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# Gaming, Student Literacies, and the Composition Classroom: Some Possibilities for Transformation

This article explores the literacy narratives of two "gamers" to demonstrate the kinds of literacy skills that many students actively involved in computer and video gaming are developing during their play. This analysis becomes part of a larger claim about the necessity of re-visioning the place of gaming in composition curricula. Ultimately, the author argues that we should use complex computer games as primary "texts" in composition courses as a way to explore with our students transformations in what literacy means.

$A$ warlock prepares a spell that will deftly take the enemy knight by surprise. As he clicks icons to ready his potion, a fellow player frantically types that she's just been ambushed by a rogue with a powerful invisibility cloak. To protect her guildmates, K'thora feels compelled to warn Gar'n and others in the area of the imminent threat. Multicolored text flashes across screens as players exchange information, manipulate icons to cast protective spells, and strategize through "chat" about how best to handle the situation. Fingers fly across keyboards as players think quickly—and critically—assessing their options. Coordination and collaboration become key in fending off the rogue, earning points to gain

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experience and "level" characters, increasing the reputation of the guild, and having a good time.

Such scenes play themselves out daily on the computer screens of many students. A recent survey of 1,118 first-year college students at a large Midwestern university, where I served as the Director of the English Composition Program for over three years, revealed that our students spent approximately six hours per week reading material on the Web and that nearly half of those surveyed (465) spent four hours per week playing video or computer games. Such numbers are in line with national trends: video and computer gaming is quickly becoming a major source of entertainment for many young people, as well as a popular form of socializing, even community building, as players interact with and get to know one another.[1] In particular, massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs), such as *World of Warcraft* from which I drew the scene above, offer significant social networking opportunities for many students.

Certainly, some writing instructors bemoan students' involvement with such games, which sometimes divert student attention from more "academic" tasks and literacy practices, and some evidence suggests that some gamers are "addicted" to the games they play, or to playing, period.[2] But many such games are also textually rich and require quite a bit of reading, writing, and critical thinking. Indeed, at the most basic level, gaming involves complex use of multiple modes of writing and a need to develop a sense of how text and visuals interact; many games provide a rich environment in which gamers are developing and (pardon the pun) playing with a variety of complex literacy skills. Focusing specifically on the relationship between literacy development and gaming, literacy scholars such as James Paul Gee and compositionists Gail Hawisher and Cynthia Selfe have recently published groundbreaking work, discussed in greater depth below, calling for scholarly attention to how a variety of gaming platforms might be used in educational settings to promote many different critical-thinking and literacy skills.[3]

While some in our field, particularly in the area of computers and composition studies, have launched research projects building on the work of Gee, Selfe, Hawisher, and others, many in the larger field of composition studies are not yet aware of the possibilities for transforming the way we approach writing instruction that emerge when critically considering the potential place of video and computer gaming in the composition classroom. In this article, I argue *broadly*, particularly for many in our discipline who have not yet considered the possibilities afforded composition by computer and video gaming, that

incorporating a strong consideration of gaming into composition courses may not only enliven writing instruction for many of our students, but also transform our approach to literacy.

How so? At one level, gaming offers us a rich venue to see *multiple* literacies—the visual, technological, and textual—at play. Since many games are also collaborative in nature, they provide an opportunity to see such literacies in evolving communal contexts. Turning our attention to gaming, then, gives us a significant opportunity to examine complex literate and rhetorical work in action. But more than this, paying attention to gaming and the "gaming lives" of students powerfully invites students to speak *with us* about how "literacy" itself is changing. In such conversations, our approach to writing instruction may substantively shift from "introducing" students to varieties of literate and rhetorical practice to exploring and reflecting with them the kinds of emerging literate practices that may be personally, professionally, and critically useful to them.

To move in this direction, following in Hawisher and Selfe's footsteps, I want to pay close attention in this essay to literacy narratives of *gamers*, particularly as they articulate their understanding of how the multimodality of gaming affects both their understanding of what literacy is and how they understand gaming as contributing to their development as literate citizens. By analyzing in some depth the literary narratives of two gamers, I take seriously Hawisher and Selfe's call to be mindful of students' extracurricular literacies, but I also want to push the discussion a bit further by putting these students' insights about those literacies *into discussion with* scholarly approaches and insights about new media literacies. As we will see, paying attention to gaming shows us how some gamers are actively engaged in developing some high-level literacy skills, such as literacy reflectivity, trans-literacy connections, collaborative writing, multicultural literacy awareness, and critical literacy development. But paying attention to these literate practices may also offer us a way to revision the place of new media, particularly gaming, in the composition curriculum. Ultimately, I argue that we should seriously consider using complex computer games as primary "texts" in composition courses as a way to engage with students a more provocative and productive examination of contemporary literacy practices.

## I. Battle of the Domains: The Emerging Composition Scholarship about Literacy and Gaming

Given the complex relationship that gaming has to issues of community, communication, and literacy, gaming has generated a fair amount of scholarly

attention in fields such as communications and sociology, resulting in the emerging field of game studies. Such work usually focuses on understanding gaming in its sociological dimensions (e.g., the connection between gaming and violence) or the promulgation of stereotypical forms of identity in gaming spaces (e.g., do video games promote sexist images of women, or men for that matter).[4] Increasingly, some scholars in English studies, particularly in computers and composition studies, are turning their attention to gaming and its rhetorical modes. A now classic study is Janet H. Murray's *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*, which considers the impact of cyber-media on how we tell stories and create fiction. More recently, an example of such work is "Connecting Video Games and Storytelling to Teach Narratives in First-Year Composition," published online in *Kairos*, in which Ann Jackson Zoevera maintains that we should be paying attention to how an understanding of gaming can be used to engage and expand students' sense of constructing and writing narratives: "By offering the use of video games as a way to give students a better understanding of storytelling concepts, I hope to give teachers an alternative way to have students write narratives in the first-year composition course" (http://english.ttu.edu/kairos/7.3/binder2.html?coverweb/jackson/index.htm).

Beyond engaging "student interest" to teach the literacy skills that *we* think are important, it is important to consider how complex communications such as video and computer games might be *shifting* what passes as "literate" in our society. Two of the most recent influential books that pick up just this issue have been Gunther Kress's *Literacy in the New Media Age* and James Paul Gee's *What Video Games Have to Teach Us about Learning and Literacy*. While the latter book is focused on gaming and the former is not, both are relevant to our discussion, as I will demonstrate below. Indeed, Kress and Gee are useful here because they are two of the leading scholars who have focused attention on multimodal texts, and Gee in particular has provocatively claimed that gaming has much to teach *us* about learning and literacy.

