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The Game of Reading and Writing: How Video Games Reframe Our Understanding of Literacy

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Abstract

This essay focuses on how video games both highlight our traditional assumptions about reading and writing and suggest alternative paradigms that combine the new and the traditional:

- Play. Video games reveal how pleasure and desire are inherent to the reading and writing process. This dimension of gaming helps explain why video games can produce resistance in terms of approaches to writing instruction grounded in maintaining the cultural distinction between play and work.
- Authority. The interactivity of video games complicates questions of who authors and authorizes meaning in a discourse community. Video game players are simultaneously readers and writers whose gaming decisions are inscribed within a certain horizon of possibilities but not predictability. The video game is an inherently dialogic discursive space that problematizes the institutionalized distinction between "reading" and "writing"
- Return to the visual. The case of video games not only helps restore the understanding of writing as a visual form of communication but also challenges the apparent static quality of the printed text, emphasizing the temporal quality of all communication. In so doing, the study of video games promises to fundamentally rewrite the conceptual binary of process and product in composition pedagogy.

Keywords: Game; Gaming; Digital; Pedagogy; Interactive; Play; Authority; Visual

1. Introduction

"Video Game Tests the Limits. The Limits Win." So ran the headline to a *New York Times* story written by Heather Chaplin in January 2007, describing the controversial exclusion of a video game based on the Columbine school shootings—*Super Columbine Massacre RPG!*

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(*SCMRPG!*)—from the finals of the Guerilla Gamemaking Competition at the 2007 Slamdance Film Festival. Slamdance positions itself as an alternative to the increasingly mainstream Sundance film festival, and the creation of the video game competition reinforced the image of Slamdance as open to new and innovative visual media. In the case of *Super Columbine Massacre RPG!*, however, that openness ran up against the conflicted cultural status of video games and gaming. While festival director Peter Baxter affirmed his own belief in artistic freedom ("I personally don't find the game immoral, because an artist has a right to create whatever he wants, whether a filmmaker or a game maker"), he had reservations extending that principle to the level of the social: "when you're responsible for presenting that work to the public, it becomes more complicated" (Chaplin, 2007, n.p.).

Beyond the conceptual slipperiness of his distinction between an individual versus a social right, Baxter's decision to drop *SCMRPG!* from the competition stemmed as much from the perception that interactive video games represent a radically different discursive experience from other texts as from confusion over the First Amendment.

> Games really are potentially a far more powerful medium than film, aren't they?... In films you play a more passive role. You're sitting back looking at something. Because of the role-playing aspect, games literally take the level of our participation to a whole other level. You are actively engaged in the outcome of your actions. Games are going to affect us in different ways, in ways we don't fully understand yet. (Chaplin, 2007, n.p.)

From Baxter's perspective, a video game based on or inspired by the Columbine shootings represents a fundamentally different kind of reading experience—and thus warrants more vigilant censure—than a novel or a movie. The fact that *SCMRPG!* has generated greater controversy and more instances of outright condemnation in the mass media than Gus Van Sant's (2003) critically praised movie *Elephant*, likewise inspired by Columbine and a film that also invites viewers to consider a school massacre at least in part from the point of view of the two young gunmen, suggests that Baxter has articulated concerns shared by many others.

The question of video games being taken seriously as cultural texts certainly involves the typical process of acquiring cultural capital that goes along with any new discursive medium, and in that respect video games are being treated with suspicions similar to those which accompanied the rise of movies at the turn of the last century. What should especially interest composition teachers and scholars about Baxter's comments, however, is his claim of difference; specifically, his fear that video games constitute a new and potentially disruptive kind of reading and writing. While critical theory challenges the popular assumption that any kind of interpretive experience, whether reading a book or watching television show, can ever accurately be described as "passive,"[1] Baxter revealed an underlying anxiety about the reading process, an anxiety that actually privileges passivity as less threatening than more seemingly interactive forms of reading on both the psychological and social levels.

