Now You're Playing With Pedagogy: Video Games, Digital Literacies, and Trans-Media Participatory Cultures

by

Matthew Kelly

B.A. in English and Rhetoric, University of California, Berkeley, 2008

M.A. in English, Pennsylvania State University, 2011

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This dissertation was presented

by

Matthew Kelly

It was defended on

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and approved by

Tyler Bickford, Assistant Professor, Department of English

Annette Vee, Assistant Professor, Department of English

Stuart Selber, Associate Professor, Department of English, Pennsylvania State University

Dissertation Director: William Scott, Associate Professor, Department of English

NOW YOU'RE PLAYING WITH PEDAGOGY: VIDEO GAMES, DIGITAL LITERACIES, AND TRANS-MEDIA PARTICIPATORY CULTURES

Matthew Kelly, PhD

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This projects examines the learning practices of video games and gaming communities while also considering the benefits of incorporating game-based projects in to the writing classroom. The first several chapters explore how pedagogical strategies in gameplay experiences are capable of creating (and critiquing) epistemological frameworks via real-time feedback mechanisms based on player participation. The author then examines the peer-to-peer teaching practices that characterize several prominent online gaming circle to demonstrate the unique forms of digital literacies cultivated through virtual gamespaces and trans-media participatory gaming communities. The author concludes by discussing my own experiences using video games in the composition classroom and contextualizing new forms of game-based teaching strategies in relation to digitally-focused composition scholarship.

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INTRODUCTION

The first time I ever used video games in my classroom was in my Written Professional Communication seminar at the University of Pittsburgh. This might seem a bit odd for two reasons. First, Written Professional Communication is not often seen as fertile territory for experimenting with new forms of digital media-based learning practices (an unfair assessment that I will eventually discuss in a later chapter). Second, my institution already offered several composition courses specifically dedicated to digital media in the course catalog. For someone who is interested in the learning practices of games and gaming communities, having a course titled Composing Digital Media already on the books seemed like a prime opportunity to explore what happens when students begin to compose through and with video games. Unfortunately, by the time I finally made the commitment to dedicate my dissertation to video games and the learning practices of games and gaming communities—thanks in part to the overwhelming support expressed by my committee advisors—I had already submitted my teaching preferences for the upcoming academic year and was committed to these course assignments. Hence, I was in a situation where I had to temper my teaching commitments with my own research interests, a position that many graduate students often (and, perhaps, necessarily) find themselves in.

While preparing for my course, I knew I wanted to use video games somehow but I did not want to simply commandeer this class for my own personal research interests. As many teachers know, a delicate balance is needed when planning a course; we cannot simply reverse-

engineer a class based on personal enthusiasm for a specific object-of-examination (i.e., radically restructuring a university-wide writing course, which is designed to serve the needs of many students, around the highly-particular, discipline-specific research interests of a single instructor). Conversely, we cannot introduce a new set of texts to pre-existent curricula without questioning how the introduction of new media or formats might radically shape the type of projects and social interactions that structure a class (i.e., taking an "add X and stir" approach to curricula design that overlooks the nuances and actual impact of new material being assigned to students). Consequently, the nagging two-fold question remained: how can video games help evolve and expand the goals of my course and, equally important, how can the goals of my course help further explore the themes and principles underlying a game or gaming community?

To quickly jump ahead, I decided on using *Minecraft* as the common territory for my Written Professional Communication seminar, and I will discuss my experiences using *Minecraft* in a later chapter. For now, though, I want to reflect upon the process of negotiating the risks and rewards of introducing video games into a specific class. My personal anxieties surrounding how I might use video games in an upper-division writing course that satisfies a university-wide requirement can be re-framed as worries about the space and locations of learning. That is to say, my concerns about balancing institutional obligations in writing courses and personal interests in video games were actually responses to the questions: how do the virtual spaces of games—along with all the discursive practices and algorithmic processes that sustain these spaces—adapt to, manipulate, or even challenge the power relations that are calcified in literal or metaphorical institutional infrastructure? Conversely, how are traditional educational spaces—not just physical classrooms, but also the conceptual and literal spaces that we demand our students inhabit when composing or reading texts—reconfigured by the participatory, situated, and action-oriented

nature of learning within video games? In short, what happens to video games when played in university spaces and what happens to university spaces when games are played within them?[1]

This question of "where"—that is, examining not only spaces in video games but the spaces where games are situated in specific physical, cultural and historical moments—seems like an appropriate evolution of the general trajectory of contemporary video game studies. The first major wave of game critics throughout the 1980s and 90s undertook the unavoidable epistemological crisis that every new scholarly field must face by asking: *what*, exactly, do we study when we study video games? The rules? The narrative? The player's interpretation thereof? As I will discuss in Chapter One, this uncertainty led to the now infamous ludology vs narratology debate, wherein the first camp sought to emphasize the rule-based structure of games while the second camp sought to examine the representational elements that constitutes gameplay experiences (Aarseth, *Cybertext*; Murray, *Hamlet*). The following wave of game critics during the 2000s agreed upon a refreshingly simple answer to this question surrounding the *what* of video games—rules, narrative, and player experiences work together to create significance!—before moving on to the methodological question of *how* we study games and gaming cultures. Critics such as Ian Bogost, Kurt Squire, Constance Steinkuehler and James Paul Gee all offer their equally-productive interpretive frameworks for understanding how multiple variables work in tandem with one another to create unique gameplay experiences and, furthermore, exploring how said experiences resonate with relevant socio-cultural themes. Whether it be a Bogostian notion of procedural rhetoric or a Squireian theory of functional epistemology, the following wave of game scholars successfully presented interpretive frameworks that allow us to further

[1] Despite my playful jab at university spaces being incompatible with video games, we must not forget that the earliest digital games were developed in traditional academic institutions (such as MIT and Brookhaven National Laboratory) by people who were willing to take play seriously.

explore the unique affordances offered by the structural features of games and the communities they give rise to.[2]

If past video games research evolved from a question of *what* to a question of *how*, we can see contemporary game scholarship as diving into the question of *where*; that is, how do the spaces of video games, and the spaces in which games are played, fundamentally resonate with the larger critical and educational value of games or gaming communities? For instance, scholars such as Nick Yee and Adrienne Shaw have explored how the ideologically-charged space of physical reality overlaps, intersects, and bleeds into virtual gamespaces, creating situations where preexistent biases regarding labor, gender, and/or sexuality are filtered through the algorithmic structures of video games. This question of the *where* of video games also operates as a useful backdrop for emerging debates in Rhetoric and Composition studies, as a growing number of compositionally-focused scholars have begun exploring what happens when video games are introduced into the writing classroom, itself a space which often finds itself entangled within larger institutional policies and infrastructure (Colby and Colby, "Pedagogy").[3] This new wave of composition-focused game scholars seek to answer questions similar to those I posed earlier: what happens when video games are put into locations where they typically are absent or even forbidden? How do games change when surrounded by the same institutional structures and policies that implicitly or explicitly govern the teaching practices or learning experiences that

[2] Obviously, this relatively simplified overview of video game scholarship negates the fascinating game-based work done in the STEM fields, such as the use of video games in neurological studies (Bavelier et al., "Brain Plasticity"). Given my own disciplinary predilections, I want to limit the scope of this examination specifically to humanities-based approaches to video games. I will further unpack my rationale behind this decision in Chapter One.

[3] Recent composition scholarship has also taken up with question of where insofar as critics such as Sidney Dobrin and Christian Weisser have both explored spatially-informed theories of composition, which provides an interesting parallel to the growing concerns and methods of video game studies. This is not to say that my cavalier theory of disciplinary evolution from what to how to where is an inevitable trajectory for all fields of study, nor am I proclaiming that all interests in game studies perfectly aligns with concerns in the field of Rhetoric and Composition. Instead, I am merely trying to identify moments of common concern between game scholars and compositionists in hopes of reinforcing the exigency of examining games and game-based learning practices in conjunction with composition studies.

occur in the writing classroom? Furthermore, how can academic policies, infrastructure, and discourses be reshaped, reconfigured, and re-approached via the incorporation of video games (or other forms of new media) into the literal and metaphorical spaces that comprise contemporary universities? By posing these interrelated questions, video game-focused composition research has made immense strides in understanding how the unique features of digital games can further expand the aims of writing instruction and help instructors better comprehend the impact of integrating digital technologies into contemporary writing curricula.

In many ways, my project builds upon (and, hopefully, contributes back to) these recent concerns insofar as the ensuing chapters seeks to contextualize the ways in which virtual gamespaces do not exist as self-contained commodities independent of the socio-cultural, political, or technological conditions surrounding them. Video games operate as spaces where ideological logics, emergent digital technologies, and oft-unpredictable individuals all coalesce; video games are themselves distillations of the spaces surrounding them and, simultaneously, spaces where new forms of digitally-mediated learning practices emerge. As will become more clear throughout this project, a discourse of "pedagogy" will operate as the synthetic tissue that connects the different spaces within and around video games, insofar as examining the learning practices that occur while playing games or navigating gaming communities will offer an object-of-examination that allows me to contextualize the larger critical, cultural, and educational significance of games and the experiences they elicit in individuals. That is to say, focusing on the pedagogical nature of/in games will not only demonstrate how video games might help instructors further evolve the goals of writing instruction amid the rapid expansion and accessibility of digital media technologies, it will also demonstrate how a discourse of pedagogy can itself operate as an interpretive framework which helps scholars understand the critical work

undertaken by games, their developers, and their players. Ultimately, the purpose of this examination is not to simply champion the educational benefits of video games nor is it to frame them as the inevitable evolution of new media practices or digitally-informed writing instruction. Instead, I want to illustrate how the learning practices which occur within video games are themselves symptomatic of their surrounding socio-cultural ideological paradigms *and* emergent forms of digitally-mediated learning practices that often exist beyond the confines of educational institutions.

Before proceeding, it is important to clarify two important aspects that govern the overall trajectory of this project. First, although I have framed this introduction by discussing my own teaching experiences, the entirety of this project will not be solely dedicated to narrating how I have incorporated games into my writing courses. Instead, the earlier chapters of this project will focus on how learning practices actually function in gameplay experiences and gaming communities. As I discuss at the conclusion of Chapter One, Kurt Squire argues that scholars should be willing to treat video games on their own terms. By this, he means that we should avoid viewing games as mere tools for solving pre-existent problems, be they specific institutional goals or broader cultural concerns. Instead, scholars need to understand how games and gaming communities actually function "in the wild" before using these examinations to reflect upon the incorporation of games into traditional educational environments. Consequently, Chapters Two and Three will be dedicated to more traditional culturally- and rhetorically-focused critical analyses of specific games and gaming communities. These earlier chapters will allow me to demonstrate how pedagogy not only functions as a central tenet of game design and gaming communities but, furthermore, offers an interpretive framework for better understanding the critical impact of games when they are played in different scenarios. Chapters Four and Five

will use the lessons learned from these earlier investigations to further clarify my rationale for incorporating games in my writing-intensive courses. In structuring my project in this way, I hope to demonstrate how instructors need not limit themselves to traditional educational environments when discussing the pedagogical quality of video games nor should they treat the classroom as an isolated space that exists independent of real-world practices surrounding games today.

The second important clarification surrounds the common discourses I will deploy in subsequent chapters. I will emphasize a discourse of "pedagogy" as opposed to "literacy" throughout this examination, and I have chosen to do so for several reasons. Rhetoric and Composition scholars interested in digital technologies have done an excellent job critiquing theories of literacy that defines this term in regards to obtaining a set of self-contained or decontextualized skills. As Wysocki and Johnson-Eiola argue, "we could describe literacy as not a monolithic term but as a cloud of sometimes contradictory nexus points among different positions. Literacy can be seen not as a skill but a process of situating and resituating representations in social spaces" (Wysocki and Johnson-Eiola 367). In this sense, literacy acts as a critical lens for understanding the processes by which individuals or communities undertake dynamic forms of representation amid numerous structures or systems (be they literal technological structures or figurative discursive systems). While I completely agree that theories of literacy allows us to better understand how individuals come to terms with the larger networks that cultivate, channel, and elicit specific forms of social participation or representation, a discourse of literacy runs the risk of operating as a quasi-conversion narrative that is limited to (or, at least, specifically aimed at) traditional institutional spaces.[4] In other words, the implied

[4] To clarify, Johnson-Eiola and Wysocki are actually trying to diagnose the same type of over-determination found in tech-focused composition studies I am identifying here, meaning that these authors take issue with the

distinction between "literate" and "illiterate" runs the risk of unintentionally reinforcing a hierarchical value system that groups individuals into binary categories of expert/novice or teacher/student, and these categories are themselves outgrowths of historical institutional designations that are fraught with the ghost of ideologically-charged social, political, and economic underpinnings (Gilyard, *True*).

We should presume new forms of digital literacy practices exist within games and gaming communities but not predetermine the function or impact of these practices. By this, I mean that we can assume that new forms of digital literacy acquisition is at work in gameplay experiences (as I will discuss further through the work of James Paul Gee in Chapter One) but the larger educational or even ideological impact of this acquisition is not a given or even a guarantee. Instead, it is the role of teachers, designers, and even players themselves to articulate the relevance of digitally-mediated learning practices within virtual gamespaces. A discourse of pedagogy, I feel, highlights the critical impact of game-based literacy practices while also avoiding the threat of over-determination or implied conversion narratives; an emphasis on pedagogy calls attention to the moment-to-moment micro-exchanges or transactions between self and other (be it another person or even the algorithmic systems that comprise the rules of a video game) without resorting to overly-simplified or predetermined categorizations that slip in through the side door when discussing literacy acquisition. That is to say, a discourse of pedagogy underscores the rhetorical process process of negotiation—the process of learning how to negotiate the possibilities and affordances of a given system, a specific moment in time, a set of discursive practices, or connection to other individuals within a particular scenario—without

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over-use of "literacy" as a master term in digitally-focused composition studies. In this sense, my emphasis on pedagogy and hesitation to focus solely on a discourse of literacy resonates (rather than challenges) Johnson-Eiola and Wysocki's concerns.

needing to qualify this process in regards to pre-existent institutional concerns. This is not to say that I discount literacy writ large, only that I am emphasizing pedagogy as a way to arrive at a more nuanced understanding of the literacy practices fostered by games without pre-determining these practices in relation to explicitly institutional objectives. With this in mind, I want to offer a brief outline of my project, which will further unpack how I am using real-world game-based research as a way to better refine my rationale for incorporating games into the writing classroom.

In Chapter One, I offer a survey of contemporary video game scholarship in order to identify a common interest surrounding pedagogy when discussing the critical and educational value of video games. My main argument in this chapter is that contemporary video game scholarship implicitly or explicitly responds to the pedagogical nature of video games and gameplay experiences. The main goal of this chapter is not to simply identify a single feature of video games that operates as the shared foundation connecting all strands of game criticism. Quite the opposite, as the breadth and variety of current game scholarship is an effect of refusing to identify a single, definitive feature of games. Instead, my goal for this chapter is to describe how a common interest in pedagogy (that is, the ways in which video games are capable of teaching players how to act through a variety of real-time feedback mechanisms and the ability to model dynamic systems) can help scholars further evolve our understanding of the critical and educational value of studying games, gaming communities, or integrating games into the classroom. In short, I argue that a discourse of pedagogy can allow us to see the learning practices in video games as reflections of, and interventions within, the larger socio-political, economic, and technological circumstances surrounding games or game development (rather than treating pedagogy as simply a set of best practices used for effectively transmitting

information from teacher to student in traditional classroom environments). I will conclude Chapter One by turning towards Rhetoric and Composition scholarship that focuses on issues surrounding digital literacy acquisition and technological access in order to demonstrate how the field of Rhet/Comp is well-suited for undertaking a nuanced, multifaceted approach to game studies. The aim of this chapter is to derive a thesis that will inform the subsequent chapters throughout this project: examining the pedagogical strategies of games or gaming communities can grant us insight into how emergent literacy practices in virtual gamespaces are themselves extensions, and even modifications, of larger socio-cultural logics, conditions, or trends. Reflecting on these game-based literacy practices, then, can help writing instructors better understand how video games resonate with the impact that digital technologies have on traditional classroom environments or curricula.

In Chapter Two, I use a discourse of politics to connect the pedagogical strategies of games to the socio-economic conditions and ideological paradigms that helped create video games as a distinct medium during the mid-twentieth century. To accomplish this goal, I use an examination of the independent game *Papers, Please* to illustrate how the pedagogical practices of this game resonates with the work-as-play/play-as-work ideological logic that characterizes many knowledge-based industries. In looking at how this game teaches players to dissolve the boundaries between work and play via a continual process of mental and psychological self-modification, *Papers, Please* simultaneously embodies and critiques the corrosive economic pragmatism that is often overlooked when discussing the affordances of digital information technologies. The goal of Chapter Two is to demonstrate how the pedagogical strategies of games (i.e., the ways in which games implicitly or explicitly teach players how to navigate their rules, narrative, or aims) is inextricably bound to the ideological logic and techno-material

conditions which contextualize a game's development. In doing so, I redefine the phrase "the politics of games" to mean the ways in which the learning practices within games are conditioned by external circumstances and, furthermore, how these learning practices can offer an outlet for reflecting upon—or even manipulating—the ideological logic underlying said circumstances.

For Chapter Three, I expand the scope of my project and examine how the pedagogical strategies of the online RPG *Dark Souls* fundamentally shapes the social relationships shared between players. By using James Brown Jr.'s notion of ethical programs and Emmanuel Levina's theory of ethical responsibility, I demonstrate how the gameplay mechanics, fictional narrative, and pedagogical elements within *Dark Souls* directly influences the creation of educational resources among the *Dark Souls* player base and, furthermore, how these educational resources reveal the ethical underpinnings of collaborative learning practices in virtual networked environments. The main goal of this chapter is to build upon the initial interest in pedagogy I introduced in Chapter Two by examining how the aesthetic experience of gameplay can lead to new pedagogical practices between players within online gamespaces (as opposed to simply focusing on the pedagogical connection that occurs between a single game and an individual player). Doing so can help us reflect upon the discourses we use to characterize collaborative learning experiences within virtual arenas. Or, more simply, I demonstrate how the internal logic of the pedagogical practices within games, while contingent upon dominant cultural logics, can reverberate outwards and begin to shape the social relations established between individuals within a specific gaming community. If Chapter Two examines the "politics of games," then Chapter Three can be seen as exploring the "ethics of games" and how their pedagogical elements can structure social relations within specific communities.

In Chapter Four, I describe how the political and ethical dimensions found in the pedagogical elements of video games—that is, the ability for players to partake in a given cultural logic via the pedagogical strategies within games and the impact that said strategies have on social relations within virtual spaces—can grow and evolve when positioned within the composition classroom. More specifically, I will discuss my use of *Minecraft* in my Written Professional Communication seminar and demonstrate how students were able to use this game to create virtual learning environments that exhibited the values of particular professional communities. By coupling Eric Zimmerman's theory of gaming literacy with contemporary conversations in Rhet/Comp scholarship regarding professional writing, I demonstrate how using *Minecraft* to create virtual learning environments not only provides students with a platform to speak form a position of professional expertise or authority but, additionally, can provide the necessary conditions for re-examining the discourses instructors use when discussing the themes of professionalism or professionalization in the writing classroom. The purpose of this chapter is to illustrate how the core concepts informing my earlier examinations can be translated into writing curricula without simply instrumentalizing video games or gameplay experiences to satisfy traditional institutional aims. This, in turn, can help instructors further expand the key terms used in contemporary writing instruction.

In Chapter Five, I discuss my experiences having students collaboratively design their own games in my Critical Writing course. In this section, I describe how Kurt Squire's theory of functional epistemologies—that is, the idea that games are capable of creating an epistemological worldview via the creation of specific rules and representational or narrative elements—provides a productive interpretive framework for rethinking not only what it means to "read" the critical argument underlying a specific video game but also reconceptualize what it

means to “write” an argument via the creation of dynamic, interrelated systems within a video game. This chapter builds upon many of the same themes discussed in Chapter Four but with a stronger emphasis on the use of video games as way to challenge commonplace epistemological assumptions (rather than focus on the creation of virtual environments that articulate the values of a professional community). The main purpose of this section is to conclude my project by demonstrating how the key concepts that have informed previous sections—namely, using a discourse of pedagogy as a method of critical inquiry and understanding what constitutes the politics or ethics of gameplay experiences—enact themselves in traditional classroom environments. This section will conclude by reiterating how critical game studies can highlight and evolve on-going debates in the field of Rhetoric and Composition that revolve around digital literacy instruction.

As I have mentioned previously, the goal of this project is not to simply champion the critical integrity of video games or their educational value (many scholars have already done an excellent job articulating the relevance of game studies today), nor do I want to imply that video games are fit to operate as the dominant medium in today’s media ecosystem. Instead, this project is dedicated to understanding how pedagogy operates as a productive interface for understanding how games, the communities that play them, and the designers that create them embody new forms of digitally-based literacy practices and cultural critique.

1.0 THE ROLE OF PEDAGOGY IN VIDEO GAME SCHOLARSHIP

The current state of video game scholarship can be described as the intellectual equivalent of a frontier land grab. Researchers from numerous fields and disciplinary backgrounds (including education, psychology, anthropology, and even cognitive science) have all provided their unique approaches to the study of video games, the effects they have on users, and the larger contexts in which games are developed or played. Previous attempts at defining a singular feature that distinguishes games from other media resulted in a now-infamous debate between "ludology" and "narratology" during the mid-1990s and early-2000s. Simply speaking, ludologists sought to understand games as interactive rule-based systems whose critical or cultural significance resided within the actions available to the user. In other words, games thrive off user participation in ways that other media—such as film or written novels—traditionally did not, and examining the rules which structured user participation can grant insight into the larger critical stance offered by any particular game (Aarseth, *Cybertext*). Counter to a ludological emphasis on the formal or structural features of games was an approach that sought to understand how video games introduce radically new possibilities for storytelling and narrative expression (Murray, *Hamlet*). Games, due to their interactive and multimodal nature, provide the foundation for rethinking how narrative content is composed, consumed and distributed across a variety of different media formats (Jenkins, *Convergence*). The assumed contention between these two methodological approaches is that ludologists negate the personal experience of game players

(along with all the spontaneity, individual interpretation, and symbolic resignification that occurs during gameplay) and reject the idea that video games' representational elements (such as character, plot, or narrative trajectory) are inextricably bound to the critical argument within a game (Hayot and Wesp, *Style*).[5] Conversely, narratologists were accused of simply super-imposing pre-existent terminology (i.e., a discourse which emphasized texts and textuality) onto video games while overlooking how the unique formal features of games distinguish them from traditional media.

Eventually, tensions between these camps simmered as a new wave of video game scholars sought to either mediate the concerns of these two approaches or reframe this debate as a way to better clarify the cultural relevance of examining video games. As several contemporary scholars argue, the ludology/narratology debate stems from a fundamental misunderstanding regarding the primary object-of-examination within game studies (Bogost, "Mess"; Kirkpatrick, "Between"). While games are rule-based systems, making rules the sole object of analysis would foreclose upon the interpretive potential for both players and scholars alike; ludological approaches run the risk of over-determination insofar as this method locates a definitive significance within a given set of rules (Squire, "From Content"). Conversely, narratological approaches should be sensitive to the unique ability for games to channel and respond to user input in real-time. Therefore, the actions afforded to users via the rule-based systems that comprise a video game are an integral part of any gameplay experience. Rather than take on an either/or approach to studying games, contemporary scholars argue that game-based scholarship

[5] Hayot and Wesp argue that rule-based systems must still take on a representational existence within games, meaning that the rules of a game can only express themselves through narrative devices such as character or setting. For instance, many historically-based strategy games used representations of historical identities as a means of expressing core gameplay mechanics (i.e. in Age of Empires, ancient Japan is given certain gameplay mechanics that are meant to reflect their technological developments of a given historical period). Hence, it is impossible to completely separate the algorithmic or rule-based functioning of games from a narrative-based attunement to the symbolic significance of games' representational elements.

should focus on the interanimating relationship that exists between rule sets and personal experiences within virtual gamespaces.

For this chapter, I want to examine how several different branches of video game scholarship have veered away from a binary opposition between ludological and narratological approaches to video games. In doing so, these respective branches of criticism bring to light the implicit and explicit pedagogical nature of games and gameplay experiences. That is to say, abandoning an oversimplified ludology-versus-narratology mindset allows us to see how games operate through a pedagogical relationship between player and game. The overarching goals of this chapter are to identify a common interest in pedagogy among several different strands of contemporary game scholarship and, furthermore, align this common pedagogical focus with Rhetoric and Composition scholarship that views sites of digital literacy acquisition as valuable territories for reflecting upon—and even intervening within—dominant cultural ideologies. Put differently, by underscoring how pedagogy operates as an integral component in contemporary video game scholarship, I will argue that examining the learning practices which occur within and around games can operate as a valuable point-of-access for analyzing larger cultural trends and concerns surrounding digital media in contemporary networked societies. In short, the pedagogical strategies deployed by games and gaming communities can operate as critical reflections of, and reactions to, the technological and socio-cultural circumstances surrounding the creation and distribution of games today. To begin, though, I want to re-evaluate the loose designations scholars often use to categorize the branches of contemporary video game criticism.

1.1 VIDEO GAMES AS DYNAMIC SYSTEMS

Jose Zagal's comprehensive overview of how contemporary game scholarship has approached the educational potential of video games exemplifies the three-part schema that is often used to categorize different approaches to video game studies today. Roughly speaking, the three approaches to game scholarship can be labeled the social scientific approach (i.e., looking at effects that games have on people's actions within or beyond virtual gamespaces), the humanities approach (i.e., looking at games as cultural objects and examining how meaning is made within gamespaces), and the industry or engineering approach (i.e., looking at the technical features and design aspects that structure gameplay experiences or the larger economic facets of the games industry) (Zagal, 13).[6] While there is obviously much more depth and nuance to each of these three categories, I feel as though the boundaries between these approaches are more porous than may initially seem. For example, questions about the sociological impact of games on individuals necessarily entails that we also look at how larger cultural contexts condition the experiences of players (which would entail a humanities-based approach). Conversely, questions about a game's design must also acknowledge that key technical features or decisions can have a dramatic impact on the psychological actions or reactions of players (which resonates with the concerns of social scientific approaches). Granted, Zagal never claims these categories to be absolute or self-contained. Rather, these categories are natural byproducts of the interdisciplinary nature of current game studies, and should function more as starting points for new research to emerge rather than over-determined end-points that game scholarship must adhere to.[7]

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[6] To clarify, all of these approaches reject over-simplified ludology-versus-narratology binaries. Instead, each of these approaches examine how the interrelation between rules and player experiences operate in conjunction with a larger disciplinary aim (such as the emphasis on meaning-making within Humanistic approaches).

[7] While Zagal never claims these categories to be absolute, I do feel as though he undermines the ability for educationally-focused game scholarship to bridge the perceived gaps between these three approaches. His

As opposed to simply reinforcing or lambasting this three-part approach to game studies, I want to offer a new framework that cuts across these categorical divisions in order to better articulate the pedagogical nature of games, gaming experiences, and the social relations that shape gaming communities. Put differently, I am arguing that focusing on the learning practices within and around games can offer a new discourse for examining the complex overlap between social scientific, humanistic, and technological concerns surrounding video games. I want to begin by focusing on authors who discuss the unique structural features of games and their capacity to simulate or model dynamic systems in real-time. This focus will not only provide a starting point for sifting through the scholarly field of game studies, it will begin to shed light on the underlying role that pedagogy plays when discussing the educational and critical integrity of game studies.[8]

Ian Bogost, a game designer and critic, and his theory of "procedural rhetoric" offers a framework for understanding *how* video games make critical arguments about the culture they emerge from. For Bogost, video games operate on a basis of proceduralism, meaning that they "rely primarily on computational rules to produce their artistic meaning" (*How* 13). Hence, the "procedure" of proceduralism lies in the algorithmic structuring of a video game's programming; any action that occurs in a game is contingent upon the algorithmic code-based processes that comprise the rules and representational elements of a game. However, video games are not simply self-contained rulesets seeing as they also rely on player participation in order to

subsequent research on game-based literacy, the use of games to induct students into communities of practice, and even the difficulties of integrating games into traditional classroom settings all provide productive insights into the educational value of games but fails to explicitly address how these situations demonstrate the necessary overlap between social scientific, humanistic, and design-focused approaches.

[8] By "educational and critical integrity," I mean approaches to game studies that straddle an awareness of how games operate as unique outlets for cultural critique and approaches that seek to integrate video games into traditional educational settings. As I will eventually demonstrate, an emphasis on pedagogy can provide the necessary interpretive framework for addressing both of these concerns.

function. This necessary incorporation of player activity into the procedural nature of games allows Bogost to couple his theory of proceduralism with a discourse of rhetoric, argumentation, and persuasion. In other words, video games must successfully persuade their players to act in certain ways if they are to incite their participation in a virtual world. The concept of "procedural rhetoric," then, is "a general name for the practice of authoring arguments through processes" and these arguments "are made not through the construction of words or images, but through the authorship of rules of behavior, the construction of dynamic models" (*Rhetoric* 125). It is precisely these models that have the power to expose "specific patterns of cultural value," meaning that video games can expose and even manipulate the ideological functioning of larger systems by modeling the processes that comprise these systems in specific ways (*Persuasive*). Put differently, games elicit user participation in order to demonstrate the habits, tendencies, and underlying patterns of cultural value that govern the functioning of abstract systems.

Bogost's work is important insofar as it identifies a key structural feature of games—namely, the ability to simulate models and abstract systems via the enactment of algorithmic-based processes—without resorting to an either/or distinction between rules and symbolic elements. In games, symbolic features (such as narrative or representations of real-world issues) work together with rules, which structure player actions, in order to simulate the functioning of larger systems with the intention of exposing the ideological features thereof. This appeal to video games' capacity to model systems through algorithmic processes is echoed by other scholars who are interested in how games are able to cultivate new psychological or physical actions in their players for the sake of critiquing contemporary socio-cultural paradigms. Alexander Galloway, for instance, argues that playing video games acts as an allegory for navigating the numerous systems and information that comprise modern life; learning how to

navigate the virtual landscapes of *World of Warcraft* using a heads-up display that overlays vast amounts of quantifiable visual information onto this gamespace is an allegory for contemporary networked culture, which attempts to organize space around quantifiable and algorithmically-processed data in real time (Galloway, *Gaming*). Hence, *World of Warcraft* can model dynamic systems that operate as distillations of the socio-cultural logic of networked societies.

Graeme Kirkpatrick shares Bogost and Galloway's concerns about games' ability to expose the ideological biases of abstract systems but he takes a more socio-historical approach to these issues. Rather than simply focusing on how games operate today, Kirkpatrick places video games within a much longer lineage of cultural and economic changes brought about by the rapid expansion of information technologies from the 1960s onwards; the intellectual flexibility required to play games is an outgrowth of the intellectual flexibility required to take on new forms of knowledge-based work within information economies, economies which are premised upon the same digital technologies that power video games. Hence, the very form of video games are tethered to the socio-economic paradigms that spurred their creation and games embody the ideological mindsets that accompany these new paradigms (which builds upon Galloway's allegorical argument and Bogost's theory of procedural rhetoric).

While these authors focus on how video games operate through the simulation of dynamic systems in order to present a critique of real-world events or issues, other scholars take a more materialist approach to thinking about the systems that comprise video games themselves. In their post-Marxist reading of the history of video game development from the 1960s onwards, Nick Dyer-Withefrod and Greig de Petuer argue that "virtual games are a direct offshoot of their society's main technology of production. From their origins in nuclear-age simulations, video games have sprung from the machine system central to postwar capital's power and profit—the

computer" (*Games* xviii-xix). In this sense, the systems that comprise video games are the literal digital technologies that fostered the rise of Western military and commercial superiority from the mid-twentieth century onwards. Hence, the algorithmic systems that comprise any game are inseparable from the socio-economic systems that sustain contemporary globalist paradigms. While not as overly militaristic in its telos as Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, others have taken up a materialist approach to examine the real-world logistics that sustain the video game industry, noting how game development exists as a complex amalgamation of transnational networks of software development, region-specific litigation, and manual labor (Nichols, "Who Plays"; Kerr, "Space Wars"). Although these logistically- and legally-focused approaches to studying the game industry lack the incisive ideological critique offered by Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, they demonstrate equally-important issues that may be overlooked in favor of the aesthetic experience of gameplay.

When taken into consideration with one another, we can see how the ideas of these authors illustrate the complexity of approaching games through a discourse of systems. On the one hand, video games are literal technological systems that emerge as an outgrowth in global networks of capitalist production/exchange, and are always embedded in the material circumstances surrounding their development. On the other hand, video games are capable of modeling or simulating abstract systems in order to identifying the ideological functioning therein. Regardless of the specific application, a discourse of systems is important insofar as it allows us to challenge easy divides between the internal functioning of video games and the external conditions in which they are created or played. In short, a systems-based approach to video games abandons false divides between ludology and narratology in order to better complicate and contextualize the unique opportunities for cultural critique offered by games, the

experiences they elicit within players, and the organizations that create them. Before discussing how a systems-centric examination of video games brings to light certain key pedagogical features of games, though, it is important to clarify the potential risks that one runs when framing the critical value of video games through a discourse of systems. At first glance, these authors seem to be underhandedly reinforcing a ludological approach—that is, simply substituting "rules" for "systems" when discussing where the critical value of video games lie. As Miguel Sicart notes, the danger of a Bogost-ian emphasis of proceduralism runs the risk of objectifying and over-determining the experiences of players. To argue that the critical stance of video games lies in systems that are simulated through algorithmic processes means that the goal of the player is simply to complete or enact that critical argument that is programmed into a video game (Sicart, "Against"). Hence, a procedural approach to games can potentially instrumentalize the player insofar as the player (along with her own subjective experiences of gameplay) is simply a necessary instrument that is required to enact the argument that is always-already hibernating within the systems that comprise a given game. This danger of over-determination extends to other authors who take a systems-based approach to game studies. In the case of Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, aligning video games with global capitalist paradigms that sustain Western domination runs the risk of placing all games within an oppression/rebellion binary. In other words, characterizing video games as being embedded within the same technological and socio-economic systems that give way to Western commercial or militaristic domination means that all games must speak to their status as either reinforcing an oppressive paradigm or rebelling against it. While many games do have a tenuous relationship with larger systems of commercial or military domination—the overwhelming of popularity of military shooters, for instance, reflects

this—tasking all games with either supporting or rebelling against globalist paradigms severely limits the interpretive potential of games and cultural relevance of gaming communities.

To clarify, I believe Sicart's worries about over-determining the cultural significance of games or their impact on players via a systems-based discourse are valid, and it is important to continually reflect upon our own approaches for the sake of identifying any methodological biases. However, I feel as though the benefits of these approaches outweigh the risks, seeing as these authors provide the necessary terminologies for linking the internal structure of games to their external conditions. For the purposes of my own examination, systems-based approaches allow me to offer an interpretation that cuts across the three categorical divisions mentioned by Zagal by highlighting the implicit role of pedagogy in this body of scholarship. The authors I have just mentioned operate under the assumption that video games have the unique ability to channel the actions of players by responding to their input in real time. That is to say, a unique feature of video games is not simply the ability to model dynamic systems but, furthermore, to provide feedback through these systems in order to cultivate player actions in deliberate ways. Bogost himself echoes this sentiment when discussing the process of "authoring arguments through processes;" video games must successfully persuade their players to act in certain ways if they are to incite their participation in a virtual world. This, in turn, means that video games can implicitly or explicitly teach their players what actions are permitted or valued in a virtual world via real-time feedback, narrative context, or other types of evaluation mechanisms. Hence, the relationship between player and game is a pedagogical one.[9] For those interested in video

[9] To clarify, my notion of "pedagogy" is simply the ability to cultivate an imperative to act or respond on the part of a game player. As I will demonstrate in my ensuing chapters, taking a broad approach to what constitutes a pedagogical relationship between player and game (or even player and player) will allow me to demonstrate the complexity, nuance, and larger ideological significance of the teaching strategies deployed in games or gaming communities. In other words, I would like to keep my definition of pedagogy relatively flexible in order to demonstrate how a discourse of pedagogy can provide useful interpretive frameworks for analyzing games and the educational value thereof.

games' capacity to engage in cultural critique—which is expressed by Bogost and Galloway—the pedagogical nature of gameplay experiences teaches players how to sustain the ideological functioning of larger systems in order to demonstrate the tendencies, habits, or biases of these models.[10] For those interested in how video games function as an extension of dominant socio-economic paradigms—as argued by Dyer-Witheford, de Peuter, and Kirkpatrick—games are capable of teaching players how to rationalize and participate in a specific socio-economic logic that is valued today (see also Grimes and Feenberg, "Rationalizing"). Hence, focusing on the systems that comprise video games entails focusing on whether these systems succeed or fail in properly teaching their players.

