A Pedagogy of Play: Integrating Computer Games into the Writing Classroom

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Abstract

Traditional distinctions between work/play and classroom/gamespace create barriers to computer games’ integration into academic settings and the writing classroom in particular. For a writing class, the work/play distinction often relegates games to an object of analysis in which students critique the games but have little invested in the gameplay itself. After examining briefly how historical changes in education created these distinctions, we offer an alternative position that places play and gamespace within the realm of the classroom. In so doing, we open up a gap for computer game theory to inform the pedagogy that can be practiced in a writing classroom. We show one such example of game theory informing writing pedagogy—the theory of emergent gaming. We then offer an example of an enacted emergent pedagogy in which students play the massively multiplayer online role-playing game World of Warcraft throughout the term, composing self-determined, rhetorically focused writing projects informed by play and written for other game players.

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1. Introduction

Many attempts have been made to link computer games to conspicuous learning, from the earliest games developed specifically to teach, such as The Oregon Trail (1971), and theories of learning tied to those early games, such as Thomas Malone’s “What Makes Things Fun to Learn? Heuristics for Designing Instructional Computer Games” (1980), to more recent distinctions between narrative and play (Juul, 2005), situated learning, and content learning (Gee, 2003; Prensky, 2001), and individual and social identity (Thomas & Brown, 2007). Such a history in some ways parallels the theoretical and pedagogical evolutions of writing instruction. For example, one could see gameplay narrative, or the “fixed sequence of events”...
(Juul, 2005, p. 157), as equivalent to the classical rhetorical canons. Alternatively, one might further see narrative’s counterpart in computer game theory—play—as the more organic and recursive process of writing later emphasized in composition classrooms. And just as Jesper Juul later revised his own distinction between narrative and play to include both narrative and play, contemporary writing studies has both reintroduced the classical canons and accepted that these processes are recursive. These parallels illustrate how computer game theory can be enacted in a practical way in the composition classroom to better teach writing. Unfortunately, there have been few examples about the relationships between computer game theory and writing pedagogy. We argue that foremost among the reasons for this dearth are traditional distinctions between work/play and classroom/gamespace. We will not only offer an examination of these distinctions but propose a pedagogy of play based on the theory of emergent gaming (Juul, 2005). We propose a class in which students play the massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) World of Warcraft (WoW), researching and writing various self-determined documents related to the game, creating a learning feedback loop in which they “probe, hypothesize, reprobe, and rethink” (Gee, 2003, p. 90). A pedagogy of play emphasizes active participation, leading to the production of rhetorical texts for a gamespace community.

Research continues to demonstrate the various ways that contemporary computer games influence learning and literacy (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, 2006; Gee, 2003; Kirriemuir & McFarlane, 2004; McFarlane, Sparrowhawk, & Heald, 2002; Oblinger, 2004; Prensky, 2001; Sandford & Williamson, 2005; Selfe & Hawisher, 2007; Thomas and Brown, 2007). This research indicates that games are productive in helping students apply, synthesize, and think critically about what they learn through active and social participation. As a sophisticated and immediate interactive and conditional space of branching possibilities or what Jesper Juul (2005) argued is a “state machine” (p. 56), computer games can offer teaching methods that help students learn through embodied simulation. Because computers can sustain simulated game worlds, they can be used to enhance learning through application within this simulation.

In our experience, most writing teachers ask students to enact their learning through the production of text. However, in many writing classes, students have little access to the discourse communities that they are writing about or attempting to write within, so as David Bartholomae argued in “Inventing the University,” students’ writing still often takes on decontextualized meaning. Furthermore, although student writing could be connected with the material and social conditions of a community outside the classroom, students often have little influence on those conditions. Even in many service learning projects where students participate within varied communities, the writing produced is often only for the teacher (Cushman, 2002; Adler-Kassner, Crooks, & Watters, 1997; Mikolchak, 2006). However, an online computer game such as WoW offers multiple forums in which students produce texts that not only require active involvement but exhibit a direct effect on the gamespace community.

