The Game of Reading and Writing: How Video Games Reframe Our Understanding of Literacy

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Abstract

This essay focuses on how video games both highlight our traditional assumptions about reading and writing and suggest alternative paradigms that combine the new and the traditional:

- Play. Video games reveal how pleasure and desire are inherent to the reading and writing process. This dimension of gaming helps explain why video games can produce resistance in terms of approaches to writing instruction grounded in maintaining the cultural distinction between play and work.
- Authority. The interactivity of video games complicates questions of who authors and authorizes meaning in a discourse community. Video game players are simultaneously readers and writers whose gaming decisions are inscribed within a certain horizon of possibilities but not predictability. The video game is an inherently dialogic discursive space that problematizes the institutionalized distinction between "reading" and "writing"
- Return to the visual. The case of video games not only helps restore the understanding of writing as a visual form of communication but also challenges the apparent static quality of the printed text, emphasizing the temporal quality of all communication. In so doing, the study of video games promises to fundamentally rewrite the conceptual binary of process and product in composition pedagogy.

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1. Introduction

"Video Game Tests the Limits. The Limits Win." So ran the headline to a *New York Times* story written by Heather Chaplin in January 2007, describing the controversial exclusion of a video game based on the Columbine school shootings—*Super Columbine Massacre RPG!*

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(*SCMRPG!*)—from the finals of the Guerilla Gamemaking Competition at the 2007 Slamdance Film Festival. Slamdance positions itself as an alternative to the increasingly mainstream Sundance film festival, and the creation of the video game competition reinforced the image of Slamdance as open to new and innovative visual media. In the case of *Super Columbine Massacre RPG!*, however, that openness ran up against the conflicted cultural status of video games and gaming. While festival director Peter Baxter affirmed his own belief in artistic freedom ("I personally don't find the game immoral, because an artist has a right to create whatever he wants, whether a filmmaker or a game maker"), he had reservations extending that principle to the level of the social: "when you're responsible for presenting that work to the public, it becomes more complicated" (Chaplin, 2007, n.p.).

Beyond the conceptual slipperiness of his distinction between an individual versus a social right, Baxter's decision to drop *SCMRPG!* from the competition stemmed as much from the perception that interactive video games represent a radically different discursive experience from other texts as from confusion over the First Amendment.

> Games really are potentially a far more powerful medium than film, aren't they?. . . In films you play a more passive role. You're sitting back looking at something. Because of the role-playing aspect, games literally take the level of our participation to a whole other level. You are actively engaged in the outcome of your actions. Games are going to affect us in different ways, in ways we don't fully understand yet. (Chaplin, 2007, n.p.)

From Baxter's perspective, a video game based on or inspired by the Columbine shootings represents a fundamentally different kind of reading experience—and thus warrants more vigilant censure—than a novel or a movie. The fact that *SCMRPG!* has generated greater controversy and more instances of outright condemnation in the mass media than Gus Van Sant's (2003) critically praised movie *Elephant*, likewise inspired by Columbine and a film that also invites viewers to consider a school massacre at least in part from the point of view of the two young gunmen, suggests that Baxter has articulated concerns shared by many others.

The question of video games being taken seriously as cultural texts certainly involves the typical process of acquiring cultural capital that goes along with any new discursive medium, and in that respect video games are being treated with suspicions similar to those which accompanied the rise of movies at the turn of the last century. What should especially interest composition teachers and scholars about Baxter's comments, however, is his claim of difference; specifically, his fear that video games constitute a new and potentially disruptive kind of reading and writing. While critical theory challenges the popular assumption that any kind of interpretive experience, whether reading a book or watching television show, can ever accurately be described as "passive,"[1] Baxter revealed an underlying anxiety about the reading process, an anxiety that actually privileges passivity as less threatening than more seemingly interactive forms of reading on both the psychological and social levels.

Despite Baxter's inference to the contrary, this anxiety about reading and writing is neither new nor unique to gaming. From the concern with the ethical use of rhetorical power that

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[1] Within English and composition studies, reader response theorists from Louise Rosenblatt to Stanley Fish have made the most famous if not the only arguments that textual meaning arises from a creative dialectic between reader and writer. For a definitive example of the cultural studies case for the active nature of the reception of visual mass media such as movies and television, see Fiske (1987).