Despite Baxter's inference to the contrary, this anxiety about reading and writing is neither new nor unique to gaming. From the concern with the ethical use of rhetorical power that

[1] Within English and composition studies, reader response theorists from Louise Rosenblatt to Stanley Fish have made the most famous if not the only arguments that textual meaning arises from a creative dialectic between reader and writer. For a definitive example of the cultural studies case for the active nature of the reception of visual mass media such as movies and television, see Fiske (1987).

motivated classical theory to the worries over the vulnerability of young minds lost in silent (and therefore internalized and unmonitored) reading that greeted the rise of the novel,[2] the issue of the listener/reader's "'level of participation"' and active engagement—in short, issues of autonomy and agency—have formed the cultural and ideological context for formalized instruction in reading, writing, and rhetoric.

The emergence of video games as a subculture, art form, and discursive environment that increasingly challenges our understanding of "reading" and "writing" is part of a larger reexamination of literacy practices that characterizes the move to digital discursive environments in general. If cultural anxieties about the power and impact of reading, writing, and rhetoric are not new in the abstract, they do take on new resonance in moments of significant social and technological change. In this essay, I argue that the interactivity of video games, understood as part of a radical reassessment of literacy in the digital age, points to a fundamental re-conception of writing pedagogy and of the metaphors we use to understand reading and writing in ways that can dramatically reinvigorate the writing classroom.

My argument will focus on three particular areas where video games reopen questions of the efficacy and ethics of writing and reading that often go under-examined in the writing classroom: the relation between play and work in the arena of writing; the intrinsically visual nature of writing; and finally the question of authority in discursive communities. The relation of these three areas to one another is dialectical rather than strictly linear. All cultural anxiety over the operation of reading and writing ultimately involves questions of authority. Discussions of the relationship between work and play and the visual dimensions of reading and writing operate as particular instances of instability that reopen persistent questions of authority in larger social discourse communities as well as in the pedagogical arena. The challenge for writing instructors parallels the challenge Baxter faced—and finally turned away from—at the Slamdance festival: whether to recognize the renewed interest and enthusiasm in reading and writing represented by the evolution of the gaming discourse community as an opportunity for the greater artistic and cultural development and involvement of young people, or to shy away from these opportunities out of a desire for a comforting, if chimerical, passivity and stability associated with more familiar discursive practices.

2. Play

The inherent instability of the cultural status of video games reveals itself nowhere more clearly than in the verb associated with gaming. We read books, watch movies, and listen to music, but we *play* video games. While the verb "play" is used in reference to other art forms, it usually applies to the producers of artistic texts—musicians, actors—rather than their audiences. As a result, cultural anxiety generally attaches to the act of production in

[2] Typical of the apologies that accompanied many early novels are the reassurances offered by Susanna Haswell Rowson in her 1794 best seller, *Charlotte Temple*. After acknowledging in her preface that a novel "stands but a poor chance for fame in the annals of literature" (1986, pp. 5–6), Rowson includes inter-textual asides to the "sober matron" who is presumably monitoring the potentially dangerous effects of novel reading on young women (p. 28).

these media rather than to the act of reception. Musicians and actors, for example, attract both admiration and suspicion as people who "play" for a living. Even within the literary field, "creative writing" has long endured a marginalized role within English studies, suggesting a less easily regulated and more potentially anarchic aspect of the discursive process than the technologies of reading and interpretation. While we do not say poets and novelists are "playing" when they are writing (although they may be writing plays), their activity seems more playful in both the positive and negative senses than the "serious" work of analysis and interpretation. The very segregation of the adjective "creative" in our curricula has become an inside joke to teachers of composition, who refer to their specialty as "non-creative" writing.

As many scholars have described, composition instruction in fact functions at just this nexus between production and consumption, between creation and reception. Indeed, one way of framing the political dimension of various composition pedagogies would be in terms of the regulation of creativity. In the straw man version of the bad old days of "traditional" pedagogy, unruly and insufficiently socialized student writers would submit their work to a master reader in the person of the instructor, who would deploy a stringently defined technology of reading to discipline, punish, and thereby contain the imaginative energies of the classroom.

As Baxter unintentionally revealed, video gaming (and the verbal form of "gaming" emphasizes the dynamic process of the discursive transactions involved) challenges our institutionalized understanding of the writing process not just by championing creativity but more so by undermining the neat division between "writing" and "reading." We can take Baxter's reference to the "more passive role" of the movie viewer as a form of instant nostalgia created by the presence of *SCMRPG!* for a discursive situation where the processes of "creation" and "reception" seemed distinct and isolated activities. That this distinction has always been a false one does not detract from its social power or utility, especially in terms of media corporations who relied on this distinction to defend the textual commodities they produced, from music to film to video, as ultimately harmless, given the supposed passivity of consumers.

