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Gaming, Identity, and Literacy

Daniel Keller with Paul Ardis, Vivienne Dunstan, Adam Thornton, Rachel Henry, and Brett Witty

Many of the games discussed in this book fall into the categories of shooter games (e.g., *James Bond* games, *Counter-Strike*), simulation/strategy (*Civilization*), or sports games. Most of these games are played on video consoles, and all of them feature graphical representations as a primary element. Neither of these qualities describes the games explored in this chapter, which deals with the genre of Interactive Fiction (IF). IF games are played only on computers and they are entirely text based. IF games trace their origins to the rise of computing and to paper-and-pencil role-playing games, such as *Dungeons and Dragons,* during the 1970s. IF's first games *Adventure* and *Zork* were also among the first computer games and led to the creation of Infocom, one of the most successful computer game companies of the 1980s. While IF games are no longer commercially viable, they are still being created, downloaded, and played by members of various Internet groups.

From Adam Cadre's *Photopia*

In the throne room

This room is just as big as the others you've seen, but unlike the others, this one contains a barnacle-encrusted object in the unmistakable shape of a chair; given the place you've found it and the fact that it's built into the floor, you can only conclude that it must be a throne. The far wall features a carved-out alcove that looks like it must have been a fireplace, though how one might go about lighting a fire underwater is anyone's guess. Mounted on the wall above the fireplace in an "X" shape are a pickaxe and a shovel.

An arched doorway leads east, but is completely blocked by debris. You can also go back the way you came.

C.L. Selfe et al. (eds.), *Gaming Lives in the Twenty-First Century*

>get shovel

You are unable to take the shovel: it's wedged behind the pickaxe.

>get pickaxe

The pickaxe clings firmly to the wall. You tug on it again and this time the handle moves a few centimeters; then you feel a distinct click. The castle begins to rumble, with the shaking most pronounced in the direction of the keep.

The shovel which was wedged behind the pickaxe clatters to the ground, and the rumbling stops. After that, the pickaxe swings back in to the place.

The Internet communities that create and share these games engage in reading and writing practices similar to those that teachers focus on in writing classrooms. In such games, player-authors become entrenched in the conventions of the genre through playing (reading) the games; familiarize themselves with the practices of the community and become a part of it, learning how to accumulate knowledge within an affinity group; and write, test, and revise games that are often beta tested (peer-reviewed) by others in the community before finally being published. Obviously, many differences exist between these IF communities and groups of students in composition classrooms, so one-to-one connections cannot be made. The goal of this chapter is to introduce readers to five IF players, and to explore their gaming and literacy practices within the context of learning principles articulated by James Gee in *What Video Games Have to Teach Us about Learning and Literacy* (2003)—specifically the principles concerning affinity groups, and the part they play in affecting genre, identity, choice, and assessment.

This chapter also aims to extend the discussion of IF to the teaching of writing. Many teachers of composition are well aware that we need to help students learn to see themselves as writers—in Gee's words, "to see themselves as the kind of person who can learn, use, and value the new semiotic domain" (p. 59). However, knowing this principle has not made teachers any better at implementing it in composition classrooms.

The five players on whom this chapter focuses all encountered IF games at early ages and, through them, gained extensive experience with digital and alphabetic literacies, which are now crucial elements of their educations and careers. Paul Ardis, for instance, is a 20-year-old computer science major at Purdue University. Similarly, Vivienne Dunstan is a 31-year-old PhD student of history at the University of Dundee, Scotland. Before turning to history studies, she was a computing undergraduate and postgraduate, with "plenty of experience of programming" in her 25 years of using computers. Rachel Henry is a 29-year-old graduate of MIT. Before becoming a full-time mom, she worked in the education department of a database software company. Adam Thornton is a 32-year-old Informational Technology (IT) consultant. Fluent in a dozen computer languages, he has been working professionally with computers for 15 years. Finally, Brett Witty is a 23-year-old PhD student of mathematics in Canberra, Australia.

Familial and Educational Gateways

Although this chapter refers to the case-study participants as "players" and "gamers," these individuals are far more than consumers and players of video games. Each has varying experience with conventional literacy, with creating IF games, and with producing digital texts. In Gee's terms, they have learned enough about their domain to make "active and critical choices" (2003, pp. 98–99) about IF and have become designers. The literacies of each contributor have been shaped by—and shaped—micro-, medial-, and macrolevel historical trends associated with digital literacy, the various social and economic contexts of literacy and gaming, and the literacy values and practices of their families and friends—among many, many other factors.

