

GAMES OF TRUTH AND IMAGINATION: WRITING A RHETORIC OF PLAYFUL
RESISTANCE

by

JOSHUA KING

(Under the Direction of Christy Desmet)

ABSTRACT

Using the structure of the game as a guiding metaphor and area of inquiry, the dissertation proposes a model for understanding rhetoric as an oscillating pattern of interpretation called “rhetorical play.” Rhetorical play represents the movement of power in an oscillating wave between the subject and the textual object. Readers cede power to texts as they become more involved and immersed, and readers reclaim power when they recognize texts as rhetorical objects. The dissertation studies games as disciplinary objects with great power to immerse and discipline their players and asserts that, although the act of rhetorical play is endemic to game-play, many video games try to suppress the player’s ability to reclaim power over the text. In spite of these disciplinary inclinations, video games can also be used to resist discipline, and the dissertation examines a set of independently-produced video games that foster resistance in their players. These forms of critical play hold great promise both for advancing feminist causes and for teaching students to engage with problematic sociocultural issues. Using game design as a model, the dissertation proposes that rhetorical play can be productively incorporated into the composition classroom as a form of social epistemic rhetoric, and it offers a set of pedagogical documents as models for using game design and rhetorical play in the writing course. Overall,

the dissertation maps theories of rhetoric and aesthetic response onto the oscillation model, outlines the power relations inherent in the rule constraints driving the oscillation, examines critical play as a means of subverting overreaching disciplinary power, and applies those theories to the writing classroom.

INDEX WORDS: Rhetoric, Composition, Games, Video games, Games studies, Literary theory, Pedagogy, Popular culture studies, Power, Resistance, Michel Foucault, Richard Lanham, Wolfgang Iser

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JOSHUA KING

BA, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2008

MA, University of Georgia, 2010

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JOSHUA KING

Major Professor:	Christy Desmet
Committee:	Michelle Ballif
	Christopher Eaket

Electronic Version Approved:

Suzanne Barbour
Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
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INTRODUCTION

THE MANY FACES OF GAMEPLAY

This dissertation, at its core, is about texts and power. It argues that texts create a power relationship between readers and writers and that neither position is inherently more powerful than the other. This dissertation establishes a fundamental model called “rhetorical play” built around the pattern of oscillation: textual power over the subject waxes and wanes in a continuous waveform. By examining the way this oscillation works, scholars and teachers can better understand the power exchanges that underlie textual interactions.

Throughout this dissertation, I will consider the textual performance as a kind of game. The metaphor of the game is extremely widespread in scholarly considerations of text and power. Wolfgang Iser, Richard Lanham, and Michel Foucault, the three theorists who have most influenced my work, all employ the metaphor of the game to express important ideas. For Iser, literary texts resemble games that provide readers with rules for performing the text. He calls the literary text “the game of the imagination” (108). Foucault recalled, at the end of his life, that his whole academic project had been “to discover how the human subject entered into games of truth, whether they be games of truth which take on the form of science or which refer to a scientific model, or games of truth like those that can be found in institutions or practices of control” (“Ethic” 112). Lanham uses the space between competitive games and whimsical play to represent the spectrum of human motivation (*Economics* 166). One could be motivated to compete, to exert power, to win, and Lanham aligns this perspective with the “game” end of the spectrum (167). Alternately, one could play just for fun, to indulge one’s imagination or aesthetic

sense, and Lanham calls this motivation “play” (168). He places the curiously-named “purpose” at the center, and writes that purpose is responsible for the “practical motives of everyday life” (167). All three scholars have different uses for the metaphor of the game, but something about it draws them nonetheless.

This dissertation uses the concept of gameplay to juxtapose two related ideas: rules and resistance. Like Iser, Foucault, and Lanham, I associate rules with restriction and behavior modification. After all, what are rules but agreed-upon constraints on action? The action constrained and driven by rules is play, an unstable, exploratory, hedonic impulse. Game rules and play behavior exert pressure on one another, and this productive tension is what drives the textual oscillation. The first chapter will be devoted to more accurately mapping the oscillation I have termed “rhetorical play.” As the second chapter points out, games are frightfully effective disciplinarians, rewarding compliance with aesthetic pleasure via the pleasures of power, acquisition, advancement, etc., but those same disciplinary requirements are constantly tested and subverted by players’ impulses to play and resist the tyranny of the rules. The third chapter will consider this resistance, especially in games designed to highlight and practice the paired acts of resistance and critique. Finally, the fourth chapter applies this power-bound oscillation to the composition classroom, casting the speaking/listening divide as a pedagogical concern.

Overall, this dissertation will seek to prove that:

1. Media operate as active, kairotic rhetorical games.
2. Rhetorical play is a sustained power relation between subject/s and textual object/s.
3. These power relations are structured according to the rules of discipline.
4. Resistance to discipline is not only possible but ethically necessary.
5. Resistance can be encouraged via ludic and pedagogical rule structures.

Jean-François Lyotard, like Iser, Lanham, and Foucault, found the metaphor of the game useful. Drawing on Wittgenstein's original use of the term, Lyotard applies the concept of "language games" to his exploration of legitimation and the construction of scientific knowledge in *The Postmodern Condition* (10). Lyotard will make occasional appearances throughout my work, but his compact summary of the broadest-scale Big Picture application of the language game to the study of human culture is worth quoting at length:

[The decision makers] allocate our lives for the growth of power. In matters of social justice and of scientific truth alike, the legitimation of that power is based on its optimizing the system's performance—efficiency. The application of this criterion to all our [language] games necessarily entails a certain level of terror, whether soft or hard: be operational (that is, commensurable) or disappear. (xxiv)

The issue could hardly be put more dramatically. Lyotard, certainly, was speaking from an unstable position in the late-seventies French academy—he later anticipates postmodernism rendering the humanities obsolete (41)—but the core issues of power, social justice, and the negotiation of truth remain urgent today. Lyotard describes postmodern knowledge as "not simply a tool of the authorities; it refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable. Its principle is not the expert's homology, but the inventor's paralogy" (xxv). This dissertation, then, is about the construction of postmodern knowledge via mediated power negotiations between subjects and objects, players and games.

I am interested in how text works on people and how people work through text. The purpose of rhetoric, to cast back to Aristotle's original definition, is "to see the available means of persuasion" (1.2.1), and George Kennedy notes that the word he translates as "to see," *theorēsai*, means "to be an observer of and to grasp the meaning or utility of" (37n34).

Throughout this dissertation, I hope to “grasp the meaning or utility of the available means of persuasion,” to combine Aristotle’s phrase with Kennedy’s gloss. Although the first chapter begins broadly with a general, game-inspired look at the rhetorical performance, the following chapters concern themselves specifically with games.

The first chapter, “Games of Imagination: A Phenomenological Model of Rhetorical Play,” proposes a play-inspired method of examining the moment-by-moment performance of media. Founded on Wolfgang Iser’s theories of phenomenology, the chapter suggests that media must be understood as an active process defined principally by an oscillating structure. Interacting with media, the chapter suggests, is fundamentally playful and can be successfully modeled using the structure of the game. As mentioned above, the game is a well-used metaphor for understanding text, and this chapter suggests a new take on the text or language game. Most importantly, however, the chapter introduces Foucault’s theory of power relations as a way of understanding rhetorical play. Rhetoric—in fact all textual interaction—is a power exchange between the subject and the textual object, and the chapter charts the movements of that oscillating power structure. The second and third chapter elaborate on parts of rhetorical play, and the fourth chapter will apply the model to the composition classroom. The first chapter, then, establishes a basic vocabulary and structure for the rest of the dissertation.

The second chapter, “Games of Truth: Video Games as Disciplinary Structures,” examines textual exertions of power on the rhetorical player. Using Foucault’s theory of discipline, the chapter argues that video games use reward and punishment to mold the game-player into a disciplined subject. The thoroughly disciplined subject engages the act of rhetorical play by principally ceding power to the disciplinary text, in other words, by immersing itself in textual power structures. The discursive object called “immersion” represents a limit case for

rhetorical play and the chapter examines the genealogy and disciplinary potential of fully immersive play. Our concept of immersion in texts and other virtual worlds has evolved from medieval practices of silent reading, the belief in a mind-body separation (exemplified by the medieval genre of the dream-vision), and the growth of private pleasure reading in the Renaissance. Historical ways of discussing and understanding immersion have persisted even in contemporary discourse. The chapter finds that total immersion—that is, a scenario in which the text has been granted total control of the process of play—corresponds strongly to what Foucault calls “domination,” the stultification of the normally-active power relationship (“Ethic” 114). Given the active pursuit of ever-more immersive experiences in contemporary game development, the chapter finds a strong need for caution in approaching and engaging in immersive experiences.

Where the second chapter examines the disciplinary rules that texts use to train players, the third chapter, “Serious Play: Rhetoric as Resistance in Feminist Game Design,” turns to the unstable, exploratory action of play as a means of resisting oppressive ludic experiences. Using feminist approaches and appropriations of Foucault’s theory, especially Judith Butler, the chapter studies a set of independent games that explore and foster the impulse to resist ludic discipline. These games subvert common disciplinary tropes from mainstream games by rewarding inaction or the decision to stop playing, by intentionally frustrating the player, and by deploying clever rhetorical tricks to redirect players’ attention. Chapter Three explores the potential of rebellious play and provides a counterpoint to the critical second chapter.

Chapter Four, “Playing the Classroom: Using Game Design to Teach Social Epistemic Rhetoric,” applies concepts from the other three chapters to the social epistemic composition classroom. While the second and third chapter focused primarily on consuming media, the final

chapter turns its attention to creating media and suggests that students can be taught to write with power and awareness of power relations by learning game designing and coding techniques. The chapter uses a set of pedagogical documents I created for an Advanced Composition course to discuss and analyze the intersections of practical composition pedagogy and the far more theoretical topics from chapters one, two, and three. The necessity of balance between speaking, listening, subjection, and resistance comes to the forefront in this chapter, and the pedagogical documents demonstrate one potential application of rhetorical play to the writing classroom. This chapter is accompanied by an appendix collecting and introducing the project prompts and other documents from Advanced Composition. Overall, the dissertation introduces a set of broad theoretical concerns in the first chapter, explores the ramifications and applications of those theories in the second and third chapters, and finally concludes by implementing the theories and suggested practices within a single test course.

This dissertation occupies an odd disciplinary position. I am trained as a composition theorist and literary scholar, but my work here—apart from Chapter Four—has more in common with rhetorical theory, games studies, and literary theory than composition theory or new historical literary criticism. My approach to media is defined by a concern for balance between listening and speaking. At the heart of the oscillating pattern that undergirds every part of this dissertation is the concept of balance. That balance can express itself as a tension, a negotiation, or a struggle, but navigating a middle way between consumption and production is this work's core conceit. Literary criticism and theory concern consumption: how texts are received, the effects they produce on their readers, and the cultural implications of that reception. Composition theory and rhetoric, on the other hand, are predominantly about producing texts. Compositionists produce pedagogical texts and guide students in the production of texts. Literary criticism listens

and evaluates while composition theory speaks and performs. These are not true binaries, of course. Literary critics produce texts of their own and consider authors as producers, and composition theorists consume academic articles and—perhaps more often—mountains of student papers. But as an always-inadequate generality, literary study concerns reading while composition theory concerns writing.

My work occupies a boundary space between composition studies, literary theory, and to a lesser extent, games studies. Appropriately for a dissertation predicated on oscillation between loci of power, my research oscillates between disciplines. I have chosen to place my scholarship in a liminal position because it is, by and large, unoccupied. The study of games as disciplinary texts has scarcely begun, and the study of *resistance* within games is almost unheard of. This dissertation's primary contribution to the fields of games studies, rhetorical theory, and composition theory is a strong focus on resistance as a counter-exertion of power and the ways games can both inhibit and encourage those counter-exertions. Using Foucault as the central theorist, I will argue that power is not only generative, it is a relationship of tension between dominant power and the resistant power of the individual subject. This relation expresses itself through individual interactions with text (including both creation and consumption) that reflect the interaction of the player with the game.

I realize that my focus on games will strike some readers as frivolous. Video games have a pronounced cultural reputation. They can elicit everything from the devotee's yelp of pleasure to the intellectual's scoff to the eye-roll of the political science major roped into a class about games. In the following section, I will demonstrate games' cultural, economic, and intellectual significance. For a medium that has existed for just sixty seven years, starting with the Cathode-

Ray Tube Amusement Device in 1948 at the *very* earliest (Goldsmith), video games have made enormous inroads into Western civilization.

Why Games?

Writing an apologia for the study of video games, knowing their too-often-justified cultural reputation as empty, violent indulgences, presents a challenge. The medium is fascinating: video games have opened new ways of interacting with texts and creating spur-of-the-moment performances using complex input devices. Yet the medium is still in its infancy, driven to a large extent by the demands of selling to a mass market and extracting as much money as possible from as many customers as possible. The economic impact of the games industry is, of course, one reason to study the medium. According to the Entertainment Software Association, the video game industry made around 22.4 billion dollars in 2014 (“2014 Sales, Demographic, and Usage Data” 14), a figure that rivals the American film industry’s 2014 revenues of 31.8 billion (“Filmed entertainment revenue”). In the U.S., around 155 million people play video games—nearly half of the population (“2014 Sales, Demographic, and Usage Data” 2). Clearly, video games are popular, and their popularity signals the medium’s impact on Western popular culture.

The iconography and media coverage of video games is hard to avoid. Popular movies are increasingly turning to games for subject matter and imagery: Adam Sandler’s upcoming *Pixels* relies on its audience’s familiarity with 80s gaming icons like Pac-Man, and the recent Disney animated feature *Wreck-It Ralph* took place entirely inside of arcade games both fictional and real. Even traditionally high-brow publications like *The New Yorker* regularly cover video games as serious media: the May 2015 issue included a long feature on upcoming space

simulator *No Man's Sky* (Khatchadourian). With the increasing prevalence of smartphones, games are infiltrating people's pockets more than ever before. Seven of the top ten grossing applications on the iPhone on the day of writing, for instance, are so-called free-to-play games (games that are free to download but offer optional purchases of in-game items and features) ("Apple App Store: Top Grossing"), and even traditionally console-based publishers like Nintendo and Konami are starting to migrate to mobile platforms like smartphones and tablets (Crecente, Klepek). Gaming devices are no longer standalone consoles or expensive gaming computers; most people carry a video game console with them already in the form of a cell phone.

Popularity is no excuse for a corpus of problematic texts, of course. Much of this dissertation is predicated on the flawed present state of video games. Nicholson Baker titled his *New Yorker* piece recounting his first experiences with mainstream gaming "Painkiller Deathstreak" for good reason. Baker's first realization is that "most [games] involve killing and dying." This is an understatement. Outside of a few genres (racing games, flight simulators, educational and puzzle games, etc.), the vast majority of video games are predicated on killing as a core mechanic. Out of the ESA's list of top-selling console games in 2014, seven of the top ten best-selling games included systems for killing opponents. The rest were sports games ("2014 Sales, Demographic, and Usage Data" 11). The centrality of violence and death to video games as a popular medium, however, should not discourage scholars from studying games but rather present a pressing problem that should be discussed and resisted. The growth of the "indie game scene" is a cause for hope and celebration. Independent games—produced by individuals or small teams for a fraction of the cost of a "big-budget" game—frequently explore mechanics and subject matters that mainstream games avoid. *Fez* is about a two-dimensional character blessed

with a magic fez that can rotate his world in three dimensions. The game is predicated on exploration and includes no killing. *Gone Home* is about a woman exploring her empty house to discover details of her family's domestic life. *Antichamber* is a surreal puzzle game that tasks the player with escaping a shifting labyrinth. Although many indie games do imitate the violence of their industry-made counterparts, many others press the medium of the video game into new territory. Chapter Three deals with a number of indie games in detail and finds hope in the efforts of individuals to speak their own experiences through the interactive medium of games.

Games allow players to inhabit other bodies, perform other lives, and imagine radically different modes of existence; taking them seriously as a medium can lend a cultural legitimacy that can, in turn, expand the acceptable boundaries of subject matter beyond violence and conquest. Further, the disciplinary mechanics of video games—discussed at length in Chapter Two—provide ample reason to study how subjects interact with these rhetorical objects. Games work differently than books, films, or television. These differences need an extended and detailed examination in order to determine the risks and potential within the medium. Games studies as a discipline has been making such examinations for several decades, and this dissertation engages in the same investigations.

The video game industry is an economic powerhouse, an increasingly prevalent cultural force, and a source of ethical questions and problems. But video games also hold a great deal of rhetorical and cultural promise. Studying this relatively new medium's mechanics and impact on rhetorical power relations is crucial for scholars interested in learning how games can be responsibly applied to the classroom, as well as scholars examining how different media impact the human subject. Games also excel in involving the player. Video games especially are active performances: players guide the moment-to-moment creation of the text by manipulating the

game controllers. This input can be productively imagined as a sort of “speech,” meaning that games are combinations of ludic speaking and listening.

Listening and Speaking

Listening and game rules are inherently linked. To play a game, one must learn the rules by listening and conforming to the performances they require. Speaking and playing, on the other hand, are energetic procedures that exist within and press against established rule boundaries. Game and play are two halves of a whole, two poles between which the act of rhetorical play oscillates. Similarly, speaking and listening are two poles on a single axis of discursive power. When I first approached Foucault, I assumed that speech was power, and to a certain extent it is—but it is reliant on another function for its power. Speech dictates the subject, but speech is powerless without a recipient, without a listener. The listener sits in judgment of the speaker, absorbing, true, but also surveilling. Frances Bartkowski’s feminist critique of Foucault revolves around Foucault’s privileging of the ear:

In the *History of Sexuality* it is the receptive ear that structures and sifts what will enter the domain of the axis of power-knowledge-pleasure. But the ear is an organ dependent on the presence of an other’s mouth to do its work. The receptive locus of power once again speaks of and for itself about that which is given no voice—resistance. *By overlooking the mouth (who has spoken?) that produces the ‘truth’ of confession, we get yet another patriarchal history of sexuality, which may know itself as such but gives no voice to its ‘other half.’* (44-45, emphasis added)

Discipline and Punish also privileges the consumer, though *Discipline and Punish* relies more on visual surveillance than on the analyst’s listening ear. In both cases, power regulates by

consuming and judging the speaker's verbal or visual products. As a result, Foucault spends far less time considering the voices of resistance than the ears of the institutions that repress them (Bartkowski 45). As a teacher, I occupy a position of privilege in the classroom. When I speak, my students (generally) listen. Surely, at least pedagogically, my power results from my speech. Bartkowski and other feminist critics would disagree. My pedagogical power actually comes from my authority to listen, to read, and to judge, not from the power of my speech or writing. Just so, the locus of my masculine privilege comes from my ability to watch and listen, and from the culture that provides a never-ending buffet of things it thinks I will enjoy watching and listening to. The financial power held by my demographic ensures that the buffet of things to watch, read, listen to, and play stays long and ever-stocked. As a result, Bartkowski writes, "both the body and the words of women become the property of the discourse of power and sexuality, sanctioning the activity, both sex and confession, which is always privatized. Knowledge is in the possession of the listeners; it is produced through voyeurism and sanctioned eavesdropping" (46). Bartkowski might revise Bacon's phrase to "the acquisition of knowledge creates power."

And yet, a great deal of feminist literature revolves around restoring power to oppressed subjects by giving them voices. That is the entire point of Anna Anthropy's feminist game design tract *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters*. Women, LGBT people, and people of color are underrepresented in the games industry, so more people need to make more games in their own voices (Ch. 1). On the surface, that exhortation might seem to play into the patriarchal institutions of listening: the church, psychologists and analysts, surveillance bodies, etc. At first, this seems counterintuitive. What, the reader might ask, about phallogocentrism? Much feminist scholarship critiques a masculinist discourse predicated on logos, the word, the creation of text bearing the symbolic power of the patriarchal phallus. But in Bartkowski's perspective,

patriarchal power also resides in the act of reception and evaluation, suggesting that speech can be simultaneously subjugated and empowered. Speech exerts power, of course, but not all speech. Listening, likewise, is a position of privilege, but not *all* listening. When Bartkowski writes that “Those who listen have the power... And the subject... is not only the one who speaks, but also the one subjected,” she does so within the context of “specifically localized” speaking and listening (45). The power inherent in speech and listening varies based on context.

There are, then, at least four broad types of creation and reception. Hearing information from a position of institutional power might more clearly be termed “evaluating,” since the reception carries with it the possibility of retribution or reward. Teachers, commanders, and managers (*DP* 140) all evaluate subjects’ performances; these evaluations determine how well the performances conform to set disciplinary standards. As Foucault writes in *Discipline and Punish*, “The meticulousness of the regulations, the fussiness of the inspections, the supervision of the smallest fragments of life and of the body will soon provide, in the school, the barracks, the hospital or the workshop, a laicized content, an economic of technical rationality for this mystical calculus of the infinitesimal and the infinite” (140). Without institutional authority, however, the act of listening stays simply “receiving.” Students receive a paper prompt; soldiers receive orders.

On the other hand, one can speak, write, or otherwise create from a position of institutional power, and I call this “coding” as a reminder that speech from a position of institutional authority creates rule structures that demand some sort of passive or active response. Speaking with power, or coding, establishes, reifies, or underlines a game of truth. Speaking without institutional authority is the quadrant that Foucault neglects, according to Bartkowski (44). This quadrant, which one might call “performing,” is the home of game players, doctors’

patients, and penitents in the confessional. One performs within existing rule structures, and performance is always under threat of evaluation. In reality, then, speaking and listening are a power relationship.

Table 1: Terms for empowered and un-empowered consumption and creation.

	Consuming	Creating
Un-empowered	Receiving	Performing
Empowered	Evaluating	Coding

As an illustration of these parallel but separate acts, consider the stereotypical *Dungeons and Dragons* game. A single Dungeon Master sits at the head of a table separated from the players by a decorative screen. Behind the screen, the Dungeon Master can consult her notes for the session, roll dice, and check rules or tables, all without fear of the players observing. The players, who each controls a single character, sit around the table. They might have their character sheets, some dice for their rolls, and perhaps copies of the *D&D Player's Guide* for their own reference. The player and the Dungeon Master are all capable of speaking and listening, reading and writing. But their relation to those acts is determined by their relation to the existing institutional rules for the situation. When the Dungeon Master speaks, she dictates the events and outcomes of the game. If she says that a dragon appears before the party, then in game terms, it appears, and the players must accept its appearance. The Dungeon Master codes the game. When responding to the Dungeon Master's rule-empowered speech, players must

receive the rules and, theoretically, abide by them. In response to the Dungeon Master's coding, the players must perform. Their performance, whether it involves fighting the dragon, running, or arguing with the Dungeon Master, is prompted and coded by the Dungeon Master's speech. Players' performances take the form of spoken descriptions ("My character draws his sword"), and the Dungeon Master must then evaluate their efficacy. She might evaluate based on strict game definitions ("You rolled a two; that's not enough to hit the dragon.") or by her own logic ("You can't draw your sword; you lost it to those bandits in the forest"), but her evaluations exert power over the players. In this simple example, the players and the Dungeon Master have each listened and spoken, but their acts of consumption and creation have had different effects based on their proximity to institutional authority.