Danny Ledonne, the then-twenty-three-year-old filmmaker who created *Super Columbine Massacre RPG!*, specifically emphasized this breakdown of the traditional dichotomy between writing and reading at the heart of his artist's statement posted at the game web site. Inspired by the development of ROLEPLAYINGMASTER (RPM), a software program that essentially allows users to create their own video games, to "achieve my childhood ambition of designing a video game," Ledonne chose as his subject the tragedy that had made a lasting impact on his generation when he was a high school student, the shootings at Columbine. Interested in moving gaming beyond "escapist entertainment," Ledonne wanted to be a pioneer in the development of "socially conscious gaming" (Ledonne, n.d.). He equally expressed frustration at discussions of Columbine in the mainstream media; in particular, the "speculative pitfalls" that he saw as characterizing efforts to understand the motivations of the young shooters, efforts resulting in explanations that contain the Columbine tragedy as an isolated incident rather than more open-ended attempts to explore the event as a symptom of what Ledonne described as a "deeply moribund" society (Ledonne, n.d.).

As a result, Ledonne wanted to "make this game feel like a combination of reading, playing, and thinking" (Ledonne, n.d.). That Ledonne recognizes how novel and unconventional his readers might find his linking of these three activities speaks both to how deeply ingrained is the idea that "reading, playing, and thinking" consist of distinct and separate cognitive

activities and also to how video gaming in particular and digital writing environments in general are causing a reexamination of our vernacular assumptions about writing and reading.[3] In designing his video game, Ledonne assumed an active, creative role for the game player. The whole point of the discursive transaction Ledonne imagined is not for players to receive or even simply interpret his ideas about and perspectives on the Columbine tragedy but to act as component parts of the writing process, in effect to erase the neat distinction between "writing" and "reading."

For Ledonne, the "provocative polarization" the game created among its players and critics is not a sign of a failure, either his own in not communicating effectively enough or among readers who incorrectly interpret his intentions, but a mark of success. His point was not to get across "his point," in the form of an adequately explained and supported thesis, but to create a richer, more nuanced discussion of Columbine that demands the personal engagement and investment of everyone participating. Indeed, he described the game's online forum as "equally important to the SCMRPG [sic] project" (Ledonne, n.d.). His use of the term "project" to describe *SCMRPG!* extended the textual and rhetorical domain of the game beyond the code he wrote or the representational strategies he used in depicting the Columbine tragedy to include everyone who "reads, plays, or thinks" about *SCMRPG!*

Ledonne's explanation of *SCMRPG!* not surprisingly echoes the theoretical redefinition of literacy practices that is the hallmark of New Literacy Studies in general and James Paul Gee's pioneering work in the field of video game literacy in particular. Through an emphasis on "literacy" not as an isolated set of cognitive activities that transcend any specific context but as instead a diverse array of socially embedded practices, Gee used the emerging discursive environment of gaming to unsettle received ideas about reading, writing, and pedagogy. In fact, Gee's work can be thought of just as much as a strategic campaign to constantly question and revise notions of literacy as an effort simply to define a new theory of it. Gee not only analyzed gaming but also recommended participation in it so that literacy theorists and instructors can immerse themselves in the experience of literacy as ongoing, evolving, dynamic practice.

Gee (2004) used his own experiences as a gamer to exemplify his emphasis on the pragmatic dimensions of literacy, on the idea that "writing" and "reading" do not exist as generalized, abstracted cognitive activities but only as specific social practices embedded in the purposes and goals of particular discourse communities, or "semiotic domains," as he referred to them (p. 17). Simply put, Gee reminded us that there are "many different ways of reading and writing" and that each different way is embedded in "a lived and historically changing set of discursive practices" (pp. 14, 21). Trying to separate reading and writing as technical skills apart from these discursive practices means losing an understanding of the motivation and purpose that drives the development of literacy. Gee criticized what often happens in literacy classrooms as a result: "In school, many times children are expected to read texts

[3] By vernacular, I am referring to the kinds of traditional or popular conceptions of reading and writing that are represented by Baxter's concerns about *SCMRPG!* To be sure, composition studies has long investigated, theorized, and deconstructed the binary distinction between reading and writing, but even here, the move to a consideration of digital writing environments and video gaming in particular reveals how print-bound our assumptions have been. See especially James Paul Gee (2004) and Gregory Ulmer (2007).

with little or no knowledge about any social practices within which texts are used" (2004, p. 16).