As we can already see, understanding video games as a collection of dynamic systems allows us to cut across the disciplinary divisions initially discussed by Zagal. More specifically, an attention to the pedagogical nature of games or gameplay experiences—that is, the ability for these dynamic systems to teach players how to act in a virtual gamespace—allows us to see the common foundation shared between humanistic, social scientific, and design-oriented game scholarship insofar as all three of these fields necessarily respond to the teaching capacities of games. In this sense, the pedagogical features of games are inseparable from the critical elements; we cannot think of the critical value of games independent of their ability to instruct players how to navigate the numerous dynamic systems that comprise their very form. This emphasis on the pedagogical nature the player-to-game connection is often turned outwards in the body of scholarship I have just examined, meaning that the pedagogical elements of games are used to further explore the circumstances surrounding games and gaming communities. Put differently, Bogost and others are concerned with how the implicit teaching strategies of games

[10] As I will discuss in greater detail during the following chapter, this ability to pedagogically cultivate psychological and physical habits within players is precisely what allows video games to participate in the types of critique put forth by Bogost and his peers.

can be harnessed to better understand the external social, historical, and even ideological conditions that influence the creation and reception of games. Now, I would like to turn my attention to research that resonates with a systems-based approach to games while focusing primarily on the internal psychological impact of gameplay experiences. While many of the scholars in the following section approach video games from more institutional educational perspectives, I will eventually demonstrate how this field of research operates upon the same pedagogical features of games that I have just highlighted.

1.2 LITERACY, EPISTEMOLOGY, AND GAMEPLAY

Scholars such as James Paul Gee resonate with a systems-based approach to video games and explicitly detail the pedagogical connection between a player and a game. However, Gee and his peers are more focused on how the pedagogical nature of gameplay experiences provides the foundation for rethinking what constitutes digital literacy and, furthermore, how this revised notion of literacy shapes the epistemological process of self-representation in virtual spaces. In other words, rather than focus on how video games can be used to turn a critical eye outwards and critique the conceptual functioning of abstract concepts or systems that surround virtual gamespaces, these scholars focus on the internal, psychological impact that video games can have on the individuals who exist within these systems. Gee begins unpacking the relationship between games and their psychological or epistemological qualities through a discourse of literacy and "semiotic domains." A semiotic domain is "any set of practices that recruits one or more modalities (e.g., oral or written language, images, equations, symbols, sounds, gestures, graphs, artifacts, and so forth) to communicate distinctive types of meanings" (*What Video*

Games 19). To be literate within a semiotic domain does not mean one is simply capable of "decoding" the intended meaning of a specific image or text. Instead, Gee's notion of literacy "requires people to be able to participate in—or at least understand—certain sorts of *social practices*" that help comprise a given semiotic domain (*What Video Games* 18; emphasis added). Literacy entails the capacity to identify and, more importantly, engage in the practices that constitute the communities which sustain a given semiotic domain. This particular interpretation of literacy is important in two ways. First, literacy is viewed as a fundamentally *participatory* undertaking, meaning that to be literate is to be able to engage with and intervene in the social practices that comprise a given community's goals, values, and/or worldview. Second, Gee's notion of literacy-as-participation entails that literacy is always *situated*; because literacy is always tethered to the discursive practices of a community, literacy can never be divorced from the material and social circumstances within a community-at-hand (even if said community is virtual in nature).

The situated and participatory aspects of Gee's theory of literacy align with his argument regarding the psychological development of video game players. While observing a young child play *Pikmin* (a real-time strategy game for the Nintendo GameCube), he notes how this game "recruits from our six-year-old a complex identity composed of various related traits. The game encourages him to think of himself as an active problem solver […] one who, in fact, does not see mistakes as errors but as opportunities for reflection and learning." (*What Video Games* 36). By learning how to play the game effectively, the young player becomes literate in the semiotic domain of *Pikmin*, becoming an active participant in the community of the game.[11] However,

[11] What constitutes a community in a video game is rather dynamic. While playing *Pikmin*, the player is part of the virtual community within the game; that is, she/he sees herself as an inhabitant of *Pikmin's* fictional world. However, the player is also part of the larger community surrounding this game, meaning she/he sees herself as someone who shares the same enthusiasm for the game as other *Pikmin* players. Hence, the use of the term

acquiring literacy within *Pikmin* has a direct effect on the type of identity the player associates with herself/himself: becoming literate within the game incites a critical self-reflection, one where the player sees herself/himself within a particular subject position (i.e. a problem solver who has a particular relationship to the experience of failure). For Gee, this process of subjectivity formation, as spurred by participatory and situated literacy, can be the most productive educational benefit of video games because "the identity that *Pikmin* recruits relates rather well to the sort of identity a learner is called on to assume in the best active science learning in schools and other sites" (*What Video Games* 37).[12] Hence, it is not only the specific skills taught by video games (i.e. resource management or hand-eye coordination) but the critical self-reflection of the subject position one inhabits while playing a video game which is most important for educators.

In aligning gameplay experiences with a discourse of literacy, Gee underscores the pedagogical relationship between a player and a game; learning how to respond to the feedback offered by a game's systems entails becoming "literate" in the semiotic domain of a virtual gamespace. Eric Zimmerman's theory of "gaming literacy" further unpacks the epistemological connection between the dynamic systems of a video game and the process of literacy acquisition within video games. Zimmerman sees video games as a collection of interrelated systems whose design channels the agency of players in deliberate ways (Zimmerman, "Gaming"). Hence, focusing on the design of a game's systems allows us to see how game developers can create the

community when discussing the discursive practices video games can refer to both inter-game (interactions within a game's virtual world) and intra-game (interactions with the real-world community surrounding a game) events.

[12] This relationship between literacy and subjectivity builds upon Gee's early work on discourse theory. According to Gee, a capital-D Discourse is the combination of language and other social practices used to sustain a given worldview shared by a particular community. Furthermore, every Discourse gives rise to a specific identity that is tethered to a given worldview. This connection between identity and discursive practices reveals how "[i]t is in and through Discourse that we make clear to ourselves and others *who* we are" (*Social Linguistics* 128-129; original emphasis).

conditions for play and the enactment of personal agency. However, gaming literacy is not necessarily about understanding the learning practices of individual video games. Instead, gaming literacy explores "how game playing and game design can be seen as models for learning and action in the real world. It asks, in other words, not *What does gaming look like?* But instead: *What does the world look like from the point of view of gaming?*" (24). Video games do not necessarily teach us about the content of specific systems (although, this can certainly be one effect of gameplay). Instead, video games teach us how to view the world as a collection of systems. Hence, "gaming literacy" is an epistemological lens forged from gameplay experiences, which allows us to take up new ways of viewing the world around us. Despite approaching games through a design-based discourse (which often aligns with industry- or engineering-focused game scholarship) Zimmerman offers a productive framework for refining Gee's theories without over-emphasizing or over-literalizing the role of identity formation.[13]

This interrelation between literacy acquisition and the epistemological impact thereof is further reinforced by Kurt Squire's experiences integrating video games into real-world classroom environments. As Squire argues, video games "are uniquely organized for a *functional* epistemology, where one learns through doing, through performance. Cognition in digital worlds is thoroughly mediated by players' capacity for action" (Squire, "From Content" 22). Squire's experiences designing pre-collegiate courses around *Civilization III*—a turn-based strategy game wherein players govern a civilization from the early modern period up through today—further clarifies how, exactly, the functional epistemology of a game is tethered to the actions that are

[13] By this, I mean Gee occasionally idealizes the role of identity formation in video games, meaning he focuses on the internal process by which game players may begin to think about themselves differently as well as the personal connection that players share with their virtual avatars. Over-relying on the psychological process of self-representation is troublesome from a methodological standpoint (meaning, it can be difficult to get an authentic narration from players regarding how they view themselves while playing games). The push towards epistemology offers a more coherent object-of-examination—insofar as we can focus on the ways of thinking fostered by games as opposed to speculating about the personal impressions of other players—and, in my opinion, more productive connection to issues surrounding literacy.

permitted or denied by the design of a game's systems (Squire et al.). According to Squire, *Civilization III* operates on upon a highly materialist interpretation of history, meaning that historical events are premised upon the material allocation, utilization, and dispute over natural resources. Hence, the functional epistemology offered by this game views history as a series of conflicts surrounding natural resources. In learning how to play this game, students implicitly learned what this materialist epistemology values and, furthermore, were able to take up a new worldview that shaped how they viewed historical events within the game and in the real world. Students were then able to compare their experiences of playing *Civ III* (and the accompanying epistemological worldview this game fosters) with their own previous experiences surrounding historical instruction; by engaging with and reflecting upon the epistemology of *Civ III*, students were able to critique standardized historical instruction that underhandedly supports the myth of Western Superiority, glosses over of the importance of transnational trade, and deemphasizes the militaristic underpinnings of colonialism. In this sense, students did not necessarily take up a Gee-ian emphasis on identity formation—meaning, they did not think as though they were really acting as "world leaders" or "military generals" or even generalized "problem solvers" while playing *Civ III*, nor did they compare these potential identities to the subject position of "students" in standard classroom environments.[14] Instead, these students used the materialist epistemology of *Civ III* to experience virtual historical events from a different perspective that was radically different from their previous experiences with history and historical education. Hence, the experience of interacting with the dynamic systems of *Civ III* provided the necessary

[14] This is not to say that students were personally unaffected by their gameplay experiences seeing as several students in Squire's classes were able to create long-term professional goals based on their interest in the themes of *Civ III*, such as international relations (Squire et al. 243). While this direct impact on identity formation may resonate with Gee's theories, Squire is more interested in how students use their video games to reflect upon their own lived experiences (and vice versa). In other words, Squire acknowledges how personal experiences shape and are shaped by video games but he de-emphasizes a discourse of identity formation or the psychological process of inhabiting new subject positions.

epistemological alternative to standardized historical education, which was then used to reflect upon their own relationship to historical instruction.

Squire's research demonstrates how a theory gaming literacy can enact itself in real-world educational scenarios. Although *Civ III* does not attempt to offer a realistic depiction of history—while being a complex game, it necessarily over-simplifies the minutiae of many real-world logistics—the design of its in-game systems creates the conditions for players to participate in the game's underlying materialist epistemology. Becoming "literate" in *Civ III*'s approach to history allows students to see the world through a new lens, one which can challenge traditional teaching methods as well as the epistemologies that these own practices deliberately or incidentally reinforce (see also Shaffer, "Epistemic Games").[15] This deployment of gaming literacy is not unique to traditional educational institutions, though, as other scholars have examined how these same issues emerge in gaming communities beyond traditional educational institutions. Constance Steinkuehler's research on massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) communities, for instance, demonstrates how virtual gamespaces offer the foundation for highly specialized player-to-player discursive interactions. In her work with Sean Duncan, Steinkuehler observes how *World of Warcraft* players empirically test different combinations of combat strategies and character equipment for optimum efficiency while, at the same time, debate the validity of their testing methods with other players (Steinkuehler and Duncan, "Scientific"). Through performing a variety of discursive actions—experimenting with different equipment configurations in-game, communicating with other players via in-game text

[15] David Shaffer's notion of "epistemic games" resonates with the same themes discussed by Zimmerman and Squire. In short, Shaffer uses video games and role-playing scenarios to introduce young students to highly-specialized professional fields (such as city planning). As with Squire, Shaffer's research does not attempt to make students feel as though they are "acting like" a city planner or other professional identity. Rather, Shaffer uses games as a way to diversify, multiply, and complicate the epistemological worldviews that students are able to take up in educational settings; by having students familiarize themselves with multiple epistemologies at the same time, they can gain a better understanding of the complexity underlying real-world situations.

or online message boards, and contextualizing the overall efficiency or appropriateness of different combat strategies—*WoW* players took up an epistemological mindset founded upon "scientific habits of mind" which is an "evaluative disposition" that "treats knowledge as an open-ended process of evaluation and argument of hypotheses about whether and how 'algorithms' govern natural phenomena." (533). Becoming literate in *WoW* entailed learning how to explore, discuss and debate the particularities of its mechanics resulting in a situation where players take an evaluative, relative, and non-determinate relationship towards "truth" even though they do not explicitly consider themselves scientists nor do they categorize their actions as scientific in nature.[16] While the educational value of this research may not be as direct as Squire's, insofar as these findings do not challenge institutional teaching practices, this work is important insofar as it reinforces the validity of examining games and game-based literacy practices as they operate in a variety of different settings. To understand how literacy functions in games, scholars need to temper the inclination to talk about games solely in traditional educational environments and examine how game players themselves describe their actions or experiences. Furthermore, this research also demonstrates how the pedagogical nature of player-to-game interactions can fundamentally structure player-to-player social relations within gaming communities.

Despite Steinkuehler's comprehensive research, it is important to recognize that not all games offer the necessary conditions for progressive alternative epistemological viewpoints. Quite the opposite, as some scholars research how the literacy practices of games and gaming communities can reinforce and even magnify dominant cultural norms and real-world biases. In

[16] Steinkuehler has also researched how gameplay experiences can cultivate epistemologies that extend beyond a scientific or quantitatively-focused mindset. This research includes the role of critical ethical reasoning in long-form role-playing games and the acquisition of specialized discourses within expert communities of practice (Steinkuehler and Simkins, "Critical"; Steinkuehler, "Massively").

looking at the player-influenced economies of MMORPGs, Edward Castronova notes how virtual currencies and value of digital objects abide by many real-world economic principles (such as supply-and-demand models of price determination for digital goods) (Castronova, "On Virtual"). This is not necessarily negative, though, as Castronova argues that we can examine player-influenced virtual economies to get a better sense of how individuals psychologically respond to constantly shifting market forces and furthermore, how economic practices often associated with material goods (such as copyright ownership) adapt to virtual environments and digital products (see also Nelson, "Virtual Property"). While the extension of real-world economic principles into virtual gamespaces demonstrates a slightly more bureaucratic (but not entirely unproductive) version of the epistemological impact underlying gameplay, other instances of real-world biases shaping games or gaming communities can be far more regressive in nature. Adrienne Shaw, for instance, examines the in-game actions and self-reflections of LGBT video game players to better understand how diversity factors into the playing habits and larger issues of self-representation within virtual spaces (Shaw, *Gaming*). In doing so, she brings to light how many standard depictions of diversity within gamespaces (i.e., the depiction of LGBT characters or issues) severely limits the intersectionality of identity and runs the risk of essentializing marginal/minority demographics. Looking at how marginal/minority players learn to interact with others through overly-simplified lenses of identity representation can help us derive new ways of fostering diversity in gamespace without regressing into a form of identity politics that has more in common with niche marketing than critical self-reflection. In short, the epistemological impact of literacy acquisition within games can range from progressive to mundane to regressive, and gaming communities are certainly not immune from real-world

ideological baggage despite popular discourses that try to characterize games as bastions for escapism or unfettered identity formation (Yee, *Proteus*).[17]

The scholars I have examined in this relatively brief section all implicitly respond to the pedagogical nature of video games insofar as they demonstrate how the real-time feedback capacities of video games offer the necessary experiences and conditions for literacy acquisition to emerge. In learning how to play a game, a player must learn how to see this virtual world as a series of interconnected, dynamic systems (i.e., the fictional narrative of the game, its mechanics, etc.). By learning how to navigate these systems—meaning, by participating in the pedagogical relationship in which these systems offer real-time feedback to the player in order to channel her actions in particular ways—the player becomes literate in a new epistemology that can shape her perceptions within or beyond a given gamespace. Now, I would like to clarify the subtle differences between these authors and those who emphasize how games can operate as vehicles for cultural or ideological critique before discussing the commonalities between these methodologies. While Bogost and others focus on how the pedagogical strategies of games help elicit participation on the part of players which, in turn, helps model dynamic systems and expose the ideological functioning therein, Gee and his peers emphasize how the pedagogical connection between player and game (or even player and player) can fundamentally shape the epistemological worldviews of individuals and virtual communities. Put differently, scholars that emphasize the cultural critique offered by games focus their attention on how the teaching strategies of games operate as an extension of dominant ideological paradigms, paradigms whose

[17] Nick Yee examines how many in-game activities mirror real-world occupational or bureaucratic obligations (such as the tedious minutia of managing resource allocations in MMORPGs). Similar to Castronova, Yee identifies how real-world economic or labor-related practices enact themselves in gamespaces that are typically seen as territories for escaping the stress of real-world obligations. However, Yee is also applicable to the research done by Shaw and others insofar as he challenges the popular depictions of "games as escape" by identifying how real-world biases (be it about the nature of labor, gender relations, or otherwise) creep into gamespaces.

logic is codified in numerous systems that structure a video game. Conversely, scholars who emphasize the epistemological impact of gameplay focus on how the process of literacy acquisition within virtual gamespaces can radically shape how players see the world, their position therein, and their relationship to others.

To clarify, I am not arguing that these two approaches abide by the same type of categorical divisions expressed by Zagal, seeing as the barriers between these methodological differences begin to break down the more we prod them. In the case of Squire's experiences with *Civ III*, we can say that the subject positions students inhabit while interacting with the epistemology of this game are themselves cultural critiques of dominant teaching methods surrounding historical instruction (i.e., by learning how to play *Civ III*, students take up a worldview that challenges traditional teaching methods while also inhabiting a radically different type of subject position that pushes back on the ideal, passive "student" in educational environments). Instead, I am identifying how these two general approaches respond to the pedagogical nature of video games and their ability to cultivate new psychological or physical actions in their players. In other words, those interested in video games' critical capacities and those interested in game-based theories of literacy both assume that video games necessarily operate through a pedagogical relationship with their players.

Identifying how pedagogy operates as a common foundation for these different approaches to video games allows me to arrive at the general thesis that will preface, inform, and guide all subsequent examinations in this project while also allowing me to position my research within the field of Rhetoric and Composition. Put simply, *video games operate at the intersection of digital literacy acquisition and a systems-based approach to cultural critiqu*e. With regards to digital literacy acquisition, learning how to play a game entails learning how to

become literate within a given semiotic domain or functional epistemology, which are comprised of both technical features (gameplay mechanics and systems, narrative elements, etc.) as well as larger discursive elements (the norms or values of a virtual community, etc.). However, games are also products of specific historical moments, socio-cultural conditions, and ideological paradigms; the systems that comprise a video game are themselves extensions of the larger external circumstances on both a literal level (meaning, these technological systems are outgrowths of contemporary socio-economic paradigms) and metaphorical level (meaning, the systems of a game are encoded with cultural values). Hence, the process of becoming "literate" within a game—meaning, the process of engaging in the pedagogical strategies that games use to teach players how to act in a virtual gamespace—necessarily entails that players participate in the larger ideological paradigms that surround, inform, and are even critiqued by video games. Ultimately, becoming literate in the internal logic of a video game means becoming literate in the external cultural logics and ideologies that structure a game, its virtual spaces, and the communities that reside therein.

The pedagogical relationship between player and game operates an integral component for several different types of game-based scholarship and concerns, be they further exploration into ideological analysis, new theorizations regarding the impact of digital technologies on traditional educational institutions, or novel forms of collective identity formation in virtual spaces. In much the same way that my initial conversation of systems allowed me to transcend easy categorical divisions between humanistic, social scientific, and design-based approaches to video games studies, a discourse of pedagogy and emphasis on the pedagogical strategies that structure gameplay experiences allow me to challenge the boundaries that might separate video game scholarship that takes an outward-looking approach (i.e., focusing on how games exist in

dialogue with their external historical circumstances) versus an inward-looking approach (i.e., focusing on how games cultivate new habits within players while allowing for new interpersonal relations to emerge in virtual spaces). More specifically, examining the role of pedagogy in current video game scholarship allows me to view games as valuable sites of new digital literacy practices while also being conscious of the larger cultural conditions and logics that inform the development or reception of these practices in contemporary societies. In this sense, the field of Rhetoric and Composition is well-suited to undertake this task of challenging supposed divisions between literacy-focused research and critical cultural analysis, seeing as the disciplinary history of Rhet/Comp is a history of how educators contextualize literacy instruction amid a complex nexus of institutional and socio-cultural concerns. In the following section, I would like to offer a brief survey of how Rhet/Comp scholarship has approached the concept of digital literacy in order to demonstrate how this research aligns with my own argument regarding video games.

1.3 THEORIZING WHAT CONSTITUTES DIGITAL LITERACY

Since the introduction of readily accessible computing technologies over the past three decades, educators have explored how computers might be integrated into writing-based curricula and questioned what, exactly, constitutes "literacy" when discussing digital technology use in educational and professional environments. Early compositionists were skeptical of institutional policies that attempted to endow students with a remedial sense of computer- or digital-based literacy, meaning a notion of literacy that relied on the acquisition of necessary skills for successfully using proprietary software in its intended ways. Defining computer literacy in terms of decontextualized skill-based proficiency overlooks institutional or socio-economic obstacles

that prevent a wide range of individuals from accessing new technologies while also downplaying the role of commercial interest when dictating technology use in educational environments (Grabill, "Utopic"; Morgan, "Access"). In contrast to a skill-based notion of computer literacy, scholars sought new ways of discussing digital technology use with a critical awareness of surrounding socio-cultural and economic circumstances that condition technological development and use. These approaches include a reconceptualization of the term "access" to account for how individuals can actively intervene in technologically-mediated practices to better account for the experiences of marginal or minority users (Banks, *Race*), a turn towards rhetorical theory to account for the larger economic and legal paradigms surrounding technology use and development (Porter, "Rhetoric"), and explorations into how the accessibility of digital media has created new opportunities for transnational virtual spaces (Hawisher et al, "Globalism").

While it is impossible to summarize the entire breadth of computer- of digitally-focused literacy scholarship within Rhet/Comp during this relatively short section, Stuart Selber's theory of multiliteracies offers a three-part schema that accounts for the theoretical concerns of scholars who reject overly-simplified, skill-based notions of computer literacy while also providing a pragmatic framework for integrating digital technologies into pre-existent curricula.[18] As Selber

[18] Some scholars have expressed concern over emphasizing a discourse of "literacy" when discussing computers or digital technologies seeing as this language is wrapped up in traditional notions of textuality and absolute divisions between a literate vs illiterate student. However, I am hesitant to completely abandon or de-emphasize a language of literacy when discussing digital technologies for several reasons. First, pragmatically speaking, many Rhet/Comp programs are housed within English departments today and the longer lineage of English studies has been intimately connected with questions of texts. By extension, traditional notions of literacy have revolved around the ability to read and produce texts. While I agree that we should avoid overly-remedial notions of literacy as merely the ability to compose grammatically-correct sentences in the written word, larger questions surrounding the socio-cultural value of textual analysis (i.e., asking what is the relationship between texts and culture or the generative potential of textual production) has been the hallmark of contemporary English studies and, I feel, are perfectly applicable to the types of critical digital literacy supported by the likes of Selber, Banks, and others. That is to say, the interrelation between literacy and textuality is already codified in the institutional make-up of many English departments (along with the university-wide writing requirements that are often managed by English programs) so it seems reasonable to continue to build upon and refine this

argues, computer-based literacy is not a singular goal but, rather, a combination of different methodological approaches to technology use that work in tandem with one another. These approaches include functional literacy, critical literacy, and rhetorical literacy. Functional literacy describes the literal ability to successfully use specific technologies. While this emphasis on functional literacy does rely on some notion of skill-based instruction, Selber is quick to avoid using tool-based metaphors that might implicitly frame technologies as politically neutral or separate from socio-cultural circumstances (Selber 36). In short, functional literacy attempts to endow students with the ability to see technologies as outlets for expanding personal agency and addressing contemporary issues without over-idealizing these technologies or separating them from real-world contexts. Critical literacy entails being able to see computers (or digital technologies in general) as "cultural artifacts" that are shaped by human activities and pre-existent power structures (81). Critically literate technology users are capable of questioning and interrogating the ideological assumptions or power relations that are inherent to technology use or development. Lastly, rhetorical literacy denotes the ability to understand the rhetorical dimensions of technology—that is, how technology channels the actions of users in particular ways—as well as the ability to actively participate in the co-creation of new technologies or technologically-mediated texts. Rhetorical literate students, then, are able to act as "reflective producers" of technology insofar as they can balance both functional and critical literacy in order

relationship as opposed to introducing a brand new term. Second, questions of literacy and writing instruction have always been tethered to larger questions surrounding institutionality, the allocation of material resources, and the ideological underpinnings of educational policy (Horner, *Terms*; Gilyard, *True*). We cannot deny that while digital technologies are becoming more readily available, there is still an unavoidable financial component to discussing the integration of computing technologies into educational environments or even the ability for students themselves to purchase the necessary equipment for digital-based projects. Undermining a discourse of literacy, then, might unintentionally veer away from necessary real-world questions surrounding adequate resources and proper institutional support for technology-based initiatives. This is not to say that criticisms of a literacy-based discourse are invalid or that there is no need to acknowledge the rhetorical dimensions of computer use. Quite the opposite, as Selber's notion of rhetorical literacy demonstrates how these two discourses can coincide in productive ways. I am simply arguing that a discourse of literacy can operate as a more productive point-of-access into questions regarding digital technologies, given the current institutional infrastructures that surround many writing programs.

to produce texts that actively intervene in larger social or ideological issues surrounding technology use (135).

While Selber's notion of multiliteracies is not the final word on how educators should approach the integration of digital technologies into writing-based curricula, he productively identifies how any theory of computer- or digital technology-based literacy should account for the capacity to navigate, interpret, and produce digital technologies. Put differently, Selber provides a multifaceted framework that redefines digital literacy as the ability to use technology (i.e., being able to operate technologies in order to negotiate real-world situations or problems), the ability to "read" technology (i.e., being able to identify the ideological underpinnings of new technologies or their deployment in real-world scenarios), and the ability to "write" technology (i.e., the ability to actively produce new technologies or technologically-mediated texts for the sake of participating in the process of meaning making).

This notion of multiliteracies resonates with my own thesis regarding the interrelation between literacy acquisition and cultural critique found in video games. Becoming literate in a video game does not simply entail learning the rules and goals (which would constitute a form of functional literacy, in Selber's terms). Becoming literate in a game can also include learning how to actively participate in the discursive actions of a given community that are used to create meaning in virtual gamespaces (which exemplifies a particular notion of rhetorical literacy) while being able to take up, and even critique, an epistemological worldview that is conditioned by the external circumstances surrounding a game (which demonstrates a form of critical literacy).[19] In other words, the process of learning how to play a video game holds the potential

[19] While I am invested in the integrity of video games, I realize that not all games are capable of deploying this progressive notion of digital literacy acquisition or the cultural value thereof. Games, like any other popular medium, range from the insightful to the entertaining-yet-critically-mundane. In other words, some games lend themselves to more thoughtful critique than others; the lessons learned from playing *Pac-Man* are radically

for enacting all three components of Selber's multiliteracies. This is not to say that there is a complete one-to-one correlation between Selber's ideas and interpretive framework that I will be applying to video games in the following chapters. Instead, I am simply identifying how contemporary concerns in digitally-focused Rhet/Comp scholarship dovetails with the recurrent themes I have identified in video game scholarship. Consequently, the field of Rhet/Comp is perfectly primed for examining the pedagogical nature of video games due to concerns surrounding the impact of integrating computer-based technologies into the writing classroom from both institutional and ideological perspectives.

In the penultimate section of this chapter, I will investigate how Rhet/Comp instructors have begun to integrate video games into their writing classrooms. The goal of this upcoming section will be to demonstrate how instructors have navigated real-world obstacles when creating writing courses around games while also identifying moments where using video games in composition classrooms illustrates the same claims and concerns of digitally-focused literacy scholars. Although I am hesitant to critique the teaching experiences of others who are equally invested in, and enthusiastic about, the educational value of video games, I will also demonstrate how current game-based composition scholarship occasionally over-emphasizes the functional and rhetorical qualities of games while downplaying the potential for a gameplay experiences to cultivate the sort of culturally-informed critical literacy described by Selber. In doing so, my aim is to acknowledge and build upon the success of game-based teaching practices rather than unfairly chastising the work of these authors. To begin, I want to discuss how writing-focused

different from what Squire's students learned by playing *Civ III*. Hence, my connection between video games and the larger ideas expressed by Selber and others is a way to demonstrate the *benefits* and *potential* of applying these interpretive frameworks to games or gaming communities (rather than simply creating blanket statements that claim all games successfully abide by these principles).

scholars have examined the formal features of video games before discussing how games can be used to re-think commonplace terms in writing instruction.

1.4 USING GAMES IN THE WRITING CLASSROOM

Many new media theorists have already examined how multimodal and digital media can reveal our tacit assumptions regarding reading, writing, and textuality in institutional environments. As both Colin Brooke and N. Katherine Hayles argue, the dynamic nature of digital texts challenges traditional assumptions regarding the supposed stability of aesthetic objects or cultural artifacts (Brooke, *Lingua*; Hayles, *Writing*). Digital texts can actively respond to the creative interpretive capacities of readers, which means the process of reading and writing exists in constant flux where neither reader nor text is the ultimate source of definitive symbolic significance or stability.[20] Video games are no different, seeing as they often operate through multimodal gamespaces wherein the printed word is just one component within a much larger "semiotic domain" (to echo Gee), which can reveal our assumptions about what constitutes a "text." As John Alberti notes, the interactive quality of video games challenges easy divisions between reading and writing. Because of their interactive nature, "reading" video games (that is, offering an analysis of a game's underlying argument) entails "writing" or inscribing actions within virtual gamespaces. Thus, playing and analyzing video games "forces us to confront the radically dynamic, temporal, and context-situated aspects of writing and reading" (Alberti 264). The

[20] To clarify, both Brooke and Hayles argue that the dynamic nature of digital media can help us see how more traditional forms of reading, writing, and textuality exists in the same type of flux. Hence, they do not privilege digital media as being more progressive or critically substantial than older forms of reading, writing, or textuality. Instead, they are arguing that digital media can help us reflect upon our assumptions regarding other forms of textuality.

multimodal nature of video games can lead students into larger discussions regarding the role of textual reception or analysis as these concepts function in other media, be they digital or otherwise. Hence, Alberti's argument regarding video-games-as-dynamic-texts is not so much about validating the legitimacy of games by aligning them with a term that holds clout in academia. Instead, video games themselves can help us re-approach commonplace terms that are prevalent in the field of English studies as a whole and expand our notion of textuality beyond solely print-based interpretations (see also Johnson, M. "Public"; Moberly "Composition").

While Alberti demonstrates how video games can change the way we talk about commonplace terms used in writing courses, other authors have explored how examining video games can fundamentally shape the types of texts that students produce. These include using the genre of video game reviews as a way of creating a more nuanced notion of what it means to undertake the work of criticism (Mullen, "On Second") or viewing in-game writing and actions as a form of social or political engagement (Raphael at al., "Games"). As Rebekah Shultz Colby and Richard Colby note in their experiences integrating *World of Warcraft* in to their writing courses, the interactive nature of video games can help students better recognize the impact of textual production or reception on others (Colby and Colby, "Pedagogy"). By having students produce texts based on their own first-person experiences in *WoW*—which can include in-game guides or other multimodal assignments—students have the opportunity to "actually participate in the *WoW* community, producing textual goods and services for that community that would also serve as academic assignments" (304). Hence, the interactive and communal nature of *WoW* can lend itself to a much stronger rhetorical awareness of how composition practices can directly impact the agency of one's intended audience while also challenging assumed divisions between academic and non-academic writing.

Structuring writing courses around video games not only provides opportunities for rethinking the types of assignments that are available to students, it can also complicate the supposed linearity of writing and research processes. As Alice Robinson argues, the nature of satisfying objectives in video games—meaning, the capacity to navigate virtual environments that possess a multitude of overlapping or cascading goals—can offer a model for self-directed learning insofar as playing video games force players to create a clear hierarchy of priorities while also micro-managing a variety of gameplay mechanics (Robinson, "Design"). Using game design principles as models for self-directed learning can result in courses where students are allowed to select assignments from a variety of options or even create their own assignments that can extend across an entire term (Hodgson, "Developing"). Modeling courses after the same principles of game design rejects the assumption that writing instruction happens in a linear fashion (i.e. the belief that writing projects can be seen as sequentially building upon one another in a linear, coherent fashion) and can be standardized regardless of student interests.

These scholars have done an excellent job examining the ways in which video games can create new opportunities for student projects and shape how we discuss writing practices as they operate in a variety of media. However, I feel as though these scholars occasionally focus on the functional and rhetorical dimensions of video games as the expense of a critical reading of these technologies. That is to say, authors who specifically examine the impact of incorporating video games into the composition classroom focus primarily on how becoming functionally literate in a video game endows students with the ability to become rhetorically literate vis-a-vis actively engaging in the discursive practices that comprise a gaming community. Unfortunately, this focus often comes at the expense of questioning larger socio-cultural or political questions regarding the pervasive ideological logic that structures virtual gamespaces. For instance, Colby

and Colby emphasize the supposed disconnection between work and play in the writing classroom, arguing that reintegrating a discourse of play via video games can provide insight into the generative qualities of writing while also fostering a stronger sense of student investment (Colby and Colby, "Pedagogy"). While these are important ideas to consider, the larger argument advocating a synthesis of work with play (as well as the underlying sentiment that this is a radically new idea) completely overlooks how information economies have gradually fostered a work-as-play mentality that accompanies radical shifts in knowledge-based labor. Simply celebrating the process of combining work and play without considering how this mindset aligns with larger socio-economic paradigms runs the risk of actually reinforcing a divide between academic and non-academic spaces; to examine the internal structure of video games without considering the external conditions surrounding them can implicitly reaffirm the "magic circle" fallacy, which views games as separate and distinct from the historical conditions that shape them (Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*). Furthermore, unintentionally supporting the magic circle fallacy runs the risk of possibly reinforcing regressive traits of certain ideological paradigms. As I will argue in the next chapter, the cultural logic that synthesizes work and play in knowledge-based industries is not necessarily a bad thing. However, this logic can potentially be used to reinforce a dehumanizing objectification and quantification of social relations. This is not to say that Colby and Colby are championing the objectification of social relations via their incorporation of video games into writing classes, I am simply pointing out that overlooking the external circumstances surrounding games can create methodological blind spots with unintentional implications.

Introducing a revised notion of pedagogy when discussing video games—that is, looking at how the learning strategies of games straddle the realms of digital literacy acquisition and

cultural critique—can help instructors avoid a magic circle fallacy. By looking at how the teaching practices of games can create an epistemological worldview that operates as an extension of real-world socio-cultural, economic, or ideological logic, instructors can better contextualize how the functional or rhetorical dimensions of gameplay can provide the foundation for a critical reflection on the paradigms being supported (or even critiqued) by video games. A critical awareness regarding the connection between epistemological nature of literacy practices in games and the larger paradigms that influence this epistemology can help students better understand how, exactly, their own composing practices can simultaneously inhabit and intervene in dominant cultural logics. Hence, a stronger attention to pedagogy can help refine, rather than outright replace, the ideas of Colby, Colby and others by helping cultivate a better sense of how the internal structure of games can grant us insight into the external structures surrounding their creation and reception. This, of course, is just one theoretical example of how a revised notion of pedagogy can build upon the exciting work done in video game-focused Rhet/Comp scholarship while also gesturing towards the concerns surrounding digital literacy expressed by Selber and others. As Chapters Three and Four will demonstrate, framing the incorporation of games into writing courses via a discourse of pedagogy can productively challenge the supposed divisions between games and their surrounding circumstances as well as the separation between academic and non-academic environments.