Most *Dungeons and Dragons* sessions work a bit differently than this example, however. Players often contradict the Dungeon Master, argue with one another, and attempt to bargain or contest the DM's adjudications. In other words, players frequently resist the DM's power. Players can use the game's existing rules to correct the DM or find other clever ways to subvert the DM's authority. Some players will intentionally act against the DM's wishes: slaying the benevolent king instead of claiming the reward he offered, then taking both the reward and the kingdom. Other players find loopholes in the rules or argue for additional "house rules" more favorable to their desires. Power relationships are not as simple as the possessors or recipients of authority, and all actors within a situation might rotate through the four types of creation and consumption within a short time. The Dungeon Master, for instance, performs for the evaluation of her players all the time—if her game, storyline, or leadership style fails to live up to players' expectations, they could start their own game with another DM, or simply stop playing her game. All this is to say that power relationships are complicated, oscillating exchanges of power and

language and that although institutionally authorized parties do have the power to establish and enforce rules, those subjected to those rules can still resist and, in many cases, interrupt existing rule structures by implementing their own. Foucault's career affirmed that power exists not as a simple hierarchical "flow" of power from the state to the citizen but rather as a hyper-complex "network of relationships of power" ("Ethic" 4). So the terms "empowered" and "un-empowered," likewise "possessing institutional authority" and "lacking institutional authority" are oversimplifications. They denote momentary positions or tendencies within a specific relation or site within the web of power relations.

My distinction between types of listening is new only in the sense that it maps power relations onto particular kinds of speaking, writing, listening, and reading. Krista Ratcliffe's "Rhetorical Listening: A Trope for Interpretive Invention and a 'Code of Cross-Cultural Conduct'" works to return listening to a place of prominence in composition and rhetoric. The article emphasizes the differences between speaking and listening, though from her comments later in the piece, "listening" is not necessarily solely aural: "sometimes it goes by another name: reading, as when we read for tone, rhythm, voice, silence and a plethora of other elements associated with a h(ear)ring metaphor" (202). Ratcliffe is interested, primarily, in applying rhetorical listening techniques to becoming more sensitive to "discursive intersections of gender and race/ethnicity" (196) that, as a white woman, she sometimes has trouble seeing. She puts forward "rhetorical listening" as a more ethical mode of attending to another's words; it is "an ethical responsibility to argue for what we deem fair and just while simultaneously questioning that which we deem fair and just" (203). At the same time that rhetorical listening involves argument, however, it also involves a surrender to discourse. Ratcliffe suggests that while her primary aim is to understand (itself a potentially problematic goal, given the issues of

assimilation and egocentric interpretation inherent in understanding the other), she really wants to under-stand, as in, to stand beneath: “Standing under discourses means letting discourses wash over, through, and around us and then letting them lie there to inform our politics and ethics” (205). The liquid associations resonate with Foucault’s “Discourse on Language,” which opens with his wish “to allow [him]self to be borne along, within it, and by it, a happy wreck” (216), though Foucault uses the voice of “Inclination” to present a seductive failure to discern discourse.

Ratcliffe appears to propose two different forms of listening, one intentionally passive (standing under), the other active and critical (rhetorical listening as “a trope for interpretive invention” (195)) under the same banner term. After all, the passive listening involved with “standing under” the waterfall of discourse is intended to prevent interpretive violence against the discourse to which one listens. If one “stands under” discourses and “let[s] them lie there” (205), one might avoid the temptation to bottle those discourses and take them home as trophies or new toys. On the other hand, however, Ratcliffe’s desire to make rhetorical listening “a trope for interpretive invention” (195) seems to *necessitate* the bottling of the discourse (or, to swim away from the aquatic metaphors, the violence of assimilating the words of the other into one’s own words). After all, invention is active, creative, and interpretation requires the violence of translation and assimilation. Ratcliffe herself parses “interpretive invention” as “a way of making meaning with/in language” (202). How can listening—even rhetorical listening—simultaneously be capable of passive acceptance and active meaning-making?

Ratcliffe’s demonstration of rhetorical listening, in which she “listens to” a student’s proposal of a rhetorical listening project, is rife with reinterpretations and presumptions. She assumes that the student wrote to her because the student needed her to make a connection the

student herself could not: “she feels the need for someone else to put it into perspective; she has heard the commonalities and differences, but she cannot see the connections clearly” (218). My interpretation of the student’s query is different: I see the student’s hesitant approach to her professor *not* as a request for clarity or enlightenment but rather as a request for permission from the possessor of institutional authority. The student knew very well what she wanted to write, but she needed to test the waters with the woman who would be grading her work. My interpretation is no more justified or ethical than Ratcliffe’s, of course. In fact, I have tailored my interpretation of the student’s letter in accordance with this dissertation’s Foucauldian background. Both Ratcliffe and I *choose* when we listen to under-stand (as she describes reading autoethnographies (211)) and when we “interpretively invent” using a text as a template.

In other words, rhetorical listening oscillates. It oscillates between listening with power and listening while consciously abdicating power. Rhetorical listening, then, is actually a pair of actions, what I above term “receiving” and “evaluating.” When one listens passively, standing under the discourse and feeling its flow without needing to bottle or claim it, one receives. When one critiques, weighs, translates, or interprets, one evaluates. Interpretive violence is a fact of intellectual life. I have conveyed the sense of a different article than the one Ratcliffe actually wrote; even if my understanding of her text was perfect, my reduction and implementation would be flawed simply by nature of the translations involved. When words change, things change. But the inevitability of interpretive violence should spur one *not* to avoid interpretation but to approach it carefully, respectfully, and ethically. To quote Ratcliffe, the goal should be a kind of listening that “may help us invent, interpret, and ultimately judge differently in that perhaps we can hear things we cannot see. In this more inclusive logos lies a potential for personal and social justice” (203).

And now, after highlighting the ethics of listening and the importance of careful, inclusive interpretation, I will summarize a huge number of disparate texts, emphasizing only that which is useful to my project and ignoring all that is not. In other words:

The Literature Review

Games Studies

Games *studies* bears very little resemblance to game *theory*. Game theory is a heavily mathematical discipline that uses games to predict the behaviors of consumers and voters, and it posits that games are mathematically definable ways to evaluate human behavior. According to Kevin Leyton-Brown and Yoav Shoham's *Essentials of Game Theory*, "Game theory is the mathematical study of interaction among independent, self-interested agents. It is studied primarily by mathematicians and economists, microeconomics being its main initial application area" (xv). Games *studies*, on the other hand, has a greater interest in games as culturally significant media. Although my work crosses over with games studies, I do not consider myself primarily a games studies scholar. This dissertation is informed more by literary and rhetorical theory than games studies, and there is a whole constellation of games studies issues that I am sidestepping by working on the "micro" level with discipline and rhetorical meaning. The virtue of an interdisciplinary field is that it encourages multiple perspectives, and I work here to expand the rhetorical and Foucauldian perspectives on games. Games studies scholars frequently work on larger scales than this dissertation tends to: considering the role of particular game mechanics in the elaboration of hours-long narratives, for example. Although I will have cause to mention particular mechanics or narrative beats, my primary interest is in the moment-by-moment creation of rhetorical meaning. As such, my research will essentially be a rhetorical

consideration of games as texts, rather than a games studies consideration of games as narratives or systems. In any case, the field of games studies *has* informed my thinking about games, especially in the works of the following authors.

The first book in the field of games studies, as it's recognized today, was Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*, published in 1938. In it, Huizinga makes the claim that “All play means something” (1), a statement made shocking by its elegant simplicity. After all, he points out, even puppies play, and puppy games have rules: “they keep to the rule that you shall not bite, or not bite hard, your brother's ear” (1). The project of his book was ambitious: “to show that genuine, pure play is one of the main bases of civilization” (5). Scholars today have less ambitious claims, but the field has taken Huizinga's statement as an assumed truth: “all play means something” (1).

Espen Aarseth's *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* has a good deal of overlap with my project. Aarseth's book “focuses on the mechanical organization of the text, by positing the intricacies of the medium as an integral part of the literary exchange” and on “the consumer, or user, of the text, as a more integrated figure than even the reader-response theorists would claim” (1). A cybertext, for Aarseth, is any text (not necessarily digital) that offers the reader the choice of multiple paths through the text, much like the *I Ching* or text adventure games like *Zork* (9, 101). Aarseth engages with reader-response criticism and other schools of literary thought, often contentiously, and challenges them to account for a new generation of digital and non-linear texts (14-17). My work will occasionally have reason to disagree with Aarseth, but his work pioneered a new critical lens for games and literature.

Jesper Juul's book *Half-Real* considers video games as just that: half-real, divided between “real rules and fictional worlds” (1). The rules and worlds give one another meaning.

Rules become meaningful when anchored in the context of fictional environments, for instance (18). The trouble with this reliance on fictional context and real rules fitting one another is that it leads to what Juul calls “incoherence,” or the disjunction between a realistically-drawn war zone and a hero who simply springs back to life after being shot to death or “in-game characters [who] talk about the game controllers that the player is using” (6). Juul minimizes the importance of such incoherence, saying essentially that the player “may not experience this as such since the rules of the game can provide a sense of direction even when the fictional world has little credibility” (6). My research runs with the idea of incoherence and theorizes that, far from being undesirable noise to be filtered out by more immersive environments or more engaging rule sets, the inconsistencies that emerge during the course of gameplay hold a great deal of potential for both the aesthetic experience and the power relation between player and game.

Another term resembling Juul’s concept of “inconsistency” gained currency in internet discussions of games, likely owing to its delicious pretension: ludonarrative dissonance. Its creator, Clint Hocking, is a creative director who has worked for some of the most famous game publishers in the world: Ubisoft, LucasArts, and Valve (“Biography”). Hocking’s now-famous blog post “Ludonarrative Dissonance in Bioshock” argued that the game “seems to suffer from a powerful dissonance between what it is about as a game, and what it is about as a story” (Hocking). *Bioshock*, Hocking says, privileges one set of values in its gameplay (“Randian rational self-interest”) and another in its narrative (“help Atlas and you will progress”) (Hocking). These two incompatible values, and the fact that the player cannot choose to support one and not the other, lead Hocking to condemn the game because it “openly mocks us for having willfully suspended our disbelief in order to enjoy it” (n.pag.). While Hocking is right that *Bioshock*’s twist ending feels cheap (the game commands the player to choose but removes

the ability to do so), the automatic assumption that ludonarrative dissonance necessarily *detracts* from a game feels simplistic to me. Dissonance is powerful, and literary works have relied on it to generate meaning for centuries. The condemnation of ludonarrative dissonance assumes that games must always be immersive, that the cardinal sin of game design is to remove the player from the game's ludonarrative flow. My dissertation contests this assumption.

Graeme Kirkpatrick's *Aesthetic Theory and the Video Game*, on the other hand, acknowledges and incorporates the notion of dissonance into his aesthetic approach to video games. Kirkpatrick, working from within games-studies, argues broadly that games must be approached primarily as aesthetic objects that use rules as aesthetic forms to guide the player's experience and performance of the text (1). As a result, Kirkpatrick toys very literally with formalism and concludes, perhaps unfortunately, "that video games are profoundly ambivalent for cultural politics... Choosing to play video games still has the power to annoy and to cause controversy and can be a form of deviancy or norm-subversion. But this choice remains purely gestural" (10). Chapters Three and Four of this dissertation counter this claim by arguing that consuming games allows the player to practice subverting and resisting discipline and that *producing* games constitutes an act of rebellious speech that can, in turn, help other players practice new ways of seeing. Perhaps strangely, Kirkpatrick asserts the importance—even the centrality—of dissonance and indeterminacy to understanding video games: "we find in video games an excess of form that overrides and negates meaning even as it repeatedly invokes it" (9). Yet this dissonance is taken not as an entry for resistance or political significance, but rather as yet another locus of aesthetic significance and another reason to consider form as the determining feature of the play experience. In other words, Kirkpatrick's concerns are predominantly aesthetic rather than rhetorical. His interest is in the formation of an aesthetic

experience, although his interest in how the game “shapes space to create the possibility of meaning only to stop short of actually providing it” (1-2) does cross over in useful ways with my work on the oscillations between determinacy and indeterminacy in the creation of rhetorical meaning.

Brian Sutton-Smith’s *The Ambiguity of Play* argues that the entire concept of play is indeterminate. The book’s project is to decipher what *play* actually means, and his conclusion (as one would expect, given the title) is that play is ambiguous and almost impossible to define (3). Although he finds it impossible to discern a single definition for “play,” he pursues the Foucauldian project of studying play as a discursive object and finds that scholars tend to talk about play in seven “rhetorics of play”: “The rhetoric of play as progress... play as fate... play as power... play as identity... play as the imaginary... the rhetoric of the self... [and] The rhetoric of play as frivolous” (9-11). But even those categories, Sutton-Smith admits, are ambiguous: “It is just as possible that the rhetorics, when explicated, will be revealed to be themselves a deceptive gloss over other, far more fundamental cultural disagreements” (9). *The Ambiguity of Play* is, at its core, a cultural study of how Western culture envisions and implements these complex rhetorics of play. To reduce the book to a single question: what do we mean when we talk about play? Sutton-Smith’s project is a culture-spanning meta-analysis of a whole series of genealogies of play and, as such, it has served my research more as background and context and less as chapter-relevant commentary. Sutton-Smith may not work specifically with play as a power relation or a mode of resistance,¹ but he underscores the status of play as an amorphous cultural cornerstone.

¹ His “rhetoric of play as power” (10) concerns literal simulations of conquest: “usually applied to sports, athletics, and contests” (10), different from the social and textual power discussed in this dissertation.

A few games studies scholars have written articles briefly incorporating Foucault. “Wii Has Never Been Modern,” by Brad Millington, uses Foucault’s theory of the “conduct of conduct” to contemplate the fitness game *Wii Fit* as a disciplinary object (621), but Millington does not generalize his study or spend a great deal of time with Foucault’s theory of discipline. Gerald Voorhees applies Foucault’s ideas of generative power and agency to *Halo 2*, finding that the game “offers players frames of acceptance and rejection, as well as a healthy dose of ambivalence—attitudes that make sense within the context the game was circulated [sic]” (Voorhees). Voorhees’ is a fairly limited study, applying Foucault to only one game. No full length studies have considered the medium of the video game as a disciplinary structure, let alone the possibility of resistance to those disciplinary structures.

Ken McAllister’s *Game Work: Language, Power, and Computer Game Culture* bears perhaps the greatest similarity to my interest in rhetoric, games, and power. McAllister states early on that “The ultimate goal of gamework analyses is to help scholars actively engage the rhetoric and dialectic of computer games with a clearer understanding of how the computer game complex has effected individual, communal, and social transformation in the past” (xi). McAllister is particularly interested in the concept of dialectic, “an existential condition in which struggle and change are the only constants and to which all materiality is subject” (29). Although ideological struggle is crucial to McAllister’s understanding of the work that games do on economic, psychophysiological, mass cultural, mass media, and instructional levels (50), McAllister conceives of ideological struggle on a much broader scale than this dissertation does. My work’s basis in Foucault (a theorist *Game Work*, perhaps strangely, never cites) narrows my focus to a nearly microscopic level. I am interested in the moment-by-moment processes of

rhetorical play whereas McAllister expresses greater interest in macro-level topics like games' impact on the economy, the rhetoric of game development, and the work of game reviews.

Game Work sets out a broad theoretical foundation for understanding the complex medium of video games based primarily on Kenneth Burke's dramatic pentad. McAllister's categories are the agent, manifestation, influence, function, and transformative locale. While McAllister admits that his "grammar of gamework" (27) is "modeled on Kenneth Burke's concept of a 'grammar'" (1), the latter half of *Game Work* practices applying McAllister's grammar to the scenes of game development, game reviews, and the game *Black & White* (71, 118, 140).

Although McAllister's book, published in 2004, does discuss rhetoric and power, just as this dissertation does, his study bears little resemblance to mine. Where McAllister wants to study the broad economic impacts of games, I examine momentary exertions of power, and where McAllister spends his time with games as ends to themselves, I am interested in the intersection of games, construed broadly, and rhetorical power.

Games Studies and Education

Two of the most significant games studies figures being used in English departments today are Ian Bogost and James Gee. Bogost's book *Unit Operations* set out a new critical vocabulary for talking about video games using the "unit operation" (a term from the engineering fields) that would serve in place of the systems-focused treatments of games often found in games studies scholarship (3-4). *How to Do Things with Videogames* provided a functional reading of games, treating video games as neither the saviors nor destroyers of digital culture, but rather as tools, artifacts that *do things* (7) like "Promotion" and "Titillation" (two chapter

titles from the book) (64, 103). James Gee's *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy* is one of the most influential books on games and education. Gee, an enthusiastic newcomer to the medium of digital games, studies how games teach players, and the kinds of knowledge and learning that are required for mainstream video games. He finds a long list of lessons that games can teach, lessons like the “Situated Meaning Principle: The meanings of signs... are situated in embodied experience. Meanings are not general or decontextualized. Whatever generality meanings come to have is discovered bottom up via embodied experiences” (105). Gee covers a great deal of ground, and there are potentially dozens of dissertations waiting to be unearthed and proven among his thirty-some principles of learning that games can teach us.

Recent articles on the possible applications of games to the writing classroom have begun to explore the ways in which games create spaces for reading, writing, and interaction—spaces that can be productively worked into the writing classroom. John Alberti writes that “Gaming is one powerful new source of such metaphors, one that can help us reframe our understanding of literacy in ways that allow us to engage our student in the game of reading and writing” (268), and his article “The Game of Reading and Writing” explores the ways in which games blur the lines between process and product, reading and writing. More importantly for the field of games studies, Alberti reminds his readers that writing *and reading* are active processes, correcting the easy assumption that reading is just the passive absorption of information (258).

Alberti, more than perhaps any other author considering games as a kind of speech, considers the potential for games as texts capable of social change. Beginning with an anecdote about the controversial game *Super Columbine Massacre RPG!*, Alberti affirms that games are poised uniquely in the space between speech and listening (261), and that composition classrooms can capitalize on the multivalenced term “play” to teach students that reading and

writing are not the isolated, uniform actions many students first assume (262-3). In places, Alberti approaches the notion of resistance, suggesting early on that “If cultural anxieties about the power and impact of reading, writing, and rhetoric are not new in the abstract, they do take on new resonance in moments of significant social and technological change” (260), the implication being that video games are part of that anxiety. On the whole, however, Alberti is more interested in returning reading and writing as a spectrum to the conversation than in considering games as potential sources of social change or resistance. Other writers like Alice Robison suggest game design as a model for composition, and my dissertation will work with her idea that “[video game] designers create the *potential* for emergent experiences that result from interactivity with the system. And so like video game designers, writing instructors are faced with creating the potential for learning without being able to guarantee that learning will take place” (363).

Most scholars working with games and composition agree that the game space and the writing space are closely connected, and articles typically provide advice on how to productively merge those spaces. Rebekah Shultz Colby and Richard Colby write about the potential of a so-called “emergent classroom” where writing assignments emerge as responses to social demands (rather than as scheduled prompts), and they find that *World of Warcraft* is an environment in which those emergent prompts occur frequently (300). *World of Warcraft* is beneficial as a miniature world in which students' writing can be significant, important, and useful (300). Given a bounded digital space in which to write, students can write to an active social world, rather than into the void (300).

A few years after the *Computers and Composition* special issue that contained Alberti, Robison, and Colby and Shultz Colby's articles, many of the same authors returned to publish

the collection *Rhetoric/Composition/Play Through Video Games*. The collection, published in 2013, collects short articles responding to a set of general questions:

How can playing a video game encourage students to (re)consider how they write, read, and research? How do gaming spaces function rhetorically and in what ways can/do gamers conduct rhetorical readings of them? How do video games represent identity and community and how are these representations interpreted by gamers? How do video games and gaming serve as metaphors for written discourse and writing? (4)

The brief articles cover a range of topics and angles. Ian Bogost's "Exploitationware" excoriates the trend (and the word) "gamification" (139); Richard Colby and Matthew S. S. Johnson, in "Ludic Snags," try to readjust expectations of game-based pedagogy and its pervasiveness in the world of composition (83); Rebekah Shultz Colby studies six of her female students and how they respond to playing *World of Warcraft* for class in "Gender and Gaming in a First-Year Writing Class" (123). Overall, the volume stations itself solidly within the walls of composition studies, preferring praxis to theory.

A sub-field of education research has sprung up in the past decade or so organized under the banner of "Digital Game-Based Learning." DGBL encompasses a wide variety of pedagogically-oriented disciplines, and DGBL approaches tend to cluster around a limited range of objectives. Nearly every work in DGBL concerns the implementation of games in the classroom. Some articles frame their implementations with disciplinary language: David Neville's "Structuring Narrative in 3D Digital Game-Based Learning Environments to Support Second Language Acquisition" is based almost exclusively in games studies research, whereas "Praxis and Allies: The WPA Board Game," written by Tom Sura et al, uses principles of writing

program administration to propose an educational board game based on the responsibilities and struggles of writing program administrators (75). Francesco Crocco's "Critical Gaming Pedagogy" approaches DGBL from a much more skeptical position, that of the Marxist, Freirian critic, and argues that if DGBL continues to endorse the principles of work-training education, "it will produce a more highly trained workforce without addressing the growing inequality and instability of the global capitalist economy in which this workforce must operate. The result is that education will continue to serve capitalism instead of critical thinking" (29). To demonstrate critically-aware pedagogical game design, Crocco proposes a lightly modified variation on *Monopoly* in which different players start with different privileges, including "different amounts of money, land, and privilege, and compete to win using the game's normal mechanics" (31). Surprisingly few DGBL works base their theory in games studies; the field seems to have more in common with Scholarship on Teaching and Learning's emphasis on active learning than with games studies. Other DGBL articles have little in the way of a critical lens and simply provide a tested method of teaching a subject.

Jerry Istvan's "Presentation of Language Games" simply offers twelve grammar games to engage and teach TEFL learners based on his belief that traditional grammar instruction is boring (206). "AxeCorp's Team Challenge," by Kendra Carmichael, describes a semester-long project-based learning course for first-year business communication students in which students used the game *Second Life* to perform a series of collaborative tasks (479-480). The article is brief and mostly consists of descriptions of the course and the particular assignment. Lucy Bednar's "Learning the Intricacies of Effective Communication Through Game Design" may not be *Digital Game-Based Learning*, but its brief exercise leading technical writing students through the process of creating an idea for a game, then writing instructions for it, then creating

promotional materials certainly incorporates games as key parts of the learning process (69-70). Kjetil Sandvic and Anne Mette Thorhauge describe one pedagogical game in “Professor Nukem: Communicating Research in the Age of the Experience Economy.” Based on their belief that games can make communicating academic research more fun and interesting (177), they created a game called “Professor Nukem” that involved answering multiple choice questions by shooting monsters, then receiving a text-based lecture at the end (185). Their older players took issue with grammar and the phrasing of questions while younger players simply gamed the system to achieve high scores without engaging the content (185-86). Nonetheless, the article’s focus on creating a playable experience to spread academic research is a promising application of DGBL.

Articles in DGBL evince a varying degree of awareness of familiarity with games studies or even games themselves. It is easy to see why Richard Colby and Matthew S. S. Johnson, in their article “Ludic Snags,” write that “*first-year writing teachers interested in integrating games into their classrooms should play more video games*” (91, emphasis preserved). More significantly, articles in the DGBL subfield generally embrace games without much thought or critique. As this dissertation will demonstrate, games are powerful texts with their own distinct affordances and risks. While they do present promise and potential for the classroom, games are both more dangerous and more useful than most pedagogues have recognized.

