



Writing and Assessing Procedural Rhetoric in Student-produced Video Games

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Abstract

Adding video games into a writing course opens up possibilities of more widely considering how multimodal texts communicate rhetorically, specifically how the rules and system of a game—its procedurality—offer an additional communication mode that engages a writer to more actively consider how a reader might interact with a work. Asking students to assess and inscribe procedural rhetorics by having them produce video games is a productive pedagogy that fosters positive habits of mind including curiosity, engagement, and creativity. Assessing these games should focus on how students write the procedurality of their games, both its potential and intention to transform. This article offers an introduction to procedural rhetoric and how it can be taught through student-produced video games. These games are then assessed not as products but through a student portfolio of shorter documents that demonstrate student learning through reflective practice involving metacognition, articulation of their own contributions and the contributions of their peers, formative and process assessment, and evaluations of their own and others' work.

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Assessing games can be vexed. Video games¹ as social constructs carry with them many avenues of analysis, including embedded institutional, genre, and authorship elements (Brooker, 2001), as well as more instrumental criteria such as interface, mechanics and play (Omar & Jaafar, 2010), or interaction maps and logs (Consalvo & Dutton, 2006); in other words, the varieties of reading a video game are plentiful. Although current scholarship in writing studies recognizes most everything from the specifics of designing text (Wysocki, 2004) to general approaches of composing with digital (Selfe, 2007; Kress, 2009) and non-digital multimodalities (Shipka, 2011), what separates video games from this multimodal scholarship is twofold. First, video games are inherently procedural and are thus based on a feedback loop that asks players to participate and learn from that participation if they want to persist in playing (Gee, 2003; Juul, 2005). Second, they are media rich; in other words, they *require* multiple modes, from the underlying program code and the unit operations of the mechanics; to the presentation of visual, text, and audio; to the haptic communication of interface, whether mouse, controller, or gesture.

Given the intertextual and multimodal richness of such texts, analyzing and assessing games requires expanding how we read games. In addition to the visuals, narrative, and sound, the quality that makes a game a game is its procedurality. As another mode of persuasive communication, procedurality provides an opportunity to further enrich

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¹ I will use “video game” because it is the more familiar term, but I much prefer “computer game” because, as Judd Ruggill and McAllister (2011) pointed out, “it is computation rather than visualization that ultimately characterizes the medium” (p. 122).

our understanding of multimodal communication, but it also lends itself to reflective practice (i.e., an analysis of writer/designer's rhetorical motives and those effects on the reader/player) because procedurality is best described through phenomenographic assessment. To describe how video games can be integrated into a writing course and how they might be assessed, I have arranged this article into three parts. The first part is an introduction to procedurality and procedural rhetoric with some examples suitable for teaching rhetoric and writing with video games. I follow this section with how reflective practice can be used with methods of reading and writing procedurality to assess student learning. The final section presents case studies from first-year writing courses I have taught that have students analyze and produce their own persuasive games and what reflective assessment reveals about student learning in these courses.

Procedural rhetoric

Procedurality consists of the unit operations, systems, and rules that make a game a game. As video games are based on a series of player-selected decisions, they can inherently present how rules and procedures work rhetorically (i.e., procedural rhetoric) in conjunction and sometimes in conflict with audio, visual, and textual rhetorics. Procedurality as a mode of expression and persuasion native to video games holds promise as an additional, rhetorically responsive mode that can be introduced using game analysis and production in a first-year writing course.

To better understand the dynamics of procedurality, consider *Congo Jones and the Loggers of Doom* (2008), an ideologically transparent activist game sponsored by the Rainforest Foundation UK. The narrative begins: “Large areas of rainforest are disappearing fast [*sic*] at this rate there will be little left by 2050.” The game follows with the player controlling an anthropomorphized monkey who is in shorts and a hat, jumping logs and crocodiles while avoiding flying chainsaws in order to bring a GPS unit to a village. Once complete, the player takes control of a human character who climbs branches and the ledges of a waterfall, still avoiding chainsaws, in order to then jump through a forest canopy, collecting seeds, while still avoiding chainsaws. The game is a simple Flash game that relies exclusively on a platformer mechanic. The archetype platformer, of course, is *Super Mario Bros.* in which the player runs and jumps the character of Mario from one platform to the next in order to save Princess Peach. The procedurality of the genre is fairly simplistic—move from point A to point B while avoiding obstacles. Although the platformer has evolved, *Congo Jones and the Loggers of Doom* does not follow this evolution². Its mechanic is dumb simple. However, its gameplay is punishingly difficult for even a seasoned gamer. What makes *Congo Jones and the Loggers of Doom* ultimately fail, despite its good intentions of raising awareness about the destructive logging of the rainforest, is that the act of jumping a monkey on a log, climbing a waterfall, and dodging chainsaws does not communicate the problem of deforestation beyond the warning that no more forest will be left by 2050.

In her examination of the potential of computers and cyber-networks to change narrative, Janet Murray (1998) wrote, “the most important element the new medium adds to our repertoire of representational powers is its procedural nature, its ability to capture experience as systems of interrelated actions” (p. 274). That is, computer technologies are based on operations programmed into the system, and manipulating those rules and procedures offers persuasive potential. Nevertheless, procedural rhetoric has been discussed very little in composition studies. Although Richard Fulkerson (2005) classified an approach to composition that focused on procedural knowledge, calling it “procedural rhetoric,” the term has come to mean something quite specific and more significant in video game studies. Ian Bogost (2007) introduced the concept in *Persuasive Games* as a way of showing how video games offer a unique means of persuasion. Bogost wrote:

procedural rhetoric is the practice of using processes persuasively, just as verbal rhetoric is the practice of using oratory persuasively and visual rhetoric is the practice of using images persuasively. . . procedural rhetoric is a subdomain of procedural authorship; its arguments are made not through the construction of words or images, but through the authorship of rules of behavior, the construction of dynamic models. (pp. 28–29)

Procedurality, then, consists of the rules and mechanics of a game that provide a context for embodied action and choices (Gee, 2003) in turn reacting to that action with an immediate feedback loop—procedural rhetoric is the leveraging of the affordances of those rules and mechanics to communicate, express, and (re)present.

² Bogost (2007) offered a similar analysis of the game's predecessor, *Congo Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Bark* (p. 50). Despite the critique, the game's designers did not change the gameplay in the sequel.

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