1.5 PRESSING START

Throughout this survey, I have attempted to identify how a variety of different video game scholars respond to the pedagogical nature of games. In doing so, I was able to describe how a

discourse of pedagogy allows us to cut across pre-existent disciplinary or methodological divisions and arrive at a complex, nuanced understanding of video games' status as valuable cultural artifacts with critical integrity *and* territories where emergent literacy practices are being created. Approaching video games through a lens of pedagogy is not without its methodological risks, though. Many agree that the first step to understanding the pedagogical nature and value of video games is to avoid the tendency of instrumentalizing games for standardized educational aims. In other words, video games should not be seen as mere tools that simply foster rudimentary skill sets, such as arithmetic or basic reading comprehension, more efficiently than other forms of instruction (Squire, "Changing"). Bogost shares similar concerns with Squire, arguing that many institutions—be they commercial, governmental, or otherwise—seek to capitalize upon the popularity of video games by stripping games down to their core components (points, levels, tedious tasks that reward the player with a sense of progression) and applying these elements to new content (Bogost, "Exploitationware"). In doing so, the aesthetic integrity of video games and the experiences of their players are marginalized in favor of a diluted, remedial, and misguided sense of what constitutes a "game." John Ferrara, a game designer himself, echoes these sentiments when arguing against the mindset that "games can be strip-mined for their 'useful' elements, [thereby] disregarding the rest of what makes a game a game" (Ferrara 291). Despite the fact that Squire, Bogost, and Ferrara all approach video games from rather different disciplinary perspectives, they agree that games should not be seen as a collection of structural components which can be superimposed upon any situation.

In lieu of treating video games as transferable learning tools, Squire advocates for "identifying and studying how game cultures themselves work, and then designing learning

systems based on these properties" (Squire, "Games" 53).[21] The communities that play and support video games embody key learning practices but the challenge for educators is to understand *how* learning takes place in games and the communities that support them in order to reflect upon the dominant pedagogical strategies used within traditional classroom environments. In doing so, teachers can find ways to organically integrate games into preexistent curricula. Therefore, "our challenge as educators is to build better game-based pedagogical theories while reciprocally investigating our assumptions about the social organization of schooling." (Squire, "Changing" np.). For this project, I want to build upon this notion of understanding games "on their own terms," meaning that I plan to examine how the pedagogical strategies of games and gaming communities enact themselves "in the wild" beyond the confines of traditional educational spaces or institutions. These examinations will allow me to examine the unique political and ethical dimensions of games' pedagogical qualities before discussing how these dimensions inform my own incorporation of video games into my writing courses.

The ultimate goal for this project is to demonstrate how my central thesis—the idea that video games operate at the intersection of digital literacy acquisition and a systems-based notion of cultural critique—and subsequent emphasis on pedagogy can provide the necessary interpretive frameworks for understanding how video games can help instructors and scholars reflect upon the larger impact that digital technologies can have on learning practices within or beyond the classroom.[22] I am not proposing that my focus on pedagogy should be the ultimate

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[21] By "transferable," I mean the tendency to radically de-contextualize video games and gameplay experiences. Such de-contextualization undermines the conditions and communities in which games are played, thereby reinforcing the idea that games are self-contained learning tools that have no cultural value other than their ability to train their players in very specific skill sets.

[22] As a side note, I will rarely use the term literacy throughout this entire project and, instead, focus predominantly on pedagogy. As Gee argues, literacy entails being able to participate in communally shared discursive values. If digital literacy acquisition is an outcome or result of gameplay, then pedagogy is the process through which we arrive at this result. In other words, using a discourse of literacy to describe games or gaming communities

goal that all video game scholars should arrive at, nor should pedagogy be a standard used to weed out good games criticism from bad. Instead, I am claiming that pedagogy should be understood as a type of critical grammar, a discourse for straddling the concerns held by different approaches to games criticism as well as contemporary conversations happening in Rhetoric and Composition scholarship. Consequently, the following chapters are meant to demonstrate how approaching games through the lens of pedagogy provides the necessary terminology for further unpacking the unique critical and educational affordances that video games offer (as opposed to simply reinforcing the idea that pedagogy is at work in a variety games or gaming communities). To begin, I want to return to an argument made earlier in this chapter—the idea that the teaching strategies games use to cultivate player actions resonates with larger cultural paradigms—in order to better explain how the internal logic of games parallels the external conditions surrounding their creation. In doing so, I hope to illustrate how a discourse of pedagogy can help us re-approach key terms in contemporary video game scholarship; namely, the issue of politics when discussing gameplay experiences.

runs the risk of simply "proving" that literacy acquisition is at work, rather than focusing on how learning practices within games offer a middle ground between the navigation of semiotic domains and cultural critique.

2.0 THE GAME OF POLITICS: EXAMINING THE ROLE OF WORK, PLAY, AND SUBJECTIVITY FORMATION IN *PAPERS, PLEASE*[23]

Released in 2013 to near-unanimous critical praise, *Papers, Please* is an anomaly in many regards. It challenges conventional notions of what constitutes gameplay, seeing as the player acts as a lowly immigration officer tasked with processing the travel documents of prospective immigrants into a fictional country all while getting caught up in a plot that includes rebel groups, assassinations, and wading through the moral grey area created by bureaucratic systems. It also transcends easy distinctions between serious and commercial games, becoming financially successful—selling well over half a million copies since its debut—despite its deliberately restrictive gameplay and weighty themes (Lee, "Papers"). Perhaps most importantly, it is one of the few games to spur critical discussion in mainstream news outlets without being subjected to traditional concerns (such as the representation of violence) that have typically been directed at video games. Amid the media attention paid towards *Papers, Please,* Lucas Pope (the game's sole designer) has dismissed easy connections between his game and real-world events. Despite the fact that *Papers, Please* takes place in a fictional communist country during the 1980s and contains an ending wherein a foreboding wall separating the cities of East Grestin and West Grestin is destroyed, Pope has stated that he did not design the game as a critique, or even re-

[23] A version of this chapter was published in *Games and Culture* in December of 2015.

enactment, of the Soviet Union's collapse (Costantini, "New"). He even avoided using the Soviet-associated designation of "comrade" in the game and asked translators to avoid the term or its equivalent when localizing *Papers, Please* in different regions (Cullen, "Lucas"). Pope has also dismissed theories that his game criticizes immigration policies, a logical association seeing as Arizona's controversial immigration bill, SB 1070, is colloquially referred to as the "Papers, Please Law" (Constantini, "New"). Pope admits that there are social critiques within his game but these are deliberately general in nature. He clarifies that he wanted to use *Papers, Please* to demonstrate how, in any real-world conflict, "all sides of any kind of issue have some justification. There's not just the good guys and bad guys—even the bad guys have some justification for why they want to do something" (Cullen, "Lucas"). According to the creator himself, *Papers, Please* is not political in the traditional sense of opposing institutionalized policies and providing an agenda for real-world social reform.

Papers, Please is so novel in terms of its design and narrative structure that it defies many traditional assumptions regarding what can be considered a "game" (the player is basically tasked with moving documents around) and challenges the political discourse we often use to examine the interaction between games, their players, and the larger societal context in which this transaction happens. Yet, it is hard to accept the idea that *Papers, Please*, which has been so influential in terms of its status within the games industry and so impactful in terms of the impressions it has left upon me as a player, is simply trying to show how there are multiple sides to every story. If we are to take video games seriously as cultural artifacts, we should avoid the temptation of having authorial intent dictate the terms of our critical investigations. Consequently, I want to push back on Pope's assertion that his game is as apolitical as he insists by asking: can we use conversations surrounding *Papers, Please* to rethink how a discourse of

politics is used within game studies? What do scholars gain in using politics to discuss the cultural or critical value of video games? Furthermore, what can we learn by applying a political discourse to a game that has already been recognized for its innovative mechanics and narrative structure?

To begin answering these questions, I want to focus on this game's most unique feature: that is, the ability to take the mundane and even boring duties of bureaucratic labor as the basis of gameplay. In other words, I want to analyze how the ingenious work-as-play design of *Papers, Please* is precisely what opens up new opportunities for re-thinking the politics of games and gameplay experiences. To achieve this goal, I plan to historicize video games amid technological and cultural developments that fostered the rapid expansion of knowledge-based economies from the mid-twentieth century onwards. More specifically, I will examine how knowledge-based economies which rely on user-generated content as the primary means of capital accumulation challenges traditional divisions between work versus play, which, in turn, reinforces the importance of individualized subjectivity for both employees and consumers of digital information platforms. I will then demonstrate how video games embody this reconfigured work/play/subjectivity interrelation via the psychological and physical self-modifying practices that players must undertake during gameplay. Finally, I will conclude this examination by analyzing my first-hand experiences playing *Papers, Please* to illustrate how this game's mechanics both exemplifies and critiques the ideology of work-as-play by making the player participate in a form of economic pragmatism which can be used to regulate, exclude, and exploit individuals. My primary argument throughout this examination is that video games not only operate upon the same material technologies that drive networked economies in global capitalist paradigms, they also inhabit the same ideology that complicates the work/play division

and positions subjectivity as an integral component in socio-economic production. The ultimate aim of this analysis is to derive an interpretive framework—one which understands the "politics of games" in direct relation to the role of work, play, and subjectivity formation in gameplay—that allows us to better understand how games inhabit, influence, and are influenced by the dominant cultural logics of networked societies. In doing so, I hope to illustrate how examining the political dimensions of video games can grant better insight into how abstract cultural logics govern our daily interactions with the world.

2.1 THE POLITICS OF/IN VIDEO GAMES

The second half of the twentieth century saw an exponential rise in the development and deployment of new digital technologies across the globe, stemming primarily, but not solely, from military research during the Cold War era (Abbate, *Inventing*). Many of these information- and communication-based technologies would eventually be co-opted into commercial sectors, allowing for the rapid acceleration of traditional economies (such as the intensification of finance banking from the 1960s onward due in part to advances in telecommunication technologies) while also providing the foundation for brand new industries (such as IT development, maintenance, and production becoming major economic forces throughout the Global South). A new medium that emerged from this intersection of military and commercial forces was video games. *Spacewar!*, one of the earliest video games and the first to be widely circulated since its introduction in 1962, was created using computer technologies designated for military research and development at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. As I referenced in the previous chapter, Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter use these unique historical circumstances to

characterize video games as the offspring of a digitally-fueled marriage between military and economic power:

> To a greater degree than perhaps any previous media other than the book, virtual games are a direct offshoot of their society's main technology of production. From their origins in nuclear-age simulations, video games have sprung from the machine system central to postwar capital's power and profit—the computer. (xviii-xix)

As many technology critics note, technological artifacts are inherently "political" insofar as any device exists as the material distillation of the economic, social, or ideological conditions surrounding its production, and these conditions continue to influence how individuals use technological artifacts in their daily lives (Winner, "Artifacts"). When understood from this perspective, "politics" does not denote traditional partisan Liberal/Conservative allegiances or questions revolving around institutionality (i.e., seeing political action as only occurring within government structures). Instead, "politics" can be viewed as the "arrangements of power and authority in human associations as well as the activities that take place within those arrangements." (Winner 123). This interpretation identifies the ways in which conceptual and material systems created through human activity directly and indirectly influence the agency of individuals. Technologies created out of said systems have the potential to support, or even challenge, these arrangements of power (see also Benjamin, *Illuminations*).

To return to Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter's argument about the relationship between video games and "the machine system central to postwar capital's power and profit," the very form of video games can be seen as embodying the political arrangements of power that characterize the synthesis of economic and military forces; the same algorithmic architecture that

created nuclear war simulations in addition to fueling the massive expansion of capitalist systems during the second half of the twentieth century provided the foundation for video games to emerge as a distinct medium. From a techno-materialist standpoint, video games lie at the intersection of digital technology and systems of power that were used to regulate capital and shore up influence in a small collection of Western nations over the past sixty years. However, video games also embody the rebellious spirit of the young hackers who helped create them, insofar as the students at MIT used their privilege—the access to rare and expensive technologies along with educational know-how acquired from elite institutions—to develop games in their leisure time (see also Williams, *Free*; Söderberg, *Hacking*).[24] Hence, the political arrangements of power inherent to video games are not just material, they are also ideological; video games exist as a manifestation of the tension between technological apparatuses of Western authority and a playful rebellion against hegemonic, elitist, or oppressive systems. These tensions continue to reverberate today within the video game industry: despite the fact that the game industry characterizes itself as building inclusive communities, a majority of video game development is consolidated within a handful of territories (the US, European Union, and Japan) that wield a disproportionate amount of influence over global gaming trends and greatly benefit from labor distributed throughout the Global South (Kerr, "Space"; Nichols "Who"). As an expressive medium that holds the potential to explore unique capacities for identity representation, movements such as the #INeedDiverseGames campaign demonstrates how the industry has

[24] Both Sam Williams and Johan Söderberg examine the ideological positioning of hackers and the hacker ethic. Williams notes how the hacker culture of the 1970s and 80s saw itself as a rebellion against the privatization of IT services, a mindset which helped establish the first guidelines for free- and open-source software (Williams, 101).

generally lagged behind when it comes to fostering diversity within games and the companies that create them (see Sarkeesian, "Tropes"; Shaw, *Gaming*).[25]

Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter do an excellent job positioning video games in relation to globalist systems of power and detailing the ideological tensions that lurk within the structural form of games themselves. For the purposes of this examination, though, I want to take a more nuanced approach to the political dimensions of video games and this medium's relationship to contemporary globalist paradigms. I agree that video games are, and will most likely always be, in a privileged-yet-conflicted relationship with larger systems of power, be they economic, cultural, militaristic, or otherwise. However, we must not forget that the connection between politics and technology is not a top-down hierarchy wherein the first term completely dictates the latter (Grimes and Feenberg, "Rationalizing"). While new technologies can proliferate pre-existent structures of authority, emergent technologies can also challenge and rewire dominant systems in unexpected-yet-impactful ways. When it comes to politics and technology, it is always a two-way street. With this in mind, I want to situate video games within a larger historical trajectory that identifies how advancements in digital technologies throughout the late twentieth century dramatically reconfigures the nature of knowledge-based labor, individual expression, and subjectivity in economies that encourage user-generated content.

[25] Adrienne Shaw's research shows how many marginal/minority gamers do not see diversity as a defining issue that guides their gaming habits, although encountering diverse characters or themes is appreciated by these players (Shaw 219). This ambivalent reaction demonstrates how diversity in games should not be used as an extension of niche marketing (i.e., believing that diverse games cater to more demographics which, in turn leads to better game sales) and game developers should be encouraged to explore more complex, less literal forms of representation in their games.

2.2 WORK VERSUS PLAY IN KNOWLEDGE ECONOMIES

While I might disagree with the militaristic telos guiding Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter's materialist approach, they correctly identify how the emergence of video games stemmed from a hacker ethic that conflated work with play insofar as the people who helped create the earliest video games used their professional instruments and institutional resources to make games that served no utilitarian purpose. Furthermore, the earliest video games took a large amount effort to build seeing as there were no developer resources to help with game programming. In this sense, the first video game developers combined work with play (they undertook the complicated process of creating superfluous games from scratch) and play with work (they co-opted machines dedicated to military research for fun). However, the work/play conflation that was happening throughout university basements and laboratories was not a random outlier. The increasingly blurry lines between work and play among the earliest video game developers is symptomatic of a much larger cultural trend that would come to characterize many contemporary knowledge-based industries. Hence, the story of video games' creation is representative of a new relationship between work and play within networked societies. To begin unpacking this relationship, I want to discuss the unique features of knowledge-based labor before examining how said features fundamentally shape the role of personalized identity in economic systems.

Information technologies created during the mid-twentieth century led to exponential growth of knowledge-based economies such as IT development and computer programming. Such economies are unique in that they do not rely on the traditional production of self-contained goods which are then sold to consumers. Instead, many knowledge-based corporations manufacture services that facilitate the process of information exchange. This shift towards information-based services reconfigures the type of labor undertaken by knowledge workers. As

Maurizio Lazzarato argues, knowledge work functions as "immaterial labor" in a two-fold sense. On a literal level, information-based services are "immaterial" in comparison to the production of concrete consumable commodities. On a theoretical level, knowledge-based work entails "the kinds of activities involved in defining and fixing cultural and artistic standards, fashions, tastes, consumer norms, and, more strategically, public opinion" among those who create and use information technologies (Lazzarato, "Immaterial"). Service-based industries not only create platforms for information dissemination, they are also tasked with cultivating the ideological conditions, cultural practices, and social relations that are conducive to individuals using specific platforms in intended ways. While Lazzarato implies that these ideological implications are present in most, if not all, forms of knowledge-based work, we can see his theory of immaterial labor most explicitly in the creation of Internet-based technologies that thrive off of user-generated content. In the case of social media, for example, companies create the potential for social relations to emerge by creating platforms that structure the interactions between individuals.[26] Furthermore, these platforms are ideologically charged because their terms and conditions dictate what social relations are permitted. In short, knowledge-based companies that rely on user-generated content formulate the tastes, standards, and general rules of engagement while leaving much of the information generation or dissemination to the users themselves.

The ideological stakes of immaterial labor puts new demands on employees. Now, the ideal knowledge worker is someone who is dynamic enough to manage an ever-changing constellation of social relations. Consequently, knowledge-based economies re-frame personality traits associated to artistic expression—collaboration, innovation, and adaptation—as central

[26] To clarify, immaterial labor diagnoses the move away from a one-to-many structure of information dissemination and towards a many-to-many composition that characterizes contemporary Web 2.0 technologies. For this analysis, I am specifically focusing on popular technologies or services that use a many-to-many infrastructure to cultivate user-generated content.

tenets to economic success. As Graeme Kirkpatrick argues, knowledge-based economies create a situation where a knowledge employee

> has to be adaptable, flexible and resilient to cope with the succession of changes they will encounter by always seeing in them opportunities and openings to extend their networks. Such a person resembles the artist intellectual much more than a traditional, suit-wearing business manager. (*Computer* 29)

In this situation, the dominant characteristics that are indicative of economic success is one's ability to transcend strict divisions between work and play; being an experimental and creative individual is the barometer used to gauge how someone will succeed or fail under the demands of a knowledge economy. Challenging the traditional work/play divide is exemplified in corporate strategies such as the infamous "twenty percent" ideal deployed by the likes of Google and other companies, which insists that employees can spend twenty percent of their time tinkering with passion projects that do not have a defined role in a company's long-term workflow (R. Tate, "Google"). The rationale behind twenty percent time is that playing around can spur technological innovation and economic success within a company (we must not forget that the now ubiquitous Gmail began its life as a pet project).[27] More generally, twenty-percent time instills an inspirational and sporadic quality to work in the name of creativity while still retaining an economic mindset that privileges efficiency; rather than outsource experimental research and development to a specific portion of a company, it is easier to let every individual employee act as a semi-autonomous R and D lab via work that masquerades as leisure time.

[27] The idea of twenty-percent time is not unique to Google (3M implemented a similar strategy earlier) nor is it an official company policy. In fact, Google required managers to dramatically roll back the number of approved twenty-percent time projects in 2013 as a way to streamline their workflow (Mims, "Google's"). This is not to say that experimentation has been completely removed from the company's infrastructure but such experimentation is now granted to a select few.

Successful employees and companies, it seems, are the ones who know how (and when) to play around.

The synthesis of work with play does not only affect workers, though, as consumers find themselves in a similar situation. Many knowledge-based economies thrive by offering services that are actively utilized, not passively consumed, by customers. This logic of what Henry Jenkins deems "participatory culture"—that is, a cultural epoch in which the primary means of individual expression and/or community association is through the active production, aggregation, and distribution of information—can be seen through the growing prominence of social media, crowd sourcing, and other platforms for user-generated content, all of which depend on consumers using their creative faculties to deploy their own personal style within virtual settings (Jenkins, *Fans*). In this sense, the playful enterprise of personal expression is also an industrious undertaking because individuals create digital objects that are simultaneously distillations of their personal identity and operate as exchangeable commodities whose circulation helps accumulate capital value (insofar as many knowledge-based companies make money by aggregating personal information which can then be used for targeted marketing). Now, a technology user's playful creativity is embedded within a work-like discourse of production and exchange.

For both workers and commercial technology users, knowledge economies that produce the conditions for social relations to emerge complicate the work/play binary, which, in turn, repositions subjectivity as a fundamental component in economic production.[28] On the one hand,

[28] My definition of subjectivity and its importance within socio-economic production stems from the work of Michel Foucault. For Foucault, "subjectivity" describes the historically-contingent nature of undertaking discursive, self-modifying actions in order to constitute oneself as a recognizable subject within systems of power (Foucault, 1994). When I use the term subjectivity in this paper, I am referring to the ways in which one's identity is contingent upon the potential for action established by larger conceptual systems, be they economic principles of production/exchange or, as I will eventually demonstrate, the rule-based infrastructure of

knowledge-based work privileges a playful approach to collaboration and innovation, thereby re-framing a worker's productive potential as contingent upon the creative impulses that stem from one's intellectual existence as a quasi-artistic individual. Hence, one's economic potential is tethered to a worker's capacity to "be" a certain type of person, rather than strictly possessing a set of technical skills (Kirkpatrick, *Computer*). On the other hand, many service-based companies flourish when users express their individuality through the production of unique digital objects. By acting as creators and not simply consumers, users of digital technologies channel their playful tendencies into a form of cultural participation that operates upon economic principles of production and exchange (not to mention the fact that these users are supporting the accumulation of capital in a service-based economy whenever they exert these creative energies). To partake in any form of participatory culture necessarily requires the same personality traits that are valued in knowledge-based employees; to engage in and derive satisfaction from digital technologies is to possess and utilize the same creative ingenuity and intellectual flexibility that characterize the contemporary knowledge worker. Thus, the desire to express oneself becomes the raw material that sustains the creation of digital objects (Nealon, *Post-Postmodernism*). In both situations, socio-economic activity—meaning, the accumulation of capital that is generated directly or indirectly through user-generated content via the social relations created by information services—thrives when the subjectivity of workers and technology users is individualized, commodified, and integrated into larger capitalist networks. Everything from outsourcing R and D to individual employees via twenty-percent time, to needing to be a unique person in order to undertake knowledge work, to capitalizing on people's imperative to express themselves in virtual arenas is symptomatic of a cultural ideology wherein the subjectivity of

a video game. Furthermore, the phrase "subjectivity formation" describes how individuals consciously adapt their practices and mindsets for the sake of accessing or becoming accessible to these conceptual systems.

individuals is characterized as a hyper-individualized and economically-productive force which helps knowledge-based industries operate at their peak efficiency (see also Foucault, *Birth*; Nealon, *Foucault*).[29] Put differently, knowledge-based industries that produce social relations, rather than concrete products, function best when the entirety of the social body is permeated with potential outlets for socio-economic activity. Collapsing the work/play division and emphasizing individualized subjectivity is a highly effective catalyst for saturating the social body with said outlets, which, in turn, continue to support information services.

Identifying the interrelation between socio-economic practices and subjectivity is important insofar as it helps us theorize new outlets for social organization. As Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri note, the globalist paradigm upheld by knowledge-based economies should not be viewed as a monolithic, hegemonic and inherently oppressive force. Instead, the same technologies and infrastructures that sustain globalist systems also offer the conditions for novel forms of social activism:

> Indeed, when the products of labor are not material goods but social relationships, networks of communication, and forms of life, then it becomes clear that economic production immediately implies a kind of political production, or the production of society itself. We are thus no longer bound by the old blackmail; the choice is not between sovereignty or anarchy. The power of the multitude to create social relationships in common stands between sovereignty and anarchy, and it thus presents a new possibility for politics. (Hardt and Negri 336)

[29] This emphasis on the hyper individualization and commodification of subjectivity resonates with Foucault's theory of biopolitics. Biopolitics marks a particular stage in socio-economic governance where a person's body, on both a biological and psychological level, is seen as an inherently generative force that must be fostered and channeled rather than strictly regulated. Jeffrey Nealon argues that biopolitical regimes are most effective when every individual in a given social body has the capacity to participate as an active economic agent, and the increasing importance of user-generated content is symptomatic of biopolitical tendencies within current socio-economic networks.

To deflect criticisms of idealism often directed at Hardt and Negri, I want to emphasize that they are not offering a naïve banner that reads "the revolution comes from within" (indeed, the "within" of individualized identity operates as prime territory for global corporate conglomerates, from Facebook to Google, and could prove a barren place when looking for revolutionary tendencies). Rather, they are presenting a theory of political critique that uses subjectivity and the social relations that arise out of/feed into it as the most efficient point-of-access into larger questions regarding opportunities for democratic progress. In other words, they avoid over-prescribing the necessary steps for revolutionary change by offering an epistemological account that tries to identify the object-of-examination which can most effectively help us understand today's socio-economic climate and the affordances for democratic progress therein. Given that information technologies have helped dissolve work into play and situate subjectivity as a primary variable within capitalist production, subjectivity itself operates as the object-of-examination par excellence that can grant insight into the networks and ideologies which govern our daily interactions in the world. As Hardt and Negri's argument goes: follow the bread crumbs of subjectivity and we shall stumble upon the cultural logic that drives globalist systems.

Given this brief historical overview, we can see how digital technologies birthed from very particular historical circumstances in the mid-twentieth century helped create massive paradigm shifts in both professional and cultural spheres. Knowledge-based economies provide the necessary conditions that conflate work with play and allow subjectivity itself to operate as a key component within socio-economic developments, which, in turn, influence new advancements in digital technologies. In the following section, I would like to illustrate how video games—as aesthetic objects and not simply the commodified products of a globalized

industry—resonate with this new emphasis on subjectivity and the blurring of work versus play. In doing so, I plan to demonstrate how video games rely on the same process of subjectivity formation that drives many service-based industries. Characterizing video games as operating upon subjectivity formation will shed light upon the unique political dimensions housed within games and, more importantly, illustrate how game criticism can help us achieve the critical project put forth by Hardt and Negri. To begin, I want to focus on how, exactly, subjectivity operates within first-hand experiences of video game players.

2.3 VIDEO GAMES AS SUBJECTIVITY MACHINES

Many authors have examined the ways in which the video game industry exemplifies the complication of work versus play and, moreover, how the complication of this relationship provides the territory for new subjectivities to emerge (Postigo, "Modding"; Castronova, "Test"; Ito, *Engineering*). For the purposes of this examination, though, I want to stray from an anthropological or sociological handling of subjectivity in video games and gaming communities. Instead, I want to turn towards a particular sect of scholarship that focuses on the psychological impact that video games can have on their users. Graeme Kirkpatrick investigates how the aesthetic experience of playing video games parallels the same type of psychological self-reflection and self-modification found in art:

> The kind of learning that is essential to art does not concern its messages but rather alterations we perpetrate upon ourselves through our engagement with it, changes that result in a new sense of what is possible. In so far as they require us

> to perform non-habituated actions to secure unexpected and unanticipated effects, games too can be part of an aesthetic adventure (*Computer* 186).

The aesthetic experience of gameplay—meaning, the process through which games require the player to associate bodily movements and emotional sensations with a specific set of in-game goals —is an open-ended event that does not culminate in the full inhabitation of a predetermined subject position. Kirkpatrick wants to avoid an over-emphasis on narrations of gameplay experiences that retroactively fits all-too-neatly into ready-made subject positions (i.e., critical approaches that use games to teach people how to "think like" a lawyer, doctor, or any other self-contained identity). Instead, he focuses on how the aesthetic encounter with video games temporarily suspends or exploits our presuppositions, thereby forcing us to adapt ourselves psychological and physically to the requirements of a given game. When viewed from this perspective, the process of subjectivity formation—that is, the continual self-modification and self-reflection of one's own experiences, expectations, and actions while playing a game—is the interface through which gameplay is experienced and conducted. Consequently, subjectivity should not be seen as the end product of gameplay but, instead, subjectivity and the continual modification thereof is the process that mediates the interaction between a player and a game.[30]

To clarify, Kirkpatrick is not necessarily discounting the work done by those interested in utilizing the role of subjectivity in video games for educational ends nor is he claiming that the identities/subject positions which emerge out of gameplay are wholly unimportant (see Gee,

[30] This is not to say that the rules which govern the material practices of players are somehow insignificant. As Eric Zimmerman and Katie Salen note, the concept of "meaningful play" (that is, the relationship between the actions undertaken by a player within the designed system of a game and how a game responds to this actions with significant outcomes) is the goal of all successful game design (Zimmerman and Salen, *Rules*). Examining a player's aesthetic experience should be seen as a compliment to, not replacement of, a focus on game design principles insofar as an aesthetic approach allows us to better understand the interaction between a player and the culturally-informed rules or mechanics of a video game. In short, the critical significance of video games emerges from the negotiation between their mechanics and the aesthetic experience of a player. The process of subjectivity formation, then, operates as a useful point-of-access into this negotiation.

What).[31] Instead, he is primarily interested in how we psychologically adapt to the subversion, challenging, or rewiring of unconscious habits while playing a game. Taking this approach can help me position games in relation to the work/play interrelation that I discussed in the previous section. To play a game takes work insofar as games demand active participation on the part of players and requires a conscious adaptation to constantly evolving goals or obstacles; games (unlike other media such as film) simply will not function if a player cannot successfully adapt to the structural mechanics that govern a virtual gamespace (Aarseth, *Cybertext*). Hence, the "work" of playing a game is the intellectual investment of continual self-reflection and self-modification of one's actions or thoughts within a virtual space.[32] In relying on subjectivity formation to facilitate gameplay experiences, video games operate on the same foundation of knowledge-based economies because both games and socio-economic activity within networked societies use the work/play synthesis to establish subjectivity as a fundamental component in their respective functioning.

To return to Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter's claim regarding the politics housed within video games, the arrangements of power inherent to games extends beyond a simple material association with apparatuses of Western domination or rebellion against these technologies. Remember, the term politics simply denotes the ways in which systems—be they technological, ideological, or otherwise—both permit and prohibit agency on the part of individuals. When viewed through this lens, the political arrangements of power found in video games operate as such: every game is tasked with getting its user to do the necessary work of self-modification in

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[31] Kirkpatrick also examines how the discursive identity of a "gamer" is constituted by the ability to evaluate and successfully manipulate the hard-to-define quality of "gameplay," but this work aligns more with an anthropological, rather than aesthetic, methodology.

[32] Nick Yee explores how gameplay experiences can mimic the responsibilities, frustrations, and even boredom of real-world work environments, such as managing player guilds or complex resource gathering processes in MMORPGs (Yee, *Proteus*). In this sense, Yee takes a more straightforward approach to the concept of "work" in video games.

order to successfully play the game. Thus, the political dimension within games is the arrangement of gameplay elements that create new possibilities for action which entice a player into participating in a work/play synthesis, undergoing subjectivity formation via psychological and physical self-modification, and establishing subjectivity as the mediating principle within gameplay experiences. Consequently, the phrase "the politics of games" denotes the ways in which games teach their players to inhabit the same ideological framework of knowledge economies by embracing a work-as-play ideal and coax players into using their own subjectivity modification as the interface for actions or events in a virtual gamespace. Arguing that the political dimensions of video games exist as a distillation of the ideology that pervades globalist paradigms is not to say that everything in contemporary networked societies functions "like a game" or that games should be seen as the most productive method of interacting with the world (to do so would only proliferate the corrosive trend of gamification, which tries to strip games down to their most base elements). Instead, rethinking what constitutes the political dimensions of games is meant to offer an interpretive framework that allows scholars to use the work/play/subjectivity triangulation as a way to better understand how games inhabit, and even challenge, the cultural logics surrounding their development.

By taking a more nuanced approach to the politics of video games and aligning this medium with prevalent cultural ideologies created in part by the expansion of information technologies, we can come to a new characterization that understands video games as something more than just a collection of rule-based systems which grew out of Western military/commercial domination; they are machines that presuppose and incorporate a player's subjective experiences into their very form and structure. In this sense, video games exist as subjectivity machines because they necessarily require a pre-existent subjectivity (they assume

the player is of a mindset that is willing to play a game's politics) and operate through subjectivity formation (the continual self-modification of the player is what drives her actions in a virtual gamespace and these actions allow the algorithmic sequences that make up a game's code to enact themselves).

At the onset of this paper, I used Pope's rejection of over-simplified, remedial notions of politics—that is, seeing *Papers, Please* as an overt critique of historical events or immigration policies—as a way to begin reconceptualizing the political dimensions of video games. My revised understanding of the "politics of games" and subsequent characterization of video games as subjectivity machines does not contradict Pope's self-proclaimed intentions to complicate good/bad binary systems by showing how "all sides of any kind of issue have some justification." Denying over-simplified good/bad distinctions and forcing the player to rationalize her decisions without these mutually-exclusive categories is a testament to video games' ability to suspend, challenge, and rewire our internal presuppositions (be they about the conventions of specific mechanics or general concepts that inform the structure and narration of gameplay). For the final section of this examination I want to play the game of politics, and play the politics of games, by analyzing my own experiences of *Papers, Please* in order to demonstrate how the triangulation of work/play/subjectivity enacts itself first-hand. I hope to illustrate how this game takes the socio-economic logic of work-as-play to its illogical extreme and, in doing so, challenges the discourses we often use to characterize contemporary information technologies.

2.4 THE RUTHLESS PRAGMATISM OF *PAPERS, PLEASE*

Papers, Please takes place in the fictional communist country Arstotzka (which is a generalized parody of former Eastern Bloc countries) during the winter of 1982. The player takes on the role of an immigration officer who has "won" a state-run labor lottery and been assigned to a border checkpoint that separates the cities of East Grestin from West Grestin, with the former being located in Arstotzka and the latter being located in neighboring Kolechia. The basic premise of the game is that the player must review the travel documents of those trying to immigrate into the country and either accept or deny them based on the legitimacy of their papers. At the end of the work day, the player receives money for each traveler successfully processed—meaning, either admitted or denied entry to the country on justified grounds—which is then used to feed and house the player's family (who will eventually perish if not enough utilities are paid for). Whenever the player admits someone who is not authorized to enter the country or denies a valid person from immigrating, she is penalized and multiple penalties results in a wage deduction. The game can end if the all family member's perish, the player is unable to pay their bills, the player gets caught dealing with people deemed a threat to Arstotzka, or if the player is attacked at certain key plot points. *Papers, Please* has a story mode that is broken up into thirty-one days, which function as traditional game levels in the sense that each day often adds new variables to account for. As the story progresses, events happen beyond the player's control, such as a terrorist bombing of the immigration checkpoint, and these events add new complications to the documents the player must review (i.e., immigrants from a particular country require a valid work visa to enter, etc.). Over the course of the game's campaign, the player gets caught up in a rebel group trying to overthrow Arstotzka's corrupt government and the player's actions have a direct impact on the success or failure of this rebellion.

All player actions are confined to the window and desk space of the immigration booth, and most of the player's experiences involve using the mouse to retrieve, examine, notarize, and return documents to hopeful travelers. While there are other actions available—such as a body scanner to detect illegal contraband and a very limited use of weapons in the game's final days—the game functions primarily by forcing the player into a monotonous routine of cross checking information via highly restrictive controls within a claustrophobic amount of desk space. In this sense, *Papers, Please* literalizes the synthesis of work and play. As Daniel Johnson argues, the aesthetic experience of making bureaucratic work the primary focus of gameplay "mechanizes the act of play through repetitive acts" and creates a situation where the "act of play becomes an act of administration, of laboring" (Johnson, "Animated" 14). The work of playing the game is the work of psychologically adapting oneself to the tedious minutia of bureaucratic logistics as well as the self-mechanization of physical action. Consequently, the game operates through a process of subjectivity formation because it demands that the player inhabits a mechanized mindset which fosters "a transference of agency away from the individual and toward the institutionalized structure of command and routinized actions" (15). However, it is precisely this subjectivity formation—the deliberate cultivation of a mindset that feeds into the "act of administration" and mechanizes the player's body/mind—that provides an incisive critique of socio-economic systems which thrive off of the work/play/subjectivity interrelation.

Papers, Please denies a humanizing counter-point to the monotonous labor in the immigration booth. At the end of each day, you do not get to interact with your family directly. Instead, you are treated to a black screen with stark, piercing text that reminds you which relatives are dying, which bills are not paid, and how much harder you will need to work tomorrow in order to keep your loved ones alive. The player's life beyond the immigration

booth—beyond the epicenter where the player is mechanized and virtual immigrants are objectified in hauntingly efficient-yet-unremarkable ways via document processing—is just another wall of information that is meant to represent familial subjects in this virtual world. And yet, this wall simultaneously reminds the player that she can only interact with these subjects through more quantifiable information, through more numbers (in this case, the cold, hard cash that is earned one passport approval or rejection at a time). Ironically, moments of intimate human connection with other people in this virtual world often come in the form of micro-narratives that occur within the player's place of occupation. At one point in the game a man immigrating from neighboring Antegria will inform the player that his wife is next in line. When the wife enters the booth, she claims that she quickly fled Antegria to avoid being killed and, consequently, does not have the proper documents to enter the country. The player can decide whether to let the wife follow the husband into Arstotzka, which would incur a penalty and risk the health of the player's family, or deny entry and split up the couple. There are no additional rewards for either decision, meaning the player must create her own rationale for choosing to protect her family or help a couple that, to be honest, is far more tangible and present than the abstract household she returns to every evening (seeing as the family is all but invisible in comparison to the randomly generated immigrants whose weathered faces relentlessly stare at the player while awaiting their processing). Regardless of what conclusion the player comes to, her decision must be made in accordance with a discourse of quantifiable economic cost (that is, can the player bear the economic risks of letting this couple into the country?). Even the humanizing micro-narratives the player shares with travelers are not immune from the objectifying process of contorting complex human relations into issues of exchange value.