All of the contributors to this chapter, for example, felt that their parents had provided a strong level of support for their conventional alphabetic literacies. According to these five participants, their parents read widely and extensively, and encouraged their children to do the same. Brett, for example, noted that his parents put very few restrictions on his reading, encouraging him to read broadly and widely. As he recalls,

> My parents didn't mind what I read, and they encouraged me to write ever since I showed interest. My father read lots of books (mostly of the political thriller kind), and my mother read this and that (sometimes magazines, sometimes books). All throughout my life they have encouraged me to read whatever—so long as it wasn't offensive or "troublesome." I read a lot of everything (fantasy, sci-fi, real science, and various "interest" books).

Adam's parents had a similar attitude—they promoted the growth of his alphabetic print literacy in whatever form it took. Reading was reading was reading—even when it entailed "crappy" science fiction. As he explains,

> I suspect that I horrified my parents a little bit with all of the crappy SF I read, but I also devoured pretty much anything else within reach, which has led to my being, for instance, the only person under the age of sixty with Betty MacDonald's books banging around his head. I always preferred reading to pretty much any other entertainment, and my parents never really tried to restrict it. Occasionally, they'd point me in the direction of something—the *Alexandria Quartet,* Flannery O'Connor, Robertson Davies—but I also found a lot of my favorites (Baum and Tolkien among them) more or less on my own.

Like most of the gamers, Paul, too, "was always a bit of a bookworm," reading sci-fi and fantasy novels "almost exclusively, a habit which hasn't changed too much yet." His parents encouraged his reading and even modeled healthy reading habits. As he recalls:

> On a typical night, they'll both sit down in the living room and spend a couple of hours or more reading away. As a result, it was soon after I could read that I was entered in summer reading programs at the library.

Rachel and Vivienne had similar stories to tell about their family literacy values and practices. Vivienne's parents were both teachers and encouraged her "to read widely." Before she was 12, she was reading "well above" her age group, "devouring masses of books in the local public library and at home." Her school library had a "dire selection" except for "some classics." Her mother was of particular help when it came to Vivienne's voracious reading:

> As I got older I quickly outgrew the books in the children's section of the public library and my mother used to borrow books for me from the adult's section, including 1 volume at a time of *Lord of the Rings* until I'd read that.

Rachel's parents read the entire *Lord of the Rings* and *Narnia* series aloud to her before she could read on her own. Once Rachel could read by herself, her reading level quickly surpassed that of her peers, and her local library had a hard time supplying her demand. As she recalls,

> I remember reading 'chapter books' earlier than most of my peers. I would say by the time I was nine I was reading at an adult level and had exhausted the "kid books" section at the library.

Rachel's voracious reading continued through high school and college and is still a prominent part of her life. As she notes, "So far in 2004 I have read 26 novels, three non-fiction books, and listened to another three books on CD or tape."

The literacy environments that these parents established also depended, at least to some extent, on socioeconomic factors. Each family, for example, was able to provide their children with access to computers—in one form or another—when they were quite young. Paul, the child of two software engineers, remembers that he had extensive access to computers: "At home, we had two machines at any one time, and I would often glom on to one of them for hours at a time to play various computer games." He fondly recalls playing computer games with his father:

> When I first played "Colossal Cave," it was with my dad. . . . The way it worked was that we'd sit side-by-side at the computer (with me at the keyboard) and would talk about the next move before doing it. His work was quite involving at the time, so I felt a bit restricted and soon moved on to playing by myself. However, I do remember enjoying those sessions with my dad, who I've idolized since a very young age.

Brett's family, too, purchased a computer when he was relatively young. As he notes,

> We got our first proper computer—a 286—when I was about ten. I originally became proficient with the computer because I wanted to write my stories on the computer and play games.

With access to a computer, Brett quickly learned QuickBASIC and Visual Basic, programming "graphic displays, extremely basic physics models, random story writers, experiments in cryptography and the beginnings of games." In his experiments, he was always "either learning something new or trying to do something I had seen in a game."

Much like Paul and Brett, Vivienne was using a computer at home by the age of nine, and some of her fondest memories of playing games date back to that time, playing IF on a sluggish Commodore 64 and MUDs on the Internet, which caused her to rack up quite a long-distance bill:

> Usually I'd be playing IF on the Commodore 64, and IF was a very long-drawn-out experience then, typically waiting ages for the game to load, quite a pause between turns, and disk-loading of new sections. Around this time I also remember playing MUD via phone/modem through Prestel in the UK. I ran up quite a big phone bill over a couple of days, and remember getting in trouble with my parents.

