Creating a Collaborative Online Resource for Integrating Videogames into the Composition Classroom

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Abstract: In fall 2012, I developed the first draft of *Videogames + Composition* on methods for integrating videogames into first year composition classrooms. By creating a taxonomy of methods and by reflecting on a collection of lesson plans, the website is designed to help instructors explore the range of possibilities for this technique. The ultimate goal, however, is to create a model for pedagogical collaboration networks. In this paper, I discuss both the content and building process of the site

I began developing *Composition + Videogames* (Thominet, 2012) last year as a resource for composition instructors who are looking to integrate videogames into their course design: (see Fig. 1). I came to the idea of creating this site through an initial interest in the pedagogical technique. After reading Gee's (2005) article, "Good Games and Good Learning," I was struck by how his theories could help in counteracting the generalized student apathy I noticed while teaching. However, I also believed that integrating videogames into my courses would be an initially difficult experiment and that it might meet with some departmental resistance, so I began to look for further information. As I searched the web, I ran into two distinct problems: 1) a lot had been written about why videogame integration could be a good idea, but very little existed to show exactly how it could be done, and 2) what little had been written about application was spread diffusely among many sites and it was written about idosycratically about what individual instructors had done with little reflection and no peer review on how the application could be improved to better meet the goals of effective pedagogical practice. It occurred to me how much was being wasted in these diffuse, scattered quests towards the same goal—in pedagogical circles, so much effort goes into continually rebuilding the wheel. Each instructor creates existing lessons anew (albeit with small variations) with each class design. What's worse, this diffusion of lesson planning can also restrict instructors from aspiring to more complex or novel methodologies for ones which have been more locally battletested.
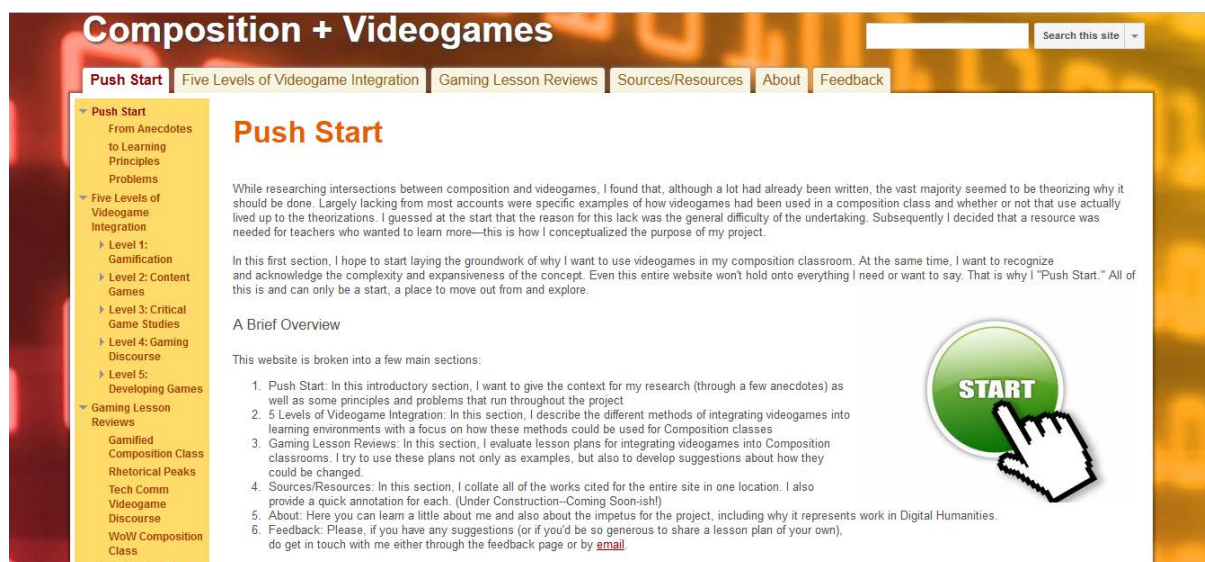

Fig 1: Website Homepage

Therefore, I wanted to create something that was publically available (online) and that could break down the available options in a way that was accessible. Additionally, my ideal end was the orientation of a pedagogical community or network of ongoing collaboration around the resource so that it could expand further. Ultimately, my design acts as a unique digital publication in a number of ways. First, it organizes the methods of videogame integration into composition classrooms in a way that has not been developed previously. Second, it collects and juxtaposes variously publically available examples of videogame integration while also reflecting within the framework on the strengths and weaknesses of each. In this way, I also turn scrutiny on my own sample lesson plans that were designed with my framework in mind. Third, the site is intended to reach out and create a participatory space for collaborative thinking.