2. Barriers and possibilities

Despite the research on computer games as tools for learning (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, 2006), evidence of writing teachers using games as anything but objects of analysis is rare. Technology
access as well as unfamiliarity with computer games as a mode of learning (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, 2004) are probably major reasons for this. However, these issues are constant when any new technology is introduced into a learning environment, and these transitions have been discussed at length (Palmquist, Kiefer, Hartvigsen, & Goodlew, 1998). We feel the primary reasons computer games have not been more fully integrated in the writing classroom are because of traditional conceptions of work and play that highlight differences between classroom space and gamespace as binary opposites.

3. Work and play

Research in the fields of anthropology and history has not only examined work/play distinctions but maintained that the two were intertwined in earlier societies. Such early integration of games into society was not clearly demarcated as leisure time (Thomas, 1964). In post-industrialized societies, the instantiation of capitalism has led to a “crisis of leisure time” (Schor, 1992, p. 7) to the extent that games, play, and leisure are pastimes not only separated from work but not held in the same esteem. Such a separation creates barriers to introducing games into a curriculum.

Within academe, the work/play separation barrier can be quite strident from the perspectives of students and faculty. Students come to college with many expectations about academic rigor, and they often perceive games as outside these expectations. Charles Bernstein (2001) wrote, “while the games often mime the purposive behavior of accumulation/acquisition, they are played out in a context that stigmatizes them as wastes of time, purposelessness, idle, even degenerate” (p. 158). Years of children being told that homework must be finished before play perpetuates this distinction so that by the time the college-bound student arrives, games exist outside the seriousness of the classroom.

Teachers and administrators are also influenced by the work/play distinction. For example, Edward C. Smith’s comment in Scott Carlson’s (2003) Chronicle of Higher Education feature on James Gee was rather clear: “If you’re going to replace traditional methods of education with something new, you should replace it with something better. If this guy thinks that playing some goddamn video game is the equivalent of memorizing a Shakespeare soliloquy, that’s crazy” (n.p.). Given such animosity, it is a difficult to imagine much support from colleagues who are unfamiliar with the possibilities that games in the classroom afford.

In either case, the issue is a rhetorical one. It might be helpful for writing students and faculty to see that education and gameplay share similar histories. According to the historian and early game theorist Johan Huizinga (1955), “Meaning originally ‘leisure,’ [school] has now acquired precisely the opposite sense of systematic work and training, as civilization restricted the free disposal of the young man’s time more and more” (p. 148). School was considered “leisure” when only the upper classes could engage in it. After school became universalized enough to admit more working-class students, school became serious work. Historically, the playfulness of learning for the upper class was readily apparent in ancient Greece, where rhetoric has a history linked to play. Huizinga (1955) wrote of sophistry’s association with play: “The sophism proper is closely related to the riddle... Games, or what we might call jeux d’esprit, designed to catch people out by trick-questions, held an important place in Greek
conversation” (p. 148). The sophist’s playful question and answer technique is akin to Plato’s dialogues. Huizinga added:

According to Aristotle, Zeno of Elea was the first to write a dialogue in the interrogative form peculiar to the philosophers of Megara and the sophists. It had a technique calculated to catch their opponents. Plato is supposed to have followed Sophron in particular when composing his dialogues. Now this Sophron was a writer of farces... and Aristotle bluntly calls the dialogue a form of mimos, which itself is an off shoot of comedy. (p. 149)

Even though this history of rhetoric offers a basis from which teachers and students can see the arbitrariness of the work/play distinction, school and writing instruction have changed. Although one positive development in college missions is providing opportunities to the underprivileged, it has also been associated with the implicit goal of “disciplining bourgeois subjectivity” (Crowley, 1998, p. 34), which in turn neglects activities not associated with serious self-improvement. Although productive play can be educational, this association causes skepticism. Nevertheless, imagining the classroom as a type of gamespace can further erase the work/play distinction.

