

WHO YOU WANT TO BE: VIDEO GAMES AS

IDENTITY-REFLECTIVE TEXTS

Video games are often criticized for, according to James Paul Gee, the “problem of content.” (22) Gee elaborates on the criticism of content as the idea that the game itself is the content to be learned, not the ideas surrounding the game. Gee is asking readers, and more importantly teachers, to consider the idea that one might read a video game in the same way that one might read a novel or a film. Even if one were to disagree with the idea that games should be used as teaching texts, this idea of Gee’s problem of content is something that should not be overlooked, as video games are an ever-increasingly important part of our culture, and incorporate far more literacy than film. For example, consider BioWare’s *Mass Effect* trilogy: the most recent game made over \$200 million in sales on the game alone, before the ancillary materials like novels, strategy guides, and action figures are included. (Sterling) The *Mass Effect* franchise also is steeped in literacy opportunities: the games themselves feature massive amounts of text in the form of menus and an in-game encyclopedia as well as novels and comic books. (BioWare) There is plenty of content here to be used, as long as the debate about the problem of content is correctly framed, focusing not on the game play, but how the game play serves the story being told. In short, video games not only provide a gateway to literacy experiences through their menus and their ancillary products, they are also wildly popular, especially among students, and a genre of which many academics are ignorant and dismissal. This ignorance of one of the most popular genres in modern entertainment can change through an examination of video games as texts – rich, elaborate, and complex texts – that exhibit unique opportunities for

self-discovery, identity formation and exploration, and the creation of experience, which each in turn provide intriguing possibilities for use in Expressivist composition classrooms.

Video games can have a place in the wider context of rhetoric and composition. If accessed through a personal computer, they help develop the functional digital literacies that concern Stuart Selber in “Reimagining the Functional Side of Computer Literacy” like keyboarding, mouse use, general comfort with the computer, application use, and other such skills. Video games also use many of the elements that concern Gunther Kress in his work on multi-modality. Kress explores the limits of various modes and how multi-modality explores the potential inherent in each mode and in the way they work together. (Kress) Video games do the same thing: when a particular task is best suited to reading, they ask the player to read. When a task is best suited to the visual mode, a good game will ask the player to think visually. Gaming is the embodiment of multi-modality, especially as games ask players to do more and take more responsibility, both as players and as readers for the narrative within the game. Kress also talks about another idea that gaming is exploring in a way that other literary genres do not really have the ability: multiple entry points and mutable texts. In his presentation “Reading Images: Multimodality, Representation, and New Media”, Kress uses the example of a web site to illustrate his concept:

The page/screen in Figure 4 has, by contrast, about 13 entry points. The reader interest determines where he or she wishes to enter the page. The same applies to the “reading path” which the reader (now usually called a “visitor”) wishes to construct: it too is determined by the reader’s interest. (Kress)

Video games, especially those with a free world or some form of a mutable story line, a concept that shall be discussed later, do not have the same sort of single entry point that texts have; they often feature textual elements that can be performed in any order the reader pleases. The internal

encyclopedia from *Mass Effect 3*, for example, can be experienced as individual entries whenever an unusual term is encountered, or as an entire whole. Another example from *Mass Effect 3* is the structure of the narrative: at any given time, the player has a series of tasks that must be completed and a series of tasks the player could complete, all of which have some form of impact on the later narrative. The player, through the narrative choices that are made, decides on their own entry point into the pre-written narrative that BioWare has supplied them, in a form more complex but still similar to the website in Kress's example.

The concept of multiple entry points leads to another intriguing possibility video games possess. In an essay on the role of digital technology in psychology, Sherry Turkle talks about the potential for video games not to contain multiple entry points to the text, but to provide them into the real world. Adopting Erik Erikson's theories on human growth and development, Turkle re-thinks Erikson's idea of an adolescent moratorium, saying that "time in cyberspace reworks the notion of the moratorium because it may now exist on an always-available 'window.'" ("Cyberspace and Identity" 645) Turkle is reinventing Erikson's idea of certain stages that must be resolved for growth in a person by forwarding the idea that video games can assist in identity formation by reopening those windows to allow a person to relive an unresolved crisis of personality. Instead of covering up a problem with its roots in an unresolved crisis, Turkle argues that a person could, in effect, revisit that crisis, gain some kind of hopefully positive outcome, and personally advance instead of co-opting an identity that is artificial and unnatural.

