason, some archives of playable games exist, most notably the over 7,000 games hosted at the Internet Archive. However, while the number of games that would fit this category (i.e., obsolete) is sizeable, it does not account for all games, nor does it account for the current and past contexts that make archiving games and their paratexts difficult.

The first part of this chapter explores the major issues raised in the literature concerning establishing a VGHA, including those surrounding gaming hardware, software, paratexts, and the role that fans and hackers have had in shaping the development of video games. I discuss the ethical dimensions of VGHA, relying, to an extent, on copyright issues not covered by the Copyright Office’s exemption. The second part of this chapter looks for a way forward through participatory archives which shift the emphasis from the material objects being archived to the archive’s users and contributors, thus resulting in a VGHA that is a collaborative, cooperative endeavor.

## WHAT TO ARCHIVE

A natural starting point for any archive is to determine what to preserve. Such questions are complicated because games and their paratexts exist as situated, contextual artifacts. What to preserve leads us to ask how, where, and when to archive a game. For a VGHA, the answer seems obvious: versions of video games. Under closer inspection, however, this answer is too simple. Preserving digital software quickly leads to preserving various types of hardware in the archive, many examples of which may be obsolete. Is archiving *Ms. Pacman* (1982) to be played 38 years later on a Windows 10 computer, in a browser with mouse and keyboard, “preserving” a game designed to be played with a joystick while the player stood at an arcade cabinet?

Then there are the paratexts that accompany games (e.g. instruction booklets, illustrated packaging materials, etc). Some scholars have pointed out that early computer magazines played a key role in teaching computer hobbyists to become gamers, shaping the role computers were to take in household usage (i.e. as a computational device or a source of entertainment) (Kirkpatrick 2017; Stuckey 2017). Expanding the idea of a paratext to include magazines opens the door to include all forms of paratexts, including those created and circulating on the Internet now (e.g. walkthroughs, fan-made art, etc), which present their own difficulties when archiving. A simple, initial answer quickly spirals out of control; the archive may become impractical; and when we make choices, we risk devaluing material being excluded (Manning 2017).

Ollie Sköld (2018) puts forward what he calls the “expanded notion” of video games, a term that encompasses not only software, but also hardware, peripherals, and all forms of paratexts; such preservation allows archivists to preserve these artifacts as well as situate them in their originating cultural and historical contexts. The first section of this chapter explores the elements included in Sköld’s definition of video games and the ethical issues presented in preserving them.

### *Hardware*

While we might imagine that digital software can find a home on any digital-casting screen, that’s not the case with games, which are often connected to proprietary hardware and interfaces. There are several debates within the archival community about how these digital texts should be

preserved and presented to the public. One debate is about the privileging of the “original experience” of gameplay over that achieved on emulators (cf. Jones 2017; Stuckey et al. 2015; Swalwell 2017), as exemplified in the earlier *Ms. Pacman* example. Another is that of the large size of the industry’s carbon footprint and what role archivists should play in helping to offset that footprint (cf. Big Fish 2012; Costanza 2012; Gordon 2020; Mayers et al. 2014). It would be unfeasible to expect an archive to maintain the space (and energy and maintenance expertise) to store arcade cabinets, multiple consoles, and computer hardware able to run aged software. Some archives, such as the Strong Museum in Rochester, New York, store such past items as artifacts to be admired by onlookers, but they remain on a shelf and do not preserve the play experience.

Individually, home computer enthusiasts have attempted to prolong the life of their hardware. Many vibrant postconsumer communities have developed around various gaming systems (cf. Deeming and Murphy 2017; Newman 2012; Švelch 2017). One reason for this is in response to technology companies engaging in planned obsolescence, which is completely legal in most countries and causes frustrated home computer enthusiasts to turn to hacking, an ethically gray activity, to extend the life of their hardware (Global 2017). Even hardware accessories like joysticks are hacked by enthusiasts and used to serve long after the intended lifespan of the product (Brophy-Warren 2007). While this particular type of hacking is not illegal, it allows a game to be played in a manner other than the designers intended.

Another reason why home computing enthusiasts seek to preserve aging hardware is due to nostalgia. Sentimental longing for the past is a powerful marketing tool in popular culture no different than video game enthusiasts seeking to own the systems they had in their youth (cf. Bjarkman 2004; Geraghty 2014; Hill 2015). This sentimental longing leads enthusiasts to collect old hardware or create emulators of these past games (Newman 2013) as a type of “restorative nostalgia” (Garda 2014, p. 2). Some enthusiasts feel strongly about the importance of this kind of preservation because it allows for older gamers to hold on to their favorite games, and it lets younger players experience gameplay in its original form (Kocurek 2019). Such preservation of obsolete hardware falls within the copyright exemption, but given the enthusiasm expressed by fan communities, many companies see the opportunity to cash in by reintroducing “retro” consoles such as the NES Mini and Sega Genesis Mini. Are these

enthusiasts still exempt from the law if the original companies making that hardware still produce new versions of it?

Throughout this section's examination of the ethical concerns centered on gaming hardware, the ethical dilemmas discussed are not made specifically by the archivists themselves, but rather by the various groups of computing enthusiasts involved. It is imperative for archivists and researchers to be aware of the ethical questions that surround these artifacts. The legal status of the materials being archived is particularly important when considering which items can be made available to the public and archive stakeholders. Understanding the ethical choices made by the different contributors and users of the archive is vital to secure buy-in from all involved. Being aware of the legal milieu involved with materials allows archivists and researchers to put potential contributors at ease and help create an environment of respect, understanding, and support. Consequently, contributors may be more willing to support the archive. This same level of awareness holds true for software and paratexts.

### *Software*

Perhaps the most obvious ethical issues surrounding gaming software involve hacking. Hacking involves the unauthorized access of computer systems with the intent to tamper maliciously with the information found (HackerOne 2019). Clearly, those who seek to exploit “vulnerabilities in gaming platforms, bundl[e] malicious software with games,” or ferret out gamer credentials for scamming purposes (Roddie 2020) exist in the community. Other hackers define themselves differently. For them, the purpose of hacking is not malicious, but rather is creating and preserving with “technical adeptness and a delight in solving problems and overcoming limits” (Raymond 2001). For this latter group, the former are not hackers, but crackers: “hackers build things, crackers break them” (Raymond 2001). For the rest of this paper, “hacker” refers to Eric Raymond's definition—because most hackers in this context do not have malicious intent.

Two main ethical issues surrounding software that are important when discussing VGHAs involve homebrew software and data mining. Homebrew is a term used to describe software created by users and hackers to be used on specific proprietary hardware and developed primarily for the homebrew, postconsumer community (Rojas 2012). These individuals, after illegally obtaining the game's source code through modifying



the original software, “eschewing copyright protections,” and then either remaster the original program or make something completely new to be experienced by others in the community (Deeming and Murphy 2017). The hackers then circulate the homebrew software within the community, often selling the games for profit, especially in postconsumer communities that strive to extend the life of obsolete gaming systems, such as the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES), the Sinclair ZX Spectrum, and the Sega Saturn platform (Nicoll 2017; Švelch 2017; Vanderhoef 2017). The number of homebrew titles available is difficult to gauge accurately; however, to give some perspective, scholars have archived over 200 Czechoslovak homebrew titles created between 1984 and 1990 (Švelch 2017). Ultimately, these hacks are not designed for the purpose of archiving and preserving, but are meant to change the games themselves—they are neither authorized nor licensed by the manufacturers and are not legal because of the use of copyrighted material (Rojas 2012). Add to this the money-making cottage industry that comes from selling the games, and the ethics of the situation get murkier. Do homebrew games’ creators have any rights to what they create even though the code it was built around was illegally obtained?

Another ethically suspect hacker activity involving software is that of data mining. Data mining is the process of accessing game and system files in order to “mine” through them for often hidden information like new game updates, items, or features that cannot be accessed by players in the gameworld (Harper 2014; “Gaming: What is data mining, and is it reliable for updates?,” 2020). Data miners, or “video game archeologists” as some prefer to be called, do not consider their activities unethical, arguing that they are not exploiting the game itself, but merely trying to see what is there, looking for insight into how the game was developed: the characters or play features that were at one time included but were excluded from the final game (“An Introduction to Video Game Data Mining,” 2017). This information is then distributed to members of the fan community. Why data mining becomes an ethical issue for archivists and researchers is twofold. First, the information found is intended by the manufacturers to stay secret, behind-the-scenes so to speak, and as a result presents not only spoilers, but offers an alternative narrative of the development of the game that runs counter to the officially released record, often to frustration of the manufacturers (Švelch 2017). Second, because of how the source code from which the data was mined was

obtained. Data mining itself is not illegal if the source code being mined was obtained legally. It is data mining of illegally obtained source code that raises ethical complications for archivists, such as the recent massive leak of classic Nintendo source codes. From an archival perspective, the leak has led to incredible finds that contribute significantly to gaming history, including proving a long-standing myth in video game circles concerning a Super Mario character (Webster 2020). The quandary is this: does the historic significance of the material gathered eclipse the illegal nature of how it was acquired?

Some types of software are released through legitimate sources but might be a source of embarrassment for the developers—for example, failed video games. For developers, preserving records of past, failed software could be a source of undesirable exposure and draw attention to aspects of the company’s history they would prefer to remain forgotten. A record of such failures might become a source of ridicule among fans or even prevent potential customers from investigating any future products created by that company. Two examples of failed video games are *kusoge* games and unreleased games. *Kusoge* is a specific term used by fans to describe games that were released onto the market and may even had a degree of financial success, but that ultimately are considered by the community as “bad” or “campy.” Derived from the Japanese terms “kuso” (meaning “crap”), and “gêmu” (meaning “game”), *kusoge* games include those that revel in game elements like awful graphics, atrocious writing and voice acting, are outrageously difficult, or that are boring or tedious. Such games are revered by a growing segment of the fandom, members even boasting *YouTube* channels devoted to critiquing and recording gameplay of such games (Navarro-Remesal 2017). *Kusoge* games which may be discarded and written off financially by the manufacturers, but for which fans now clamor and demand be preserved creates an ethical concern for archivists trying to negotiate between the differing interests of various contributors (Geuss 2014).

In the same way that *kusoge* software has captured the heart of fans and the embarrassment of the industry, so too has the promise of games that ultimately go unreleased for whatever reason. Often these unreleased games are announced by the company, either as part of an already popular franchise, or they might promise an innovative approach to the genre. *Sonic X-Treme* and *Sonic Crackers* were two such games in the Sonic the Hedgehog franchise that entered the prototype phase, caught the mind and heart of fans, but were never ultimately released (Navarro-Remesal

2017). Inclusion of such games in a VGHA helps to make visible the history of the development process; however, inclusion of such material becomes problematic for archivists if the production companies would prefer to “relegate much of the history behind games to the shadows” and not see it preserved in a public forum (Lowood et al. 2009).

For *kusoge* and unreleased games, at least the relevant institutions in some way decided either to move forward with or withdraw support from these projects. Sometimes, however, aspects of video games can generate glitches or behave in ways unintended by the production company, the result of coding or architectural errors in the original program. The Minus World is a level in the 1985 Nintendo game *Super Mario Bros*, the result of a glitch created by the coding mechanics of the software. The minus world was level 36-1; however, due to a glitch, the 36 was never displayed, thus making the level 1. Additionally, the level can never be completed because of another glitch that, upon finishing the level, takes the player back to the level’s start (*Minus World*, 2020). Nintendo removed the Minus World from subsequent releases of the game and fixed the glitch, much to the fans’ dismay. It is something that Nintendo never intended and even today is reluctant to acknowledge, even though the Minus World is an integral part of the game’s history from the fans’ perspective (Newman 2017). Even though the material itself may not be illegal, the manufacturers many resist its archival inclusion, leaving archivists with an ethical problem: do they preserve and make available to others material that one of the main archival stakeholders asks to be suppressed?