Kress maintains throughout *Literacy in the New Media Age* that the "dominance" of the "image" and the "screen" among younger people will re-shape what passes as literacy. This is not the *end* of literacy, though; Kress acknowledges that many, if not in some ways *all* of the technologically enabled communications platforms, prompt at least *some* kind of writing—and a lot of it. Given this writing, the primary issue we need to examine is the *situation* of writing vis-à-vis these other modes, such as the visual, and he worries over the "question of the future of writing": "Image has coexisted with writing, as

of course has speech. In the era of the dominance of writing, when the logic of writing organized the page, image appeared on the page subject to the logic of writing" (7). At this historical juncture, then, writing's former "dominance" is being called into question. Kress unpacks throughout his book some of the features of this shift, but he carefully refrains, unlike Sven Birkerts or Neil Postman, from overtly passing judgment on and waxing nostalgic about the move from the "dominance" of writing to other modes. For Kress, though, the end result of this change in writing's dominance is clear: "One [engagement with text] was the move towards contemplation; the other is a move towards outward action" (59–60). Kress's argument about such differences has a direct relationship to our work as literacy specialists and writing instructors: How can we simultaneously pay attention to and use these new modes of literacy in our classrooms while maintaining and promoting "older" modes that we know to be useful and productive of critical thinking, of the kinds of careful and imaginative reflection that Kress, among others, associates with reading long printed texts and writing essays?

Similarly, Gee argues throughout *What Video Games Have to Teach Us about Learning and Literacy* that "[w]hen people learn to play video games, they are learning a new *literacy*" (13; emphasis in original). Like Kress, he senses significant changes in what will pass for and count as literacy in the future, and he examines specifically the impact of video and computer gaming on literacy. Gee traces no less than thirty-six different "learning principles" that video and computer games seem, in his view, to promote among those playing them. These include principles such as the "text principle," the "intertextual principle," and the "multimodal principle," in which learners—that is, gamers—learn how to read, understand, and manipulate a variety of texts in a variety of circumstances. For instance, to play effectively, gamers have to learn how to "read" images and text (in a chat box, for example) both independently and in relation to one another. As such, learning and literacy become multimodal, as Kress suggests in *Literacy and the New Media Age*. But Gee also believes that participating in gaming can promote *critical* learning; specifically, he argues that "[c]ritical learning . . . involves learning to think of semiotic domains as design spaces that manipulate us . . . in certain ways and that we can manipulate in certain ways" (43). He believes that gamers/learners will learn all the more effectively and powerfully as they not only master the skills necessary to game but also experiment with the rules of the games they play, creating new skills and literacies in the process.

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While Kress and Gee have been among the most influential voices in turning our attention to the impact of new media technologies, such as gaming, on our students' and our own conception of literacy, their insights are grounded for the most part in their observations. Indeed, what is often missing in Gee's discussion is a "paying attention" to what students *themselves* perceive as significant learning and literacy experiences and developments as they game. He envisions good games as embodying good principles of learning, but what do students make of *their* engagement with such games? A recently published collection, Selfe and Hawisher's *Gaming Lives in the Twenty-First Century: Literate Connections*, builds on their previous work in surveying uses of technology by focusing specifically on computer and video gaming. Their approach is unique in the fields of computer and composition studies and gaming studies in that they asked contributors to their volume to collect "life histories" of gamers, who reflected on what gaming means to them and their development of literacy skills. Specifically, the essays in the collection "explore the differing perspectives [on gaming] by relating the stories and experiences of individual gamers who have formed their own observations about the benefits and shortcomings of game playing in a digital world" (3). Chapters variously focus on the "social dimensions of gaming" such as relationship and community building during game play; "gaming and difference" as revealed through the experiences of gamers coming from a variety of racial, gender, sexual, and age backgrounds; and "gaming and literacy" intersections. Selfe and Hawisher also asked each contributor to make connections between the life histories they collected and potential ramifications for the teaching of writing in particular and literacy in general; their hope was to "provide literacy instructors with a methodology that they might use in their own teaching for evaluating the impact of gaming on literate lives" (3).

Such work builds on that of Gee, and Selfe and Hawisher make it clear in their introduction that they wish to extend Gee's work, carefully exploring his claims about the efficacy of gaming in helping students develop certain kinds of literacy and critical-thinking skills. In their article "Computer Gaming as Literacy," Selfe, Anne F. Mareck, and Josh Gardiner conclude that "Young people's literacy activity in the semiotic domain of gaming may prepare them to operate, communicate, and exchange information effectively in a world that is increasingly digital and transnational—and in ways that their formal school does not" (30). Such statements corroborate Gee's assertions. The methodological *gain* in *Gaming Lives*, however, is that such claims are grounded in analysis of the experiences of *actual gamers*. A potential drawback is that connections

between the gamers' experiences and the composition classroom are often left under-explored.

My intention in the remainder of this article is to utilize Selfe and Hawisher's approach and extend it by showing how attentiveness to gamers' experiences and reflections might directly affect—indeed, alter—specific composition pedagogies. Specifically, I would like to discuss the content of some interviews I recently conducted with two students who actively play a variety of computer and video games and use numerous other new media communications platforms, such as email, texting, and the Web. While recounting their comments, I examine their thinking and reflections about their literacy practices in light of what thinkers such as Kress and Gee suggest about such practices. In the process, we will see that these students understand their literacy practices in ways that are both comparable to and divergent from those suggested by both Kress and Gee. For instance, as part of the following discussion, I want to take issue first with Kress's metaphors of "dominance" and his assertion that we are now experiencing "the broad move from the now centuries-long dominance of writing to the new dominance of the image" and likewise "the move from the dominance of the medium of the book to the dominance of the medium of the screen." While I believe there are definite *shifts* taking place, I remain unconvinced that image and screen are becoming "dominant," even though we may have to adjust our thinking about their *interaction*. Secondly, I also want to take issue with the assumption that gamers aren't necessarily reflective about the literacy practices developed while gaming. I believe they are, and, like Kress, I believe that we can help them augment that reflection with our literacy practices. I will conclude with a discussion of how our composition pedagogies may shift as we pay attention to and consider more carefully *students'* observations and reflections on their literacy practices.

## II. Students' Reflections, 1.0: Becoming Reflective about Literacy

Two undergraduate students at the University of Cincinnati agreed to share with me some of their insights about gaming and even introduced me to several of the games that they play, including one MMORPG, *World of Warcraft*. The students, both young (21) white men named Mike and Matt (pseudonyms), were music majors who claimed to be lifelong gamers.[5] Both spoke consistently of the importance of being "immersed" in a gaming environment, particularly if the game was an MMORGP; such immersion seems to rely on the use of *multiple* modes of technologically enabled forms of communication, including cell phones and instant messaging, with which these gamers communicate

with one another as they play. Shortly after the interview, both contacted me about using Skype, which allows computer users to chat telephonically with one another through the Internet, to complement and enhance their game play. Their technological sophistication—and *technological literacy*—alone is remarkable. Neither student studies computer science, but both are fairly representative of members of their socioeconomic class who are also interested in gaming: they utilize multiple communications technologies during play, and they do so with no small amount of skill. During game play, they simultaneously manipulate icons, chat or text via cell phone or Skype, and type furiously in chat boxes to coordinate play and complete quests. My graduate students and I received a taste of the high level of multitasking of which these students are capable when Matt came to my graduate seminar on Electronic Literacies to give us a demonstration of *World of Warcraft*. He brought his wireless laptop and positioned its screen on a document camera so the screen could be projected up for all of us to see. He then simultaneously played the game, chatted with other players who noticed he was "on," and talked his way through what he was doing. It was an impressive, even intimidating, sight.

