# A Language of Play: New Media's Possibility Spaces

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## Abstract

This article sketches a theory to describe how play—like words and images—is a resource used by people to express attitudes, to share ideas, and to persuade others. This *language of play* is at stake at all levels of composing, including invention, production, consumption, distribution, and access. To make this case, this essay makes two large, over-arching claims in its description of play. First, play is symbolized non-discursively within *magic circles*, or rule-bound cultural sites where composers act strategically. Second, play is emphasized and enabled by specific characteristics of computable media that allow it to be symbolized through rhetorical forms such as memes, feedback systems, and avatars. In particular, the essay describes four *possibility spaces* for play that are opened by computable media. Play is endlessly repeatable, customizable, interactive, and radically variable. The essay concludes by offering a rhetorical definition of play specific to computers and writing and suggests possible pedagogical moves instructors might make to highlight the rhetoricity of play for students.
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How does play happen? How is it that a game board and a pair of dice, or a game program on a hard drive, or a baseball, a bat, and an empty lot somehow ramify into the experience of play—an experience of endless pleasure and variety that defies ordinary description?
—Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, *Rules of Play*

If we lose sight of how students are composing meaning in electronic gaming environments and networked systems, among other contexts, or which rhetorical representations and practices they encounter as they work in and around games, or what motivates them to teach and learn in these language rich venues, we run the risk of ignoring a whole arena of serious language use and play. If we pay careful attention to these sites and to the productive ways in which they overlap with our own area of study and teaching, we can open new arenas for understanding the very human acts of composing, creating, communicating, and, of course, engaging in serious play.
—Cynthia L. Selfe and Gail E. Hawisher, *Rhetoric/Composition/Play*

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In an important 2004 *Computers and Composition* article, "Show, Not Tell: The Value of New Media Composition," Cheryl Ball distinguished between *scholarship about new media* and *new media scholarship*. While the former takes new media as its subject or object of analysis, it relies on print to advance an author's argument. Scholarship about new media appears in many of the field's flagship journals, such as *College Composition and Communication*, *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, and *Computers and Composition*. *New media scholarship*, on the other hand, uses a variety of non-discursive rhetorics (Murray, 2009)—such as image, movement, or sound—to compose arguments, and it is exemplified in the webtexts of online journals such as *Kairos* and *Enculturation*. Ball's invocation of the old creative writing adage, "show, not tell," effectively suggested the expressive possibilities of new media scholarship.

However, print-based scholarship has been and remains an indispensable and flexible means of doing academic work. Jay David Bolter (2001) described the current time as the "late age of print," or a time when print remains essential but may no longer seem so (p. 1). Print indeed remains crucial for rhetoric and composition even as the new media scholarship Ball described proliferates, in part because print's primary mode—discursive writing—is remediated by new media. Therefore, rhetorical theories in the late age of print must both attend to the implications of new composing technologies and remain mindful of print's many possibilities that are refashioned and repurposed by new media.

In this essay, I offer the concept of *play* as a valuable resource for rhetorical theory in the late age of print. Discussions of play are far from new to computers and writing research, as Albert Rouzie (2005) urged that the field should "begin to consider play as a significant rhetorical element of composition and communication" (p. 189). Indeed, the field answered Rouzie's call by considering how play is pleasurable and self-motivating (Gee & Hayes, 2010), by creating playful classrooms where students may experiment and take risks (Hodgson, 2013), and by theorizing the procedural and expressive affordances of gameplay (Bogost, 2010). However, many such approaches have focused on play only at a particular point in the composing process, such as invention or even assessment (Colby, 2014). Here, I sketch a theory to provide teachers and researchers with a terminology to describe how play—like words and images—is a resource used by people to express attitudes, to share ideas, and to persuade others. Such play is at stake at all levels of composing, including invention, production, consumption, distribution, and access. I refer to this theory as a *language of play*.

Theories sometimes oscillate between viewing play as something objectively real or as something poetic or creative. Johan Huizinga (1938), for instance, in the same text claimed that play is "objectively recognizable, a concretely definable thing" (p. 46), and that play "creates a second, poetic world alongside the world of nature" (p. 4). Lately, rhetorical theory been tuned to a parallel track, as recent work has extended the domain of rhetoric beyond human symbol making into non-human objects and environments. Thomas Rickert (2013), for example, suggested an ecological theory where rhetoric is not only a human concern and in which humans "are posited not as masters of the earth but as co-respondents and cocreators" (p. 186). Although it is beyond the scope of this article to fully explicate such complex moves in rhetorical theory, my reason for invoking it is to make clear in what sense I view play as rhetorical. In these pages, I take play to be rhetorical in that it is simultaneously something humans *do* and that environments *have*. The environments most commonly associated with play are the virtual environments of videogames, and these spaces are designed with deliberate rhetorical intent. In games such as *Fat World*, designers[1] may author persuasive arguments through *procedural rhetorics*, which Ian Bogost (2010) described as "a general name for the practice of authoring arguments through process," such as the rules of videogames arbitrated through computer code (p. 29). Likewise, when people play within such composing environments (what I refer to in this article as *magic circles*) rhetoric emerges in a variety of forms that have potentialities such as moving emotions, sharing ideas, persuading others, and creating identifications.

## 1. Possibility spaces

Although play is, of course, not exclusive to new media, I argue that play is emphasized and enabled by the possibilities opened by computerization. To make this case, I borrow a few concepts from game design in order to clarify my argument: 1) play, 2) possibility spaces, and 3) magic circles. Here, I briefly describe these terms in order to align them with more familiar ideas from rhetoric and composition.

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[1] John Ferrara (2012), for example, argued that game designers can articulate a core message by valorizing particular outcomes in a game or by rewarding certain choices made by players (p. 203).