In recent years, video game companies, recognizing that piracy and hacking have “taken a chunk out of [their] software sales,” have come up with two solutions: free-to-play games and cloud gaming, both of which pose unique problems for archivists and researchers (Elliott 2009). Free-to-play games are often altered over time to include additional content, and each version “supersedes previous versions of the game” (Manning 2017, p. 190). Mobile games, such as *Crossy Roads* or *Candy Crush Saga*, or hugely popular online games such as *League of Legends*, *Fortnite*, or *Roblox*, are constantly being updated, modified, and added to, all in an attempt to get people to play longer and to pay more for in-game purchases (Manning 2017). For these games, preserving one version of the game is like preserving only a snapshot of the game at a specific point in time, which presents a conundrum for archivists.

The other recent trend is cloud gaming. Traditionally, video games are sold on some form of physical cartridge or disc and played on a specific,

proprietary game console. With cloud services, no physical copy of the game is sold; rather, the games are purchased and distributed via digital download or by streaming and so do not have the same “physical presence” for consumers. Without a physical copy of the game, the publishers could at any time remove the game from the cloud, thus making the game “unavailable or unplayable within a few years of release” (Kocurek 2019). What the consumer is actually paying for is temporary access to the game (Gurwin 2019). Even if a company is willing to make access available indefinitely, there is no guarantee that the company itself will persist. The video game industry is infamously unstable; for example, ten major game studios closed their doors over a 12-month period during 2017–2018 (Kocurek 2019). Whether purchased on digital distribution sites that require live accounts to play the games, like Steam or Origin, or whether a membership is purchased to a cloud gaming service like Stadia or GeForce Now, the consumer does not own any copy of the digital games. Instead, the consumer is simply renting those games, and access can be cut off or denied at any time, even though the consumer paid for it (Castle 2020; Walker 2012). Some online services have resisted the always connected nature of cloud gaming, such as GOG.com and Humble Bundle by selling Digital Rights Management (DRM)-free games, with GOG.com displaying their “you buy it, you own it” philosophy on their website. But these cases are the exception, and cloud gaming is becoming the norm—and are often not archivable outside of version snapshots of source code, which most companies keep closely guarded.

The industry has also taken to rereleasing and remastering software. Essentially, companies rerelease previously sold and discontinued software, recontextualizing these games for a modern audience as nostalgic. Understanding the power of nostalgia, the industry uses these releases in order to play into fans’ cherished childhood memories and fans’ potential desire to introduce their children to the same games, thus tempting consumers to potentially pay more than once for largely the same software (Jaeger 2019). Additionally, some companies, notably Microsoft, offer backwards compatibility for older games on newer consoles. However, that feature is only available as long as the company decides it is viable. For archivists, preserving what is essentially two or more copies of the same software becomes a challenge.

### *Paratexts*

Paratextual material includes anything to do with video games that does not fall under the previous two categories, from packaging to instruction booklets, T-shirts to plush toys. Paratexts represent not only the gaming industry, but its community as well: paratexts include fan-made material. Especially online, there is a wealth of fanfiction, fanart, walkthroughs, and countless YouTube and other types of video channels devoted to fans playing, critiquing, and parodying all manner of digital games. The “fast and loose” attitudes many fans have with regard to intellectual property raises ethical concerns.

Because many fans have such a personal connection to the games they repeatedly play, they often create their own paratexts, publishing them online for other fans—with only a cursory concern for any laws they may be breaking by doing so. Although these paratexts are fan-made, several scholars argue that such material is equally valuable to study and preserve as materials directly released from video game companies (Lowood et al. 2009; Navarro-Remesal 2017; Nicoll 2017; Swalwell 2017). There may be support for archiving these fan-made paratexts, but these texts pose ethical dilemmas, and not just those involving intellectual property law. There are also ethical issues surrounding archiving materials made by fans without their permission, or by those wishing to retain the anonymity afforded to them by publishing online.

## WHO TO ARCHIVE

Thus far, we have concerned ourselves with what to include in a VGHA; there are also ethical questions surrounding who contributes the materials being archived (and thus whose history gets preserved), as well as who will potentially use and access the archive. The two most obvious groups of VGHA stakeholders are fans and industry professionals. As previously discussed, fan-generated content is worth preserving because of the potential it offers in preserving video game history; however, fans are not only interested in generating their own content. Many fans are also playing a significant role in the preservation and curation of gaming history through donating personal collections. In addition, these donors’ curatorial care and diligence rival those of archival professionals (de Klerk 2018; deWinter and Kocurek 2017; Geraghty 2014).

Aside from collectors, another subgroup of fans who play a significant role in shaping the history of video games are hackers. Hackers' role in video game history is an uneasy one because hackers are often lumped together with crackers, the latter most often associated with pirating and exploiting games rather than preserving them (Raymond 2001). This is an unfortunate stigma because, without many of these hackers, much game hardware and software would have become inaccessible long ago. As preservationists of game history, the struggle is how to recognize and preserve the results of these hackers' unsanctioned actions when they clearly violate copyright laws (Kirkpatrick 2017).

The other major group of VGHA stakeholders is the production companies and industry professionals. This group has a vested interest in preserving video game history, for such archives can serve as a repository of previous projects for present and future company employees. One subgroup of industry professionals poses an ethical complication: industry employees who may have kept developmental documents related to products they worked on (and many can be found online, some hosted by the developers, and some from questionable sources). Such things may include documents, notes, screen captures, concept art, unused code, and other materials that were part of the development of a game, but whose public circulation is often not sanctioned by the company itself. These texts provide great insight into the history and development of digital games, but because of copyright or work-for-hire laws, they pose a problem for archiving. Many times these insiders do not own the rights to the material they kept, creating roadblocks for archivists trying to acquire the material, especially if the company in question went out of business years ago and the industry insiders do not know who to get the rights from (deWinter and Kocurek 2017).

## A WAY FORWARD: PARTICIPATORY ARCHIVES

Thus far, this chapter has examined the types of video game materials available to archive, and the ethical problems associated with archiving them. In the remainder of the chapter, and following the example of two scholars, Melanie Swalwell (2017) and Abigail De Kosnik (2016), I offer a potential way forward: participatory archives.

Right now, there are no established procedures within the field of game studies that offers a model of how to address these ethical concerns. Online and physically offline video game archives do exist, but there are

limits to how people can access those archives. Online and emulation archives neglect much of the experience the developers intended, while original hardware (and software) requires hacking to make work. There are also so many ephemeral games, whether cloud-based or failed, that are nearly impossible to present in a legitimate archive. And this says nothing of paratexts, much of which is lost over the years.

Furthermore, as archivists, we must assure that all stakeholders have voice. As scholars trying to establish a VGHA, we need to acknowledge and respect the positions and opinions of any potential users or contributors, not only to engender their trust and respect so that they feel comfortable contributing their materials (thereby establishing personal buy-in), but also to create an archive that all parties can accept as valuable and useful. What fundamentally differentiates the primary stakeholders—video game companies and fans—is the economic principles that each group operates on. Video game companies operate their business and circulate their materials according to the principles of a market economy; it is their primary goal to make money. Fans circulate their materials according to the principles of a gift economy. In a gift economy, intellectual property is not formalized, but rather is recognized and rewarded through such methods as linking back to the original work, personal acknowledgments, recommendations, and referrals (Jenkins 2009). A gift economy and a market economy are equally valid ways to operate a business or a community; however, the logic of a gift is at direct odds with the idea of monetary exchange (Vaughan 2010). Trying to establish an archive that respects and incorporates the values of two such opposing parties, an archive that could potentially serve the needs of both groups seems like an impossible task, one for which no readily available model of resolution presents itself from game studies.

Swalwell (2017) and De Kosnik (2016), recently published work that resolves some of these archival questions. Game studies scholar Swalwell and fanfiction scholar De Kosnik independently decided to search outside their fields to find potential models for or solutions to their research questions, while at the same time calling other scholars who work with archives to seek more inclusive understandings of the types of archives that are in use at present, whether professionally mediated or not. Following Swalwell's and De Kosnik's example and looking outside game studies, we find in the field of information science the model of a participatory archive.

In 2008, information science scholar Isto Huvila (2008) asked fellow archival scholars to imagine “an archive implementing decentralized

curation, radical user orientation and contextualization of both records and the entire archival process,” one that potentially used Web 2.0 and increased participatory practices to create what Huvila called a participatory archive. Other scholars took up Huvila’s challenge, each one offering their preferred version of a participatory archive, until Kate Theimer (2011) argued that there was no one satisfactory definition, offering hers as “an organization, site or collection which people other than archives professionals contribute knowledge and resources, resulting in increased understanding about archival materials, usually in an online environment.” Anne J. Gilliland and Sue McKemmish (2014) took this definition of participatory archives one step further by deliberately foregrounding the importance of respecting the rights of all stakeholders. They propose a theoretical framework that foregrounds an individual’s right to have one’s role in creating the archival content acknowledged, along with the right to “exercise one’s belief systems through archival descriptive practices” (2014, pp. 84–85).

Whereas Huvila (2008), Theimer (2011), and others foregrounded ideas of decentralized curation and incorporating Web 2.0 software to facilitate “asynchronous interactions” between archivists and users separated geographically, Gilliland and McKemmish (2014) focused on the “rights, responsibilities, needs and perspectives” concerning the archive’s users and contributors (p. 82). They envisioned a participatory archive as “a negotiated space in which these different communities share stewardship – [participatory archives] are created by, for and with multiple communities, according to and respectful of community values, practices, beliefs and needs” (p. 79). Essentially, they put the rights, needs, and perspectives of the archival stakeholders at the heart of the participatory archive.

Using Gilliland and McKemmish’s (2014) vision of a participatory archive for a VGHA offers a foundational ethos that speaks directly to the central ethical dilemma: the clash over copyrights and the diametrically opposed gift versus market economies governing the stakeholders. Their vision is more theoretical and does not offer practical advice on establishing participatory archives; however, Edward Benoit and Alexandria Eveleigh’s (2019) work does. They identify four aspects (which the rest of this chapter briefly examines) of a participatory archive, combining practical techniques with Gilliland and McKemmish’s foundational focus on the voices of all stakeholders creates a viable, ethical model for a VGHA.



Benoit and Eveleigh's (2019) techniques include social tagging and commenting, transcription, crowdfunding and outreach, and alternative and activist. In social tagging and commenting, users are asked to "identify, describe or comment on" the archived material, be it entire collections or individual records. These descriptions are then added to the archive, providing a way to create and preserve knowledge that supplements traditional archival descriptions. The 2017–2020 Nordic project, Collecting Social Photography (CoSoPho), uses social tagging and commenting in their participatory archive that preserves digital photographs of Denmark posted on *Instagram* (Jensen et al. 2019). The temporary, unstable nature of photographs posted to social media make them difficult to find and preserve; however, the CoSoPho archivists were able to through this implementation. The volatile, transitory nature of these photographs is similar to that of unstable video game software, suggesting social commenting and tagging as a viable way to collect and preserve it.