But intense communication is not confined to the game space. Mike, the leader of his guild in *World of Warcraft*, worked with his long-distance friend Josh to set up a website to organize guild events, coordinate play, and share information with other guild members. Communication on the website is largely mediated through numerous message boards, and posting weekly on the boards is required for continued membership in the guild. Almost every player in the guild posts regularly and enthusiastically. Member participation and discourse on these boards offers a concrete example of what Gee calls "design grammars" in such semiotic domains—or, more specifically, "the principles and patterns in terms of which one can recognize what is and what is not an acceptable or typical social practice and identity in regard to the affinity group associated with a semiotic domain" (30). Guild members refer in specific and specialized language to various aspects of the game, and it becomes quickly apparent who is a "newbie" and who is not. Along these lines, the website, World of Warcraft Pro (http://wow-pro.com/) offers extensive space not only for posters to participate on message boards but also to compose (often lengthy) guides to playing the game. Other readers comment on these guides, prompting revision and development of further guides. One in particular caught my attention: Groktal's guide to "Guide Writing" at http://wow-pro. com/node/635. On his guide, Groktal advises other guide writers about how they can organize information accurately and effectively, including creating

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introductions, organizing information in the body of the guide, and rounding out with a good conclusion. Along these lines, another poster, Toogie, created "A newcomer's Guide to Warcraft—Toogie learned the hard way so you don't have to!" (http://wow-pro.com/node/1077). The introduction lays out in a chatty way the author's motivation for creating the guide and its purpose:

> Hi. I decided to make this guide for fun and to kill some down time at work. I will cover many topics from character creation to strategies for making money. It's not a guide to tell you what to do but it will explain many things which should be considered when rolling your first character and many lessons I learned the hard way. I have played this game way too much so I hope this helps some people out there.

With tongue-in-cheek humor, Toogie outlines not only what his guide will do, but he also makes a stab at creating ethos, a sense of why he is qualified to author the guide: "I learned the hard way" and "I have played this game way too much." Further examples of such writing are easily accessible through quick searches.

As you can see, these gamers use multiple modes of technologically enabled communication platforms to enhance their game play. Beyond being technologically intimidating, though, I believe that Mike's and Matt's experiences also show us important literacy practices that both confirm and challenge Gee's and Kress's views of the impact of new media on literacy. Certainly, students deploy Gee's "multiple routes" and "intertextual" principles, in which gamers understand that multiple texts and genres of texts must be used and manipulated to achieve their ends. At the same time, such use of texts problematizes some of Kress's assertions about changes in writing as we move from print-dominated to screen-dominated forms of communication. Kress argues that "[w]riting is becoming 'assembling according to designs' in ways which are overt, and much more far-reaching, than they were previously. The notion of writing as 'productive' or 'creative' is also changing. Fitness for present purpose is replacing previous conceptions, such as text as the projection of a world, the creation of a fictional world, a world of the imagination" (6). Based on my experience with Mike and Matt, I cannot completely agree with Kress's understanding of the changing nature of writing. Indeed, in terms of *writing*, the amount of written communication undertaken in playing the game and posting on such websites is extraordinary. In fact, Mike suggested to me, as I learned to play *World of Warcraft*, that I focus my attention on the chat boxes; he maintained that almost everything I needed to know and pay attention to as I was playing was occurring in the text chat boxes, of which there were as many as three at one time—one for individual communication, one for guild

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communication, and one for communication with players I might be playing with directly in groups to complete quests—all text being color coordinated as well. Mike went so far as to suggest that, besides the icons I needed to master to cast spells and perform other functions, the images appearing on the screen were largely, in his words, "for pretty"; they didn't contain as much information as the textual communication in the chat boxes. As such, these students seem to be developing a degree of *literacy reflectivity*, in which they think critically about the kinds of communication strategies that are most effective, as well as deploy with great thoughtfulness numerous kinds of communication (from chat boxes to message boards) to organize and enhance their game play.

Further, such comments and interactions suggest that Kress is not quite accurate in suggesting that we are witnessing the movement from print domination to screen "domination" (Kress's word), in which visuals are most important—at least not in the complex virtual worlds of MMORPGs. It may be the case that printed text is no longer a "dominant" form of literacy, but the text that appears on screen and on websites seems just as significant as the visuals and icons involved. Writing, in this sense, may have moved to the screen, but it is nonetheless a vital part of play—and communication. In the following two sections (summarized in Table 1), I explore some of the more specific kinds of writing and literacy development occurring in these venues: *trans-literacies, collaborative writing, multicultural literacies*, and *critical literacies*.

## III. Students' Reflections, 2.0: Trans-Literacies, Collaborative Writing, and Multicultural Literacies

I believe that Kress is accurate in pointing out the complexity of reading strategies involved in playing MMORPGs, such as *World of Warcraft*, and he uses gaming as an example in his discussion of reading new media: "The strategies for successful reading are every bit as complex as those of the written page—one might be tempted to say, more complex, given the pre-established reading path of the page—but in any case, and certainly, different. It is not that there isn't a reading path, though many games of the 'role-play' variety (say, a game such as *Final Fantasy*), or even action adventure games such as the famous Lara Croft, offer alternative reading paths, something not encountered on traditional pages. Readers of such screens are used to a different strategy" (161). Given the multiple modes of textual and iconic manipulation required to "read" the game, I agree with Kress that there is certainly a significant reading complexity involved in successful game play. What is missing from his discussion, though,

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**Table 1. Literacy Practices of Gamers**

| Literacy Skill | Description and Examples |
|---|---|
| Literacy Reflectivity | Gamers begin to reflect on what kinds of communications skills are necessary for successful game play. For example, Mike and Matt use multiple communications venues, weighing the value of each one for the task at hand. |
| Trans-Literacies | Mike and Matt make connections between their in-game communications skills and communication skills or needs on nongame environments. They suggest, for instance, that their work on their guild gives them organizational and leadership skills, particularly in communicating effectively with in-game "subordinates." |
| Collaborative Writing | Gamers create, both in-game and through website discussion boards, a variety of complex texts depicting multifaceted gaming strategies. For an example of the extensiveness of message board posting, see the primary *WoW* message board site at http://forums.worldofwarcraft.com/?sid=1. |
| Multicultural Literacies | Gamers play with others from different cultural backgrounds with divergent understandings of word usage, standards of sensitivity, and cultural values. For example, Mike reflects on how he, as Guild leader, needed to help all players develop norms of communication that respected cultural and identity differences, such as sexuality. |
| Critical Literacies | Mike and Matt reflect on how games are products of or reflective of specific ideological investments or values. For instance, Mike understands how *World of Warcraft* uses a "race war" as its primary narrative, and he makes connections among race, conflict, and language, to wit, an inability to communicate successfully and mutually interrogate assumptions may exacerbate preexisting biases or hostilities. |

is a more specific examination of the kinds of complexities involved. Mike and Matt provide some useful insights here.