As I discussed earlier, when work becomes play, one's subjectivity and the social relations that stem from it becomes a central tenet to socio-economic production and capital accumulation. *Papers, Please* exploits this coupling of subjectivity with economics by turning the player's relationship to both her family and the travelers she processes into tight, suffocating financial exchanges; the player's familial connections are represented by an always-unnerving balance sheet while her rationale for choosing to support any ethical obligations to the immigrants she processes must be weighed against potential monetary consequences. Hence, in willingly taking up the mindset that locates agency within an "institutionalized structure of command and routinized actions," the player is forced to inhabit a ruthless form of economic pragmatism that objectifies herself, the characters she interacts with, and the social relations that exist between them. By making repetitive bureaucratic work the central premise of gameplay, *Papers, Please* takes the pro-capitalist mantra of "do what you love for a living and you'll never work again" and turns it on its head; work is literally play within the game but what emerges is not a feel-good embrace of Silicon Valley-esque idealism. Quite the opposite, as the game exposes how the work/play synthesis can lead to an unsettling, dehumanizing objectification and quantification of social relations. Through inverting the logic of do-what-you-love capitalism, the game leaves us with a new, darker motif: when subjectivity becomes an outlet for socio-economic production, the only way to connect to subjects is through a discourse of economic cost. Or, more bluntly: when you do what you love for a living, you never really stop working.

The callous economic pragmatism of *Papers, Please* betrays the liberation discourse which is often directed towards user-focused information technologies that privilege personal expression and collective organization. A popular notion touted by tech enthusiasts is that individuals can use social media platforms, such as Twitter or similar services, to express their

ideals in virtual spaces, which will then lead to real-world mobilization against oppressive regimes (Morozov, *Net*). However, arguing that corporate-owned services can guide us towards a better world underhandedly "allows vested interests to disguise what essentially amounts to advertising for their commercial products in the language of freedom" (Morozov, *Net* 304). The labor done by the player in the immigration booth holds up a rather disturbing mirror to this liberation discourse by demonstrating how commercial and ideological influences can channel knowledge-based work towards exclusive, not inclusive, ends. In an odd way, the player functions as a modern-day knowledge worker when completing her occupational duties. Much like how knowledge-based industries create services for information dissemination as opposed to self-contained goods, the player does not produce any tangible in-game objects but, instead, regulates the proper dissemination of information via cross-checking travel documents; looking for information discrepancies in traveling papers manifests itself as literally moving information from one place to another (i.e., shuffling documents around before notarizing and returning them). By undertaking the knowledge work of document processing, the player inadvertently enacts many of the same features of immaterial labor. When accepting or denying prospective immigrants, the player is managing social relations and cultural standards by regulating which people are incorporated into the social body of Arstotzka. The game gestures towards the ideological work being undertaken by the player by having her faceless avatar make nationalist declarations such as "Glory to Arstotzka" or "Do no harm" whenever a traveler is allowed in to the country. These mantras become more haunting as the player realizes how this language of glory is nothing more than a placeholder for national agendas that are willing to partake in fascist practices which exploit and even punish individuals who do not possess the characteristics—individuals who cannot "be" a certain type of person—that Arstotzka deems economically

valuable. Consequently, the mantras echoed by the player's avatar reflect how external economic and cultural forces can channel the immaterial labor of managing social relations towards oppressive ends.

Although the game puts the player in the role of an immigration officer that undertakes a particular form of knowledge work, *Papers, Please* does not refute Kirkpatrick's aversion to criticism that views gameplay as an opportunity to inhabit fully-formed subject positions. This game does not instruct us how to act like a real-life immigration officer nor does it try to teach us the particularities of immigration policies. Rather, this game demonstrates how the ideological nature of immaterial labor can be channeled by commercial incentives so that knowledge-based work actively cultivates a corrosive form of economic pragmatism which denies individuals access to resources due to their inability to offer explicit, and often significant, compensation. Hence, *Papers, Please* teaches us about ourselves insofar as it reveals the presumptions we harbor when agreeing to participate in the work/play synthesis or using a discourse of liberation when characterizing commercial information technologies. This is not to say that *Papers, Please* demonizes user-centric services or the ideological nature of immaterial labor writ large. If it did, the game would be cutting off the branch it sits upon, seeing as it too is a product of the very technologies and mindsets that synthesize work, play, and subjectivity. Instead, the politics of *Papers, Please* short circuits the dominant ideology of networked societies in order to demonstrate the unintentional human consequences of taking this logic too its illogical extremes.

2.5 CONCLUSION

I began this examination by asking what we gain in remaining loyal to a discourse of politics when critiquing video games. I chose to focus on the most unique feature of *Papers, Please*—the coupling of work and play in its mechanics—as a way to begin answering this question. By taking the connection between work and play as my primary focal point, I was able to offer a revised historical narration that places video games within a larger ideological paradigm which reconfigures the work/play/subjectivity interrelation within contemporary networked societies. From this, I derived an interpretive framework that views video games as not simply commodities forged from transnational networks of commercial production but, instead, as distillations of the same ideology that governs the capitalist systems from which these aesthetic objects emerge. Therefore, examining the complex constellation of work, play, and subjectivity provides the territory for connecting the internal logic of specific video games to the external logic that surrounds their development and contextualizes their cultural significance. Focusing on the politics of games—that is, the ways in which games teach us how to use our own self-modifying practices as a way to mediate gameplay experiences—allows us to better understand how games inhabit and even subvert the cultural logic of their particular historical moment, an argument that I demonstrated in my analysis of *Papers, Please*. To conclude, I sincerely hope that this examination and the interpretive framework offered therein can add another layer of depth to an already fascinating game in addition to providing the resources for further investigating the critical value of video games and the experiences they elicit in their players.

3.0 *DARK SOULS* AND THE ETHICS OF NETWORKED PEDAGOGIES[33]

It is just past midnight and I am undertaking the horror-medieval-fantasy equivalent of housekeeping. Let me start again. I am in the 90th hour of my playtime in *Dark Souls*, an action-role-playing game that garnered massive critical acclaim along with a notorious reputation for being uncompromisingly difficult. I am preparing to travel deep within the decaying world to the Kiln of the First Flame, the location where I must take on Lord Gwyn, the now-insane god of fire, and either take up the mantle of the new flame lord or allow the world to slip into the inevitable darkness that is necessary for rebirth to occur. Before that, I have some unfinished business to attend to in the sun-drenched kingdom of Anor Londo. Anor Londo was once a city of the gods before these deities either went mad or fled due to the threat of impending darkness. In my first visit to this area many hours prior, I defeated Dragon Slayer Ornstein and Executioner Smough (one of the most difficult boss fights in an already-difficult game) before meeting Gwynevere, daughter of Lord Gwyn. Gwynevere praised my accomplishments and opened up several new areas of the world to explore. Feeling equal parts satisfied and masochistic, I pushed further with my adventure.

Despite my initial enthusiasm, this situation was not as straightforward as it initially seemed. As I eventually discovered, the Gwynevere that I encountered was actually an illusion created by her estranged brother, Gwyndolin, who has taken up residence in Anor Londo after

[33] A version of this chapter was published in *First Person Scholar* in May of 2015.

the city became desolate and used his magic to keep up the illusion of Gwynevere's presence for centuries. I returned back to Anor Londo one last time because "killing" the illusionary Gwynevere allows me to fight Gwyndolin, who drops a high-level item that can be used to craft a rare weapon. Furthermore, striking the faux Gwynevere not only dissolves the illusion, it also casts Anor Londo into darkness, seeing as the sun's warm glow was also a ploy created by Gwyndolin. Perhaps more interesting than the family politics of these deities is the fact that the game itself never tells you about Gwyndolin's deception, only alluding to this situation in obscure item descriptions that can be easily overlooked. A typical player could finish the entire game while leaving Anor Londo as sunny and stoic as it was when they first entered, all while passing up the key items gained from exposing Gwyndolin's deception. I came across the first mention of this sub-narrative thanks to anonymous player-created messages posted around the world (the precise nature of which I will further discuss in the next section). At first, I took messages urging me to attack Gwynevere as mere trolling, seeing as *Dark Souls* is infamous for allowing the player to permanently kill non-player characters (NPCs) along with all the items or backstory they might provide. However, other messages kept mentioning some sort of "illusion" and many tried to steer me towards Gwyndolin's hidden enclave. Bewildered and trying to simply survive, I moved on from Anor Londo without giving these messages much thought. Dozens of hours later, as I was scouring one of the many player-created online wikis in preparation for the final boss fight, I eventually stumbled upon this sub-narrative. I returned to Anor Londo prepared to exhaust the last narrative tidbits and gameplay items that *Dark Souls* had to offer. In much the same way one makes sure the doors are locked and stove is off before leaving home for an extended period I felt as though I was turning off the lights in Anor Londo (literally and metaphorically), making sure all the final boxes were checked before completing

Dark Souls and putting its twisted yet endearing world to bed until I returned for an inevitable second playthrough.

I bring up this specific moment because I feel as though it encapsulates how *Dark Souls* handles the process of building a dedicated player community in remarkable, almost counter-intuitive ways. The world of *Dark Souls* is equal parts beautiful and barren, highly memorable in its visual design but still desolate and lonely. And yet, this game also allows for highly rewarding moments that emerge out of collaboration with anonymous players both within and beyond the game. While I have much to say about the larger cultural and theoretical significance surrounding *Dark Souls* and the pedagogical strategies it elicits between, or even within, players, I want to first detail the specific gameplay and story elements underlying the gameplay narration I have just provided. In further exploring how the mechanics and story of this virtual universe directly influence the actions, experiences, and even emotions of its players, I can better demonstrate the ways in which *Dark Souls* provides the foundation for new forms of pedagogical strategies that resonate with the material and ideological conditions of contemporary networked cultures.

3.1 LORDRAN AND THE SPACE OF NON-ENCOUNTERS

Dark Souls is an action-role-playing game developed by From Software wherein the player takes up the role of an anonymous undead warrior and explores the kingdom of Lordran while trying to make sense of the chaos and darkness that is slowly creeping into this world.[34] In terms of

[34] Released in 2011, *Dark Souls* is technically the second game in the *Souls* series (which includes 2009's *Demon's Souls*, two numbered sequels following the original *Dark Souls*, and the spiritual successor to these games, *Bloodborne*). Despite sharing similar gameplay mechanics and online components, all games in this

gameplay, *Dark Souls* has been praised for its ability to create tense, difficult, and incredibly satisfying battles by making all player actions feel weighty and consequential. Every attack and evasive maneuver depletes the player's stamina bar, healing items leave the player temporarily vulnerable while being used, and each weapon has a specific range or attacking speed. All of these elements combine to present situations where the player must take a deliberate, meticulous approach to every battle and the game quickly punishes those who try to rush in to any situation. Regardless of how much planning the player invests, though, she can expect to die in *Dark Souls*. A lot.[35]

The weight and deliberation of player combat is a sharp contrast to the game's overall story, which is vague, indirect, and often hidden within small details in item descriptions or obtuse allusions in conversations with NPCs (non-playable characters). At the start of the game, the disembodied narrator tells the player about a "chosen undead" who can relight the first flame and banish the darkness that has begun to threaten the stability of this world.[36] After a short introductory area that teaches the player basic gameplay mechanics, the player is dropped into the center of Lordran without much direction and she must find her way through this universe on her own. The intricate level design and innovative shortcuts create an interlocking network of unique areas characterized by their own visual design while still feeling part of the same

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series have their own stories and virtual worlds. I have chosen to specifically focus on *Dark Souls* because it was the first game in the series to receive widespread commercial and critical success (due in part to its multi-platform release across the Xbox 360, PlayStation 3 and PC, whereas *Demon's Souls* was a PlayStation 3-exclusive). I will only discuss my experiences playing *Dark Souls* for the sake of simplicity but many of the ideas expressed in this examination are entirely applicable to other games in the *Souls* series.

35 In some sections, death is inevitable. While exploring the Duke's Archives area, the player is thrown into a fight that cannot be won. Once defeated, the player wakes up in a prison beneath this area and must battle their way back to the upper levels.

36 On its most basic level, the story of *Dark Souls* revolves around Lord Gwyn, the god of fire who organized an army with several other gods to defeat the dragons that once ruled the world. After many generations of prosperity in Lordran, an impending darkness has begun to creep into the kingdom (the same darkness that has caused the undead to roam the world). Lord Gwyn has gone made trying to stave off this darkness and now it is up to the player to either re-light the "first flame" to hold off the darkness a bit longer or to exhaust the flame and let the inevitable cycle between light and dark run its course.

universe. As GameTrailers.com put it in their video review, "[t]he world becomes a wormy apple, and you the worm, linking disparate zones into an exquisite jigsaw puzzle" where each new area or shortcut simultaneously adds a sense of coherence to this virtual kingdom while making the player's role therein even more hazy (GameTrailers, "Dark"). While the game occasionally guides the player to certain areas in order to receive plot-specific items (especially in the first few hours of gameplay), she is mostly free to traverse Lordran and slowly uncover its lore at her own pace.

Dark Souls purposefully plays with this tension between suffocatingly-tight gameplay mechanics and the disorienting process of stumbling through Lordran without any clearly-defined narrative objectives. Fights where every stab, roll, and shield block have massive significance are framed by exploring a kingdom where it is never quite clear what the player should be doing or why things are the way they are. This tension between order and chaos, between purpose and meaninglessness, is most explicitly manifested in the game's unique online features. Despite being considered a multiplayer game, *Dark Souls* eschews the persistent, synchronous world of many online RPGs. Instead of having a shared world where dozens or even hundreds of players co-exist in the same gamespace simultaneously, the virtual world of *Dark Souls* is a lonely, desolate place where the presence of other players is seen through traces and residues of their actions.[37] For instance, the player will often come across bloodstains on the ground during her travels. In interacting with these stains, the player will see a ghostly silhouette that re-enacts another player's final moments before dying. These silhouettes might show

[37] In popular MMORPGs, such as *World of Warcraft* or *EVE Online*, players all co-exist within the same gamespace in real time. This means that one can literally see other players running around the same virtual world. This format also allows for large-scale social arrangements (such as coordinating raiding groups that can consistent of dozens of players) which require highly-coordinated communication. As I will demonstrate, *Dark Souls* rejects this idea of a persistent, commonly shared universe in favor of a gamespace where player-to-player interaction happens through radically constricted and indirect means.

another player frantically battling an invisible enemy before eventually succumbing to this foe or even falling to their death while trying to cross particularly treacherous terrain.[38] There are also moments where silhouettes of other avatars will momentarily come into existence while the player is exploring or replenishing their health at one of the many bonfires scattered throughout the world.[39]

The most immediate and, in many ways, most impactful, player-to-player interactions occur through a unique messaging system wherein players can leave notes on the ground that provide hints or warnings. If possessing an Orange Guidance Soapstone, the player can leave a message comprised of pre-determined phrases that include actions and allusions to the environment. For example, the messaging system provides general phrases such as "Look out for..." or "Be wary of..." that can be connected to generalized descriptors such as "Ambush" or "Trap." In addition to leaving messages, the player can also rate messages left by others. The general assumption is that higher-rated messages are the most productive and, consequently, the game's programming will keep these well-received messages in the world longer compared to lower-rated advice. While this system can be abused—it only takes one message that proclaims "Try jumping" next to a cliff to make new players suspicious of anonymous tips—the highly structured nature of these messages is designed to help rather than hurt. In other words, the ready-made phrases offered to message-writers are geared towards informing and, more often than not, the highest-rated messages throughout the game offer substantial advice. Just as the exploration *Dark Souls* exists as an almost paradoxical combination of meaningful actions within

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[38] Enemies are not rendered in these re-enactments, so the player only sees another player's avatar responding to invisible threats. While omitting enemies could easily be due to system constraints, the image of another person fighting off unseen threats adds a haunting element to these re-enactments insofar as the player knows a threat must be nearby but she is unaware of what shape it will take.

[39] Bonfires operate as checkpoints where the player can regain their health, level up their character with experience gained from defeating enemies, and offer a brief reprieve from exhausting battles with enemies. In typical *Dark Souls* sadism, though, resting at bonfires also respawns all non-boss enemies.

a world where meaning is never specified, the mechanics governing player-to-player interactions combines highly-specific, targeted engagements (i.e., messages comprised of pre-determined phrases or death re-enactments that reproduce a definitive moment of failure for another player) with constant reminders that the ghostly player community within this game is always just out of communicative reach (such as when the player catches momentary glimpses of others resting at bonfires or exploring on their own).

Based on these multiplayer mechanics, the kingdom of Lordran might be characterized as a space of non-encounters, insofar as most player interaction happens through indirect, fleeting, and asynchronous exchanges that lend themselves to an overwhelming feeling of isolation. As Keza McDonald notes in her IGN.com review of the game, this isolation can have an immediate and almost guttural impact on the player, noting how "30 hours in [to the game], stuck in an underground poisonous swamp, you'll feel like you'd give anything just to see the sun again. *Dark Souls*'s design is so consistently dark and twisted that it actually starts to encroach on your mental well-being after extended play" (McDonald, "Dark"). And yet, in spite of design decisions that might elicit a sense of isolation, we can also see how communal, collaborative learning practices are programmed into the very architecture of *Dark Souls.* As I mentioned in my previous chapter, video games have the ability to teach their players how to undergo the necessary physical or psychological self-modifying practices in order to mediate gameplay experiences and *Dark Souls* is no different. Death re-enactments found in bloodstains can warn of possible dangers ahead and scripted player-generated messages are tailored towards collaboration and co-learning. However, *Dark Souls* is unique in that it actively integrates the player community into its pedagogical strategies; every success the player accomplishes could give her the necessary information and motivation to leave her own note for others. In a way,

Dark Souls not only teaches the player how to play, it also teaches her how to teach and how to translate her subjective experiences into tightly scripted (yet immensely valuable) advice for others.

This explicit incorporation of the player community into the pedagogical elements of *Dark Souls* stems from Hidetaka Miyazaki, the game's director, and his interest in network theory. In an interview, he described his fascination with networks and the ability to extend personal experiences across a variety of spaces and media:

> When I was in university and later graduate school, I was interested in studying social sciences on the side. At the time, the Internet had really just entered the world. Looking back, it was a very interesting era—a time that really made me think about a lot of things. Of course, I was always playing video games and wasn't a very serious student, so I don't mean to say I'm some kind of expert, but I think I was influenced in a way. […] I find network systems to be very interesting, both in general and when applied to games. Whether it's an experience in a game or some kind of value, it can be expanded across a multitude of layers. This may sound a bit dramatic, but I feel that I'm very lucky to be able to create games in an era like this. (Zefha)

It is safe to say that Miyazaki succeeded in using the structure of networked societies to expand personal experiences "across a multitude of layers" given the fact that the *Dark Soul*s player community is just as dedicated to creating information resources (both within and beyond the game) as traditional online RPGs which emphasize real-time communication and in-game social organization among players.[40] For the purposes of this chapter, I want to take up this connection

[40] Miyazaki famously toyed with players' incentive to uncover the secrets of *Dark Souls*. At the beginning of every new game, the player can choose from one of several starting gifts which range from a few extra bombs to

between the collaborative teaching practices surrounding the virtual gamespaces of *Dark Souls* and the structural features of networked societies by asking: how do the pedagogical strategies that constitute the internal logic of *Dark Souls* and its player community resonate with the external logic surrounding this game's current historical and material circumstances? In other words, how can the unique collaborative features of *Dark Souls*—that is, the ability to integrate players into the pedagogical strategies that help structure a virtual world and influence the self-modifying practices of others therein—help us explore other issues surrounding shared learning practices within networked societies? To answer these questions, I will examine the aesthetic experience of playing *Dark Souls* and the process of relying on the pedagogical contributions of anonymous players in order to further unpack the internal logic that constitutes the asynchronous player-to-player interactions throughout the game. As I will demonstrate, these highly restrictive player-to-player engagements resonate with the theme of *vulnerability*, not simply loss or isolation, which can reflect our current position within an always-on, digitally-connected networked culture. Through the work of James Brown, Emmanuel Levinas, and Jeffrey Nealon, I will illustrate how the vulnerability experienced by players within *Dark Souls* is symptomatic of the ethical predicament we face while living in a networked society, a society where we are continually subjected to the interventions—sometimes startling, sometimes unwarranted—of other people and even automated programs. In using the theories of Brown, Levinas, and Nealon to come to a more nuanced understanding of ethics vis-a-vis networked cultures, I will then turn to the pedagogical practices of the *Dark Souls* player community—specifically, fan-made videos

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a ring that slightly boosts health to the mysterious Pendant that has no clear purpose or benefit. In an interview with Japanese gaming magazine, Famitsu, Miyazaki said that he would personally choose the Pendant or no starting gift at all. This comment would create a wave of speculation among *Dark Souls* players about the Pendant's larger narrative or gameplay significance. Miyazaki later confessed that he "actually had a little bit of an intention to play a prank" with the Pendant, given that he knew players would obsess over his comments and try to decipher this useless item's supposed significance (Stanton, "Dark").

designed to help other players explore the unique narrative aspects of *Dark Souls*—in order to demonstrate how these videos gesture towards new conceptualizations of shared learning experiences in virtual spaces and the ethical consequences thereof. I will then conclude by explaining how the learning practices of the *Dark Souls* community can be used to re-approach common theories regarding learning practices within highly specialized communities of knowledge. The goal of this chapter is to articulate a theory of "networked pedagogies," by which I mean pedagogical strategies that resonate with the unique ethical and political dimensions of digitally-networked cultures. To begin, though, I want to push back on common characterizations that frame the world of *Dark Souls* through loss, isolation, and failure.

3.2 VULNERABILITY, EXPOSURE, AND ETHICS

As I mentioned previously, the social interactions that happen within Lordran can be characterized by non-encounters, traces, and residues, all reminders that a larger community does exist yet still remains beyond the horizon of the player. However, there still exists the possibility of encountering others in a direct, albeit highly restrictive, manner. Throughout the game, the player can pick up an item called "Humanity." If the player consumes Humanity, she gains a large amount of souls (the game's version of experience points used to level up character attributes) and has the ability to temporarily restore her status to full human (she begins the game as a wandering undead and returns to undead form if she ever dies while human). While in human form, the player is able to see "summoning signs" on the ground and touching one of these signs will call up another real-life player to temporarily join the game in real time. This temporary co-op partner can interact with the world just as the player does, attacking enemies,

casting spells, and even healing the player in dangerous situations. While having a partner is an immense benefit throughout the game, especially boss battles, restoring oneself to human also makes one vulnerable. When in human form, others can invade the player's world as a Red Phantom. When invaded by another person the game locks down the current area, preventing the player from escaping and turning the game into a one-on-one deathmatch.[41] Unless the player can hide from her invader for a ten-minute time limit, she must fight to the death. In its own diabolical way, *Dark Souls* continually reminds the player that others also populate its virtual world yet punishes her for trying to initiate face-to-face (or avatar-to-avatar) contact with them; creating the potential for cooperation and success also invites the threat of invasion and death. Poetically speaking, to become human within the game is to open oneself up to both help and harm by the hands of others.

I bring up these unique player-to-player mechanics because they introduce the interrelated themes of vulnerability and exposure, and how these concepts are fundamental to one's first-hand gameplay experiences. It is easy to see how becoming human is a vulnerable moment because it exposes the player to unwanted invaders. However, the non-encounters I discussed in the previous section can also be characterized as byproducts of one's vulnerable exposure. The player is vulnerable to the user-created messages left on the ground insofar as she must gauge the validity of these anonymous statements based on their ratings. Conversely, if she chooses to leave a note for others, this message is left exposed to the world, open for anyone to read, it yet it is impossible for the player to fully witness the impact this message might have had

[41] Players do have an incentive to invade the worlds of others. If a Red Phantom successfully kills the host of an invaded world, she is rewarded with more Humanity items. If a player successfully wards off an invading Red Phantom, she is rewarded with a substantial amount of souls. There is also a complex system wherein players can join "covenants" (in-game allegiances to a fictional faction within the *Dark Souls* universe) that dictate which worlds they invade or join. While it would be interesting to explore the ethical concerns surrounding these covenants, I want to focus mainly on the creation of educational resources within the player community.

on someone else. Furthermore, the player often relies on these messages or the bloodstains of others because she knows she can be exposed to the unknown threats or traps that reside around the next corner; running across a message that warns of a nearby ambush can sow seeds of paranoia and bring up fears of one's imminent doom even if the player suspects this message is a ruse. More broadly, the mere presence of other peoples' ghosts reminds the player that she is vulnerable to the rules and algorithmic infrastructure that systematically deny her the communicative resources afforded by other online RPGs. And yet, these ghosts can also point towards the player's unrecognized exposure to others, seeing as the player's avatar can be projected into the gamespace of others but the game will never announce when this is happening. Hence, both the non-encounters and actual encounters with other players stem from an initial moment of extreme vulnerability and exposure to others even if this theme eventually manifests itself in sentiments of loss, isolation, or failure (sentiments that are fundamental to the aesthetic experience of *Dark Souls* but are not the ultimate determining factors that guide player actions).[42] In short, sentiments of isolation or loss emerge as a result of the player's vulnerability towards the harsh world of Lordran and an uncontrollable exposure towards the other players who traverse its dangerous landscapes.

In following Alexander Galloway's argument that playing video games can operate as an allegory for navigating social reality in today's digitally-connected, globalist paradigm, I want to claim that these themes of vulnerability and exposure are fundamentally connected to the nature of social interactions that occur through and around virtual spaces within networked societies

[42] I harp on this issue of vulnerability because I feel as though it resonates deeply with the cultural logic and historical circumstances surrounding *Dark Souls* without falling victim to cynicism or pessimism. Put differently, understanding *Dark Souls* only in terms of failure or isolation might prove useful in contextualizing the nature of social relations in networked societies today yet this approach would assume failure to be default condition of the world. Much like how Walter Benjamin's angel of history needs to see the world in ruins before his feet before a truly revolutionary future can be envisioned, relying on a discourse of failure to understand the cultural logic of a particular historical moment runs the risk of sacrificing the hopeful, inspirational qualities of yesterday or today for the sake of trying to reach an ideal future (Benjamin, *Illuminations*).

(Galloway, *Gaming*). That is to say, I want to describe how the vulnerability experienced by the player within *Dark Souls* gestures towards the consequences of living within a highly-interconnected networked culture (a characterization that will eventually allow me to touch upon the larger issue of ethics and how ethical responsibility characterizes the teaching practices within the *Dark Souls* player community). James Brown's theory of "ethical programs" can illuminate this connection between vulnerability, exposure, and the structural features of contemporary networked cultures. He argues that the always-on nature of the digital devices that structure our daily lives has created a situation where we are continuously subject to unsolicited encounters with others, be it through email spam, social media messages, or the occasional wrong phone number (Brown, *Ethical*). This is an unavoidable cost, though, as networks and networked societies are fundamentally characterized by their interconnected and open nature (see also Castells, *Rise*; Galloway and Thacker, *Exploit*).[43] Networks are "open" in the sense that each node within a network must be open to communication or information dissemination from other nodes or even from other forces beyond the network.[44] Consequently, the always-on, always-open nature of living in a networked society means that we are always vulnerable and exposed to the influence of an externalized Other (be it other people, devices, or software that utilize, exploit, or simply reinforce our interconnected status).

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[43] The theory of "the network" within English, Rhetoric, and Composition studies is rich and varied. Authors such as Helen Foster examine how a discourse of networks (and the underlying issues of topographical interconnectivity or challenging simplified subject/object binaries) can help instructors rethink the role of writing, literacy acquisition, and information distribution today (Foster, *Networked*). However, offering a critical overview of how scholars have approached networks within English studies would be beyond the scope of this chapter. Instead, I am building upon Brown's characterization of networks, which is highly influenced by the likes of Alexander Galloway and Eugene Thacker.

[44] To clarify, networks are open insofar as their structural functioning requires each node (be it a human actor, anonymous program, or otherwise) to be capable of receiving and transmitting information. This discourse of openness does not mean that networks are fundamentally liberating; Galloway and Thacker even argue that networks are capable of decentralizing power relations and channeling resources for the sake of governmental efficiency rather than liberation or democratic progress. Instead, the openness of networks illustrates how their structural functioning will always try to incorporate and channel information (as opposed to censoring or denying it). This inclination to circulate and disseminate information provides the foundation for Brown's theory of ethical programs.

Brown uses the heritage of ethical theory in order to begin theorizing how we might interpret this openness towards an externalized Other.[45] More specifically, he turns towards the work of Emmanuel Levinas and a characterization of "ethics" that does not rely on grand metaphysical gestures towards transcendent principals such as truth, justice or morality. For Levinas, one's psychological existence is characterized by an inescapable and, in many cases, unwarranted exposure to an externalized Other (Levinas, "Philosophy"). The initial encounter with an Other surpasses any attempt at categorization or thematization; upon first recognizing our exposure to the Other, there is a momentary hesitation that stems from our inability to immediately and directly connect to this Other in a true intersubjective relationship. Despite this inability to engage in an intersubjective connection, we still feel compelled to react towards (or, at least, react in the face of) this Other. Levinas argues that this process of encountering the Other is always characterized by a sense of responsibility, not necessarily the sense of feeling responsible for the Other's actions but in the sense of needing to respond to our own vulnerability to the Other in some way. In this sense, the notion of ethical responsibility is not necessarily concerned with how we hold ourselves liable for the Other (although questions of liability can stem from a Levinasian ethics) but, rather how we respond to our own vulnerability and exposure towards an Other that exists beyond our comprehension.

Brown connects this unavoidable exposure to the Other and the underlying sense of responsibility back to the vulnerability of residing within networks:

> Prior to the large-scale availability of networked computational devices, Levinas described the relation that defines networked life. Levinas likens this predicament to that of the hostage, and he suggests that if "we" as humans share anything at

[45] Brown notes how this ethical conundrum regarding the Other is not a recent development. However, he agrees that digital information systems have exponentially intensified ethical concerns surrounding our openness to others, automated programs, and information that both these parties are prone to distributing.

> all, it is this experience of being held hostage by another that resists representation, that arrives over and beyond our attempts to make sense of that other. Who can deny that this phenomenological description of existence maps directly onto networked life, which is utterly defined by the arrival of others? (Brown 2)

In response to the unavoidable "arrival of others," Brown derives a notion of "ethical programs" which are the computational, linguistic, or discursive scripts that "enact rules, procedures, and heuristics about how (or whether) interactions should happen" between self and others (Brown 6). In other words, ethical programs denote how we permit, foster, or actively deny social relations between ourselves, those around us, and even those who are not-yet-encountered, based on our predisposed vulnerability and responsibility towards the Other within networked societies. These ethical programs can be human—meaning, they can be linguistic codes that are communal and social in nature—or even inhuman—in the sense that computer programs can automate the type of social relations that are allowed to emerge. More importantly, though, these programs are not absolute rules but processes that are continually subject to modification, adaptation, and even exploitation based on our own critical reflections (see also, Porter, "Rhetoric").[46]

Brown does an excellent job connecting Levinas's theories of responsibility and exposure back to the current conditions surrounding networked life today. However, I want to push further with how the vulnerability towards an Other fundamentally shapes one's aesthetic experiences within or around virtual spaces. Brown's quasi-materialist approach helps us understand the structural and socio-cultural issues surrounding ethics in networked societies but I want to couple

[46] James Porter is also interested in the role of ethics when discussing writing or, more broadly, information exchange within digital information networks. However, Porter frames his discussion using traditional terminology associated with literacy studies—that is, an emphasis on textuality, writer, and reader—whereas Brown is more focused on a general notion of "programs" that can be both sociolinguistic and computational in nature.

this approach with a sensitivity to the role of aesthetic experience (seeing as my prior characterization of video games as subjectivity machines demands that we pay attention to the self-modifying practices that players must undertake in order to mediate the aesthetic experience of gameplay). The work of Jeffrey Nealon can complement a theory of ethical programs by reinforcing how personal aesthetic experiences stem from one's responsibility towards the Other. In reviewing Levinas's concept of responsibility, Nealon discusses how this idea directly impacts our sense of personal identity and agency:

> There is, in other words, neither a determinism nor a nihilism in Levinasian responsibility; there is agency, but there is always something prior, a hesitation, a marking or inscription that necessarily makes subjective agency a *re*making or *re*inscription of existing sociolinguistic codes. […] This emphasis calls our attention to the *specificities* of certain kinds of *subjection*: what makes us unique is not our personal qualities (the ways we can rise above other people's definitions of us) but precisely the qualities of our subjections. Perhaps what we require is not an *identity politics* of who we are, but an *alterity politics* of how we've come to be who we are. (Nealon, *Alterity* 51; original emphasis)

Both Nealon and Brown agree, albeit in different ways, that we should avoid treating the Other in anthropomorphic terms or assuming that we can ever engage in a true intersubjective, unmediated connection with the Other. For Brown, the Other is sometimes inhuman and therefore cannot be treated as a self-aware consciousness, or the Other is anonymous and can never be encountered face-to-face. For Nealon, the Other can never be fully comprehended due to the limitations of discursive communicative practices as well as the idea that identity itself (be

it ours or that of the Other) is always in a state of flux and can never be fully apprehended.[47] Rather than mourn the inability to ever arrive at an unmediated connection with the Other, Nealon uses this opportunity to turn back towards the interiority of personal experience and begin to question how our vulnerability towards the Other (be it another person or an anonymous system of power) shapes our own subject positions and personal agency. That is to say, Nealon's theory of ethical responsibility asks: how does the aesthetic experience of our own exposure and vulnerability help us understand the ways in which we are subjected to—the ways in which we become subjects through—systems and structures surrounding us?

For the purpose of this chapter, I want to couple Brown's theory of ethical programs with Nealon's emphasis on the aesthetic experience of alterity. Ethical programs allow us to identify the preconditions and presumptions underlying social interactions within digitally-mediated networked spaces—that is, the unavoidable vulnerability and exposure towards an Other—without over-determining these social interactions based on technological or ideological biases. An emphasis on aesthetics can help us see how ethical programs not only allow us to negotiate our vulnerability towards the Other in networked societies but also how we make sense of the systems—be they technological, socio-linguistic, or otherwise—that we are subject to. Hence, my argument is that ethical programs are not only procedural and structure (i.e., ethical programs focus on the processes through which we establish social relations), they are also aesthetic and personal (i.e., they help us make sense of our personal experiences and the structures that we are subject to). To further unpack my argument, I will be looking at a prominent YouTube streamer,

[47] Nealon is greatly indebted to the work of Judith Butler and her theory of performativity (Butler, *Bodies*). In short, Butler argues that identity is a collection of performative discursive practices. However, the very notion that those performative discursive practices can be repeated or re-contextualized entails that these acts must necessarily be incomplete and always open to reinscription. Hence, sociolingustic acts, and the identities that stem from them, can never be fully arrived at or solidified.

VaatiVidya, and his self-produced videos dedicated to the fictional backstory of *Dark Souls*.[48] These educational videos, as I will demonstrate, operate as ethical programs insofar as they provide the conditions for rethinking the systems or structures that players are subject to while exploring virtual gamespaces and, furthermore, help re-align the social relations that exist between, and within, players themselves. To begin, I want to briefly discuss the standard educational resources created by the *Dark Souls* community before examining how the videos of VaatiVidya depart from these conventions.