Benoit and Eveleigh's (2019) second technique, transcription, offers a way to create accurate transcriptions (that automated processes cannot) of audio recordings, documents written by hand, and materials containing moving images. Copies of such materials can be preserved, but often their actual content is not described or recorded in traditional archives because of the use of automated copying processes. Automation is favored because transcription takes time unavailable to archivists of larger collections. The American Archive of Public Broadcasting is faced with just this situation as they seek to preserve thousands of hours of public television from the Boston public television station, WGBH. Employing the transcription process in collaboration with the archive users allowed for "multi-relational modes of description" and access to content in more meaningful ways (Dong 2019). Although digital games are not television programs, they are texts with moving images, as are the fan-made paratexts (e.g. video-captured walkthroughs, game review podcasts, etc.) posted on YouTube and other social platforms. Using transcription as part of a VGHA will allow more content to be preserved and provide alternatives to the archival process not found in more traditional archiving.

The third aspect of a participatory archive is crowdfunding and outreach which use social media to reach out to stakeholders and the public to seek funding, receive donations of rare materials, etc. One particular example of a participatory archive that uses crowdfunding and

outreach is that of the Northwestern University's collection of "cell phones, ranging from a mid-1990s Motorola to early 2010 s smart-phones" that preserves not just the artifacts, but the content of mobile devices as well (Alagna 2019, p. 143). Transferring such content from the devices to a central archive often required proprietary or obsolete cables and peripheral equipment that were not acquired at the same time as the cellphones. By applying the techniques of outreach to the surrounding community, archivists were able to crowdsource peripherals containing nearly 100 items of which 38 were unique (Alagna 2019).

The fourth aspect of Benoit and Eveleigh's (2019) participatory archive model is making space for alternative and activist communities to participate as stakeholders, especially for less-mediated or non-professionally mediated spaces such as community-based projects. This aspect deliberately opens space for those participants at risk of being overlooked. When combined with Gilliland and McKemish's (2014) focus on respecting stakeholders' rights, contributions, and needs, this technique provides a powerful tool to ensure voices are heard. A prime example of this is Project Naming, housed at the Library and Archives Canada, which at its inception digitized almost 500 photographs of Inuit people whose names were never recorded (Greenhorn 2019). Any information previously recorded followed a traditional archival model, and many of the photograph captions were pejorative and woefully inadequate. Those in charge of Project Naming deliberately reached out to the Inuit communities, opening a space for them to collaborate in crafting descriptions for the images, thus countering "the long history of colonial documentation by acknowledging and respecting the authority of the community to document their own identities, knowledge and language" (pp. 47–48).

Similarly, a participatory archive for gaming would give voice to those often underrepresented in the industry. For example, small studio, individually designed (independent), narrowcast, and experimental games might be better represented if their designers could contribute (in addition to hackers, crackers, and modders).

The participatory archive model proffered here allows for an ethically sound archival foundation, so any dataset researcher drawing from the archive would be equally sound ethically. A participatory model as described above would also offer models for practical aspects of archives, such as suggesting potential funding opportunities or helping with the collections of rare and obsolete materials. The point is that the model

of the participatory archive suggested in this chapter has the potential to establish an archive that would suit diverse research as well as offer solutions to practical problems inherent in establishing a VGHA. It offers an archive that not only addresses the ethical difficulties faced by archivists when preserving video game history, but also enables researchers to access ethically sound datasets of material for their work.

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# Toward a Broader Conception of Theorycrafting

*Cody J. Reimer*

## THEORYCRAFTING, PRESCRIPTION, AND EXCLUSION

The term “theorycrafting” abounds in video game argot. Theorycrafting takes place in games, about games, and through the paratext of games. It is a metagame practice. As *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*) (Blizzard Entertainment 2004) grew in popularity, many academics began turning their attention to its persistent, massively multiplayer realm of Azeroth and its emphasis on theorycrafting for endgame content. There, they found players increasingly engaging in the practice of theorycrafting and relying on fan-run websites dedicated to such work. The term “theorycrafting” originated with *Starcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 1998), but as Christopher Paul (2011) notes in “Optimizing Play,” much academic literature on the topic is related specifically to Azeroth. Paul defines theorycrafting as “the search for the optimal set of strategies with which to play” (abstract) and explicitly connects the practice with statistical analysis in

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sports, grounding theorycrafting in quantitative research. He sees theorycrafting as an attempt to “seek out the hidden rules” (para. 13) of the game in the same spirit as Billy Beane, who applied statistical analyses to change the way professional baseball teams evaluated players. In their pursuit of unveiling a game’s inner workings, players become, as Paul sees it, “authorities in a discussion of how [a game] works” (para. 4). As authorities, theorycrafters model “the procedures of the game by developing paratexts” (para. 4) and create “a dynamic relationship” (para. 4) with ongoing design practices.

Bonnie Nardi (2010) also defines theorycrafting in her ethnography of *WoW*. Like Paul (2011), she understands it as “the discovery of rules that can not [*sic*] be determined through play” (p. 137). Also akin to Paul, she explicitly connects the practice with quantitative research. She discusses how players research the game by playing the game, using test dummies implemented by the game designers for the express purpose of theorycrafting. Similar to Rebekah Shultz Colby and Richard Colby (2008), Nardi (2010) writes about the practice’s value for teaching scientific literacies: “technically oriented players designed quantitative experiments, performed tests, analyzed the results, published them online, and worked with one another to solve puzzles of game mechanics” (p. 139). The experiments run and tests performed are necessary because the inner workings of the game, the code itself, act as a black box. This obfuscation encourages players to research and study, which is an important angle of player engagement. Paul (2011) points to a post by *WoW* designer Ghostcrawler, wherein the designer justifies the use of black boxes:

There is a risk players will stop experimenting and theorycrafting if they think we will eventually just dump all of the answers on them .... Having black boxes adds depth and a sense of exploration to the game. When everything is known with certainty, you can do things like definitively know the best choice in every situation. Theorycrafting is dead. (para. 28)

Ghostcrawler’s post frames theorycrafting as an avenue for engaging players, but it’s the warning about definitive knowledge that matters. The testing dummies intentionally court theorycrafting. This courtship, part and parcel with what Paul (2011) characterizes as a “dynamic relationship” with ongoing design practices, is rooted in a modernist worldview. It supposes the black box proffered players can be cracked and the veil of the game peeled back with fundamental Truth laid bare: the code of the

designers staring back, their calculations manifest and clear. This brand of modernism, this exclusive conception of theorycrafting as quantitative, is misguided and dangerous.

These quantitative definitions of theorycrafting hide the modernism that promised a techno-social positivism of the sort Stephen Toulmin (1990) discusses in *Cosmopolis*. He links what he calls the “modern project” to the conviction that rational thinking, reasoning, and logic can lay bare the fundamental, objective Truths of the natural world. This sort of unencumbered objectivity is alluring when the phenomena being investigated is algorithmic, procedural—that is, when it’s a computer game. Except, of course, positivism was critiqued and upset decades ago. When Thomas Kuhn (1962) wrote about paradigm shifts, he was addressing the move away from the positivist paradigm of research. He acknowledged the limitations of positivist methodology, recognizing that there were certain things that worldview couldn’t account for. In a similar fashion, a solely quantitative conception of theorycrafting views a gameworld in which only a small number of questions are answerable and worth investigating, and the answers to them carry the conviction of a modernist uncovering of truth. If quantitative theorycrafting provides the only questions and their answers, their proponents’ conviction becomes a lens through which too many decisions are made, decisions not only about how to play, but who gets to play. Moreover, there are questions worth investigating in theorycrafting whose answers elude the constraints of positivist answers.

It makes sense, then, to encourage a shift away from a modernist, positivist view of theorycrafting. A move from positivism toward the pragmatism offered by mixed methods (Teddlie and Tashakkori 2009) can help reconcile the lack of qualitative, constructivist methodological consideration in theorycrafting. In their book on the foundations of mixed methods (MM) research, Teddlie and Tashakkori describe pragmatism as a “compatibility thesis” between the epistemological tension of qualitative and quantitative research (p. 15). Their thesis is that MM offers holistic understandings of phenomena, drawing from both narrative and numerical information as well as analyses only afforded by MM (e.g., data conversion and transformation, p. 7). My contention is that theorycrafting can benefit from a more pragmatic, holistic approach, one largely ignored by the predominantly quantitative definition.

Cynthia Haynes (2016) opens space for qualitative research in her rhetorical analysis of theorycrafting. She relies on the WoWWiki definition, which explains theorycrafting as “the attempt to mathematically analyze game mechanics in order to gain a better understanding of the inner workings of the game” (p. 183), but she acknowledges that the scope of theorycrafting is broader than mathematical or quantitative. She writes that “theorycraft is not just about maximizing gameplay through calculation and experimentation, it is about collaboration and conductive reasoning, persuasive discourse, and a kind of ‘open source’ negotiation between developers and players” (p. 185). Haynes unpacks the relationship’s dynamism by demonstrating how theorycrafting, even the quantitative flavor, operates in the larger paratext: it demands persuasive framing (many theorycrafters go so far as to include a methods section), open discourse with designers (challenging them on issues of balance and design), and collaboration (often mirroring peer review). These characteristics are explicitly, prominently rhetorical and epistemic.

Haynes’s (2016) attempt to broaden conceptions of theorycrafting is productive. While academics (Shultz Colby & Colby, 2008; Nardi, 2010; Paul, 2011), players (WoWWiki), and designers (Ghostcrawler) limit the practice to quantitative research, theorycrafting is an empirical pursuit that employs (or can employ) both quantitative and qualitative methods. Approaching theorycraft as qualitative and quantitative broadens the scope of how players arrive at what Paul (2011) calls “optimal play.” Players determine optimal play *also* through informal study using observation (streamed games), focus groups (guild and general chat), surveys (forum posts), case studies (pro player games), and other qualitative methods, but these are seldom classified as theorycrafting and rarely appear in the paratext in the same way as quantitative studies—for any number of reasons: perhaps because players view them as less rhetorically compelling, they view them as less useful for the types of questions they pose, or the types of games that engender theorycrafting draw the types of players who are more likely to value or be trained in quantitative methods and who subscribe to a modernist worldview.

Haynes (2016) sees theorycrafting as a new theory of interpreting power, and a sign of the “mass resurrection of structuralism” (p. 186). While “structures of power are interpreted with critical theories of various stripes,” she writes, “theorycraft has more rhetorical dexterity since it draws on algorithm, combat mechanics, optimal collaborative ethos, [and] swift trust” (p. 186). As a theory of interpreting power alternative

to interpreting meaning, theorycrafting emboldens players with empirical authority and agency, imbuing them not with the confidence to know the *meaning* of a game mechanic, spec, or itemization, but to know its *power* in terms of quantitative, raw, brutal efficiency: “What will give me the best chance of crushing my enemy, seeing them driven before me, and hearing their lamentations over chat?” such a player might ask. Or so we might believe if we subscribe to a solely quantitative, modernist interpretation of theorycrafting.