These powerful tools for identity formation within video games allow video games to conceptualize identity in a new way. Turkle begins to re-think the nature of identity in a digital context, saying in 1997 that "if, traditionally, identity implied oneness, life on today's computer screen implies multiplicity and heterogeneity." ("Computational Technologies and Images of the

Self” 1101) Gee further develops this idea as one of his 36 Learning Principles of good video games, of which four are particularly salient to an examination of video games as texts for the composition classroom: his psychosocial moratorium, the “identity principle,” the “self-knowledge principle,” and the “cultural models about the world principle.” (Gee 222, 226) Each of these principles provides an interesting context for considering video games as texts for the composition classroom.

Returning to identity, Gee develops Turkle’s ideas further by codifying the split identities Turkle explored into three separate identities: the virtual, real, and projective identities: the identities of the textual character, the human behind the screen, and the identity space where the two identities come together, respectively. (Gee 48 – 54) Where Turkle only considered identity as an interplay between the player and the player’s projected identity – an understandable position, considering that Turkle was working with a specific type of identity – Gee complicates this understanding of identity by taking into account that characters in modern video games are often very fleshed-out and personal characters in their own right. (“Computational Technologies” 1101-2; Gee 48-54) This triad of identities brings this understanding to the fore through an examination of a character in a specific type of video game, the mutable fixed-world, a concept that will be explored later. Simply, Gee defines these three identities – virtual, real, and projective – as being the identity of the constructed character from the text, the real identity of the person in front of the screen controlling the character, and the projected identity of the player into the character, explained by Gee as a fusion of the identities of the player and the character. (51) This fluctuation of the nature of identity enables several textual possibilities for the study of video games. First, it allows video games to be studied reflectively not merely as an imposition of the reader upon the text, but as a cooperation of the reader with the text. Second, it leads

directly to two of Gee's other learning principles – self-reflection on identity and self-reflection on culture – through the destabilizing influence identity games have on the constructs of the real identity.

These two ideas are the third and fourth useful learning principles from Gee: the “self-knowledge principle” and the “cultural models about the world principle.” In composition, a common goal of the class is to engage simultaneously with the text and to learn how to use the text reflectively, to either see the world in a new way, or to see yourself in a new way in relation to the world, the point of both of Gee's learning principles. Video games already accomplish these goals. In her book *Reality is Broken*, Jane McGonigal talks about how video games do certain things better than reality. One such thing is engagement. According to McGonigal, “games focus our energy, with relentless optimism, on something we're good at and enjoy,” and “games motivate us to participate more fully in whatever we're doing.” (McGonigal 38, 124) Today, more people play games than read the newspaper, and in the process, they learn more about themselves and their situations than any composition textbook ever printed could teach. As an examination of both principles, take the example of Rockstar's *Grand Theft Auto IV*: a game structured around killing, the game uses several particular opportunities for murder to force the player to ask very interesting questions about their own culture and their own personal selves. People often speculate about their capacity to murder someone who has betrayed them, and *Grand Theft Auto IV* takes that question and literally puts the gun in the hand of the projected identity: will you find yourself capable of killing random people you have been asked to kill? What about the man who betrayed your military unit in Serbia, but has subsequently fallen into drugs and depression? What makes you capable of these acts, rendered and executed so viscerally? These are all questions that occur in the projected and real identities that are the focus

of *Grand Theft Auto IV*'s revenge plot. The game, through its heavily immigrant focused narrative – the two main characters and most of the supporting cast are either immigrants or maintain ethnic identities that override their identities as Americans – and its world built on satire asks some very interesting questions about basic tenants of American-ness: is there really a fresh start, is materialism truly a path to happiness, and what is acceptable in the pursuit of happiness? All of these are questions expected from a complex text, especially one that students would be asked to respond to. And they are all found in a video game.

