Gaming/Writing: Alternative Discourse Communities in Online or Digitally Enhanced Technical Writing Classrooms

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Abstract: This presentation focuses on the infusion of computer gaming into writing pedagogy at those entry points where the practice can enrich online or digitally enhanced technical writing courses. We ground our conceptualization of *community* briefly and explain how we invoked this understanding as a heuristic during ethnographic study of dedicated gamers. We discuss interviews that shed light on the intersections between community-building and the notably technical nature of much writing produced during gaming activities. We explore how the act of gaming/writing, in conjunction with the most pedagogically appropriate and attractive features of gaming, suggests teaching strategies and specific assignment prompts to support and to amplify pre-existing approaches to the teaching of writing in e-learning contexts.

Introduction

Computer gaming enjoys great popularity and wields significant cultural impact in virtually any context where the required technology is widely available. Over half of U.S. teenagers, for instance, now report regularly playing video games ("MacArthur," 2006). Gaming long has been used in the military industrial complex to train pilots (e.g., the 1979 program *Flight Simulator* ["Bruce Artwick," 1996]); and in the medical community gaming appears with increasing frequency, such as for mental screening purposes. One study at Oregon Health and Science University recently asked elderly test participants to play a computer card game known as *FreeCell*, observing the gamers' playing behaviors to determine the existence of cognitive damage (Hitti, 2006).

This presentation focuses on the infusion of gaming into the world of English teaching, specifically in the subfield of *technical communication,* which concerns itself with effective rhetorical strategies within scientific and related contexts. We understand *gaming* as laid out by Salen and Zimmerman (2004): "[Designed] rules and structures

that result in an experience for players" (p. 1). Specifically, this experience "is the process by which a player takes action within the designed system of a game, and the system responds to the action" (p. 34). In its digital incarnation (e.g., software games or Web-based protocols), gaming has the potential not only to engage students with their coursework, but to prepare them for employment after college. The widely read magazine *Wired* recently chronicled how one young job seeker was offered a top engineering management position because of his "decisive edge: He was one of the top guild masters in the online role-playing game *World of Warcraft*" (Brown & Thomas, 2006, p. 120). Gaming, as the article explained, has made users "more flexible in their thinking and more sensitive to social cues," because gamers are "learning *to be* as opposed to learning *about* [italics ours]." In other words, so the reasoning goes, gamers are working actively with the data they encounter instead of passively memorizing it as the articles' authors suggest happens in traditional educational settings (p. 120).

To be sure, as gaming has evolved from activities requiring limited skill sets to extremely challenging problem-solving contests on the physical, mental, and at times emotional levels (in short, as the practice of gaming has come to involve more and more complex rhetorical situations), expertise in gaming often suggests the mastery of valuable computational and communicative expertise. This fact is being noticed in the world of the professions, as we have just suggested. Yet in the technical communication field, many teachers persist in underestimating the skills developed through gaming. The historical stigma attached to gaming—that gamers are physically isolated, socially awkward individuals, for instance—may generate such resistance. Yet a number of researchers (e.g., Randel et al. [1992]; Prensky [2004]) have provided evidence that these assumptions are unwarranted.

This presentation first describes ethnographic research into gamers, writers, and what we describe as *gaming/writing*, or the complex of writing situations and behaviors that have arisen and are arising within the gaming community, so that we might construct an understanding of discourse community that is generative for teachers of online and digitally enhanced courses who are pursuing curricular uses of gaming. Key to our argument is the notion that gaming has evolved in such a way that writing not only plays a major role but is a central activity within it. We assert that, shorn of this activity, the gaming community, were it to remain a community, would exist in a substantially impoverished form. The presentation concludes with an exploration of how the concept gaming/writing and its relation to *community* suggest novel e-learning strategies for writing teachers. As English teachers interested in gaming, we have noted how both the field of technical communication and that of information science offer discussions of *discourse community* that continue to influence pedagogical reflection and practice profoundly (e.g., Nystrand [1982]; Swales [1990]; Porter [1992]; Bizzell [1992]; Buckland [2006]; Nyce and Kahn [1991]). We consequently believe that a synthesis of these disciplinary discussions would inspire productive teaching strategies. We attempt, specifically, to blend the *discourse* focus in professional and technical communicator's notion of *discourse community* with the *critique of accepted knowledge sources* focus in information scientist's comparatively loose notion of *community*. As we will discuss, for teachers in the online or digitally enhanced writing classroom such a synthesis might take