Players, as Paul (2011) concludes, gain new authority in discussing the game when they have empirical evidence to support their claims about how to play most efficiently. And that’s a large part of what theorycrafting is about: finding the most efficient means to play. It’s about squeezing out every possible advantage, leveraging every detail, minimizing risk while maximizing value. Its *telos* is victory, its *ethos* is optimization, its ethic is expedience; and that is inherently dangerous. When Steven Katz (1992) wrote about the “ethic of expedience,” he was referencing the Holocaust—and specifically a technical memo concerning a mobile gas chamber. While I am uncomfortable associating, even loosely, the gravity of Katz’s subject with video games and the ostracism they can produce, the ethic of expedience conceptually frames some of the harm of a strictly quantitative approach to and definition of theorycrafting, offering a partial explanation for the harassment that follows it. Katz attributes the ethical problem from the Nazi memo to deliberative rhetoric, linking deliberative rhetoric to technical communication and an epistemology of objectivity that leads to an ethic of expediency (p. 260). He explains that this ethic is “an exclusively logical, systematic, even quantifiable one” tied to an *ethos* of technology concerned with “rationality, efficiency, speed, productivity, power” (p. 266). An exclusively quantitative application of theorycrafting shares this ethic, and when players embrace the *ethos* of a competitive game to perform well, they risk the deterioration of Aristotle’s concepts of ethics and virtue, as Katz argues (p. 270), for the power and authority of theorycrafting.

The authority theorycraft instills in players carries with it that ethic of expedience, because with theorycrafting, players have power over other players: they *know* they “know” more than players who don’t study theorycrafted knowledge. That leads to tensions in collaborative-competitive games where each player’s success (and experience) depends on their teammates’ behavior, particularly when one player doesn’t conform to the latest tenets set forth by theorycrafting.

## A BALANCING ACT

Theorycrafting's emphasis on expedience seems sensible in the safe confines of play, but Paul (2011) also provides an important critique of its promise of excellence. The practice's tendency to suggest not just new or efficient ways to play the game, but *right* ways to play "marginalizes all other modes of play, creating a situation where you either use it or are left behind." "Suboptimal" strategies, point allocations, and itemization, which some players consider enjoyable, are met with disdain and rebuke from others. Paul (2018) contends that these reactions give rise to toxicity, writing that "popularization of the blanket term 'toxicity' largely comes from the work of the *League of Legends* developer Riot Games" (p. 69). The result of toxic reification of theorycrafting's prescriptivism is that one type of play is emphasized and embraced: playing to win, to progress, to be the most efficient. A min/maxed, theorycrafted, modernist approach to play runs distinctly contrary to play as exploration, as surprise and wonder and excitement, play with what Bernard Suits (1978) calls the "lusory attitude." A solely quantitative understanding of theorycrafting strips surprise from the experience, replaces exploration with domination, and substitutes perfecting mechanical execution for revelry. Quantitative theorycrafting foregrounds "proper" play by promising optimization, precisely what Ghostcrawler feared. Players need no longer make choices about how to allocate items, ability points, or team members, and can instead focus on simply playing "better" than the other players. As with life, games are more complicated than solving equations.

Not only does the reinforcement of theorycrafting's dictates about proper play influence players, but as significantly, it potentially influences the designers of the game. The industry shift in business models toward always-online, micro-transactions, and DLC-driven games means that designers are required to push new content through updates and patches, accelerating the need for and cycle of theorycrafting in competitive games. In multiplayer games these content pushes also include balance changes to address player concerns, lest they (and their wallets) abandon the game. New patches mean new questions. To patch and update and balance games successfully, to improve player experience, designers are frequently listening to players and/or—more commonly—examining data from their play (Drachen 2015; Reimer 2017; Karabinus and Atherton

2018). Where and how this turn happens varies based on design philosophy and game genre. As Ghostcrawler’s post explains, *WoW* designers were largely content to maintain a black box and add test dummies, leaving players to their own methods.

Riot Games’s design philosophy contrasts Blizzard’s model; Riot wants *League of Legends (LoL)* “to be the most player focused game in the world” (Riot Games Manifesto). One of the ways they strive to meet this goal is by turning play data over to the players through an Application Programming Interface (API). Riot permits players to use their open API to access data recorded by the game, from champion win- and pick-rates to item selection and beyond: It’s Big Data. This level of access creates a feedback loop wherein players play, their play data is recorded, the players pore over that data, use it to theorycraft, rely on theorycrafting to inform subsequent play, and then discuss the play, data, and experience with designers, who are also looking at the data (Reimer 2017). If Blizzard designs for theorycrafters by encouraging scientific experimentation through the parsing of combat logs and meticulous backward calculation to arrive at numbers with which to inform optimization, Riot designs for theorycrafters to research not in game but in the paratext. Players could essentially skip a step, or several.

Riot Games’ decision to use an open API only partly results from the emphasis on player focus. They were incentivized to enable theorycrafting through API because the inability to experiment in game. For a long time, *LoL* players pleaded for a sandbox game mode in which to practice, experiment, and theorize. It wasn’t until early 2017 that Riot implemented one. Prior to the addition of a sandbox mode, *LoL* players were not afforded the time and space to experiment in situ. Recording damage and other metrics in the way common to *WoW* meant organizing a faux match with friends or stopping mid-match in *LoL*; and stopping meant death, accusations of “feeding,” and potential penalties for being inactive (stepping away from the keyboard mid-game in a game like *LoL* is frowned upon). Players were constrained to theorize from the pool of data pouring in from recorded play. The size of that pool provides theorycrafters with statistical significance and a sense of quantitative certainty, so apart from wishing to test long cooldown abilities without waiting, players mostly forgave Riot’s delay in providing a sandbox mode. They could get their answers by consulting fan-made sites drawing on the API.

*LoL* players, brimming with certainty, take to forums, to game lobbies, and to game chat to use that certainty as a cudgel. On forums, spec’d

for quantitative research, they wage rhetorically complex and oftentimes sophisticated appeals to designers to make particular balance changes. In game lobbies, armed with databases replete with player data, they gank nonconformist player choices based on pick-rates and win-rates. In game chat, armored with pro player guides and statistical analyses, they team fight about players' itemization and play styles. Riot has simultaneously worked to cultivate and curtail this behavior. They've committed to being player focused—giving players unsurpassed access to data and designers—which has power-leveled their pursuit of expedience. But Riot also hired a behavioral analysis team which included an experimental psychologist and PhDs in Cognitive Neuroscience, Brain and Cognitive Sciences, and Human Factors Psychology (Scimeca 2013). This team implemented the “Tribunal,” a peer review system to pass judgment on players who were reported for various infractions. While some of those experts have since left Riot and the Tribunal has been shelved in favor of different reporting measures, the efforts of the player behavior team continue because the toxicity persists.

As designers add content; tweak programming; adjust coefficients; and balance, patch, and update the game, they are doing so with theorycrafting and its effects in mind. In the case of *WoW*, they tune the highest echelons of difficulty for those who chew through content the fastest—those who min/max, theorycraft, and play to win. Resultantly, those who subscribe to other forms of play and fun are left with endgame content that they often must resort to theorycrafting's prescriptions to overcome. They feel they only have access to part of the game they paid for (Paul 2011). In the case of *LoL*, Riot Games invites players to work with and respond to the data—going so far as to hold competitions for players' API implementations. A major difference between the two is that *WoW* theorycrafting explores mechanics at a granular, individual level, whereas *LoL* theorycrafting explores systematic design by relying on enormous datasets. Riot encourages players to engage in the theorycraft structures of power more deeply; and while more player engagement is the reasonable conclusion of a company mission striving to be player focused, the power structure implicated in this engagement is, ironically, at least partially complicit in the negativity warranting the creation of their player behavior team. It rewards those types of players who study the paratext, research optimization, discuss strategy on forums, and engage the structures of power that form a foundation both for competition and



condescension. Designing competitive spaces for players of varying types requires a balancing act.

David Sirlin (2000) indirectly captures this balancing act, arguing in favor of an exploitation mindset; his insights are valuable in addressing the behaviors that give rise to theorycrafting and toxicity. Ironically, he also offers some of the best advice to competitive players about the lusory attitude and helps put into sharp relief the tenuous balancing act designers perform. Sirlin's thesis is that playing to win means doing everything the game permits to win, even (ab)using bugs, glitches, and exploits: "The game knows no rules of 'honor' or of 'cheapness.' The game only knows winning and losing." It is *realpolitik* in a black box. He encourages players to push the boundaries of the game, exploring "extreme 'corner cases'" to find such bugs, glitches, and exploits. By exploring the corners, mapping the boundaries, and pushing against them, competitive players, Sirlin contends, accumulate deeper understanding of mechanics, design, counters, and playspace. In essence, he encourages critical play and, though he doesn't use the term, theorycrafting. To be fair, Sirlin justly observes that this "playing to win" mindset can only morally be applied to games, as "exploring extreme situations in life can easily be socially unacceptable, morally wrong, and illegal."

Sirlin (2000) calls "scrubs" those players who insist that certain tactics, strategies, moves, and play styles are "cheap" or unfair. Scrubs aren't playing by the rules of the game, but by their own fictional rules within the game based on their notions of balance and fun, notions often arrived at separately from other players. Scrubs sound awfully similar to theorycrafters, who abide by the rules strictly, handing down dictates and decrees about the statistically superior strategies, tactics, and choices. The same language Sirlin uses to describe those who don't play to win applies equally well to theorycrafters who *do* play to win. The heart of this dissonance is in the prescriptivism attached to theorycrafted "findings." It's one thing for a player to believe they have found the optimal way to play; it's another thing entirely when they prescribe those beliefs onto others, and ridicule them for not sharing that belief, or caring at all.

As a former professional gamer turned game designer, Sirlin (2000) writes about playing to win through the lens of immutable arcade fighting game cabinets, which were rarely patched, updated, or balanced. Dominant strategies emerged, and if the game was "deep" enough, counters to that strategy were discovered and competition was richer and more sophisticated for the additional layers. If players complained about

a bug, they were a scrub. If they complained that a strategy, character, or item was imbalanced, they were a scrub. There was no adjusting balance, tuning, or tweaking; there was only the cabinet, the sole arbiter of winning and losing. When players can negotiate the ongoing design of a game, and balance issues are up for negotiation—as they are in the cases of *WoW* and *LoL*—any understanding of the scrub is complicated.

If there's broad consensus among the best players that a particular strategy is overwhelmingly imbalanced or degenerate, Sirlin (2000) considers the game shallow and poorly developed and thinks players will move on. But what happens when the designers can step in and attempt to balance the game? If the designers hadn't made the balance change, would players eventually have found a new, more powerful strategy or exploit? How long should designers wait until they step in? If they step in too quickly, they may cave (or be seen to be caving) to (mis)perceived imbalance; they would have catered to scrubs. If they step in too late, how many players will have abandoned the game as “shallow” and undesirable as a competitive platform?

When to take action is an important question for live iteration, and necessitates rich, open dialogue between designers and players, something designers have been reluctant to do (Crawford 1982; Koster 2015) but are slowly acknowledging (Karabinus and Atherton 2018). This very issue can also impact toxicity. If theorycrafting and its proponents decide that *this* is the best way to play the game, other players may be ridiculed and harassed as they search for counterstrategies that fall outside of *that* avenue of play. The longer designers wait for players to find counterstrategies, the more likely nonconformist players will be ostracized until a more dominant strategy *is* found (if there is one)—assuming the designers don't implement a patch before a counterstrategy appears (and they often do).

Sirlin (2000) advocates playing to win, but a significant part of the competitive mindset must be devoted to what he calls “exploratory play” (Suits's [1978] “lusory attitude”). Exploratory play is intentionally not playing to win but playing to find new ways to win: trying the ridiculous, practicing the unconventional. It is practicing what others disdain because it may just be what beats the in vogue strategy. It is playing to be surprised. But how and when can players practice the unconventional—when they are derided, excluded, and penalized for doing so—often resembles the spoilsport who intentionally misplays. Exploratory play is most helpful when the stakes are serious; otherwise,

the results of exploratory play cannot be taken seriously: the outcome may have been the results of others not trying their hardest. Thus, players trying their hardest are routinely necessary for investigating the whacky and challenging the status quo. And when teammates are relying on one another for their own success, deviating from the norm is a less than welcome practice.

