



# Game-based Pedagogy in the Writing Classroom

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## Abstract

Games enhance writing pedagogy because they are multimodal systems with their own active genre ecologies. However, not many writing teachers use games to teach writing possibly because there are currently no textbooks on teaching writing with games and most scholarship on game-based pedagogy consists of case studies conducted by individual teachers. To provide writing teachers with a broader perspective on how to teach with games, I conducted interviews with writing teachers within the fields of rhetoric and composition and technical communication about how they use games to teach writing and what their rationales were for doing so to build a scheme of approaches. I found that writing teachers used game-based pedagogy in order to help students rhetorically analyze the procedural and multimodal affordances in games and to foster rhetorically sensitive multimodal design. They also used games to concretely illustrate theories, especially theories about new media design and critical theory. They used games as an interactive way to illustrate how paratexts and game design documents circulate within their discourse communities. Teachers also used the networked genre ecologies of games as an active writing and research space. Finally, along with reflection, teachers used games to foster critical thinking and transfer about writing.

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## 1. Introduction: Using Games to Teach Writing

Games, both video games and non-digital games such as card and board games, offer many pedagogical opportunities for writing teachers because they are multimodal systems with their own active genre ecologies. However, the evidence of teachers using games is limited to the few published studies by the practitioners who use games in their own classrooms to teach writing (Alexander & Losh, 2010; Hodgson, 2013; LaVaque-Manty, 2013; Shultz Colby, 2013; Bianchi & Bohunicky, 2014; Colby, 2014). This lack of evidence might be because there are currently no textbooks or other direct teaching materials on teaching writing with games and studies on game-based pedagogy consist of case studies conducted by individual teachers on their classrooms. To provide writing teachers with a broader perspective on how to teach primarily with video games but also to a more limited degree non-digital games such as board games, I conducted interviews with writing teachers within the fields of rhetoric and composition and technical communication on how they used games to teach writing and what their rationales were for doing so. I discovered that writing teachers used games for multimodal rhetorical analysis and design, to illustrate and embody critical and new media theory, to illustrate how game paratexts and game design documents circulate and are used within their discourse communities, as research and writing spaces, and, when coupled with reflection, as a way of facilitating writing transfer about aspects

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of the writing process. Finally, I discussed the pedagogical implications of the study, arguing that games need to be used to illustrate and embody specific learning goals and not for their own sake.

### 1.1. Reasons Games Enhance Writing Pedagogy

There are several powerful reasons to teach writing with games such as using games to explore the affordances and constraints of multimodality, the modeling capabilities of their rule-based systems, and the genre ecologies they and their design texts and paratexts create. All games, but especially commercial video games, provide richly multimodal spaces that incorporate visual, aural, written, spatial, and kinesthetic modes that students can then analyze and explore. It is fairly well accepted that each mode offers its own communicative affordances and constraints (Kress, 2003). However, when put together in a multimodal text, the modes remediate each other, changing how we read them (Bolter & Grusin, 2002). For instance, Gunther Kress (2003) established that on the screen, written text takes on more attributes of the visual, becoming more spatial and image-like. Because each mode remediates how another mode is understood and used, both James Paul Gee (2003) and Kress have argued that we employ different grammars in order to make meaning from each unique multimodal text. In fact, Gee argued specifically that video games are crucial for learning multimodal literacy because they create avenues in which many students figure out these multimodal grammars for themselves. Gee goes on to classify the set of practices that surround meaning making with one or more modes a domain, specifically studying video games as a set of domains or systems of meaning making.

Furthermore, video games illustrate multimodality in ways that surpass many other types of media. As Lev Manovich (2013) has argued, most multimedia is not a true synthesis of media or of multimodality, what he terms media hybridity. Instead different media made up of different modes often sit side by side, without really interacting or complicating each other as media. For instance, most websites are still designed around this model: there are pictures and possibly audio or video files, but they are all placed separately around written text. Video games, on the other hand, usually present a synthesis of modalities which, because they employ state of the art graphics and sound as well as three dimensional space coupled with kinesthetic interfaces, offer unique affordances, grammars, and logics. Lev Manovich (2001), in fact, used the video games *Doom* and *Myst* to discuss new media imagery because they use some of the same visual logics of film but incorporate three dimensional space, which players can actually move through. He examined how film imprisoned the gaze, fixing it in place with the film lens, but that in video games, the gaze becomes free to move around three dimensional space, although the gaze is usually still constrained by the perspective of the avatar or other game rules (e.g. the top-down God view).

Another way that games showcase the richness of their multimodal affordances is that their play does not necessarily entail following a strictly linear narrative as would be the case in other multimodal media such as most novels and films. Although there are games that follow a fairly fixed, linear narrative, what Jesper Juul (2005) terms games of progression, most games are instead complex systems governed by specific rule sets, which insist on somewhat different sets of textual grammars in order to navigate. As complex systems, games teach students strategic problem solving but, even more importantly in a world of increasing complexity and interconnection, systemic thinking: how one person's actions can affect the entire system (Squire, 2011). Furthermore, if the rules of that particular game system potentially illustrate or model a theory or an aspect of a theory (Galloway, 2006; Bogost, 2007), teachers can let students play with the rules of the system, letting them directly interact with and, consequently, embody that theory, an interactive embodiment which also means students are more likely to identify with the roles the game is placing them in (Gee, 2003). For instance, the auction house in *World of Warcraft* (WoW) allows players to purchase and set prices for goods, which can teach students economic principles of supply and demand, as the economist Edward Castronova (2001) has shown with his economic analysis of the auction house and player economy of *EverQuest*. Kurt Squire (2006) showed how the game *Civilization*, a turn-based strategy game in which players vie for world domination using historical civilizations, teaches players about how history was partially determined by advantageous geographical locations that afforded access to the most resources.

While a game system can only teach what its rules and algorithms allow, games are growing in their complexity. Some big budget video games have such complex systems that they are considered sandbox games: players can follow multiple objectives and, in some cases, repurpose their own objectives and rules, a type of play called emergent play because it emerges out of player culture and not the overt intentions of game designers (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004). These forms of emergent and potentially resistant play can be especially educational if they are placed within an ideologically laden and culturally representative game system, and in this way, can often illustrate cultural and critical

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