the form of, for instance, asking students to use gaming/writing as opportunities for analyzing discourse (especially analysis of digital genres such as blogs and FAQs) and for historically tracking the development of dominating "facts" and beliefs (such as examination of which best practices surround a particular game or how the degree of one's awareness of these practices might constitute community boundaries and identities).

Methods

As outsiders observing the worlds of computer gaming, and as technical communication teachers in an environment slow to address the potential relevance of gaming to writing classes, we chose to conduct in-depth interviews with dedicated gamers in order to expand our own appreciation of the relevance of gaming/writing to the teaching of technical communication in online and digitally enhanced classrooms and to help bring the voices of gamers/writers into the discussion of *discourse community* in our field.

Our participants were two long-time gamers. The first, Karen (a pseudonym), was a 32-year-old enrolled as a technical writing major at a state university in the midwestern United States. Karen indicated that she had played "computer games since [she] was a child and learning to program" and that she and her husband regularly played the Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG) *World of Warcraft*, in which players encounter quests, monsters, magic, and other challenges, including professional life. David (also a pseudonym) was a 19-year-old music performance major at a state university in the southern United States. David told us that he had been playing computer games since he was nine or ten years old and that his game of choice was *Wolfenstein: Enemy Territory* (*ET*). *ET* is a first-person shooter (FPS) game whose scenario is a Nazi prison of war camp in the Second World War, from which allied spy B. J. Blazkowicz is attempting to escape.

We collected the first round of data from our participants in February 2006 and re-contacted them in March 2006 if we had questions about the original data, asking additional questions in order to elicit in-depth information about topics that interested us especially. After gathering and reviewing our data, and confirming and expanding them with the participants, we selected passages that were relevant to our key topics *discourse community* and *writing*, or *rhetoric*. We provided the participants with our penultimate draft of this article in order to consider any comments they wished to share or to make any changes they felt were necessary. The shape and much of the content of the current article also reflects papers delivered and/or responded to at the Popular Culture Association and American Studies Association joint annual conference in 2006 and at the Computers and Writing Online conference in 2007.

Communication in Gaming/Writing

Gamers/Writers are engaged in a very broad range of communication forms. Level of discourse aside for the moment, the technical sophistication required to access these forms is undeniably substantial. But more important in terms of our discussion of *discourse community* is the ongoing relations that gamers/writers are involved in with

other members of the gaming world and that are made possible mainly through written communication. This section describes the gaming media and genres that the gamers/writers we interviewed were familiar with as a result of gaming, many of which they used on a daily basis in collaboration with other community members (See Table 1).

Table 1. Communicative Genres Accessed by Gamers/Writers Interviewed for This Article

Books	Printed materials available in stores and libraries on the topic of effective play in specific games
Ancillary written materials	Printed materials such as charts or instructions packaged with gaming software
Electronic tutorials	Texts taking users step by step through the process of play outside of the networked environment
Hotkeys or hot buttons	In-game teaching strategies appearing in a specific place on the interface
Guild forums or clan websites	Online environments where members of a specific gaming community meet to take care of community business, broadly conceived
Internet sites associated with the larger gaming community	Sites dedicated to promoting and explaining the game to all its users
Blogs	Online sites where gamers post commentary to which others may respond
mIRC chatrooms	Online environments where players use streaming audio and other technologies to communicate re gaming
Bulletin boards	Online environments where messages about gaming and the relevant community are posted by a moderator