First, both students' comments reflected what they feel playing these games is offering them in terms of life skills, particularly literacies they will be able to take with them into other venues—what I can *trans-literacies*, or portable literacies. Matt's comments are insightful in this regard: "Mike's

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learning a lot about leadership [by leading the guild]. You also learn a lot about problem solving and especially in role playing games you have to solve a lot of problems. It can be anything from puzzles to goals." Matt suggests that effective communication, via a variety of venues and platforms, is an important part of critical problem-solving. Curiously, the guys see this skill as significantly tied to leadership skills that they might use in the business world or as employees in future professions—a connection I call "trans-literacy" awareness in that the students are becoming more conscious of how certain literacy and rhetorical skills might transfer to other writing environments. For instance, both Mike and Matt suggest that multitasking and engaging multimodal forms of communication are essential components of working with the new media of MMORPGs, and they attempt to link these skills to potentially useful skills in the working world. It may be the case, given their parents' disdain for the games, that Mike and Matt are overstating their case for the usefulness of these games. In many ways, though, I don't think so. Kress suggests that such multitasking and multimoding, to coin a phrase, "are the skills of the multimodal world of communication. They entail differentiated attention to information that comes via different modes, an assessment constantly of what is foregrounded now, assessment about where the communicational load is falling, and where to attend to now. . . . [T]his is reading for specific purposes, for the information that I need now at this moment." (174). Again, I am not entirely sure that I agree with Kress's seeming insistence that reading and writing in such new media venues is completely purpose-driven; I see a lot of imaginative play in the guys' manipulation of *World of Warcraft*, among other games, and I see them attempting to make connections about the skills they are developing and their potential usefulness *outside* the context of the games.[6]

For instance, what I find most compelling about Mike's and Matt's reflections—and this is a point that Kress and Gee largely gloss over—is the *collaborative* nature of most of the writing in gaming spaces. Gee suggests that students often have to work together in many gaming environments; what I find compelling, though, is that some of these students are not just "working" together but *writing* together about a variety of topics, some game-related, some not. When Mike talks about developing a gaming strategy through email with Josh, or when both Mike and Matt refer to the activity on the discussion boards of their gaming website, they are showing us how writing in these contexts is highly collaborative; as Mike explains, the boards serve not only "strategic" gaming purposes but also contribute to community and relationship building:

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> The website's just like a giant forum. . . . On the website people communicate with each other about making trades and meeting times. . . . We have an announcement section where we put important announcements where only our leadership can post. . . . . It's just [like] any kind of communication you would have with a friend about a book that you're reading. It's the same here, it's just like a guideline to take people, you know, to where they feel like discussing the game.

The website's discussion boards cover a variety of topics from gaming to non-gaming subjects, allowing players to communicate about a variety of topics.

We can see collaborative writing at work on a number of similar guild sites. For instance, the guild site for Thrall's Chosen (http://www.guildportal. com/Guild.aspx?GuildID=24923&TabID=224934) offers a "Pub" section in which players can share stories about their characters, consider feedback from other posters, and elaborate on their writing. The multipart "Bio of Kkir" has drawn much commentary and advice, suggesting storylines and improvements:

> Staying busy was a good thing for Kkir. His soul mate, Kerrybella, had left the melee months ago and headed back to her tribal home. She was called home to take her place on the Heaven Light Counsel, as required by clan customs. She insisted Kkir stay and continue the important work of the guild. Kkir and Kerrybella stayed in contact via messages and a soul-bond few will ever understand, but the emptiness in Kkir's heart and essence weighed heavily on his life. He dealt with this by immersing himself in his work.

I like this brief excerpt for its direct mention of "messages" as a way for these characters (i.e., players) to stay in contact with one another.

The discussion boards on Mike's guild site also reveal how multiple individuals contribute to the development of a strategic text or "game plan" that all participants will then follow. That text takes shape through much discussion, negotiation, collaboration, and some amount of contention. Ideas are discussed, arguments put forward, rebuttals heard, and evidence (based largely on the experience of past game play) considered. In one instance, a special board was set up to discuss how to mount an attack on a particular monster, who could only be "killed" by a collective effort of players working together. Members posted various strategies, with some writing 1,000-word "essays," introducing why this particular "kill" was important, setting up strategies for accomplishing the mission, considering potential counter-arguments to the strategies outlined, and concluding with rhetorically rousing "calls-to-arms." But the most intriguing aspect of such argument—not unlike the argumentative skills we teach in several of our first-year writing courses—is that they are

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taking place as students are collaboratively working on *one text*. Again, such collaboration is not uncommon in many professional fields, but I wonder to what extent we in our writing courses are teaching students not just to write but to *write collaboratively*.

Further, Mike argued eloquently about the importance of learning during game play of how to communicate across multicultural differences and through multiple styles of *culturally inflected communication*. Players interacting with each other through MMORPGs are likely encountering both nonnative speakers of English (who are often nonetheless playing on English-speaking servers) and players from diverse parts of the world. This sometimes presents unique communications challenges that gamers feel are significant to work through to coordinate efforts and enhance the gaming experience:

> [S]omething I've dealt with lately is, you know, we have actually this sixteen year old French Canadian kid on our guild now and he just clashes with everybody. . . . This is his secondary language so some people when they first meet him can either be offended by some of the things he says because he hears other people say them and he'll just say them. Like, for instance, first when he got on the guild he started using a lot words like fag and gay and stuff because he saw so many of the other players using these words and stuff in negative situations calling each other this and, you know, on our guild we have a few gay members. That's not really acceptable using those terms in a negative connotation, so I took him aside and I explained to him, you know, I know that this isn't your language, but you can't just go saying that word like that. You're going to offend people. He said, "What does it mean?" And right when he said that I realized he wasn't, you know, trying to use any negative terms against anybody in a way that would offend someone having to do with their sexuality. [So I helped him] express himself in ways that wouldn't offend people and teaching him what words are offensive and which aren't is really important.