Rachel and Adam had their earliest computing experiences not at home, but at friends' houses and at their parents' workplaces. Rachel, for instance, reports using "computers recreationally about as long as they have existed." Although Rachel did not have access to a computer at home, she did have access to these machines at school and at her mother's workplace. Most of her computer use, as a child, was limited to schoolwork—"writing papers, working on the school literary magazine, or something for my creative writing classes." Rachel played games at her mother's workplace as well, sometimes playing IF with her mom. As she recalls,

> When I was a kid my mom would do the typing. We both read [the screen] independently and made suggestions about what to try. Usually we kept a map that we would both add to. We solved the puzzles cooperatively.

Adam, too, played games at his dad's workplace—a Chevy dealership—and at a friend's house, using computers with now-obscure titles: PDP-11 and TI 99-4/A. From grade six through high school, Adam had an Apple II. Describing himself as "part of the generation who can code," Adam was programming games and doing "lots of (very slow) mathematical visualization" at a young age. Adam has been working professionally with computers for 15 years and is now an IT consultant. In particular, Adam realizes his good fortune at being born at the right time and in the right socioeconomic situation and to parents who did not make his computer-gaming existence too difficult:

> My parents were well-off enough to afford a computer and they didn't fuss too terribly much about the amount of time I spent playing with it. In a lot of ways I'm just lucky to be the age that I am, and that I had the opportunity to obsessively fiddle with something that ultimately turned out to be a decent career. If I were five years older, instead of being a relatively well-paid computer geek, I'd have been one of those guys in the Car Club always tinkering trying to get an extra three horsepower out of his engine, and I'd be a much-less-well-paid mechanic.

Adam's recognition of his having entered the world on the cusp of the computer age is important when considering how he and the other players became involved with IF. Because they were raised in families that encouraged reading and enabled access to computers, these players were the ideal audience for games based on the concept of interactive stories related solely through text. When Infocom formed in 1979 and released its first IF game, *Zork,* it was entering a computer game market

in which graphic technology was rudimentary, allowing only for simple line drawings and a limited color palette. Even though competing games' graphics were not terribly impressive, Infocom still had to draw consumers away from such games to convince them that its offering of textual worlds was a better choice.

One of the key challenges that Infocom faced was to make the case to U.S. consumers that text-based game entertainment was not a waste of money and computer equipment. Arguably the most successful purveyor of IF, Infocom capitalized on the fact that the middle-class families—then beginning to buy computers in large numbers—were also readers. The company marketed its games accordingly, taking the unusual approach of selling its games alongside both digital texts and print texts in computer game stores *and* bookstores. In addition, the box descriptions of these games typically referenced both print and literary antecedents. *A Mind Forever Voyaging,* for instance, name-dropped Huxley and Orwell; while *The Lurking Horror* was described as part H. P. Lovecraft and part Stephen King. Infocom also involved an author in a book-to-game translation when Douglas Adams coauthored the game version of his *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy.* Whereas many game companies during this period included only a disk and an instruction manual in their game packaging, Infocom included short magazines that related to the game's story, masterfully easing readers of print texts into the environments of computer-based gaming.

Brett explains the attraction of book readers to IF in this way:

> Such people naturally adapted and were drawn to computers, but were familiar with traditional books and didn't like the arcade-style entertainment usually offered. Although off-the-beaten-track, IF offered the intellectual challenge of books and benefits of a simulated environment. I would think that such people would adapt to computers regardless of what is available. IF is just a nice niche for people like that.
>
> IF offers something novel (pardon the pun) in that you have the potential for something as literary as a novel, but as adaptive as a computer program.

Although IF games clearly involved reading and writing, the parents of the five case-study subjects were not easily convinced that their children were learning in gaming environments or that computer games were part of the equation for academic success. Almost all the parents of case-study participants viewed games as entertainment rather than education, and—perhaps more importantly—came to understand games and education as part of a play/work dichotomy. Vivienne's parents, for example, made distinctions between educational and noneducational software—and IF was not considered to be the former. As Vivienne recalls,

> My parents didn't view IF or other computer games as educational tools. Games were fun. There were more educational uses of the home computer, like learning to program or using custom-written educational software (e.g., language learning programs).