What's a designer to do? Some attempt to categorize and classify player behavior and motivation, to better understand how to answer that question. Early efforts at categorization focused on identifying players as "hardcore" or "casual." Like Sirlin's (2000) players-playing-to-win and scrubs, this (spoiler: false) dichotomy of "hardcore" versus casual was/is the seed of much resentment among players and between players and designers. "Hardcore" players theorycraft. Casuals don't. For most designers, the decision is a balancing act, because when put together in the same lobby, match, raid, game session, or server, the "hardcore" players' success depends on the viability and expedience of the casual players' choices. The result is often prejudice and exclusion. It's no fun.

### CORE-CASUAL CONTINUUM

The core-casual divide is a false dichotomy. On *Gamasutra*, Ernest Adams and Barry Ip (2002) suggested identifying what they called "gamer dedication" using 15 characteristics. Notably, the characteristics are all rooted in identifying just how "hardcore" a player is—casual, for them, is defined as the inverse or absence of "hardcore." The piece is not without its problems but reflects a prevailing thinking about the core-casual divide from the time, and how designers thought and perhaps still think about players. Their "dedication" characteristics were not generated by talking to players about their play preferences, but by using "a combination of relevant discussions and certain principles of consumer classification from academia." Adams and Ip's (2002) 15 factors, which they note are "not in any particular order" but are later weighted so as to be "determined arbitrarily according to the importance the marketer perceives them to hold for his [*sic*] own purposes" include some of the following: is "much more tolerant of frustration," has "hunger for gaming-related information," "discuss[es] games with friends/on bulletin boards," shows "indications of early adoption behavior," and has "comparative knowledge of the industry." These factors reflect the same ethic of expedience as theorycrafting. "Hardcore" players must want competition, tolerate

frustration, pursue knowledge, engage paratext, adapt quickly. Alarmingly, they seem to employ Sirlin's (2000) exploitation mindset beyond the confines of the game. They remark, for instance, that the category of "ultra casual" gamers "have great potential for further [market segment]exploitation," like noobs waiting to be ganked and camped.

Nick Yee (2018) provides a contemporary classification of players using data from Quantic Foundry's "Gamer Motivation Profile." The profile consists of 12 motivators across six categories and was used to survey over 350,000 gamers worldwide. Respondents were asked to self-identify as a casual, core/mid-core, or hardcore player, with each identity linked to frequency of play, level of competitiveness, and access to high-end equipment. Yee notes that "there isn't a standard definition of these terms in the gaming community" but that "without some guidelines around what these terms mean, the results would have been difficult to interpret." The addition of a third point in gamer identity (core/mid-core) replaces the binary with a comparative continuum, a more appropriate vehicle than Adams and Ip's (2002) for examining player motivation and identity.

Yee's (2018) findings produce a significant takeaway: a distinct gender disparity in what it means to be "hardcore." Yee notes, "hardcore is more about breadth [across the motivators] for female gamers and more about specialization for male gamers." Female respondents identifying as "hardcore" scored above average across all the motivators: their "hardcoreness" is represented in their breadth of motivation. They're more motivated by everything, but only slightly so. Male respondents identifying as "hardcore" scored much higher in fewer motivators (competition, excitement, and challenge). They were specialized, hyper-focused on competition and challenge, the sort of gamers who subscribe to "playing to win." This means male and female gamers can both consider themselves hardcore but look at the other and not see that same hardcore identity reflected. Such a disconnect between gender, identity, and motivation has serious consequences when these identities are used to inform design decisions for players, argue about the metagame from a position of *ethos* as a "hardcore" player, or—worse—impact hiring and promotion decisions within the gaming industry.<sup>1</sup>

The 2002 and the 2018 profiles attempt to isolate specific motivators to more clearly understand what drives particular types of play and players. While too granular to scrutinize here, the continuum they inform can be productively mapped on a Venn diagram of gaming spaces to illustrate how and where the engagement of player types occurs (see Fig. 17.1).

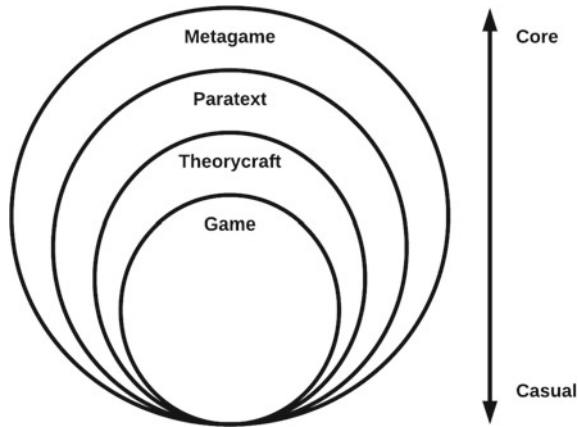


Fig. 17.1 Gaming spaces mapped with an engagement continuum

The most casual-leaning players' engagement is limited to the game itself. It doesn't take much engagement, however, to move up the continuum into other spaces while remaining nearer the casual end. Casual and core alike can engage the paratext and enjoy transmedia storytelling, fan fiction and fan art, guides, tips and tricks, and the myriad ways of engaging a game through theorycrafting, paratext, and the metagame writ large. This conceptualization recognizes the breadth of ways that casual players often engage with the game in ways overlooked by "hardcore" gamers who value specialization over breadth.

The most core (or, in Yee's 2018 framing, "hardcore") players' engagement extends into the metagame to the extent that they care more about *it* than the game itself. Core players will frequently invoke "the meta" as a means of justifying and defending play decisions. They construe theorycrafting's dictates in aggregate as "the meta." They will critique the state of "the meta" in paratextual lobbying efforts targeting designers. In this way, they are using the term "metagame" as Stephanie Boluk and Patrick Lemieux (2017) describe it: "the common strategies or passing fashions surrounding competitive [games]" (p. 10). Boluk and Lemieux's *Metagaming* plays with the slipperiness of the concept and its incumbent prepositions, suggesting additional definitions and identifying other uses, "from a specific subset of mathematical and economic game theory to

the metaleptic slippage between in-game and out-of-game knowledge” (p. 10). They posit that the standard forms of play, the prescribed set of best practices of theorycrafting that comprise the metagame “not only disavow their status as a metagame, but, in doing so, inhibit the production of more diverse forms of play” (p. 281). That is, for core-leaning players, the metagame, while called “the meta,” is disavowed as such and is instead understood to lie at the heart of the game, much to the discontent and disruption of casual-leaning players. Boluk and Lemieux, like Sirlin (2000), encourage exploratory play, rejecting standard forms that may inhibit others. There are many ways to play. The notion of theorycrafting as solely competitive (rather than to pursue a sort of intimacy with the game-as-art) and solely quantitative (rather than studying whether/how players qualitatively study games) reifies a sort of toxic taxonomy in much of video game culture. Since only 10 percent of multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA, the genre of *LoL*) players are female (Yee 2017), theorycrafting’s epistemology gets mediated through a patriarchy of competitive gamers and leveraged for one *telos*: expedience.

As players experiment and explore in certain games, they face the scrutiny of others’ prescriptivism. Theorycrafting’s proponents threaten to report experimenters whose performance—anticipated or actual—they attribute to malice or incompetence, and this willingness to report operates as a form of gatekeeping, a punishment for stepping outside of the metagame within the game. The gatekeeping—determining who is permitted exploratory play and who is not—operates at the nexus of paratext (e.g., websites that provide player profiles), gaming capital (e.g., being able to cite recent pro player performances), *ethos* (e.g., players’ own win-rates and rankings), theorycrafting-informed-meta (e.g., the standard forms of play), and toxicity escalated by an ethic of expedience. Player self-identification and the *ethos* they cultivate inform how they stage rhetorical gambits to stave off harassment and deflect criticism. In *WoW*, exploratory play means risking neglect—the pool of people with whom to raid is shallower. In *LoL*, exploratory play means risking report—players will take umbrage with suboptimal strategy and report it, often as either “griefing” or “int’ing,” intentionally “feeding” the enemy player kills, which grows the enemy’s power and swings the game. Compared to *WoW*’s Azeroth, then, the penalty for exploration and bucking the meta in *LoL*’s Runeterra is harsher and caught up in the same reporting system implemented to help ward against toxicity.

## ILLUSTRATIVE CASE

The first *League of Legends* World Championship was held in June 2011, and its outcomes exemplify issues emblematic of the game’s design and play. First, the burgeoning *LoL* playerbase tuned into streaming services like Twitch to watch the highest caliber of play. Second, viewers witnessed European and American playstyles clash. At the highest level of competitive play, teams relegated a champion to a supporting position. In a contest of five players against five players, each striving to kill NPC monsters (called “creeps”) to gain gold to buy items with which to better kill the enemy and push down the opposing base, dedicating a single character to explicitly not earn any gold was then somewhat novel for casual American players. The best teams’ use of a support character meant their fragile, glass-cannon “carry” could safely earn the same gold as two opposing champions, escalating their purchase power and ramping up their ability to figuratively put the team on their back and carry them to victory by mowing down the opposing team.

At that time, Riot’s design didn’t explicitly recognize a support role. Assuming a support position without much income meant that support champions were not fun in the way every other position was—they died easily and many players didn’t have a good grasp on how and why they were important to a team or how to play them effectively. After the World Championship, the precedent set by top-tier teams percolated into the paratext: game lobbies throughout *LoL* were filled with the expectation that one player would pick support, forums were filled with speculation and discussion and analysis about which champions were best suited for the role, videos of the championship were studied to see how the role was played, and vitriol rose as casual players who had not watched the championship or read the forums and had never heard of this “support” expectation refused to play it.

Killing creeps was fun. Earning gold was fun. Buying items was fun. This was the core gameplay loop for much of the game. Why should one-fifth of the team be excluded from it? The minigame of getting the last hit on a creep to earn its money was often split between players sharing a lane. With the first championship, the expectation shifted and a part of the meta coalesced. Suddenly, if a “support” player “took” a creep from the carry, they were charged with intentionally sabotaging the team. Tensions rose. Riot Games sought new ways to design a space that recognized supports and made playing support enjoyable, while players sought to

uncover which of the dozens of playable champions were best suited to play in that role.

American expectations about how to play were upheaved by the clash between American and European playstyles. Fnatic, the European team that went on to win the championship, used unconventional champions. Their team composition was different than the American meta: instead of having only one mage-type champion, they used two, and their preference for sending a mage champion to the top of the map's three lanes would greatly influence the American metagame in the months to come. One of Fnatic's two mage players, Maciej "Shushei" Ratuszniak, preferred "exotic" champions that in the American scene were either unpopular (in the case of the beer-chugging, barrel-tossing Gragas) or typically played as a front-line crowd-controller (in the case of the brawny minotaur Alistar).

Both Gragas and Alistar had magic damage abilities and benefited tremendously from mage-type items. These abilities and their magic damage scaling were overlooked for many reasons, in part because their other abilities were defensive in nature, their base health and defensive stats were high, their basic attacks were close range, and they had powerful crowd-control effects. Many tanky, melee, brutish fighter champions had magic damage coefficients in their abilities, but they weren't often played as mages. The magic damage from their abilities was designed to diversify their damage output, so they weren't rendered completely useless if the enemy team stacked armor to mitigate physical damage. But Shushei recognized their potential as fully itemized mages and showed the world that potential. Picking Alistar and Gragas helped team Fnatic smash their way through the brackets, earning Shushei the MVP title. These shakeups: atypical champions, off-meta positions, and unusual itemization routinely follow new patches, and when a pro player demonstrates the success of one, invariably it leads to speculation, observation, and experimentation (Reimer 2017) as players race to ask questions about the phenomena and try to answer them with theorycraft.