Against Binaries

This dissertation is rife with pairs of terms. The speaking and listening matrix proposed above contrasts sets of pairs within a matrix composed of a pair of pairs: empowered and un-empowered speaking and listening producing the pairs of coding vs. performing and evaluating vs. receiving. In the following chapter, I will draw on many pairs from Iser and Lanham. At first

glance, it looks like a deconstructionist's dream (or nightmare, depending): so many binaries to deconstruct!

But I hope that, throughout the dissertation, the reader will consider these pairs not as *binaries*, but rather as tendencies or locations along a spectrum. I use the oppositional terminology mostly out of convenience, but when I write about “coding” or “receiving,” these are not pure actions or positions. Real power dynamics are inextricably complicated. One is never perfectly empowered and almost never perfectly un-empowered. The game of truth and imagination—what we might also call rhetoric—is a constant play between boundaries. The binary terminology is meant to define those limits, those boundaries, but the real play of rhetoric always takes places between boundaries. So when I speak of “at” reading, it is not a perfect, uniform mode of reading. Rather, it describes a general practice or tendency that a given type of reading resembles.

In the following chapter, I will more fully elaborate on the power relations that fuel reading and playing experiences and suggest that aesthetic experience is, itself, a kind of power relation constantly oscillating between the subject and textual object. Overall, however, I hope to convince the reader that games are ethically, disciplinarily, and aesthetically complex objects deserving sustained study, aggressive critique, and creative pedagogical implementation.

CHAPTER ONE

GAMES OF IMAGINATION: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL MODEL OF RHETORICAL PLAY

My goal in this chapter will be to introduce a critical vocabulary for understanding interface as a playful rhetorical space, the boundaries defining that space, and the ways in which these interpretive and play-based restrictions are revealed in digital games. All of these issues cluster around one central concern: a user's interpretive and generative play within the boundaries of a device or a medium. This chapter will begin by examining and recontextualizing Wolfgang Iser's theory of reception aesthetics. Iser's theory dovetails smoothly with Richard Lanham's theory of attention economics—especially Lanham's “style/substance matrix.” Combining the oscillating structure of Iser and Lanham's theories with a background based in Foucault's theories of power dynamics, this chapter proposes a model of rhetorical play inspired by games and fueled by the omnipresent power relation between subject and object, reader and text, player and game. This chapter will describe and explore the structure and movement of this model, beginning with its phenomenological background and assumptions, then working through its parts, its arrangement, its oscillating movements, and the contexts in which it operates. Ultimately, this chapter will propose—to crib from Donald Murray's “Teach Writing as a Process Not Product”—that we read media as a process, not a product (3). The subject's interaction with the textual object is a power oscillation between ceding and taking power over a text, and I have termed this oscillating process “rhetorical play.” Rhetorical play is endemic to all media, and its foundation is Iser's understanding of the textual performance as phenomenology.

Wolfgang Iser's phenomenology-inspired reader-response criticism studies *how* meaning is created, under what conditions, and with what impact on the reader. Other schools of criticism and theory examine the cultural or formal significance of the work, its later permutations, and its political significance, but because my work is interested primarily in rhetoric and how texts exert power over their interpreters, I have chosen to use Iser's phenomenological reader-response criticism. This chapter, however, is not focused primarily on the first part of Iser's title, *The Act of Reading*, but rather on the second: *A Theory of Aesthetic Response*. That second, more general term suggests that Iser's theory can be applied to more than only novels (and, indeed, Iser occasionally has cause to mention poets like Spenser and Shakespeare).

The Preliminary Model

The purpose of this chapter is to propose and describe a model for understanding how people and interfaces work together to create meaning. In order to provide context for the rest of the chapter, I will first offer a preliminary model, simplified and given a familiar set of terms. This preliminary model is a simplified look at playing a game.

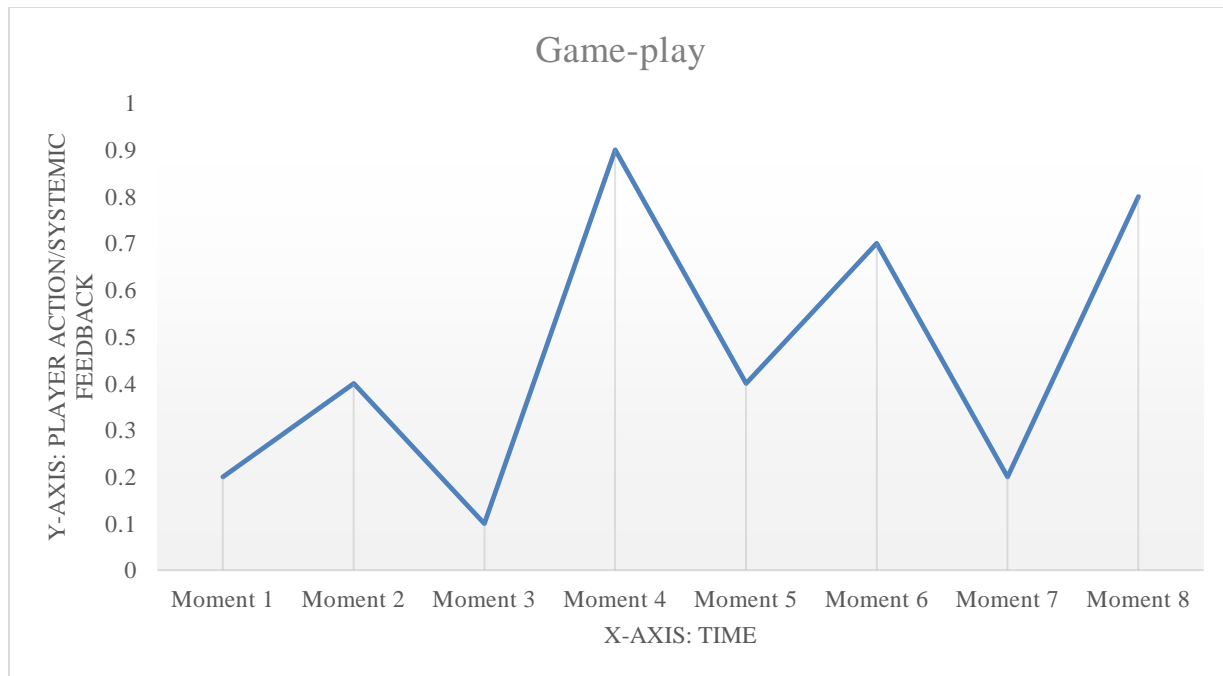


Fig. 1: Game-play as oscillation between player action and systemic feedback.

Games consist of three essential elements: a set of rules, a player, and a means of providing feedback. Every game has rules. In Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman’s respected text *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*, they write that rules have five essential characteristics: rules “limit player action, are explicit and unambiguous, are shared by all players, are fixed, are binding, and are repeatable” (142). Rules tell the player what the goal of the game is, and the actions the player is allowed to take in order to reach that goal. Rules provide a stable, delineated set of codes describing how the player may interact with the game and the other players (if any). Summaries of a game’s rules, in a board or card game, might be found in a paper rule book. These are not the rules themselves, only descriptions of the rules, since games’ rules are simply agreed-upon behavioral constraints restricting a player’s action. Digital games are also bound by rules, though these are rarely written out so neatly. The rules of video games are buried

in the game's code (although they might also be summarized textually). Other games, like riddle games, might have oral or assumed summaries of their rules. But the point stands: whether digital, physical, or oral, all games are bound by rules. On their own, rules do nothing. Absent a player and the process of play, rules are inert, even nonexistent.

Most importantly for the model above, rules govern the kinds of feedback a game system offers. In *Super Mario Bros.*, colliding with an enemy results in Mario taking damage or dying. This is a game rule, formalized in the game's code. The player discovers these rules either by inference (noticing, for instance, that the first enemy in the game is scowling and walking directly towards Mario) or by experience (touching the enemy and losing a life). Rules, in video games, govern the game's response to the player's actions. By watching the game's feedback, the player learns the rules. When the player knows the game's rules, she can modify her actions and contend more skillfully with these restrictions on her play. Rules likewise offer the player a menu of available actions. In *Super Mario Bros.*, the player's actions are restricted to moving forwards and backwards, jumping, and—given a particular power-up—throwing fireballs. The player selects and makes a move from her available selection (represented, in the chart, by the upward-moving line), receives feedback from the game (represented by the downward-moving slope), and in the next moment, chooses a new move and makes it. Play oscillates in this fashion between player action and feedback from the rules.

Every game has at least one player: an agent capable of making actions according to the game's rules in order to accomplish an objective. The player does not need to be human. Computers can play games—just ask Deep Blue or IBM's Watson—and, arguably, every video game with digital opponents has digital game-players. *Rules of Play* generally addresses the player obliquely, almost tangentially. She is an assumed presence, one who tends to interact in

certain predictable ways (e.g. within the inefficient-by-design structure of the game rules) (77), but Salen and Zimmerman are more interested in creating effective rules and play experiences than in firmly defining the elusive figure of the player. In my preliminary model, the player's attention is represented by the oscillating line. The player herself is absent, unrepresented. If, as I will propose later, the text is actually a process, then a model simulating that text will represent a dynamic process and assume without picturing the physical text or player.

Finally, players must be able to take actions and receive feedback from the game system on those actions. In other words, players must *play*. Salen and Zimmerman write that “Ultimately, game design is play design. The rules of a game are relevant because they facilitate the experience of players” (299). Two pages later, however, the authors cite Brian Sutton-Smith's *Ambiguity of Play* as an admission that play is unstable and nearly undefinable (301), but even so, they suggest a broad definition for play: “Play is free movement within a more rigid structure” (304). This dissertation will assume this short, evocative definition for play.

Generally speaking, player actions and game feedback are signified by physical objects of some kind. In chess, one player moves pieces around a board, and receives feedback by observing how the other player's pieces move. By observing the feedback from the game or the opponent (whose action is translated through the rules of the game into feedback for the first player), the player can consider her options and take actions informed by feedback. The player's attention oscillates back and forth between the game system and herself, now considering the game and its feedback, now considering herself and her options. The model represents this with a simple wave pattern moving left to right along an axis labeled “time.” This repeating oscillation between player and rules is the core of this model and, I believe, the core of game-play.

My model bears a degree of resemblance to one proposed in 2010 by David O. Neville in his digital game-based learning article “Structuring Narrative in 3D Digital Game-Based Learning Environments to Support Second Language Acquisition.” Neville lays a strong foundation of game theory, including a citation from Julian Kücklich that establishes the project as semi-phenomenological: “This whole process [of narrative interpretation] takes place on a level that cannot be located within the game, but exists merely as a projection of the player’s mind” (Kücklich par. 26). Neville and I share the same central assumption: that games operate via feedback loops. Our models differ, though their structure, swinging constantly between player and text, are similar:

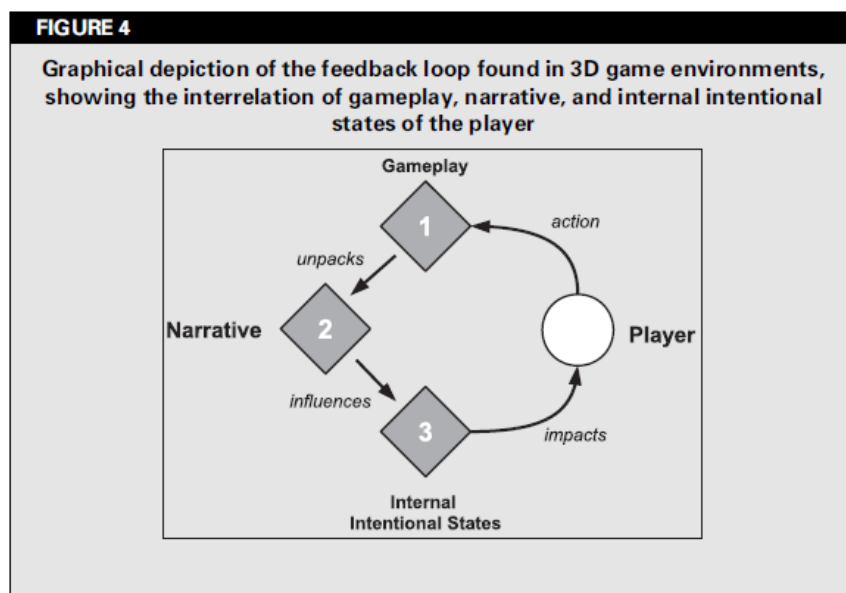


Fig. 2: Neville’s model of the feedback loop (458).

Neville's graphic models the revelation of a game's narrative via gameplay: what the player plays becomes part of the game's narrative. That narrative then impacts the player, altering his "internal intentional states," which subsequently shift his gameplay (458). Gameplay, for Neville, is a spiral moving forward through time. My oscillating model likewise oscillates between subject and object, but I am unconcerned with narratology or the progression of plot. I am interested, instead, in how the game creates a meaningful rhetorical experience, and rhetoric does not necessarily involve "narrative." Narrative is also irrelevant to a large number of games: *Tetris*, for instance, has no characters, conflict, or story, and neither do a whole host of other video games.

This chapter is not, however, solely about games. The purpose of my model is not to describe games, but, as it turns out, the process of playing a game holds a great deal in common with the process of dealing with interface. Both are defined by the same oscillation of power and attention between the self and the other, though the forms of oscillation and interpretation involved in the text or interface are more involved than the preliminary game model I have just proposed. Games and texts are not the same thing, but they have a great deal in common, as the following sections will demonstrate.

The Playing Field: Interface as the Site of Meaning Creation

From Iser I take an understanding of where interpretation is situated in space and time. Iser studies how readers respond to texts, where the act of interpretation occurs, and how readers build understandings of texts through extended interactions with them. Like so many other reader-response critics, Iser tries to answer the foundational, yet apparently impossible, question "who reads?" But, as Ben de Bruyn points out in his companion volume to the theorist, Iser's

theory was also informed by German philosophy, particularly the phenomenology of Roman Ingarden (4).

This dissertation rests on a foundation of phenomenology. De Bruyn writes that “phenomenologists refuse to study purely objective natural facts and subjective psychological states, and focus instead on the way in which so-called 'phenomena' appear to an idealized, abstract consciousness” (100). Phenomenology places itself in the middle ground between objectivity and subjectivity, in the space where subjects confront objects and do something with them. Iser applies this fundamental principle of phenomenology to the reading experience: “If the virtual position of the work is between text and reader, its actualization is clearly the result of an interaction between the two” (21). Iser goes so far as to claim that what we call the “work,” the novel or film or game, has two parts, “two poles, which we might call the artistic and the aesthetic: the artistic pole is the author’s text and the aesthetic is the realization accomplished by the reader” (21).

Iser's suggestion that the book alone is not the work might look, at first, like subjectivism, but by situating the act of reading between subject and object, Iser slips out of the affective fallacy. The reader is a critical element to the work (since the work could not exist without the reader interpreting its text, images, etc.), but the reader's interpretation of that text is controlled and guided by the text. So, in Iser's words, “Although it is clear that acts of comprehension are guided by the structures of the text, the latter can never exercise complete control, and this is where one might sense a touch of arbitrariness” (24). Iser allows that certain aspects of the act of reading seem arbitrary, but he controls for this by suggesting that texts also have a degree of determinacy: certain elements of textual interpretation are stable and resistant to contrary interpretations. Later in *The Act of Reading*, Iser compacts this blend of determinacy and

indeterminacy into a single metaphor: the game. He writes that “author and reader are to share the game of the imagination, and, indeed, the game will not work if the text sets out to be anything more than a set of governing rules” (108). A text's determinacy is its “set of governing rules,” but this cannot overpower the indeterminacy, or the reader's ability to play within those rules.

Textual meaning, of course, cannot exist without text—the reader must have an object to interpret. But meaning cannot exist without an interpreter either. Books are objects, and without readers, they are nothing more than bound pulp and ink. Logically, then, the creation of meaning must happen between the two poles of subject and object. The reader uses the text as a set of guiding instructions for a mental game of meaning. Playing that game always involves some degree of indeterminacy (the play will change each time it is performed, sometimes slightly, sometimes greatly), but it is always bound by some degree of determinacy. The exact proportions of these determinacies and indeterminacies change between texts, and even between readings, and trying to evaluate empirically the degree of each present in a given text is a pointless exercise. The text, in other words, is a script that the reader brings to life in an always-unique act of game-play. The text, whether displayed on a screen or printed in a codex, is always mediated by its interface.

This chapter will reference interface frequently, and while the word is familiar, its associations are deep. Interface is more than design. The term was originally coined, in the late nineteenth century, as a scientific descriptor: “A surface lying between two portions of matter or space, and forming their common boundary” (“interface, n. 1”). This interface is a skin between two bodies or spaces, and in many ways, that continues to be the most expressive definition. Consider Twitter. Its web interface is “a surface lying between” the user and the code that

enables that user to tweet. The web browser is a surface between the user's eyes and the imaginary space of the website. The screen of the laptop, desktop, tablet, or phone is another “surface between two portions of matter or space”: this surface separates the body of the user and the digital space of the device.

The *OED*'s second definition of “interface,” dated to *Gutenberg Galaxy* in 1962, will help limit the first expansive definition: “A means or place of interaction between two systems, organizations, etc.; a meeting-point or common ground between two parties, systems, or disciplines; also, interaction, liaison, dialogue” (“interface, n. 2”). The second definition suggests a more active understanding of interface than the first: where the first definition imagines interface as an object, the second implies that interface is an interaction. It is “a means... of interaction,” “a meeting-point,” “interaction, liaison, dialogue.” Interface, in this version, is something one *does*. Interface becomes a function, a verb, an interaction, and an exchange. This notion of active interface is crucial to my dissertation. Inspired by Iser's understanding of the performed nature of aesthetic texts, this chapter argues that interface is a site of play, an active interaction between user and medium—not merely a surface. Interface is *also* a surface, an object, but it uses that surface/object/space as a set of rules to provoke the reader into playing.

To use Mary Louise Pratt's term, the interface is a “contact zone.” Her article “Arts of the Contact Zone” takes as its representative text *The First New Chronicle and Good Government*, an autoethnographic book written by an Andean scribe in 1613 and addressed to King Philip III of Spain (34). The book is written in both Spanish and Quechua, and includes “four hundred [pages] of captioned line drawings” (34). The book is a contact zone, a written space where two distinct cultures are seen interacting. The Andean writer uses the Spanish language to satirize the Spanish conquest, and Spanish artistic styles to give voice to Andean subjects. An interface, as

seen in the second definition, is “a meeting point.” In fact, the textual and artistic interfaces of *The First New Chronicle*, the meeting point of codex and reader, are what reveal the contact zone, the meeting point of the conquered Incas and the conquering Spanish. The *form* of the conqueror's language and imagery are used to express the *content* of the conquered. The interface, then, is a primarily rhetorical locus. It is in the active play-space of the interface that rhetoric blends form and content. In that space, power is traded between subject and object, reader and text, player and game. This oscillating power relation will define the act of rhetorical play throughout this dissertation, but an easy way to discuss that complex interaction of text, power, and play is “interface.”

Rules and Repertoire

Iser calls reading “the game of the imagination,” and writes that “the game will not work if the text sets out to be anything more than a set of governing rules. The reader's enjoyment begins when he himself becomes productive i.e., when the text allows him to bring his own faculties into play” (108). Iser's framing of the text as a set of rules is significant. Rules in a text, just as in a game, determine what the user can and cannot do. This section will discuss the disciplinary power that textual rules enforce on the players of textual games. I will argue that the text is an embodied artifact that presents a series of definite and indefinite rules to guide the user's playing of the interface.

When Jorge Luis Borges describes the Library of Babel as being “composed of an indefinite, perhaps infinite number of hexagonal galleries” (112), the rule represented by the word “hexagonal” prohibits the reader from imagining those galleries as pentagonal or octagonal. Texts set all sorts of rules. Word connotations and denotations channel the reader's

imagination into particular images and tones, just as grammatical structures restrict the relations between words. When Borges writes that “Light [in the Library] is provided by certain spherical fruits that bear the name 'bulbs'” (112), the textual rule created by the phrase “certain spherical fruits” demands that the reader first interpret the lights as fruit—as something organic—and *then* as technological “bulbs.” The textual rule constraints and spurs the rhetorical play: the implied reader first imagines light coming from fruits, then the blur of connotation (fruit blurring with light bulb) resolves, and the reader's imagination of the fruit shifts into the image of a light bulb, perhaps still retaining certain organic features. Borges'² choice of words and grammatical sequence restrict the reader's imagination.

Iser says that the rules of a work of literature are *determinate*, while the reader's playing of those rules is *indeterminate* (170). The terms themselves Iser borrows from Roman Ingarden, but Iser refines and redirects Ingarden's original concept somewhat (169). The text of a physical book is set. It cannot change.³ That is to say, the physical book cannot change. However, the rules of the “game of imagination” (108) are revealed by play, and play is active by nature. The novelty of Iser's phenomenological perspective is that something external to the reader (the text) meets with the reader in the act of playing—but if rules only come into being when they are encountered through play, how can they be said to have external reality? In other words, how does the binary of self and other keep from collapsing on itself in the act of playing?

The reader of a text has no way to discover and enact the text's rules except by reading the text—that is, by playing within, and sometimes testing, the rules. I cannot discover the shape of Borges' Library's galleries but by reading the description. If a text's rules are revealed (thus

²And Borges' translator Andrew Hurley.

³I realize that, from a post-modern perspective, these claims are suspect. Text is never stable or reliable. But within this limited context—that of the individual playing of a text—the physical text, the positions of the letters and sentences within the codex artifact, are stable and act as rules within that artifact.

created in the mind of the reader) in the act of rhetorical play, then is it possible to say that the rules have their own external existence? The text on its own is an inert object and can only become rules (or agreed-upon conventions) in concert with a reader. The rules and the act of playing the game cannot be self-identical; after all, *something* is being played. The obvious answer is that the physical text is being played, but the text is not self-sufficient. The book alone cannot be responsible for creating and sustaining its own textual rules. There must be more to the rules than rules.

Textual play does not exist in a vacuum. The core of the literary work is the moment-to-moment play, the collaboration between subject and object, player and rules. But this literary experience takes place in the real world. The literary work (and the interface, and the game) is informed and restricted by the culture that produced it. Iser calls this cultural context the “repertoire” of the text, or “all the familiar territory within the text. This may be in the form of references to earlier works, or to social and historical norms, or to the whole culture from which the text has emerged” (69). In order to make sense of a text, the reader and the text both must draw from a commonly held set of codes and understandings, another layer of cultural “rules” binding the particular rules of the text with the cultural rules internalized by the reader. In this way, the reader plays the particular rules of the text as she reads, but these particular rules must obey—at least partially—a shared cultural *repertoire* held in common with the reader.

Iser's understanding of this repertoire was inspired by J. L. Austin's speech act theory, and while Iser disagrees with Austin and Searle on several points (especially the speech-act notion that literature is a “parasite” on speech, incapable of making its own performative utterances), Iser repurposes Austin's notion of the performative utterance. The performative utterance *does* something. It is a linguistic object that creates an action (54). As Iser says,

We may recall that Austin listed three main conditions for the success of the performative utterance: conventions common to speaker and recipient, procedures accepted by both, and the willingness of both to participate in the speech action. ... The *conventions* necessary for the establishment of a situation might more fittingly be called the repertoire of the text. The *accepted procedures* we shall call the strategies, and the reader's participation will henceforth be referred to as the realization. (69, emphasis preserved)

Iser replaces "conventions" with "repertoire," but Austin's term helps illuminate Iser's theory perhaps more than "repertoire." Rules are shared conventions, mutually accepted restraints on behavior.