Similarly, although Adam's parents "didn't fuss too terribly much" about the extensive time he spent on computers, they did consider his computer time less valuable than the time he spent reading books. Within the hierarchy of the

family's literacy values, moreover, playing video games and watching TV came at the bottom of the heap:

> While my parents encouraged reading, they were less sanguine about ridiculous computer overuse. It was difficult to make the case that the computer was somehow different than video games (which, to be fair, much of the time it wasn't), and those were down there with TV in the don't-overdo-it realm.

For Paul, at this age, games were banned entirely unless they were being played on the computer. Paul remembers that his parents "declared a moratorium on video game consoles," but not on computer games; he imagines that they made such a distinction because they wanted him to gain experience with computers, even if the experiences came from games:

> My parents disapproved of the obsessive factor of video game consoles and believed (wrongly) that such would not be duplicated on a PC. Also, though they would not likely admit to this, they both wished me to gain a strong interest in computing, since both of them are computer scientists; I did build up such an interest, after all.

In contrast, neither Brett's parents nor his teachers played a significant role in shaping the specific uses he made of time spent on the computer. His friends, however, exerted an important influence:

> My teachers had little to do with my early computer training and by the time that they were in a position to help me, I already knew as much as them. My parents weren't particularly computer literate, but some of my friends were, so I guess my friends influenced me the most with regard to computers. The friends led to playing games which led to programming.

Gee notes that "a number of the young people" he interviewed found video games to be a "fruitful precursor domain for mastering other semiotic domains tied to computers and related technologies" (2003, p. 48). This observation is supported by numerous stories of individuals who grew up as gamers later being hired by professional game-development companies (King & Borland, 2003). This pattern finds credence in the case studies on which this chapter focuses. For most of the participants featured here, games served as a primary gateway to learning programming.

At the same time, for many of these players, this important gateway proved somewhat difficult both to find and enter. Gaming was often discouraged at home and in school. The schools attended by the case-study participants, for instance, generally promoted computers only for academic uses: working on the school paper, writing essays, learning programming. Game playing, of course, was prohibited. Even in this context, however, Adam and Paul found ways around such restrictions. By the age of 12, for example, Adam was already making "menu-based text adventures for the Apple II." His school's computer lab "prohibited game playing, but programming was perfectly fine." To get around this restriction, Adam and his friends learned the programming language BASIC and used the lab's computers to write simple adventure games for each other to play.

Paul's high school also served as a gateway for his digital literacy, but, like Adam's school, this gateway was not entirely an open one. Most of Paul's teachers, for instance, instead of encouraging technological skills, set up their classrooms so that they were "independent from machines"; Paul was not even allowed to use a calculator in his calculus class. Nor was he encouraged to take a programming course—the word among students was that these courses were "slow and worthless." Paul and his classmates knew enough about computers to realize that their school curriculum was inadequate, and they knew how to get around the school's rules on the "non-academic uses" of computers in order to play games:

> The only time that I saw a computer during the school day was when my friends and I went up to the computer lab in the library to play games. The administration of my school frowned upon the computers being used for non-academic uses, so they installed a program (I forget the name) which blocked specified URLs that they would store. At the time, my friends and I liked playing games on a site that was called Virtual Arcade.
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> Having seen one student go to this site, the lab admin blocked the URL http://www.virtualarcade.com, believing that this would solve the problem. However, we discovered that simply using www.virtualarcade.com (without the protocol listed) would be interpreted within the browser as correct for the site but would not be stopped by the block. Realizing (weeks later) that we had done this, the admin blocked all protocol attempts directed at www.virtualarcade.com, again thinking that the problem was solved.
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> However . . . we would use URL obfuscation techniques (such as using character codes for letters) in order to get around the block. By this time, the admin had started logging all sites I (and I believe one other of my friends) visited. They would block all sites that we visited with games on them, but we found various mirror pages and alternate locations each day. In a way, it was another game that we played: annoy the admin. . . . We were always looking for new (and increasingly more obscure) ways to make the job harder.

In college the case-study participants found both their print and digital literacies to be of value. But their more formal experiences with programming and computers in college courses lacked the creative dimension of writing and programming games. As Rachel noted,

> I find myself much more motivated to figure out programming problems and algorithms if there's a game puzzle behind the problem—and much *less* motivated by the usual problems presented by regular programming classes.

Vivienne, too, was struck by the differences between her informal, self-sponsored adventures with coding and the more formal approaches to programming fostered in computer science courses. Before converting to history studies, Vivienne completed a bachelor's degree in computer science and started a PhD in it. She quickly came to the conclusion that playing and coding IF and MUDs offered a "crucial" creative outlet—and one that balanced the "very mechanical process" of her coursework:

> Go into the computing lab for the required amount of time, implement the program (having designed it beforehand), write it up, and then hand it in for marking, etc. It

> was far less about being creative, and far more about implementing. [IF] was fun, something I chose to do in my spare time, and for my entertainment. Crucially, it also tapped into my imaginative side, something that my studies completely failed to address.