## BALANCE THEORYCRAFTING

What followed the first *LoL* World Championship was an invigorated ambition to study the game. Much of the work consisted of qualitative inquiry. Early casters—game announcers for professional play, employed by Riot Games—offered expert insights (LoL Esports 2013) for fans/viewers/players/theorycrafters to respond to in discussion fora.



One fan even created a documentary to explore Shushei's performance and impact (Gbay99 2020). It is not possible to quantitatively determine which champions are optimal at meeting a given role (e.g., mage or support) in part because there are so many variables, and the roles are continually being refined and revised in design and player execution. Qualitative research—for instance, observing other players, playing through cases/scenarios, holding what amount to focus groups on forums—helped players investigate what, how, and why certain choices were effective. Riot began implementing items clearly for support champions. Sometimes those items were used by non-supports. Sometimes they were too good.<sup>2</sup> They were iterated. Riot tweaked the magic damage coefficients of champions (in the case of Alistar, making him less explosive.<sup>3</sup>) Riot also changed how champion selection works in the game's client to clarify roles, enacting team composition rigidity that earlier versions didn't have. They sought balance and transparency in design philosophy.

Every time the meta shifts or is upset (as often happens after big tournaments or significant patches), research questions effervesce: Why was that decision so effective? Was it only good in the context of that match? What other ways can similar decisions be deployed to similar effect? How will this change the meta? Did the changes upset other facets of the meta? What can we still assume is optimal? And so on. Players strive to unpack, study, and answer such questions and their qualitative inquiry is overlooked as a form of theorycrafting. When players enter lobbies or select champions with unconventional, “off-meta” choices to test them out, their teammates regularly demand a defense of the choice. These demands highlight the sort of toxicity Paul (2018) describes, but also indicate a lack of awareness of the value and merits of qualitative inquiry and exploratory play.

Framing theorycrafting as both qualitative and quantitative, as an empirical study of optimal play that can employ mixed methods research, to an extent alleviates the need to defend the unconventional. It recognizes games as complex and their variables numerous, with a non-trivial number of corner cases and irregular boundaries. A holistic methodology of theorycrafting can, in part, contribute to easing the prescriptivism and exclusion that occur at the hands of expedient play. Theorycrafting isn't just crunching numbers. It's also texturing play and telling the story of *agon*. There is room in all games, especially competitive games, for all players. That's something both players and designers need to reconcile.

Blizzard has made strides in addressing core-casual design issues in Azeroth. *WoW* raiding is more stratified than in the past, and casual-leaning players have access to more content; core-leaning players have access to achievements and token incentives to reward their play styles and values. Riot has worked to make similar strides in *LoL*'s match-making system and champion design. The agonistic push that makes *LoL* a good platform for competition has been compartmentalized, although it's unclear how successfully. So long as theorycrafting is defined by an ethic of expedience and the delusion of quantitative positivism, so too will toxicity be bolstered by the prescriptivism of theorycraft. By recognizing how theorycrafting occurs qualitatively, even informally, and valuing the contributions such methods can have on exploratory play, playing to win, and upsetting "the meta," gaming spaces can reduce prescriptivism, embrace other ways of playing, and help drop *aggro* from cultural toxicity.

So long as there exists gender disparity in gaming identities along the core-casual continuum, and so long as those identities remain a critical component in motivating players' actions within gaming spaces (the game, theorycrafting, paratext, and the metagame), sexism and misogyny and gender discrimination will have yet another lane in which to farm. By recognizing that there is no right way to play, that there are many valid forms of fun, that engagement is a complex continuum rather than a binary, that diversity is part and parcel with exploratory play, the games industry—from designers to companies to players—can make the metagame more inclusive.

## NOTES

1. Such as the case alleged by a gender discrimination class action lawsuit against Riot Games (D'Anastasio 2018) which charged that male Riot execs, who saw the company's culture as belonging to "hardcore" gamers, passed over women employees for raises and promotions because of a lack of cultural fit.
2. The "Heart of Gold" is one such classic example: it was eventually "removed because it allowed non-support characters access to free extra gold" (Fandom).
3. In patch v1.0.0.121 launched July 8, 2011, shortly after the first World Championship.

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## Using *World of Warcraft* for Translingual Practice: Teaching Recontextualization Strategies

*Rebekah Shultz Colby*

The practice of disallowing students to deviate too far from “Standard English” has long been called into question: an ethical writing pedagogy must teach students how to effectively negotiate, even challenge these traditional “norms.” I propose an approach that enables students to use recontextualization strategies that help them prepare audiences for deviations from “Standard English” that nevertheless fulfill authorial meaning-making goals. In this chapter, I offer specific examples of such strategies gleaned from two Chinese students who conducted research (that resulted in academic articles) in *World of Warcraft*. I analyze how these texts rhetorically operated and how they created scholarly knowledge, showing how we can adapt these strategies to teach students to re-envision research

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article genre conventions: namely, to use framing strategies in introductions, literature reviews, and methods sections that introduce translanguaging terms and engage indigenous, decolonizing research methods that use these terms in data coding.

## DEFINING TRANSLINGUAL PRACTICE

Suresh Canagarajah (2013) defines translanguaging practice as an activity of meaning-making in which multiple semiotic resources are negotiated within the meaning-making process. The term is an outgrowth of previous work within linguistics, especially applied linguistics. For instance, the applied linguist, Alastair Pennycook (2010), argues that instead of viewing language as a system with discrete boundaries, language should be viewed in context as a specific way of doing; a social action; a contingent, local practice. With this framework, we are all translanguaging because to use a language is to use a set of diverse codes within a constant interaction with other semiotic resources on hand such as images and signs which include modes such as the visual, aural, and spatial (Kress 2003) but that also work within the context of objects, other participants, and our bodies (Latour 2005). While language patterns arise, creating genres, dialects, and grammatical forms, such patterns are created and seem stable through performative sedimentation (Butler 1997), or the iterability of language (Hopper 1987). Language patterns are constantly renegotiated as they come in contact with other codes and multimodal resources. Furthermore, according to Pennycook (2010), as social practice, language is used by communities to achieve its purposes, creating a discourse community. As Pennycook argues, discourse within translanguaging practice is always about contextual practice, and avoiding universalizing norms, utilizing the little “d” as opposed to the big “D” in James Paul Gee’s (1989) definition of discourse.

Because we use language to communicate with whatever semiotic affordances we have on hand, we constantly shuttle between codes, discourses, and other forms of semiotic resources, often intermixing them—code-meshing—in order to negotiate meaning. Everyone code-meshes constantly, often without noticing, as different semiotic resources meet in communication. As Paul Matsuda (2013) points out, the concept of code-meshing has been developing within linguistics for decades, specifically within discussions of code-switching (Nilep 2006). For instance, John Gumperz (1982) refers to using two codes within one

speech exchange, and Peter Auer (1998) discusses code-mixing in which multilingual speakers intentionally intermix two languages creating a new code, which is not just an intermixing of two languages side by side.

Canagarajah (2013) and literacy activists such as Vershawn Ashanti Young et al. (2014) and Min-Zhan Lu and Bruce Horner (2013) have taken up the intermixing of languages, discourses, and semiotic resources within translanguaging practice as not only a theoretical construct but as a deliberate ethical pedagogical strategy within the writing classroom to better address difference and confront monolingual ideology within pedagogical practice. In contrast to translanguaging practice, monolingual conceptions of language see language as composed of universal rules that are out there ready to be acquired (Chomsky 1965) rather than seeing language as an always already contingent negotiation for meaning which constantly intermixes semiotic resources. Specifically, translanguaging practice disrupts notions of “Standard English” as a stable language system with discrete boundaries by calling into question the idea that all deviations from language norms are actually errors and showing instead that they can be ways of making meaning through combining various language codes, especially as language norms are not universal constructs: they are themselves open for negotiation within each specific rhetorical context. Of course, the idea that “Standard English” is not a universal language system with completely stable norms that can just be checked for “correctness” is hardly new, Gee (2011), for instance, calling “Standard English” “something of a fiction” (p. 2).

However, language still has norms, even if these norms are constantly in a process of negotiation and depend on the context of a specific rhetorical situation. Furthermore, as social action, language norms partially solidify through a process of sedimentation if they are iterated consistently enough within a specific discourse community in order to achieve that community’s goals, becoming, like genres, stabilized for now (Hopper 1987; Schryer 1993). As such, language use within these communities can still be about power relations with gatekeepers who patrol the boundaries between novice and expert (Rorty 1979; Gee 1989; Swales 1990). As social action, if specific acts of discourse are deemed as not serving the social purposes of the community, the community can still silence them (Gee 1989). However, as Etienne Wenger (1998) notes, any practice within a community is always open for negotiation and redefinition, and practices inevitably adapt and change as the needs of the community

change: norms of practice are constantly contested. As translingual practice demonstrates even more radically, by constantly mixing codes, we all have the potential to contest norms of language practice through each communicative act we make.

Regardless of how language norms are negotiated, any act of communication is foremost about co-constructing meaning, as language is always about doing. As Gee (1989) has long argued, “a person could be able to use a language perfectly and *still* not make sense. It is not just *how* you say it, but what you *are* and *do* when you say it” (p. 5). This is certainly the case when people from diverse cultural backgrounds communicate. Some of their codes may be radically different, such as when international students interact with U.S. students.

Nevertheless, no matter how radically different some of these language codes might be, Canagarajah (2013) shows how communicators are still often able to co-create and negotiate meaning effectively because they use all of the semiotic resources available, including multimodal resources, which Canagarajah calls “interactional strategies.” Interactional strategies directly help communicators with the co-construction of meaning. They specifically help with alignment: making sure that all of the communicators have access to similar sets of semiotic resources (i.e., codes, specific modes, objects, etc.) so that meaning-making is possible—even while interactional strategies are dynamic, vary widely, and change depending on the rhetorical context and communicator needs.

Recontextualization, which is also termed “footing” or “framing” (Goffman 1981), is a strategy that prepares communicators for the meaning-making process, mediating differences as it helps prepare audiences for potential variance in norms and codes or differences in semiotic resource alignment. In other words, recontextualization constructs shared frames of reference. More specifically effective recontextualization creates common ground by using shared frames of reference, helping audiences remain open, able to negotiate differences in codes that might not be shared and, therefore, clearly understood. Consequently, even though we all constantly shuttle between diverse semiotic resources, intermixing them appropriately per rhetorical context, the more diverse our codes, the more unique the semiotic alignment, the more audiences need effective recontextualization strategies to understand our message.



TOWARD A TRANSLINGUAL WRITING  
 PEDAGOGY: TEACHING STUDENTS  
 A META-AWARENESS FOR RECONTEXTUALIZATION

While we all intermix semiotic resources, much of it happens on a tacit level in which we evaluate rhetorical social contexts and frame or recontextualize intermixing so that it is understood and accepted. Consequently, to intermix languages, dialects, discourses, and semiotic modes well, writing students need meta-language to discuss how to recontextualize effectively. Gee (1989) argues that meta-language is difficult to come by because one is always inside a discourse. To critique or analyze that discourse in a way that constructs a meta-language for it is to step outside of it. However, the juxtaposition that happens in discourse meshing could be a way of achieving the critical perspective needed for meta-language, even as we are never fully outside of discourse: rhetorical theory could be a way to analytically critique the effectiveness of recontextualization strategies in texts (Ray 2013). In fact, in an earlier article, Canagarajah (2011) already intermixed the discourses of rhetorical theory and linguistics when he discussed how students must still intermix languages in rhetorically effective ways for their audience, writing that “[s]tudents have to develop a critical awareness of the choices that are rhetorically more effective” (p. 402).