The Website

Videogames + Composition is directed primarily at instructors who are already interested in the topic, but want to explore some ideas on how it can be done. To this end, the website is broken into 4 main sections (see Fig 2): an introductory background, a taxonomy of five methods of integration, a review of existing lesson plans, and a bibliography of further resources.
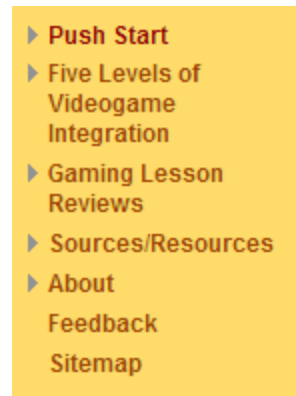
▸ Push Start
▸ Five Levels of Videogame Integration
▸ Gaming Lesson Reviews
▸ Sources/Resources
▸ About
  Feedback
  Sitemap

Fig 2: Website Navigation Bar

The primary framework for the analysis of methods and composition lessons in the project was James Paul Gee's learning principles. For the sake of simplicity, I turned to a shortened version of his published in "Good Games, the Human Mind, and Good Learning" (Gee 2007a). While, at first blush, this form of analysis might seem as a suggestion to judge the integration of games by a theory of integrating games, that is not the case. Gee (2007b) stated:

> I know that many people who have read this book take it to be an argument for using games in schools or other education settings. However that is not the argument I have tried to make in this book. I have first wanted to argue that good video games build into their very designs good learning principles and that we should use these principles, with or without games, in schools, workplaces, and other learning sites. Second, I have wanted to argue that when young people are interacting with video games--and popular cultural practices--they are learning, and learning in deep ways (p. 215)

In my commonsense extension of Gee's claims, my working hypothesis became that for videogame-integrated composition lessons to be successful, they would need to be gamic in nature. In other words, they would need to function primarily through the effective learning principles that Gee identified. So this became the root of the problem: how do we create a composition curriculum around videogames that keeps intact the beneficial learning opportunities offered by games?

In practice, this means that my goal is not simply to propagate composition projects that involve analyzing videogames as a replacement for other, more traditional texts. It also means that I am not interested in a simple application of videogame terms to existing pedagogical methods in composition studies. At the same time, I feel that it is unwise to reject, out of hand, any method that might add to the cogence and reach of the class, which is why, in the categorization of methodologies that follows, I will include the aforementioned pedagogical uses of videogames. However, what I found to be most important is that methods were used in concert with each other create a tightly interwoven lesson design.

A Brief Overview of the Methods

On the website, I create a taxonomy of methods of videogame integration. The organization of these methods is of my own design, but the concepts are derived from research into the topic. Ultimately, I developed the taxonomy by investigating how various scholars were talking about using games in classrooms and how instructors were implanting game integration (these authors are described in more depth on the website) and then by searching for similarities in theories and applications. This is to say that I did not create the methods themselves, but only identified and organized them in this way. While the website describes these methods specifically as ways of integrating videogames into a first year composition classroom, many of them could easily be expanded to address videogame integration in a variety of classroom settings.

Method 1: Gamification

> Gamification refers to the process of adding game elements to non-gaming activities. In practice, this typically means giving non-standard awards or evaluations in non-gaming environments. For example, a teacher might give a badge or a level to a student rather than a grade. The process is often more about creating a new conceptualization of the non-gaming environment, to effectively make it seem more enjoyable. (Thominet, 2012)

Many scholars have spoken about gamification (or creating gameful classrooms) as a means of defamiliarizing the classroom environment. Initially, this method shows some promise as a means of reorienting student expectations, and thereby combatting student apathy. Regardless, my impressions of gamification in the classroom are not terribly positive. Rather than opening up playfulness or even making use of the principles described by Gee, gamified classrooms may change little more than the words used to describe existing classroom practices. It is only when these terms introduce new practices that they can contribute constructively to student learning. For example, reorienting evaluation around particular achievements (such as developing an excellent thesis or making a thoughtful revision) and allowing students to choose among multiple semester-long quests (such as publishing a fleshed out and convincing argument in a publicly accessible location) in their own way and at their own pace, could create an atmosphere that encourages students to customize their experience to their own current skill level.