Consider the game of tag. Tag has no physical pieces, no written-out rule books, and its only interface is the bodies of its players. Tag is defined solely by its collectively understood rules and the title of "Tag." More accurately, Tag consists of a set of agreed-upon behavioral conventions. When one player is "it," that player's behavior shifts from "evading" to "chasing." The rule-conditions of the game require a change in behavior, but nothing enforces this change besides the mutual agreement of the players to abide by the game's rules. The game-play shifts when the game's interface (that is, the body of the "it" player) provides feedback to that player (in the form of a touch). As soon as the evading player receives feedback, he processes this feedback through his shared knowledge of the game's collectively understood conventions, and his behavior shifts quickly to chasing, rather than evading. The rules, or conventions, define the players' behaviors and play actions. These conventions are what Iser calls the repertoire. The repertoire is a shared set of conventions held in common between the reader, player, or user; the text, game, or informational other; and the broader culture that binds the subject and the object.

Culture provides broad rules that the text can draw upon and modify to set its own rule boundaries. Repertoire provides a pool of conventions and rules that individual texts can draw upon, contravene, subvert, etc.

Although Iser uses “repertoire” mostly to discuss the social milieu reflected in a work of literature (the social conventions giving rise to a particular text), it can also be understood to signify the mutually accepted restraints on behavior. Repertoire, then, is simultaneously background and foreground. The text is informed by its context, and the text provides the context for the reader's rhetorical play. There seems, then, to be a two-tier system inherent to the repertoire. Iser agrees, stating that there exist “two ranges of indeterminacy: (1) between text and reader, (2) between text and reality” (66). The interface of reading displays the distinction between these two types of repertoire particularly clearly: text-reader repertoire (the rules of the text), and text-reality repertoire (the shared conventions of the culture). Games still have determinacies and indeterminacies, just as novels and other forms of printed text do. The indeterminacies, in the case of games, are the open spaces in which players can play—the ranges of choice and selection. The determinacies, of course, are the rules and visual, textual, and aural resources of the game. These do not shift, or, if they do, they shift in predictable, determinate ways.

Lyotard, as mentioned in the introduction, used Wittgenstein’s term “language games” to describe how people use language to negotiate with one another (10). He writes that “each of the various categories of utterance can be defined in terms of rules specifying their properties and the uses to which they can be put—in exactly the same way as the game of chess is defined by a set of rules determining the properties of each of the pieces, in other words, the proper way to move them” (10). Lyotard’s vision of the language game is more extensive than Iser’s. For Iser,

literature creates a game for its reader, but for Lyotard, *all language* is a game. His conception of the linguistic negotiation as a series of discrete moves (10) is perhaps oversimplifying the squishy complexities of actual discourse, but his three observations about language games are helpful for filling out Iser's strongly literary game metaphor. Lyotard says that language games "do not carry within themselves their own legitimation, but are the object of a contract, explicit or not, between players" (10). Second, "even an infinitesimal modification of one rule alters the nature of the game," and finally, "every utterance should be thought of as a 'move' in a game" (10). Comparing something as complex as language or literature to the by-nature limitations of the game inevitably results in some reduction and simplification, and the notions of "language games," "games of imagination," or even "games of truth" are inherently flawed. In spite of their necessary compaction of meaning, they are extraordinarily useful. That utility, however, comes at the price of opening one's theory to the accusation of insufficient rigor, as the debate between Wolfgang Iser and Stanley Fish will demonstrate.

Stanley Fish and the Trouble with Indeterminacy

According to Michael Bérubé, Iser fell out of fashion at the same time as reader-response itself, at one specific moment, with one specific article. Bérubé writes that "Stanley Fish killed [reader response criticism] the day he published his *diacritics* review of Iser's *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*, under the title, 'Why No One's Afraid of Wolfgang Iser'" (13). The review was devastating. In the first half, Fish writes a hasty synopsis of *The Act of Reading*, focusing particular attention on Iser's distinction, outlined above, between textual determinacy and indeterminacy. The strength of Iser's theory, Fish says, is essentially its friendliness. It unites opposing views without needing either view to be wrong (3). Iser's theory,

for instance, steers a middle course between formalism and the affective fallacy. The phenomenological background makes the text *somewhat* structured, but ultimately dependent on the reader for its significance. Meaning is manufactured neither wholly in the text nor wholly in the reader. And, as this chapter's broad-based application of Iser's theory demonstrates, it is remarkably customizable. Fish places the responsibility for this inoffensiveness on a single dichotomy: indeterminate vs. determinate (6). Fish writes that "The distinction is crucial because it provides both the stability and flexibility of Iser's formulations. Without it, he would not be able to say that the reader's activities are constrained by something they do not produce" (6). Fish's problem with Iser's theory is that the categories are not stable between readers. What Iser identifies as *determinate* might for another reader be *indeterminate*,⁴ and if his key categories are unstable, then the entire theory must inevitably shake itself apart. Fish says that Iser's theory lacks an "independent given which serves to ground the interpretive process" (7). In other words, Fish claims that Iser's theory is not generalizable. It cannot be applied consistently to a given literary text. The theorist could not translate it into a coherent taxonomy, a la Barthes in *S/Z*.

One senses that Fish wants Iser to pick a side, to be offensive to someone. Either Iser needs to give into formalism and identify some kind of "independent given," an aesthetic-response Rosetta stone, or Iser needs to give into the chaos and admit, along with Fish, that "if gaps are not built into the text, but appear (or do not appear) as a consequence of particular interpretive strategies, then there is no distinction between what the text gives and what the reader supplies; he supplies everything; the stars in a literary text are not fixed; they are just as variable as the lines that join them" (7). Fish insists on an unrealistic standard for theoretical validity. It is unrealistic to demand "an independent given," since the point of reader response

⁴ Iser's method of distinction between the two likely rests on his conception of the "implied reader," but that, in turn, still relies on the dual categories of determinate and indeterminate.

theory is that independent givens do not exist, *necessitating a focus on subjective responses to a subjective aesthetic experience*. Fish ignores the intense personal variability of the aesthetic experience. For Iser, with his focus on the personal reading experience, some parts of a text will be determinate, will translate fairly directly into images, connections, etc. For most readers, Iser knows, “hexagonal” will mean “six-sided.” The word is determinate, but only within the given cultural repertoire.⁵ At the end of the article, Fish demands, essentially, that Iser pick his poison: “In the absence of that purity *one can say either that everything is determinate*, because nothing proceeds from an unfettered imagination, *or that everything is indeterminate*, because everything is produced by the activities of the reader (but by a reader who is, like what he produces, community property)” (12, emphasis added). Fish insists upon an unrealistic degree of theoretical purity, one that prioritizes technicality over theoretical pragmatism or applicability.

Nowhere in Fish’s review does he mention the similarities between Iser’s acceptance of Searle’s “repertoire” and Fish’s own “interpretive community” (which Fish first proposed five years earlier in “Interpreting the ‘Variorum’”). In fact, Fish faults Iser, essentially, for not using Fish’s theory:

What I have been saying is that there is no subjectivist element of reading, because the observer is never individual in the sense of unique or private, but is always the product of the categories of understanding that are his by virtue of his membership in a community of interpretation. It follows then that what that experience in turn produces is not open or free, but determinate, constrained by the possibilities that are built into a conventional system of intelligibility. (11)

⁵ For a counter-example, consider the word “literally” which, in recent years, has become a common intensifier, often used in conjunction with obviously non-literal phrases, e.g. “I literally ate myself to death at dinner.” Its cultural repertoire has shifted, to the extent that the Merriam-Webster dictionary now lists “in effect: virtually” as the word’s second definition (“literally”).

Yet Iser readily acknowledges—with an entire chapter entitled “The Repertoire” (53)—the existence of a larger social context within which rhetorical meaning is created: “The repertoire consists of all the familiar territory within the text. This may be in the form of references to earlier works, *or to social and historical norms*, or to the whole structure from which the text has emerged—in brief, to what the Prague structuralists have called the ‘extratextual’ reality” (69, emphasis added). Iser accounts for the interpretive community, but the repertoire features nowhere in Fish’s review.

In the end, Fish takes Iser to task for insufficient theoretical precision when such precision was never Iser’s goal in the first place. Iser writes in *The Act of Reading* that “the time has surely come to cut the thread altogether and replace ontological arguments with functional arguments, for what is important to readers, critics, and authors alike is what literature *does* and not what it *means*” (53). Iser’s theory of aesthetic response is one based on pragmatism and broad applicability—exactly what it accomplished until Fish torpedoed it. Bérubé laments in his article that “After the Fish-Iser exchange, it became possible for professional literary critics to operate as if there were nothing inside the text, and as if this were a good thing too” (14). To his credit, Bérubé manages to chart a middle ground between Fish and Iser. Bérubé believes that

It would have been possible, in other words, to contest Fish’s reading of Iser not by stubbornly insisting on the determinacy of the determinate, and not, good Lord, by insisting on two separate varieties of determinacy and assigning ‘interpretation’ to one of them, but by acknowledging that all forms of reading are interpretive but that some involve the kind of low-level, relatively uncontestable cognitive acts that we engage in whenever we interpret the letter ‘e’ as the letter ‘e,’ and some involve the kind of high-level exceptionally specific and complex

textual manipulations, transformations, and reconfigurations involved whenever someone publishes something like *S/Z*—or *Surprised by Sin*. (18)

Bérubé compromises by stating that Fish's argument that everything is interpretive and *to some extent* indeterminate (since all language functions on *doxic* meaning and words only work if their users more-or-less agree on their meanings) is correct, but that some kinds of indeterminacy are culturally engrained and thus *less* indeterminate than other kinds of indeterminacy (18). In other words, Bérubé discards one of Iser's categories and turns the other into a wide spectrum.

Bérubé's exasperated "good Lord" was inspired by Iser's response to Fish's review, in which Iser tries to correct Fish by insisting on two different types of determinacy: one still called "determinate," and the other called "given." Iser writes in his response that "The words of a text are given, the interpretation of the words is determinate, and the gaps between given elements and/or our interpretations are the indeterminacies" (83). The root of Fish's, and Bérubé's, and my problem with Iser's theory is that *nothing* can be truly, literally determinate, since the phenomenological mode of experience makes interpretation—not objective existence—the genesis of the text. Iser insists on the existence of a verifiable external reality: "I maintain that what can be seen will be there (unless the world is to be regarded as an hallucination), and it is the interpretation of what can be seen (i.e. how it is seen) that is a function of the various categories" (84). While this is obviously true, it is irrelevant. Iser's theory of aesthetic response begins with the subject's approach to the text, and that approach is always already interpretive, always already (to a greater or lesser degree, as Bérubé reminds) indeterminate.

Iser's theory works best as a functional, pragmatic approach. As Iser says, he wants to "replace ontological arguments with functional arguments" (53), and part of that functional approach is assuming several points. I suspect that Iser sees his "determinate" as less inflexible

than Fish or Bérubé think. Given his book's emphasis on context (after all, he spends nearly thirty pages laying out a theory of the repertoire and its function), "determinate" works only within a particular discursive repertoire. From Fish's miles-high, zoomed-out vantage point, "determinate" still looks awfully indeterminate. But Iser is concerned with the moment-to-moment individual understanding of a literary text, so "determinate" can, at that contextual level, still be a meaningful term—but only as long as one remains on that contextual level. Iser says as much in "Talk Like Whales":

True, there is no unmediated given, but interpretation would be useless if it were not meant to open access to something we encounter. Interpretation is always informed by a set of assumptions or conventions, but these are also acted upon by what they intend to tackle. Hence the 'something' which is to be mediated exists prior to interpretation, acts as a constraint on interpretation, has repercussions on the anticipations operative in interpretation, and thus contributes to a hermeneutical process, the result of which is both a mediated given and a reshuffling of the initial assumptions. (84)

One senses a note of frustration in Iser's prose as he protests that the text *does* exist and *does* exert some force on the aesthetic experience. The "something" that exists apart from the interpretation is the text, and that text has an impact on the aesthetic experience. Everything might be interpretive, Iser agrees, but that interpretation does not exist in a vacuum. One can see, in moments like this, the fundamental opposition between Iser's phenomenological worldview and Fish's critical consensus worldview.

Ultimately, Fish's rhetorical sleight of hand is to slice out a crucial component of Iser's theory—the repertoire—then strip the remaining components of their complexity and subtlety

(by claiming that Iser believes in “pure” categories of determinate and indeterminate),⁶ then claim that the theory (now deprived of both foundation and subtlety) cannot stand. This is not to say, of course, that Fish misunderstands Iser’s theory—indeed, some of his examples are pulled from Iser’s chapter on “The Repertoire”—but rather that Fish believes in the total primacy of the interpretive community. Of course a theory of generalized aesthetic response would look wrong-headed; anything that does not study how an interpretive community would determine the text’s aesthetic impact would look wrong-headed. But it is neither Iser’s goal nor mine to study the interpretive community. We are interested in the individual creation of meaning, and, unlike Fish, we believe that one can speak meaningfully of a text as both rules and play.

Significant differences exist between Iser’s theory and mine, however. Iser is concerned exclusively with the literary text, because for him, reality is *referable*. The literary experience differs from the non-literary one because literature does not refer to an external given reality. Non-literary texts refer to an existing reality. A phone book, for instance, should have few indeterminacies, since the words all correspond to verifiable realities. But even the phone book would present some non-referable indeterminacies. An ad depicting a plumber happily fixing a pipe refers *not* to an existing reality but to a fiction, a situation that could happen but has not. The plumber is not real; he is a model or an illustration. The ad becomes non-referable “literature” and the phone book then transforms into a pop-art anthology of aesthetic response-provoking literary works. I cannot help but see indeterminacy and non-referable text everywhere. Even in a nonfictional document—say, an annual report—the reader will interact with literary and non-

⁶ Fish claims, in a moment of extreme oversimplification, “that ‘supplied’ and ‘given’ will only make sense as fundamental categories of classification *if the entities to which they refer are pure*, if, at some level, we can speak meaningfully of *a text that is simply there*, waiting for a reader who is, *at least potentially, wholly free*” (11-12, emphasis added). Nowhere does Iser state that the text is “simply there” nor that the reader is “wholly free.” His repeated returns to the repertoire totally refute the idea that any reader or text is “simply there” or “wholly free.”

literary texts in similar ways. Some aspects of the report (the statistics, explanations, labels, etc.) should be determinate. Others, however, require an interpretive leap. The report's synthesis of statistical trends and anomalies presents the reader with an interpretive gap, an indeterminacy. The reader must close that interpretive gap by mentally correlating the stated observation (attendance declined because of changes to the program, for instance) with the evidence given (perhaps declining usage statistics alongside fewer classes offered). An interpretive gap, however small, still exists, even in this nonfictional account.⁷

That is to say: everything is rhetorical. Iser's divide between the literary and non-literary introduces questions that the literary scholars of 2015 might find uncomfortable: is pulp literature literary, since it is non-referable? Most pulp novels would certainly involve fewer indeterminate gaps than Iser's example of *Ulysses* (48), but the pulp novel is still comprehensible using Iser's phenomenological model. What of creative nonfiction? Ostensibly referable, nonfiction still involves literary indeterminacies. Finally, games present a challenge to Iser's theory of aesthetic response. They are almost uniformly non-referable, and while their graphics would seem to eliminate the possibility of indeterminacy (after all, what's to interpret when the game shows the player how to interpret its content), the introduction of player choice and agency riddles the medium with indeterminacy. Each new choice is a new indeterminacy to be considered, selected, and incorporated into the narrative.

A variation of aesthetic response theory applied specifically to games would have to lean heavily on the implied reader, discussed below. Postmodern texts, on the other hand, continue

⁷ Unintentionally indeterminate moments happen frequently in video games: moments when a textual gap opens and the reader snaps back into some sense of self-awareness are often called glitches. The glitch is a technical error somewhere in the execution of the game's code, and they will almost inevitably break immersion. If the virtual skin on a character's face fails to load, the player is left—in some games—looking at hovering eyeballs, teeth, and a tongue. The moment instantly snaps the player into awareness of the game as a (malfunctioning) program.

Iser's prediction of increasing indeterminacy; unconventional book-projects like Jonathan Safran-Foer's *Tree of Codes*, Mark Danielewski's *House of Leaves*, and J.J. Abrams' and Doug Dorst's *S.* shift traditional printing conventions and in so doing open gaps of indeterminacy, often using paratextual elements not ordinarily associated with literary meaning, that Iser could only have imagined. These gaping indeterminate gaps—sometimes outright aporia—form one end of a spectrum of determinacy ranging all the way down to very slight indeterminacies like the conclusions drawn from the correlated statistics and explanations in an annual report. I propose, then, that the degree of determinacy or indeterminacy must also be a constant negotiation between two extremes. Most of the time, the text will not be fully determinate or indeterminate. The oscillations between determinate, secure, transparent reading and indeterminate, unstable, opaque reading will vary depending on the text, its genre, its kairotic moment—on everything, in other words. “Determinacy” and “indeterminacy” should be thought of *not* as isolated categories or a binary but rather as tendencies or locations. One part of a text will tend to be a little less determinate, a little less capable of being assumed, while another will be more determinate. Reducing phenomenology to a binary violates the basic mean-between-extremes structure on which phenomenology is founded.

This does not mean, of course, that aesthetic objects cannot provoke their own considerations of indeterminacy. Graeme Kirkpatrick cites Foucault's investigation of Magritte's “Ceci n'est pas une pipe” and the painting's ability to “[make] us question how such effects are achieved and especially the relationship between discursive and visual representation in traditional painting” (71). This questioning is provoked by an indeterminacy within the painting: the relationship between words and text are a gap, and the painting draws the viewer's attention to the gap simply by refusing to explain the apparent contradiction. The dissonance between

words and image open a gap, and the viewer's closing of that gap is the creation of the work. In Iser's terms, that interpretation, that moment of recognition held midway between text and reader *is* the work (21). The painting provides the raw materials, the cultural repertoire provides the rules, and the viewer "performs" these rules to create the work itself (21). The work alone, of course, is not solely responsible for creating the indeterminacy. Even the reader's own subjective approach will shift the text's determinacy. In one curious, questioning mood, the reader may pry open indeterminacies that would not have presented themselves had she approached the text while tired and in need of textual simplicity.

My model begins with Iser, but in the next section, the addition of Michel Foucault's theory of power and domination and Richard Lanham's work with the style-substance spectrum will complicate and enrich my rhetorical model.

Gameplay: Oscillating Attention Structures and the Generation of Power

The core of my understanding of interface is oscillation—a rapid turning or vibration between poles. Players of games of all kinds will be familiar with a similar terminology. Games are played across a series of *turns*, or *rounds*. Games are cyclical. They work in disciplined ways, informed by their rules, always moving between the same goals, actions, and systems. Games oscillate. Interface oscillates. This section will describe the core of my model: the oscillating attention structure constantly vibrating between the Subject (or player, reader, or user) and the Object (or text, or game, or rules). Attention structures oscillate up and down, along the y-axis of subject and object, but they also move forward through time, my model's x-axis.

For the past several decades, Lanham has been developing his own rhetorical vocabulary for describing style, the "style/substance matrix." The matrix is composed of four related spectra:

Signal describes the opacity of a medium or artifact; Perceiver describes how a viewer looks at the world; Motive describes the purpose or intent of human expression; and Life is Lanham's attempt to contain the other three in a near-transcendental measure of epistemological perspective (*Economics of Attention* 158). But all four spectra are, essentially, four axes of the same spectrum. Lanham's basic philosophy, in *The Economics of Attention*, *The Electronic Word*, *Style: An Anti-Textbook*, and elsewhere, is that humans view and understand the world by oscillating between *at* and *through* (*Economics* xiii). Dozens of alternate terms exist: style/substance, fluff/stuff, medium/content, how/what, etc. At its simplest and most profound, Lanham's work examines the oscillation between the always-related acts of observation and involvement.

Observation and involvement are actually Iser's terms (128). Iser uses his matrix to study the power of literature over humans while Lanham broadens the matrix's relevance to visual art and writing of all kinds. Iser, true to his phenomenological background, applies his understanding of the style/substance matrix to the performance of the aesthetic object: "The ability to perceive oneself during the process of participation is an essential quality of the aesthetic experience; the observer finds himself in a strange, halfway position: he is involved, and he watches himself being involved" (134). Iser's conception, here, is flipped. The viewer looks *at* not only the aesthetic object, but also himself.

Rhetorical play is situated between the two extremes of the self (the reader) and the informational other (the text). Within that game-play, the reader and text exchange power over the course of the temporal reading experience: as time progresses, the reader oscillates between taking power and ceding it. Over a series of moments, the text's power, that is, its influence over the reader's playing, fluctuates based on a variety of factors. The chart below represents a sample

of rhetorical game-play that begins with a critical reader holding most of the power: the line denoting the level of textual power hovers closer to the bottom. As the reader becomes more engrossed in the text, she cedes more textual power and the line rises slightly in the next moment. Perhaps something distracts her or causes her to question the text, and she retakes some power over the rhetorical game in the third moment. By the fourth moment, however, she finds herself engrossed and cedes a great deal of power to the text. The oscillation carries on in this way throughout the reading experience. The rest of this chapter is dedicated to exploring this fundamental oscillation.

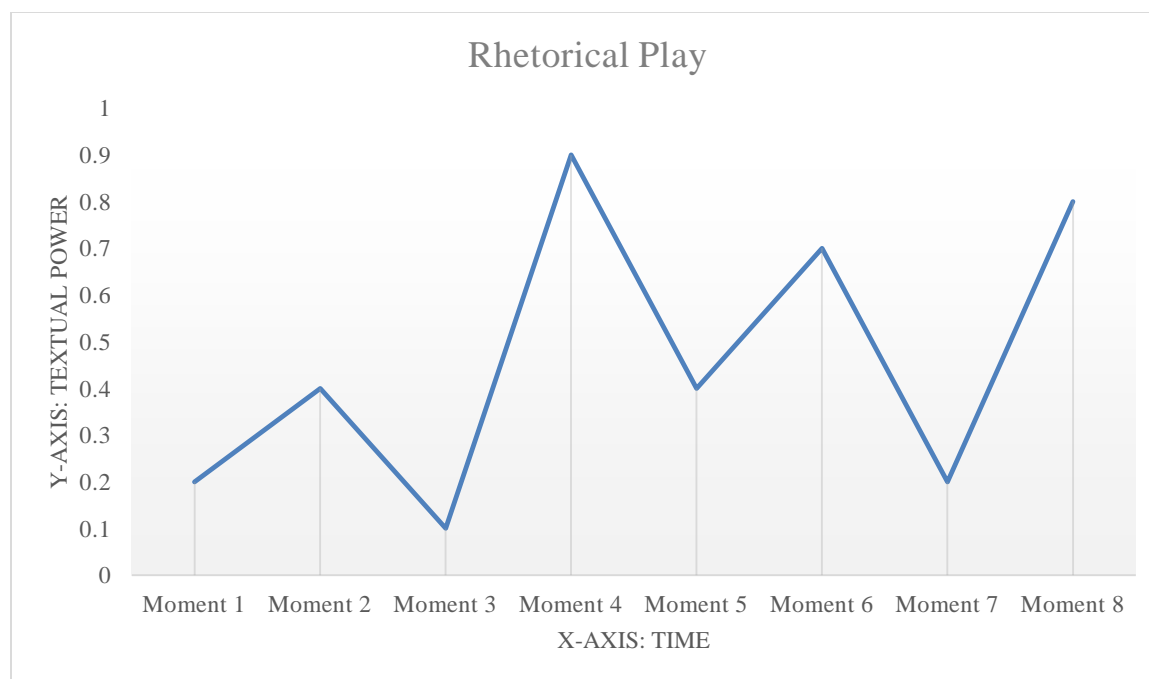


Fig. 3: Charting rhetorical play.