We were not surprised to learn that traditional media such as **books** and **ancillary written material** packaged with gaming software, although clearly a part of the gaming universe, were little depended upon by the gamers/writers we interviewed. David claimed that he had never used a book to learn how to play a computer game although sometimes he read ancillary written materials listing rules and other information associated with more complicated games. **Electronic tutorials** associated with the games, that is, electronic texts that take users step by step through the process of play, were also rarely accessed. For instance, David referred to a tutorial associated with the first game he had ever played as something he "never used." Instead he "sort of hit the play button and things appeared on the screen, and [he] started improvising." This remained his method for learning new games. In contrast, he normally used in-game teaching strategies such as "**hotkeys or hot buttons** on the top or bottom" of the screen which, in his view, made games essentially "self-explanatory." The fact that participants seemed uninterested in accessing information outside of the networked environment suggests to us the importance of social activity to these gamers/writers.

In regard to the socially interactive genres, both interviewees acknowledged the importance of **guild forums or clan websites** in their gaming/writing experience. Karen characterized the former as "an avenue to air grievances, hold discussions, clarify issues, and have . . . the occasional heart-felt apology." The forums Karen participated in were

"open to the entire guild to see to ensure that everyone is 'on the same page.'" Whereas Karen's experience with forums was positive, perhaps because she was a guild leader and therefore in a position to shape discussions substantively, David was less sanguine. "I don't waste my time with [*ET* websites]. . . . There was a time when I'd write in forums and respond to other people's points," he told us, "But the childish 'I'm right and you're wrong' prevailed, and I gave up." David did consider these sites useful, however, to the extent that they provided hints to advanced players for perfecting skills. Karen agreed, observing that "having a vast array of information at one's disposal can greatly increase your effectiveness as a player":

> I recently came across tips and guidelines for a new player I am bringing up in the game of a different class than the one I am used to playing. [The guild forum's] well-thought-out tips and articulate explanations have proven very beneficial in quickly learning how to play this class of character and how it interacts with other classes. Information sites can also help overcome stumbling blocks that may otherwise take days of trial-and-error.

Both she and David noted the problem of credibility of posts to guild forum and clan sites; David claimed that "a lot of it is bologna," and Karen, that "there is a plethora of erroneous information and general wastes of server space" on such sites. Thus, she noted her responsibility, as guild leader, to "step in, clarify, discuss" questionable information posted by others. The gamers we interviewed believed themselves able to differentiate between accurate and inaccurate posts. This ability arose, they implied, from their high level of gaming expertise.

As Karen pointed out, "The World Wide Web certainly plays an important role in both general game play and the development and maintenance of online communities." Not surprisingly, the gamers/writers we interviewed visited frequently, in addition to websites associated with their own guild or clan, **internet sites associated with the greater gaming community**. Karen cited <www.worldofwarcraft.com> as "a repository for helpful add-ons to make game play easier" and for "all things found in the game, from quest hints to item descriptions. Almost all players of the game reference this site or one other much like it, so references to them are ubiquitous in the game." Again, she alluded to her role as guild leader, stating that add-ons found at such sites helped her organize the sending of mass in-game emails, organize her guild roster, and perform other administrative tasks. She also found add-ons to help her character optimize functioning in groups and to help customize her interface. David's interest in other *ET* websites focused on tournament play. He occasionally visited magazine sites with important information about upcoming games and often visited two tournament webpages, e.g., <www.teamwarfare.com> and <www.caleague.com>; the latter provided small prizes to winners of its tournaments.

Although David was familiar with the genre, he had ambivalent feelings about the **blogs** associated with gaming. On the one hand, he stated that he "disliked all of them" because of the arguing and childishness that characterized their discourse; on the other, he noted

that there were "a lot of helpful comments that would help starters of the games (*noobs*)" as well as many "tips and tricks to get familiar with the controls" and to create an interface that reflects a gamer's personality and gaming preferences.

A form of communication regularly used by David were **mIRC chatrooms**. mIRC is a shareware that allows users to, among other things, send and receive files, handle events, access the World Wide Web, and use streaming audio in online group conversations. David described these chatrooms as "the backbone of the community," since it was through them that he set up "scrims," or scrimmages, reached people from his own clan, and got to know other gamers.