Method 2: Content Games

> The earliest way many of us were introduced to games in the classroom was through content games or "edutainment." My childhood memories are rife with Number Munchers, Oregon Trail and Reader Rabbit. As in these examples, this type of games purports to teach specific information. In most classroom environments, instructors first figure out what they need to teach (which is usually determined by written institutional expectations) and only then decide how they will teach it. Content games come into this process in the method step by reconfiguring old lesson plans into the form of interactive digital media. (Thominet, 2012)

Creating a content game for a composition class would not be easy. The most obvious answer would be to build a game around lower order composition concerns such as mechanics, grammar, and punctuation. Among others, I have been working towards this in developing interactive tutorials for my university's writing center. Many similar tutorials of varying quality already exist, but in my own designs, I've aimed at providing a structured lesson plan with multiple paths that helps build students from initial recall of information to more complex and freeform applications. Still, these tutorials fall short in two ways. First, as games, few tutorials actually develop any distinct level of learner playfulness or investment. Instead, they often reside in a more traditional conception of learning as information banking. I don't mean to discredit my own work or others in this way, as I do see value in these tutorials and in working to develop strategies for creating them, but they simply aren't full games yet. Second, and more important, in focusing on lower order concerns, most tutorials aren't actually teaching the true content of a composition class as it is currently conceptualized. If they desired to do this, they would instead have to focus on much more complex rhetorical situations that are difficult to capture effectively with the limited interactive features offered by most commercial tutorial builders. Once again, I have been trying to design around this problem by focusing some of our tutorial on more complex tasks and by looking at Peter Shea & Jim Grenier's (2012) work on Rhetsims, which are interactive texts used to help developmental writers create essays in response to a prompt prior to having the full range of writing capabilities to perform the task on their own.

Also of interest is *Rhetorical Peaks*, which was developed by graduate students by the University of Texas at Austin. It was discussed by Anthony Matteo (2007) and Matt King (2008). The primary concept of the game was to provide a situation in which students could analyze the rhetorical strategies of various non-player characters and subsequently write an argumentative piece situated within the context of the game. While my review of the game critiques its text-heavy format and its limited interactive capabilities (thus also limited its effectiveness as a game), *Rhetorical Peaks* does suggest how we might begin to pursue content games for composition courses.

Method 3: Critical Game Studies

> Critical Game Studies focuses on the close analysis of how games actually function. The goal is often to understand more about what makes the genre unique. As James Paul Gee said (2007a), "Next to nothing is good or bad for you in and of itself and all by itself. It all depends on how it is used and the context in which it is used. ... So good video games are good for your soul when you play them with thought, reflection and engagement with the world around you" (pg. 8). The "proper" way to play games is the same as the "proper" way to read a text or to watch a movie: namely,

to do so actively and critically. Videogames are particularly prone to "improper" play because of the level of involvement that of a player in creating the text, as well as the unrelenting flow of content. If time isn't set aside to think about the game and how it is acting within a particular space, important features/world-views/discourses can go by unnoticed (Thominet, 2012).

Critical Games Studies is likely the most common way that videogames are used in composition classrooms. Rather than building an analysis around a more traditional text (such as a book or article), instructors have used videogames as the focus of an analysis or argumentation assignment. By analyzing videogames, students might come to better understand a media that they tend to take for granted. Additionally, videogames can provide a complex rhetorical object for analysis because of because of their inconsistent form (which is due to the player interaction). This, of course, could be seen as either a positive or a negative feature of using games this way. Perhaps it could distract too much from the real purpose of the exercise (which is likely to develop students' strategies for approaching a school text critically), but it might also, in much the same way as other multimodal exercises have, improve the students' understanding of the wider applicability of such an analysis in their own lives.

However, like the previous examples, this method could easily lack that very gamic quality that is being sought after in the integration of videogames. Simply replacing one text with another does little to alter the underlying structure of the learning process. Certainly, it is possible that students will become more engaged with a videogame than with an 18th century novel, but actively reading a game is not engaging in the same way as playing it casually. It is my assumption that this method, if used alone, would not have a significantly different result in terms of student learning or engagement than what could be achieved with a more traditional assignment.

Method 4: Gaming Discourse

> The idea of communication taking place within discourse communities has been an essential strain of composition theory for some time. Charles Bazerman (2009) defined a discourse community as "a grouping of people who share common language norms, characteristics, patterns, or practices as a consequence of their ongoing communications and identification with each other." This is what I am talking about with the idea of a gaming discourse: namely that through active use of language within a situated context, students can develop knowledge of communication strategies as well as a meta-awareness of the ways in which that knowledge is structured by context (Thominet, 2012).