Gee's focus on "use" here ties in crucially both with the idea of play in gaming culture and also the return to writing and reading as primary forms of communication, socialization, and play among young people that marks digital culture. The idea that literacy practices emerge from the needs and purposes generated by specific discourse communities challenges the pedagogical model of literacy instruction as an amorphous social skill whose specific uses are defined in terms of institutionally mandated learning outcomes and curricula. College students, for example, are required to develop their writing and reading skills in composition courses in order to meet the needs of various external constituencies, from academic disciplines to future employers. Even though these needs are often expressed as ultimately in the best interests of students, student writers typically have little formal input into the articulation of these needs. As a result, the learning outcomes of composition courses can become divorced from the evolving needs and purposes of the digital literacy communities in which our students are developing as writers, as many theorists of literacy in the digital age acknowledge.[4]

As compositionists such as Rouzie (2001, 2005) are pointing out, "play" both returns the motives impelling literacy acquisition to the student writer and undermines external efforts to contain those motives within binary categories of "important" versus "trivial," "productive" versus "wasteful," and even "safe" versus "dangerous." Much of the criticism of *SCMRPG!*, for example, stems from an aversion to the very idea of using a "game" that people "play" to explore such an obviously serious, tragic, and disturbing event, not from a detailed discussion of the particular gaming text that Ledonne created. Games by definition challenge the utilitarian concept of productivity that emerged in the transition to market capitalism: they combine pleasure and pain, leisure and work, a dedication to achieving goals that have no ends beyond themselves.

Interestingly, their "playful" quality most directly connects games and gaming to arts and aesthetics, the very cultural connection that became so fraught at the Slamdance festival. Gaming shares the same paradoxical quality of "purposiveness without purpose" that Immanuel Kant (1998) invented in *The Critique of Judgment* in order to categorize and contain the aesthetic impulse (p. 264). Aren't novels, after all, seen as "games" that readers "play?" They require active participation, hours of work, and result in experiences that range from the amusing to the disturbing to the tedious. As with all forms of "serious play," from aesthetic experiences to hobbies to even scholarship itself, novel reading complicates and enriches the notion of "fun" in ways that are unsettling to bureaucratized forms of instruction and pedagogy, a potentially subversive quality celebrated by Bakhtin as the carnivalesque and in poststructuralist theory through the concept of *jouissance*.

[4] See Ulmer's discussion of "electracy" (2007) again, as well as Myka Vielstimmig (Kathleen Blake Yancey and Michael Spooner), who correctly pointed out that any new pedagogy inspired by the ways that online environments are redefining literacy must contend with the institutional exigencies of grading and assessment (1999, p. 112). Richard Ohmann's work, especially his seminal *English in America*, has been exemplary and influential in analyzing the ideological function of English studies within higher education. Along these lines, see Evan Watkins's *Work Time* as well.

3. Return to the visual

The suggestion that video games most disrupt received ideas about writing and reading because of the parallels between gaming and novel reading provides a bit of contrarian *jouissance* to the cultural critic, as a medium seen as distracting young people from the authorized (if still suspect) pleasures of literature does so by recreating those same pleasures. At the same time, the inescapably visual dimension of gaming equally challenges orthodoxy by helping to return to our sight as writing teachers the inescapably visual dimension of writing. The return to the visual in digital culture forces us to confront the radically dynamic, temporal, and context-situated aspects of writing and reading. In short, the visual historicizes writing. Those of us old enough as writing teachers to have experienced the advent of word processors in the 1980s can remember the shock of the visual they brought to the writing classroom. Take the explosion of visual possibilities offered by even the first writing software programs, for example. While scholarly organizations and style guides were quick to identify a limited number of acceptable and professional typefaces, students embraced the *jouissance* of suddenly having dozens and dozens of fonts and visual markers, from bold to italic to color combinations, at their disposal.