The example of *Grand Theft Auto IV* forces us to return to a very important element of Gee's learning principles: the psychosocial moratorium, where consequences are diminished or nonexistent. While Turkle talks about video games and online identity as a replacement for Erikson's adolescent moratorium, Gee takes that idea further, developing a space he calls the "psychosocial moratorium": another idea from Erikson, but instead of tying this idea to a specific point in life, the psychosocial moratorium occurs whenever the real life consequences of an act can be diminished or forgotten. (Gee 59) *Grand Theft Auto IV* is again an excellent example. Forgetting for a moment the carnage the player wreaks in their wake and focusing on the executions, *Grand Theft Auto IV*'s psychosocial moratorium allows the player to experience the aforementioned events with no regard for what would happen to them in reality if they ran around an *ersatz* New York City executing mobsters for revenge. With a very few rare exceptions, mostly augmented reality games, most video games are based on this premise: whatever you want to do can be done, with no consequences outside the game.

These principles have some intriguing possibilities for use in composition classrooms alongside or instead of traditional texts, but what games make the best use of these principles? Particularly, two classes of video games best exhibit these particular principles: Free-World

games and Mutable Fixed-World games. Free-World games are games that develop a world where there is little to no virtual identity with which to grapple and provide only the tools to explore their worlds. Examples of this genre would be the Maxis games *Spore* and *The Sims*, particularly the later installments of *The Sims*. These games both have little to no underlying narrative, but both provide a rich universe in which to play around primarily with identity, for instance, *Spore*, a game which provides a world where the player evolves a space-faring civilization from microbes. There is no proscribed virtual identity to complicate matters, so the civilization that develops is a direct reflection of the choices the player has made in the civilization's rise: for instance, at the end game, a civilization that made its rise possible through trading and negotiation will exhibit many different characteristics than a carnivorous, warlike race or a peaceful race. These characteristics stem directly from player choice, realizing two defining characteristics of the Free-World genre: a high level of player agency, and a small virtual identity subsumed by the projected identity. *The Sims* illustrates these characteristics again, and becomes the perfect example of the genre with its emphasis on another characteristic: largely player-defined objectives that reflect the player's own objectives in reality. On *The Sims*, Alexander R. Galloway says that "listening to music, ordering pizza, and so on in *The Sims* is most probably closer to the narratives of normal life than is storming the enemy base in *SOCOM*," and David Brooks agrees, saying "There's no winning and losing in *The Sims*. No points, no end. In the game, as in life, you just keep doing the dishes until you die. (Galloway 72; Brooks 367). Both writers are talking about the same idea, that *The Sims* and its simulation of life naturally inspire the player to seek objectives that they would naturally seek in the real world as their projected identities – *The Sims* has even weaker virtual identities than *Spore* – are direct reflections of their real identities. These three characteristics make this particular genre of Free-

World game almost less of a text and more of a laboratory to test out personal ideas, objectives, and convictions in the advantage of the psychosocial moratorium.

The second genre that readily exhibits these characteristics is the genre I will term Mutable Fixed-World games. Unlike Free-World games, these games have a specific story and at least some element of a virtual identity, but significant agency is retained by the real and projected identities. Examples of this genre would be games like BioWare's *Dragon Age: Origins*, the *Mass Effect* franchise, Rockstar's *Grand Theft Auto IV*, Lionhead's *Fable III*. In these games, there is a strong story line, but the way the player encounters that story will be different for every player based on the actions of the projected identity. This is probably seen best in *Dragon Age: Origins*, where the player's real identity from the beginning has a strong degree of agency over the virtual identity, seen in character creation. The character the player creates, right down to the back story, is completely chosen by the player, creating a virtual identity that is heavily dependent on a projected identity that actually is in existence before the virtual identity is fully established. Another, similar feature is the idea of experience in the text being shaped by the projected identity. Unlike Free-World games, where the story is completely a product of the projected identity, the story in a Mutable Fixed-World game is a product of the negotiation between the virtual and real or projected identities: the virtual identity provides the real and projected identities with a choice of options, which then are returned to the virtual identity as a choice, which in turn will impact the virtual identity. An example of this would be *Grand Theft Auto IV*'s executions. Another example would be *Fable III*'s Weight of the World section, where the player is placed in charge of the kingdom, and must make decisions that affect the course of the kingdom, and therefore the story. This concept also exhibits another example of the Mutable Fixed-World: the fantastic scenario. While the Free-World focuses on simulation of the real or

near-real world, the Mutable Fixed-World places the player in a situation where the scenario is far less real: space marine, rebel prince, hardened criminal. The Mutable Fixed-World game provides a scenario where ideas, not actions, are explored by alienizing those ideas and repositioning the identity exploring those ideas where they can be explored without significant discomfort, creating their own psychosocial moratorium.