The x-Axis: Moving Forward in Time

My metaphors for the creation of rhetorical meaning, so far, have been overwhelmingly spatial. Meaning is created in the *space* between text and reader; rules and other constraints cordon off metaphorical *spaces* in which readers and players can create meaning, etc. What about time? Neither reading, nor playing, nor using the internet happens outside of time. Time structures our experience of media.

Iser measures literary time in swings between the foreground and the background. The pendulum of the reader's attention moves back and forth between the two, and the ticking of this pendulum decides the pace at which the text moves.

in literature this switch [between figure and ground], though it takes place continually, is not an end in itself, but is simply the precondition for a process which might be described by Arnheim's colorful phrase, 'mutual bombardment.'

The background-foreground relation is a basic structure by means of which the strategies of the text produce a tension that sets off a series of different actions and interactions, and that is ultimately resolved by the emergence of the aesthetic object. (95)

Iser writes a few pages later that the structure of theme and horizon “initiates a process of communication through transformation of positions” (99), or of oscillation. Theme and horizon are closely related to foreground and background; when horizon oscillates forward and becomes theme, the new theme cannot be interpreted except by reference to the new horizon (or, the old theme). Memory provides a constant reference point, a background against which the foreground of the current interpretive moment might stand out. Each textual moment serves as the background for the textual moment that follows it.

Iser incorporates time into his theory of aesthetic response with the metaphor of “the wandering viewpoint” (108).⁸ The trouble with literature, Iser says, is that, unlike visual art, the reader must travel through the work, experiencing it in pieces and chunks but not all at once. Iser's statement that “This mode of grasping an object [by moving through it, interpreting it from within] is unique to literature” (109) oversteps logic (since the interpreter's situation *within*, rather than without, the text is also common to film, games, oral performances, music, etc.), but Iser's primary point stands. Literature must be experienced gradually: “In brief, the sentences set in motion a process which will lead to the formation of the aesthetic object as a correlative in the mind of the reader” (110). Novels are read not all at once, but slowly, the reader's attention shifting between external object and subjective memory over the course of hours and days. The novel embeds actions, characters, and themes in its reader's memory. The reader's memory becomes the background for the current scene, the present moment of play. The accumulated memories of the previous pages should lead to a present moment of *kairos*, of perfect timing. In the best novels, memory will press the reader forward into game-play situated in kairotic moments.

Kairos is foregrounded in games, especially video games. Every action must be situated at just the right moment. Jumping a moment too soon or too late will plunge Mario into the pit—the player must read the game's interface in search of a kairotic moment, and, once the moment is found, the player must act precisely. From a temporal perspective, a game is nothing but an accumulated mass of momentary actions performed in sequences. From that same temporal perspective, a book is only an accretion of memories created by a reader based on momentary textual decryption. Each decryption and interpretation reifies some indeterminacies and opens

⁸Even in his choice of the term “wandering,” Iser cannot escape the spatial metaphor. The viewpoint does wander, but it wanders more in time than in space.

others, or, as Iser puts it, “Each new correlate, then, will answer expectations (either positively or negatively) and, at the same time, will arouse new expectations” (111).

The present textual moment is the fullest, most clearly understood (as you are likely more familiar with this sentence than the previous one), but the present implies and lays open future moments. Based on that sentence, telling you that “the present implies and lays open future moments,” you likely suspected that a sentence in the near future would explain something about the past. Your play experience was informed partially by my words, but partially too by your own expectations that were, in turn, informed by your memories of the words I have already used. This text is structuring not only your present reading experience, but your expectations of future reading and your memories of past reading. In this way, you travel through my text being pulled by expectations of the future and pushed by your memories of the past (Iser 112).

The y-Axis: Ceding and Taking Power

So far, I have suggested that the model is defined by a “playing field,” controlled by discursive rules, a cultural repertoire, and, of course, the reader. I have positioned time as a kairotic force driving the reader through the text. In this section, I will argue that the y-axis should represent discursive power with an increase in altitude representing increased textual power over the reader. As readers read, players play, and listeners listen, they inevitably cede certain amounts of power to the text to define and guide their rhetorical play. At other times, whether because of the text’s indeterminate gaps, the subject’s volition, or other factors entirely, the subject gains greater control over the text. This oscillation is also covered in *The Act of Reading*: Iser calls it “a dialectic—brought on by the reader himself—between illusion-forming and illusion-breaking” (127). During the process of illusion formation, in my Foucault-assisted

formulation, the reader cedes power to the text and allows it to engross her. In my model, illusion-forming will be represented by a rising curve. When the illusion breaks, however, the reader takes power over the text, and the model will represent this with a declining line. Together, the oscillations between illusion-forming and illusion-breaking will resemble a sine wave.

In his “Discourse on Language,” Foucault makes the foundational claim that “in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organised and redistributed according to a certain number of procedures, whose role is to avert its powers and its dangers, to cope with chance events, to evade its ponderous, awesome materiality” (216). For Foucault, a discourse is not solely a material force. It might have a “ponderous, awesome materiality,” but it is also a temporal phenomenon. Foucault summarizes the relationship between discursive time and space:

If discourses are to be treated first as ensembles of discursive events, what status are we to accord this notion of event, so rarely taken into consideration by philosophers? Of course, an event is neither substance, nor accident, nor quality nor process; events are not corporeal. And yet, an event is certainly not immaterial; it takes effect, becomes effect, always on the level of materiality.

(231)

A discourse, then, is a sum-total of a series of events, a series of discursive actions associated with particular moments and materialities. These events, Foucault notes, are *not* necessarily linear. They are moments of particular disruptive import—*kairos*, not *chronos*: “caesurae breaking the instant and dispersing the subject in a multiplicity of possible positions and functions” (231). Foucault’s momentary discursive interruptions bear a striking similarity to

Iser's moments of indeterminacy. The discursive caesura interrupts the regular flow of the text and scatters the reader. Foucault's phrase "dispersing the subject in a multiplicity of possible positions" (231) indicates that the reader is left with *choice*; her responses and reactions are unknowable to any but the reader herself. Power moves in these moments of discontinuity.

Rhetorical play, then, constantly oscillates on two different axes: one temporal (the wandering viewpoint, oscillating between past, present, and future), and one powerful. I acknowledge that in introducing "Discourse on Language," I have opened my theory to a host of new complexities. In suggesting that readers are bound by discursive power structures, I have also implicitly acknowledged that readers are themselves discursively constructed, held within networked rhetorical power relations. Given that readers are subjects to such immense disciplinary power, many critics of Foucault (like Martha Nussbaum and Nancy Hartsock, both of whom will be discussed in Chapter Three) would argue that I have undermined my own theory, since Foucault's formulation of discursive power supposedly removes individual agency. What these critics generally neglect, however, is that Foucault's theory is both a macro-level and micro-level model. Concepts like the game of truth and the will to knowledge might be society-spanning, but other facets of Foucault's thinking, like individual discipline, work on the micro-scale. Discipline, after all, is "a political anatomy of detail" (*Discipline and Punish* 139). The fluctuations of power between the reader and text that my model reflects operate in miniscule kairotic moments: in a single second, a gap in the text can open an indeterminacy and invite the reader to take power. Discourse is a network of power relations, and resistance to discursive power is just as necessary, in Foucault's formulation, as the overwhelming power of dominant discourse itself. In *The History of Sexuality Volume I*, Foucault writes that

Are there no great radical ruptures, massive binary divisions, then? Occasionally, yes. But more often one is dealing with mobile and transitory points of resistance, producing cleavages in a society that shift about, fracturing unities and effecting regroupings, furrowing across individuals themselves, cutting them up and remolding them, marking off irreducible regions in them, in their bodies and minds. Just as the network of power relations ends by forming a dense web that passes through apparatuses and institutions, without being exactly localized in them, so too the swarms of points of resistance traverses social stratifications and individual unities. (96)

If power swarms, then resistance also swarms. In Iser's work, one can see the outlines of power relations almost wherever one goes. Indeterminacy, Iser says, must always be restricted: "these indeterminate elements must be kept in check by means of conventions, procedures, and rules, but even these cannot disguise the fact that indeterminacy is a prerequisite for dyadic interaction, and hence a basic constituent of communication" (59). This bears a strong resemblance to Foucault's formulation of power and resistance: indeterminacy allows for reader control and empowerment, but this kind of open resistance must constantly be restricted by cultural power ("conventions, procedures, and rules") (59). Even the conception of reading as "the game of the imagination" (108) relies on a model of power and resistance. Submission to game rules is a requirement, but to advance, players must always pit themselves against the game system, finding ways to slip around it, bend it to their advantage, or simply optimize their method of operating within that system. Succeeding at a video game requires simultaneously obeying the game's rules and slipping past them most efficiently.

Iser claims that the nature of fictional text is subversive: it serves primarily to question and defamiliarize. Fiction “must call into question the validity of familiar norms,” so “how can this 'common ground' be established, in order for the communication to be 'successful'? After all, the ultimate function of the strategies is to *defamiliarize* the familiar” (87, emphasis preserved). How can rules be identical to the games that they inspire? How can a game driven by rules successfully call into question the same rules on which the game relies? In other words, how can literature be subversive while following its own rules? Iser makes his argument with the help of Gestalt theory:

Each schema makes the world accessible in accordance with the conventions the artist has inherited. But when something new is perceived which is not covered by these schemata, it can only be represented by means of a correction to the schemata. And through the correction, the special experience of the new perception may be captured and conveyed. (91)

In other words, when a reader encounters something with which she is unfamiliar, she must “correct” her understanding of the material to account for the new, unfamiliar material. She must assimilate new experiences into the old by shifting her understanding of the framework so that the new material is logical and familiar. She must convert the unfamiliar material into something familiar. This process of assimilation or “correction” gives literature its subversive power.

One can see this oscillation in a commonplace happening: the act of getting lost in a book. At some moments, a reader can be so absorbed by the text that she loses all consciousness of the fact that she is reading. The text dominates, and the reader loses awareness of herself. At other times, the text becomes visible either because of stylistic features or because the reader becomes distracted, and the reader's own attention to the words takes precedence over the world

that those words evoke. Chapter Two will consider disciplinary power and the limit case of “getting lost in a book” in more detail.

A natural affinity seems to exist between Iser and Foucault, then, but another problem exists: phenomenology. In *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow apply Foucault’s work on “the statement” to Austin and Searle’s speech act theory. The subheading title is “A Phenomenology to End All Phenomenologies” (44). Clearly, a text that openly predicates itself on phenomenological structures—as mine does—must needs address this apparent conflict of interests. What Dreyfus and Rabinow seem to suggest is that Foucault’s work creates a figure-ground reversal of phenomenology’s usual assumptions and procedures: “Foucault develops in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* a method which allows him to avoid consideration of the ‘internal’ conditions governing speech act understanding, and to focus purely on what was actually said or written and how it fits into the discursive formation—the relatively autonomous system of serious speech acts in which it was produced” (49). The usual concern of phenomenology, the subject’s experience of the phenomenon, is snipped neatly out. The genealogist then studies everything *around* the now-absent phenomenon to determine how that phenomena functions as part of its discursive structure. Foucault’s mode of phenomenology (studying the experience of, in his case, “the statement,” what Dreyfus and Rabinow refer to as the “serious speech act” (46)) ends the possibility of phenomenology by hollowing the statement itself and studying it only in the arrangement of other texts that define and contextualize it.

The trouble with incorporating Foucault’s model of power and disruptive discourse into a basically phenomenological model—one that assumes that meaning is produced in the oscillation of power between text and subject—is that Foucault dismisses almost out of hand the importance of the subject. Just after his discussion of disruption in discursive events in “Discourse on

Language,” Foucault writes that “Such a discontinuity strikes and invalidates the smallest units, traditionally recognised and the least readily contested: the instant and the subject” (231). In a way, Foucault’s refusal of the subject returns to that most troublesome of reader response questions: “who reads?” If the moments of discursive disruptions, so crucial to the creation of rhetorical meaning, are potentially anywhere, and if they inevitably fracture the subjective experience of the work, then how can one say anything at all about the individual performing or being performed by the discourse? More pointedly, in the interview “Truth and Power,” Foucault says that

I don’t believe the problem [of historical contextualization] can be solved by historicizing the subject as posited by the phenomenologists, fabricating a subject that evolves through the course of history. One has to dispense with the constituent subject, to get rid of the subject itself, that’s to say, to arrive at an analysis that can account for the constitution of the subject within a historical framework. (118)

To crudely summarize: the subject is not *useful*. It is either so historically situated that it cannot be known without the historical knowledge that the scholar seeks to assemble (thus making it useless as a heuristic) or the subject is “transcendental in relation to the field of events” (118), in which case it is so removed from the historical context that, again, it loses its utility. Here too I see an agreement between Foucault and Iser. Foucault dismisses the subject in favor of the genealogical approach by which the historian “can account for the constitution of knowledges, discourses, domains of objects, and so on, without having to make reference to a subject” (118). Iser, for his part, proposes the implied reader as essentially a textual construct. Iser removes the subject entirely, sublimating it back into the text (38). Foucault transfers the importance of the

subject back to the historical context that surrounds it, and Iser, similarly, makes the subject into the implied reader who, in turn, serves as essentially another textual rule structure (38).

None of this is to say, of course, that the individual subject does not physically exist. The individual subject is everywhere; it haunts Foucault and Iser's studies, even though it is unstable to the point of insubstantiality. Rather, the subject cannot be predicted or analyzed with any great stability. I cannot say for certain how "The Reader" would respond to a particular rhetorical moment, whether he would recognize himself as a reader after being subjected to a moment of indeterminate discontinuity because there is no single class of "Reader"; there are only individual readers. Like Foucault and Iser, I will generally concentrate on the power and influence of the text, though I will often have cause to refer to the subject as an active agent. Even when I refer to "the reader," "the player," or even "the subject," it can only ever be placeholder, a silhouette.

The Sine Wave: Mapping Rhetorical Play

Within this playing field, defined by power and time, the reader's engagement with the text can be understood as a rhetorical oscillation "between illusion-forming and illusion-breaking" (Iser 127). This oscillation is a natural outgrowth of Iser's phenomenological approach. Because reading takes place in a middle ground between the self and the external text, the reading experience will always be a blend of self and not-self. Reading must, by necessity, involve the incorporation of otherness to the self. Reading is assimilation. Iser describes the process of readerly assimilation: "From [the unfamiliar experience's] virtual presence arise the 'alien associations' which begin to accumulate and so to bombard the formulated gestalten, which in turn become undermined and thus bring about a reorientation of our acts of apprehension"

(126). The reader oscillates between familiarity and unfamiliarity, constantly struggling to incorporate and make sense of the “alien associations” given by the text. This oscillation, Iser says, is the root of “the impression, as we read, that we are living another life” (127). In many ways, the vibration between “illusion-forming and illusion-breaking” (127) is more profound than any of the others. It is the oscillation between self and other, the navigation of the unfamiliar, and the conquest of the unknown by the self. By forming illusions, the text's otherness is negated and absorbed. When illusions are broken, the text reasserts itself and challenges the reader to confront it. The text faces the reader with its otherness. And, inevitably, the reader must again assimilate.

Transferring Foucault's conception of swarming power and resistance relations into a phenomenological playing field confirms something that Foucault assumed all along: that power relations *always* necessitate resistance. Power without resistance is domination, as Foucault describes in “The Ethic of Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom”:

This analysis of relations of power constitutes a very complex field; it sometimes meets what we can call facts or *states of domination, in which the relations of power, instead of being variable and allowing different partners a strategy which alters them, find themselves firmly set and congealed*. When an individual or a social group manages to block a field of relations of power, to render them impassive and invariable and to prevent all reversibility of movement [...] we are facing what can be called a state of domination. It is certain that in such a state the practice of liberty does not exist or exists only unilaterally or is extremely confined and limited. (114, emphasis added)

When seen as a waveform, power also oscillates. When oscillation stops, power relations “congeal” into domination. Power relations are, in a way, phenomenological: active performances held between extremes. When the wave ceases to move, when the coordinates are fully aligned with the subject or the object, play stops and becomes something else. For media, the fully-subjective experience is not a medium, not a text, not a game, but only a self, a reader, a player. The fully-objective experience is what Chapter Two will call a “total immersion,” no longer rhetorical but instead substitutive. Just so, a power relation without oscillation is domination. Foucault and Iser’s theories, then, are more similar than they first appear.

The oscillation's end result is that the reader is in a “continual oscillation between involvement and observation” (128). Meta-consciousness of the reading act is the nature of reading. More broadly, the aesthetic experience is defined by the ability to reflect on it as it is happening. Every aesthetic experience—every interface—is a negotiation between the self and the external aesthetic object. The pleasure of the video game is the insertion of the self into a digital space: one becomes a doubled self when playing a game, at once the real self, the one holding the controller and observing the game, and also the virtual self, the one represented onscreen, surrounded by and interacting with an unreal world. Every game requires some balance of immersion and observation. Every aesthetic experience is an “oscillation between involvement and observation” (128), between “receiving” and “evaluation,” to use the terms from the introduction, and the ability to manipulate those two power fluctuations successfully defines what Richard Lanham calls an “attention economist.”

The viewer of an art object, say, Duchamp's *Fountain*, perceives the object as an art object, but must also perceive himself as the viewer of an art object. He views the urinal-art, and he watches himself viewing the urinal art. Perception is a mirror as well as a lens. Lanham's “at”

end of the spectrum matches up, roughly, to Iser's "observational" mode: in both cases, the self and the medium (or the way in which the self interacts with the information) are foregrounded, and the content of the medium becomes background. And Lanham's "through" end of the spectrum correlates with Iser's act of "involvement": the self and the interaction with the medium are forgotten, and only the content is remembered. *Fountain* is an almost purely observational art object: there is no content,⁹ only the self-conscious presentation as *art*. The viewer must recognize herself as a viewer of art (or of art-packaging at least).

Attention Waves

The oscillation of attention between "at" and "through," then, is not a new structure. Richard Lanham's genius is in suggesting that, rather than using at and through (or involvement and observation, or immediacy and hypermediacy, or question and answer) as categories or methods of classification, that we instead understand them as a filter:

we can consider art not as objects but as ways of seeing objects.... If objects can invite us to look through them or at them, or alternate from at to through using a particular frequency of oscillation between them, then our attention can operate in the same way. Our attention is richest and most powerful when it oscillates between everything that *at* vision does and everything that *through* vision does
(*Economics* 178-79)

For Lanham, then, art is a mode of interpretation, a recognition of the oscillation between at and through. Art is awareness of process.

⁹Besides a urinal.

Process and motion have come up repeatedly in this chapter, but they have been mostly overlooked. Reading is a process, writing is a process, and interpretation more broadly is a process, but what manner of process are they? Let us return briefly to the model.

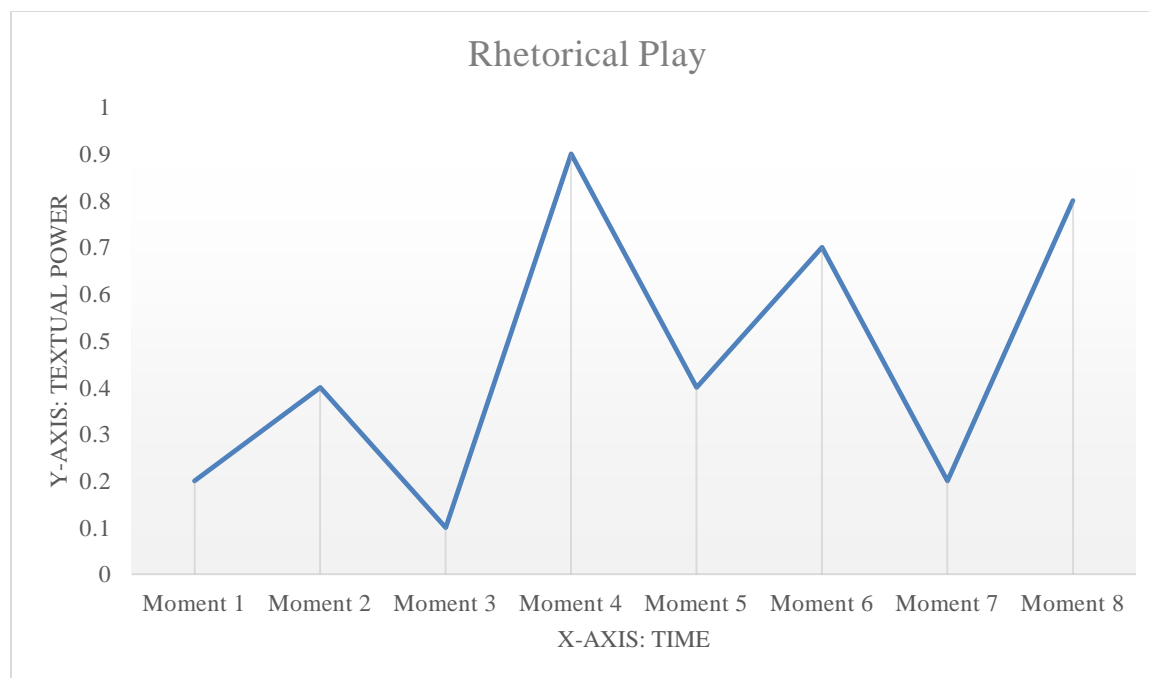


Fig. 4: The oscillating structure of rhetorical play.

The oscillation is a wave. Lanham mentioned a useful word in the above block quote: frequency. Lanham refers there, and a handful of other places, to “frequencies” of oscillation between at and through (100, 126, 178, 238, 243). He never develops a specific system for understanding frequency, but one can draw conclusions based on the following quote: “Again, an interesting contrast between a high-frequency oscillation between word and image [represented by artist's books] and a low-frequency one [represented by David Carson's jarring design work]” (126).

When readers or viewers can make sense of an object more quickly and easily, the oscillation between subject and object is faster. Signal from the object is assimilated and familiarized by the viewer more quickly, allowing him to return again to the object. The frequency is high, the wavelengths grouped more closely together. But in a low-frequency oscillation, more time elapses between the observation of the object and its assimilation. The object defies the subject, the text resists the reader's interpretation. The work becomes “obscure,” or “obtuse,” or “opaque.” In other words, the reader must look *at* it, rather than *through* it. Thus, we understand that “through” vision (or involvement, or immediacy, or immersion) has a high oscillating frequency, while “at” vision (or observation, or hypermediacy) has a low oscillating frequency.

What, exactly, is that oscillating wave pictured in the model? It's easy to label it “attention”; the subject's attention oscillates between the text (in the “through” mode) and the subject (in the “at” mode). But while the upward trajectory, toward the object, is easy to explain—paying attention to a media object is familiar—the downward trajectory, back toward the subject, is less intuitive. This is what Iser calls “feedback,” and what this chapter understands as a claiming of interpretive power by the reader from the text. Or, from a different perspective, the text “grants” power to the subject by encouraging critical reflection or self-awareness. The text drives the subject back to an awareness of herself. The object is inert, but if it confers an effect on the subject, the object begins to take on something like an agency of its own.