Speaking more plainly, this section highlighted a coalescence of two related methods. In the first, students would be given a game whose content was a simulation of a workplace or other nonacademic environment. In this case, the writing produced by these students would be connected to the professional practices of the simulated environment. In this way, it would hopefully overcome some of the transfer difficulties students face when moving between academic and nonacademic settings. This method is discussed at length by David Shaffer et al. (2011) in their exploration of epistemic games. In their study, they introduced first year students to an engineering simulation called Nephrotex. Their preliminary results showed that, by encouraging engagement, this simulation helped students to better grasp engineering content and to think more like an engineer. Extending this concept to composition classes, we can see how it might assist instructors in developing realistic environments for writing across the curriculum.

The other form of gaming discourse is much more closely tied to the traditional composition assignment. In connection with playing a commercial game, students would be assigned with creating texts for the vibrant player-communities that typically surround such games, texts such as reviews, faqs, focused strategy guides, or trouble shooting guides. Anne Richards and Adrienne Lamberti (2007) explored this method and developed a breakdown of different genres used by gamers, including: strategy guides, printed charts, electronic tutorials, and guild forums among others (pg. 13).

Notably, their list of genres included both texts that are created by the game developer and those created by the players. So, in thinking about the discourse community surrounding games and the possible exercises in a composition classroom, we can begin by looking at this range of genres as a way for students to write for an active discourse community.

There are, perhaps, as in all the previous examples, also some drawbacks to this method. Neither example explicitly requires the playful engagement desired (simulations can be tedious and writing for gaming discourse communities might seem as alien to some students as writing for academic journals). However, these two methods still can encourage an, at least, seemingly authentic participation in a discourse community—something that can become a struggle in traditional composition settings where students always already write for their instructors eyes only.

Method 5: Developing Games

> Developing games in a composition classroom can take several possible forms. It could focus on game design, programming, interactive fiction, or some combination of the above, though each of these is likely to cause a considerable amount of criticism within the field. For now, it should be enough to say that this is the least explored method of integrating videogames into the composition classroom because it is both difficult and largely divergent from traditional composition classroom activities (Thominet, 2012).

Developing games is exactly what it sounds like: directing students in the composition of videogames for various purposes. An instructor might do this in a movement toward a fully multimodal form or composition, or, perhaps, as a means to assist students in better understanding the makeup of videogames. (The second of these options could likely be connected to a project in critical game studies.) Regardless, as mentioned above, various options exist for integrating game development, each with potential technological difficulties and with varying focuses. The game design sub-method focuses primarily on exploring the functioning of games, irrespective of technology. It often takes place as a creation of non-digital games (board, card, etc.) to explore the underlying structure of these objects. Programming, the most highly technological of the three sub-methods, directly addresses the language of computer games. As such, its lesson content would reflect computer science more than traditional English composition, but knowledge of programming syntax is invaluable to considering the functioning of videogames as technology. Finally, interactive narratives try to toe the middle line. They focus less intently on either games or technology, but instead try to interrogate (in an approachable manner) the intersections between the two. Often this type of lesson can be carried out with the assistance of toolkits included in some commercial game releases.

Speaking in depth about the criticisms of this method here is likely unnecessary. As it does not seek to directly instruct students in English Language Composition, it can be seen as an unnecessary distraction (by untrained instructors) from the real purpose of the course. These objections might be overcome (while necessitating far greater depth of discussion) with appeals to multimodal composition, to critical thinking about contemporary texts, or even to the benefit of critical attention to syntax.

Lesson Reviews

At the heart of my attempt to make teaching with videogames a more approachable task for composition instructors, was the need to provide direct and varied examples of how this had been or could be attempted. However, once I began to explore past lesson plans, I found that, in many cases, they simply did not match up well with the learning principles for good videogame-based pedagogy. To this end, I structured my reviews into three sections: 1) an introductory listing of applicable learning principles and methodologies involved, 2) a summary and critique of the lesson, and 3) a review of the major strengths and weaknesses of the lesson. I derived this format from typical videogame reviews, which often begin with a statistical breakdown of the game (# of players, genre, etc.) and which often end with bulleted highlights.