4. The classroom as a gamespace

Although the classroom, with its schedules and calls for assessment, seems far removed from a virtual gamespace, these spaces are not as distant as they might appear. Huizinga (1955) wrote that the play that occurs within a game is a “magic circle... quite consciously outside ‘ordinary’ life as being ‘not serious’... an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit,... proceed[ing] within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner” (pp. 11; 13). Later, Roger Caillois (2001) added, “In every case, the game’s domain is therefore a restricted, closed, protected universe: a pure space” (p. 7–8). However, like a gamespace, a classroom is a magic circle, a space bounded by terms and class periods and defined by its own set of classroom rules and learning objectives. With grades come the classroom’s own rewards for reaching objectives in the form of arbitrary points that have capital within the classroom space, but, at least to students, often seem to signify very little outside that space. Both spaces seem to be part of a magic circle that exists in a space clearly not a part of what usually gets termed the “real world” but in a pure space.

The computer, though, has made it possible for both games and classrooms to seep outside their spaces, blurring the boundaries between the magic circle and the “real world.” With the advent of computer-mediated-communication, classrooms can extend beyond the confines of a term with discussions and projects that initially began as an assignment persisting after the official class has ended. MMORPGs like WoW are also persistent spaces—play persists around the world even when one player is logged off. In a classroom based on WoW, students have the potential to not only always be playing but learning as well.

Playing WoW as part of a class can disrupt the materiality of gamespaces and classrooms, further disrupting the play/work binary. Although Roger Caillois (2001) described gamespaces as “unproductive—creating neither goods, nor wealth, nor new elements of any kind” (p. 10), Julian Dibbell (2006) and Edward Castronova (2003) have shown that the materiality
of online gamespaces such as **WoW** are often directly connected to the “real world” in the form of real goods and services that can be purchased to improve gameplay, creating a “real world” economic impact “of $20 billion each year” (Dibbell, 2006, p. 13). Similarly, in the writing course we are proposing, students would actually participate in the **WoW** community, producing textual goods and services for that community that would also serve as academic assignments. In this way, there is no reason why the objectives of a course could not be the objectives of a game—and that textual objectives achieved in both spaces could not also have “real world” significance.

A major difference, however, between the gamespace and most composition classrooms is that games are voluntary; as Caillois (2001) wrote, “a game which one would be forced to play would at once cease being play” (p. 6). Game players can take up a game or put it down at will, but the first-year writing course is rarely voluntary. The consequences of giving up on most games1 are not as costly as they would be for giving up on a first-year writing course.2 After all, games function more from the voluntary pursuit of enjoyment, which can become so intense that gamers become immersed. Within the field of game studies, some scholars consider immersion a fallacy because, just as with a movie or a book, most people do not completely suspend disbelief (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004). However, immersion is still partially possible. When playing a good game, it is possible to become immersed enough to temporarily lose track of time, forget surroundings, and desire to exist in the gamespace—even if logically this is not possible.

Ideally, writing teachers encourage students to become immersed in their writing and research, but is this possible? Immersion occurs because gamers learn as they play: solving puzzles, learning strategies, and meeting the challenges of the game while staying within the constraints of the game world. Learning not only makes play enjoyable, it is the whole basis for games. As Raph Koster (2005) wrote, “Games are puzzles to solve, just like everything else we encounter in life. They are on the same order as learning to drive a car, or picking up the mandolin, or learning your multiplication tables. We learn the underlying patterns... and file them away so that they can be run as needed” (p. 34). Yet just as all learning does not have to be fun to be productive, not all gameplay is necessarily fun. Koster (2005) emphasized, “Games grow boring when they fail to unfold new niceties in the puzzles they present” (p. 42) and we have mastered them to the point where we cannot learn anything new by playing them.

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1 Just as writing teachers emphasize collaboration within their classrooms, most gameplay in **WoW** involves working as a group of players. Gameplay in **WoW** involves different types of classes, each with its own specialized abilities, so a group with balanced abilities is necessary for much of the advanced gameplay. Just like in a classroom, not showing up for an event or not interacting can have negative social consequences. Many guilds in **WoW** have to deal with the fact that real life (RL) people come to rely on other RL people to play their part in the gamespace, and when they do not, friendships and reputations can be negatively impacted. However, although quitting the game does have negative social ramifications, it does not create the negative economic impact that quitting a college course can.