David also from time to time accessed electronic **bulletin boards**, which he described as comparable to a school bulletin board where users or a moderator posts electronic messages. He told us that he had posted recruiting threads when looking for clans to join or when recruiting new players to join his clan. In this case, he said,

> [I would] state my reputation, the clans I'd been [in], the type of player I was looking for, you'd have to be above a certain age, mature, have these skills. Have Vent [a software allowing online discussions between two or more people], have your voice not be squeaky or annoying. Also if someone else that I know posted on the recruiting forms, I'd recommend him or her most likely if they were a friend.

As we will discuss in more depth in the next section, it again seems clear that, at least to the participants we interviewed, the issue of ethos in the gaming community is of singular importance.

Of the communicative genres and media we have just discussed, a few have obvious potential applications in the advanced writing context. These are forums, websites, blogs, chatrooms, and bulletin boards. Based on these applications, technical communication assignment prompts might include the posting of audience-appropriate technical definitions and descriptions, the revising of gaming specifications into more usable formats, and the construction of orientation and user manuals for gamers at various skill levels. We will now discuss further implications for advanced writing pedagogy in light of rhetorical strategies employed and social behaviors engaged in by gaming/writing communities.

Observations on the Rhetorical Appeals in Gaming/Writing

Through interviewing Karen and David, we were inspired to search for ways to promote in-class discussions of rhetoric that use gaming as a framework, encouraging students to consider how what they may have learned in their gaming/writing community might contribute to their effectiveness as communicators in other environments. Both gamers/writers we spoke to were highly attuned within the context of their communities to the rhetorical appeal of ethos; as guild leader and author of frequent communiqués to her guild members, Karen was concerned with issues of arranging accurate information

effectively, or the appeal to logos; and both gamers noted the powerful emotional content of much gaming/writing, or the importance or the appeal to pathos in their communities.

It is our impression that expert gamers/writers are likely to be well aware of the issue of credibility, or ethos, of the gaming texts they read, a recurring theme of the interviews. We have already suggested in the context of specific communicative media how the gamers we interviewed evaluated and performed gaming expertise in the context of their online communities. Karen was especially conscious of the issue of ethos, presumably because she was a guild leader, and addressed the issue of credibility in gaming/writing on more than one occasion. "In trying to separate the useful from the bull," she said,

> I usually look at a couple of areas. First, I look at the overall readability. I have found that the best and most useful information is written in full sentences, using good grammar, and laid-out in a clean, almost professional manner. If I see a lot of instant messenger type abbreviations, no capitalization, and a visually messy presentation, I usually move on.

Karen's interest in technical writing clearly had a strong influence on her reception and performance of gaming/writing, a context that in turn offered her opportunities to hone her technical writing skills. One of the technical documents Karen had written for her guild was a charter, which she considered an appeal to ethos insofar as it let "other players outside of [her] guild form an impression of what they are seeing when they see the guild tab below [a] player name." Ethos for Karen was a matter of effective expression, of rhetorical skill and understanding, and the gaming environment provided her with ongoing opportunities to develop confidence in her skills as rhetor.

Karen also noted the importance of the rhetorical appeal to logos, or logic—in this instance, the presentation of accurate information in a rational manner, through running the guild web site and through writing a guild guide to the game. She observed that "when you take time to write a guide, you have to explain why you've made the choice to use the specific abilities you rely [on] and why you've chosen to eschew others." These choices require value judgments based on usefulness and accuracy of information; indeed, noted Karen, "writing a [guild] guide involves . . . a critical eye." Once again, Karen's gaming community provided her the opportunity to develop rhetorical expertise.

The emotional nature of many communicative situations recalled by Karen and David figured prominently in the interviews. Although gamers do use voice communication technologies, in Karen's opinion, "It is still the written word that can cause the most damage and heal the most hurts." As mentioned earlier, she cited guild forums as a site for the "occasional heart-felt apology," thus alluding to the fact that tempers flare in the gaming community, as in other complex social situations. "Often, when discussing their game characters, people become very passionate," Karen added. "All one has to do is read some of the forums at the *World of Warcraft* to see the passion of and personal investment made by the people who play the game." David noted, too, that "in games, people tend to be very emotional" and that this tendency cuts across levels of mastery. And insofar as friendships can be a part of the gaming context, the affective content of

gaming/writing can be considerable. We are personally aware of a high school student gamer who announced his suicide to friends through a web forum. Such heartbreaking communications are, fortunately, rare, but as teachers we should bear in mind that the writing taking place in the gaming community can have a deeply emotional character; part of this has to do, no doubt, with the age of the writers, many of whom are traversing the difficult years of adolescence and young adulthood.