Brett's take on this matter has to do with the difference between the coding he did for games and that which he completed during more formal coursework. For Brett, programming classes were "essentially linear" in their approach to problem solving, while coding games were "nonlinear." In some important ways, this contrast between traditional programming and the coding that players do for games, may mirror the sharp division between how students are taught to write in many composition classes and how they choose to write when authoring self-sponsored creative works. Most college students, for instance, are asked to limit their writing in introductory composition class to nonfiction prose and to focus on a relatively narrow set of assignments and approaches. Although many of these students come to college enjoying the practice of self-sponsored creative writing—in online chat rooms and in digital gaming environments, for instance—they are discouraged from even thinking about these practices as "writing" of the kind they are asked to do in school. It does not escape the notice of students, for instance, that fictional genres are scarcely found in composition handbooks and readers. Many students, moreover, are discouraged from writing fiction and poetry except in creative writing classes. Such experiences may contribute to students' general lack of enthusiasm for college-level writing classes.

For Brett, writing IF has provided a different perspective on composing print novels as well as on coding programs. As a writer of "novels, poems, articles—both technical and fun, and (of course) IF," Brett is experienced in multiple genres and has gained an expanded awareness of print literacy. In articulating what he has gained from his IF experiences, Brett illustrates what Gee calls metalevel thinking (2003, p. 50) and the principle of intertextuality (p. 108)—both of which are crucial to learning:

> In conventional writing, most problems of plotting, pacing, point-of-view and characters aren't that difficult to deal with. But in IF, due to its nonlinear nature, you have to really think about these considerations. You also have to willingly sacrifice some of these aspects in order to have a more smooth gaming experience. For example, you can almost never calculate the pace of a game without making it run on rails [forcing the player's choices and trajectory]. In a book, you have full control over pacing and so you are obliged to worry about it. [With a book] you never have to worry about readers' personalities, whereas in IF . . . games need to be fully debugged to satisfy the poke-and-prod players, [and] they need to be well-written to satisfy the literary types.

Choice and Identity

As Gee notes, three identities are at play in a video game—virtual, real, and projective. The virtual identity is often referred to by gamers as the Player Character (PC), the character that players control in the game world. The real identity is the

player's, which, as Gee notes, consists of multiple nonvirtual identities that "are filtered through" the game-playing experience and affect the player's choices. The projective identity is one that the player "projects" onto the virtual character, specifically in terms of values and goals (pp. 54–55). Given that these values and goals must operate with the predetermined (programmed) characteristics of the virtual identity, projective identity is shared between the player's real and virtual identities (p. 56), between the player and the PC. Gee further states that the involvement of the "tripartite play of identities" in video games is "at the root of active and critical learning in many other semiotic domains, including learning content actively and critically in school" (p. 59).

Many of the helpful concepts that Gee uses to explain how real, virtual, and projective identities work—identity repair (p. 61) and Eric Erickson's *psychosocial moratorium* (p. 62)—are familiar, in one form or another, to composition instructors. For instance, Gee refers to three principles associated with identity repair work that composition teachers should find, in his words, "pretty basic":

> 1. The learner must be enticed to try, even if he or she already has good grounds to be afraid to try.
> 2. The learner must be enticed to put in lots of effort even if he or she begins with little motivation to do so.
> 3. The learner must achieve some meaningful success when he or she has expended this effort. (pp. 61–62)

Similarly, most writing teachers will have little difficulty understanding Gee's explanation of how video-game environments make use of Erickson's concept of *psychosocial moratorium.* Gee, for instance, notes that games create "a learning space in which the learner can take risks where real-world consequences are lowered" (p. 62), a space in which there is "a relatively low cost of failure and high reward for success" (p. 63). Many composition teachers use these same concepts to structure the low-risk environments of writing classrooms.

According to the case-study participants in this chapter, the identity work that goes on in gaming has a great deal to do with *choice*—an observation also made by the participant-authors in chapter 8, Stephanie Fleischer's and Susan Wright's chapter in this book. One of the main reasons players are drawn to IF is that a well-designed game offers a range of options. Rachel, for example, plays "a lot of computer games" and thinks that some games come close to being IF, but "too often the narratives are simplistic and linear and confining, like a really bad piece of IF." She likes games in which "the player's actions should make a difference. I don't like it when the author has left only one course of action, and stops all other behaviors."