2 Although college is voluntary, college is mandatory if students want certain professional jobs (Cohen, 1998). Without professional jobs, students will likely only be qualified for jobs in what some economists term the secondary labor market: “industries in highly competitive markets, with low technological development, and offering nonunion wages and working conditions” (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1991, p. 9). Because of this economic reality, most college students do not consider college optional. College enrollment rates also continue to rise because it is becoming increasingly difficult to earn a living wage from most working class jobs (Cohen, 1998).
Thus, game designers work to design games that keep gamers engaged, or in what Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990) termed flow—“the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter” (p. 4). Game designers work to ensure that a game is neither too difficult nor too easy, and well-designed games have a feedback loop that keeps game objectives within this range. Tasks that are too difficult are replaced with ones players can more easily master; tasks that are too easy are replaced with more challenging ones. So, good games keep players within a type of zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1986). At the core of all immersive games is a secret that both good teachers and game designers know: learning is immersive if people are constantly challenged, striving to learn, but also feel capable of the task at hand.

Although introducing a game such as WoW into the writing classroom will not make the experience completely voluntary, both gamespace and classroom space allow opportunities to safely fail and offer the presence of reactive assistance to achieve objectives. Furthermore, if the writing assignment selection is voluntary and self-directed and the purpose of those assignments crosses the boundaries between work and play, students will not only become more immersed as they write beyond the classroom, but they will potentially learn writing strategies that place them in a state of flow.

5. Emergent learning

A transformation of the writing classroom from workspace to gamespace allows writing pedagogy to be informed by computer game theory. Two such theories are emergent and progression gaming. In a game of progression, the player follows a series of challenges that appear in a fixed, linear fashion. For instance, many textual adventures are games of progression. In a game of emergence, however, the player explores the gamespace, creating challenges which constantly change within the context of play (Juul, 2005). A game like chess is a game of emergence. Each game is different with players creating their own game experience. In a classroom based on a pedagogy of progression, one assignment or reading leads to the next with little variety or exploration. Students have little ownership of the assignments they do, so there is little to keep them immersed. With an emergent pedagogy, teachers introduce writing principles and strategies in order to open up a studio-like space for students to work through those strategies on their own. When gameplay such as WoW is added to an emergent pedagogy, students discover exigencies within the gamespace that need to be addressed through playing the game. They then determine the game audience these exigencies affect and compose documents that address those exigencies. Thus, this pedagogy creates a playful space that allows students to pursue their own discovery process and create their own challenging assignments.

Because students are immersed in an actual game community, their play within that community results in textual artifacts that the community will use, further deconstructing the “real world”/virtual world, work/play dichotomies. For instance, as a result of playing WoW, students could design forums, blogs, websites, and various gamespace guides. This feature of the emergent class also means that its predominant feature is not just analysis of a cultural artifact. Although some analysis can still serve an emergent pedagogy, this analysis is in service of helping students produce actively used, rhetorical texts within and for the game community.
Consequently, through playing and discussing the game in class, students are more apt to feel they have the expertise to move beyond what others have written because they are writing for those who are as invested in reading the material they produce.