Predictably, many of us as writing teachers reacted to the playful possibilities of word processing with fear or, put more charitably, skepticism. Our instinct, reinforced by the experience of our institutional practices, was not to celebrate the polysemy and possibility made available by expanding the visual dimensions of writing but to contain the "excess" of meaning created by student texts that featured multiple fonts and design features. Even though in the privacy of our homes and offices we were just as likely to play with our word processing programs as our students, for the most part we maintained the classroom as a place for the "serious" production of meaning, one in which expanded visual opportunities were deemed potentially disruptive and distracting.

What both reactions revealed, however, was the power of the visual, a power always latent in institutionalized writing pedagogy now made manifest. While many of our initial reactions to word processing, for example, implied that font design and typeface were supplemental rather than inherent to writing (a rose in any other font would smell as sweet), many of the regulations governing student writing practices suggested otherwise in ways more obvious to students perhaps than writing instructors. As Cynthia Selfe (1989) and others quickly began to argue, the expanded visual vocabulary of the computer-mediated writing environment was transformative, a critical discussion that has lead to ideas such as Ulmer's concept of electracy and Vielstimmig's meditation on and practice of the "new essay."

Still, the enduring distinction found in many composition syllabi between handwritten and word-processed texts persists. While many of us justify this distinction on pragmatic bases that are extrinsic to the central writing process—the desire for legibility, the importance of developing "professional" writing habits, etc.—we can also admit that many students carefully double-check how this distinction will be policed. Most of us, students and teachers alike, have learned to recognize mechanically printed writing as inherently more serious—and also less "personal"—than handwritten texts. Indeed, I would argue that part of the challenge represented by word processing was not only the many new visual options presented to student writers but also how "professional" student writing suddenly appeared, even if development,

analytical sophistication, and tone had not appreciably changed, thus upsetting our familiar visual signifiers of "formal" and "informal," "serious" and "playful."

The discursive environment of gaming completes this transition to a recognition of the essentially visual dimension of writing—ironically, in the same way that new digital technologies return to student writers visual and design possibilities that typewriters had taken away, possibilities that have always remained available to the very young writers using paper, crayons, and markers. Ultimately, the return to writing in its visual mode underlines the irony of viewing visual rhetoric and design theory as "new" approaches to the study and teaching of composition.

Visual rhetoric has appeared on the scene like the classic case of the supplement in deconstructive theory, which is shown to be "always already" implied in the conceptual framework to which it supposedly functions as a later addition. Visual rhetoric began to appear in composition textbooks in the form of a "supplementary" chapter dealing with static images that can be reproduced in a written text. Now, of course, whole composition textbooks are organized around the concept and pedagogy of visual rhetoric, but still so far as just one category of textbook, not (yet) the norm.[5] Gaming, however, by restoring the understanding of writing and reading as intrinsically visual forms of communication and challenging the apparent static quality of the printed text, can help push the strategic deconstructive turn of asking, "visual rhetoric as opposed to what?", a properly rhetorical question that would render the phrase "visual rhetoric" itself redundant.

4. Authority

It is an interesting coincidence (and perhaps no accident), that three words drawn from systems of symbolic visual representation—writing, painting, and drawing—can be used both as verbs and nouns. This split within a single word corresponds to the distinction between "process" and "product" in composition studies, and the inherent ambiguity of the word "writing" reminds us as well of the inherent instability of this distinction, an instability connected to questions of authority, both in the larger cultural arena and in the classroom.

Ultimately, Peter Baxter's anxiety as director of the Slamdance festival is really a crisis of authority, a crisis with a clear pedagogical dimension. Part of the purpose of a film festival, after all, is no different from a key purpose of any film class: to promote access to and discussion of a greater range and diversity of cultural texts than attendees or students had previously been familiar with. From the perspective of the film and video makers invited to participate, the festival functions as a creative workshop, a chance to share and receive feedback for what can always be viewed as works in progress. The digital age in general and video gaming in particular make manifest the idea that "work in progress" describes the fundamental nature of all texts. A text in progress is an unstable text—it is not even a singular "text"—and this inherent instability and multiplicity of *SCMRPG!* meant Baxter could never determine exactly what text he and by extension the festival were being held responsible for. Was it the textual experience

[5] See especially Atwan (2005) and McQuade and McQuade (2006) for striking examples of visual rhetoric textbooks.

that many gamers found challenging and thought provoking, in the ways suggested by the game's creator? Or was it the textual experience of those who were shocked and frightened by the gaming experience? Or was the idea of the text—a video game about Columbine—so inseparable from the text itself that its very conception merited censure?