Peter Koch and Wulf Oesterreicher (2001) conducted a study on the use of intermixing languages, specifically code-meshing, which can illustrate how and why rhetorical theory could be useful in discussing intermixing textual language. They found that the level of distance from the audience affected how much code-meshing was used and whether the audience accepted it. In immediate face-to-face conversation, code-meshing was used often—communicators have more immediate semiotic resources they can draw on to repair their utterances if clearly misunderstood: facial cue, tone of voice, body language, and gesture among others. However, they found that code-meshing was not highly used in written texts with broader audiences when highly distanced from the writer, as is the case with journalistic features or research articles (as cited in Paquet-Gauthier and Beaulieu 2016).

By using rhetorical theory, writing teachers can still teach students to effectively intermix languages, discourses, and other semiotic resources for various genres written for specific audiences, even if these written

genres greatly distance the writer from that audience. For instance, journalistic features and academic research articles can still have fairly specific audiences, or at least a specific enough rhetorical context for classes to discuss a range of specific recontextualization strategies that could be rhetorically effective for a specific target audience. Basic rhetorical concepts like genre, audience, purpose, *kairos*, and exigence are already meta-terms that writing teachers employ to help students understand writing in diverse rhetorical situations. By using linguistic and rhetorical terms, writing teachers can invite students to explicitly intermix languages, discourses, and multimodal resources in rhetorically effective ways for a range of more specific audiences. For instance, after a guided activity which teaches students how to find peer-reviewed yet-accessibly-written academic research articles, writing teachers could ask students to find research articles that intermix languages. After students explain who the probable target audience for the article may be, explaining it with demographic ranges that vary, students can then discuss why the intermixing of different languages was rhetorically effective for that audience (assuming it was) but also how it was recontextualized for that audience: how the author prepared that specific audience to understand and rhetorically accept the intermixed portions of the text. Through discussion, the class can generate multiple specific writing strategies for recontextualization. Even though each example is bound up in the contingencies of a specific audience and genre and cannot necessarily be used in the same way in a different rhetorical situation, discussing why a range of rhetorical recontextualization strategies are effective helps students to develop meta-awareness for seeing recontextualization strategies in action and rhetorically analyzing how and why they are effective for different audiences. As Canagarajah (2013) notes, students also already possess a savvy rhetorical repertoire of strategies for the effective recontextualization of code-meshing; they just may not be aware that they possess these linguistic resources. As a result, students could be asked to reflect on previous examples of intermixing languages, discourses, and other semiotic resources in their own lives; then they could be asked to explain why these examples were rhetorically effective and what recontextualization strategies they used: how they prepared their audience to understand and be persuaded by their intermixing. In these ways, writing teachers can prepare students to effectively use recontextualization strategies within a range of rhetorical situations.

Writing pedagogy that rhetorically employs recontextualization along with other meta-rhetorical terms and teaches recontextualization is an ethical teaching practice that does not force students to white-wash discourse in approximations of “Standard English” in the name of rhetorical appropriateness. Young et al. (2014) argue against this approximating: it forces an absolute code-switching that creates painful double-consciousness, a dual identity in which one discursive identity is constantly rejected (in the William Du Bois [2005] sense). As Young et al. argue, writing teachers unfortunately have often taught their linguistically diverse students to code-switch, thinking that code-switching would increase student achievement, especially when students write within genres that have been considered too formal to be written in anything but “Standard English”—such as the research article. Teaching students how to recontextualize their use of intermixed language is a more ethical teaching practice than code-switching because it draws on students’ linguistic diversity while still teaching them how to effectively write within these genres. Furthermore, by teaching students how to analyze genres to identify rhetorically effective recontextualization strategies, students are also taught rhetorical tools to conduct intermixing. Thus, students of difference are not burdened to prove they belong in academic discourse communities with their difference without teaching practices that show them how to do so first (as Lu and Horner [2013] argue).

### TRANSLINGUAL PRACTICE WITHIN *WORLD OF WARCRAFT*

To encourage translingual students to deliberately identify and intermix terms while also asking them to study how to rhetorically recontextualize this intermixing effectively, teachers could use the rich translingual spaces of video games—especially online video games in which players communicate by using various multimodal resources, languages, and dialects, often in real time. For example, *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*) offers a multimodal space that juxtaposes modes in graphics, sound, and written text where students can engage in translingual practice. As a global, massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG), *WoW* is played by people from diverse countries, backgrounds, and cultures. Consequently, it offers an environment in which languages, dialects, discourses, and other semiotic resources are constantly intermixed within the shared, contextual purpose of gameplay. This shared purpose brings players into a certain degree of linguistic alignment, making communication between diverse

groups easier because they can always use the communicative affordances available within the context of the game to recontextualize their communication differences. While each server is supposed to support a specific language, hosting people who largely speak that language through online written text and audio voice chat programs like Discord, there is still much diversity in language groups and norms. I have played on an Orange County-based server and heard English speakers complain about Chinese players speaking Chinese while reading a forum post in which British expatriates look for a guild of English speakers on a Chinese server (laowaijames 2018). While players occasionally complain about incorrect grammar usage and other deviations from “Standard English” norms, most of the time players focus on their alignment of shared gaming literacy: negotiating multimodal cues from the game as well as verbal and written directions from other players in order to achieve a specific gaming objective as a group. In other words, negotiating meaning well enough to play together effectively is prized over “correct” grammar.

Because video games are such richly meshed multiculturally multimodal environments, many literacy scholars have studied them. Jonathan Alexander (2009) has argued that *WoW* can foster multicultural literacy, the ability to take into consideration views, perspectives, and values from others as trans-literacies and the ability to negotiate meaning across multiple genres, which may use different modes. Paul Rama et al. (2012) examined how two Spanish speakers used *WoW*'s multimodal resources and gaming discourse to learn English. Yolanda Rankin et al. (2006) studied how international students learned English from playing *EverQuest*, primarily from the written and audio speech of non-player characters (NPCs). Similarly, Jim Renalli (2008) examined how students learned English from the multimodally rich world of *The Sims*.

When teaching writing and academic research, video games can serve as a bridge to academic discourse: through a shared purpose, which already aids semiotic alignment for a diverse range of students, and through gaming discourse with which students often already feel comfortable. Gee (2003) argues that video games help students learn academic literacies because they offer a situated way for students to learn abstract academic concepts: in games, they see such concepts in action and concretely apply them to solve problems through gameplay. Gee also discusses students' comparative ease at identifying with game “affinity spaces.” As an MMORPG, *WoW* gives students a hands-on affinity space in which they can learn about research as they conduct it, often through play

(Shultz Colby and Colby 2008). For translingual players who are learning English, *WoW* can also offer a space to conduct research, analyze their data, and problem solve—while using a mix of languages, discourses, and semiotic resources. Because these students are already intermixing academic and gaming discourse, writing and researching in and about *WoW* can provide familiar footing, alignment, and ways to recontextualize academic discourse.

I examined research articles (written primarily in English) of two Chinese students, who I refer to with the pseudonyms Hui and Li, to investigate how translingual students can effectively shuttle between languages and discourses. In my first-year writing class, they played *WoW* to research player culture on a Chinese server. In this Writing in the Disciplines course, students conduct research in *WoW* using qualitative, quantitative, and/or textual research methods, and then write in an academic research article genre appropriate for their chosen research project. Student research is guided by a research question outline, a detailed research method description, and a reflective rationale for why these research methods are best suited to their inquiries. Students then find a research article that reflects their chosen research methods and write a genre analysis in which they analyze both the content and rhetorical moves of the article. For instance, if students conduct qualitative or quantitative research, they analyze research articles written predominantly in IMRaD format—with an abstract, introduction, and literature review, and methods, results, and discussion sections. Research projects for which students analyze the game as a text ask for thesis-driven analytical essays with literature reviews that situate and create a framework for their study. After conducting their research, students write about their research using genre conventions and rhetorical moves similar to their article. In the class, students conduct and write two research papers, one individually and one collaboratively. Here, I analyze the aforementioned, individually written qualitative IMRaD research articles, examining how two Chinese students intermixed languages, discourses, and other semiotic resources. The pedagogy enabled them to create meaning, was ethical (because their sharing of cultural knowledge deepened their analysis and created new knowledge for English speakers in the process), and illustrated their ability to recontextualize their translingual terms within an academic research article for English speakers.

## TRANSLINGUAL PRACTICE WHILE TEACHING WITH *WORLD OF WARCRAFT*

My Chinese students negotiated both differences in academic and *WoW* discourse, and language differences between Chinese and English. Furthermore, they brought cultural references to bear that deepened the meanings of terms and their subsequent analysis: the process helped them to not only make meaning but to construct new knowledge. Intermixing languages can help construct knowledge because juxtaposing two languages can synthesize two frames of thinking, co-constructing a slightly different and possibly unique perspective in the process.

An example of knowledge construction through translanguaging practice occurred with a research paper about damage per second (DPS) where Li mixed academic with gamer discourse. Within the game, a whole culture has sprung up around DPS, with players competing to statistically “out damage” the other. Each player has their own theories about what creates the most DPS: Li decided to capitalize on conflicting DPS theories by interviewing Chinese players to discover the dominant view of what constitutes the highest DPS, conducting qualitative theorycrafting. He discovered that buffs, enhancing spells that players cast on themselves to increase damage, and internet connection enhancement only marginally increased DPS. Gear—clothing that a character wears that has DPS enhancements on it—increased DPS slightly more. What enhanced DPS the most according to player interviews was spell or ability rotation, the specific order that a player uses them. Certain orders increase the statistical likelihood of critical strike or burst damage: a chain reaction that makes spells inflict the most damage. So, by using the academic research method of interviewing participants within *WoW* culture, Li discovered how DPS worked and what increased it the most and thereby constructed knowledge by combining discourses from both academic and gaming communities.

Furthermore, Li was able to use the rhetorical framing of the academic discussion section to clearly articulate and summarize these new findings, recontextualizing them effectively, even if they intermixed discourses. He writes,

From the result we can see that most of the players said that a perfect rotation will help the player have a better DPS when they have the same equipment level. In the game you can see many players' equipment are

[*sic*] in a high level, but only a small part of them can do well on [the] DPS side.

While *WoW* developers iterate and change these rotations over time, the community itself still debates those changes, and Li was able to construct knowledge by finding general agreement within his interviews that spell rotation was the best way of increasing DPS. And while the factors creating the most DPS were not necessarily new knowledge to the *WoW* community, these findings could be considered new knowledge to an academic community.

My Chinese students also created knowledge by mixing English and Chinese, translating gaming concepts unique to Chinese gaming communities into an approximation of an equivalent English term. By playing the game in Chinese and then conducting their research in the game in Chinese as well, they translated their Chinese research into English for their research papers. This translation also led them to use English in unique ways. Often, simple and direct translation from Chinese to English is not possible, especially when also translating more complicated *WoW* terms; thus, this translation difficulty led to more descriptive use of language that enriched the meaning of common English terms and idioms, often bringing deeper cultural understandings to clichés that are often taken for granted and, consequently, not thought through deeply. To illustrate: Lu and Horner (2011) use the example of a Chinese student who used the phrase “Little Grass Has Life.” Even though this phrase is idiomatically incorrect, they argue that it is rhetorically effective as it not only communicates that one should stay off the grass but it also deepens the meaning behind this message by showing why people should: so that the grass can live. In other words, translingual phrases like this, that bring two cultural contexts into contact, can force readers to slow down; think about language, terms, and ideas in new ways; and potentially develop new ideas in the process.