Arguably, emergent pedagogies are nothing new to education\(^3\) or composition. A pedagogy in which the instructor provides guidance on student-directed assignments brings to mind many instantiations of the early writing process movement.\(^4\) What may be a closer parallel to the emergent pedagogy we propose is a textbook by Lynn Troyka and Jerrold Nudelman (1975), *Taking Action: Writing, Reading, Speaking, and Listening Through Simulation-Games*, based on Troyka’s doctoral dissertation. Troyka (1973) studied writing classes built on a simulation-gaming principle. Students were presented with a “brief situation statement which gave the setting and background of the [rhetorical] problem as well as the action and rules for the simulation” (as cited in Hillocks, 1986, p. 124) that students then addressed by writing various self-selected documents. In George Hillocks’ (1986) meta-analysis of composition approaches, *Research on Written Composition*, the difference in how much better the students who were in the emergent classroom did over the control group was large enough that Hillocks did not include it in his final meta-analysis homogeneity statistic so as not to skew the final results. Later simulation uses in the writing classroom including David Fisher’s “CMS-based Simulations in the Writing Classroom” (2007) and the *Ink* project (in this issue) by Sheridan and Hart-Davidson (2008) have provided robust possibilities for teaching writing in new ways. Despite the possibilities, simulation games struggle to make any larger impact on writing pedagogies at large simply because the process of simulation often imagines a fictitious audience rather than an actual, addressed audience (Ede & Lunsford, 1984). By contrast, in the emergent pedagogy using the MMORPG WoW we propose, players compose writing to an addressed audience.

\(^3\) Starting in the 1960s, simulation gaming was used in educational contexts in everything from economics to history. A statistical meta-analysis of these early studies found the same effects that Troyka found—greater cognitive learning and a more positive attitude towards the subject (VanSickle, 1986). Simulations have such close ties to education that a brief survey of so-called education games or edutainment reveals that most are often just simulations with sometimes rather rudimentary game mechanics. Given the costs and labor associated with the development of more complex games, it is understandable that more games are not developed for education.

\(^4\) Early writing process movement instruction in which students picked their own assignments, their own genres, and worked individually with the writing teacher is similar to the emergent pedagogy we are arguing for here except for a few differences. The first difference is that emergence requires that the participants are aware of and working within rhetorical situations that exist within an actual community outside the classroom. So much of the early process movement emphasized students’ individual discoveries through writing. However, in many ways, this writing was arhetorical because the writer was writing for the self. This partly led James Berlin (1982) to label the early process pedagogy practitioners as expressivists. The second difference is that in an emergent pedagogy, students need to work and write together reciprocally and not sequentially as so much of early process pedagogy suggests. In a sequential process, students would draft and then seek the next stage of the sequence, feedback from the instructor, before they would continue. In an emergent pedagogy, the process of research and writing is frontloaded so as to provide some rhetorical tools for students, but what they research, write, and revise is based on rhetorical constraints embedded within an outside community, thus extending student writing beyond the sequencing of assignments within the traditional classroom. We are aware that this is a truncated analysis of these distinctions with many assumptions embedded in how we represent the so-called process movement, but we wanted to at least address the apparent parallels.
6. An emergent approach to World of Warcraft

Blizzard Entertainment’s WoW debuted in 2004 and currently boasts ten million subscribers worldwide (Blizzard, 2008). It is rare to teach a class that does not have at least one student who actively plays WoW. However, popularity alone does not mean that the game automatically offers possibilities for teaching. We selected WoW for three primary reasons. First, because WoW is an objectives-based game, embedded within it are possibilities for emergent gameplay. Objectives-based games entreat directed-play that mirrors more persuasive rhetorical situations because, like a writer achieving a rhetorical goal, a player must assemble resources in order to achieve certain objectives. For example, if students wanted to write a guide for some feature of WoW, they would have to be purposeful in persuading readers how to achieve a designed game goal. There might be many avenues to achieving that goal, but the goal remains fixed. Secondly, WoW has an active community outside the gamespace that provides opportunities for writing. Websites such as Wowwiki and Wowhead allow participants to write strategy, lore, and loot guides for the game. These websites provide immediate opportunities for students to communicate with the game community. Third, WoW is a social game that requires player negotiation and cooperation. Such cooperation is not only important to gameplay but in the writing about and for the game because the community so actively communicates and collaborates outside of the gamespace.

WoW has a loose narrative structure tied to emergent gameplay mechanics. In the gamespace, players create a virtual avatar as one of eight character classes (Warrior, Warlock, Rogue, Shaman, Mage, Priest, Paladin or Druid). Each avatar class has certain abilities that other classes do not have, so players have to work together to achieve greater rewards in the game. However, unlike many other MMORPGs, most of the game can be played individually because of an elaborate questing system in which players complete individual objectives for rewards. Because the quests are not required to continue to progress in the game, WoW is a game of emergence rather than progression with enough variations in gameplay available to provide students with a number of possibilities in a writing class.