We can see these kinds of cultural considerations at play in other guilds as well. Guild Portal (http://www.guildportal.com/) is one of many such sites that serve as a directory for guilds that have created similar kinds of homepages to discuss the game in detail. Message boards and short essays abound. Members use such sites to establish conventions and norms for their guilds—including norms of literacy. For instance, The Paragonian Knights (http://www.guildportal.com/Guild.aspx?GuildID=30032&TabID=269178) make it clear that "hate speech" is not allowed among its members:

> We expect all members to be courteous to each other and treat others as they want to be treated. We do not tolerate bullying, flaming, discrimination, and

excessive use of foul language. This includes in-game and website conduct. For the first offense we will issue a warning. Thereafter any successive transgression will result in immediate removal from the SG and Guild portal site and will not be re-invited to the SG.

Please remember that you are a representative of our Super Group. Be kind and courteous to others as it will reflect back on the Super Group as a whole when you do or do not. Wear the Paragonian Knights and Rogue Knights name proudly!

Given such comments, I concur with both Gee and Kress when they maintain that such games and new media experiences can promote not only a toleration of and even interest in cultural difference, but also an understanding of the role of communication in mediating that difference and the role of literacy in working collaboratively with cultural differences in mind. Gee argues, for example, that one major learning principle gamers glean from gaming is the "Cultural Models about Semiotic Domains Principle," in which "[l]earning is set up in such a way that learners come to think consciously and reflectively about their cultural models about a particular semiotic domain" (211)—in this case, the domain of the MMORPG. Mike is willing to analyze the semiotic situation and assist another player in understanding how text and words circulate socially and culturally in this particular gaming forum. As such, he exhibits a fair amount of reflection about the social dimensions of language.

Kress understands the potential implications of analyzing and using such encounters in pedagogical situations: "Literacy and communication curricula rethought [with interactive new media in mind] offer an education in which creativity in different domains and at different levels of representation is well understood, in which both creativity and difference are seen as normal and as productive. The young who experienced that kind of curriculum might feel at ease in a world of incessant change" (121). But Gee and Kress are thinking in terms of what the games and such new media offer students in *academic* contexts. Curiously enough, Mike and Matt see games as offering them a variety of skills, literacy related and otherwise, that are potentially useful *outside* the classroom. I believe they are beginning to understand their literacy skills as malleable and in need of "customizing" to meet a variety of different rhetorical situations in the world at large. In so many ways, this is *exactly* the kind of rhetorical awareness and sensitivity with which we as compositionists attempt to equip students. By paying attention to such reflections, we are learning about, in Gee's words, how these students "read" these games—and about the literacy practices they are perceiving as significant and useful.

## IV. Students' Reflections, 3.0: Critical Literacy Development

Mike's and Matt's reflections on their game play prompt me to consider how *critical* these students' engagement with these games and new media spaces actually is. Such critical engagement, I believe, exists both (1) in manipulating technologies and skills to develop new media literacy fluency *and* (2) in becoming more reflective about the complex social and cultural impacts of these new media technologies on how we communicate. I believe that Mike and Matt approach an awareness of and engagement with these critical dimensions.

First, these students have demonstrated that they are more than willing to develop a variety of skills, both technological and literacy skills, to manipulate the gaming space. As one example in terms of manipulating visually rich texts, Anne Frances Wysocki, in *Writing New Media: Theory and Applications for Expanding the Teaching of Composition*, has argued in favor of having students think about "designing" texts with visual elements; her comments apply to students experimenting with composing in, with, and alongside new media, such as complex gaming spaces: "We come to see visual composition as rhetorical, as a series of choices that have much broader consequences and articulations than visual principles . . . suggest" (173). We have seen in a few examples above how Mike and Matt seem to be developing some rhetorical savvy as they play. Mike's work with the French Canadian player is one powerful example, but we can also see rhetorical savvy developing as Mike and Josh use the website and discussion boards to help other players develop complex plans and strategies for game play. The players master a language, much of it consisting of specialized terms and vocabulary, and they argue at length about what will constitute effective plans of attack. There is clearly a lot of effort exerted here, albeit *within* the parameters of the game's rules and goals—or, in Wysocki's words, this is work that still "fits its circumstances."[7]

Stuart A. Selber, in *Multiliteracies for a Digital Age*, argues for an emphasis on critical literacy of new media, in which consumers of new media act as *critical* consumers; specifically, "students should . . . be able to function as more ambitious agents of positive change. In other words, students should be able to function as reflective producers of computer technologies" (133–34). Are Mike and Matt's literacy practices in and on these various sites *critical* in Selber's view? At times, their reflection certainly seems critical. Mike acknowledges, for instance, that gaming is "big business"; he's aware that a lot of money is changing hands as kids play these games.[8] But more interestingly, Mike discusses at one point how the game's designers have created "racial" tensions to enhance game play; in fact, advanced ways of playing the game revolve around "racial" conflict:

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> [*World of Warcraft* is] a game that's focused on a war between two enemies basically and the way the game is modeled is to make players hate people of the opposite faction and, you know, the people of the opposite faction are also players but because they're of the opposite faction you can't help but to hate them the way they've designed it. This is because there is no way you can talk or communicate at all to those people in the other faction. They don't understand your language, they don't know what you're saying. If you talk to them everything you say comes through a translator and it turns it into like orcish or elfish. People of a different race, in the opposite faction, aren't going to understand anything you say. [The game designers] throw many obstructions between the two races. There's just a lot of animosity built towards each other.

Gee argues that "reading and writing should be viewed not only as mental achievements going on inside people's heads but also as social and cultural practices with economic, historical, and political implications" (8). Although Mike's reflections are mostly descriptive in the above passage, he is clearly articulating how a lack of understanding, compounded by an inability to communicate, has the potential to enhance conflict. Certainly, the game *designers* understand this and have introduced this element creatively into the game's "war." But Mike knows what's going on. He perceives not only how the game has been set up but also how communication is crucial in both play and in understanding the social, cultural, and political "story" generated during game play.

Some will argue, and rightly to some extent, that Mike seems to understand that he is playing at "race war" when jumping online and logging into *World of Warcraft*, and that his continued interest in the game despite this knowledge suggests a callousness about issues such as racial conflict. I do not know if Mike would support a race war IRL—that is, "in real life"—but I tend to think not, based on my conversations with him. Granted, Mike stops short of *critiquing* the game, which is hugely popular among gamers like Mike. Still, his awareness of how the game makers have designed the game so that *communication* is figured as part of and even crucial to the game's *politics* seems to me pretty savvy. It is a reflective gesture—one that is willing to imagine what the designers had in mind, to refuse to be simply, in Gee's words above, one of the "dupes of capitalist marketers." Indeed, Gonzalo Frasca, in "Videogames of the Oppressed: Critical Thinking, Education, Tolerance, and Other Trivial Issues," argues that games cannot change reality, but that "players can realize that there are many possible ways to deal with their personal and social reality. Hopefully, this might lead to the development of a tolerant attitude that accepts multiplicity as the rule and not the exception" (93). Given the example of Mike's awareness of *World of Warcraft*'s design, as well as the earlier example of Mike

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working with the French Canadian player to use more appropriate and tolerant language during game play, I believe that Frasca may have a strong point.

