



Improving Writing Literacies through Digital Gaming Literacies: Facebook Gaming in the Composition Classroom

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Abstract

Composition continually evolves as new technologies emerge and newer generations transform digital literacies. As the concept of literacies is being defined and redefined by the technologies our students use, we as instructors can tap into this resource to engage students in the excitement of writing. Through digital literacies, students are networking and learning to match social mediums to the information they generate and audiences they address. I propose the integration of gaming and composition as a way to develop students' writing practices. In this article, I show how areas of composition—such as engagement, problem solving, collaboration, and audience—connect to the Facebook gaming world. Through the use of gaming in composition instruction, we can build bridges between students' interests and help them develop scholarly purposes of writing. *Mafia Wars* functions as a vehicle to further enhance students' writing and as a way to demonstrate how gameplay contributes to what students learn in composition. Additionally, I suggest assignments that exemplify how *Mafia Wars* is applicable to the development of writing. By including gaming in composition, students can learn how the skills they already use in gaming are relevant to writing and develop an awareness of how they are cultivating these skills.

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Composition continually evolves as new technologies emerge and newer generations transform digital literacies. Digital literacies involve the public nature of writing, social networking through technological mediums, communicating with others through a social medium, and deciphering multi-modes at one time. Allan Martin (2008) defined digital literacies as “the awareness, attitude and ability of individuals to appropriately use digital tools and facilities to identify, access, manage, integrate, evaluate, analyze and synthesize digital resources, construct new knowledge, create media expressions, and communicate with others” (pp. 166–167). Through digital literacies, students are networking and learning to match social mediums to the information they generate and audiences they address. These digitally literate people quickly move between various mediums knowing how to present different information through these mediums to best reach their desired audiences (Lanham, 1995). These skills of multitasking, problem solving, and communicating with others are fostered in the gaming community as well as in the field of composition.

In their everyday lives and communities, students construct their own worlds and through their gaming experiences look at literacies from a digital standpoint. These literacies and social skills are cultivated through networking

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and collaboration. Henry Jenkins (2009) found that “these skills build on the foundation of traditional literacy, research skills, technical skills, and critical analysis skills taught in the classroom” (p. 4). These literacies are being broadcasted through social mediums and include the public nature of writing. This type of writing involves crafting an argument and selecting the appropriate rhetoric in order to reach a real audience. By communicating through these mediums, our students are delivering and receiving immediate feedback. Through these practices of digital literacies, as Colin Lankshear and Michele Knobel (2008) explained, students are “engaging in meaning making mediated by texts that are produced, received, distributed, exchanged, etc., via digital codification” (p. 5). These online spaces and digital literacies are not exclusive to gaming, but can be seen as one way for our students to interact with the writing process and understand how to communicate with others as they receive immediate feedback.

Many researchers have found that through the majority of the games our students play, they are practicing complex thinking, problem solving, strategizing, investigating, and understanding rules and codes of simulated worlds (Alexander, 2009; Colby & Colby, 2008; Gee & Levine, 2009; Merchant, 2009; Squire, 2006). Gamers must learn to read visual cues and negotiate their positions in the virtual world in order to be successful while gaming. This form of play, as defined by Jenkins (2009), involves problem solving through experimentation with one’s environment (p. 4). When we provide our students with a text to read or a piece to write, we are asking them to develop similar skills. They read the text and analyze the situation being presented to them by considering textual and rhetorical features that exist in the text. Students also investigate the cues of a text to decipher meaning and determine the argument before them. They distinguish the evidence in the text with similar methods in gaming; for example, they have to determine the objective of a game, what course to take during the game, or if they have enough energy to fight an enemy. As David Williamson Shaffer, Kurt Squire, Richard Halverson, and James Paul Gee (2005) asserted, gaming allows participants to “‘learn by doing’ on a grand scale” (p. 10). We ask our composition students to follow a similar protocol: become better writers by writing; writing in this article refers to rhetorical and textual skills, such as crafting a message to a particular audience and developing rhetorical awareness. Through playing these games, students not only practice similar skills that they need for writing, but additionally these games can help students become more critical of the ways they are already engaging with those skills.

Nowadays, our students are playing games through social network sites like Facebook that they can access from various devices, such as computers, mobile phones, etc. In order to evolve with the new literacies our students use, we should follow Cynthia Selfe and Pamela Takayoshi’s (2007) declaration to change our modes of composition instruction in order to effectively prepare students of the 21st century (p. 8). In order to address this claim, I propose the integration of gaming into composition instruction as a way to further help develop students’ writing. Gaming and digital literacies are one approach to add to the current composition practices.

Though not yet widely accepted in composition, gaming on social network sites can be incorporated into composition in order to help our students develop and expand the literacies they employ in everyday life. I echo Lankshear and Knobel’s claim (2008) that when employing gaming into composition the aim is not just based on the premise that gaming can be fun or reach students who are not as successful with conventional school literacies (p. 9). Instead, through the use of gaming in composition instruction, we will be able to build bridges between students’ interests and help them develop scholarly purposes of writing.

In order to illustrate the ways this is possible, I show how areas of composition—such as engagement, problem solving and questioning, and collaboration and audience—connect with the gaming world. While one appeal of these games may be entertainment or procrastination, gaming also fosters important skills our students develop in writing. When I discuss digital literacies in this article, I am referring to the ways students utilize the digital medium of Facebook and *Mafia Wars* to communicate with others, participate and evaluate the public nature of writing, and multitask by deciphering multiple modes simultaneously. I also share my findings from conducting an exploratory research where I describe my processes of playing the Facebook game *Mafia Wars*. I explain how *Mafia Wars* functions as a vehicle to help students further develop their writing and how gameplay contributes to what our students learn in composition courses. Throughout this piece, I provide suggestions for assignments that exemplify how Facebook gaming can be applicable in composition. As Gina Maranto and Matt Barton (2010) suggested, teachers “must embrace the paradox embodied by social networking, rather than opt for panic and place yellow police tape around an entire realm that promises to have impacts on the workplace and the polis” (p. 44). In following this suggestion, we as instructors can generate writing assignments and teach our students how the analysis they apply in gaming can also benefit them when writing in our classes.

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