Paul, too, prefers IF to graphic-based computer games. As he notes, such games are

> an interesting distraction but often not as deep or engaging as IF can be due to the lack of user interaction within the story (arcs are predefined, actions are limited to a small set of possibilities within the game rules).

Because IF games are text based, designers can more easily program multiple PC actions and game responses into the story. In graphic-based games, programming multiple options for the player becomes a phenomenal task. As Adam explains,

> Graphic games tend to be less involving, simply because the amount of effort to create as much plausible response to player choice is so much huger if you actually need to draw, animate, or model the player's world, instead of just writing about it.

At some level, then, the options that IF offers can help players project identities into the game-playing world and to learn within its domain. For writing teachers, this observation, too, rings true. Providing students multiple options for writing and more freedom for expression often provides individuals the space they need to engage productively with assignments.

Gee's analysis of the tripartite identities he personally experienced when gaming hints at some additional complexity in connection with this issue. Gee observes that his role-playing game (RPG) character Bead-Bead allowed him greater interaction among the identities than did the Master Chief character he assumed in the first-person shooter *Halo* (p. 58). When Gee, as a real-world player took on the virtual identity of Master Chief, his projective identity was limited; in a game in which hordes of alien creatures try to kill you, if the real-world player wishes to be merciful and *not* annihilate every alien creature that materializes, it's going to be a terribly brief game. However, in the RPG character of Bead-Bead, Gee found a larger fictional space available for projecting his real-world desires and goals, and more choices available for determining his own actions, even though the programmed parameters of the virtual character were not infinite.

The importance of Gee's observations here is that the identities at play in gaming environments seem to be reflexive in their interaction:

> Once the player has made some choices about the virtual character, the virtual character is now developed in a way that sets certain parameters about what the player can do. The virtual character rebounds back on the player and affects his or her future actions. (p. 58)

Many of Gee's statements about identity and gaming environments find validation in the comments of the case-study participants. As Gee notes, these players sometimes "feel responsible to and for the character. They are projecting an identity as to who the character ought to be and what the trajectory of his or her acts in the virtual world ought, at the end of the day, to look like" (p. 58). Rachel, for example, notes:

> I find myself identifying with and subsuming into the PC. I want to care about their worries, understand their limitations, etc. In the best stories, what the player has to do to solve puzzles (push stuff around, put X in Y, and so on) all makes sense within the confines of the tale, and doesn't require me to dissociate from the PC in order to make progress as a puzzle-solver.

Some of the other case-study gamers, however, want their projective identity to be less dependent on the virtual character's programmed traits. Vivienne, for

instance, prefers "the PC to be more of a blank slate for me to define . . . as neutral as possible, even in terms of gender." Brett concurs, stating that he will often try to ignore the PC's parameters set by the game's author:

> I usually feel as though the PC is my own character, almost regardless of how the author writes it. I do shape my own mental picture around what is presented, but my approach from game to game is extremely similar. I hate games where they force you to act out a character with no leeway.

Vivienne and Brett, then, prefer more choice and latitude in defining their projective identity and their actions as characters. As Paul puts it,

> The PC should have some characteristics that the author decides upon which give a sense of backstory, but should not overly impinge upon the play of the user unless they wish to force role playing upon them.

For Adam, his relation to the PC "depends very much on the game." Many IF games—especially the older games that were strings of puzzles—provide little detail to the identity of the virtual character. Adam finds that his sense of projective identity is at its largest "in games with the Ageless, Faceless, Gender-Neutral Protagonist, where, hey, it's *me* wandering through the Great Underground Empire [the setting of the classic *Zork* series]." However, Adam is also interested in games that provide a virtual identity with strong traits already determined:

> I adored playing the female servant in *Metamorphoses,* and I understood how being female and of the lower classes critically informed her perspective on her job and her life, which showed up, very subtly, as I dug through the game. Tracy Valencia [the PC in *Interstate Zero*] made me feel a little sleazy, because I felt like the game was very much intending for me to play her all slutty. The protagonist in *Anchorhead* needed to be female for the ending to have the force it did. . . . Sometimes it's neat to be forced into a very strange viewpoint: the robot in *Lash,* the one in *BadMachine,* someone hallucinating and dying of thirst in *Shad.*

Even though each player has his or her own preference for the play of tripartite identities, all of the players recognize, as Adam does above, that the degree of projection depends upon the game and the level of choice it allows. Put another way, in gaming environments, there are multiple levels of identity involvement, and the appropriate level of involvement is decided by both author and player. As Rachel explains,

> The author provides a framework for the PC, onto which the player is projected. There is room for variation, but the author should provide some direction. How much is needed depends on the story at hand—for example, in *Jigsaw,* it doesn't really matter [who the PC is]. But in *Anchorhead,* it's critical that you're the wife of this guy who has inherited a creepy old house, and that you love him, etc.