Oscillation Frequencies

This “wavelength theory” of attention oscillation bears a striking resemblance to Marshall McLuhan's idea of hot and cool media. Media, according to McLuhan, can be “hot” or “cool,” and these categories—perhaps unsurprisingly—line up roughly with Lanham, Iser and all

the rest's understanding of the at/through oscillation. Cool media, McLuhan says, “are high in participation or completion by the audience” (162), while hot media “do not leave so much to be filled in or completed by the audience” (162). “At” vision is cool. It demands more of its subject; the subject spends more time assimilating the media. The oscillations are slower, the wavelengths longer. “Through” vision is hot, energetic. Subjects execute more oscillations in the same amount of time, and spend less time assimilating and considering the media before returning to the object. McLuhan builds on his initial metaphor of temperature a few pages later when he introduces the core of my model: motion (163).

McLuhan is interested in the spiral. In a series of intellectual hops, McLuhan finds his way from the hot, direct efficiency of print culture and its translation into the even-hotter electric age, to Yeats' picture of the spinning jenny in God's side, to Yeats' great obsession: the spiral (163). The spiral “is a redundant form inevitable to the electric age, in which the concentric pattern is imposed by the instant quality, and overlay in depth, of electric speed. But the concentric with its endless intersection of planes is necessary for insight” (164). McLuhan, freed from the need to condense his theory into a coherent model, argues that this spiral pattern is a departure from the linearity of the mechanical age, and thus also a departure from that age's media concerns: “More and more we turn from the content of messages to study total effect” (164). In other words, McLuhan anticipates Lanham's claim that the world has become one of fluff, not stuff. Yet, I suspect more is buried in that statement. McLuhan's use of the *oscillatio*-inspired “turn” is not accidental. I suspect he is playing a game with us. I suspect that “more and more,” here, is not the same as “increasingly.” Coming on the heels of his praise of the spiral, it seems doubtful that McLuhan would suggest that the electric age has moved in a parabola from the mechanical age. We have not changed directions; we are *always* changing directions. The

attention economy of the electric age is not merely traveling in a different direction than the old “stuff-based” economy, but rather has turned itself into a spiral. McLuhan is suggesting, obliquely as usual, that we are engaged in a constant oscillation between “the content of messages” and “the total effect,” or that we, as a culture, have learned to oscillate between at and through, fluff and stuff, hypermediacy and immediacy, observation and involvement.

I do not, however, embrace McLuhan uncritically. His theory is problematic in places, especially his reductive vision of media history. To hear McLuhan, one would think that the benighted centuries before the twentieth had never heard of manipulating attention. He contrasts the electric spiral with “the old lineal and fragmentary procedures and tools of analysis from the mechanical age” (164), but the spiral, the oscillation, is as old as rhetoric. The history of media is a long engagement with attention structures. Meaning has *always* been created by dancing between observation and involvement, and while electric technology certainly produces new methods of capturing attention, the basic mechanics of interpretation and rhetorical play are the same. One need only look at the metadrama of early modern theatre to see attention manipulation in action.

Metadrama is a form of intentional attention shifting. In moments of metadrama, previously transparent action, in which the audience is likely to be most concerned about the characters or plot, suddenly turns opaque with the forced realization that the audience is watching a play. Metadrama frequently involves a play-within-a-play, like “The Murder of Gonzago” in *Hamlet*, or the innumerable dumb-shows in *Spanish Tragedy* and *Revenger's Tragedy*. The actors in the play suddenly become viewers themselves. In seeing the main characters suddenly rendered mute, the audience must recognize itself as an audience watching another audience. In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare dramatizes the power relation between subject and

text when Hamlet uses “The Murder of Gonzago” to “catch the conscience of the king” (2.2.526). Hamlet relies on the text’s ability to cue self-awareness. Claudius is meant to participate in the play’s illusions and subsequently shift attention from the play to himself. The text will oscillate between the players’ illusion and the viewer’s break from fiction into self-reflection. The actual *performance* of “The Murder of Gonzago,” however, draws the audience into a parallel enacting of the rhetorical play.

To use Iser’s term, the audience members become *observers*. They must recognize themselves as observers, and the performance *as* a play in both its verb and noun forms. Metadrama slams a translucent filter over transparent action and development. It demands recognition. In his instructions to the players, Hamlet seems to emphasize immersion. First, he cautions against melodrama (“It out-Herods/ Herod; pray you, avoid it” (3.2.12-13)), then against excessive subtlety (“Be not to tame neither” (3.2.15)), finally encouraging them “to hold, as ‘twere, the mirror up to nature, to show virtue her feature, scorn her own image” (3.2.20-21). In essence, Hamlet cautions the player against anything that would break the scene’s immersion. Unlike the modern and postmodern works of interest to Iser, Hamlet intends to provoke a moment of critical illusion-breaking with immersive performance, rather than intentionally disruptive or indeterminate textual breakages. The early modern approach to media, at least in this instance, emphasizes the microcosmic parallels between stage and world. A natural performance, for Hamlet, will lead more smoothly to personal reflection—a marked difference from the intentional textual breaks employed by the modernists and postmodernists. At any rate, the play-within-a-play works differently on the audience than on Claudius. Where Claudius notices the parallels between the world of the play and the larger world of Denmark, the audience notices the parallels between the fictional Denmark and their own theatrical experience.

At least in the Second Quarto version on which my Norton Critical *Hamlet* was based, “The Murder of Gonzago” is preceded by a dumb-show that silently enacts King Hamlet’s murder. Following the dumb-show, the audience watches the players enact the actual play-within-a-play, at least until Claudius rises. Not only does the audience watch the actors watching actors pretending to be actors, the audience is first primed for the metadrama by seeing the actors act what is essentially a silent abstract of the play to come which, in some ways, resembles a compacted version of *Hamlet* itself. The number of dramatic layers is dizzying, and the dramatic refraction turns the audience into an audience once removed: an audience watching an audience. In that prismatic splitting of audience, the viewer is offered a chance to step outside himself and consider himself as a viewer. In that removal, the audience-member attains some measure of power. He recognizes the play as a powerful illusion, a text capable of making a king flee.

The spiraling oscillation between *at* and *through* is the moment in Seneca’s *Thyestes* when Atreus throws open the hall to reveal Thyestes having eaten his own sons (27), or perhaps when Atreus reveals to Thyestes his sons’ heads in the charger (29). Thyestes himself becomes the subject of oscillation, shifting from experiencing his grief transparently and fully to being the object of scorn and shame. Seneca demonstrates for us that attention is power. The full revenge comes not from the murder, but rather from the recognition of the murder. Revenge tragedy is about transparency and opacity. Revenge occurs when participation becomes observation, when the act of vengeance is made known, when Atreus uncovers the dish bearing Thyestes’ sons’ heads (29). Revenge drama is so captivating, so powerfully theatrical, because its conventions demand such drastic oscillations between observation and involvement. Performance is oscillation. Interpretation requires it; perception requires it. Oscillating attention structures are at the core of powerful media.

Temperature in Ludic Oscillations

For McLuhan, temperature is a measure of how much work the interpreter must do. Comics require a great deal of interpretation; the reader must assemble for herself what happens between panels. When Batman disappears from the police department's roof at the end of a conversation with Commissioner Gordon, the reader might not see Batman's departure, only Batman and Gordon together in one panel, and Gordon alone on the roof in the next. The reader must take more of an interpretive leap, and thus more time spent on the "Subject" pole of the model, than if the comic were a novel describing Batman slipping down the fire escape while Gordon looks away. The gaps in the comics require more from the subject: more time processing the movement, more mental energy figuring out what happened. The primary measure of a medium's temperature, for McLuhan, is the degree to which it is characterized by gaps. The more work the subject must do to make sense of the object—the more time spent near the "Subject" pole—the longer the wavelength and the cooler the medium.

But what of games? According to McLuhan's scale, games—which demand near-constant player participation to exist at all—should be a very cool medium. Yet games can have extremely short wavelengths between subject and object. Skilled players practically vibrate between looking "at" and "through"; the execution of the game demands it. In one micro-moment, a player considers the controls and how to manipulate them (perhaps pressing a conjunction of forward, right trigger, and X to make a character leap off a ledge), and in the next, is wrapped up in the world of the game (watching the character land amongst a surprised crowd), then nearly subconsciously selects the next flow of controller commands. Skilled players are able to forget the controller in their hands and simply manipulate the on-screen world. This is not because they cease observing or because the game becomes transparent, but because they can oscillate so

rapidly between participation and observation. Yet, for McLuhan, play is a cool medium: “It is play that cools off the hot situations of actual life by miming them” (168). Or maybe it isn't: “Such sports are inflammatory, it is plain. And what we consider entertainment or fun in our media inevitably appears as violent political agitation to a cool culture” (168). McLuhan takes both sides within a paragraph. Play is cool, but also hot?

Perhaps medium is not everything. Great variance can exist within a single medium. Novels can exhibit wide gaps that demand a great deal of effort to traverse (consider *Gravity's Rainbow* with gaps so wide that multiple companion volumes exist), but novels can also be straightforward, easy to understand affairs with few gaps and a high oscillating frequency. Games too can be hot or cool. Popular titles like *Bioshock*, *Assassin's Creed*, and *Mass Effect* are hot, featuring almost imperceptibly quick oscillations between seeing and participating. Moments of meta-recognition, in which the player sees herself playing, are few and far between. The games press on with hot speed, throwing the player through satisfying rounds of violence and spectacle.



Fig. 5: A screenshot from *Mass Effect 3* (Heywood).

But other games can be cool. Quieter, independent titles like *Gone Home* and *Proteus* demand reflection and reward long periods of consideration. The oscillations between immersion and observation are so long that some players refuse to recognize them as games at all. In both games, the player must assemble a narrative through wide gaps. In *Gone Home*, the player wanders an empty house, finding and reading domestic documents—a VHS rental receipt here, a takeout menu or note-to-self there.



Fig. 6: A screenshot from *Gone Home* (Warr).

The game's narrative, such as it is, emerges as the player assembles these little artifacts into the story of the main character's sister falling in love with a girl from her school and running away from home. The pleasure of *Gone Home* comes from its coolness, from its gaps. Yet it is played through the same interface as *Mass Effect* or *Bioshock*; it is the same hot/cool medium of the video game.

McLuhan benefits little from trying to create stable systems from his theories, but his notion of hot and cool media suggests something important about my model. Different types of media and different media artifacts have different, distinctive frequencies, based on the ways in which the viewer's attention oscillates during the playing of that medium. Some media, like

Gone Home, have long wavelengths with a great deal of time spent participating in the world of the game—walking the halls of the empty house, opening drawers, reading notes and dust jackets—and a great deal of time and energy spent interpreting and contemplating the artifact. Other media, like *Assassin's Creed*, demand very short wavelengths: recognizing enemy attacks, responding, making attacks oneself, moving to advantageous positions, all of these actions happen multiple times per second, and if one spends too long looking *at* the game (contemplating the animation, or appreciating a texture), one dies and is prevented from advancing. This is not to say that a single artifact's wavelength remains the same throughout the experience. *Assassin's Creed* manipulates attention masterfully. It draws the player's attention to violent *coup de grace* animations by entering slow motion and zooming in—the observation of carnage becomes a reward for the previously “through-playing” player.



Fig. 7: A screenshot from *Assassin's Creed Unity* (Invasion IV4).

Bioshock Infinite intersperses its rounds of combat with elegantly designed and beautifully colored vistas, though it too allows for gruesome, attention-grabbing “executions” that are sometimes rendered literally opaque by a splash of blood covering the screen.¹⁰

The subject, too, has power over the frequency of the rhetorical oscillation. I have discussed skilled players of games so far, and Iser assumes a skilled reader of fiction. But unskilled players and readers' experiences would have very different looking wavelengths than their skilled counterparts. Existing gaps in the experience yawn wider; transparency is forbidden, and in its place, a frustrating opacity. But even experienced players and readers will not approach the same artifacts in the same ways. Play is hopelessly plural, so when we discuss the frequency of an artifact, we can only refer to the actions of *an implied subject*. The exact frequency of the rhetorical oscillation will change with each iteration.

The core of a media object is movement, process, oscillation. Interpretation is a game that moves through a repeating series of oscillations or spirals in order to generate meaning. These oscillations in the subject's interactions with the object are driven by physical media as well as learned cultural methods, and they can be undermined and resisted.

Other Variations on Oscillating Attention Structures

Other scholars besides Lanham and Iser have dealt with the same style/substance matrix with different terminologies and emphases. In 1999, Jay Bolter and David Grusin's *Remediation* proposed a very similar-sounding spectrum. They propose the terms “immediacy” for media that encourages transparency and erasure (in other words, media that makes its subject immediate), and “hypermediacy” for media that foregrounds itself as a medium (5). These terms map

¹⁰It says a great deal about the state of the games industry that so much effort and sophistication is put into drawing player attention to the results of their violence.

conveniently on to Lanham's at/through matrix. Immediate media are meant to be transparent, looked *through*, while hypermediated media demand that viewers look *at* them; they are translucent. Bolter and Grusin are careful to say that these are not universal categories, only genealogical markers applicable to certain objects at certain times (21). This is true, to an extent. Bolter and Grusin's particular terms are grounded in a media-studies context, but the broad applicability of the at/through matrix might be universal—at least universal to human media.

The matrix is an opening model of what Lanham calls “a new rhetoric of the arts, an unblushing and unfiltered attempt to plot all the ranges of formal expressivity now possible” (14). But, in fact, the matrix is nothing new. Its phrasing and its use of the spectrum format might be new, but the idea of shifting attention between considering the textual object itself, and considering what it represents, is as old as rhetoric. Plato demonstrates Lanham's rhetorical oscillation repeatedly in the *Gorgias*, and, arguably, in every Socratic dialogue.

Plato distrusts rhetoric because—as he has Socrates argue—its purpose is to persuade, and not to teach or seek truth. The pursuit of truth is the domain of dialectic. Dialectic is similar to rhetoric, but unconcerned with matters of mere style or persuasion. Its intent is to discover truth, to teach true knowledge, and Socrates (and, thus, Plato) accomplishes this by using a very particular interface. Plato works through dialogues. Midway through the *Gorgias*, Plato has Socrates say this to Gorgias: “I will ask you what you do mean by the persuasion that results from rhetoric, and with what matters you think it deals. Now why is it that, having a suspicion of my own, I am going to ask you this, instead of stating it myself?” (Plato 65). Socrates' second question is key to understanding Plato's model of meaning creation. Why does Socrates ask? For that matter, why does Cicero's Crassus ask? Simple declamation would, on the surface, seem to be the most direct, efficient method of arriving at the truth. Dialogue—that inherently dramatic

format—opens the door to all kinds of inessential stylistic distractions: irritating interruptors like Polus, cheering audiences, and the frequent switching of disputants.

Socrates answers that he speaks in dialogues “not on your account, but with a view to the argument, and to such a progress in it as may best reveal to us the point we are discussing” (Plato 65). The dialogue format, for Plato, is conducive to the revelation of the truth? The answer is the word “progress,” from the Latin root “*prōgressus*” meaning “forward movement, advance, development” (“progress, n.”). An argument is a thing that moves, and dialogue—much more than nonfiction prose—is strongly anchored in the forward flow of time. In the back-and-forth of the discussion, the reader is reminded constantly of time. Each shift of speakers is a reminder of the conversation—and time—moving forward:

Socrates: You are right there. Come now, answer me in the same way about rhetoric: with what particular thing is its skill concerned?

Gorgias: With speech.

Socrates: What kind of speech, Gorgias? Do you mean that which shows sick people by what regimen they could get well?

Gorgias: No. (Plato 62)

We have seen this before. Plato uses the dialogue form to foreground what Iser calls the “wandering viewpoint,” the reader's situated-ness in a moment in time. The dialogue form, then, is a “process” (which shares the root “*procedere*” with “proceed”). It is a form of play.

The Platonic dialogue format foregrounds the *progress* inherent in meaning creation, and at the same time, dramatizes the involvement of the self in the assimilation of meaning. In Iser's phenomenological model, the “game of the imagination” (108) occurs in the oscillation between self and text. The reader constantly converts unfamiliar (othered) text into something familiar:

memories and interpretations of the text. The Platonic dialogue allows this wobbly assimilation to happen smoothly. The disputant's frequent answers of “yes” and “as you say” and “certainly” are moments in which chunks of meaning are processed and accepted. The disputant accepts Socrates' statement and signals with the acknowledgment that he is prepared to receive another piece of the argument. The affirmations are temporal markers but also dividers of meaning. Plato asks rather than tells because the dialogue form is a metaphor, a model for the process of meaning creation. Dialectic dramatizes rhetorical play. The dialectic form foregrounds an exchange of power between speakers. As the dialogue progresses, as it *progresses*, power fluctuates between speakers, and the total effect of these momentary power fluctuations is the process of the creation of truth. The dialectic is the game of truth and the act of rhetorical play: a series of rule-bound power exchanges by which truth is produced.

One likewise senses the presence of an oscillating textuality in Roland Barthes' *The Pleasure of the Text*. Though Barthes refuses to spell out something as simple as a binary, the two modes of engagement with a text—what the translator renders “pleasure” and its broken, orgasmic counterpart “bliss”—do bear some resemblance to the core ceding and resistance to textual power. The closest Barthes' intentionally broken, disjointed text comes to defining the relationship of pleasure to bliss seems to be this passage: “Now the subject who keeps the two texts in his field and in his hands the reins of pleasure and bliss is an anachronic subject... he enjoys the consistency of his selfhood (that is his pleasure) and seeks its loss (that is his bliss). He is a subject split twice over, doubly perverse” (14). For Barthes, the movement is between the continuity of pleasure and the moment of its loss; all of literary experience for him seems to be balanced along what he calls a “seam” between continuity and breakage. He writes that “what pleasure wants is the site of a loss, the seam, the cut, the deflation, the *dissolve* which seizes the

subject in the midst of bliss” (7). Obviously, Barthes’ project in *The Pleasure of the Text* is to map the metaphor of text-as-coitus. Pleasure, continuity, what Lanham would call “through” reading, parallels the rhythm of sex, but paradoxically, this pleasure wants its own cessation in the form of orgasm: a thrilling breakage, a climax that ends the process. Within the model of rhetorical play, moments of broken illusion are moments of bliss, a cessation to the rhythmic illusion of the text-as-pleasure and a discontinuity between the subject-as-subjected-to-the-text and the subject-outside-of-the-text.

I have condensed my comparative approach to these writers’ uses of oscillation into the following table:

Table 2: Variations on the oscillation structure

Theorist; Discipline	Rising Slope	Declining Slope
Michel Foucault; History/Politics	Subject cedes power	Subject resists
Richard Lanham; Rhetoric	Through reading	At reading
Wolfgang Iser; Reader response	Illusion forming	Illusion breaking
Jay Bolter and David Grusin; Media ecology	Immediacy	Hypermediacy
Marshall McLuhan; Media ecology	Hot media	Cool media
Roland Barthes; Literary theory	Pleasure (<i>plaisir</i>)	Bliss (<i>jouissance</i>)
William Shakespeare; Drama	Drama	Metadrama

Remaining Questions

Who Reads?

Games need players. I have referenced the subject, the player, and the reader many times, but I have not yet identified that figure. The reader represents a problem for reader-response

critics. Who reads? Every reader-response critic proposes his or her own answer, and Iser lists a few of them: “there is the superreader (Riffaterre), the informed reader (Fish), and the intended reader (Wolf)” (30). Each of these readers, however, is mired in historicity, attempting to reflect actual readers responding to their various historio-cultural contexts; they are “nevertheless drawn from specific groups of real, existing readers” (30). Iser's solution cuts the Gordian knot. In de Bruyn's succinct phrasing, “*there is no such thing as the real reader*” (105, emphasis preserved). Iser introduces the “implied reader,” an imaginary reader-figure anchored completely in the text (34). This is the reader implied by “predispositions laid down, not by an empirical outside reality, but by the text itself” and is “in no way to be identified with any real reader” (34).¹¹ It might seem counter-intuitive to answer the question of “who reads?” with “imaginary people,” but the implied reader is a useful tool. It allows one to consider the interaction of reader and text without having to define a set of historically real or hypothetically plausible readers.

The implied reader does not, of course, render the real reader obsolete, since “the real reader is always offered a particular role to play, and it is this role that constitutes the concept of the implied reader” (34-35). The implied reader is the expression of Iser's phenomenological understanding of the act of reading. It blends a subjective experience with an objective reality. The implied reader's roots are in the words of the text—the objective reality—but it simulates the subjective experience of a reader's interaction with that text. In de Bruyn's phrasing, the implied reader has a “two-part structure... [a] textual and [a] mental dimension” (106).

Ben de Bruyn suggests that Iser's notion of the text is drawn from speech-act theory: to Iser, the text of a novel is a performative utterance, “which actively *create[s]* the state of affairs

¹¹Other writers like Walter Ong and Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford have proposed similar hypothetical readers: Ong discusses a writer's always-fictional audience, and Ede and Lunsford propose an “audience invoked” by a text. Both ideas are nearly the same as Iser's: an imaginary reader cued by the structure of the text.

[it is] describing” (115, emphasis preserved). An utterance in a novel demands performance. In *The Faerie Queene*, Spenser describes Archimago's hut as “A litle lowly Hermitage it was,/ Downe in a dale, hard by a forests side” (1.1.34.1-2), and based on this utterance, the implied reader will imagine a small, humble hermitage. The language drives the reader to play by its rules.

The reliance on an implied reader is ahistorical and (strangely for a theory based on reader-response) could be accused of formalism, since the implied reader is defined by the form of the text. The implied reader brushes over one assumption, however. It is based partially on the rules of the text, but it is also based on the mind of the individual critic. My perception of the rules governing *The Faerie Queene* will vary from other scholars, and so my implied reader can never be identical to another critic's implied reader. This is the limit of the implied reader. It must involve a real reader at some point, and the introduction of the real reader infects the implied reader with the same uncertainties and instabilities that accompany discussions of such a temporally, spatially, economically, politically, culturally (etc.) dispersed group of readers. The implied reader neatly cuts out the actual reader, but to avoid becoming a purely textual structure, indistinguishable from the text itself, the implied reader must assimilate certain traits of the real reader—particularly her human responses to text. Perhaps, then, Iser's terminology is misleading, since “the concept of the implied reader designates a network of response-inviting structures, which impel the reader to grasp the text” (34), not a reliable reader-figure. We return, then, to Iser's characterization of the implied reader as a role for a real reader to play.

One could not write a reliable script of the implied reader's response to a text, but one could (as Barthes does in *S/Z*) write an actual reader's script of a text, knowing that that script would be the recording of one particular variation of the text. The implied reader is ultimately a

discursive formation. The implied reader's extra-textual counterpart is the idea of "reader strategies," linguistic, rhetorical, and literary conventions common to a large bloc of readers. Iser's understanding of reader strategies comes from speech act theory, specifically Austin's term "procedures accepted by both" text and reader (Iser 69). Reader strategies themselves are relatively simple; Iser says that "The strategies can generally be discerned through the techniques employed in the text—whether they be narrative or poetic. One need only think of the panoply of narrative techniques available to the novelist, or the dialectical pattern employed by the sonneteer" (87). Reader strategies, then, would include elementary literary techniques like foreshadowing and flashbacks, poetic techniques like repetition and enjambment, but also such fundamental structures as grammar: "all those rules and processes that must be common to speaker and listener if the speech act is to succeed" (87).¹² Within the context of rhetorical play, reader strategies result from disciplinary forms of reading. Culture provides rules for reading, and readers' conformity to those rules is one feature of the Foucauldian game of truth. The reader strategies all readers within a given discipline use structure the reader's experience of the text, and, in Lyotard's terms, determine the interpretive "moves" available to the language game's player.