It is interesting to question whether the game designers are consciously inculcating particular values in their game designs, or if their narratives (such as storylines involving race conflicts) arise out of a political *unconscious*, out of a fairly unreflective mirroring of the world around us. The answers, certainly beyond the purview of this essay, are probably complex and even game specific. But I believe that Mike's awareness of the game's design suggests a reflective practice that challenges Kress's seeming assumption that new media spaces promote more "action" as opposed to "contemplation." In this particular case, these gamers engage in more than a bit of critical reflection, in a variety of ways. And it may be at this juncture that implications for writing pedagogy emerge—a juncture considered in the following concluding section.

## V. Game On: Some Implications for Teaching Writing

In the preceding discussion, I highlighted the specific kinds of literacy skills that I believe Mike, Matt, and others are becoming conscious of during their game play. In particular, *literacy reflectivity, trans-literacy connections, collaborative writing, multicultural literacy awareness,* and *critical literacy development* are all in play during these students' experience of and participation in the gaming environment. My goal thus far has been to take seriously what students think about their gaming and to model an approach to understanding their literacy practices that puts their *own* reflections in conversation with *our* insights about learning and literacy. How, then, can we productively use students' interest in and knowledge of such games in the composition classroom, in which many of us have to instruct students in more "traditional" and academic literacies? Generally, when we think of engaging students in discussions about technology and the new media, such as gaming, we have tended to think in terms of *issues*, such as gaming and violence or stereotypical representations of gender in gaming narratives and visuals. Indeed, a growing body of research is devoted to exploring sociological dimensions of gaming (see in particular the work of Henry Jenkins), and a writing course taking as its focus such themes could easily be developed. Compositionists can certainly design rewarding courses that focus on *issues* in gaming, such as the vexed sociological relationship between gaming and violence or the much-needed analysis of gender stereotypes in gaming narratives and visual representations. A good part of such a course could be spent analyzing and debating the many arguments put forth in the academic articles examining gaming and its connection to violence and gender issues.

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While such courses may be topical and useful, I think they may miss some of the juicier thinking about *literacy* that might occur when we look critically at gaming with our students. More specifically, I believe that the multimodal dimensions of many MMORPGs offer a fertile ground for nurturing rich examinations of literacy—but this is a ground that we must tend to *with* students. Doing so requires that we acknowledge the literacies that students are already developing outside the classroom and demonstrate how they can be complemented and augmented with more "traditional" academic literacies. Working with gaming literacies can powerfully enhance such a project.[9] Kathleen Blake Yancey, in "Made Not Only in Words: Composition in a New Key," offers several examples of what students *could* be doing to further their thinking about the literacies they are developing *outside* the classroom and how those literacies have potential use-value in a variety of contexts, including academic ones. For instance, she maintains that such students could "consider what the best medium and the best delivery for such a communication might be," "consider how to transfer what they have learned in one *site* and how that could or could not transfer to another," and also "think about how these practices help prepare them to become members of a writing public" (311). I believe that Mike's and Matt's reflection on their gaming practices and literacy development suggests some far richer uses of gaming in the composition classroom—alternatives that foreground *literacy* over sociological issues. The following discussion, summarized in Table 2, offers suggestions for assignments that can connect gaming literacies with the kinds of literacy practices we frequently help students develop in our composition courses. Through such assignments, we can prompt students to think about games as "texts," consider successful (and unsuccessful) communication during game play and the subsequent creation of discourse communities, make connections between gaming literacies and literacy skills students are developing outside of game play, and reflect on their literacy development by putting their experiences into conversation with other students and literacy experts.

*Literacy Reflectivity:* At the simplest level, composition courses (at either the first-level or in more advanced upper-level sections) may take a game as the primary "text" for discussion, exploration, and play. Throughout the course, as students learn to play the game, which should be an MMORPG or other "group game" to ensure maximum participation, students can reflect throughout in writing on both their development as gamers and as learners working on developing new *literacy* skills. Guided reflection prompts can shape such meta-writing. For instance, the instructor might ask the following:

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What kind of writing do you find yourself doing during game play?

What kind of writing do you wish you could do to facilitate your game play?

What kinds of writing are more appropriate/less appropriate as you play?

What's the relationship between visuals and text (and writing) in game play?

Describe a situation in which you could not communicate effectively with others.

Describe a situation in which you could communicate effectively with others.

What characterized each?

The goal in such guided reflections is to develop a compelling literacy narrative *in progress*; that is, a powerful assignment might be to have students compose a literacy narrative not about *past* literacy and learning experiences, but about a literacy and learning experience they are undergoing contemporaneously, such as learning the game.

*Trans-literacies*: As students continue to reflect on how they are engaging the game as *literacy learners*, they can begin to think, as Mike and Matt do, about potential connections between the kinds of writing they are doing in the game and the kinds of writing they may find themselves doing both in other courses and in different professional environments. For instance, Mike has begun to think about the kinds of skills he is developing in communicating while playing *World of Warcraft* and leading a "party" of online players and how such skills may be useful in the business world:

> [I]f I ever wanted to pursue any kind of business career in which I have to, you know, lead any kind of project or be a manager which I have employees working for me or anything of the sort, I'll be able to draw on my experience from the game, believe it or not. I've learned how to manage people and deal with people while being strict but not overbearing or mean or anything. I know how to deliver my points and my ideas without making people feel forced. I try to always explain why we do things a certain way.

Such rhetorical savvy and awareness of transferability of communication skills can be profitably noted in composition courses, and we can encourage students to continue to develop such connections and reflect on them by writing about them in journals or even in literacy narratives.

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**Table 2. Gaming and Pedagogical Transformations**

| Literacy Skill | Composition Class Connections | Composition Class Transformation |
|---|---|---|
| **Literacy Reflectivity** | We become more powerful communicators when we are aware of our own literacy skills and their development. | Have students play text-rich games and reflect frequently on what kinds of skills they are developing, what kinds of communication strategies work (and do not work)—and why. |
| **Trans-Literacies** | Communication, specifically writing, varies from environment to environment; knowing how to make connections across different writing environments suggests increased rhetorical savvy. | Have students write more consciously about moving from one genre or writing environment, such as gaming, to another, keeping track of what skills are useful and replicated. This should increase students' meta-cognition about their writing skills development. |
| **Collaborative Writing** | Writing is often not a "solo" activity; much writing, even single-authored pieces, is composed "in conversation" with others' thinking, writing, and ideas. | Have students work collaboratively during game play, keeping track of the kinds of literacy skills they are developing as they play. Have students compose gaming scenarios in teams, focusing on the purpose and skill sets to be fostered during game play. |
| **Multi-cultural Literacies** | Taking into consideration others' view, assumptions, and values is crucial not only to demonstrate audience awareness but in making sophisticated claims and creating effective arguments. | Have students note during gaming interactions what kinds of communications work and what kinds do not. What cultural assumptions enable (or hinder) effective communication? Students can also do basic ethnographic research about gamers and their cultural assumptions during game play. |
| **Critical Literacies** | Pushing beyond surface-level interpretations and analyses, in writing, demonstrates not only rhetorical awareness but also a critical engagement with the topic at hand. | Have students read Gee and others who have written extensively about gaming, inviting them to "talk back" to the scholars and experts about gaming and its various values (or not). Have students design games that take into consideration different values than those currently "at play" in many MMORPGs and other kinds of games. |