Gaming, Identity, and the Teaching of Composition

What can composition teachers learn from the literacy practices and values, from the life stories of these case-study subjects? Although generalizing from their experiences to the writing classroom is impossible, some tentative observations may be in order.

Observation #1

Students may enjoy reading and writing in gaming environments because these spaces succeed in providing each individual the degree of choice they require to invest productively and enjoyably in a projective identity.

Throughout the interviews with these case-study participants, each gamer expressed clear views on the relationship between identity and choice, factors crucial to their enjoyment of IF. In IF, identity and choice depend upon decisions made by both the game's author and player. When the author has programmed multiple options, the player has greater choice in how to shape the PC, the projective identity. Extending the author-player relationship to the teacher-student situation in the writing classroom can be illuminating.

> Brett: I hate games where they force you to act out a character with no leeway. It's like being an actor where you are forbidden to explore the role.
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> Vivienne: [A] poor interactive experience [gives] the impression that the author is telling a story, a preset story, and the player is just playing it straight back, with little opportunity to influence it, or to discover it in new ways.
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> Rachel: The author provides a framework for the PC, onto which the player is projected. There is room for variation, but the author should provide some direction.

Student writers similarly want some direction from teachers, but most do not want all of their decisions to be predetermined—to be given assignments "with no leeway." Teachers should provide the framework for students to form projective identities as writers, and this framework will shift according to the writing situation. In freewriting exercises, for instance, most teachers allow students to write with complete freedom; of course, such freedom is rarely "complete" because most students are aware that their writings might be shared with other students or the teacher. If teachers and students were to discuss the rhetorical constraints of such situations, they might then alter the projected identity in the freewriting—to write "freely" with a particular tone or with a particular audience in mind. Alternating between freewriting and these more directed freewriting exercises might help students practice with different projected identities in the classroom.

Playing with identity and choice could then continue in longer writing assignments. Instead of giving students assignments that are either specific or open in purpose, audience, and tone, teachers can give students a range of options not

only in the topic itself but in the rhetorical choices. Writing instructors do not have to exhaust the possibilities (and themselves) in creating such assignments; they can devise a few examples of how students might adjust purpose, audience, and tone in a particular assignment, and then give students the option to devise their own.

Observation #2

Games provide low-risk environments and continuous assessment, reinforcing positive choices and encouraging players to take risks. Teachers should mirror these principles with low-stakes writing assignments and positive feedback.

From Infocom's *Borderzone*
The sounds of dogs barking madly and soldiers barking orders are close upon you. A muddled explosion—a signal flare lightens the sky with a red-orange glow. Before you can react, you are spotted! Brilliant white searchlights are aimed upon you, blinding you long enough for more soldiers and border guards to arrive. With no hope of escape, you surrender to the guards, and are led away, handcuffed, to the border station.
***** You have been arrested *****
Would you like to start over, restore a saved position, get a hint, or end this session of the game?
(Type RESTART, RESTORE, HINT, or QUIT)

In most video games, you are given a chance to restart the game or to restore to a saved position. Either way, you get to keep trying. In the composition classroom, the obvious counterpart is, of course, revision. Letting students try again and again without penalty to their grade is one way to create a low-risk environment. However, when students only have a few major assignments that count toward their grade, the writing situation seems much more fraught—even with revision. Providing only a few major assignments makes sense from a teacher's point of view: we have only so much time to plan for class, assign papers, and respond to them. Yet video game players are accustomed to different levels of risk and assessment in video games.

From Infocom's *Wishbringer*
Mr. Crisp reaches under the service counter and pulls out a mysterious envelope. "We just got this Special Delivery," he snarls, tossing it onto the service counter. "I want you to drop it off right away. That means NOW!"
>get envelope
Taken
(Your score just went up by 5 points! Your total score is 6 out of 100.)