The description of an emergent pedagogy that follows is based on a studio model of composition in which, while playing the game, students work concurrently either individually or with their peers to create self-selected documents centered around and addressed to the WoW game community. These documents will be immediately published on the many online sites that WoW players regularly read.

6.1. Part 1: introduction

An introduction to the WoW course starts before students enter the classroom with advertising for the course. Ideally, the course should be clearly described in the course catalog or advertised through flyers and email. Students should be aware that they will not only be expected to play the game but will also write a substantial amount.

Second, the teacher should assess the students’ expertise with computers, their experience with the game, and the computers that they expect to play the game on. Students who have more experience with the game might write short documents describing for the rest of the class how to change certain settings or the user-interface within the game. Although
WoW has relatively low system requirements, this assignment can also help some students learn what system requirements mean and open up opportunities for writing in the course.

Third, students need to be given a working introduction to rhetoric and different research methods. Students should be introduced to rhetorical terminology (logos, ethos, pathos, kairos) and three traditions of inquiry (interpretative, quantitative, qualitative), along with how each is associated with audience and purpose. The game offers many potential activities for working with logos, ethos and pathos. For instance, on web posts appearing on the Blizzard/WoW forums, students can analyze how the community constructs ethos through listing accomplishments, pathos in how they refer to other players, and logos through using game statistics.

In these rhetorical introductions, students could also analyze how genre is part of the rhetorical situation. For example, students could examine the rhetorical constraints and affordances to posting on a forum or creating an entry in a wiki. These can be discussed as a class, allowing students to assemble their own sense of how to read genre rather than just following a prescriptive formula. More importantly, with such an introduction to genre, students gain flexibility in choosing venues when they begin writing about gameplay. Students could also write a rhetorical analysis of the genre they choose, analyzing why it is rhetorically effective in order to gain a more sophisticated rhetorical understanding of the genre.

Research traditions could be introduced using the game community. Although students should be introduced to traditional forms of textual research, they could also be introduced to the textual evidence within the publications, forums, wikis, and blogs of the game community. Similarly, students can learn about qualitative research—how to conduct and write about observations and interviews—through reading excerpts from ethnographies that explore massively multiplayer online gamespaces like T.L. Taylor’s *Play Between Worlds* (2006) or Julian Dibbell’s *Play Money* (2006). Finally, students can learn how to conduct and write about quantitative research through examining what is known as theorycraft within the WoW community—controlled and semi-controlled quantitative experiments of WoW game mechanics that are posted on the Blizzard forums and other websites. Students can learn basic statistics, the importance of a large sample size, and the basics of the research method through these experiences.

When students embark upon the emergent part of the class, they first write research proposals, detailing their methodologies and rationales. This allows students to design their own emergent research paths while helping instructors guide students from making novice mistakes. Although students cannot be expected to become expert researchers, they can be provided with introductory scaffolding so that they are familiar with different research traditions and rhetorical situations and will be better prepared to write within them later on in their academic and professional lives. This introduction also serves the purpose of easing students into an unfamiliar class by giving them some familiar scaffolding from which to begin exploring new options.

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5 Windows or Macintosh, 800 MHz Pentium III/933 MHz G4/G5; 512 MB RAM; 32 MB VRAM.
6.2. Part 2: emergence

Once these writing and research traditions have been introduced, students will begin playing WoW, looking for rhetorical exigencies that create opportunities for emergent learning. Here are a few examples of student-driven emergent projects.

Josh, an experienced WoW player and economics major, decides to write a strategy guide for one of the professions within the game. As such guides often fail to take into account the game’s economy in relation to different professions, Josh’s own interests prove purposeful. He decides on a quantitative research approach along with some textual research to provide evidence for this research gap. Because a certain number of pages need to be collaboratively composed in the class, he asks Brad, an economics major who is new to the game, to co-author a post at Wowwiki about a profession in the game, jewelcrafting. After doing a cost, production, and consumption analysis of jewelcrafting materials purchased in the in-game auction house, they create a hypothesis, test their hypothesis by selling various jewelcrafting items, and then write up the results for Wowwiki. Finally, they write reflective essays addressing the rhetorical and research choices they used.