3.3 LEARNING THROUGH LORE

Like many RPGs, *Dark Souls* has a wealth of user-generated resources that are specifically aimed at educating players about technical gameplay mechanics. These include online wikis with extensive data on equipment statistics, message boards for debating the effectiveness of different gameplay strategies, and highly detailed walkthroughs that give step-by-step instructions for new players to follow. As Constance Steinkuehler argues, these types of online resources can act as productive territories for cultivating "habits of mind" that allow individuals to cultivate the necessary intellectual skills for creating, and even interrogating, larger epistemological worldviews held by certain communities of practice (Steinkuehler, "Massively"; Steinkuehler and Duncan, "Scientific"). In other words, these user-generated resources endow players with the

[48] VaatiVidya is not unique in his lore-based videos seeing as there are many other popular streamers who offer their own narrations and interpretations regarding the *Dark Souls* universe. These streamers include EpicNameBro, DaveControlLive, and SilverMont, all of which host respective YouTube channels that undertake projects similar to VaatiVidya's. Despite the similarities between these different streamers, I have chosen to focus specifically on VaatiVidya due to his popularity. He is currently the most popular of *Dark Souls* streamers, acquiring over 471 thousand subscribers and over 50 million video views on his YouTube channel (as of November, 2015). Additionally, focusing on one prominent *Dark Souls* fan will prevent this chapter from becoming too broad in scope.

necessary information and strategies to engage in highly specialized communities of knowledge and the worldviews that said communities harbor when sifting through large amounts of empirical data or negotiating social relations within virtual spaces. While these user-generated resources demonstrate the in-depth collaboration and critical debate that occurs within or around virtual gamespaces, much of these resources strive to arrive at some form of technical mastery or personal agency over a set of gameplay mechanics.[49] More simply, these educational resources are fundamentally goal-oriented and solutions-based; all information and criticisms thereof are aimed at locating the most efficient or effective gameplay strategies, which, in turn, will allow players to overcome more and more difficult obstacles. Even resources dedicated to narrative exposition of many RPGs—mainly, wikis and online videos that stitch together the oft-complex lore surrounding a particular game—are written with an emphasis on clarity and continuity.[50] In this sense, even narrative-focused resources routinely operate on some form of logo-centricism seeing as they are meant to dissolve any uncertainty regarding the sequence of events within a specific in-game universe.

Dark Souls is no different from a majority of RPG communities. Three of the more popular user-based wikis (darksouls.wikidot.com, darksouls.wiki.fextralife.com, and darksouls.wikia.com) are highly goal-oriented with most pages dedicated to the game's infamously difficult and complex mechanics. Even the story-based sections on these wikis strive

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[49] Steinkuehler has also conducted research regarding the role of critical ethical reflection in gameplay experiences (Steinkuehler and Simkins, "Critical"). However, this work on ethics assumes that video games rely on traditional forms of narrative exposition, meaning Steinkuehler uses games that have straightforward storytelling procedures where the player can make a visible and immediate impact within a virtual world. While this work on ethics is very useful, it heavily relies on games that utilize the same type of explicit narrative worldbuilding which *Dark Souls* vehemently denies. Consequently, Steinkuehler's work in this area is not entirely applicable to this specific examination.

[50] For more on typical user-generated educational resources, see WoWpedia.com (a user-generated wiki for the *World of Warcraft* universe) or the *Lore of the Cards* YouTube series produced by Six Gamers (which gives extensive backstory for the characters referenced in *Hearthstone*, a collectible card game based upon the *Warcraft* universe).

for comprehension as they try to piece together the story behind Lordran based on excerpts from item descriptions, conversations with NPCs, and visual cues from within the gameworld itself. However, these attempts at narrating the lore of *Dark Souls* can only go so far. Miyazaki, the game's director, made sure that the narrative was left incomplete thereby forcing the player to fill in certain narrative gaps with her own imagination and interpretations. This deliberate push towards personal interpretation helped cultivate a small yet highly vocal collection of fans dedicated to interpreting, not simply clarifying, the elusive events that led to Lordran's decrepitude. One of the most prominent fans that discuss *Dark Souls* lore goes by the gamertag VaatiVidya (real name, Michael Samuels). While VaatiVidya does offer videos that cover more traditional elements, such as strategies for acquiring high-level items, he also produces videos which extend beyond didactic tutorials and, instead, open up new avenues for exploring the ethical considerations underlying one's first-hand gameplay experiences.

VaatiVidya's videos combine real-time gameplay footage, visual overlays that target in-game cues or item descriptions, and voice-over narrations. He also deploys a machinima-style approach, meaning he uses in-game character models to reenact certain events for dramatic effect.[51] More importantly, VaatiVidya's work demonstrates the ethical concerns surrounding Nealon's theory of alterity and personal agency by exploring how the player's vulnerable exposure towards the systems that comprise *Dark Souls* (both in terms of mechanics and narrative) can be used to rethink the symbolic significance of the actions she undertakes in a virtual gamespace. In one video, VaatiVidya discusses the mysterious goddess of sin, Velka,

[51] VaatiVidya has recently been the target of plagiarism accusations with several fans pointing out the cinematic and voice-over similarities between VaatiViday's videos and those of others (Klepek, "Plagiarism"). VaatiVidya has since admitted using other sources for the inspiration behind his voice-over narrations and apologized for not properly citing these influences. Several other streamers within the *Dark Souls* community have weighed in with their own opinions, some of which were highly critical of VaatiVidya and some acknowledged the unavoidable risks that streamers run when participating in a community premised upon collaboration and sharing information. For more on changing notions of authorship and originality in virtual spaces, see Johndan Johnson-Eilola and Stuart Selber's theory of "assemblage" (Johnson-Eilola and Selber, "Plagiarism").

who is referenced several times throughout the game but is never directly encountered by the player. VaatiVidya speculates that Velka is responsible for bringing the player to Lordran and has a role in preparing her for the final battle with Lord Gwyn.[52] However, this theory is a bit problematic. On the one hand, Velka should have some inclination to stave off the darkness and inevitable Age of Man seeing as she is a goddess. On the other hand, her ambiguous status as the goddess of sin and retribution means she could be inclined to force the gods to repent for their trespasses. In the voice-over for this video, VaatiVidya offers one interpretation for this conundrum:

> The "Vow of Silence" miracle [an in-game spell the player can acquire] describes Velka as a rogue deity, suggesting she has no allegiance save the hunting down of sinners. Perhaps by taking you to Lordran, she's unleashing you upon the gods for their sins. The chosen undead [the player's character] certainly is a nightmare for any gods he encounters, attacking them relentlessly until he succeeds, not even letting death stop him. I think having someone unkillable come at you over and over again is pretty good punishment. (Samuels, "Dark")

In speculating as to why Velka would actively help the player, VaatiVidya offers a haunting re-framining of the player's own participation in the game's lore. Rather than view the player's avatar as a tabula rasa upon which the player can project her own experiences or intentions, VaatiVidya depicts the player's character as an amoral and unstoppable killing machine that is just as frightening as the other creatures that populate Lordran. Now, the player is no longer a source of agency within the game but, rather, a figure that is subject to larger systems, characters,

[52] At the onset of the game, the player must escape an undead asylum, which is completely separated from the rest of the game overworld. After defeating this area's boss, the player is transported from the asylum to Lordran proper by means of a giant crow. Based on in-game item descriptions and the art style of several different enemies, VaatiVidya deduces that crows are symbols of Velka and, hence, reinforces the theory that she was responsible for transporting the player into Lordran.

and events that extend beyond her immediate comprehension. By re-narrating the player as a terrifying instrument of divine retribution, VaatiVidya calls our attention to our own vulnerability towards narrative and gameplay systems that fundamentally subject-ify the player in ways that may not be immediately evident. The depiction of player-as-monster, in other words, demonstrates how the player's actions can be re-framed through a critical narration that departs from an over-emphasis on agency or technical mastery and, instead, turns our attention towards the structures that endow our actions with symbolic significance. Granted, there is still a degree of agency for the player—she is, after all, required to undertake certain actions in the game in order to progress regardless of her comprehension of Velka's machinations—but VaatiVidya's video attempts to create a momentary hesitation or deliberation that forces the player to rethink the discourse used to characterize the agency she attributes to herself or her avatar.[53]

This narrative strategy of rethinking the systems that subject-ify one's actions and attempting to spur a momentary hesitation or critical deliberation within a player is a reoccurring theme in VaatiVidya's other videos. When discussing the story behind Knight Lautrec, an untrustworthy NPC who attempts to kill the few friendly characters the player meets, VaatiVidya declares:

> Knight Lautrec looks out for himself. If we are to judge him, then we should count our own sins first. You, who invades [the world of other players] for

[53] This examination of the subject-ification we experience via our own exposure towards outward structures, people, or events should not be seen as contradicting my claims regarding subjectivity formation in Chapter 2. In these videos, VaatiViday is calling attention to how the self-modifying practices that mediate our gameplay experiences in *Dark Souls* can be used to rethink the social relations that exist between ourselves, virtual gamespaces, and the others (both human and computer-controlled) that inhabit them. I will speak more about the connection between this chapter and the previous one in the following section.

> Humanity. You, who kills simply because something is in your way or because they have something important to you. (Samuels, "Lautrec")

This voice-over is coupled with gameplay footage that shows a typical player undertaking morally-questionable actions, such as killing innocent NPCs or invading the world of other players in order to get valuable items. Rather than simply discuss Lautrec in terms of strategies (i.e., what gameplay interactions the player might have with him) or in terms of grand moral evaluations, VaatiVidya begins by using Lautrec to reflect upon how the player might rationalize her actions given the parameters of the game's story and mechanics. As with the previous video, these narrative strategies seek to evoke a moment of internal reflection on the part of the player in order to reconsider how her actions are conditioned by larger systems, and this strategy is punctuated by the video's final lines when VaatiVidya asks whether the player will revive a friendly character killed by this murderous knight "or will you give in to the same temptations as Lautrec? Who wants to go Hollow, after all?"[54] Throughout this video, VaatiVidya refuses to come to any definitive conclusion about the nature of the player's actions (or even a stable judgment on Knight Lautrec's character). Instead, he calls attention to the player's ethical responsibility—that is, her vulnerable exposure towards the Other, both in terms of the characters she meets within the game as well as the inhuman programmatic game structures that govern her actions while playing—and provides the conditions for personal reflection without overdetermining the outcome of these deliberations based on an absolute moral judgment.

This appeal to speculation, interpretation, and personal deliberation is a hallmark of VaatiVidya's videos in particular and the *Dark Souls* community in general. In an online interview, VaatiVidya further clarifies how the unique narrative strategies of the game demand

[54] In the game, a "Hollow" is an undead who has lost all memories of being human and has gone insane. While the player's character can never get to this state of insanity, several of the NPCs throughout the game express their fears about "going Hollow."

an interpretive element on the part of players. When discussing the breadth of other lore-based streamers, he states:

> There are definitely many people in the *Dark Souls* community worth mentioning! I think everyone has different talents, and everyone contributes something unique. EpicNameBro [another prominent YouTube streamer] is great at speculation, and I agree with most of what he says because he has logical reasoning behind it. But even if I didn't agree, I don't think there would be anything wrong with that! You fill in the gaps in *Dark Souls* with your own theories, and that's what makes it so great. My videos are my own sensationalist interpretation and I encourage people to come up with their own idea of what the story means to them. (Carlson, "YouTube")

Here, VaatiVidya makes an explicit connection between the internal mechanics of the game and the influence these mechanics have on the formation of external social relations; the nature of *Dark Souls*'s storytelling demands individual interpretation while, at the same time, encouraging collaboration among community members. This unique combination of personal speculation and collaboration has a direct impact on the player-to-player conversations within message boards and online forums. In one message board post, a player admits to missing most of the plot speculation during her first playthrough and asks where she might find more information surrounding the game's story. Another fan writes in response:

> ENB [EpicNameBro] and VaatiVydia are good lore buffs, I prefer Vaati though since his videos are based more around what the game implies. I think ENB's lore videos, while good and I enjoy them, have a little more speculation in them than actual facts. Still though, every point of view from different heads putting

> all their knowledge together could give us just that one answer we may be seeking. Can't tell you how many times a thumbed up comment on YouTube has given me some more material to research." (SelftoSelf, "Some")

I find this response interesting insofar as it identifies the parallels between a critical self-reflection spurred by VaatiVidya's videos and the formation of new real-world social relations surrounding the game; this poster articulates how the experience of rethinking her position within the world of *Dark Souls* (i.e., rethinking the lore that grants her actions symbolic significance) has led her to rethink her role within a larger community characterized by "different heads putting all their knowledge together." The last sentence of this post only further reinforces the unique similarities between in-game actions, critical speculations and extra-game social relations. Just as the player is left vulnerable and exposed to anonymous messages or potential invasions while traversing a virtual gamespace, this poster is "vulnerable" to the YouTube comments she almost haphazardly stumbles upon insofar as these comments can send her down a new path of speculation.

In claiming that VaatiVidya's emphasis on the player's ethical responsibilities within the game correlates to a rethinking of the real-world social relations surrounding the game, I am attempting to demonstrate how the theme of vulnerable exposure manifests itself across a variety of different player practices. A cultural logic of vulnerability structures first-hand gameplay experiences via the game's mechanics and narrative, and this logic can be taken as an object-of-examination within VaatiVidya's lore videos, which, in turn, can help other players rethink their position within the game *and* within a larger player community. Hence, a critical deliberation of one's ethical responsibility within Lordran can coincide with (or even foster) a personal reflection of one's ethical responsibility within a real-world community. This interrelation can be

seen in several forum conversations wherein new players have been inspired to participate in the community after watching the videos of VaatiVidya and others. In one message board post, a new member asks for advice on how to begin producing her own lore-based videos and another member responds:

> Well, for starters, look at existing lore videos, and either A. Avoid those topics, since they've already been covered or B, Offer a DIFFERENT opinion on those topics, provided you have information to back it up. Worst case scenario, ask for suggestions on what people want to know more about (which I guess this [message board] topic is). I consider myself a pretty big lore buff, but on that note, perhaps you could dig out as much information on what exactly the undead are, how hollowing works, and how different cultures view the undead. (HolyGrave, "Dark"; original emphasis)

In offering advice for creating more lore-based videos, this comment reinforces the collaborative nature of *Dark Souls* player-generated resources; she suggests that the original poster "ask for suggestions" or even take a quasi-anthropological approach by making videos about "how different cultures view the undead." As with the previous message describing how one player sees herself as part of a larger community working together, this advice re-characterizes the original poster as someone who can contribute to the *Dark Souls* community based on her ability to produce different, innovative, and even highly personal ways of interpreting the narrative elements of the game. In doing so, this online dialog reinforces the connection between taking an ethical examination of a player's in-game actions or persona and the larger, extra-game social relations that stem from these examinations.

To echo Nealon, VaatiVidya's videos and the conversations surrounding them offer narrations of "how we've come to be who we are" by calling attention to the ways in which larger narrative structures can force us to rethink or re-rationalize the consequences of our actions. Put differently, these videos use the aesthetic experience of gameplay (i.e., the story tidbits collected while playing in addition to the actions the player must take in order to progress through the game) as a way to explore how the player is subjected to the narrative and mechanical structures that govern her actions within and beyond a virtual gamespace. On an individual level, VaatiVidya's videos force players to undergo a momentary hesitation and narrative re-structuring that challenges the strive towards personal touted by traditional educational resources (such as online strategy guides dedicated to technical details of *Dark Souls* or other games). In calling attention to our own subject-ification, he problematizes the appeal to personal technical mastery by offering a disturbing recognition of our own manipulation by the game's lore; given the narrative background discussed in these videos, we could say that *Dark Souls* plays us just as much as we play it. On a broader communal level, the conversations spurred from his videos depict a player community capable of rethinking not only the internal social relations within the game but also their position among external social relations. In researching different theories regarding Lordran's lore, players implicitly call attention to their own status as individuals within a highly specialized community of knowledge that relies on collaboration, conversation, and personal deliberation within virtual arenas. Ultimately, the speculative narrations offered by VaatiVidya offer startlingly sentimental interventions that exposes the player's vulnerability towards the systems that extend beyond her present comprehension, both within and beyond the literal gamespaces of *Dark Souls*.

3.4 THE ETHICS OF NETWORKED PEDAGOGIES

To reiterate Brown's claim, ethical programs "enact rules, procedures, and *heuristics* about how (or whether) interactions should happen" in the face of an externalized Other (emphasis added). In this sense, the videos of VaatiVidya operate as ethical programs in both an inter-game and intra-game sense. With regards to the first-hand gameplay experiences of *Dark Souls*, these videos reveal the inter-game "social relations" (i.e., gameplay and narrative structures) that presuppose and interpellate the player, her actions, and the larger significance thereof. With regards to the intra-game community surrounding *Dark Souls*, these videos provide the necessary conditions for creating new social relations founded upon deliberation, interpretation, and collaboration. From both perspectives, VaatiVidya's videos are *heuristics* insofar as they teach the player how social relations surrounding *Dark Souls* can fundamentally shape the interactions she has with her virtual surroundings or the community that is created through them. Put differently, these videos are heuristic not because they teach other players how to act successfully within a virtual gamespace for the sake of technical mastery but, instead, because they offer a foundation for re-learning how we come to be who we are within the virtual space of Lordran and, furthermore, how we can use this knowledge to create a player community premised upon something other than personal mastery of game mechanics. Consequently, these videos are pedagogical but they depict "pedagogy" as a critical narrative that catalogs one's process of coming to terms with her own subject-ification, the ensuing impact that such subjection has on the personal interpretation of one's actions, and how these personal

interpretations can help create a community that is focused on the ethical responsibility they experience via their shared vulnerability within a virtual gamespace.[55]

For the moment, I would like to briefly take a step back and explain how these ideas resonate with my previous chapter on the politics of games and the learning strategies therein before discussing how these player-created videos can further expand my central focus on pedagogy. To reiterate, the phrase "the politics of video games" denotes how the pedagogical strategies of games implicitly or explicitly "teach" the player how to participate in a specific cultural logic via engaging in self-modifying physical and psychological practices. As I have hopefully demonstrated, the gameplay mechanics of *Dark Souls* operates upon the politics of vulnerability and exposure within networked societies; the asynchronous nature of player-to-player interactions gestures towards a cultural logic that views networks as fundamentally open and, consequently, makes us vulnerable to the intrusion of human and nonhuman Others. From the anonymous messages left throughout the world to the threat of invasion by other players to the indirect narrative exposition, *Dark Souls* relentlessly forces the player to face her own vulnerable exposure to a highly fragmented (yet still commonly shared) world.

If the politics of *Dark Souls* describes how the game teaches the player how to participate within an ideological paradigm characterized by vulnerability and exposure, then the pedagogical practices of its player community demonstrate how aesthetic gameplay experiences can influence the ethical nature of the social relations that occur within and around this ideology. As I have just demonstrated, the lore-based videos of VaatiVidya most explicitly demonstrate how a politics of

[55] With regards to Levinas's theory of ethical responsibility, these fan-made videos unpack the larger structures that incite us to respond, either through gameplay actions or personal reflections on the symbolic significance of these actions, while inhabiting a virtual gamespace. Hence, these videos examine our ethical responsibility insofar as they examine how our exposure towards the Other (i.e., in-game mechanics, fictional narratives, NPCs, and even other players) fundamentally shapes how we respond and how such responses resonate with the social relations forged within or beyond the game.

vulnerability or exposure impact the ethical responsibility of the player (i.e., how vulnerability and exposure shape the player's ability to respond to the anonymous or algorithmic Others that comprise a virtual gamespace and, furthermore, how this responsibility can act as the basis for his narrative interpretations). Rather than rely on a didactic and logo-centric style that characterizes other user-generated educational resources, these videos offer a critical narration that re-frames a player's collection of self-modifying gameplay practices in conjunction with the multitude of social relations (that is, the fictional relations that can help contextualize the symbolic significance of the player's actions within Lordran itself as well as a real-world player community) which shape how the player is interprellated and subject-ified. Hence, if the politics of *Dark Souls* denotes the vulnerable exposure we experience within networks, then the ethics of *Dark Souls* denotes how we come to terms with our own respons-ibility amid this exposure and, furthermore, what type of social relations are created through the aesthetic experience of one's vulnerability while playing or even discussing the game. Thus, VaatiVidya and his peers demonstrate how the politics of *Dark Souls* are inseparable from the pedagogical practices of its player community and the ethical underpinnings therein. In short, pedagogy is not only political, it is also ethical. Or, put differently, pedagogy resonates with both the participation in a specific cultural logic as well as with a critical reflection on the social relations that are permitted or denied through this cultural logic.

In concluding, I want to briefly describe how these examples of player-generated pedagogical practices can help us better understand the ways in which we characterize the types of learning that happens within communities of specialized knowledge. In short, I want to ask: how can a theory of pedagogy vis-a-vis ethical responsibility help us better clarify the processes and impact of collaborative learning experiences within communities of highly specialized

knowledge? Traditional approaches to theorizing the learning practices within communities of specialized knowledge tend to emphasize the means by which new members are taught the discursive practices that constitutes a community's communal identity or epistemological worldview. Critics such as Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger argue that a "community of practice" is group of individuals who share a common set of disciplinary goals—often linked to professional concerns or duties—and strategies for overcoming obstacles while trying to achieve these goals (Lave and Wenger, *Situated*). Many communities of practice are constituted by a set of "epistemic frames," which are a collection of discursive practices that implicitly reinforce a particular worldview by creating a hierarchy of information that is deemed relevant or irrelevant (Shaffer, "Epistemic Frames"). More importantly, epistemic frames help new individuals become active members within a given community of practice; by learning how to identify and apply an epistemic frame (i.e., learning how to identify what information is relevant for a given community and the problems it attempts to solve), new members can begin to internalize the practices that constitute a given community and begin to see themselves as active members therein (see also Perkins, *Smart*). In short, the most productive learning experiences are when new members begin to see themselves as reinforcing the values and aims of a specific community they are affiliated with.

This body of scholarship has done an excellent job examining how learning is often associated with community identification within larger circles of specialized knowledge. However, much of this scholarship implicitly emphasizes a dichotomy between internal and external; scholars such as Lave, Wenger, and others focus on how individuals might internalize the discursive practices in order to transition from an outside to an insider within a community of practice. While the underlying conversion narrative from outsider to insider might be seen as

reinforcing a sense of inclusivity—that is, the goal of this scholarship is to find efficient ways of helping individuals feel as though they are valued members inside a given community of practice—this emphasis can unintentionally prioritize uniformity and minimize the importance of adapting or modifying the discursive practices of a community to account for the aesthetic experiences of individuals within or beyond it. That is to say, this scholarship focuses primarily on the means by which individuals are incorporated into communities of specialized knowledge without considering how individuals might intervene modify collective practices in order to better account for the first-hand experiences of others who still exist outside these communities.

The pedagogical practices of the *Dark Souls* community offer a counter-point to this internal/external dichotomy via an emphasis on alterity. As Nealon argues, a notion of "alterity" gestures towards an Other that dissolves easy inside/outside distinctions; the vulnerability experienced in the face of the Other represents a moment of invasion, a moment where the internality of one's psychological space is infiltrated by an outside source. The videos of VaatiVidya, therefore, demonstrate this same type of infiltration. Re-characterizing the player as an undead tool of divine retribution, for instance, identifies the Other lurking within the player's avatar and actions; the characterization of player-as-undead-killing-machine offers a radical re-subjectification that identifies how an Other (in this case, the machinations of an elusive goddess) that destabilizes the divisions between inside (the player's own rationale for her actions) and outside (the virtual narrative that frames the significance of these actions). Disrupting seemingly stable boundaries between inside and outside is precisely what allows these *Dark Souls* players to undertake a Nealon-esque version of ethics and question how their vulnerability, exposure, and subjection to larger systems shapes their aesthetic experiences within a virtual arena.

In many ways, the pedagogical practices of the *Dark Souls* community veer away from theories of specialized knowledge communities (along with their implicit reliance on an internal/external dichotomy) and moves closer to the ideas of Paulo Friere, Henry Giroux, and the larger tradition of critical pedagogy. As Freire notes when discussing the "banking model" of education, we should avoid resorting to theories of pedagogy that rely on an expert/novice relationship wherein a teacher imparts specialized knowledge into naïve or ignorant students in hopes of reinforcing the discursive practices of dominant systems or communities (Freire, *Pedagogy*). Instead, educators should develop pedagogical strategies that are dialogic in nature, meaning that students take an active part in the co-creation of knowledge and, furthermore, have the capacity to begin challenging or reshaping the functioning of larger systems. Similarly, the pedagogical practices of fans such as VaatiVidya are not meant to simply transmit quantifiable, discernible facts or strategies to other players for the sake of their technical mastery. Although these videos assume a certain proficiency in highly technical skills (*Dark Souls* is still a notoriously difficult game that requires a great deal of dexterity to play), they focus primarily on teaching players how to re-learn their own position among a complicated nexus of social relations and algorithmic systems. In doing so, these videos provide the territory for re-conceptualizing the role of personal agency when describing the learning habits of communities of specialized knowledge. Instead of framing "personal agency" as solely the ability to become an active member within a given community whose actions reinforce communal values (as Lave and Wenger might argue), the *Dark Souls* community teaches its members how to understand their agency in connection to their ethical responsibility within and around a specific virtual gamespace. Consequently, "individual agency" is not simply about technical mastery but about being able to ask: what structures or social relations help constitute an "agent" insofar as these

systems subject-ify individuals that are permitted or denied certain actions? Or, more simply, the *Dark Souls* community demonstrates a critique of individual agency by examining how we, as players and community members, come to be "agents" via our ethical responsibilities towards an Other that may exist beyond our comprehension or control.

To clarify, I am not arguing that the scholarship offered by Lave, Wenger, and others is somehow defunct or needs to be replaced, nor am I arguing that VaatiVidya's videos are undertaking the same radical rejection of highly oppressive government regimes discussed by someone like Freire. Instead, I am arguing that the pedagogical practices of the *Dark Souls* community offers a productive intersection between traditional theories of specialized communities of knowledge (i.e., an emphasis on the internalization of technical practices and trying to act as a member within a given community) and a critical awareness of the ethical underpinnings of collaborative learning within gaming communities. In this sense, the pedagogical practices of *Dark Souls* players can help us balance the internalization of specialized knowledge or skills with a critical awareness of how this information (as well as the systems that frame them) can be used to reflect upon one's own ethical responsibility while acting as a member within a given community. In the following chapters, I will further unpack this balance by discussing my own teaching experiences using video games in my writing-focused classes. Before that, I would like to take a brief reprieve at my own intellectual bonfire (to remain with Lordran-ian references) and take inventory of the ideas that have been put to play in this project thus far.

3.5 CONCLUSION

Over the past two chapters, I have discussed both the political and ethical dimensions of the pedagogical practices within games and gaming communities. In the case of *Papers, Please*, I argued that the internal pedagogical strategies of the game incite the player into modifying her psychological and physical actions in order to participate in a much larger cultural logic, one that is premised upon a conflation between work, play, and subjectivity formation. However, this is not to say that all teaching strategies within games are directed towards a work/play interrelation; simply demonstrating how every video game buys into an ideology of work-as-play and play-as-work would be overdetermining at worst or unproductive at best. In turning towards *Dark Souls*, I demonstrated how the self-modifying practices that constitute the aesthetic experience of gameplay can be aligned with other cultural logics, which, in this case, was a logic of exposure and vulnerability within networked societies. In looking at *Dark Souls*, I expanded the scope of my analyses to include the social interactions which occur through and around a particular gamespace. In doing so, I demonstrated how the politically-influenced pedagogical strategies of the game (i.e., how *Dark Souls* gets the player to participate in a cultural logic of exposure) shapes the ethically-influenced pedagogical interactions within its player community. Rather than see these past two chapters as making definitive declarations about the nature of politics or ethics when discussing video games, my goal was to reinforce the value of incorporating a discourse of pedagogy into on-going scholarly conversations and demonstrate how a focus on pedagogy can operate as an interface for connecting video games to the social, technological, and historical circumstances surrounding their development. Moving forward, I want to transition from examining how pedagogy functions "in the wild" (that is, pedagogical acts which occur beyond the confines of traditional educational institutions) into my own teaching experiences

using video games as not only a central object-of-examination for analysis but as a medium *through which* students can undertake critical projects. The goal for these final two chapters is to explore how instructors might translate a politically- and ethically-influenced approach to pedagogy via the incorporation of video games into traditional writing courses.

4.0 GAMING LITERACY AND PROFESSIONALISM IN THE COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

In my previous sections, I highlighted the political and ethical dimensions of the pedagogical strategies that occur within video games and gaming communities. In Chapter Two, I discussed how the learning practices within video games resonate with the larger cultural and socio-economic logic surrounding the development of video games from the 1960s onwards. By examining the ways in which video games can teach players to participate in a broader cultural logic—in the case of the independent game *Papers, Please*, a work-as-play mindset that dissolves the boundaries between economic productivity and personal creative expression—I illustrated how the pedagogical nature of video games possesses a political dimension insofar as games are capable of teaching players to successfully inhabit dominant ideologies of contemporary networked societies. In this sense, the phrase "the politics of video games" denotes how games teach their players to modify their physical and psychological habits in order to conform to the internal logic of a game (i.e., a game's rules and narrative structure) while still remaining aware of how this internal logic is inextricably bound to the external technological conditions and socio-cultural climates surrounding games and the communities that play them.

In Chapter Three, I expanded the scope of my analysis to discuss the teaching practices that occur between players within and beyond virtual gamespaces. By looking at the educational resources created by online role-playing game communities (which included videos as well as

user-generated databases and wikis), I demonstrated how these materials possessed a strong ethical component insofar as these resources tried to incite a moment of critical self-reflection on the agency wielded by their audience. In other words, these user-generated educational resources were not designed to simply endow players with a sense of technical mastery but, rather, to provide the necessary information for players to rethink how their own agency is conditioned by the actions of others in a shared virtual space. If the phrase "the politics of games" describes the ideologically-charged teaching relationship between player and game, then "the ethics of games" describes how this relationship can reverberate outwards and radically shape the ways in which individuals negotiate their personal responsibility to other people in virtual environments.

For this chapter, I want to discuss how I apply these concepts—that is, the ability for players to partake in a given cultural logic via the pedagogical strategies within games and the impact that said strategies have on social relations within virtual spaces—to my incorporation of video games in writing-intensive courses. By examining my use of the open-world video game *Minecraft* in my Written Professional Communication seminar, I will analyze how students were able to create virtual learning environments that exhibited the political and ethical dimension of video games, which, in turn, can provide the necessary conditions for re-examining the discourses instructors use when discussing the themes of professionalism or professionalization in the writing classroom. To begin, I want to offer a very brief overview of *Minecraft* itself before exploring how student familiarity with this game influenced the language they used to characterize the agency of their intended audience when creating multimodal composition projects. I will use this reflection on student responses as a way transition into a larger discussion regarding the intersection between digital literacy and video game scholarship. By examining the work of Eric Zimmerman and his theory of "gaming literacy," I hope to demonstrate how the

unique structural affordances of video games can help clarify what types of literacy games foster in their players. I will then transition into a discussion of how my own institutional context shapes my rationale for incorporating video games into a writing course that has not been traditionally seen as a venue for radical experimentation with new media. My central premise in this section is that using video games in a course dedicated to professional writing and communication can provide a useful case study for understanding how games can help evolve the central themes of preexistent writing courses. Finally, I will turn to student-created *Minecraft* projects in order to demonstrate how composing with (and through) video games can actively foster students' rhetorical sensitivity to the experiences of others while also calling their attention to design decisions (both written and non-written) in the composition process which can fundamentally impact the personal agency of an intended audience. To begin, I want to turn to the specific gameplay mechanics of *Minecraft* before describing how a familiarity with these mechanics affected the reader-focused goals of my students' composition projects.

4.1 MINECRAFT AND AUDIENCE AGENCY

Minecraft is a first-person video game wherein players can create a variety structures and items from textured cubes modeled after fictional and real world materials (such as wood, cobblestone, iron, etc.). While *Minecraft* does offer a Survival mode that operates upon traditional video game mechanics and goals—such as the need to fight off enemies, create weapons or armor, and venture into the bowels of a virtual world in search for new challenges—its Creative mode provides users with unlimited building resources without fear of enemy attacks or the need to gather items. Often described as a three-dimensional Lego set due to the ability for players to

arrange blocks in practically limitless configurations, this game has led to player creations ranging from one-to-one scale recreations of famous landmarks to highly complex machines (such as a functional hard drive that uses a complex network of on/off switches to physically mimic binary math principles). Furthermore, *Minecraft* players have cultivated numerous networks for user-generated content, with numerous wikis and thousands of YouTube videos dedicated to explaining the intricacies of the game's mechanics and offering tutorials for initiating new players into the much-loved block-based world.[56]

With the basic foundation of *Minecraft's* mechanics and its focus on user-generated content covered, I want to discuss a brief anecdote using this video game in my Written Professional Communication seminar at the University of Pittsburgh. More specifically, I want to compare my students' responses to two different brainstorming prompts. At the onset of the semester, I asked my students a seemingly straightforward question: what type of writing do you want to capable of producing by the end of the course? A majority of my students emphasized "objectivity," and many other characteristics that are traditionally seen as a mark of "good" professional writing (i.e., an ideal image of writing as a completely transparent medium that operates without sensitivity to the material circumstances of either the writer or reader). Throughout the first several weeks of the semester, I gradually introduced my students to *Minecraft* and gave them the opportunity to experiment with the basic tenets of the game's Creative mode in class and on their own. Little by little, my students began to uncover the depth and complexity that this relatively simply game had to offer. I then assigned a semester-long project in which students were tasked with using *Minecraft* to introduce and explain a concept that is foundational to a professional community they are affiliated with. When introducing this

[56] The overwhelming popularity of *Minecraft* and strength of its player community eventually caught the attention of Microsoft, who purchased Mojang (the game's developer) for an unprecedented $2.5 billion in September of 2014 (Crecente).

semester-long assignment, I asked my students to write down any goals or aims they wanted to accomplish via their potential *Minecraft* projects. In stark contrast to the responses I received for my previous question about writing goals, several of my students described a complex interrelation between the imagined users of their *Minecraft* worlds, the concepts they were trying to simulate, and their own liability in facilitating this interrelation via the design of their virtual environments. One student who was building a binary calculator said she wanted other users to feel "confused, then enlightened" about the inner workings of the complicated machine. Another student wanted to recreate downtown Pittsburgh with historical information about the city, hoping that other users would feel "confident" in their ability to navigate this neighborhood and "excited to explore" other sections of the city afterwards. As opposed to the radically decontextualized descriptions of "good writing" exhibited in their previous responses, students were precise and enthusiastic about crafting a relational, interactive, and experiential engagement between their *Minecraft* creations and intended audience.

In comparing these responses, I find it fascinating that my students chose to characterize "good" writing by focusing on traditional criteria which idealizes the written word as a completely transparent medium for communicating information regardless of context or reader experiences. I find it equally fascinating that *Minecraft* shifted my students' attention away from the wrought mechanics of a given medium and allowed them to focus on the experiential engagement between their "text" (i.e., a virtual *Minecraft* world) and the agency of a proposed audience (i.e., other players who would interact with their *Minecraft* projects). In short, it seems as though when students think of "good" writing in a professional environment, the personal agency of the audience encountering a text is negated in favor of the assumed transparency of the medium at hand. I want to use this reflection as a way to discuss how video games can help

students and instructors re-conceptualize the assumptions we harbor when discussing the themes of professionalism and professionalization in writing courses. Put differently, I want to ask: how can the intersection between the unique design features of *Minecraft* and the underlying ideas expressed in these student responses help us better understand the ways in which emergent digital technologies can further evolve the ideological aims of courses dedicated to professional communication? In what ways can the structural affordances of video games (that is, their characteristics which distinguish them from other media) help us re-approach the foundational terms we use to characterize specific writing courses? To clarify, I am not arguing that video games somehow overcome the shortcomings of the written word or writing-based theories of literacy as they are applied to professional writing in particular or writing instruction in general. Instead, I want to use my students' *Minecraft* projects as a way to interrogate our assumptions surrounding institutionalized writing-intensive courses that seek to serve the professional needs of students. To begin, I will offer a brief overview of how Rhetoric and Composition scholars have approached the use of video games in the writing classroom.

4.2 BECOMING LITERATE IN VIDEO GAMES

Exploring the relationship between video games and theories of digital literacy is still a relatively new, but no less fruitful, area of study. As I mentioned in Chapter One, many Rhetoric and Composition scholars have examined how the multimodal qualities of video games can expand upon tradition terms used in composition scholarship. John Alberti notes argues the interactive quality of video games—that is, their capacity to create a highly visualized world wherein text, symbols, audio, and tactile elements coincide within a single multimodal environment that

responds to player input in real time—"forces us to confront the radically dynamic, temporal, and context-situated aspects of writing and reading" (Alberti 264). Video games challenge the idea that aesthetic objects, be they written texts or new media compositions, are self-contained and unchanging entities; games are not simply a collection of predetermined rules but, rather, exist as a dialectic between said rules and the creative input of players. This dialectic gives way to a continuous feedback loop in which both text and reader can never be entirely static or complete unto themselves. The notion that video games challenge the assumed stability of aesthetic objects resonates with other Rhet/Comp scholars who argue that the radical dynamism found in digitally-based texts (be they games or otherwise) can be used to reflect upon traditional assumptions regarding textuality, reading, and writing (Hayles, *Writing*). Consequently, teaching with and through video games can help both instructors and students re-interpret foundational terms within English studies and writing instruction.