Even the phrase "gaming experience," while it does reference the active, dynamic status of gaming and/as writing, still implies a kind of singularity or boundedness that misses the actual experience of games as literacy practices. What does it mean to have a gaming experience? What counts as a "comprehensive" experience? Must a player make it through to the final level and complete the mission of the game? Follow all possible routes, make all possible decisions, and follow all possible strategies along the way? What about less skilled gamers who quickly reach the limits of their abilities soon after beginning? Gamers who just sample the experience? What about gamers who rely on cheat sites and other "supplements?" Are these ancillary materials really ancillary? Is using a cheat site really "cheating" (or are these materials shades of *Cliff's Notes* and *Masterplots*)? What about those critics of *SCMRPG!* who never played the game (or who might have never played any video game) but who still read about the game, visited the game web site, or heard a discussion of the game and formed judgments based on these experiences? Is the gaming experience limited only to those who hold controllers in their hands?

These rhetorical questions should sound familiar to anyone conversant with the history of literary theory and composition studies, especially those that focus on the pragmatics of the actual reading experience. From Louise Rosenblatt's pioneering work in transactional (later called reader-response) theory to the deconstructive and poststructuralist insistence on the instability and even illusory nature of the text to dialogic explorations of heteroglossia, there has been an enduring recognition that all reading experiences are partial, context-specific, and notoriously resistant to efforts at constructing minimum parameters for what constitutes a "basic reading."

Still, the materiality of printed texts, including the reproducibility of copies of the "same" book, has allowed us to maintain the useful fiction (and there is no denying that it is both a fiction and useful) of the stable text, the "product" of the process/product model. The book becomes a locus for authority, semantically affirmed in the very word "author-ity," and thereby an arena for contestation and dispute, but an arena amenable to the presence of codified rules, referees and judges, and institutional controls. Organized religion needs an orthodoxy, a film festival needs criteria for inclusion and exclusion as well as the granting of awards, and schools need methods of certification, all social activities that benefit from the useful fiction of the stable text.

It is worth reminding ourselves that the development of the process/product dichotomy within composition studies was as much a strategic rhetorical move as it was an empirical description, aimed at decentering the centrality of the printed text in an effort to move from writing as noun to writing as verb. From the beginning, the process movement understood itself as reframing questions of authority, of who could or should control the production of meaning as well as of whose interests are being served in the writing classroom. The inherent and inescapably interactive nature of gaming likewise complicates questions of who authors and authorizes meaning in a discourse community. Writers/creators of video games necessarily anticipate players who are simultaneously readers and writers, co-authors whose decisions are

inscribed within a certain horizon of possibilities but not predictability. From the perspective of print-based theories of literacy, gaming is an inherently dialogic discursive space, one that problematizes the distinction between "reading" and "writing," "process" and "product."

As an emerging discursive genre, gaming both insists on the visuality and materiality of all writing and defies efforts to fix the gaming experience within a stable product or text. The binary code of the video game shares the same material ambiguity as electricity: it is both real and ephemeral, visible (in the flashing pixels on the screen) and invisible (magnetic traces on the hard drive). This same description, of course, applies to word-processed texts, although our atavistic tendencies are to view electronic texts as simply means to the traditional end of what we now call a "hard copy." The printed form of this essay, for example, suggests singularity, a centered text that can be referred and responded to. But what of the multiple copies of multiple electronic drafts on my various storage units, from my desktop Mac to a memory stick? They suggest a textual space where words appear and disappear, where my simultaneous activities as reader and writer in the composing process promote impermanence, instability, and even irreverence—in short, the writing process/product as an arena of play.