By extension, I have frequently asked students to interview professionals in different fields to find out specifically what kinds of writing each professional finds himself or herself doing on a regular basis. Students often discover that business professionals will frequently work collaboratively on a proposal or business case, and much of the initial writing occurs in bursts over email or even in instant messaging (IM) chats. Interestingly, MMORPG gamers find themselves coordinating complex gaming strategies via IM or chats embedded in the game, and such strategizing occasionally finds itself extended, as with Mike's website and discussion boards, to forums outside the game. As such, the text-based brainstorming and drafting in one writing environment finds curious parallels in another. Students can compose rich essays that reflect simultaneously on the interviews they have conducted, the games they have played, and the potential literacy skills connections between different writing environments.

*Multicultural Literacies and Collaborative Writing:* A particularly useful and more extended writing assignment emerging from such reflection may be to have students examine in depth a specific instance of *unsuccessful* communication during game play. Why, how, and in what specific rhetorical contexts did the miscommunication take place, and how was it resolved, if it was resolved? Mike's and Matt's story of the young gamer from Quebec offers a wonderfully rich example of how unsuccessful communication during game play opens up an opportunity to discuss the rhetorical significance of audience and ethos. How one uses language to craft a character, interact with others, and navigate relationships that are almost purely mediated by text is of the utmost importance in game play; as such, critical examinations of such communications offers a nearly unparalleled opportunity to see text "in rhetorical action," so to speak. Along theses lines, students can examine in more detail the kinds of cultural and ideological assumptions implicit in games. I have had students, for instance, read and comment on Tom Henthorne's essay, "Cyber-utopias: The Politics and Ideology of Computer Games," in which Henthorne examines computer games from the perspective of their potential utopian qualities. Henthorne notes the limitations of thinking about computer games in utopian terms: "Cyber-utopias do not allow free play.... The parameters of the personal utopias player[s] can create ... are limited by the games' structures, structures that reflect the beliefs and values of the games' designers just as much as *The Republic* reflects Plato's" (64). With such ideas in mind, we can ask students to examine critically how games narrate worlds into virtual being, what assumptions underlie such narrations, and what possibilities and limitations are enabled by such assumptions and virtual world-crafting. Inviting students to

compose along such lines should prompt them to reflect all the more critically about how we individually and *collectively* narrate worldviews—and how such narrations involve complex literacy movements that both open up and foreclose on socially desirable and undesirable possibilities. A useful collaborative writing assignment has students outline and design, in writing or as a website, an MMORPG. Students can reflect on the "values" they would want their game to have and think critically about how they can set up both the rules of their game and the parameters of interaction, enabled and facilitated by communications technologies, to foster those values. Comparing their games with those such as *World of Warcraft*, in which technology is used to *prevent* communication between players of different "races," might be revealing in terms of how communications technologies can be used to foster—or stymie—interchanges, exchanges, and understanding.

*Critical Literacies*: Perhaps most provocatively, I think that introducing such "texts" into the composition classroom can serve as the basis for a curriculum in which the students themselves can become literacy researchers. More specifically, students can, much like I have in this essay, conduct interviews with other students interested in gaming, collect literacy narratives from gamers, and perhaps even organize focus groups for students interested in multimodal texts to discuss their interests, their uses of such texts, and their insights into what such texts are teaching them about literacy and communication. As suggested earlier, Hawisher and Selfe already have templates for designing interview and questionnaire protocols, and students could easily adapt and perhaps improve on their data collection tools. Summarizing such field research—a rudimentary digital ethnography, if you will—can serve as the basis for sophisticated comparisons between what students are saying and what scholars and educators such as Kress and Gee are saying *about* the students and their new literacy practices. For instance, we have considered working with students to create an exhibit of photographs, video, and literacy narratives specifically about gaming; this could easily become a powerful and rich class project for any number of composition courses across the county. I can think of few better ways of respecting student literacies than by inviting them to participate in research and to join the conversation about gaming and literacy that is starting to take shape in the academy. Such a course may not only be intellectually rigorous but also illuminating for students and instructors alike as both develop deeper insights into the impact of gaming on literacy.

Having students read Gee's book on video gaming and literacy might be illuminating in a number of other ways as well. As students support, contest,

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or modify some of Gee's claims based on reflections on *their own* experience, not just Gee's relatively secondhand knowledge of game play, they have the opportunity to "take back" their representation, critique how others view their literacy practices, and potentially come to understand and articulate insights about such practices that we, even as scholars and teachers, cannot see ourselves. Along such lines, one of my graduate students, Kathryn Cole Bunthoff, has been working on a project to use the computer game *The Sims* as her primary course text in a first-year writing course. She insightfully notes how games can problematize commonplace notions, such as identity and community, offering students an opportunity to reflect powerfully through definitional analysis on how gaming opens up a space for reconsidering community interaction. She notes that "[q]uestions such as these could be asked: Why is the word 'community' used here? What communities are evoked *in* the game, and what communities have developed *around* the game? What do these community members *do* that justify their classification as community?" Indeed, students should be encouraged to develop a *critical* stance vis-à-vis gaming, perhaps augmenting and developing some critical reflections about the games they play. Many popular works about video and computer gaming can be held up for critical examination. For instance, Brad King and John Borland's *Dungeons and Dreamers: The Rise of Computer Game Culture from Geek to Chic* is useful as a reading for interrogating claims the authors make about video and computer games. King and Borland claim that "computer games as a sweeping, socializing force" (7)—and not a negative, violence-inducing one, either. Specifically, they argue that "[f]or millions of people, computer games have provided an opportunity to find other people who share similar backgrounds, stories, hopes, and dreams" (8). Other claims, however, such as the claim that "virtual worlds are now just an extension of the real world," are in desperate need of nuancing: What, exactly, is extended from one "world" to the next, and is the "real world" perhaps its own extension of the "virtual world"? More specifically, and critically, whose "worlds" are we talking about, in terms of both the "real" and the "virtual"? In many ways, Mike and Matt are already thinking about such questions, so I do not want to suggest that we are *bringing* such critical awareness to them and others potentially like them; as we have seen, they reflect on their own about the economics involved in maintaining the computer game industry as well as some of the underlying cultural issues that designers use (consciously or not) to create their games' narrations. Our role as instructors, rather, can be to help such students continue to develop their critical skills, putting multiple texts, ideas, and viewpoints into play for them

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and helping them navigate among them and negotiate with them a reflection on their own experiences with gaming technologies. Indeed, the use of such games as texts is not designed to promote a love of gaming or to justify its usefulness. If anything, the goal of helping students increase their reflective understanding of their literacy practices in one mode is to prompt them to make connections *across* modes. And, as you can see from the sample assignments I have outlined, *multiple* literacy skills are developed through each writing experience; inviting students to become increasingly aware of their complex literacy practices constitutes a significant part of our work as compositionists.