I want to push further with Alberti's argument by exploring what unique structural features allow video games to express the "radically dynamic" qualities of both reading and writing. More specifically, I want to focus on video games' ability to model multiple systems in real-time based on user input.[57] To do so, I would like to return to Eric Zimmerman's notion of "gaming literacy," which I discussed in Chapter One. However, I would like to further detail the intricacies of Zimmerman's ideas in order to further emphasize the role of agency in gameplay experiences, which, in turn, will provide the foundation for rethinking how we define

[57] There is some debate regarding the essential feature of video games that distinguishes them from other media. Many scholars interested in game studies emphasize the interactive nature of video games and their reliance upon user participation in order to function (see Galloway, *Gaming*; Atkins, 2006; Aarseth, *Cybertext*). Conversely, Jody Shipka argues that traditional texts incorporate on the same type of interactivity that is championed when discussing new media or multimodal compositions (Shipka, "Including" 75). Poetry, for example, relies on the interrelation between the sight and vocal enunciation, as performed by the reader either internally or literally. While there is no definitive agreement on the essential structural features of games that marks them as different from other media (nor should we try to establish a single set of criteria lest we run the risk of over-determination), acknowledging what particular features are most pertinent for a given examination can only enhance the impact and relevancy of using games in traditional classroom environments.

professionalization in composition courses. Gaming literacy, as an interpretive framework, is comprised of three interrelated concepts: systems, design, and play. To reiterate my earlier claims from Chapter One, Zimmerman views video games as a dynamic network of interlocking systems. In learning how to play a game, players learn how to take up a systems-point-of-view insofar as "[h]aving a systems point of view (being systems literate) means understanding the world as dynamic sets of parts with complex, constantly changing interrelationships—seeing the structures that underlie our world, and comprehending how these structures function" (25). In other words, taking up a systems-point-of-view entails being able to negotiate overlapping, intersecting, and even conflicting networks of relations that respond to user input in real-time. This initial emphasis on systems and becoming systems literate gives way to the second component of Zimmerman's schema: play. "Play" denotes the process of reconfiguring a game's systems or rules in order to achieve an intended goal. That is to say, play is not just about playing *within* a given system of relations and constraints but playing *with* systems themselves (meaning, an individual is capable of manipulating the tendencies of a given system or systems in order to achieve her goals but such manipulation is based on her ability to read and recognize the abstract functioning of these networks). Understanding the connection between systems and play leads to the third aspect of gaming literacy: a critical awareness of design. Design is "the process by which a designer creates a context, to be encountered by a participant, from which meaning emerges." (28). Design is the active creation of rules, relations, and constraints within a given system which cultivates and channels a user's ability to play. Furthermore, design acts as the mediating principle for meaning making within games, insofar as significance (be it a personal significance felt by a player within gameplay experiences or the representation of a

game's underlying critical argument) emerges from the interrelation between the systems that comprise a game and the individual agency a user has within these systems.

In learning how to play a game—that is, in becoming literate within a virtual gamespace—a player must take up a systems point-of-view, which, in turn, allows her to understand how the design of certain systems fundamentally impacts the agency of individuals and structures the potential for play. However, gaming literacy is not necessarily about deriving an interpretive framework that allows educators to neatly compartmentalize systems, design, and play in order to decipher the educational value lurking within any given game. Instead, gaming literacy asks "how game playing and game design can be seen as models for learning and action in the real world. It asks, in other words, not *What does gaming look like?* But instead: *What does the world look like from the point of view of gaming?*" (24). Hence, games and gaming are interfaces for interacting with the world that highlight the interrelation between agency and constraint (as mediated via the design of systems) in addition to how this interrelation gives way to meaning making (as manifested in the practice of play). As I demonstrated in Chapter Two, a game such as *Papers, Please* creates a series of overlapping systems comprised of narrative elements (that is, the fictional country of Arstotzka, its troubling governmental practices, and the morally gray scenarios the player must negotiate) and gameplay mechanics (the highly restrictive, physically-tedious practice of processing virtual travel documents within a claustrophobic immigration booth). In manipulating the tendencies of systems—that is, in playing with these systems—players can learn how to inhabit a new subjective mindset that reveals the corrosive economic pragmatism underlying contemporary knowledge-based economies. Moving forward, I would like to discuss how Zimmerman's ideas informed my use of *Minecraft* in several Written Professional Communication seminars in order to demonstrate

this game allowed students to create their own lenses for viewing the world (and the systems therein) through different professional discourses.

4.3 WHAT'S SO PROFESSIONAL ABOUT VIDEO GAMES?

Prior to examining my students' Minecraft projects, I want to first discuss the institutional context surrounding my Written Professional Communication (WPC) course at the University of Pittsburgh and explore how Zimmerman's ideas can be coupled with contemporary theories of professionalization in the writing classroom. As Bruce Horner argues, to deny the material and institutional contexts that shape our teaching-based research is to undermine the social relations that sustain our work as educators and, more importantly, reinforce archaic value systems that attempt to treat academic scholarship as transferable commodities which exist independent of real-world circumstances (Horner 11). Consequently, I want to be sensitive to the real-world circumstances in which gaming literacies are implemented in order to demonstrate how video game-based teaching experiences and pre-existent institutional infrastructure can work in tandem to create unique learning environments that build upon university resources offered to both students and educators. Put more simply, the only way I can realistically speak about using video games in my composition courses is to acknowledge and integrate the material circumstances of my own institutional position into my research. Otherwise, I run the risk of prescribing a one-size-fits-all treatment that views video games or gaming literacy as magic bullets which miraculously lead to radical new teaching methods independent of context.

WPC is an upper-division writing-intensive course that satisfies one of required writing classes that must be taken by all undergraduates at my institution. Standard WPC courses often

revolve around questions of professional genres, with a typical semester broken up into sections dedicated to composing documents and assignments designed to mimic real-world occupational contexts or best practices.[58] WPC sections consistently achieve their maximum enrollment each semester by students predominantly (but by no means entirely) from the STEM fields or social sciences. While instructors are free to craft their own specific syllabi, the official course description offered to students by the department provides some general guidelines and rationale behind this class:

> In this course we will examine the contexts for and rhetorical dimensions of a variety of professional documents, including those documents students produce in the course itself. Major assignments include a set of career materials (resume, cover letter, career report); a correspondence packet that addresses a conflict; a proposal; and a longer report based on research and analysis. As we engage in this work we will explore the nature of professionalism, common features and efforts (enabling and disabling) of professional discourse, and strategies for negotiating the "borders" of specialized and non-specialized discourse.

Looking back on this course description, a concrete definition of what constitutes "professionalism" or a "professional" is interestingly and conveniently (for me, at least) absent. To clarify, I am in no way chastising departmental or administrative policies vis-a-vis critiquing course descriptions (to do so would only overlook the difficulty of crafting course descriptions that establish a sense of coherence among different sections while still allowing for a strong

[58] My impressions of WPC are based mainly on researching syllabi from previous semesters. While my English department has done a great job improving their catalog of past course descriptions and syllabi, it is still difficult to get a streamlined sense of the common theme underlying all WPC sections due to human error (such as instructors not submitting their syllabi to the general department database) or technological limitations (the department has only recently begun cataloging course descriptions online and there are a multitude of older print documents that are difficult to locate).

degree of personalization and autonomy among instructors). Instead, I want to use my department's course description as a foundation for clarifying the rationale behind using *Minecraft* as a focal point for student projects.

This question regarding how we define a "professional" or "professionalism" is where I begin structuring my WPC course. At the beginning of the semester, I have students read Ann Surma's work on public and professional writing, seeing as she offers a definition of professionalism that does not fall victim to remedial notions of occupational or vocational training. Surma argues that a professional functions as a recognized member of a highly specialized community of practice whereas one's occupation is dictated by the contract help with an employer.[59] While it is inevitable that one's profession and occupation overlap, Surma clarifies how these two roles are not always one-in-the-same. She writes, "in organisational or corporate contexts, employees often act in an environment that encourages loyalty to the organisation or […] rather than to specific individuals within or beyond those structures" (48). This subtle but important distinction between one's profession and occupation helps expand a theory of professionalism to account for the ethical responsibility one might feel towards the agency of others; in this quote, Surma argues that professionals are attune to how the functioning of corporate or commercial organizations directly impact the agency of individuals, as opposed to employees whose occupational duties are obligated to focus on the health of a company.[60]

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[59] In terms of what constitutes a "member of a highly specialized community of practice," we can say that professionals possess some form of official accreditation (via a degree or certification). While other scholars have discussed professional affiliation in terms of shared epistemological worldview, the application of technical skills to solve mutual problems, or general enthusiasm for a field of knowledge (see Shaffer, "Epistemic Frames"), Surma's recognition of organizational affiliation forces us to confront the uncomfortable tensions that arise between one's professional and occupational obligations. This unavoidable tension can lead to productive conversations surrounding the ethical liability professionals might feel towards others, whereas other scholars focus primarily on how new members become inducted into specialized communities of practice and overlook the conflicts that might arise from inter- or intra-professional relations.

[60] Furthermore, the fact that people may find themselves in situations where bureaucratic roadblocks designed to protect a company from legal responsibility actually hinders professional practices is a testament to the crucial

Consequently, this professional versus occupational distinction entails that "professional writing is reconceived as constitutive of relations between self and other rather than as a process with exclusively instrumental ends" (29). In short, a professional can use her specialized knowledge to understand how practices within organizations (be they commercial, corporate, or otherwise) affect the agency and experiences of individuals, and professional communication contains an ethical component due to this feeling of liability for personal agency on the part of others.

Surma's gesture towards the agency of individuals provides a useful point-of-contact with Zimmerman's notion of gaming literacy. In much the same way that Zimmerman emphasizes the role of agency (via the discourses of design and play) when taking up a systems-based worldview, Surma focuses on a professional's ability to understand the impact that larger structures or processes might have on the agency of individuals. If we couple Zimmerman's emphasis on systems-based thinking with Surma's appeal to feeling ethical responsibility for the agency of others, we can come to a revised notion of professionalism that synthesizes the theory of gaming literacy with a critical awareness of one's professional (rather than simply occupation) obligations: professionals are members of a highly specialized community of practice who see the world as a delicate balance of interlocking systems and, furthermore, are attune to the ways in which the design of these systems shape the agency of individuals who reside therein.[61] Gaming literacy, then, can build upon Surma's interest in professional ethics by introducing an

slippages between one's profession and occupation. Hence, treating profession and occupation as equivalents runs the risk of over-simplifying, or outright denying, conflicts of interest which may spur productive conversations about the role of a given professional community and/or the impact of corporate success on individuals.

[61] The question of what constitutes a "system" in this revised notion of professionalism has spurred several conversations among my students. Medical professionals, for instance, can see the human body as a complex nexus of systems (i.e., the body is comprised of many different bio-physical systems that can interact with each other in consequential ways) that directly impact the lived experiences of individuals. However, medical professionals can also view the complicated legal systems surrounding medical care (such as insurance policies or confidentiality agreements with patients) as yet another network that can affect agency of individuals who are receiving treatment.

interpretive framework (comprised of systems, design, and play) that can help us better identify, critique, and even modify the locations where individual agency is influenced by the functioning of larger systems.

To return to my department's course description, using gaming literacy to establish a more refined understanding of what constitutes a professional does not necessarily mean the traditional assignments in WPC's course description should be entirely removed in favor of game-based learning. Rather, understanding professionals or professionalism in terms of systems, play, and design can help clarify the underlying aims of WPC and the projects assigned therein. For example, WPC and similar courses can still have students produce documents within traditional professional genres—such as lab reports or job application materials—but instructors can frame these assignments through the interrelation of systems (how does the notion of "genre" implicitly function as a rhetorical system with standard practices and assumptions about the intended readership?), play (what affordances for action, either on the part of the writer or reader, do certain genres present?) and design (how can a writer craft a document so that she can take advantage of pre-disposed rhetorical systems or generic conventions to achieve personal writing goals or elicit an intended response from her audience?). I do not want to go too far in exploring how a theory of professionalism framed by gaming literacy can open up new avenues for assignments or conversations within WPC but it is important to briefly acknowledge the fact that new definitions of professionalism can enhance, not merely override, institutionalized course descriptions or goals. Now, I would like to turn to my a specific *Minecraft* project in order to demonstrate how this game allowed students to deployed a revised notion of professionalism, one which takes the intersection between systems and agency as its primary concern.

4.4 USING GAMING LITERACY TO (MINE)CRAFT PROFESSIONALS

Despite research that suggests using games in the composition classroom is an easy pill to swallow for students because either they are familiar with games beforehand or they welcome new approaches to the stuffy writing classroom (Colby and Colby, 2013), my own experiences suggest otherwise. Throughout three semesters of teaching WPC with *Minecraft*, the typical breakdown of student interest or enthusiasm is as follows: about half of my students are either confused by or hesitant towards my use of *Minecraft* initially while the other half is a mixture of cautious optimism and, minimally, full-on excitement (this last group of students are usually those who already play video games as a hobby and/or have first-hand *Minecraft* experience). I attribute the apprehension or confusion surrounding *Minecraft* to general student presumptions surrounding professional and technical writing instruction, which were illustrated in the brief writing exercise I assign at the beginning of the semester. As I mentioned at the onset of this chapter, I ask my students to describe the type of writing they want to be capable of producing by the end of the semester. After cataloging the responses from several courses, here is a general breakdown of the writing aims/goals of the students throughout several WPC courses: out of 66 responses, an overwhelming number stressed some form of objectivity in their writing as their primary goal (31), slightly less focused on learning professional genres such as lab reports (12), others wanted to learn how to demonstrate their mastery or expertise within a given field of knowledge (15) and a few brave souls unabashedly stated they wanted to learn how to get a job (8).[62]

[62] I cataloged these responses based on the primary focus of my students. There were many responses that included several writing goals—such as striving for objectivity and demonstrating technical mastery—but, for the most part, these responses focused on a single goal that was complemented by secondary aims.

While this relatively brief survey is in no way comprehensive, the results are symptomatic of the general inclination to approach professional/technical writing instruction through a skills-and-drills mentality (i.e., seeing professional writing instruction as internalizing a handful of writing strategies that are applicable to any occupational scenario via repeated, consistent exercises). To bypass this skills-and-drills approach, I assigned both Zimmerman and Surma's texts in order to introduce the revised notion of professionalism I just discussed and, in doing so, qualify my use of *Minecraft* in our WPC seminar. While spending the first several weeks reading these authors and clarifying the systems/play/design interrelation underlying professionalism, I also task my students with specific in-game goals ranging from the most mundane (living through the first night of the game's Survival mode) to the intermediate (craft a pickaxe and gather coal). These assignments served a two-fold purpose: first, I wanted to ensure all students felt relatively confident in navigating the basic controls and mechanics of *Minecraft*. Second, I wanted to provide the opportunity for them to experience Zimmerman's gaming literacy in action. *Minecraft* is comprised of many different systems (dynamic day/night and weather cycles, enemy AI, collecting and organizing resources, rudimentary physics engine, etc.) that all provide particular outlets for player agency, so I wanted my students to feel attune to the ways in which these systems interact with each other and how they can play with the design of these systems to achieve personal goals. While playing through the game and tackling these entry-level objectives, my students kept a "design journal" that documented moments where they felt confused, frustrated, or accomplished when navigating the multiple systems at work within the game. The purpose of this journal was to catalog their firsthand gameplay experiences and get them to begin thinking about how/why certain problems arose in *Minecraft*. These experiences would provide the foundation for their first large-scale writing assignment, which

was the creation of a beginner's guide that helped introduce new players to *Minecraft* and provided them with instructions for achieving a certain in-game goal.

In composing these documents, my students had to consider how they define their topic in such a way that a reader can understand how this topic contributes to gameplay experiences within *Minecraft* while, at the same time, gesturing towards the larger, complex systems that frame this topic. For example, one student wanted to describe how to build a boat based on her own experiences in the game (images from her document are included below). More specifically, this particular student lived through the harsh realities of *Minecraft*'s randomly generated landscapes seeing as she was dropped into a collection of small island territories that had very little natural resources or much to do in terms of exploration. Hence, she was forced to build a boat and travel to neighboring lands in order to gather materials and, more generally, just have more fun navigating a diverse landscape (to be fair, *Minecraft* works best as a terrestrial, rather than nautical, adventure). In her first draft of this document, she translated these experiences into a guide that focused on the creation and application of the boat within the game. It was obvious this student had done some extensive reflection on her own gameplay experiences, insofar as her writing demonstrated a clear mastery of *Minecraft*'s mechanics and the ability to articulate the nuances of gameplay experiences in technical, yet still accessible, language. However, her original approach took on a "do X to solve problem Y" approach, insofar as she framed the usefulness of the boat in terms of overcoming a specific obstacle; this student was trying to operate as a seasoned *Minecraft* mariner by demonstrating her ability to solve an isolated problem (large bodies of water prevent exploration) using specialized knowledge of the game (how to build and operate a boat). While the initial draft of this project was very strong, it veered away from openly embracing the larger complexity of the systems being described and, instead,

played it safe in terms of its scope. In other words, this document did an excellent job discussing one specific technical feature of *Minecraft* yet it did not engage in a more conceptual discussion of the larger networks of association that contextualize the larger relevance of its main topic.

I decided to use a draft of this document for a class workshop so that students could get a sense of how others were approaching this assignment. During this session, I asked my students to consider the larger systems surrounding the relatively simply process of making a boat and how the boat might be used as a framework for understanding these systems, rather than seeing the boat as a tool for overcoming obstacles that are byproducts of multiple systems intersecting with one another. Students were adamant about using their own Minecraft excursions to think about how boats exist at the intersection of overlapping gameplay systems. For example, one student recollected the traumatic experience of being killed by a Guardian (an underwater enemy) shortly after discovering an Ocean Monument (an underwater temple that is randomly generated in oceans). In doing so, this student implicitly described how environmental terrain, exploration, and battle mechanics can coalesce in interesting ways. Another student talked about how he was initially unclear as to how players needed to harvest wood then turn this resource into planks in order to build more advanced structures, seeing as building a boat requires these same general practices. In a way, this comment illustrates the intricacies and, occasionally, obscure nature of resource gathering, which may be unclear to new players. In short, this class workshop was less of a copy-edit session and more of a conversation about how the author's initial topic can be used as a method for linking together complex and seemingly disconnected systems within *Minecraft*, which, in turn, helped us characterize the boat itself as a frame of reference for describing larger, abstract concepts.

During the revision process, the student-author wanted to include the feedback from her peers but this required re-structuring her document. Rather than simply offer a step-by-step instruction set for creating a boat, she introduced her topic using a question-and-answer format that gestured towards the different systems surrounding the use of a boat in *Minecraft* (see below). In each of these questions, the author used the boat as a way to mediate the larger systems at work and how such systems create opportunities for action on the part of other players. The questions posed (and the systems that she described through these questions) were as follows: Why use a boat instead of swimming (in which she described how environmental factors impact personal movement in the game)? Are boats safe (in which she described aquatic enemies and, more generally, the presence of enemy AI in the game's Survival mode)? What resources are used to craft boats (which allowed her to discuss resource gathering and item crafting)? How do I operate a boat (which discussed first-hand player movement)? Can I reuse boats (which explained inventory management)?

This question-and-answer format allowed the author to identify the numerous systems at work in the game and how such systems impact personal agency. Furthermore, the final draft of this project treated the boat itself as a design element unto itself—and not simply as a solution to a given problem—and used this design element as a mediating principle between the game's systems and actions that are afforded to the player. In other words, the design elements of creating and utilizing a boat in *Minecraft* acted as her primary frame of reference for describing a rather complex network of relations and series of player actions. By treating the boat as a design element that acted as a point-of-access into larger system/play/design interrelations, the initial premise of this document evolved from "building a boat in order to solve a problem" to "using the boat as an interface for describing how systems impact individual agency." The fact that she

accomplished this using a question-and-answer format—a style which explicitly mentions the reader of a document and implies their capacity to interact with the author or the ideas expressed by a text—reinforces the participatory nature of this reading engagement.

Ultimately, this first major assignment accomplished a few key goals in terms of the overall structure of our WPC course. It introduced students to the basic mechanics of *Minecraft* while simultaneously providing them the opportunity to compose documents that began to exhibit a form of professionalism that uses a systems-based view of this virtual world to locate potential outlets for individual agency on the part of an intended audience. In doing so, it gave students the opportunity to rethink how their own composing strategies implicitly or explicitly resonates with the agency of an audience. As was the case with the aforementioned player guide, shifting towards a question-and-answer format subtly changed the nature of the student-author's topic while also signaling the interactive dimensions of the reader-text engagement (i.e., this document used a participatory question-and-answer style which parallels the participatory nature of a player's *Minecraft* experiences). In regards to the long-term progression of our course, this assignment also helped prepare students for our semester-long group project. In the following section, I want to briefly discuss the nature of this semester-long project before focusing on one group project in order to demonstrate how students were able to further demonstrate a revised notion of professionalism via the creation of virtual learning environments in Minecraft.

4.5 THE GAME OF CIVIL ENGINEERING

I tried to make the prompt for our semester-long project as direct as possible while still providing enough flexibility for students to invest their personal interests and/or goals into this assignment.

Simply speaking, this project asked my students to use *Minecraft* to teach a key principle, idea, or process that was central to a given professional community. In other words, my students were tasked with designing a virtual environment where players could engage with systems that modeled or simulated a key principle used by a real-world professional community (with the assumption that their intended audience may not be knowledgeable about these ideas). One group of students, all of which were engineering majors, planned to create a transportation system that took advantage of several gameplay mechanics, including self-automated minecarts, and water physics, to demonstrate the general principles underlying large-scale civil engineering projects. During a group conference, these students brainstormed several ways to create a virtual environment that demonstrated civil engineering principles. They considered placing signs and books (which, in *Minecraft*, operate as basic word processors that can store several pages worth of text) at key locations within their virtual world to indicate particular strategies that civil engineers need to overcome in real-world situations. They also toyed with the idea of creating scenarios where the user would be able to actively participate in building the transportation infrastructure to get a sense of how civil engineers would plan and initiate complex, long-term projects. Throughout this conservation, it became clear that this group was not necessarily trying to model the specific nuances of particular transportation systems. Instead, they seemed more interested in re-creating scenarios in which civil engineers needed to cooperate with and navigate pre-existent natural or artificial infrastructures when building new projects. Once they identified this underlying theme, my students seemed more focused in what they wanted to accomplish and began construction on their virtual *Minecraft* world.[63]

[63] As Rebekah Colby and Richard Colby note, having students write about their own experiences in shared virtual gamespaces can help them see their composition processes as producing "actively used, rhetorical texts within and for the game community" (Colby and Colby, "Pedagogy" 305). Video games provide an opportunity to for students to write about the issues or problems they personally experience in a virtual gamespace with the

After almost two months of work cataloging their design process and prototyping their project with the help of their peers, this group was prepared to present their finalized *Minecraft* realm. This realm was comprised of a central hub and several far off "villages" that each had their own respective geographical features, obstacles, and goals for creating a transportation system. For instance, one "village" was a highly developed castle on a steep mountain top, which required users to navigate slopes when building their infrastructure. Another "village" was in a mountainous region with many underground canals and water reservoirs, which meant that users had to be careful when burrowing through the land so as to not trigger a flood. The last "village" was a port city riddled with canals and rivers. The ultimate goal for prospective users was to create a transportation system that connected each village to the central hub and to each other while still abiding by resource restraints and limitations created by these geographical features.

To help users accomplish this goal, these students created a library within the central hub which contained introductory information on several engineering processes such as creating dams, levees, and railway systems. These books were not just dedicated to technical information, though. One student who was particularly interested in science-fiction and fantasy crafted small histories for each locale as a way to contextualize the logistical and geographic circumstances surrounding this village (i.e., explaining how and why the castle village was so industrious compared to the port village). This narrative context gestured towards the importance of understanding the social and political, not just material and technical, conditions that civil engineers must be sensitive towards in their profession. Denying the particular socio-political climates of specific locations runs the risk of treating engineering principles as ideals that exist in

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intention of distributing these reflections to other players. Several of the assignments in my WPC course seek to instill this same sense of community-focused writing (such as an instruction set aimed at new *Minecraft* players), and examining the interrelation between traditional text-based projects and video games will be the focus of a subsequent chapter.

a vacuum, independent of real-world constraints. Hence, this project introduced socio-political contexts (via a fictional narrative universe) as yet another system whose design influences the specific actions one can or cannot take while engaging in engineering projects.[64]

In designing and demonstrating this *Minecraft* project, my students exhibited a nuanced, refined notion of "professionalism" as interpreted through the concept of gaming literacy: this project illustrated the ways in which the profession of civil engineering operates at the intersection of numerous systems—material, technological, socio-political—and the design of each of these systems introduces new variables that channel the potential for action (or play) on the part of engineers. In composing this project, my students acted as professionals in the sense that they possessed a critical awareness of the real-world systems they were trying to model in addition to understanding how such systems create opportunities for player involvement within their virtual environment. My students were not "acting like" professionals by doing specific tasks that explicitly mimicked real-world engineering practices. Rather, they were "acting like" professionals by possessing a clear understanding of the conceptual systems that govern the actions of civil engineers and using this knowledge to design a virtual world that modeled these principles. This newfound professionalism emerged in conjunction with their ability to echo Zimmerman's sentiments and ask, "*What does the world look like from the point of view of gaming?*" (24). The results, in my opinion, demonstrate the complexity and ingenuity that can emerge from posing this question.

[64] In demonstrating their virtual world to the class, these students also discussed future educational potential for this project. For instance, instructors could build upon the virtual world they created and introduce new gameplay variables to test different skills. Imposing resource limits, for example, would mean users would only have so many blocks to work with to accomplish certain goals. Additionally, players could create new villages, each with their own infrastructure, and add to expanding world within *Minecraft*. Introducing new systems of constraints and complexity to this project would only refine and evolve the outlets for personal action on the part of other users.

While the finalized version of this virtual world illustrates a notion of professionalism framed by the systems/design/play interrelation, the meticulous process of designing and composing this *Minecraft* realm reinforces Surma's emphasis on a professional ethical responsibility towards others. After identifying the key principles they were trying to model in our group conference, these students began building within *Minecraft*. After a few weeks, each student group had the opportunity to let others play around with their project prototypes in order to get a sense of how other users interacted with their design decisions. By focusing on how certain design elements succeed or fail in cultivating player actions in intended ways, these students were able to use the oft-unpredictable playing habits of their peers as a way to reflect upon the impact that their design decisions had on the agency of the intended audience of their *Minecraft* worlds. During the prototyping activity, a student from the civil engineering group noticed his peers' confusion while navigating this virtual world:

> I let them [the other group members] explain the central idea of the project while I studied the students who were interacting with our project. Though the students were not saying much, I noticed that most of them were confused while exploring our world. Once I realized this, I knew that we would need to implement something to help clear the confusion. I decided that our ideas may be clarified by explaining the storyline better, which was exactly what they needed to help grasp the concept of our project.

The confusion of players during the prototyping phase did not emerge from any technical deficiencies in their project—the gameplay mechanics in this *Minecraft* realm were relatively stable at this point—but stemmed from a lack of narrative context and a clear motivation for achieving the intended goals of the project. Realizing that they needed some way to both inform

and motivate players to engage in the intended goals of the project, this group returned to the aforementioned fantasy back-stories and made them more central to the information stored in main library section as well as adding more information to the signs and books located in each village. In the early stages of this project, users wielded a great degree of agency (perhaps even too much) but this agency was not adequately structured in ways that would successfully demonstrate larger civil engineering principles. Hence, in acknowledging how their design choices impacted the agency of other users—that is, in acknowledging how this *Minecraft* world failed to adequately channel the actions of other people—this group was able to emphasize yet another system within their project for the sake of cultivating player participating while implicitly refining the professional values being modeled.

Throughout this project, students had to balance a critical awareness of the larger systems/play/design interrelations that are implicated in their main topic while also considering how other individuals would experience these interrelations in their own gameplay sessions. In this sense, Surma's and Zimmerman's theories were not checklists to ensure that these projects satisfied a set of predetermined criteria. Instead, a sense of ethical responsibility towards the agency of others and the interpretive framework of gaming literacy were actively taken up by students themselves while composing their *Minecraft* projects. In creating these projects, students were not functioning as professionals via some ritualistic induction into a community of expert knowledge. Instead, students took up the ideals and values of professionalism by embracing a critical consciousness of the productive tension between constraint and agency, as mediated by carefully crafted design choices.

4.6 THE ROLE OF PEDAGOGY IN PROFESSIONALISM

While planning these large-scale projects, many of my students ran up against a common two-fold question: how do you teach an audience about the potential actions they can take in a virtual gamespace and how can the designers of said gamespace illustrate the larger significance of these actions? In the case of the civil engineering project, how can the game environment (i.e., written books, signs, images, or even geographical landscapes) communicate the potential actions a player can (or should) undertake? Additionally, how can the design of this virtual world help players understand the larger civil engineering principles they are participating in? This unavoidable pedagogical imperative to teach a player how or why she can act within a virtual environment highlights the oft-overlooked importance of pedagogy when discussing professional communities and the correspondence that occurs within or beyond them. As I mentioned previously, Surma's approach to professionalism entails that professional communication is not only a process of actualizing oneself within a given community of practice but also actualizing a readership who is affected by larger systems and, furthermore, to feel invested in the actions, experiences, and agency of this readership. This liability for the agency of others entails that professional communication must undertake some pedagogical relationship to its audience; if professional communication attempts to channel the agency of its audience in intended ways then it must deploy some form of pedagogical praxis (insofar as it provides the audience with a set of learning strategies that teach them how to engage with the world). Ultimately, professionalism possesses some degree of pedagogical awareness, and any course dedicated to the theme of professionalization should be willing to discuss how pedagogy factors into this concept.

To be a professional is to view the world as a collection of intricate systems and understand how the design of these systems permits or prohibits agency on the part of individuals. Consequently, to communicate as a professional is to present a pedagogical framework that allows others participate in the systems, practices, and values that comprise a professional community's worldview. *Minecraft* allowed students to create participatory learning environments whose design elements communicated the outlets for player agency while also gesturing towards the principles, values, or rationale underlying the actions within a given community of practice, thereby exhibiting key features a highly revised notion of professionalism. This is not to say that simply using video games in my WPC course fundamentally "caused" my students to take up a new approach to professionalism and the pedagogical underpinnings thereof. Instead, using gaming literacy as a framing principle for this course allowed us to re-approach the theme of professionalism by focusing on the ethical connection to an audience while also understanding the importance of taking a systems-based perspective of the world, both of which helped us bypass an overly-remedial equation of professional communication with vocational training. The pedagogical element of these *Minecraft* projects emerged from the intersection between systems-based thinking and an ethical liability for the agency of others.

In concluding, it is important to note that I am not the first to use video games or game-based learning as a way to introduce students into communities of practice or disseminate highly specialized technical information (see, Shaffer, "Epistemic Games"; Charsky, "Edutainment").[65]

[65] David Shaffer uses both video games and role-playing scenarios to simulate the real-world practices of professions. In one example, Shaffer's students played *Madison 2200*, a city-planning simulator, as a way to better understand the cultural, political, and economic influences that influence regional development ("Epistemic Games"). In another example, students participated in the *Pandora Project*, which is a role-playing game in which students approached the issue of animal-to-human organ transplant procedures from a variety of perspectives (i.e., some students played the role of medical researchers while others acted as legislators) ("Epistemic Frames" 480).

While current research in this area does an excellent job demonstrating how video games can simulate the best practices of real-world professional communities or help students view the world from a variety of professional perspectives, my concern with this scholarship is that it treats game-based teaching strategies as a one-way street: games can teach students to inner working of a professional community's best practices but students rarely have the ability to actively shape or modify these practices to account for their own first-hand experiences that may differ from what is considered standard operating procedure. The ability for students to actively design, compose, and modify *Minecraft's* systems to account for the lived experiences of others disrupts the implied hierarchy—that is, the one-way transmission of information from game to player—that emerges when discussing the use of video games to teach students professional practices. This is not to say that my own theory of professionalism discounts scholarship that uses game-based learning scenarios for professional training. Instead, I see my work with *Minecraft* as complimenting this research, insofar as these projects demonstrate what happens when students themselves are able to have a hand in shaping the learning strategies which seek to model professional values. Put differently, focusing on how students can internalize the practices and values of a professional community is important but providing the opportunity for students to create learning strategies for others can help further clarify, evolve, and even interrogate the underlying logic within specialized communities of practice.

4.7 CONCLUSION

My previous chapters explored the pedagogical nature of video games and gaming communities. As I discussed in Chapter One, many game scholars implicitly or explicitly respond to the unique

ability for video games to teach their players how to act or react in given situations. That is to say, a structural feature of video games is their ability to offer real-time feedback and, in doing so, cultivate a new collection of psychological or physical habits within their players. Chapter Two built upon this foundational role of pedagogy by demonstrating how the learning practices which occur between player and game are themselves conditioned by the technological and socio-economic conditions surrounding game development. Hence, by participating in the pedagogical strategies within a video game, players are also participating in the larger cultural logics that sustain the conditions for games to emerge as valuable cultural aesthetic objects. In Chapter Three, I shifted my attention away from player-to-game interactions and focused on player-to-player teaching encounters to demonstrate how peer-centered learning calls attention to the ethical responsibility players feel towards others when navigating shared virtual spaces. My students' *Minecraft* projects demonstrate how students themselves can actively take up and apply the two-fold pedagogical nature of games and gaming communities in their own composition processes. On the one hand, the learning practices designed within these *Minecraft* projects (i.e., the strategies used to cultivate player participation, be they the creation of virtual structures that housed important technical information or fictional narrations that contextualize the relevance of a player's actions) were conditioned by the larger cultural logic of the professional community on display. With the civil engineering example, the pedagogical strategies created by these students were fundamentally tethered to the logic underlying civil engineering practices in the real world (that is, an attunement to political and material, not solely technological, systems that influence the creation of transportation infrastructure). On the other hand, these *Minecraft* projects also demonstrated a strong sense of ethical responsibility and liability towards the experiences of others insofar as students were able to witness first-hand how their design

decisions directly impacted the actions of users in a virtual space. Hence, the teaching situations they crafted in a virtual realm were dedicated to cultivating and channeling user agency for the sake of helping an intended audience participate in a larger set of values and practices. In simultaneously resonating with a larger cultural logic and engaging in the cultivation of user agency via designed pedagogical scenarios, these *Minecraft* projects illustrate how students can utilize an active notion of pedagogy when engaging in new forms of professionalism, which, in turn, can help instructors further refine the foundational terms used in course descriptions and the goals thereof. In my next chapter, I will discuss the use of video games in my Critical Writing course and describe how students designed their own games (as opposed to simply building upon the rules of an already-developed game) as a way to take a critical stance on issues that extend beyond a given professional community.

5.0 THE LABOR OF CRITIQUE: USING FUNCTIONAL EPISTEMOLOGIES TO RETHINK THE WORK OF CULTURAL CRITICISM

In the previous chapter, I examined how using *Minecraft* to create virtual learning environments exhibited both the political and ethical dimensions of the pedagogical strategies found in video games, insofar as students were able to use *Minecraft* as a virtual territory where other players could participate in the actions, scenarios, and values that comprise a professional community. For my final chapter, I want to push further with the advantages and affordances of having students design virtual gamespaces. More specifically, I will discuss how students in my Critical Writing course designed, documented, and began to construct their own video games—as opposed to using the user-friendly modification capacities of a pre-existent game—in order to take a critical stance on a particular issue. As with my previous chapter, I will first discuss the larger institutional contexts surrounding my course before discussing how a discourse of criticism and critique has been handled by compositionists within the lineage of Critical Pedagogy. By looking at the work of Paulo Freire, Henry Giroux, in addition to those who have voiced concerns about the methodological strategies posed by these scholars, I will demonstrate how the aims and strategies of Critical Pedagogy practitioners (despite their best intentions) might inadvertently marginalize the actual composition process in writing classroom while also running the risk of cultivating an unnecessarily reactive stance towards socio-cultural issues. The goal of this relatively short survey is not to denigrate those loyal to the heritage Critical

Pedagogy nor is it to salvage this particular method (indeed, many of those who helped usher in this subfield of Rhet/Comp studies are still alive and well in regards to their academic production, and certainly do not need my assistance in resuscitating Critical Pedagogy's approach to writing instruction). Instead, my aim is to articulate how scholars have traditionally handled the concepts of "criticism," "critique," and "critical writing" in the composition classroom while also articulating the potential obstacles or ideological blindspots of emphasizing a discourse of "criticism" when developing class assignments or policies. I will then discuss how the work of Bruno Latour offers the necessary theoretical foundation for re-approaching a discourse of criticism/critique without marginalizing the process and real-world impact surrounding student composition projects.