5. Implications for the writing classroom

What does it mean to re-imagine the writing classroom as an arena of play, to pursue the metaphor of writing as gaming? Digital discursive environments, from gaming to social networking to blogging to messaging, contain imaginative possibilities for the transformation of writing pedagogy that we are still only beginning to explore. From a pragmatic perspective, they are the literacy environments in which our students have developed and now live as writers, readers, and players. Neither utopian fantasies nor dystopian nightmares, digital writing environments at the very least need to be explored and understood by every contemporary writing instructor. As I have suggested, the obstacles to this exploration have more to do with the assumptions and controlling metaphors we bring to literacy instruction than with the technological unfamiliarity of new software programs, although many instructors still code their anxiety over the new kinds of critical consciousness demanded by digital discourse in terms of technophobia.

A recent example from a discussion within our own department over the possibilities of making our classes as paperless and therefore as green as possible demonstrates how just the idea of a writing course where most if not all of the writing existed only in digital form prompted reexaminations of our fundamental assumptions about reading and writing. Just as significantly, the tone and much of the substance of the dialogue evinced a loyalty to and in some cases almost a need for the presence of the paper text at the "center" of class, a sentiment that expressed itself in terms of both anxiety and fondness; this view sees the paper text as an anchor in the wild seas of digital communication, no matter how illusory that anchor may prove to be.

I mean neither to reduce the complexity or efficacy of the arguments made in favor of the hard copy nor to exclude myself from the same sense of anxiety and rootlessness many participants expressed. If I have developed an openness to the possibilities of digital writing environments, it is not from any particular technological prowess, pedagogical bravery, or visionary inspiration.

Instead, a lifelong attraction to and frustration with the writing process (conflicted emotions that probably define the experience of most serious writers) have always fostered the quixotic hope that some new gimmick or gizmo might miraculously banish procrastination, eliminate the need for revision, and miraculously unite intention and achievement (really, it's the same impulse that leads writers to search for just the write ink pen and to fetishize certain brands and models). Plus, digital environments, from the Internet to video games, were attractive precisely because they were arenas of play, great ways to be intellectually engaged while waiting for inspiration to return (did I mention procrastination?).

What I discovered, of course, were discursive worlds developing and evolving in fascinating and complex ways that belied the simplistic descriptions of them found in mainstream (and not only print) media. I likewise discovered a renaissance in text literacy among young people, a return to reading and writing as arenas of socialization, communication, and, ultimately, play. Instead of trying to judge these forms of writing practices as "good" or "bad" based on criteria developed in relation to very different kinds of semiotic domains, I was interested in the motives and desires that were impelling these emergent digital discursive communities. As a writing teacher, I recognized opportunity: future writing students who came into the classroom immersed in writing and reading practices that stressed interactivity, visuality, fluidity, and fun.

Making the writing classroom into an arena of play—more precisely, moving from the metaphor of the fixed-text, hard-copy "paper" to the virtual metaphors of digital writing drawn from the domains of design and gaming—can allow a focus on the motivation for writing, what Albert Rouzie (2005) explicitly defined as pleasure—to become the center of pedagogical practice. Asking ourselves what it might mean to play the games of writing, to invite students to expand their game-playing skills and experiences from the semiotic domains with which they are most familiar to the purposes and practices of various forms of academic writing, not only directs our attention to the question of student motivation but does so by inviting us to reexamine our own lives as writers through the metaphors of gaming. Why do we play? What are the rules and conventions of the game? Who is in the community? What might a "cheat site" mean for academic writers (and I don't mean term paper mills)?

As I have discussed above, the use of a term like "play" inevitably raises concerns over standards and rigor, but only among those who have not participated in gaming or other digital discursive worlds. The simple response, as Gee might recommend, would be to try a game. They are harder than they seem, not only, as Steven Johnson (2006, p. 54) pointed out in his popularized version of new literacy research, *Everything Bad is Good For You*, because of the hand/eye coordination involved, but more so because of the complex cognitive demands made by the games, the set of nested decision-making structures that he called "telescoping" required for successful participation.

In order to more fully explore and exploit the radically new pedagogical possibilities of digital writing environments, we have to reconceive our central metaphors about reading and writing, and we can start by reminding ourselves that these metaphors have always been just that—metaphors, symbolic representations of activities we call reading and writing, not empirical facts. Gaming is one powerful new source of such metaphors, one that can help us reframe our understanding of literacy in ways that allow us to engage our student in the game of reading and writing.

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