Tiffany, who enrolled in the course because it was convenient and her roommate was taking it, knows very little about the game. Both she and her roommate Liz, an experienced WoW player, often participate in the social networking website Twitter. They decide to create a proposal for a Twitter-like website that tracks what certain players are up to in a game guild. Because so many quests are multipart, having a “what are you doing now?” type of website is beneficial for other players. They decide to take a qualitative approach and interview a number of Liz’s guildmates to generate ideas and find expertise in creating such a resource and also observe the Looking for Group (LFG) chat channel within the game. After doing this, they realize that they are unable to easily create such a resource. They decide instead to write a proposal to Blizzard that allows the current LFG chat channel to display all avatars who are on a particular quest within the same zone. Tiffany and Liz write a formal proposal using their qualitative and textual research. They also write reflective essays discussing their rhetorical and research choices.

Students might also decide that they want to create a class-wide guild, all starting from level one, seeing how far they can get within the term. They might create guild websites, strategy guides for lower-level content, and even systems of organization for making sure classmates get to run a particular instance or complete a quest. Thus, students approach the puzzles of the gamespace by attempting to solve them rhetorically.

6.3. Part 3: assessment

An important constraint students face in constructing rhetorically effective documents is that they need to fulfill the course objectives. It is vital that students not only have collaborative guidance from the teacher throughout but that students understand these objectives as they write. One structured option is for students to write a plan beforehand as to how they will meet the course objectives through their writing and playing tasks. However, this can partly defeat a truly emergent pedagogy in that organic and exigent writing tasks that appear through gameplay can be ignored because they are not part of a student’s plan. Students could also
write reflective essays explaining how their chosen projects demonstrated course objectives. The reflective essays would also create an opportunity for students to think critically about what and how they learned while playing WoW.

7. Conclusion

Emergent pedagogy highlights play as an important part of the writing process, intertwining work and play in ways that more productively highlight areas of the rhetorical canon that have often been underutilized within composition. For instance, gameplay becomes an important part of the invention process, helping students creatively discover problems and rhetorical solutions within the gamespace. As students play the game, they begin seeing it as “a system and a designed space” that opens up not only critique of the system but novel approaches to gameplay (Gee, 2003, p. 42). Furthermore, playing a MMORPG like WoW provides “not [only] specific knowledge of how to kill an endgame boss or negotiate passage through a dungeon, but how to respond to cues from other players, how to think ahead, and how to perform tasks in concert with others” (Thomas and Brown, 2007, p. 159), all important qualities for invention in a rhetorical situation. Taken together, these layers of invention open up possibilities of discovery rather than limit inquiry to one instructor’s expectation.

Furthermore, emergent pedagogy in WoW highlights delivery in ways seldom achieved in traditional classrooms by giving students access to the circulation of their writing. Students can almost immediately see the effects of their writing as it circulates throughout the game community, seeing how their writing is quoted on blogs and forums but also how it is implemented within the game itself. Emergent pedagogy also complicates traditional notions of audience as students will be more able to see how their writing circulates not through one culturally homogenous audience or even one distinct audience, but how their writing circulates through many divergent audiences simultaneously. Students will be better able to see how their “cultural products pass through a range of meanings and uses as they are taken up at various points in the social formation” (Trimbur, 2000, p. 196) of the WoW community.

We recognize that it is a daunting task to convince students and faculty that playing a computer game belongs in a college writing class. However, we would never contend that the mere playing of the game will make a student a better writer; instead, the process of learning through the game supported by rhetorically meaningful writing tasks will engage students in complex ways as they consider both academic and professional options for writing. The intention of such an emergent pedagogy of play when connected with writing tasks is that students will come to consider actual audiences, approaches, and genres even as they are shaped by the games they play.

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