The second half of this examination will explain how Kurt Squire's characterization of video games as "functional epistemologies" can enact the concerns expressed by Latour in the writing classroom, insofar as Squire's theories can help both students and instructors arrive at a more nuanced, progressive, and historically-relevant understanding criticism while bypassing some of the pitfalls associated with Critical Pedagogy. As Squire argues, video games have the unique capacity to create an epistemological system (i.e., a network of dynamic relations that revolve around information deemed relevant within a virtual gamespace) which uses player interaction to model the tendencies, consequences, and oft-unannounced hierarchies implicit within a given interpretive framework. That is to say, Squire notes how well-designed games can avoid didactically categorizing epistemological systems within good/bad, liberating/oppressive dichotomies while still demonstrating the consequences of participating in said systems. I will conclude by discussing several student projects that were informed by Squire's theories in order to articulate how the process of designing games can present students with new avenues for

undertaking critical inquiry without succumbing to the ideological biases or corrosive skepticism diagnosed by Latour and others. Ultimately, the aim of this chapter is to demonstrate how the numerous themes I have introduced thus far—such as the pedagogical nature of gameplay experiences, the ethical and political dimensions of virtual gamespaces, and the integration of games as an opportunity to reflect upon key terms in composition studies—might coalesce as students themselves take up the mantle of game designers. In doing so, I hope to conclude this project by considering how instructors can further explore the unique intersection between video games, contemporary writing courses, and our own research practices. To begin, though, I want to briefly discuss how a discourse of "critical" has commonly been used in composition scholarship.

5.1 WHY SO CRITICAL?

As with my previous chapter, I find it important to acknowledge the institutional contexts surrounding my course, and reviewing the official course catalog can be a productive starting point. Class titles and course descriptions are, more often than not, influential factors for students taking courses that do not satisfy university-level or major-specific requirements. Therefore, understanding both the institutional circumstances surrounding a course and the expectations or academic situations of students is necessary if instructors want to further evolve the key terms, aims, and relevance of writing courses. My course, simply deemed Critical Writing, was an

upper-division writing-intensive class that satisfies one of the three required writing courses for all undergraduate students. The university catalog description presents a generalized overview of what students should expect in terms of class goals and workload:

> This course is designed to help students improve as critical writers by becoming more observant and discriminating evaluators of how they and others use language to interpret, judge, and ultimately shape the worlds in which they live. Students will be first asked to reflect on the behavior of critics they have encountered in an effort to define what they believe good critics do. They will then be asked to test their definitions through close attention to various writing samples, including material they select as well as pieces chosen by the instructor. In keeping with the belief that critical reflection and dialogue enable both individuals and groups to improve, the course is discussion-based, and class members' progress as writers will be its steady concern. This section is best suited for students familiar with basics of grammar and composition, interested in composing more responsible and effective written opinions, and motivated to participate in conversation about reading and writing critically.

Personally, one of the more interesting aspects of this course description is not necessarily the description of critical writing in terms of the skills students are expected to master but the explicit categorization of “the critic” as a supposedly stable subject position. In other words, this description identifies “the critic” as a persona that holds some degree of authority and influence via her or his strong powers of discernment. Although it is never explicitly stated, the assumption is that students themselves might act as critics themselves (or, at the very least, operate as peers

who are capable of explaining “what good critics do”) through the process of reading and writing critically.

The correlation between the goals expressed in this course description and the typical expectations of students is strong enough to warrant some discussion. Over the course of two semesters, a typical Critical Writing class consisted of predominately sophomore- and junior-level students, almost half of whom were undeclared majors. The other half of students were evenly split between the STEM fields (predominantly computer engineering or information sciences along with a few math majors) and social sciences (such political science or psychology). At the beginning of each term, I ask students to explain their rationale for enrolling in this course and to describe some of their writing goals for the semester. Students who were undeclared often said they were taking this course so they could learn effective and practical writing strategies that could be useful in any major they might eventually choose. Those who already had a declared major typically said that their field of study did not offer any writing courses and they wanted to take a course dedicated solely to writing in a variety of different scenarios. Overall, these student responses overlooked any discussion of criticism/critique or the role of the critic today in favor of an emphasis on efficient and transferable writing skills. In all fairness, these student responses demonstrate a perfectly valid logic. If you are not sure what you would like to study, why not take a course that will be useful regardless of your major? If your own major is lacking in a particular focus (in this case, writing), why not go out of your way to learn this subject from people who specialize in it? Rather than didactically degrade the characterization of good writing as a set of transferable skills, I wanted to heed Russel Durst’s advice that we accept “students’ pragmatic reasons for attending college [by] seeking to establish

common ground between teacher and student" (Durst 111).[66] That is to say, I wanted to avoid simply attacking the idea that decontextualized writing skills can be productively and seamlessly transplanted in any other academic scenario and, instead, take up the following questions implied by this course description in order to find some common ground with students: what is the role of the critic, criticism, and critical writing today? In what ways might criticism or critique extend beyond the relatively self-contained arena of literary studies and begin to address real-world needs or academic pressures of students who, realistically speaking, will only take a handful of writing classes throughout their undergraduate careers? More broadly, can we begin to explore these questions without losing sight of how we "use language to interpret, judge, and ultimately shape the worlds in which" we live? To begin addressing these concerns, I would like to first review how a discourse of criticism/critique has been commonly handled within Rhet/Comp scholarship. Doing so will provide the foundation for introducing contemporary literary theory into conversations regarding critical writing and the instruction thereof.[67]

[66] Durst is explicitly responding to the risk of alienating students within Critical Pedagogy classrooms by marginalizing their professional- or career-focused goals in favor of radical political intervention. Despite his criticisms (and ensuing responses by Critical Pedagogy practitioners), Durst openly and repeatedly admits that his work is "an effort not to dismiss critical pedagogy but to examine it more closely" and adapt it to the real-world circumstances surrounding both students and teachers (Durst, 111).

[67] Before proceeding, it is important to clarify that I am not insinuating that this course description misleads students into false pretenses; from personal experience, I do not believe a single course description is guilty of perpetuating the widespread and problematic characterization of good-writing-as-transferable-skills. Quite the opposite, as I am interested in the unique and rather novel questions implied within this course description: namely, what constitutes the act of criticism and what role does the critic play in contemporary society?

5.2 READING AGENCY, WRITING AGENCY

In today's academic climate, the term "critical" is often thrown around as an administrative buzzword that shores up the levees surrounding a Liberal Arts education. Consider, for a moment, how many English departments harp on their ability to teach "critical thinking" as their ace-in-the-sleeve compared to other fields. Rather than dwell on issues surrounding disciplinary branding in the Humanities, I want to focus on one of the more direct engagements with a discourse of criticism, critique, and critical writing in Rhet/Comp studies: namely, the Critical Pedagogy movement. Paulo Freire and his influential *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* are often viewed as founding figures for the Critical Pedagogy movement.[68] Freire argues against a "banking model" of education that views students as empty, passive, and completely homogeneous recipients that must be inscribed with information or educational experiences deemed relevant to contemporary society. Framing students as passive receptors of information allows for unquestioned and unexamined ideological indoctrination, meaning that educational institutions can be guilty of naturalizing the power relations (be they social, political, or economic) that exploit disadvantaged and marginal populations for the benefit of an elite few. Hence, Freire calls for an educational model that spurs students to challenge dominant ideologies and by exploring how their individual experiences are symptomatic of larger, ideologically-laden

[68] The "critical" label in Critical Pedagogy can be attributed to the methodological association Friere and others have to the Frankfurt School's neo-Marxist theory of cultural and social critique, deemed Critical Theory in contemporary academic circles (Breuing, "Problematizing"). A central tenet of Frankfurt School critics (which included Max Horkheimer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor Adorno) is that self-conscious social critique aimed at cultural, political, and economic systems can lead to emancipation and social progress. This goal often manifested itself in a dialectical method in which the examination of a particular cultural artifact or commodity can lead to a better understanding of the superstructures surrounding them which, in turn, can help individuals challenge dominant ideologies that attempt to naturalize these superstructures. Many of these same methodological features can be found in courses that align themselves with the Critical Pedagogy movement and several Critical Pedagogy practitioners (Freire included) have acknowledged their influence by either the Frankfurt School in particular or the lineage of Marxist theory in general.

socio-cultural contexts, systems, and structures of governance.[69] To achieve this goal, Freire argues that instructors take up an educational method of praxis, meaning a continual cycle of theoretical reflection and real-world action (as opposed to an unreflective transmission of information which never changes despite new insights or circumstances) that can pave the way for personal and communal liberation from oppressive regimes. One way to achieve this liberatory form of praxis is to discard a banking model of education in favor of a "problem posing" model that allows students to function as co-learners alongside instructors; as co-learners, students are not tasked with simply retaining information that has trickled down through an exclusive hierarchy but, instead, are able to participate in the creation of new knowledge by forging new ways of linking their lived experiences to oft-nebulous concepts or power relations.[70] More importantly, a problem posing model calls attention to the constructed-ness of knowledge by allowing students to examine how abstract or theoretical knowledge is deployed in real-world circumstances (a process which can lead into larger questions about the potential biases of theoretical knowledge, those who benefit from it, and those who are exploited by it).[71]

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[69] My use of the term "governance" is not limited to official state institutions (although Freire, himself a former government official who needed to flee Brazil in the wake of a 1964 coup, understood the necessity of critiquing state institutions). Instead, my use of "governance" aligns with Michel Foucault's theory of "governmentality" or the general idea that larger institutions (be they state, commercial or otherwise) reinforce normative discursive practices for the sake of regulating the actions and potential for actions of individuals (Foucault, 2004).

[70] What constitutes "power relations" within the subfield of Critical Pedagogy has not been explicitly defined via a fixed set of criteria. According to Patricia Bizzell, "power" is not a uniform, homogeneous, or inherently oppressive force (Bizzell, "Power"). Instead, power, generally speaking, is simply the conflation of numerous forces (such as responsibilities granted by someone's institutional affiliation) that can shape the way other people act (i.e., the power granted by a university to an instructor allows said instructor to delegate assignments to students). When crafted carefully, the power relations within a classroom can foster a progressive authority within both students and teachers alike (hooks, *Talking*), which allow us to see how "power can be transformed in the interest of creating a democratic society." (Giroux, "Postmodernism" 248)

[71] Students can operate as co-learners in a variety of ways. Conceptually speaking, being able to apply theoretical knowledge to personal experience exemplifies a "co-learner" insofar as students take part in learning new ways of understanding their world via self-reflexive praxis. Literally speaking, a hallmark of many Critical Pedagogy classrooms is allowing students to dictate the overall shape of their courses (such as voting on the types of assignments they want to conduct or the criteria which will be used to evaluate them), thereby acting as "co-learners" because they now wield some of the same responsibilities that teachers have when establishing class policies.

In acting as co-learners alongside instructors, students can begin to uncover how their personal experiences are shaped by dominant ideologies, structures, or systems and, furthermore, gain the necessary self-awareness for taking action against the oppressive tendencies of these systems.

Throughout the 1980s and 90s, many educators took up these same themes and concepts—namely, an emphasis on liberation, social progress, and greater democratic participation that emerges as a result of reconfiguring the power relations within classrooms and allowing students to interrogate the ideological functioning of dominant structures or systems. Scholars such as Henry Giroux, Peter McLaren and Ira Shor formulated teaching methods that built upon the ideas introduced by Freire in order to "better understand the role that schools play in transmitting certain messages about political, social and economic life" in such a way that educators could "realize the possibilities of democratic social values within their classroom" (Breuing, "Problematizing" 4-5). As with Freire's theory of problem posing education, a key assumption for many of these educators is that that challenging traditional power relations within a classroom sets the foundation for rethinking how students themselves might challenge the power relations that permeate other locations and experiences beyond the classroom.[72] This is not to say that everything in society functions "like a classroom." Rather, the implication is that the traditional classroom is just one location where hierarchical power relations exist most explicitly. Therefore, reconfiguring inter-classroom power relations can allow students to better grasp the agency they wield, agency which, in turn, can be directed towards shaping intra-classroom power relations.

[72] There are many different aspects, aims, and ideas emphasized by each scholars who aligns herself/himself with Critical Pedagogy. For the purpose of this examination, I want to focus primarily on how personal agency is highlighted by reconfiguring the power relations within classroom settings because this will provide a segue into larger discussions surrounding the role of writing and critique in Critical Pedagogy.

While there are many other variables that are emphasized by different Critical Pedagogy scholars, I do not want to insinuate that there exists some predetermined or quintessential features that determine whether an instructor falls under this category. For the purpose of this examination, the specific focus on student agency can help us talk about the role of reading and writing in Critical Pedagogy courses. From this brief examination, we can say that an underlying theme in these courses is helping students better understand hegemonic systems that implicitly or explicitly support socio-political and economic oppression. The assumption is that identifying the hegemonic functioning of dominant systems and their exploitive tendencies can grant students the necessary insight for locating moments where marginalized individuals might exert their own influence within these processes for politically liberating ends. Although these socially-progressive aims proposed by Critical Pedagogy are laudable, many have explored how an over-emphasis on agency in the face of hegemony inadvertently undermines the actual role of composition practices Critical Pedagogy classrooms.[73] As Richard Fulkerson points out in his comprehensive review of composition scholarship at the turn of the twenty-first century, proponents of Critical Pedagogy and approaches that emphasize similar forms of cultural critique often fall victim to marginalizing the actual process of student writing in their courses.[74] Despite a discourse that emphasizes student-centered classroom dynamics Fulkerson laments how many of these courses fail to address student composition practices, both in terms of discussing the

[73] Reservations surrounding Critical Pedagogy are not limited to concerns about student composing practices. Many have discussed Critical Pedagogy scholars' tendency to over-emphasize economic class at the expense of racial or gender-based societal issues (hooks, *Talking*). Additionally, this approach runs the risk of taking a reactive and, in some ways, regressive stance towards student interests (Durst, *Collision*). Framing any teaching-based method through a discourse of liberation can implicitly frame students as inherently ignorant, naïve, or complacent with systems that might exacerbate inequality or prejudice. If enlightened liberation is the goal, then we risk making ignorant oppression (either on the part of students or their audience) the necessary precondition. This sentiment will be echoed during my discussion of Latour in the following section.

[74] In Fulkerson's survey, he uses the designation CCS (or, Critical Cultural Studies) as a general umbrella term for composition courses that emphasize cultural critique as well as classes that deploy Freire-ian principles. Grouping together classes that are deliberately connected to Critical Pedagogy with generalized cultural studies courses makes sense given the overlapping methodologies, aims, and scholarly influences between these two approaches.

particularities of specific composition processes as they pertain to student interests as well as the impact that student writing might have beyond the class-at-hand. This, in turn, leaves us in a situation where "the writing in such a course will be judged by how sophisticated or insightful the teacher finds the interpretation of the relevant artifacts. In other words, papers are judged in the same way they would be in any department with a 'content' to teach." (Fulkerson, 662). With this, Fulkerson diagnoses the tendency for many of these courses to mimic the structural function of traditional content-driven courses (both within and beyond English departments), which can betray a Freire-ian emphasis on challenging students to act as co-learners in the classroom. These concerns culminate in an observation that shifts our attention away from ideologically-charged discourses of hegemony, agency, and so on, and back towards the relationship between reading and writing. Fulkerson notes how in both literature-focused composition courses (i.e., comp courses that make literature their primary object of examination when discussing writing practices) and some Freire-ian inspired classes

> writing is essentially a display of valued intellectual interaction with the relevant texts and is judged accordingly. Ungenerously, one could argue that this not produce a writing course at all—any more than a sociology course in race relations that uses extensive writing is a writing course. Certainly it provides students with extensive practice in writing and with getting feedback—although it isn't clear whether the feedback is mainly about writing or mainly about culture and how to "read" it. (663)

Despite the fact that students may produce many texts in a Critical Pedagogy course, these texts still reside within the domain of "reading" insofar as student composition projects seek to demonstrate an individual's ability to identify, interpret, and, more often than not, chastise

dominant discourses or hegemonic practices. In this sense, writing is almost depicted as an unavoidable byproduct of critical inquiry; if one of the goals of Critical Pedagogy is to enlighten students from the mystifying powers of ideology, writing is merely the necessary vehicle used to arrive at a progressive and liberating mindset.

I would like to use Fulkerson's observation about the role of reading and writing in Critical Pedagogy courses to return to one of my initial framing questions: what is the role of the critic, criticism, and critical writing today? According to Fulkerson's analysis, we can say that the act of criticism or critique in a Critical Pedagogy classroom is being able to "read" oppressive systems and demystify their hegemonic functioning. In this sense, the critic is a (oft-pessimistic) reader of culture, and criticism is a reflection of the critic's ability to raise the veil of false consciousness in order to begin to see the world for what it "truly is." When viewed through this lens, "critical writing" is simply the negative imprint of an individual's capacity to undertake the necessary interpretive reflections required to read culture and establish herself or himself as a competent critic. As Fulkerson and others have pointed out, this marginalization of writing obfuscates the process by which students might translate their composition practices into real-world engagements or interventions (see also, G. Tate, "Empty"). In other words, these courses might do an excellent job cultivating a student's ability to "read" culture but it is unclear how these classes might focus on a student's ability to "write" on both a literal level (i.e., making actual composing practices, strategies, and consequences a primary object of study in the classroom) and a figurative level (i.e., how to "write" or inscribe actions into the very systems they are critiquing for the sake of progress). In short, it is not entirely clear how students make the leap from reading the ideological functioning of oppressive systems to actively deploying the new-found agency that stems from critiquing these systems or translating this new-found agency

to other people who may be subject to these same systems. Thus, the assumption is that the mere act of distanced critique is enough to arrive at real-world change. How, when, and where we might translate this critique into action is not a primary concern for the critic.

Despite these reservations, the underlying concerns of Critical Pedagogy continues to live on in contemporary scholarship even if a discourse of criticism or critique has fallen by the wayside. For instance, Christian Weisser and Sidney Dobrin, have de-emphasized the discourse of criticism and (especially for Dobrin) focus on individualized agency when discussing the real-world impact of student writing, opting instead for questions regarding the spaces in which writing is produced and circulated beyond traditional classroom environments (Weisser, *Moving*; Dobrin, *Postcomposition*). Meanwhile, Adam Banks has attached the "critical" label to a discourse of "access" within technology studies as a way to describe how minority demographics might begin to intervene in technological practices in order to account for their personal, and often marginalized, experiences (Banks, *Race*).[75] For the purposes of this examination, I want to use criticisms (for the lack of a better word) of Critical Pedagogy to rethink the role of critique in the contemporary writing classroom instead of simply abandoning anything and everything that might share connection to the theories of Freire, Giroux, and others. That is to say, I want to build upon the arguments made by both supporters *and* detractors of Critical Pedagogy without merely dusting off this method for another go-around or rejecting its values wholesale. More specifically, I want discuss how the student-designed games in my Critical Writing course resonate with the Freire-ian appeal to personal agency without marginalizing the role of student writing or regressing into an unproductive form of criticism that operates through a passive,

[75] Scholars who attached the adjective "critical" to their specific field of study, such as Banks, still resonate with the appeal to personal agency and the ability to use socio-cultural inquiry as a way to better understand the ideological functioning of larger systems or the possible exploitative tendencies of said systems. Although a discourse of liberation may not be at the forefront a la Freire, many of the same underlying ideals and methods are at work when adding "critical" to a field of study.

distanced "reading" of socio-cultural systems from afar. To do so, I want to briefly depart from Rhet/Comp scholarship and discuss how literary theorists have voiced similar concerns regarding culturally-focused critical analysis before demonstrating how contemporary literary theory might help writing instructors derive a more productive understanding of what constitutes critical inquiry in the writing classroom.

5.3 WHY SO LIBERATED?

As I mentioned previously, my generalized course description made direct reference to the status of "the critic" as a distinct position with its own goals and responsibilities (even if said goals and responsibilities were rather vague) and implies that criticism today is still a pertinent discipline. In his essay, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," Bruno Latour diagnoses what he sees as all-too-common features of contemporary critical inquiry and, therefore, what characterizes the mantle of "a critic" today. Latour begins by identifying a type of corrosive skepticism that has infiltrated contemporary critical inquiry, which is most explicitly manifested in two common argumentative strategies that, curiously enough, always benefits the critic and puts him or her on the logical and moralistic highground.[76] The first strategy attempts to demystify the supposed autonomy of objects or ideas, similar to the

[76] Latour begins his essay by lamenting how the methods and goals of criticism have been used to make all theories, events, or generally-agreed upon evidence (no matter how progressive in nature or objective in fact) subject to accusations of ideological biases. Put differently, Latour argues that the same critical tools that were once used to critique power relations for progressive means have are now being used for regressive and potentially dangerous ends; the same methods and practices that previously allowed Latour to under the implicit ideological functioning of scientific advancements are now being utilized to support climate change denial or global conspiracy theories, for instance. In short, anything and everything is up for "critique" insofar as anyone can go down the relativist-rabbit-hole and demonstrate how all knowledge is socially constructed, subjective, influenced by ideological tribalism, and so on.

aim of dissolving “false consciousness” in Marxist-influenced commodity critique. This strategy begins by targeting an idea or object that holds some authority or autonomy in contemporary society, then demonstrating how these subjects are not quasi-deities that act independent of human action. Ideas or objects that were once seen as authoritative, absolute, or even natural are revealed to be products of human activity and, therefore, are not nearly as universal as we initially thought (i.e., we can no longer talk about the “free market” as if it is its own entity because the free market is actually driven by human action and intentions). The end goal of this argumentative strategy is to demystify the allure of commodity fetishism and empower the critic’s audience with a newfound sense of liberation. The second strategy takes an inverse approach, beginning with the assumed agency of an individual before systemically deconstructing how one’s agency is actually governed by much larger structures beyond his or her control. According to this argumentative strategy, what we thought was our own “free will” was actually the unconscious functioning of larger determining systems (such as the desires of transnational capitalism, the ideological tendencies hidden in everyday language, or even biological factors lurking within our genes).

While the first strategy hopes the emancipate individuals who have been mesmerized by the commodified luxuries of modern socio-economic paradigms, the second strategy gives a stern reality check to those who are all-too-comfortable with their supposed agency. As Latour succinctly puts it, “When he or she [the critic] debunks claims of the fetishist by showing the work of his or her hands or when he or she debunks the naïve belief in freedom by showing the weight of determination” the critic always turns out to be correct (Latour, “Why” 240). In both scenarios, the critic’s superiority hinges upon an appeal to (or deconstruction of) the liberating potential of one’s personal agency. In appealing to liberation vis-a-vis agency, contemporary

criticism reeks of a pessimistic and reactive attitude insofar as the critic's audience must necessarily be a dupe (either because she believes in the autonomy of commodities or in the power of her own free will) in order for the critic's superior powers of intellect to shine through.

Latour identifies the corrosive consequences of holding liberation hostage, so to speak, as a way to frame a critic's intellectual superiority; when the critic puts liberation on the table, things can quickly escalate into a zero-sum game of liberation versus oppression. Diagnosing the dangers of over-emphasizing a discourse of oppression/rebellion in conjunction personal agency can help us further unpack the reservations surrounding Critical Pedagogy and, more importantly, begin to rethink how instructors might offer alternatives to overcome the pitfalls associated with this methodology. Latour argues critical inquiry often operates under the assumption that the reader necessarily be naïve or misguided individual who is then brought to enlightenment via a critic's investigations (hence him chastising the two argumentative strategies that always favor the intellectual and moral superiority of the critic). Similarly, Critical Pedagogy can be seen as over-emphasizing individualized intellectual liberation against the mystifying powers of ideology, thereby cultivating a quasi-conversion narrative where the student-writer must pass from ignorance to enlightenment without much consideration of how her or his personal ruminations might begin to elicit change in the world. In both cases, stressing liberation via the examination of personal agency actually undermines the potential to act insofar as the distanced nature of contemporary critique—at it functions for Latour and in Critical Pedagogy classrooms— only leaves two options for the reader: shrug our shoulders and buy in to the systems being chastised, or wipe our hands and completely abandon these systems (either by refusing to participate or, in some cases, demand an outright dismantling of them). Hence, critical inquiry that synthesizes the act of distanced critique with a discourse of personal

liberation leaves us in a double-bind: opt-in and we perpetual oppression, opt-out and we are left with no roadmap for living a so-called liberated life (as if going off the grid or staging a revolution is a realistic possibility for students taking out thousands of dollars of loans to attend college).

To clarify, I am not claiming that the act of reading cultural systems for the sake of locating their exploitative tendencies is a lost cause. Instead, I am using Latour's essay to identify how an over-emphasis on "reading" (i.e., distanced critique that seeks to liberate despite offering no tangible strategies for enacting change) at the expense of examining "writing" (i.e., an attunement to how composition practices, be it an essay or otherwise, might begin to influence real-world situations) runs the risk of creating the zero-sum game of oppression/rebellion I just mentioned. In short, when the critic's role is to de-mystify from afar, we implicitly set a precedent that actively undermines criticism's ability to actively engage in real-world events, places the critic in a safe ideologically-neutral zone (i.e., a literal classroom or the figurative space of contemporary academia), and pessimistically positions the reader in a lose-lose situation regarding their compliance with potentially-oppressive systems.

In reaction to these complaints regarding contemporary criticism, Latour proposes a new methodology for critical inquiry that attempts to unpack the nuanced complexity of contemporary issues, events, and circumstances without succumbing to over-simplified appeals to personal liberation (which, as I will eventually demonstrate, can help instructors recouple the intimate dialogue between reading and writing). Such a project entails that

> The critic is not one who debunks, but the one who assembles. The critic is not one who lifts the rugs from under the feed of naïve believers, but the one who offers the participants arenas in which to gather. The critic is not one who

> alternates haphazardly between antifetishism and positivism like the drunk iconoclast drawn by Goya, but the one for whom, if something is constructed, then it means it is fragile and thus in great need of care and caution. (246)

In other words, bad criticism over-simplifies complicated issues with a stern hand from afar and attempts to distance people from their preconceived notions about the world (your free will is not free! Your commodities are not autonomous!). Conversely, good criticism attempts to bring individuals together and closer to the world by offering an arena where we can further explore the complexity and nuance of real-world issues. Furthermore, this act of helping people become more intimate with the complexity of the world should be handled with enough care so that it is accessible (but not remedial) to those who are invested in these concepts.[77]

For the remainder of this examination, I would like to explain how having students design their own video games enacts Latour's revised-yet-still-abstract image of criticism in tangible ways. In doing so, I hope to demonstrate how the process of having students act as game designers can resonate with the larger aims of Critical Pedagogy without succumbing to the pitfalls associated with over-emphasizing a liberation discourse vis-a-vis the appeal to student agency, thereby granting instructors a more comprehensive understanding of what it means for students undertake the act of criticism in their composition projects. The ultimate aim of the following section is to further illustrate how introducing video games to the writing classroom can help us come to more progressive interpretations of commonplace terms in Rhet/Comp while

[77] I read Latour's use of the word "care" as a reaction against the combative tone of contemporary critical inquiry, meaning that he is calling attention to the critical tendency to simply lambaste dominant systems. As Latour argues, real-world issues and events are themselves products of human activity and, as such, are not essential or completely pre-determined. This non-essential quality (which Latour notes is not the same as an unproductive form of cultural relativism or a nihilistic form of social constructionism) is precisely what demands that we cultivate and foster issues, ideas, or concerns in order to ensure that they continue to grow in accordance with the needs, experiences, or circumstances of contemporary life.

simultaneously reinforcing the unique teaching opportunities afforded by video games and educationally-focused game scholarship.

5.4 CREATING FUNCTIONAL EPISTEMOLOGIES AS A FORM OF CRITIQUE

In structuring my Critical Writing course, I chose to front-load the early parts of the semester with video game scholarship that introduces key terms and methodologies for understanding how games can tackle intricate real-world issues via their unique structural functioning. Kurt Squire's theory of "functional epistemologies" was an early cornerstone for our class, one which would inform how our class both interpreted several games we played together and how students began to compose their self-designed games. As I discussed in Chapter One, Squire argues that video games "are uniquely organized for a *functional* epistemology, where one learns through doing, through performance." (Squire, "From" 22). Squire uses his teaching experiences with the turn-based strategy game *Civilization III* to illustrate the epistemological underpinnings of gameplay experiences. *Civ III* depicts a materialist interpretation of history in that most (if not all) player actions are informed by the quest for allocating raw natural resources that are then used to advance their own nation. In doing so, *Civ III* offers a vision of history that revolves around economic gain (and all the contentious enterprises associated with it, such as colonialism) as opposed to grand narrations of Western superiority. Hence, the ways in which a game facilitates the potential actions offered to a player are themselves reflections of an epistemological lens that re-envisions the underlying motivations, preconditions, and consequences of historical progress.

Hence, the notion of a "functional epistemology" denotes how video games can use player actions to simulate dynamics systems of relations in order to offer a new way of understanding how and why certain events happen in lieu of others.

In addition to Squire, students also read Constance Steinkuehler's work on MMORPG-communities and Ian Bogost's theory of procedural rhetoric. While I tend to think Steinkuehler and Bogost share more similarities than differences with Squire, I chose to emphasize Squire's notion of functional epistemologies as a foundational concept throughout our course because his work aligns more with the the larger issues surrounding criticism/critique/Critical Pedagogy and the role of student agency. In comparison, Bogost emphasizes the rhetorical nature of video games—namely, how games use procedures and processes as a method of persuasion when presenting an argument about how certain systems function—but his work can occasionally marginalize the experiential impact that games can have on its players and even run the risk of instrumentalizing the player for the sake of enacting the internal systems of a video game (Sicart, "Against"). Meanwhile, Steinkuehler focuses on the discursive practices of gaming communities yet it would be difficult to translate her ethnographic approach to a writing class without structuring the entire course around an online game and the community therein.[78] Conversely, much of Squire's research focuses on how the introduction of games in to traditional educational spaces and a discourse of epistemology can make students' personal gameplay experiences the primary focal point for unpacking both the critical potential of video games and their role in curricula development. This is not to say that Steinkuehler and Bogost did not inform my

[78] While several composition scholars have had success integrating MMORPGs into the writing classroom (Colby and Colby, 2008), I personally try to avoid structuring a course around a single online game for a variety of reasons. Mainly, the most popular and expansive MMORPGs, such as *World of Warcraft,* are quite resource intensive and require a dedicated graphics card to play. Many students in my class used laptops with integrated graphics, making it almost impossible to play the more elaborate games. Without an on-campus game lab or digital studio that allowed students to install commercial video games, students would need to rely on impromptu access to reasonably-powerful computers (such as using a friend's machine) which, in turn, would introduce a host of extra logistical issues.

students' design process, it is just that Squire operated as primary framing mechanism for discussing the critical potential of video games.

After spending the first two months of the semester reading these critics and applying their ideas to a handful of video games, I introduced our semester-long project of having students work in small groups to design their own games that present a functional epistemology surrounding a contemporary issue. By this, I mean that the aim of these games was to allow players to interact with abstract or complex ideas in a tangible, meaningful way, and the end goal of these games was to provide the necessary conditions for players to reflect upon their own assumptions regarding the topic-at-hand. In much the same way that *Civ III* offered a materialist interpretation of history without coming to easy, over-simplified good/bad divisions in Squire's research, I urged students to design their games without trying to over-generalize their topic or discuss it in a divisive manner. Put differently, I tried to get students to think of their games as simulating the functioning of larger systems and demonstrating the pros and cons of their functioning while still allowing their prospective players to come to their own interpretations regarding these ideas. In terms of the actual documents students would be producing, each group was tasked with creating a Design Portfolio that detailed several aspects of their games such as the fictional narrative, gameplay mechanics, underlying epistemological outlook they were trying to express, the context or relevance of addressing these themes at this historical moment, and visual mock-ups of how their game might look and function first-hand. Given the relatively short amount time students had to complete this project, I did not require students to create functional prototypes (although the example I will discuss did take advantage of free game-design software). Instead, I wanted students to focus on how the explained and rationalized very specific design decisions in accordance with the underlying themes of their games. I will speak more

about the role of the Design Portfolio and how it shaped the nature of student writing in my course during the following section but, for now, I want to turn to a student project that demonstrates the potential of framing these composition projects through Squire's ideas.

One of the more intricate student-designed games was titled *Them*. This game functioned as a hybrid dungeon-crawler/top-down-shooter wherein the player would take control of a blue square capable of firing projectiles at enemies while exploring a variety locations. Enemies would come in the form of different colored squares (beginning with red but then adding more variety in later levels), and their tactics would become more complex as the game progressed. Throughout the game's introductory level, players would come in contact with a several blue squares that would detail the basic gameplay mechanics (i.e., one blue square will teach the player how to move, another would discuss shooting mechanics, another would discuss ammo or health management, etc.). One of these squares would warn the player that red squares are violent and should be attacked at first sight. In later levels, these NPC squares would warn the player of the increasing aggression of red squares and even offer strategies for defeating them. However, the twist is that not all red squares are inherently violent, meaning that the supposedly objective information or strategies being presented by the blue squares is actually biased towards very particular outcomes or informed by specific concerns/fears. Furthermore, this student group wanted to implement a real-time adaption system where red squares would react to the player's aggression (or lack thereof).[79] The implication is that assuming all red squares are violent would

[79] A main concern during this design process was trying to create situations or incentives for the player to not immediately kill every red square she comes across, thereby giving her the opportunity to rethink the supposedly violent nature of them. Due to time constraints, this student group was only able to speculate some possible gameplay mechanics that would help achieve a momentary reflection in the player, which included having some red squares offer helpful items to the player or creating scenarios where the player would be surrounded by an overwhelming number of red squares who would not attack unless the player does so first. Despite the fact that this group never came to an absolute agreement on how, exactly, they would convey the non-violent tendencies of some red squares, thinking about how they might cultivate particular responses—as opposed to simply demanded the player act in certain ways—was a very productive exercise for considering

cause the player to immediately kill them which, in turn, would make more red squares violent and initiate a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy wherein biased information (i.e., the NPC squares warning the player of supposedly violent enemies) would actively cultivate the type of actions that would lead to this biased information being "validated." At the conclusion of each level, a short cutscene would play wherein two squares of the same color (sometimes blue, sometimes other colors) would briefly discuss the impact of player actions from each square's respective viewpoints. What might be championed as a courageous act of self-defense by one set of squares would be interpreted as unprovoked violence by another, and it is up to the player to interpret the larger significance of her actions.

From the onset of the design process, this student group wanted to emphasize how quickly a vicious cycle can emerge from over-reacting to partial or misleading information. As one student explained the underlying argument of their in game in the Design Portfolio, this group wanted to demonstrate how

> preconceptions are often misconstrued. This happens in the event that we listen to what other people tell us about a said person, race, culture, etc. The game portrays this aspect by having other blue squares serve as a messenger where they tell us false information about the other colored squares. For example a blue square might say "watch out for the red squares they are shooters". Adding this aspect into the game allows for a player to believe the blue squares information and find out for themselves that what people always tell you is not true.

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how the structure of gameplay systems can exhibit the ideological tendencies of larger epistemological frameworks. I will speak more about how these ideas translated themselves into this group's design portfolio later in this section.

In short, a primary goal of this game was to put players in situations where they could reflect upon the disjunct between supposedly objective statistical information (i.e., the likelihood of red squared exhibiting violent tendencies), the real-world situations or actions that are informed by said information, and the threat of self-fulfilling prophecies that emerge when people respond to misleading information under the threat of violence. Hence, the game's title *Them* gestures towards the discourses often used to perpetuate partial information about dangerous "others," discourses which themselves can actually spur the very violence that causes oppressed groups to react in aggressive ways.