For example, in a lesson plan I developed myself (in the limited examples I currently have, I pulled fairly evenly from my own mind and from publically posted lesson plans developed by others), I sought for a way to connect *L.A. Noire* (2011), with rhetorical analyses typically taught in composition classrooms. My "lesson preview" opens with a bullet pointed list: (see Fig. 3). The primary goal here is to layout information that will help instructors quickly evaluate the possibilities (and benefits) of plugging this type of lesson plan into the class.

Rhetoric and L.A. Noire

L.A. Noire is a videogame for Xbox, Playstation 3, and Windows that was released by Rockstar Games (the publisher famous for the *Grand Theft Auto* series). In *L.A. Noire,* players take the role of a police detective in 1947 as he investigates a series of crimes. While the game features an open world map that the players can move around and explore as they like, it also has a strong main plot that directs most of the action and progress. The primary gameplay is connected to the investigations. First a player moves around the crime scene, looking at objects and (hopefully) collecting clues. Then the player can interrogate witnesses, who are often trying to withhold the whole truth. In these interrogations, players are given three options for interaction, they can accept the statement as truth, they can doubt the statement, or they can openly challenge it as a lie. The choice among these three options is determined by the evidence that the player has found. Doubting a statement is useful when that statement can't directly be proven untrue. Often there are multiple witnesses to interrogate for each crime. Successfully completing the mission and solving the crime requires a certain amount of successful interrogation.

Fig. 3: Lesson Preview for L.A. Noire and Rhetoric

The actual lesson follows, laying out the intent and a general description of the assignment program. In this case, students would initially focus on the procedural aspects of the game's interrogation system (which is built in branching dialogue trees based on character knowledge and player choice) by exploring programming language structure and then applying its procedural aspects to an exercise in standard English (where dialogue is built through input and output). Next they would be tasked with building a rhetorical analysis of the game, combining attention to the procedural aspects of the game and the traditional rhetorical aspects (rhetorical triangle, stasis theory, etc.) of character interaction within the game. Finally, the use of this text could be further expanded with students creating argumentative pieces reviewing the game or comparing it to its apparent parentage (noire films or pulp detective novels). In this way, the videogame could provide the basis for a series of major assignments in a composition class while allowing for some play in the range the selection of writing goals.

Finally, the review ends with a succinct listing of my own perspective on the lesson, including strengths (such as a wide range of possible assignments) and weaknesses (such as the limited range of rhetorical interactions available in the game): (see Fig. 4). I see this section as a way to summarize pedagogical reflection in an accessible format.

Strengths of Lesson:
- Focus on creating a featuring rhetoric
- Wide range of writing assignments
- Can help students become actively involved in use of rhetoric

Weaknesses of Lesson:
- Game has high system requirements
- Interaction in actual game is fairly simplistic

Fig. 4: Summarized Strengths and Weaknesses

Conclusion

As I said at the start, this project is, as of yet, unfinished. While I have a workable draft of all the parts, I do not feel that it has reached the critical level of content to be the resource I want it to be. To begin with, the lesson plan reviews need to be greatly expanded. Ideally, this would occur through the solicitation of both successful and ineffective lesson plans from instructors across the nation. In order to achieve this, I will not only need to publicize the site to interested parties, but also to create a set of guidelines for submission. These might include the requirement that all instructors also provide a reflection of the effectiveness of their own lesson in addition to the information currently found in each review. This could be further supplemented by peer review and rating of the lessons. Furthermore, I would look to expand the links between the website and valuable outside resources. Finally, I've also

come to the conclusion that the site will need to be migrated to a more robust platform. This is for two reasons: 1) I would like to develop more intertextual connections through metadata tagging to subvert the current linear organization of the site, and 2) I need a platform that allows for a wider range of community interaction. Additional suggestions were offered by the audience at my presentation on this topic, which included: 1) adding a number of new resources on balancing the time requirements of institutional standards for the writing course and appropriate pedagogical integration of videogames and 2) creating centralized suggestions for typical assignments (such as a list of successful questions for student analyses of games).

Ultimately, it is my belief that the website, even in its current state, holds the seeds for a productive expansion of videogame integration in composition classrooms. But this isn't my final goal. Instead, I want to continue to explore the means for creating productive pedagogical networks across institutions. In creating these spaces for collaboration, we might be able to strike faster into the future of innovative pedagogical techniques. Certainly this is shooting high for my meager project, but, as Jane McGonigal (2010) said, great games have the possibility of an epic win.

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