Further Observations on the Social Aspects of Gaming/Writing

Outsiders may think of the world of gaming as distinguished by bloodthirsty heroes, oversexed heroines, and unbridled imperialism, and of gamers as escapist, misogynistic, sociopathic, or worse. In fact, our interview participants confirmed these stereotypes to some extent, noting that gaming/writing may lead to poor thinking, escapism or even sociopathy, and exclusionary behavior—disadvantages that writing teachers must resist importing into their classrooms. Yet the overall attitude of our interview participants towards gaming was positive. The advantages they cited point to gaming/writing as a potential source of dynamism and enhanced achievement in online or digitally enhanced technical writing courses. We attempt in this section to flesh out our representation of the gaming universe as a discourse community by delving more deeply into the social world of gaming.

Both David and Karen were concerned about the emergence of inappropriate social behavior in their gaming communities. Some of this behavior was public and shared, e.g., flaming; other behavior was, we understood, comparatively private, e.g., escapism. As a young man who had just left his longtime home in the midwestern United States to study one thousand miles away, David found himself resisting the inclination to allow the game to loom too large in his personal life, admitting that he sometimes struggled against the urge "to escape from the day-to-day problems of life, and the . . . easiest way for [him] to do that was play games." He compared people who spent too much time on video games to alcoholics or to other addicts and said that players may dedicate excessive time to gaming and to being accepted into better clans, efforts that often are "negative, that is, . . . could be channeled into real life." Perhaps looking back on his own history with gaming, he suggested a connection between young people/novice gamers and the propensity to miss the "bigger picture, which is there's life outside computer games."

David also believed that the gaming community at times discourages its members from thinking critically. He felt it was very important for gamers to find the "right people to play with. Because depending on who you play with . . . and this could be on Vent, Teamspeak, or *ET* servers, they influence how you play and think, which may lead to bad habits and poor thinking." He explained that since most community members "tend to be immature," they promote a repartee that is shallow and cutting. "And the people who fall into that pattern, fall into that groove," David said, "We call them 'tools,' because they don't really have original thoughts of their own, they're the followers." Most disturbingly, David concluded that the gaming/writing he had done had "probably worsened [my writing in general]. I probably feel more confident in what I say, but I haven't really learned anything. I've just learned to beat someone at a [silly] argument."

This confession demonstrates that as teachers of writing we will continue to be responsible for helping students think clearly, critically, and self-reflexively if we import gaming/writing contexts into our online or digitally enhanced classrooms.

Finally, gaming/writing can marginalize or silence members of the community. Karen noted that she "would never consider" posting her own responses to online arguments about gaming because (1) the parties had usually already made up their minds and (2) those who had not or who were "objective" would likely not post. "It seems," she concluded, that "those most likely to post are those that post the most inflammatory comments!" We were not surprised to learn that Karen felt it her duty as guild leader to "lock down an argument that is getting out of hand." Thus, at times, "nonobjective," angry, or otherwise problematic members of a community are also excluded from conversations.