Part of the Design Portfolio asked students to explain the current socio-cultural context of the themes that structured their games. In explaining the context of their games, students would be able to explain how and how and why the first-hand experience of playing their game could provide the foundation for the player to take up a new epistemological worldview which can then be used to examine other issues or trends. In other words, I wanted students to build upon Squire's argument that the epistemological lens created within a virtual gamespace is intimately linked to the real-world conditions surrounding a specific game and, furthermore, this new lens can be used to re-approach commonplace events or circumstances from a new perspective. This student group contextualized the relevance of this game's underlying themes—namely, the interrelation between preconceived notions based off of partial, misleading, or misinterpreted information as well as the type of violence encouraged by an us-versus-them discourse—by discussing the Syrian refugee crisis. At this point in the semester, the crisis was beginning to reach a breaking point as several European countries were debating whether to grant asylum to refugees fleeing the escalating conflict in Syria. Tensions surrounding the massive influx of refugees into European countries manifested itself in an uptick in far-right anti-immigration

groups using fear-mongering tactics—such as circulating misleading statistics detailing the "dangers" associated with liberal immigration policies or the literal instigation of violence against immigrant communities. This student group explained how the over-saturation of misleading information and outright xenophobic calls for violence against migrant communities directly informed the design decisions underlying gameplay mechanics of *Them*, noting how

> preconceived notions can also be established from the statistics and other data conveyed through the media. News reports about criminal activity near migrant housing can influence the viewer/listener to believe the whole group is dangerous. In this modern world, where there is a constant barrage of information conveyed through social and corporate news media, the data can be presented in a highly subjective manner, with problematic and even violent results.
>
> Extreme examples of this resulting violence can be seen in the recent news from Germany, where there have been arson attacks and vandalism against refugee housing, and in Stockholm where masked men went on a violent rampage against non-Swedes in an attempt to avenge a recent crime at a refugee center. In the example from Germany, the refugees as a whole group were targeted regardless of their individual circumstances. However, the events in Stockholm went one step further by targeting anyone who did not have the physical appearance of an ethnic Swede. These instances represent the manifestation of preconceptions about whole groups of people based on the reported or

experienced actions of a few.[80]

Contextualizing the real-world events that informed their design process helped students connect the internal logic of their game—meaning, the gameplay mechanics and narrative elements that channel player agency in very deliberate ways—to external socio-cultural circumstances. In making this connection between the internal structures and external conditions of *Them*, students were able to create a virtual arena where other individuals could experience the oft-abstract functioning of larger systems, processes, or concepts in such a way that they could further understand the complexity underlying these issues without necessarily coming to universal or over-simplified conclusions. Much like how *Civ III* avoided coming to easy good/bad categorizations about the nature of historical progress in favor of offering an alternative perspective that sought to further complicate the numerous forces surrounding historical events, *Them* calls attention to how supposedly objective statistics and information are themselves intertwined with human actions, intentions, and (more often than not) misguided interpretations which, in turn, can escalate already-tense conditions into full-blown violence. It this sense, the critique offered by *Them* diagnoses and explores the underlying assumptions, preconditions, and possible consequences of a given system of thought (i.e., the discourses used to establish an us-versus-them mentality in addition to the distribution of partial information that sets favorable conditions for this mindset). Rather than simply lambaste those who peddle fear-mongering data to shore up divisions between individuals or present a naïve, sanitized checklist for overcoming personal biases in order to coalesce into a utopian harmony, *Them* attempted to simulate the first-

[80] In January of 2016, over one hundred masked assailants gathered in central Stockholm to distribute anti-immigration leaflets and began physically attacking individuals who were assumed to me immigrants. In August of 2015, there was a string of vandalism directed at Syrian refugee camps throughout eastern Germany.

hand experiences that facilitate how one might inadvertently participate in complicated (and often chaotic) circumstances framed by violence or uncertainty.

To reiterate Latour's claims, the critic should be "one who assembles. The critic is not one who lifts the rugs from under the feed of naïve believers, but the one who offers the participants arenas in which to gather" in order to become closer (not more distant) to the intricacies of the real world. In this sense, *Them* operated as a student-assembled virtual arena where an individual could participate in digital simulations of real-world issues without needing to arrive at some form of liberating revelation. Indeed, one of the most complicated aspects of this game was the lack of an easy checklist for overcoming the influence of biased information; there will always be a small portion of squares (of every color) that will be violent and there will always be squares who attempt to capitalize on misleading information for personal gains. However, this refusal to offer an overly-simplified checklist for change does not entail we simply accept these issues or systems for what they are nor should we abandon all attempts at mitigating violence aimed at marginal/minority communities (doing so would only reinforce the critical double-bind that Latour identifies in any appeal to liberation). Instead, *Them* acknowledges that violence exists and, in very specific circumstances, is necessary for the sake of protection but we must try to understand why people—ourselves included—might inadvertently contribute to a viscous cycle that is spurred by, and feeds into, highly partial information or fear-mongering. Put differently, *Them* refuses to offer a utopian image of liberation—meaning, this game does not delude us into thinking we can overcome all personal biases and avoid all instances of violence, nor does it call for an outright abandonment of the socio-cultural circumstances that give way to these issues.

The form of critique offered by *Them* avoids the knee-jerk reaction of either abandoning or completely dismantling systems that are potentially exploitative. Instead, this critical undertaking embodies a more nuanced and necessarily-moderate approach: just because individuals buy into system (i.e., acknowledging that personal bias and violence are not going anywhere soon) does not mean we can't begin slowly change it for the better. In doing so, *Them* illustrates how personal agency can still be a fundamental focus on criticism without the baggage of a liberation/oppression dichotomy; this game simultaneously embraces agency—insofar as it is an interactive game that requires a player's participation in order to function—while also demonstrating how one's agency is not an autonomous, transcendental essence but, instead, is conditioned by numerous systems that often exist beyond a person's immediate comprehension. The underlying epistemological argument in this game revolves around the player realizing how she can potentially be manipulated by impartial information, thereby undermining her own sense of autonomy and potential to act as an enlightened, liberated subject.[81] Hence, agency is the means by which a play can come to understand the complexity of this situation as opposed to agency operating as a final product that miraculously emerges from one's reading of hegemonic cultural systems. In divorcing agency from the pipedream of complete liberation, *Them* offered a pragmatic—yet not pessimistic or nihilistic—vision for how players might use the lessons learned from this game to better understand the complications surrounding the particularities of discourses that rely on extreme forms of isolationism or anti-immigration.

[81] As I discussed extensively in Chapter Two, video games can be described as "subjectivity machines" insofar as they rely on a player's psychological and physical self-modifying practices in order to function. In much the same way, *Them* requires the player to undertake the necessary self-modification (that is, not only learning to play the game but also learning how to reflect on one's personal experiences with misleading information). I will discuss the pedagogical elements of video games in the following section when discussing the role of co-learners in the game design process.

5.5 THE ROLE OF WRITING IN THE DESIGN PROCESS

Ultimately, a game such as *Them* demonstrates how we can be attune to the role of agency within the act of criticism without framing agency through a zero-sum game of liberation versus oppression. In doing so, *Them* offered one example of how students themselves might achieve Latour's vision for new forms of critical inquiry that attempt to bring people closer to (not over-simplify) the complexity underlying pressing real-world issues while also allowing others to explore these concepts without the stern guidance of the critic-as-enlightened-narrator. For the final section of this examination, I would like to discuss how writing functioned throughout the design process in order to return to the reading/writing tensions discussed by Fulkerson. As I mentioned earlier, the Design Portfolio was used for detailing specific gameplay mechanics or narrative structure as well as contextualizing the relevance of the ideas expressed through the actions afforded to the player. In connecting abstract systems (such as socio-cultural climates, the role of misinformation in perpetuating fear, etc.) to the very specific mechanics and narrative structure that guide player actions, students were challenged to not simply "read" these systems. Rather, students had to actively translate, modify, and, perhaps most importantly, empathize with the logic of these systems in order to create a set of coherent gameplay mechanics that allowed potential players to fully participate in a game's underlying epistemology. That is to say, rather than simply lambaste the circumstances or individuals involved with perpetuating misleading information for the sake of violent isolationism, students needed to first understand *how* these systems functioned in such a way that people actively bought into their ideological logic, then translate this knowledge into gameplay systems elicited active participation (not passive observation) from them. Just as Squire notes how *Civ III* avoids coming to grand evaluations about the materialist underpinnings of historical progress in favor of demonstrating the

ideological tendencies of a materialist approach to history—not to mention how this epistemological framework allowed players to rethink the oft-understated role of military imperialism or colonialism in standard historical education—the student-designers of *Them* were tasked with creating a game that simulated how a particular system of thought could create violence-begets-violence scenarios while, at the same time, illustrate how these same system genuinely structure the first-hand experiences and actions of individuals.

Having the written Design Portfolio operate as the territory where students sought to contextualize, understand, and translate abstract systems into gameplay mechanisms that structured player experiences in deliberate ways calls attention to the humanistic underpinnings that often accompany a discourse of "design." As Richard Buchanan notes, a rhetorical approach to "design" throughout the twentieth century veered away from a focus on a individual's craft and towards the power relations that gave way to an industrial then post-industrial socio-economic paradigm. Buchanan argues, "design is an instrument of power. It is the art of inventing and shaping two-, three-, and four-dimensional forms that are intended to satisfy needs, wants, and desires, thereby effecting changes in attitudes, beliefs, and actions of others" (Buchanan, "Rhetoric" 247). Hence, a discourse of design calls attention to the ways in which aesthetic principles can resonate with and channel the potential to act on the part of other people. In much the same way, the Design Portfolios for student projects operated as vehicles for creating "aesthetic forms" (i.e., gameplay mechanics and narrative elements) that structure the experiences of other players. In this sense, the process of designing gameplay elements reinforced the act of "writing" not only in the literal sense of creating a text-heavy document, but "writing" in the conceptual sense of students were actively re-assembling the very systems they were critiquing via the translation of real-world practices into gameplay mechanics. That is to

say, students did not just "read" the socio-cultural and ideological systems that influenced the creation of *Them*, students also needed to "write" or "compose" these systems within a virtual gamespace in such a way that they channeled the actions of players in deliberate ways. In doing so, they had to account for how their composition practices—that is, the act of composing speculative rulesets in a gamespace—resonated with the rhetorical elements described by Buchanan insofar as they needed to create rules and experiences that channeled the agency of their players without simply telling them what to do. Hence, the act of creating a written Design Portfolio avoided the over-emphasis on reading that can be associated with Critical Pedagogy classrooms insofar as students had to write in direct response to the agency of their prospective players, as opposed to simply using writing as a way to catalog their own personal readings of hegemonic systems. Hence, the design process made the delicate interrelation between conceptual systems and individual agency a primary concern a primary concern for students (thereby resonated with Freire's theories) without marginalizing the importance of student composition practices in the classroom.

The humanistic underpinnings of the design process—that is, the process of creating aesthetic forms via the construction of gameplay systems that elicit specific reactions or experiences on the part of the player—introduces a discourse of writing and composition that may occasionally be overlooked in Critical Pedagogy courses while also expanding a Freire-ian emphasis on individual agency to others beyond students in specific classroom settings. While pedagogy may not have been a central term used throughout students' design processes, the same pedagogically-based principles that I have examined throughout this project (such as the ability for games to teach players how to inhabit an ideologically-laden cultural mindset or the ethical response-ability that might occur when navigating virtual spaces) were very much in effect. Put

differently, the pedagogical elements of student-designed games operated as the interface or mediating principle that facilitated a player's ability to inhabit a new mindset and, by extension, a new way of approaching the world and the issues therein. Hence, these student-designed games illustrate how the pedagogical principles within gameplay experiences can be used to further enhance our understanding of commonplace terms in writing instruction (i.e., criticism) while also demonstrating the ways in which student composition practices can actively deploy pedagogical strategies for the sake of discussing real-world issues.

5.6 CONCLUSION

In concluding, I want to return to the questions I originally posed at the onset of this examination: what is the role of criticism today and how might it impact students who may not take other courses where a discourse of critique is the central focus? To reiterate Zimmerman's notion of gaming literacy, these self-designed games gave students the opportunity to reinterpret oft-muddy real-world issues into a dynamic set of interrelated systems. This process of recreating systems in a virtual gamespace helped students understand how the design of abstract systems fundamentally shapes the experiences of individuals while also governing their potential to act or react. A game's functional epistemology emerged out of the negotiation between these systems and the agency of individuals, and being attune to how ways of seeing the world emerge from this negotiate (regardless of whether or not these perspectives are progressive or even valid) can grant the necessary insight that helps students understand how individuals might be influenced or conditioned to think and act in highly specific ways. In a way, the act of creating gameplay

systems to elicit certain experiences for players operates through a quasi-empathetic lens; in recreating the systems that might lead to prejudice, students first needed to understand the internal logic of these processes in order to simulate the potential consequences of undertaking the mindset these processes foster. Hence, the form of critique offered by these games depicts a form of systems-based gaming literacy that also seeks to empathetically understand the subjective, psychological, and epistemological impact that socio-cultural systems might have on individuals. My hope is that the type of criticism depicted by these student-designed games grant the necessary experiences—namely, the ability to read conceptual systems and rewrite or recompose them in virtual spaces in order to better understand how they influence individuals—for diagnosing the underlying epistemological impact of conceptual systems and, more importantly, provide the foundation for offering alternative epistemologies for the sake of better addressing societal issues.

To clarify, I do not want to insinuate that these student-designed games can be used to "fix" real-world scenarios (to do so would underhandedly reinforce the argument that Critical Pedagogy avoids explaining how in-class composition practices can begin to elicit real-world change). Despite the enthusiasm of scholars who support the a gamified-esque approach to tackling socio-cultural problems (see McGonigal, *Reality*), I am hesitant to make a one-to-one correlation between the complex-yet-still-simplified systems of a video game and the real-world systems comprised of human actions and motivations. Furthermore, believing that games or gameplay experiences can resolve real-world tensions can potentially run the risk of instrumentalizing games and treating them as mere tools to obtain pre-determined goals. Doing so would undermine the interpretive potential of games, the people who design them, and those who play them. In lieu of asking whether or not games can fix problems, I would like to echo the

underlying thesis of Eric Auerbach's magnum opus *Mimesis.* Auerbach argues that art cannot represent reality, art can only represent the subjective mind that must necessarily adapt to circumstances and conditions of reality. Similarly, student-designed games can only demonstrate the way of thinking that feeds into (and is fed by) a particular ideological logic with the hopes of offering opportunities for creating alternative epistemological viewpoints which, in turn, can better address real-world issues. Consequently, the discourse of epistemology championed by Squire can be seen as a way of extending Auerbach's original argument while being sensitive to the unique structural affordances offered by video games.

Whether or not these student-designed games can recover the heritage of Critical Pedagogy was never a goal for this examination and, to be honest, perhaps returning to a specific movement from two decades ago may not be the most useful scholarly project. As Giroux himself acknowledges

> I think it is best to think of critical pedagogy as an ongoing project instead of a fixed set of references or prescriptive set of practices–put bluntly, it is not a method. One way of thinking about critical pedagogy in these terms is to think of it as both a way of understanding education as well as a way of highlighting the performative nature of agency as an act of participating in shaping the world in which we live. (Tristan, "Henry")

Giroux's sentiments help clarify how Critical Pedagogy is not a monolithic set of ideals but, instead, an outgrowth of recognizing the "performative nature of agency" and its intimate connection to educational institutions. We do not need to attach these ideals to a specific subset of Rhet/Comp scholarship or a handful of scholars, seeing as the connection between education and the "act of participating in shaping the world in which we live" has been (and will continue

to be) a primary concern for those interested in any form of humanistic education. However, "criticism" is still a valuable term in the Humanities that, as I made reference to earlier, is often seen as something unique which separates us from the STEM fields and Social Sciences. My hope is that the classroom experiences of having students take up the mantle of game designers can help educators further refine our understanding of what constitutes "criticism" today and how we might evolve this term alongside the values discussed by Giroux and the affordances of integrating emergent digital technologies into the writing classroom.

6.0 EPILOGUE

Over the course of this project, I have offered critical examinations of video games from the perspective of individual gameplay experiences, community interactions, and classroom-focused projects. The variety of methodological approaches and general conclusions of each chapter reinforces the central premise that I discussed in Chapter One, which is that the pedagogical dimensions of games can operate as a critical interpretive framework that grows, expands, and evolves in conjunction with the unique circumstances surrounding games and those that play them. In Chapter Two, I used the self-teaching practices of games—meaning, their ability to respond to user input in real time as a means of "teaching" players how to inhabit a certain subjective mindset—as a means of connecting the internal logic of games to their external socio-economic conditions. Consequently, my analysis of *Papers, Please* narrated the individual, aesthetic experience of playing this game amid contemporary socio-technological trends; by analyzing how an individual must learn how to physically and psychologically adapt to the unique mechanics of this game, I was able to illustrate how interactive games in general are capable of teaching their players to inhabit a specific cultural and ideological mindset through an on-going process of self-modifying practices. In doing so, a discourse of pedagogy operated as a vehicle for better understanding the critical work undertaken by the aesthetic experiences of interactive digital games.

In Chapter Three, the aesthetic elements of pedagogy gave way to discursive and rhetorical analyses of gaming communities. Put differently, the aesthetic experience of encountering anonymous messages in *Dark Souls*—which themselves played an explicitly pedagogical role in trying to help players navigate this game's notoriously difficult environments—transitioned into larger questions about the creation of information resources that took interpretation and introspection as their primary methods for communal engagement. In these examples, pedagogy took on a slightly more heuristic nature insofar as these information resources were designed to teach players how to re-envision the symbolic significance of their actions within a virtual gamespace that operated through indirection and non-encounters. While the rhetorical analyses conducted in Chapter Three may have been less ideologically-charged than the critique of knowledge-based economies and information technologies found in *Papers, Please*, the player communities surrounding *Dark Souls* similarly used the self-modifying practices that structure gameplay experiences (i.e., stumbling across anonymous player messages in a desolate world) as a means for resonating with the ethical features of networked environments.

The transition into classroom-specific teaching experiences in Chapter Four applied the themes of Chapters Two and Three to concerns surrounding professionalization and professional writing instruction. In doing so, I was able to demonstrate how key features I analyzed in games and gaming communities—namely, the ability for games to operate as situated, dynamic learning environments that teach players how to new mindsets while also creating shared virtual spaces that evolves our understanding of the ethical dimensions of networked spaces—can help writing instructors rethink the goals of composition courses dedicated to professionalism. More specifically, I argued that Eric Zimmerman's notion of "systems literacy" can structure projects

which encourage students to create virtual gamespaces that teach players how to inhabit a particular epistemological worldview (i.e., a worldview shared by professional communities of practice) while also feeling ethically invested in the agency and experiences of others. Hence, in this chapter "pedagogy" was a discourse used by students to highlight the epistemological underpinnings of professional communities while, at the same time, providing them the opportunity to compile a variety of technical documents that explained the rationale behind specific design decisions. Chapter Five expanded the scope of these ideas to include the realm of cultural criticism, insofar as students channeled the pedagogical features exhibited by earlier *Minecraft* projects towards cultural and political (not just professional) issues. In doing so, these projects veered away from overly-pessimistic forms of commodity critique and moved us towards a revised notion of criticism, one which seeks to enhance the complexity of real-world issues and encourage readers to engage with these ideas.

In a way, Chapter Five signals a return to the beginning, a return to thinking about the ways that video games exist as cultural artifacts whose internal logic is intimately tethered to their external conditions. In much the same way that my initial argument about *Papers, Please* gestured towards the ways in which video games demand that we undergo a continual process of self-modification in order to actually play a game, the student projects discussed in Chapter Five required players to adapt themselves in order to inhabit (not simply observe from afar) the very ideological paradigms and cultural logics that were being examined. In circling back to the same themes that began this project, I would like to conclude by briefly discussing two key terms that have been ever-present yet never explicitly discussed in depth. My aim is that quickly discussing some unacknowledged terms can gesture towards future applications of my general thesis, be it within or beyond the classroom. These two terms are access and play. Rather than demand that

we view these two ideas in conjunction with one another, I would like to discuss these concepts separately in order to demonstrate the possible avenues for further research, each with their own potential methodological approaches, emphases, and general aims. That is to say, the ensuing discussions of access and play can offer two new critical horizons to work towards in future investigations, one that is distinctly material and institutional in nature (access) and another that is narratively-focused and design-based (play). To begin, I want to comment upon the role of "play" and how it has been—and will continue to be—an important variable in the ideas I have explored throughout my previous chapters.

6.1 PLAYING WITH PEDAGOGY

Despite the fact that I have been discussing *games* for more than a hundred pages, rarely have I undertaken an extended discussion of play and how it operates as a necessary component when considering the pedagogical implications of video game studies today. As Miguel Sicart notes, play has been intimately tethered to learning and pedagogy even beyond the specific field of critical game studies:

> Play is finding expression; it is letting us understand the world and, through that understanding, challenging the establishment […] and creating new ties or breaking old ones. But ultimately whatever we do in play stays with us. Play is a singularly individual experience— shared, yes, but meaningful only in the way it scaffolds an individual experience of the world. (Sicart, *Play* 18)

In this sense, play tests the limits of what is possible or knowable while also testing the limits between supposedly isolated, individual experiences and shared, collective methods for interpreting the world. These generative and even transgressive features of play have been at work throughout this project; from willingly undertaking the self-modifying practices that constitute dehumanizing bureaucratic labor in *Papers, Please* to creating learning environments in *Minecraft* that teach individuals how to share the same worldviews as professional communities of practice, play operates as the means by which players engage with the interactive and dynamic systems of games. A critical emphasis on play not only provides a new term for understanding how the self-teaching features of games can give way to new methods of knowing the world and those around us, it can also offer a necessary counter-balance to an over-emphasis on the posthuman discourses of systems and procedurality. As I noted in Chapter One, Sicart himself warns that focusing too much on systems and procedures can unintentionally objectify or instrumentalize players, insofar as players, their actions, and their experiences can be seen as working in servitude to the larger critical argument embedded within the rules and algorithmic code of a video game.

Play is also important for the on-going goals of this project because it can offer yet another bridge that links critical game studies and contemporary trends in Rhet/Comp scholarship. Several branches within writing studies explore the creative moment of invention wherein a student reconfigures pre-existent discourses or ideas in order to generate new methods for viewing the world. As Albert Rouzie notes, a discourse of "play" within literacy studies can help students and instructors alike test the supposed divide between "serious" academic work and personal creativity in the writing classroom insofar as "play can perform a metacommunicative function that can enable us to reflect upon what we are doing" (Rouzie, *At*

7). Hence, playing around—breaking rules, parodying dominant discourses, tinkering with limits—calls attention to the ways in which we are consciously manipulating and undermining the supposed seriousness of proper procedures. In doing so, we undertake a moment of re-signification that opens up new ways to rethink the legitimacy (however warranted or not) of the rules that structure socially-acceptable interactions or discourse.

For both critical game and literacy scholars, play represents a poetic moment of knowledge transformation, a moment where pre-existing information or beliefs are turned on their head in order to re-orient ourselves to what is possible. In this sense, play is still pedagogical because it teaches us about our own assumptions regarding the importance or legitimacy of dominant rules (to reiterate Sicart's claim). Consequently, play—be it in the written word or a virtual gamespace—can offer the foundation for rethinking new methods for undertaking critical work in academic spaces. I touched upon these same concepts briefly in Chapters Four and Five by demonstrating how students used play to call attention to the primary themes they were engaging with. In the case of civil engineers, play was used to highlight the political backdrops that influence large-scale infrastructure projects. In the case of student-designed games that tackled misconceptions of marginal groups, play was used to demonstrate the ideological biases that can be easily manipulated through partial, fragmented, and misleading information which is often disguised as objective facts. However, a more extensive examination of the actual playing habits surrounding the design of these games would further reinforce the pedagogical dimensions of gameplay and the ways in which it can be steered towards productive critical ends. That is to say, I would be interested in extending my analyses to incorporate more quasi-ethnographic accounts or narrations from students themselves. In terms of my past teaching experiences with games, I was a bit reticent to having students rely on their personal

narrations from gameplay experiences seeing as there was a tendency to treat these narrations as impromptu product reviews; students had a tendency to frame their personal experiences with a game in terms of what they "liked" or thought was "good" or even "fun" game design. In doing so, students unintentionally used their subjective experiences as a yardstick for consumer advice, thereby turning their critical essays into a generalized "should you buy this?" op-ed. Moving forward, I would like to focus on how students can view their personal experiences of "play" as participating in a dialogic relationship with the rules of a game and its surrounding social contexts. Viewing play as a dialogic undertaking can simultaneously challenge the image of academic work as cold, distant, and devoid of personal voice while also highlighting students' critical awareness of the formal features underlying interactive digital media platforms (and, by extension, demonstrate how said platforms fundamentally channel our potential for actions in virtual spaces).

While it is important to consider the critical work undertaken by play, it can be just as valuable to acknowledge the policies and infrastructure that radically limits the ability for games to be played in standard academic environments. That is to say, this brief discussion of play can point towards future investigations focused on the ongoing feedback loop between student and text (or, in this case, student and game). However, we must also acknowledge the external material conditions that frame, preface, and influence this feedback loop, lest we run the risk of naively believing that technological resources are uniform, homogenous, and equally available to all students in all scenarios. To begin discussing how "access" can be an equally productive concept for future applications of my general thesis, I would like to begin with an interesting anecdote surrounding my students' *Minecraft* projects in my Written Professional Communication seminar.

6.2 GAINING ACCESS, GAMING ACCESS

Early in the semester, before class participants were officially required to begin playing *Minecraft*, one student wanted to create a class server so her peers could log on and begin to learn about the mechanics of the game in a shared multiplayer environment. This student had previous experiences hosting *Minecraft* and other game servers so she felt comfortable undertaking this experiment on her own. After successfully creating a *Minecraft* server on her laptop and testing it out from her apartment, we were ready to have a "lab day" where students showed up to class with the goal of collectively tinkering around in *Minecraft* for the first time (and I would essentially play tour guide as I introduced them to the basic features of the game).

Our plans immediately hit a wall the morning of our class when the student tried to log on to the university's wifi network. Apparently, IT services were fine with students using wifi to play online games but the powers that be prevented any students from *hosting* a game server for others. While this is understandable from a logistical perspective—I am sure administrators wouldn't take kindly to campus bandwidth being being eaten up by large-scale gaming tournaments while other departments are busy upholding our institution's history of curing deadly diseases—this policy severely limited the ability for my students and I to inhabit the same physical and virtual environments simultaneously. To be a bit more acerbic, physically standing in front of my students while virtually helping them build a log cabin was a bit too much for university infrastructure to handle. After a short, frantic, and unproductive call to the IT help desk, my students and I chose the path of least resistance; the student who created the game

server offered to set up shot across the street in a nearby cafe so she could use their wifi to host our class's lab day. For the remainder of the class period, I walked the class through the basics of *Minecraft* as students followed along on their laptops while also keeping in touch with the courageous server-hoster across the street via Google Hangouts. Sometimes the simplest solutions are the best.

Despite the impromptu and improvisational nature of this experience, the struggles surrounding this experimental lab day demonstrates how a discourse of "access" is a pressing issue for anyone who wants to incorporate video games (or interactive digital media in general) to their courses. That is to say, the obstacles my students faced when trying to host and access their *Minecraft* projects stems from the fact that at the moment, there is no easy way for archiving and hosting their projects for a larger audience that spans multiple environments (each with their own technological restrictions). Unlike static documents—such as PDFs or word processor files, which many online course management systems easily handle—complex interactive projects such as games require a much more intricate infrastructure than many university IT departments offer at the moment. Hence, student groups were forced to derive their own methods for storing and accessing their projects in such a way that ensured a smooth workflow. Later on in the semester, some students opted to host their *Minecraft* servers on their own computers with the assumption that one student would need to be at an off-campus site during lab days while others opted to purchase a short-term subscription to *Minecraft Realms* (a monthly service offered by the game's developers for hosting and maintaining multiplayer *Minecraft* worlds). In other words, the seemingly simple question of how students can or cannot access their digital projects brings to light the oft-invisible policies and infrastructure that dictates are daily interactions with digital technologies.

Moving forward, underscoring issues of access can serve the immediate need of instructors interested in game-based learning while also highlighting institutional issues that affect instructors who are interested in using interactive digital media in their courses. Fortunately enough, Rhetoric and Composition scholars have already provided the foundation for doing so. Adam Banks offers a four-part schema that for understanding how the term "access" is used throughout early digitally-focused composition scholarship: there exists material access (the literal ability to come into contact with digital technologies in the physical world), functional access (the knowledge of how to use technologies), experiential access (the ability to make technologies a relevant part of one's daily life), and critical access (the capacity to understand the risks/benefits of technologies as well as the ability to intervene in tech/tech practices for the sake of progress) (Banks, *Race* 41-42). Critical access is the most crucial component in Banks's schema because it reiterates the idea that "access" must extend beyond a vulgar distribution of material goods and address the ways in which people comprehend, effectively wield, and, perhaps most importantly, modify technologies and technological practices to better account for their real world experiences. Further enhancing our understanding of, or offering strategies for acquiring, critical access should be the ultimate aim for technology scholars, seeing as this type of access provides the foundation for social progress via the ability to intervene in practices that do not conform to dominant or hegemonic practices surrounding technology use or acquisition.

To return to my students' games, Banks can offer a productive framework for considering how access-based issues—that is, issues surrounding the ability to host, preserve, archive, and (re)distribute students' digital projects—can help instructors begin rethinking the institutional policies and technologies that push back against the incorporation of interactive media in the classroom. That is to say, we can apply Banks' notion of critical access to the unique

workarounds and impromptu fixes that students necessarily undertake when creating interactive digital projects in order to better understand how these workarounds gesture towards the latent ideological leanings within institutional infrastructure or IT-based policies. Furthermore, framing student experiences through a discourse of access can help instructors begin to reconsider the necessary digital literacy skills underlying digital and multimodal composing practices. Put differently, the process of reading, critiquing, and composing digital projects also necessitates conversations about how to properly archive, preserve, and circulate sensitive or delicate digital information using a combination of commercial, institutional, and open-source software (much like how my WPC students needed a similar combination of commercial, institutional, and open-source programs to successfully hold the productively-chaotic lab day). Perhaps more pragmatically, calling attention to issues of access touches upon the fact that many student-designed digital projects run the risk of being permanently lost due to poor archiving practices or systems. Despite my enthusiasm for my students' work throughout Chapter Four and Five, it is nearly impossible for my readers to actually have a chance to play these games seeing as I did not properly account for the difficulties of storing or preserving these complex programs.[82] To be honest, the only consolation I can offer is asking my reader to take my word for it. I promise, these student-designed games existed and were just as—if not more—fascinating than my narrations might lead you to believe. Unfortunately, though, I fear that these projects will eventually be lost to the misty curtains of time seeing as my students' games are either trapped

[82] This was especially an issue for students in my Critical Writing course seeing as many of them were using the open-source program Game Maker to design prototypes. These students were forced to continually back up their files in compressed folders at regular intervals, meaning that anyone who wanted to play their prototypes using a different computer would need to download these files, download and install Game Maker, and cross their fingers to ensure no incompatibility issues (be it from a hardware or software standpoint) would crop up.

on a laptop that will eventually become obsolete or have been deleted because their *Minecraft Realms* accounts have not been renewed.[83]

Similar to how a critical focus on "play" would necessitate a slightly different methodological approach to game-based research, a discourse of access would necessitate a greater exploration of how specific institutional policies adapt to, or reject, new student activities and assignments. This would require examinations of how university infrastructure, commercial software, and the policies that mediate the relationship between these two spheres have evolved since the massive grow of computing technologies in the classroom over the past three decades. Rather than focus primarily on personal narrations of students—although, getting a students' perspective on how she or he has negotiated university policies would be a valuable insight—this avenue of research would necessarily take on a historical, material approach to university IT policies. However, the primary difficulty in undertaking an access-focused approach to game studies would be the issue of transferability; local university policies are often incredibly particular to their specific institutions (sometimes to the extent that different sectors within the same university system may have their own unique set of IT rules) so it would be difficult to derive a universal heuristic that would be applicable to all instructors regardless of their unique institutional circumstances. Consequently, game-based research that frames the incorporation of digital technologies into the writing classroom via a discourse of access should strive to emphasize how particular university policies resonate with broader political and economic trends

[83] This notion of digital preservation in game studies is a very relevant issues as many game historians are encountering situations where older games, arcade cabinets, and entire systems are at risk of becoming unplayable because physical hardware replacements are no longer in production. Hence, game historians are simultaneously trying to create permanent museum exhibits so that physical hardware can be maintained as much as possible while also considering the advantages of archiving game code in digital databases. Both strategies have their own hurdles—game systems or peripherals are meant to be physically played and will always endure some sort of deterioration while archiving game code runs into numerous technical obstacles trying to emulate out-of-date software (not to mention ownership concerns from a game's original programmers).

in IT litigation in hopes of identifying moments where instructors or administrators can begin to slowly shape university policies (or create new resources) to better account for emergent teaching practices.

6.3 CHOOSE YOUR OWN ADVENTURE

To conclude, both play and access operate as useful horizons to work towards as I and, hopefully, others continue to expand the general notion that video games and the critical work they undertake operate through a pedagogical relationship between player and game. As I have just discussed, these two terms are rather unique in their respective methodological approaches. However, there is still potential for overlap in specific ways. Just because we discuss access through bureaucratic and legal terms does not mean that we completely overlook the importance of first-hand narrations on the part of students or instructors. Quite the opposite, as anecdotes such as my WPC's class frantic lab day can actually reinforce the relevance of examining abstract institutional policies because these anecdotes demonstrate the immediate, real-world impact said policies can have on the classroom. In this sense, access-focused research should not be seen as the stuffy, more-mature older sibling of play-based investigations but, rather, an alternative starting point for further exploring the difficulties (and affordances) of game-based research. Conversely, examinations focused on play could incorporate the materialist underpinnings as access-based investigations; having students describe the ways in which they tinkered with the algorithmic processes that structure a video game could grant valuable insight

into how rules, technological limitations, and player activity can work in conjunction with one another to test new boundaries for knowledge production in virtual spaces.

Regardless of the specific approach we take for future research, it is important to reiterate that video games, despite the numerous pages I have dedicated to them, have not been the sole object-of-examination per se throughout this entire project. As I mentioned when discussing Kurt Squire in Chapter One, games and gaming are critical lenses for viewing the world and understanding the social relations therein. Hence, video games operate as a dynamic petri dish where larger concerns surrounding digital media technologies are enacted through playful, experimental actions that can never fully be determined in advance. In a way, my own investigations into how video games, gaming communities, and game-based projects can function as useful frameworks for exploring larger issues that range from ethics to professional writing instruction resonates with the historical genealogy of games themselves. As I mentioned in a brief aside during Chapter Two, one of the first video games to use a visual interface was *Tennis for Two*. This game was created by William Higinbotham in 1959 as a way to educate and entertain visitors at the Brookhaven National Laboratory. At this time, the notion of a "computer" was still a radically new idea for the general population and, as such, it was difficult for average middle-class citizens to fully comprehend what, exactly, these massive machines were capable of accomplishing. Higinbotham decided to create an interactive display to help demonstrate what computers actually did and, tangentially, quell general anxieties about any nuclear-related research during the early days of the Cold War. Years later, he recalled how "I knew from past visitors' days that people were not much interested in static exhibits […] so for that year, I came up with an idea for a hands-on display—a video tennis game" (Apperley, *Gaming* 45). Hence, one of the first video games ever created operated as a cultural artifact that

explored the untapped potential and possibilities of emergent digital technologies, and this lineage continues today (one only need to look at growing interest in virtual reality and augmented reality in contemporary game development to see how these technologies might grow in the future).

At the risk of comparing myself to someone such as Higinbotham, I have attempted to use games in a similar manner. Throughout the previous chapters, I have discussed games or gameplay experiences as a way to demonstrate the new learning scenarios, literacy skills, and composing practices created by increasingly-accessible digital media technologies while, at the same time, signaling towards the larger socio-political trends that influence the development of these technologies. In doing so, I have tried to build upon the unique lineage of video games as playful experiments that test the limits of what computing technologies are capable of and, equally important, new social configurations that are created in or around virtual spaces. As both game studies and digitally-focused Rhet/Comp scholarship moves forward, my goal is to continue deriving new methods for understand how games are themselves emergent manifestations of still-undetermined trends and potential for new technologies and technologically-mediate social relations. Thankfully, there is no need to derive a universal framework that applies to all video games in all circumstances. Those interested in games and learning are in the rewarding position of being able to choose their own adventure, to choose which ideas, methods, or interesting activities can provide the initial starting point for uncovering the complexity and intricacies that underlie games and the experiences they create. I hope that this project—either in its entirety or its specificity—has provided the interpretive frameworks, teaching scenarios, or, more simply, interesting examples that can help others continue to the ever-expanding interest in games and their cultural significance today.

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