How Does Player Agency Change the Model?

This chapter, thus far, has focused predominantly on rhetorical play within media other than games. Although all media is playful, to the extent that the power oscillations of rhetorical

¹²The line separating "repertoire" from "strategies" is a narrow one. Both rely on shared conventions. The repertoire is Iser's representation of the rules themselves, and strategies are the reader's methods of enacting those rules. But both parts do much the same thing. They provide the reader a means of accessing and performing the rules of the text.

play are common to all media, not all media can be literally played. Games are different from texts, and this section will consider how.

Games and books operate within the structure of rhetorical play sketched above, but in spite of the similarities in issues of performance, play, and repertoire, the media differ. The root of this difference lies in games' embodied dynamism. There is a materiality to the performance of a video game that print text cannot replicate; games allow the player to *speak* in a way that books do not. Most people are used to speaking with voices, pens and pencils, and keyboards, but the video game player speaks with a different mechanism: the controller. Just as surely as the keyboard produces a written text, the controller produces an image-driven performance. The video game's play-performance is ephemeral (although video recording can cement it), but it is no less a form of input than the keyboard or pen. Here we return to the matrix of speaking and listening from the first chapter. Most books can be received or evaluated, just like games. They can be consumed. Games, however, require input, performance, production. The game is a hybrid medium that requires a material performance to exist. True, books also require the material performance of reading, but the oscillations between speaking and listening are more pronounced in the video game. When one acts in the game, the game responds and provides feedback. The call-and-response pattern of gameplay is reciprocal, requiring production and consumption for its very existence. The unperformed game is merely a disc, a jumble of inactive code. Again, books are also performed artifacts, as Iser repeatedly confirms. But books do not literally enact the reader's input. Books create meaning internally. Games create meaning both internally and externally. The video game's text literally shifts to reflect the player's performance.

Espen Aarseth's *Cybertexts: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* states that the difference between the playable (ergodic) text and non-playable (non-ergodic) text is actually choice:

a reader, however strongly engaged in the unfolding of a narrative, is powerless....

Like a passenger on a train, he can study and interpret the shifting landscape, he may rest his eyes wherever he pleases, even release the emergency brake and step off, but he is not free to move the tracks in a different direction. He cannot have the player's pleasure of influence. (4)

Ultimately, Aarseth says that the reader is “Safe, but impotent” whereas the ergodic text’s player is “at risk: the risk of rejection” (4). I would argue that Aarseth’s distinction is inaccurate, that the game player is no more at-risk than the reader. The only risk one runs in most games is that of losing time: failure generally means nothing more than backtracking or restarting.¹³

Most obviously, the game can immediately reward or punish a player's action. Directing Mario into a pit of lava in *Super Mario Brothers* will result in a sound, the loss of a life, and the restarting of the level. The action is punished immediately, and the experience of the text shifts to accommodate the player's action and the game's feedback. The feedback exerts power over the player—it rewards or punishes player activity. Yet, texts do provide feedback to readers. Readers' expectations can be met or negated, and the confirmation or denial of those subjective expectations is feedback. The feedback comes not from the text (as it does in a video game) but from the reader who evaluates his or her interpretation in light of the textual context. In the example from Spenser, the second line of the stanza would cast immediate doubt on the interpretation of the Hermitage as a tower, since towers are rarely in dales or by forests (1.1.34.2). The reader has provided her own feedback, based on context. So textual feedback still

¹³ Except for in art games like “Lose/Lose,” in which shooting a space invader results in a random file on the user’s computer being deleted (Gage).

exists, but it happens within the subject, not the object. In interactive media, the feedback is externalized. The implied reader (or maybe implied user) becomes more obvious, the intended role for the user is foregrounded. So the object itself is not an agent. It does not drive subject attention back to itself. Rather, it provides the means for the subject to return to self-awareness. The media object provides the subject a means of breaking her own illusions. To use Iser's term, the media object opens indeterminacies.

Games can open indeterminacies—spaces in which the subject takes power over the mediated experience away from the text—in a variety of ways. Gaps in the text do not necessarily have to be artistic; glitches can cue the player to break immersion and critically consider their engagement with the medium. During one session of *Guild Wars 2*, an immersive 3D Massively Multiplayer Online RPG, my avatar stood on the edge of a cliff in just such a way that his body canted at a forty-five-degree angle over the cliff's edge. His posture was normal, only he was standing at a wild angle over the ledge. Instantly, I was broken out of the game and began considering how the game calculates the interaction between avatar and world. The glitch opened an indeterminacy and I was able to snatch some power over the experience. Immersion broke, and I was returned to an awareness of myself as a game-player and the game as a computer program. I reclaimed power over the game.

Indeterminacies can also open almost on their own. *Halo 4* is an immersive 3D first-person shooter, and its approach to player death is similar to many other games of its genre. When the player dies, she is simply returned to a checkpoint to try again. During a particularly challenging mission segment, I must have died and respawned at the checkpoint a dozen times. After the first few attempts, any sense of immersion broke down and I noticed my own performance. Each attempt was a little different, but each attempt was accompanied by the strong

sense that I was running through variations of the same performance, like an actor who keeps botching his lines. Each death was a botched line, and during the next rehearsal, I tried to note and avoid my mistake from the previous rehearsal. It frequently failed, and I died in the same ways many times—often in the same places and to the same enemies. It should go without saying that I powerfully resisted the game’s attempts at immersion, and I stopped playing for the day the moment I found the next checkpoint. This indeterminacy—my sense of self-performance—cued me to retake power over the medium, and I used the player’s greatest tool for resisting ludic discipline: the power button.

Some games, like the literature Iser references, work indeterminacies into their texts. Art games and independent (or indie) games are generally more likely than mainstream so-called Triple-A games to intentionally confuse, provoke, or frustrate the player. The browser-based game “is it time?” by Jaime Fraina, for instance, dramatizes the life of an elderly woman whose husband has died and whose daughter is too busy for her. The must keep the woman alive by feeding her the meatloaves her daughter drops off every few days, keep her entertained with a television, and fend off loneliness by visiting a friend. The game changes over the course of ten in-game days, however. Words eventually become misspelled (“Yoar TV is bruke?”), then garbled (“Yoar UV is truke”) (Fraina). The furniture appears in different arrangements. Perhaps most chillingly, at the end of each simulated day, the player must answer the question “is it time?” by moving the cursor onto “Yes” or “No.” At a certain point, the figure of the woman’s dead husband appears and drags the cursor toward the word “Yes.” The game is chilling. Much of its impact derives from indeterminacies filled by the player. It is never specified, within the game, what the misspelled and garbled words represent. Perhaps they signify an auditory processing disorder, but I interpreted them as a dramatization of dementia. This particular

connection—this moment of taking power over the game’s meaning—has significance to me, since my grandmother, who had struggled with dementia for years, recently died. Thus, I read the mangled orthography in a specific way. The game’s creator left a space in which I could supply my own meaning, and I did. His game is mostly defined by its indeterminacies. It has little immersion and few direct statements of meaning or authorial intent. The player is allowed to explore and prod at the game to see what meanings it might hold; illusion-breaking is easy when the game’s illusion is so simplistic.

In *Guild Wars 2*, a glitch gave me an opportunity to see the game as an opaque rhetorical text, an assemblage of code that had failed. *Halo 4* forced a recognition of my performance by my repeated failure, and I had a moment of awareness as a result. “Is it time?” was constructed around a series of significant indeterminacies that handed interpretive power freely to the player. In all of these examples, something in the text’s script enabled me as a player to take rhetorical power back from the text, but sometimes, the player can wrest power from the game by sheer determination.

One night, I was playing *Assassin's Creed III: Liberation HD* with my wife. The game's main character, Aveline, lives in a large manor in Revolutionary War-era New Orleans, and one segment of the game begins in this house. My game-play in *Assassin's Creed* tends to follow the implied player. I like to play by the rules. I follow the designers' quiet suggestions and use the tools they suggest because these choices tend to produce the most rewarding results (and the fewest retries). This time, however, I deviated from the designers' intent. I did not proceed directly to the next objective point (a nimbus of light floating beside the harpsichord). Instead, I wandered the house. I do not remember why I chose to wander instead of progress; perhaps I was

curious, or perhaps tired of dashing from assassination to assassination. In any case, I decided to wander the house for a while.

Assassin's Creed III: Liberation HD is a re-release of a slightly older PlayStation Vita¹⁴ title, graphically improved and polished for the PlayStation 3. As such, its textures, lighting, and sound design are less sophisticated than other games native to the more powerful PlayStation 3. As I wandered, I recognized in the game-house a certain doll-like quality. Furniture had no shadows. Display cases had nothing to display. The walls were bare but for a pink wallpaper, and, moreover, when I looked outside the windows, instead of the bustling New Orleans neighborhood that usually surrounds the house, I saw only a blurry texture. When I craned the camera around, I could tell that the house's interior was contained within a box only a few virtual feet larger than the actual house. There was no New Orleans out there at all—just this eerily quiet house (non-diegetic harpsichord music played for a minute or two, then went silent for another few minutes only to return unexpectedly) and the badly painted box that contained it, floating alone in a digital void.

The illusion broke. The steady wavelength of the game destabilized, and I was stuck in an almost pure “at” vision. I couldn't quite look *through* the game again so easily. So I wandered through the strange little doll's house and allowed myself to look at it. I was surprised by the number of glitches I found. Here was a chandelier hanging from nothing—no connection to the ceiling. Here was a two dimensional slice of something dark gray protruding from a ceiling (a slice that disappeared when viewed from the reverse). Here were two bookshelves cloned and set next to one another (with the same books in the same arrangements). I was beginning to spot the gaps present in the game, and the way in which my mind filled those gaps created a very

¹⁴A portable console that, while powerful, has significantly less processing power than the PlayStation 3.

different experience than what the implied player would have. Instead of simply passing through the house and beginning the next mission, my longer-wavelength rhetorical play turned strange.

I realized how *creepy* it was to be stuck in an empty house without sound, without shadows under the furniture, or a world outside the windows apart from a poorly painted backdrop. I began to be unnerved by the glitchy artifacts like the hanging-from-nothing chandelier and the visible-from-only-one-side smokey object on the ceiling. Eventually, with some prodding from my wife, I began the next mission and was transported out of the house. The point of this is not to decry the existence of glitches or low-fidelity gaming experiences, but rather to establish that players have a great deal of power over the playing of an interface. What players notice, or don't notice, can fundamentally alter their understanding of the game. Media objects tend to encourage their subjects to engage with them in specific ways (and I suspect that the lack of adornments or sounds were intended, in part, to shepherd me into the glowing mission-start object), but subjects are slippery and often rebellious. Real people are contrary and clever, sometimes spiteful, and sometimes dense. The frequency of the oscillation shifts for all of these modes of interaction, and will vary for every reader, player, and user.

This moment of recognition, this tour of a flimsy doll's house, was a moment in which rhetorical play returned power to me as a player. When I suspended my suspension of disbelief, I was able to play critically and see the joints in the virtual world. I retained power over my own aesthetic experience and learned to recognize some of the joints in the virtual world. In a way, my wresting of power away from the game's immersive flow was an inoculation against the seductive enclosure of the immersive experience. In Chapter Two, I will elaborate on immersion's promises and problems further, but I will conclude this anecdote by affirming that allowing the game to structure my experience, to catch me up in its flow, is not an evil. It is one

particular mode of experiencing the text. Throughout the next chapter, however, I will argue that the immersed, illusion-bound experience of the text must not become the only priority in video games: rhetorical play requires a balance of power and a tension between the curious player and the text's system.

Conclusion

In a class on video games and theatre, I volunteered my conception of the interface experience as an oscillation between subject and object, illusion forming and illusion breaking. Conversation had been revolving around the fantasy of the perfectly immersive game: the 1990s' dream of perfect virtual reality, the technology of "the wire" from *Strange Days*, and the matrix from *The Matrix*. My oscillation model did not, initially, fit with the discussion. If media works as I claim that it does, cycling constantly and inexorably between participation and observation, then why is immersion so prevalent a fantasy? Why are "immersive" games praised so highly, and why is virtual reality such a constant fascination, even today?

As the conversation moved elsewhere, I considered. I thought about Richard Lanham's spectra, about what it would be like to live purely on one end of the Play/Game spectrum of motivation. A life of pure play is a fantasy, one offered to us by resorts and theme parks. But no one lives at Disney World. Life requires oscillation; experience is defined as a constant back-and-forth between the real and the unreal, the pleasant and the painful, between carnival and the work week. Immersion is indulgence, escapism, fantasy. Total immersion is a fantasy of eliminating the interface. No controller, just the matrix. No screen, just the thrill of heroism. If we can just be immersed enough, we hope, we can escape the interface. We can escape material culture. We can escape the oscillation.

The dream of interface-less information is the dream of perfect assimilation, of turning experience into memory without considering the self or the process of acquisition. Perfect immersion in media neatly slices out self-awareness. If a player is never reminded of the game system, or the numbers running the experience, or the controller used to translate player movements into electrical signals, then the player can forget that he is playing at all. Instead, he is simply living in the electronic world, perfectly and seamlessly. The player loses himself in the experience. But the controller always threatens to reassert itself. Batteries die, fingers fumble, and just like that, the player is thrust back into the half-reality of the game, and must look *at* the experience again. Perfect immersion is the loss of the self to the object. We want to lose ourselves. We want to escape.

Or perhaps, more accurately, we don't want to escape but to control. We want to make everything unfamiliar into something we know and own. Interpretation is assimilation. Performing a text reduces its unfamiliarity and allows us to swallow, digest, and make a memory of it within ourselves. To play a game is to assert one's own power on the open structure of the game. The dream of perfect immersion is the dream of perfect conquest. Total, perfect immersion—an interpretation without self-awareness or interface—is perfect assimilation, unspoiled by self-consciousness or interruption. Perfect understanding absorbs the world into the mind. We, as a culture, want total immersion, because we want total ownership, unfettered by material or ethical constraints. Total immersion is a fantasy of consumption, not the dream of escaping the world, but the opposite: consuming the world.

But oscillation is omni-present. It reclaims us, and it forces us back into the embrace of ludic discipline. Immersion is always a dream. A mono-polar medium is no more possible than a mono-polar magnet—fortunately for us. The constant oscillation of interpretation assures us that

we will always be reminded—like it or not—of our status as viewers, readers, players, and consumers. *Oscillatio* is not just a constant pattern in rhetorical play; it is also an ethical imperative. Self-recognition, self-knowledge, and self-awareness are all products of the oscillation between observation and participation, and the aesthetic experience is, by necessity, a self-critical one. The act of reading—and not only reading, but playing, watching, and listening—requires self-recognition.

CHAPTER TWO

GAMES OF TRUTH: VIDEO GAMES AS DISCIPLINARY STRUCTURES

The first chapter established a model for rhetorical play, but play cannot exist without rules to contain and direct it. This chapter considers how game rules discipline and structure the oscillations of power between subject and object, here considered particularly as player and game. Game rules are disciplinary structures. They use pleasure and reward to train and guide players' bodies through elaborate series of actions and interpretations, eventually creating highly disciplined subjects who view themselves and their virtual environments in ways useful to game designers, marketers, and sponsors. Yet games are frequently overlooked as disciplinary objects. Most people view games as escapist shelters from the oppressive hierarchies and social structures that oppress players. This chapter will demonstrate how deceptive that assumption is. Within the matrix of speaking and listening established in the introduction, this chapter focuses primarily on un-empowered performance and reception and the disciplinary rule structures that cue those types of textual interactions. This chapter's primary interest lies in discovering how playable texts exert power on their players and how those players receive and perform the input they are given.

Consider the stereotype of the beaten-down office worker who, after a grueling day of paperwork and HR representatives, settles at her computer and becomes a powerful Death Knight in the *World of Warcraft*. The shackles of work melt away as she raids dangerous dungeons, finds valuable treasure, and acquires more powerful skills and spells. This image's appeal comes from the imaginative escape, the sense of freedom, and the feeling of power that

come with playing a powerful character in a video game. Video game players¹⁵ often associate games with freedom, happy other lives and other worlds in which the harshness of the real world can be eluded, if only for a time. But this is not the whole truth, even if it may feel true in the thrall of play. Our part-time Death Knight has subjected herself to a whole new panoply of disciplinary controls. The game controls how she learns, communicates, earns and spends money, accomplishes tasks, and even how she understands the meaning of tasks. Our Death Knight is just as bound by external forces as her alter-ego the office worker. The difference, of course, is that *World of Warcraft* provides strictures meant to induce pleasure and continued play, while the World of Work provides strictures meant to cue productivity and efficiency.

The study of games as disciplinary objects has received insufficient attention, given the economic and cultural power that video games now hold. One of the most popular and widely read works on games studies in recent years, Jane McGonigal's *Reality Is Broken*, paints an oppressively optimistic picture of the world-changing potential of games and game players. If only the world could be remade in the image of video games, she argues, then it could become a better, happier, more productive, and more philanthropically rich place (13-15). Like Janet Murray's *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, McGonigal is relatively unconcerned by the disciplinary power that games hold. That tremendous disciplinary power must be examined with the same rigor and depth as any other political, governmental, or social system that structures the flows of power.

I have chosen to narrow my focus to games (as opposed to games and film, or games and printed text as the previous chapter did) partially because (as mentioned above) games have

15 Throughout this chapter, I will use “video game players” in place of “gamers.” The term “gamer” has, in many circles, become a pejorative, associated with racism, misogyny, and unexamined privilege. From my personal experience, the stigma is not unearned.

received insufficient scholarly attention and significantly because the structure of games is already very close to Foucault's structure of disciplines and discursive formations.¹⁶ As this chapter's introductory anecdote demonstrated, games create disciplined subjects who willingly tune their bodies and minds to the needs of the game. Games employ everything from posture to hand-action to eye-movement to broader rhetorical appeals like pathos and ethos to create a flow of sensory experiences. Games have a great deal of power over their players, and a critique of that power-relation using Foucauldian terms and assumptions will help explain how rules structure and discipline the action of rhetorical play.

Discipline and Punish is crucial to understanding—or at least questioning—the power relations that structure humans' experiences of the world. This chapter will begin with the oscillation model proposed in the previous chapter and will focus specifically on textual rules. Foucault has a great deal to say about the function and nature of various rule-sets in Western culture, and this chapter will use Foucault's terminologies, his findings, and (to a more limited extent) his methodology to argue several points. First, video games can be understood as a particular discipline and a genre of power-relation, and by critiquing the flow of power and knowledge between game and player, the Foucauldian archaeologist can expose the types of surveillance and control that games exert on their players. From the Foucauldian stance, games can be understood as compact systems of knowledge and power structured and powered by rules. Foucault refers to disciplines as “games of truth” because disciplines, much like games, have discrete rule-sets that govern and evoke the experience of the individual (“Ethic” 112).

Five months before Foucault's death, he said in an interview: “I have tried to discover how the human subject entered into games of truth, whether they be games of truth which take

¹⁶ Disciplines are, by nature, discursive, but “discursive formation” refers to a narrower spectrum of discourse than “discipline,” so the terms are not quite equivalent.

on the form of science or which refer to a scientific model, or games of truth like those that can be found in institutions or practices of control” (“Ethic” 112). Like Foucault, my goal is to examine the relation of the subject to the knowledge/power relationship. In the previous chapter, I proposed rhetorical play as a model for the creation of textual meaning via power relations. In this chapter, I will employ Foucault’s work, especially *Discipline and Punish*, to explore how playable texts exert power over players.

Iser, in the previous chapter, provided a useful starting place for a Foucauldian understanding of the rule-structures of the interface. Both scholars employ the metaphor of the game. Iser calls reading “the game of the imagination,” and the text “a set of governing rules” (108). For Iser, the act of reading is bound by rules on both the immediate textual level and a broader, more abstract level called the “repertoire” shared by the text and its audience. Iser’s textual rules guide and structure the performance of reading, and I argued that a version of those rules also applied to any interface. Rules also provide readers with feedback, a way to continually adjust the act of rhetorical play. Foucault was probably not surprised by any of this.¹⁷ Iser’s *Act of Reading* was first published in German in 1976, seven years after Foucault’s *The Archeology of Knowledge* broke the world of “things” into a discursive world composed of language instead of people, objects, and ideas:

What, in short, we wish to do is to dispense with 'things'. To 'depresentify' them. To conjure up their rich, heavy, immediate plenitude, which we usually regard as the primitive law of a discourse that has become divorced from it... To substitute for the enigmatic treasure of 'things' anterior to discourse, the regular formation of objects that emerge only in discourse. To define these *objects* without reference to

¹⁷ I have, so far, found no evidence of Foucault commenting on Iser’s work.

the *ground*, the *foundation of things*, but by relating them to the body of rules that enable them to form as objects of a discourse and thus constitute the conditions of their historical appearance. (47-48, emphasis preserved)

What Foucault wants, then, is to privilege the many small discursive rules that structure the human experience and to put away (at least temporarily) the grand historical narratives and ideas that define most historiographical thinking. To repurpose William Carlos Williams' phrase, Foucault believes in “no ideas but in discourse.” But because discourse is evanescent, always shifting and impossible to pin down—a kind of micro-physics of language, to adapt a term from *Discipline and Punish* (26)—the archaeologist must instead examine the rules that guide the discourse formations.

Games as Disciplinary Objects

The mere existence of the video game *America's Army* should be enough to confirm that games are disciplinary objects. *America's Army*, a realistically-rendered squad-based first-person shooter, was developed by the U.S. Military with the stated goal of recruiting soldiers. In it, players can not only fight enemy troops on realistically rendered battlefields, they can complete training exercises, increase their honor, loyalty, and courage scores, and even serve virtual jail time if they assault an officer (Kennedy). The game is more than propaganda—though it certainly is that. It also uses rule systems to immerse the player in the Army's discourse. In one gameplay video (showcasing the third *America's Army* game, *America's Army: Rise of a Soldier*), the player is rewarded with fifteen “Integrity Points” for “Mission Fire Discipline,” which, to the best of my understanding, means not firing one's weapon indiscriminately (Beaupre 3:54). The rifle scope wavers unless the player “holds his breath,” and this steadies the scope but

depletes a “stamina” bar. The game's written language is likewise loaded. Players do not “die”; they “fail to respond.” When a team loses, they are not “killed”; they are “neutralized” (Sega Studios San Francisco). The purpose of the game is to discipline potential recruits, to initiate them into an unfamiliar game of truth by way of a literal game. The Army “hopes that by providing more information to prospective soldiers, the game will help cut down on the number of recruits who wash out during the nine weeks of basic training and subsequent specialized training” (Kennedy). In other words, the military hopes to begin soldiers' training with a video game.

Disciplinary games are not limited to openly propaganda-based games like *America's Army*. Every game is disciplinary. Foucault writes primarily about pedagogical, industrial, and military applications of discipline, but discipline also exerts itself through less overtly disciplinary media, like video games. Games can be easy to ignore as powerful disciplinary objects because people often consider games empty entertainments. Perhaps surprisingly, many video game players bristle at the suggestion that games are anything more than a way to “let off steam.” Comment threads attached to critiques or close considerations of games are full of grouchy comments about “reading too much in” to what, apparently, should be a medium so empty of significance as to repel academic discussion or critique. It seems strange that game enthusiasts should insist on the insignificance of their chosen hobby, but they often do.