So where do these two genres fit into composition instruction? They ask interesting questions in their content, and in return force players to ask interesting questions about themselves in their particular process of identity formation, dovetailing nicely with many of the ideas that Expressivist composition teachers, particularly those inspired by Ken Macrorie, espouse. In her essay “Self-Orientation in ‘Expressive Writing’ Instruction,” Janine Reed talks about the difference between Macrorie’s approach to Expressivism and Peter Elbow’s, saying that “Macrorie believes that for writers to write well, they must be ‘honest’ and ‘tell the truth,’ while Elbow believes that writers must engage in a process that will ultimately transform their words into meaningful prose.” (110) Reed terms these two schools as “authenticity” and “generativity,” respectively, and in the interest of space, we shall focus mainly on the authenticity approach, although gaming can be incorporated into both approaches.

Macrorie’s authenticity approach emphasizes the creation of text that stems from personal experience, as the writer will be the expert on what has happened in his own life, and this material will naturally lead to better composition, because the writer is an expert. (Reed 111) Macrorie states as much in his own book on teaching, *A Vulnerable Teacher*, where he describes his conclusions gleaned from teaching courses designed to help students free themselves from their normative composition practices and write something that they feel is new and interesting, saying that “the superior-inferior relationship is lessened because the teacher makes himself

vulnerable to his students' experience.” (Macrorie 12) What Macrorie found in his own pedagogy was an increase in engagement and original thought when his students were finally free to draw on their own experiences to create texts applying their own lenses, in his examples, to Shakespeare. This particular method of textual use in the composition classroom holds two different, but intriguing possibilities for the use of video games: first, as texts for personal reflection, and second, as texts for experience generation.

In the first instance, assignments should be built that ask the students to play through an entire game, or a particular segment of a game, all while recording their choices and reflecting on why they ended up making the choices they did. Essentially, the assignment becomes writing that reflects on life, but instead of focusing on a long-past and ill-remembered real identity, the writing focuses on an immediate and vivid projected identity, where the student is consciously aware of choice and agency, or their lack of it, and can reflect more effectively on what they are experiencing. Free-World games become effective in this instance, because it allows the students a laboratory to live out life choices and experiment with identity in an environment with no risk all while recording what they are experiencing. The structure of the reflection can either target real-identity experiences through the lens of the projected identity, or projected-identity experiences as mediated by the real identity. Either way, the use of video games as a rich, engaging text full of possibilities is enormous.

The second reason for using video games is as texts for the production of experience. Macrorie effectively asked students to write about their own experiences in relation to Shakespeare, but one issue sometimes encountered in the classroom is a lack of relevant experience. Video games can be used to bridge this gap by providing experience in new and interesting ways. Many of the games previously mentioned can provide experiences across any

number of topic that students might normally never have the opportunity to experience in real life, either due to the fantasy of the situation, or a real-world lack of access. Take for example another video game: *Spent*. Unlike the games previously mentioned, this simple browser game does not attempt to tell much of a story, nor does it attempt to give the play a ridiculous amount of freedom. Instead, it tries to help the player feel the reality of being underemployed in America today. Many students encountered in colleges may have never had this experience, and such a game will help to enrich their writing by providing an experience they may never have had otherwise.

Video games are often in the news as the instruments of destruction for a younger generation. They are dismissed as simple entertainments based on the visions from their early days, where technological limitations kept them from telling stories with meaning and potential. But today, the experiential stories and visuals compete with any other form of storytelling today, and provide an experience that no other narrative method can emulate, all while becoming one of the most popular entertainments today. Such texts have potential in the classroom, and that potential is realized by identifying genres with particular features that push video games into a realm film and text cannot match, and by finding pedagogical techniques that take advantage of the medium's unique ability to emulate experience, enabling students to simultaneously look at the world again, a new way, and have new experiences to inform their writing.

— JAMES BALES, UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT SAN ANTONIO

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