Li, for instance, when discussing the critical strike build-up (through spell or ability rotation to maximize DPS), needed to describe both the build-up process and the critical strike damage that a specific rotation causes: his term, a “flutter.” To me, this sounded like a bird suddenly fluttering its wings to gain momentum—and this is what the build-up of correctly timing a spell or ability rotation can feel like to a player attempting a critical strike: a purposeful crescendo reaching a sudden impact of maximum damage, like a bird fluttering its wings increasingly

quickly to gain the momentum to soar. Furthermore, while “flutter” is not commonly used by English-speaking players on U.S. servers, it is a valuable term because English speakers do not have a corresponding term for critical strike build-up.

While Li did not use overt rhetorical recontextualization strategies for “flutter,” using “flutter” instead interchangeably to mean either the spell or ability rotation build-up and the critical strike itself contextually throughout the paper, he relied on the alignment of a shared game discourse (instead of overtly recontextualizing). A simple definition for the term the first time it was used in the introduction would have been an overt recontextualization rhetorical strategy for U.S. players. Li’s use of alignment worked to recontextualize “flutter” like this: he used the academic introduction to set up the frame of his research project—specifically introducing the concept of DPS, which players in the *WoW* gaming community already understand—and then introduced the three factors necessary to achieve the most DPS (“the level of equipment, rotation, and something else”). *WoW* players would already know that rotation refers to spell or ability rotation and all players are in pursuit of the “something else,” the secret X factor that could increase DPS. Consequently, when Li used the term “flutter,” readers who play *WoW* are already cued to co-construct meaning in the context of shared understandings of achieving maximum DPS. He writes: “For those players who are really want to show the great DPS, they will treat every flutter carefully, no matter it is just a daily random normal dungeon or a heroic raid.” However, without a deeper understanding of how to play *WoW*, academic readers might still be lost and need an overt definition.

Another interesting example of Chinese and English translanguaging practice that led to a more accurate description of *WoW* discourse and culture was an additional Chinese saying that Li translated into English in his paper. It was from an interview of a Chinese player who said, “People always saying purple outfit grizzly brain.” In *WoW*, the description of the highest-level clothing and gear is always highlighted in purple. People spend hundreds of hours playing to attain these purple items for a good reason: purple gear provides the highest boosts to a player’s armor, abilities, and spells; however, these boosts can make players feel invincible, causing them to play more aggressively and sometimes more foolishly than usual. Equating this sense of invulnerability to a grizzly is not only poetic but accurately describes the psychology of this phenomenon in a



concise way. Sadly, this is not a phrase that U.S. *WoW* players use, and in fact, they do not seem to have a term like “grizzly brain.”

As with “flutter,” there are no overt rhetorical recontextualization strategies for “grizzly brain”—no definition is offered; however, the term is still recontextualized by the frame of the results section and by the fact that it occurs as raw interview data. Both recontextualization frames influence the attitudes readers bring to constructing the term’s meaning in context. Academic readers who respect data will take the time to carefully read the quote in order to understand it as data. Players within the *WoW* community will also respect the quote, taking more time to read it in context because players prize game experience above correct grammar and usage, and the player’s experience is evident from the quote. They will also understand the quote within the context of their own gaming experience and may agree with it as they remember times in which players acted more aggressively after receiving a purple item.

Hui also used language in thought-provoking ways when translating from Chinese into English. He was researching whether people choose races and classes that fit their own personalities or whether they choose characters that represent opposite traits to their own. Specifically, he used the term “introvert” to describe someone who is not only shy and prone to being a loner because they find energy from within, but also to describe people who are tolerant and peace-loving. In an informal conversation, I asked him about the extra meanings for introversion. He explained. At first I thought he had made a translation error, but as I thought about it, I realized that it made sense: someone who is inwardly drawn may hate conflict with others because they would have to become suddenly outgoing to defend themselves, even while that outgoingness with a hostile audience would deplete their inner resources more. Consequently, categorizing someone who is introverted as easy-going and tolerant not only make sense, but expands and deepens the concept of introversion.

Hui’s recontextualization of his broader definition of introversion happened more overtly as he defined the term in several different ways simultaneously for his readers, offering a definition that is more overt than readers would otherwise construct through context alone. Specifically, he defines introversion in the methods section when he maps his coding scheme for the different races and classes, defining which personality traits each embodied. For Night Elves, he wrote, “people who are quiet, love peace and introversion.” For priests, the best healer class, he wrote, “people that like to help others and feel happy to that. It also represents

the introversion and tolerance.” Admittedly, his research coding scheme is flawed: the personality traits people attribute to a specific race and class will undoubtedly widely vary, especially as we bring markedly different subjectivities from our own construction of identity to bear on how we interpret the identity of specific game characters’ races and classes. Hui was also only able to interview a handful of players and did not have time to interview the many different class and race combinations in the game, let alone with any depth. However, through juxtaposing the words “tolerance” and “love peace” with introversion in his coding scheme, he was still able to recontextualize the meaning of introversion clearly enough to help readers potentially co-construct a deeper meaning by integrating these terms into a new definition.

### RECONTEXTUALIZATION STRATEGIES FOR TRANSLINGUAL PRACTICE IN ACADEMIC RESEARCH ARTICLES

The above student examples, while partial and imperfect because they also illustrate the process of student learning, still have potential for illustrating how writing teachers can more ethically teach students recontextualization strategies so that students can intermix languages, discourses, and other semiotic resources in even formally distanced academic genres such as the IMRaD research article. Traditionally, within the research article, titles, epigraphs, and acknowledgments have been low-stakes areas in which to experiment with language and more freely intermix languages and discourses (Thaiss and Zawacki 2002). However, as my students illustrate above, introductions, literature reviews, and methods sections can be used for recontextualizations to set up definitions and contextual alignments for intermixed terms. Finally, using indigenous, decolonizing research methods could be another way to include a space for intermixing languages and discourses, particularly in the methods and results sections.

Introductions, specifically literature reviews, already exist for recontextualization as they rhetorically frame the alignment for an argument: defining which theoretical concepts will be used and how they will be used by framing them within the previous discussions of the topic. For instance, while Christopher Thaiss and Terry Zawacki (2002) found that titles, epigraphs, and acknowledgments were low-stakes areas to include alternative discourse that intermixed languages or discourses in unique ways, the literature review tends to be a high stakes area that consequently has traditionally used intermixed terms the least as Canagarajah (2013)

notes. However, like a literature review, titles and epigraphs still frame an article, coloring the attitudes and values that a reader may bring to it. Therefore, terms that uniquely intermix languages, discourses, or other semiotic resources could still be carefully introduced in the introduction and literature review in a similarly framing way, provided that the writer defined and justified how the terms were to be used theoretically. Specifically, literature reviews could still more overtly use intermixed terms if the literature reviews were carefully built in order to theoretically support research that might need to use the term. For instance, hypothetically by using John Swale's (1990) Create-A-Research-Space (CARS) model, after establishing a territory of research by reviewing previous literature on the subject, writers could create a need for a specific intermixed term by showing how the previous literature is lacking because the term has not been previously used, indicating a research gap in which the term becomes necessary for future research or further analytic analysis.

Unique mixtures of languages, dialects, or discourses might not need overt introductions provided their use works within the context of the argument—as Li illustrates using “flutter,” particularly if this intermixing illustrates or embodies the argument. For instance, Geneva Smitherman (1999), in “CCCCs Role in the Struggle for Language Rights,” carefully intermixes academic discourse with African American Vernacular English (AAVE). Her academic discourse describes a detailed history of CCCC's 50-year struggle to enact more multilingual language theories within writing pedagogy because of prevailing monolingual perceptions of language and pedagogy. While Smitherman never overtly justifies her use of AAVE, she carefully inserts AAVE phrases throughout, mixing them with “Standard English” in ways that embody and perform the literacy arguments she is articulating. Because she has already framed the article around competing language theories using academic discourse, she has also already cleverly created a framing recontextualization for her enactments of AAVE and does not need to overtly justify them.

Furthermore, students could also learn how to intermix languages, dialects, discourses, and other semiotic resources to construct knowledge using qualitative research methods, particularly if qualitative research methods are also intermixed with indigenous, decolonizing research methods. These methods stress respect for indigenous cultures to the point where the researcher co-constructs knowledge and meaning along with the participants, just as translanguaging practice stresses co-constructing meaning within each situated communicative act (Tuhiwai Smith 2012;

Fixico 2003). Indigenous research comes from a paradigm in which knowledge is considered relational (Wilson 2001), an epistemological orientation which could work in tandem with understandings of translanguaging practice as meaning-making that happens through relationships: an active co-construction of meaning between participants using any relationships with the semiotic means on hand. Opposed to positivist orientations of research, indigenous research works with qualitative research methods, especially as qualitative research is primarily concerned with studying social practice in limited, situated contexts, and comes from a constructivist epistemological orientation. Consequently, indigenous research methods are often mixed method: mixing the qualitative research methods of interviews, participant observations, and focus groups with the indigenous research methods of storytelling and oral history (Wilson 2008; Botha 2011).

Often indigenous research is written in ways that freely mix languages or dialects. Researchers acknowledge that in representing cultural practices, meaning is often lost in translation, and they may resort to placing languages side by side so that different readers will at least have more potential to co-construct meaning. For instance, a PhD candidate justified using both Spanish and English in her ethnographic dissertation of women's prisons in Uruguay, writing,

Some words that are essential to understanding the meaning of the narratives have a specific meaning within the context of the group interviewed: Uruguayan female former political prisoners. Such words, although they might have a Standard English translation, would lose an important part of their meaning because these meanings are created by the context within which they are used. (Lincoln and González 2008, p. 788)

Consequently, terms that use two languages or dialects can appear liberally within the data and analysis of qualitative research studies.

Intermixed terms can also appear in methods sections. As qualitative researchers often develop coding schemes through grounded methods of emergent coding, constructing coding schemes through trends they observe in the data (Patton 2002), researchers can use coding terms from the reoccurring language that actually appears within their data trends, regardless of whether or not the language used is an approximation of "Standard English." As a result, in teaching students to carefully code qualitative data, students could also be taught to be sensitive to the

possible differences in meaning that could happen as they code data that uses different languages, dialects, or discourses, as my student's definition of introversion illustrates, especially if students are not active participants within the community they are researching.

This exploration of strategies to effectively use translingual writing strategies within academic research articles applies mainly to the humanities and social sciences, even while we might desire wider application. While all journals have differing publication standards which may vary even between individual, gatekeeping editors, as Canagarajah (2013) notes, journals in the sciences can have particularly conservative grammatical expectations. However, because translingual practice comes from a similar epistemological framework as many qualitative and indigenous research methods, there could be useful ways of using translingual terms in articles that study culture.

In these ways, by using recontextualization strategies that are rhetorically effective for genre and rhetorical situation, students can effectively use translingual terms—even in genres considered too conservative for much deviation, such as the academic research article. Recontextualization and intermixing are ethical pedagogies because they not only prepare students for successfully using translingual terms, but they also show that, in so doing, they can create new knowledge.

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