David's interview reminded us of an especially troubling aspect of the social world of gaming: gender bias. Although Karen was an expert gamer, and certainly could not have constituted one-third of the expert gaming female population, David claimed that he knew about only "two, no actually three" women gamers. One was in the top tier of *ET* players, but he believed that she was "probably their *mascot* . . . a derogatory term for worthless clan members. . . . she's in their clan because many people believe she's a girl, and that's why they like her. But she does have skill; whether she has as much skill as her clanmates, that is questionable." We asked him directly about the role of women in gaming, and he eagerly responded that he kept "hearing that there are more and more girls coming into gaming . . . and I'm glad. Though, there's a whole different market for them I think. I remember my sister got really into the Sims, which is a game that deals with domestic issues, but when I asked her whether she liked my kind of games [FPSs], she disliked them." In reviewing the interviews, David noted that he had not meant to make a sexist remark about women gamers. It seemed to us that David, like many men of his age group, are conscious that women have a comparable ability to be expert gamers; yet the gender stereotypes so prevalent in the broader culture, and certainly within gaming world such as *Wolfenstein: ET*, remain to some extent with these young men as (usually) unquestioned assumptions. Again, it is the role of the writing teacher to help bring these assumptions to the foreground of classroom work and to explore, with their students, ways of correcting unhelpful habits of thought.

Yet our interview participants suggested that, on the whole, gaming promotes sociability: the tone of the interviews, not surprisingly, was overwhelmingly positive in respect to the gaming discourse community. And gaming communities offer writers opportunities for setting and achieving complex rhetorical goals, a fact of special importance to teachers of online and digitally enhanced technical writing courses.

Karen noted that gaming/writing could constitute a highly specialized task requiring sophisticated ability to collaborate and to achieve complex rhetorical objectives. In writing the guild charter, "a document that says who we are, what our general goals are, and our manner of achieving those goals," Karen found herself creating multiple drafts over a period of months. When she was satisfied with her efforts, the charter was

presented to the guild membership for ratification by a full vote. Perhaps realizing that her interviewer might wonder why anyone would go to so much trouble "just for a game," Karen added that "the guild does truly represent an online community; and where a hundred or so are gathered, a general set of rules, expectations, and disciplinary measures must be established." Indeed, the most involved activities might require the coordination of 40 or so players. We were impressed with Karen's sense of accomplishment as a prominent and active member of her guild and had no doubt that her confidence as a writer of importance in such a large and diverse community would help her feel qualified to undertake assignments in technical writing courses, many of which are team based and require students to develop skills in collaboration, compromise, and effective leadership.

As mentioned, both interview participants felt that the social benefits of gaming/writing outweighed its drawbacks. Although he had indicated a serious concern that gaming could lead to antisocial behavior, David observed that, at the same time, "it was ironically a social thing to do since a lot of people played." He compared online gaming to *sport*, and other types of media experiences, e.g., watching television or playing games by oneself, to *entertainment* since online gaming was in his view, active. Although computers could be more challenging opponents than human beings were, David said that he preferred playing with "humans. . . . Cause I'm in it for socializing." Likewise, Karen told us that "there are many friendships that develop from gaming together," and that these friendships were heavily dependent on the activity of gaming/writing. The guild forums, she observed, "often, even more so than in the game, . . . allow us to see into the hearts of those we game with everyday and get to know others in our guild that we may not play with often due to level discrepancies or the inevitable player cliques that arise."

When David first started playing computer games, he had not joined an online community. His experience with solo gaming was negative because it lacked a social context: "it's not very sociable," he explained. "It's not like talking to people like you do in real life." Of course, online gaming is not always community oriented, David continued, because some "people enter that game to win, not to socialize." His attitude towards gaming as a communal activity was tempered but positive overall:

> When I think of a person who plays a sport, say a soccer player, I envision someone who lives life for the thrills, excitement, not only of winning a game but also the friendship, the close friendship, between his or her teammates. So I think that sports players who are really in it for competitive play, if you want to be truly competitive, it is inevitable that some social aspects are included. Now the platform by which you compete differs from game to game, and I would have to say gaming is probably the least sociable sport there is, considering you're not face to face with someone. But it's also the most convenient sport and probably the easiest since it doesn't involve physical exhaustion.

David also gave us insights into the complex of activities that gaming can be part of. As a high school student, he had found a group of friends who liked to play computer games

together. They did not do so in any compulsive or systematic way; rather, they would stop playing now and then to listen to music, to run outside, or to do homework together. They would often be engaged in activities unrelated to gaming but then start a "political" discussion about their gaming community, laughing at its "stupidity," talking about "what was going on, what was changing about it." Thus, gaming did not always involve a software, a server, or even a computer. Clearly, the gamers/writers we interviewed conceived of gaming as an activity whose value was located primarily in its potential to generate personal relationships and a sense of belonging that might, in the best circumstances, extend beyond the virtual world that had engendered them.