Inevitably, some instructors (or administrators) will question the attention I am asking us to pay to gaming as a literacy event and pedagogical space. Such instructors rightly ask what is *left out* of our writing instruction when we turn to examining gaming. If students are designing an MMORPG, what kinds of writing are they *not* doing? I cannot help but ask in return, *what are we already leaving out by* not *examining gaming as a literacy event for our students?* More politely, I want to point out that the kinds of writing assignments I am suggesting—writing literacy narratives, reporting on interviews, reflecting on writing and learning to write in different situations, conducting research through ethnography, articulating critiques of and arguments with scholarly and academic sources—are actually fairly typical, if not "traditional" writing assignments. Even having students design an MMORPG can be—and *should* be—a thoroughly "academic" exercise in the sense that students will have to conduct research, sift through their experiences, make claims, support them, and consider rebuttals to their designs. All of these rhetorical activities can take place in the genres of the proposal, the literature review, the audience analysis, the position paper, and the research proposal. The critical difference, I believe, is that in focusing our and our students' reflections and writing on a practice such as gaming, we are both honoring an emerging interest among many students and helping students work in platforms that, in some cases, mimic the kinds of writing environments and situations that students might find themselves in *outside* our classes (such as in the business world, where the use of IMing and collaborative writing situations is increasingly frequent). Moreover, my emphasis on inviting students to consider connections *across modes of writing and writing environments* cuts to the heart of what we as compositionists *should* be doing: offering students a diversity of writing experiences *and* encouraging them to become more *conscious* writers—that is, writers rhetorically aware of how audience, genre, and tone work in a variety of writing environments.

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Other instructors are going to worry that what I am proposing will not work for them because, quite simply, they have never played a game before. In many ways, these are the ideal instructors for such a course—because they can learn *with their students*. More powerfully, many of their students might be *teaching the instructors* about gaming, allowing the students some opportunity to think authoritatively. Such "newbie" instructors have a rich opportunity to show their students how they—as seasoned, "master" learners—approach and acquire new literacy skills. Indeed, at this point in the development of multimedia and multimodal texts, I contend that many students are inevitably going to be—and will *continue* to be—light years ahead of us in technical capacity. We nonetheless have rhetorical knowledge, savvy, and sensitivity that they can use to understand those texts in more complex and compelling ways. A willingness to introduce and invite such texts into the classroom may lead more profoundly and productively to collaboration and mutual learning between teachers and students. Also, not all students are interested in gaming, and some will point out that gaming is still something that more men than women enjoy. Granted, but I think that the sheer topicality of gaming will fascinate enough students so that those who are not gamers will be intrigued enough to participate fully. In some ways, students who are *not* gamers might have some of the most interesting things to say about gaming and literacy, in that they might be able to take a more "objective" or disinterested approach to gaming.

Clearly, more work needs to be done on examining a *wider* range of gamers and their literacy practices, as well as the potentially specific literacy interactions and engagements of people of different backgrounds. Young women gamers, for instance, may generally favor different sets of practices (or even games), and noting such differences may be crucial in effectively designing pedagogical spaces that use video and computer games to teach writing.[10] Additionally, we need to continue to pose questions about issues of access to computer and communications technologies in general, as well as questions about the materiality of the technologies that are being engaged. For example, how do engagements with the virtual worlds of video and computer games affect our perception of the material world? These are complex theoretical questions—but they are questions that deserve attention for answers that might alter how we view the potential interaction between gaming, literacy, and pedagogy. More practically, part of the challenge we as instructors may face in thinking about gaming and writing pedagogy is our lack of familiarity with the literacy venues that students are using. Studying how "older" generations approach and engage such technologies might itself offer fruitful insights into both the technologies

and the literacy practices they potentially enable. And, as I have argued here, I think the answers may lie in paying closer attention to those already actively involved with and engaged in the new media. As such, I maintain the necessity of both paying attention to, in Kress's words, "the young on the grounds of their experience" (175) *and* offering them some of the literacy skills that *we*, as academic readers and writers of longer printed texts, have developed—with the goal of promoting reflection on *all* of our literacy practices. Such attention should make for richer worlds—virtual and otherwise.

## Notes

1. See Bruce Sterling Woodcock's tracking of MMORPG statistics at http://www.mmogchart.com/ for a sense of how widely played such games are.

2. Consider Nicholas Yee's "Understanding MMORPG Addiction" at http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/gateway_addiction.html.

3. The work of Hawisher and Selfe may be methodologically useful here, particularly in providing a framework for approaching and understanding how students use new media platforms. See "Becoming Literate in the Information Age: Cultural Ecologies and the Literacies of Technology," as well as *Literate Lives in the Information Age: Narratives of Literacy from the United States*.

4. A wide-ranging sampling of such work can be found in anthologies such as *The Video Game Theory Reader*, edited by Mark J. P. Wolf and Bernard Perron. See also Prensky and McAllister.

5. Both students were eager to share information, particularly about the games they play and their history as gamers. There is clearly a generational divide, if not exactly a *technological* divide, in these students' knowledge about computer technologies. Both students come from fairly middle-class families that had access to computer technologies, though both students reported that their parents were not keen about their sons' gaming.

6. Ellen Cushman's comments in "Composing New Media: Cultivating Landscapes of the Mind" may be relevant here.

7. Some critics have argued that the narratives embedded in many computer and video games do not invite the kind of imaginative play that more traditional reading does. See Aarseth for more detail.

8. As such, I believe he might enjoy Ken McAllister's recent work on gaming and labor, *Game Work: Language, Power, and Computer Game Culture*.

9. Zoevera is interested in connecting video/computer gaming practices to the teaching of narrative, and she provides a number of exercises and activities to

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guide instructors interested in making such connections for their students. For instance, one exercise asks students to create and describe their own video games.

10. Scholarly attention to issues of gaming and gender has tended to focus on women's (lack of) access to, use of, and experience with computer games, although recent work is paying more attention to women gamers. See Tapscott; Cunningham; Thurlow, Lengel, and Tomic; Vered; Cassell and Jenkins; Ray; and Kendall.

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