Vivienne observes that IF games are similar to coursework that provides "smaller modular steps and continuous assessment." These smaller steps are assessed in IF when points are attributed to actions such as *get key, unlock door.* When players gain points, they are being rewarded for positive actions; the game is encouraging particular kinds of behavior that will serve the player well throughout the game. Vivienne notes that the learning that takes place throughout the game is often more important than the end point, a feeling she compares to coursework:

> Whenever I've got to the end of a course there's been a similar anticlimactic sense to finishing an IF game. Yes there may be a final mark, but I've been more conscious of the learning taking place while in the course itself and working on the smaller essays/projects/whatever that form the continuous assessment element. Remember that many IF games reward puzzle solving by increasing the player's score. IF players are aware of that, and it's a type of reward that isn't too dissimilar from getting a grade in continuous assessment.

Holistic grading and portfolio assessment are some ways in which the "anticlimactic sense" of the coursework is countered. These methods also stress the learning that has taken place over the term. As for the "smaller modular steps" described by Vivienne, teachers could provide more low-stakes writing assignments. Even though teachers may have to spend some time responding to these early in the semester, they could have students assess each other and themselves as the semester progresses (through rubrics and peer-review sheets/letters). Multiple smaller assignments and lots of positive feedback from the teacher and peers could help students to restart and revise—and not to quit.

Observation #3

The practices of affinity groups help players become insiders, critical users of the domain. In making the classroom into a community of writers, teachers could model some of these practices.

Playing and creating IF games may seem like isolated endeavors as they happen, but they actually involve a great community effort. IF affinity groups have set up numerous Internet sites and Usenet discussion groups to post games, game walkthroughs, opportunities for beta testing, FAQ lists, how-to manuals (for playing and creating games), and discussion threads for both theoretical and practical concerns. When Brett joined the community, he found a lot of people "just committed to making darn good games. There was a lot of help and seemingly few trolls. In short, it was a community, not a collection." He has written reviews of games, participated in beta testing, and runs a LiveJournal on IF. Brett participates within this affinity group and expects his efforts to be reciprocated: "I do all of these things because I love IF and the community, and I feel like I should give something back if I can. [In return], I request beta testing, programming info and feedback from the community. I think it's a fair trade."

Rachel went to the IF Usenet groups for help with writing her game. She knew how to become part of the group—she would have to participate before asking for help. As she states,

> I knew I would need help, and I also knew my questions would be more welcome (and more likely to get an answer) if I had a feel for the group and had perhaps contributed some answers myself. Mostly, I hoped to gain help learning [the programming language], *inform*, and help others out in return.

Their participation with an affinity group is part of what has made all five participants insiders. As writing teachers, we hope to instill our students with a sense of community so that they can learn from each other as writers. But what seems to happen more often is that they become a *collection,* and *not* a community. Studying the behaviors and practices of video game affinity groups may provide teachers with some methods for developing writing affinity groups.

For instance, having students create and add to an FAQ list from one semester to the next is one way of promoting the idea that writers are not born geniuses, scribbling brilliant, muse-inspired prose; instead, an FAQ list would be an excellent method of proving how knowledge is shared and distributed among writers. Starting an FAQ would be simple enough: students come up with questions about grammar, essay conventions, and research methods all the time. As the FAQ is passed from class to class, and as students revise and add material, they would credit themselves for the questions and answers they provide.

Online discussion groups (through e-mail listservs or online bulletin boards) would be another way to mirror the practices of video game affinity groups. Here, students can post writings and ask for feedback; ask and answer questions that might become an FAQ list; and post links to websites that help with grammar, development, research, and so on. Getting students to participate in such discussions is tricky. Making online participation a part of their grade is one way to encourage participation. But another, less coercive method might be to help them understand the purposes of and proper behaviors within an affinity group. To that end, assigning students to study online affinity groups—how they function, how people behave, how negative behavior is classified and treated, etcetera—may be one step in asking students to help develop the rules for their discussion group. Teachers could gather a few colleagues to make initial posts, modeling the kind of interaction that is expected. And, if possible, posts could be made available across semesters, so that the knowledge created and shared by one class benefits the next class, which would only help to encourage similar behaviors.

Conclusion

It is probably impossible to replicate in the classroom the exact level of engagement students have with games. The pleasure of playing IF, for instance, comes through encountering story, puzzle, identity alteration, interaction, fantasy, or mystery, etc—all in a low-risk environment. Given the necessary context of the classroom, with its grades and judgment of teachers and peers, removing risk

entirely from writing situations is not feasible. However, such risks can be mitigated. Through producing assignments and exercises that offer identity choices, low-stakes situations, and possibilities for becoming insiders, we can create learning experiences that come closer to students' preferred ways of learning.

References

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