Suggestions for the Classroom

As the interviews indicate, digital gaming's current incarnation encourages symbiosis between gaming/writing and community-building, to the extent that communication-based activities may be the primary attraction for participants. As teachers of technical communication, we find the rhetorical skills generated and polished by gaming/writing to be noteworthy.

In this exploration of a rationale for importing gaming's specific writing, community-building, and rhetorical skill sets into our classrooms, we have used a *discourse community* framework to generate assignment prompts and activities—specifically, we have accessed the *discourse* focus in professional and technical communication's *discourse community*, coupled with the *critique of accepted knowledge sources* focus in information science's *community*.

Gaming discourse analysis assignment

Many students now are fluent in navigating technological interfaces, including those of digital games; yet many students continue to see technical communication as a neutral, values-free act. For their teachers, exploding the language-as-neutral myth can help students come to terms with the fact that their writing is a social action for which they ultimately are responsible.

Our "Gaming Discourse Analysis" assignment asks students to connect writing to values-building through exploring the forums from three MMORPGs. The roles that participants assume in each game must differ noticeably from one another; for instance, a student might choose to explore the gamer's interaction with nature in *Animal Crossing,* the gamer's long journey through the countryside in *Neverwinter Nights*, or the gamer's survival skills in the "Old West" in the upcoming *Frontier 1859*. Students then select and track the busiest *thread* (or discussion topic) from an online forum for each game, post a contribution to this thread, and monitor feedback. Their research culminates in an analytical essay that draws parallels among the most popular topics across the three threads and feedback. Such parallels create an opportunity for class discussion during the writing process: Unearthing which tacit values count most in a simulated world, and preparing the students to connect writing with the perpetuation of these values.

Gaming rhetorical analysis assignment

Sequencing from the Gaming Discourse Analysis prompt is the Gaming Rhetorical Analysis assignment, an opportunity to tie classroom lessons on argumentation strategies into those used in gaming/writing. The Gaming Rhetorical Analysis assignment asks students, once again, to refer to the three games discussed during the Discourse Analysis assignment, this time focusing on the games' blogs. Students select a blog entry that has elicited several responses from gaming participants and examine the claims, warrants, and evidence used in the entry and responses. Having familiarized themselves with the game's larger discourse community in the preceding assignment, students are able to compose an analytical essay on the rhetorical strategies that are viewed as acceptable and credible in each blog, and explore how these strategies are a natural outcome of each discourse community's value system.

Although at first glance these assignments appear to ask a great deal, the number of classroom preparatory exercises necessary for each assignment's completion in fact is productive rather than prohibitive. For instance, the Gaming Rhetorical Analysis assignment suggests opportunities not only to discuss classical rhetorical approaches used in traditional student writing, but to observe how these approaches are re/shaped when pulled through different digital contexts (e.g., the difference between texts that appear on a corporate Web site and on an *Animal Crossing* FAQ). Other lesson plans might include an examination of information credibility among digital resources (e.g., researching a topic using Expanded Academic ASAP versus Wikipedia). In other words, such prompts and exercises call upon the community, student-centeredness, and critical-thinking values that have existed in education long before the advent of digital gaming, while recognizing and benefiting from our students' contemporary technological savvy.

Conclusion

We have discussed only a few of the many potential pedagogical uses of gaming in online and digitally enhanced communication courses. We have asserted that the online gaming community is constructed discursively, that is, through the complex of writing activities that gamers engage in; this complex we have referred to as *gaming/writing*. We have argued, further, that a synthesis of technical communication and information science conceptualizations of *discourse community* can assist writing teachers in designing innovative pedagogy that exploits and develops the skills of students, regardless of whether they are dedicated gamers. We look forward to constructing with our colleagues an understanding of best practices in writing pedagogy that values the rhetorical potential of gaming/writing.

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