Video games' apparent insignificance is actually a compelling reason to study them. Games are conduits of social, political, and economic power, and their ability to hide the rivers of power that they arrange testifies to the power of discipline to make itself invisible. As Foucault writes, “Disciplinary power... is exercised through its invisibility” (*DP* 187). Games'

transparency, and moreover, their frequent attempts at immersion, make them excellent candidates for studying the structured flow of power through an interface.

In this section, I will use the criteria for discipline in *Discipline and Punish* to describe the ways in which games discipline their players. Discipline creates “an individual that is endowed with four characteristics: it is *cellular* (by the play of spatial distribution), it is *organic* (by the coding of activities), it is *genetic* (by the accumulation of time), it is *combinatory* (by the composition of forces)” (167, emphasis added). Video games create player-subjects endowed with those same four characteristics. The same rule structures that entertain and challenge players also structure player expectations, techniques, actions, and modes of perceiving their surroundings. Video games speak with power. They literally code the experiences of the players who will “listen” to them. The players, for their part, perform within (and sometimes against) the rules of the games. Simultaneously, players receive input and feedback from the games: rewards and punishments designed to alter and train player behavior. This section will discuss the disciplinary techniques games use to code player experiences and, conversely, how players must perform within those coded rules. Those performances create disciplined subjects.

In this section, I will briefly demonstrate the ways in which games cleave to Foucault's four categories of discipline. Discipline enacts power rhetorically by arranging bodies in space, time, and in relation to other bodies and objects. Each of Foucault's four categories is based primarily in arrangement: the disciplined body is cellular, or arranged in space. It is genetic, or arranged in time. Organic discipline describes the method by which bodies are organized via relation to external objects. Finally, “tactics” coordinate the three other forms of arrangement and fit disciplined subjects together in great disciplinary mechanisms.

Cellular Discipline: Location, Partition, Division

Games arrange their players into specific spatial arrangements; this tendency is what Foucault calls “cellular.” Foucault begins the section by writing that “discipline proceeds from the distribution of individuals in space” (141) and writes first of “enclosure,” or the partitioning off of specific spaces in which disciplinary activities—and no others—will occur (141).

Factories, barracks, and school rooms all contain and structure the activities that happen within them (141-42), and this principle applies to many of the spaces in which video games are played. A video game arcade is a disciplinary space. Its rows of machines direct the flow of traffic and require players to stand in specific places (in front of the machine, often slightly to the left or right to align with the first and second player control boards) and with specific bodily arrangements (standing hands outstretched, gripping joysticks or hovering over buttons). Arcades seal video games and players away from the wider world just as surely as Foucault's examples of monasteries and barracks. But after their heyday in the mid-80s, arcades began to fail, thanks largely to pressure from home game consoles (Lui). Instead of gathering in arcades' enclosed disciplinary spaces, games and their players migrated into the living room. Video game consoles like the Atari 2600, introduced in 1977, and the Nintendo Entertainment System, introduced in 1985, turned living rooms, dens, bedrooms, and offices into the disciplinary sites of video game playing (“A History of Video Game Consoles”). Yet these are not specifically designated enclosures like the arcade.

Foucault's third point accurately predicts this development: “The rule of *functional sites* would gradually, in the disciplinary institutions, code a space that architecture generally left at the disposal of several different uses” (143, emphasis preserved). Sure enough, the living room is a decidedly multipurpose “functional site”—just like the basement, the den, the office, the

bedroom, and any other room that hosts a game console. The game console, in Foucault's terminology, participates in the “individualizing partitioning” (144) of space, allowing for more flexibility as well as more supervision of those spaces. Games are noteworthy for their use of the domestic space; with the advent of the home game console, ludic discipline emigrated from the arcade to the home. Video games may be neither the first nor likely the most important source of discipline in the domestic space, but they represent a diffusion of disciplinary authority from a central source into innumerable private domestic spaces. In Foucault's example of a workshop, a single overseer could observe many workers all doing different tasks, but in the case of video game consoles, the overseer—the disciplinary enforcer—can walk through millions of disconnected houses. By diffusing discipline into game consoles, discipline exerts itself at a distance.

A third category of game systems exist that have not yet been associated with a partitioned space. Handheld game systems have existed since the 1970s (Melanson), and unlike home consoles or arcades, portable game consoles are not anchored to specific spaces. Again, Foucault seems to anticipate the video game, since his second principle of cellular discipline is that “the principle of 'enclosure' is neither constant, nor indispensable, nor sufficient in disciplinary machinery. This machinery works space in a much more flexible and detailed way” (143). In other words, designated enclosed space is *not* a requirement for cellular discipline. Discipline can arrange space around individuals. All it wants is “to establish presences and absences, to know where and how to locate individuals, to set up useful communications, to interrupt others, to be able at each moment to supervise the conduct of each individual, to assess it, judge it, to calculate its qualities or merits” (143). Games are capable of doing these things

anywhere. Handheld video games create bubbles of isolation around players in public; one can submerge oneself in portable discipline anywhere one wishes.

Organic Discipline: Controlled Subjects Controlling Controllers

Games create what Foucault calls “organic” players. By “organic,” Foucault means that discipline controls and evokes the bodily activity of its subjects (151). Foucault references the time-table as a means of controlling activity (149), but video games have another artifact that elicits and governs activity: the game controller. In fact, the use of a controller for inputting commands and overcoming challenges meets all four of Foucault's criteria: like the time-table, it is a device for mediating between the power and the subject. The time-table structured workers' day-to-day experiences by enforcing a strict, delineated use of time (149). In a similar way, the game controller structures the player's experience of the game by defining actions that do and do not impact the game world. It is a filter through which the subject's activity must pass, and if the activity is not in keeping with the structure of the controlling object, the activity is either corrected or disregarded. Game actions are always kairotic—that is to say, they are always anchored to a particular, appropriate point in time. Foucault suggests that organic discipline provides “another way of adjusting the body to temporal imperatives” (151), and any game that requires quick reflexes functions by providing temporal imperatives. Mario must jump at a certain time or be killed by an enemy. To jump too soon or too late—that is, to ignore the temporal imperative—is to die. Finally, video games enforce “the correlation of the body and the gesture” (152). Foucault demonstrates that handwriting requires close scrutiny of the movements of the body, and in much the same way, games demand powerful correlation between body and movement. In action games, this correlation is the crux of the game's challenge (and, for many

players, the game's fun). The player succeeds by making just the right gestures at just the right moments.

Consider the actions of the hands when playing *Super Mario Bros.*. The player sees an enemy approaching and must ready himself for action. He is holding down the right-side of the cross-shaped directional pad with his left thumb, and his right thumb is poised over the pair of red A and B buttons. One governs jumping, the other makes Mario run. When the enemy character approaches Mario's character, the player must judge an appropriate time, and hold down the right side of the directional pad for a precisely timed moment, press the A button to make Mario jump, and release the directional pad at an equally precise time. If the player's sense of *kairos* has been accurate, Mario will land squarely on the enemy's head, killing it. The connection between player and controller is powerful, tightly bound, and—for experienced players—nearly unconscious. This leads to Foucault's final category of organic discipline: “The body-object articulation” (152). As we have seen, the player must be more than an individual holding a controller. The controller must be an extension of the player's hands; “it constitutes a body-weapon, body-tool, body-machine complex” (153). For haptic devices like the Nintendo Wii controller, this “body-machine complex” is even more obvious. The Wii remote, a motion sensor generally correlating the player's arm gestures with on-screen virtual gestures, fuses the player's body with the game's unreal world.

Genetic Discipline: Kairos and Arrangement

Games create *genetic* players. In other words, games structure the player's experience of time. Most games rely heavily on a particular method of structuring both time and space. This method is the “level.” Even gaming neophytes generally know that games are broken into

different levels.¹⁸ A game level is a discrete section, frequently linear, graphically distinct, and placed in a specific sequence. Not all games are linear, but nearly every game has some analogue to the “level.”¹⁹ Foucault writes that discipline organizes time in four ways. Genetic discipline will “Divide duration into successive or parallel segments” (157). Very few games are open and unstructured from beginning to end; levels divide most video games into discrete segments. *Pac-Man* is broken into a series of changing maps of increasing difficulty and complexity. Recent games like *Super Mario Galaxy*, published nearly thirty years after *Pac-Man*, involve a nearly identical structure: *Galaxy*, like *Pac-Man*, breaks the protagonist's adventure into a series of discrete, successive stages with different maps and levels of difficulty. The tendency for games to arrange themselves from lesser to greater complexity reflects Foucault's second criterion for genetic discipline: games “Organize these threads according to an analytical plan—successions of elements as simple as possible, combining according to increasing complexity” (158). In nearly every game, challenges will be relatively straightforward in the beginning (puzzles will have obvious solutions and enemies will be easily overcome), and will increase in complexity and difficulty over the course of the game. For a game with a smooth difficulty curve, each level will be a little harder and more complex than the last. Where Mario begins *Super Mario Bros.* by defeating slow-moving enemies by jumping on them once, by the end of the game, Mario will have to avoid fast-moving enemies covered in spikes.

Foucault's third feature of genetic discipline, in the world of a video game, resembles a boss fight: “Finalize these temporal segments, decide on how long each will last and conclude it with an examination, which will have the triple function of showing whether the subject has reached the level required, of guaranteeing that each subject undergoes the same apprenticeship

18 Synonyms include levels, stages, acts, scenes, zones, areas, etc.

19 Even the famously non-linear *Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* has discrete linear sections called “quests.”

and of differentiating the abilities of each individual” (158). In many games, levels end with a “boss fight,” a large, unusual enemy that will present a greater challenge than the level's standard enemies. A boss is a kind of examination, testing the player's skill before allowing passage to the next level. Players generally replay the level until they can defeat the boss. In many games, such as the *Legend of Zelda* series, players must defeat bosses using tools and techniques found in the boss's level. Finally, genetic discipline will “Draw up a series of series; lay down for each individual, according to his level, his seniority, his rank, the exercises that are suited to him, common exercises have a differing role and each difference involves specific exercises” (158-59). In other words, discipline must be adaptable to the individual. Recent advances in hardware and software have made “adaptive difficulty” possible. Games using adaptive difficulty shift on the fly to accommodate the player's performance (perhaps by decreasing the number of enemies if the player-character is repeatedly killed), but games have had a rudimentary adaptive difficulty for decades. The player's ability to choose “Easy” “Medium” or “Hard” before beginning the game is a way for video games to customize their exercises or challenges for players with a wide array of skills or experience levels.

Tactical Discipline: Meta-Arrangement and the Coded Subject

The last of Foucault's categories is a culmination of the previous three. The “combination of forces,” or tactics, is a meta-arrangement. It arranges and deploys the three other types of arranged discipline already discussed. Foucault writes that tactics are “the art of constructing, with located bodies, coded activities and trained aptitudes, mechanisms in which the product of the various forces is increased by their calculated combination” (167). These “tactics,” Foucault says, “are no doubt the highest form of disciplinary practice” (167). Part of the reason for the

elevation of tactics above the other forms of manifested discipline is that tactics coordinate many disciplined subjects with one another. The subject's body is made to interface with other bodies (164), and the body's temporal and kairotic arrangements are coordinated with other bodies (164-65).

That coordinated mass of interconnected bodies—that multi-bodied machine—is taught a series of minimalist codes. The master of discipline (if one exists; a singular master is unnecessary in the broader function of discipline) will “Place the bodies in a little world of signals to each which is attached a single, obligatory response” (166). The video game is a near-perfect demonstration of Foucault's “little world of signals.” Video games are strange little worlds, packed to the brims with obligatory signals. Contemporary games especially litter their virtual environments with pop-up commands. In *Tomb Raider* (2013), when the player navigates Lara Croft, the player's avatar, to an interactive object, a translucent graphic pops up, showing a simplified graphic (perhaps a flame, indicating a flammable object, or a box with an arrow, indicating a moveable object) and the icon of a button. The message is obvious: press the indicated button to accomplish the indicated task. An enormous number of games use this sort of contextual display combining either a simple word or phrase (“Open Door”) and a button prompt. When *Tomb Raider's* player sees the fire icon and the X button, she will press X without thinking. The action is hardly considered or planned, and it quickly becomes a honed reflex. This reflexive coding stacks. Games quickly become galaxies of “single obligatory responses” (166) triggering situations that can be resolved by other “single obligatory responses.” One is obligated, in *Super Mario Bros*, to command Mario to jump on or over an enemy (an obligatory response) because the player has progressed to that point by jumping on or over other enemies. Games are chains of obligatory reflexive responses.

The other key features of discipline—the creation of timetables (or interfaces) for the exertion of power, the arrangement of bodies in time and space, and the structure of the subject's interaction with objects—are implemented in the combinatory function of “tactics.” Tactics functions as the arrangement of arrangement, and it is much harder to point to a specific “product” of games than it is for Foucault to offer examples of disciplined soldiers producing more deadly armies, disciplined factories producing more goods, or disciplined schools producing more thoroughly educated students (164-65). What do games produce? Essentially: compliance. Games are disciplinary objects that reproduce and disseminate more discipline. From a certain point of view, the pleasure that games provide serves primarily to reinforce the techniques and practices desired by the game. Compliance with the system generally produces the best in-game results,²⁰ and these results are reinforced by the pleasure of playing the game. The most perceptible result of a well-played game is a player more skilled in playing that game. That claim may sound cynical, but it is not. Games are skilled pedagogues, and educators have much to learn from them.

The Ethical Exercise of Power

As scholars, teachers, writing center consultants, and administrators, we often worry about the power we hold over students. This tendency towards worry appears most often in articles applying Foucauldian terminology and concerns with power to the classroom or the writing center. Examining power, discipline, and discourse in pedagogical settings is important, even crucial, but one must not confuse critique with fear. In articles such as Michael Mattison's

20 As always, exceptions exist. Many independently created games play with the expectations of more mainstream games, and they will be discussed in Chapter Three. When this chapter speaks broadly of “video games,” it refers to professionally published and marketed video games.

“Someone to Watch Over Me: Reflection and Authority in the Writing Center,” power is something to be feared and abnegated. Mattison feels conflicted about the reflective journaling exercises he assigns to his consultants and undergraduate students (32). The act of reflection, Mattison fears, is ultimately a technique of surveillance, an exertion of power over his consultants, and ultimately, a tyranny (30). Mattison writes that “The journal, *rather than a safe textual space* for students to question, critique, and explore, *is instead a window onto their world* that can be utilized by a teacher (or director) to keep order” (35, emphasis added). Note the implied dichotomy between “safe” and “observed.” Mattison assumes that observation is dangerous, that surveillance—and the power extended by surveillance—is inherently problematic. Later, he writes:

when I ask the consultants to review their evaluations from the past semester, I prompt them to tell me what they want to “work on” for the coming term; what is it about their consulting style and approach that they would like to change? ... There is the assumption that there are aspects of their approach that need changing—just as spying assumes some unwanted activity that needs to be controlled. (36)

Mattison’s ethical concerns are admirable, but they assume (again, admirably) that discipline is abusive. First, Mattison’s article assumes that power flows down from an authority figure, that he, as the director of the writing center, is the source of power in the writing center. From this perspective, his worry makes sense—he could be responsible for his students’ discomfort or oppression—but it denies the generative nature of Foucauldian power. Power, for Foucault, is a web of infinitesimal power relations. It includes subjects exerting power over themselves as well as subjects surveilling and exerting power over one another (*History of Sexuality Volume I* 96).

In this sense, the surveillance of the reflection paper is an extension of power, but surveillance preexisted the written reflections. The writing center is already a Panopticon; the reflective journals merely draw attention to preexisting power structures. Writing consultants, just like the students they serve, perform within the writing center's pedagogical game of truth. Students oscillate between receiving feedback and evaluating their consultants' performances, just as consultants oscillate between performing within the rule structures of the writing center and coding experiences for the students with whom they work (suggesting that coding and performing can happen simultaneously).

Second, and more importantly, Mattison's article assumes that power is inherently undesirable. In the block quote above, Mattison says that "spying assumes some unwanted activity that needs to be controlled" (36). But surveillance does not assume misbehavior. Surveillance is an exercise of power that both controls for undesired behavior *and rewards desired behavior*. Foucault writes that "In discipline, punishment is only one element of a double system: gratification-punishment" (*DP* 180). Mattison would likely have fewer problems with rewarding positive evaluations or asking his students to consider their strengths. But those activities exercise power just as thoroughly as asking consultants to consider their flaws. Power is not immoral, nor is the exercise of power necessarily problematic. In "The Ethic of Care for the Self," Foucault reiterated this point several times: "Power is not an evil," he says. "Power is strategic games" (129). Later, Foucault provides a crucial statement on power and pedagogy:

I don't see where evil is in the practice of someone who, in a given game of truth, knowing more than another, tells him what he must do, teaches him, transmits knowledge to him, communicates skills to him. The problem is rather to know how you are to avoid in these practices—where power cannot not play and where

it is not evil in itself—the effects of domination which will make a child subject to the arbitrary and useless authority of a teacher, or put a student under the power of an abusively authoritarian professor, and so forth. I think these problems should be posed in terms of rules of law, of rational techniques of government and of ethos, of practice of self and of freedom. (129-30)

In other words, Foucault says, teachers must exercise restraint on their power but not refuse to exercise it. Power is endemic; it flows ceaselessly between and within individuals, pooling here and there within hierarchies and systems but constantly flowing. The task of the ethical director, teacher, or governor is to exercise power without abusing it, to maintain a purposeful and useful authority. The writing center director ought to direct but not dominate her consultants. The teacher ought to teach, but not require arbitrary obedience or pointless exercises of obeisance. “Power is not an evil,” Foucault reminds us; “it is strategic games” (129).

Mattison's final conclusion, the decision that allows him to duck out from under the threat of abusing his power, is to diffuse his surveillance authority among his consultants. Instead of him reading their journals and helping them reflect, they will instead read one another's work and help one another reflect (45). His basis for this is the isolating effect of the Panopticon (45), but the effect does not reduce the exertion of power. It dissolves it, thus insulating Mattison from the direct imposition of power, but surveillance, normalization, and subjectivization are still operating within his writing center. One final note on Mattison's research: other critics too replicate the same excesses of concern and moral evaluation that Mattison exemplifies. Mattison's article is the most pointed and honest about the pedagogue's insecurities of any I have read, but other critics writing about Foucault and education frequently mistake “power” for “abuse of power.” Toward the end of Mattison's article, he outlines a responsible understanding

of power: “power can be wielded in different ways; not every government needs to inculcate fear in its citizenry. As I structure the 'possible field of action' for consultants, I can look to make that field as open and inviting as possible” (45). The call for the responsible exercise of power is common among articles applying Foucault to pedagogy; one such exhortation comes from Dennis Lynch and Stephen Jukuri's “Beyond Master and Slave.” When discussing the disputes between so-called radicals, who want to openly politicize class, and conservatives who want to strip the classroom of all politics, the authors write that “Ultimately, both sides need to realize that they themselves contribute to both domination and exploitation, that the other side is also enmeshed with both forms of power, and that to the extent to which we can entertain a double vision of power, we may be able to come together and resist the bad effects of all forms of power” (272). My point is similar. The goal of the Foucauldian critique to follow is to encourage awareness and critique of the natural flows of power, not to despair.

In this chapter, I will do my best to limit my discussion to specifics. As Paul Veyne wrote of Foucault's historiographical theory, “big words cover thoughts and realities ('discourses' and 'discursive practices') that are far narrower and have quirky edges” (12). So this chapter will try to avoid “big words” meant to hide the odd angles and “quirky edges” that particular discursive objects inevitably present. To do this, I will consider one primary discursive object, chosen for its relevance to my model of rhetorical play. This object is the new media concept of “immersion,” specifically as it applies to games and virtual reality.

Immersion was a *cause célèbre* in the 1990s, and while fewer scholars write about it today, it maintains a powerful position within the world of video games and games journalism. Immersion as a discursive object will provide a useful sustained example against which I can test Foucault's theories and my own. I will first examine the historical roots of the discursive object

we have named “immersion,” beginning with the practice of silent reading and ending with video games and virtual reality. Then I will examine immersion the discursive object as a disciplinary technique, one that is uniquely suited to dominating individuals. The object of immersion will emerge as a cautionary tale and a way to better understand Western culture's infatuation with the “escape” offered by games.²¹ An immersive experience is one in which the rules of the text dominate the subject, and by studying its features, this chapter will elaborate on the functions and dynamics of the object of interpretation.

The Game of Truth as Intersection of Discipline and Discourse

Foucault's “Discourse on Language” makes a surprising and poignant reference to the seductive draw of immersion. As he questions how he ought to begin, Foucault writes:

Inclination speaks out: “I don't want to have to enter this risky world of discourse; I want nothing to do with it insofar as it is decisive and final; I would like to feel it all around me, calm and transparent, profound, infinitely open, with others responding to my expectations, one by one. All I want is to allow myself to be borne along, within it, and by it, a happy wreck.” (215-16)

Foucault deploys the language of immersion to express the impulsive desire for simple, unexamined discourse: he wants “to feel it all around... to be borne along, within it,” in other words, to be submerged in transparent discourse, like a reader lost in a book, or a player locked into an Oculus Rift virtual reality visor. Note too Foucault's choice of the word “transparent” for the immersed world of unexamined speech. To experience a text transparently, as I demonstrated

21 I am knowingly following Foucault's example, working with a particular discursive object in a “history of the present” sort of way, but I am aware that my technique will deviate significantly from Foucault's more developed, mature, and perceptive method (which he outlines in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*). I will not attempt to be Foucault, only to be inspired by him.

in the previous chapter, is to (temporarily) escape the awareness of oneself as a mediated subject, to submerge oneself in the illusion of the work. One might adapt Foucault's voice of "Inclination" with the following: "Immersion speaks out: 'Let me submerge myself in the illusion of transparent discourse; let me immerse myself and so forget myself; let me float through the sluices and gates of disciplinary rules; let me play the game and forget the world around it.'"

Foucault's self-set task in "Discourse on Language" and *Discipline and Punish*, published six years after "Discourse," is to examine those "barely imaginable powers and dangers" not only in *spite* of, but actually *because of* how "humdrum and grey it may seem" ("Discourse" 216). In "Discourse on Language," Foucault says that "I am supposing that in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organised, and redistributed according to a certain number of procedures, whose role is to avert its powers and its dangers, to cope with chance events, to evade its ponderous, awesome materiality" (216). One of the principal structures for the organization, selection, and production of discourse is the discipline, what Foucault would later call the "game of truth": "Disciplines constitute a system of control in the production of discourse, fixing its limits through the action of an identity taking the form of a permanent reactivation of the rules" (224). In other words, a discipline is a means of structuring and controlling discourse, a set of rules for structuring how subjects approach truth within a given field. Although I risk accusations of oversimplification in saying so, I believe that "disciplines" and "games of truth" are synonymous: rule structures that limit the acceptable means of producing knowledge within the field. In "The Ethic of Care for the Self," Foucault says that "when I say 'game' I mean an ensemble of rules for the production of the truth" (127), an almost identical definition to the one for "disciplines" in "Discourse": "a system of control in the production of discourse" (224).

Foucault draws an implicit line between *a* discipline (indefinite article) and *discipline* (no article). A discipline provides a set of rules to govern the production of a discourse. The various discourses that produced the discursive object “immersion-in-text” were themselves subject to their own various disciplines. *Discipline* is partially pedagogical and partially psychological; it controls bodies by coercing them into internalizing its rules for movement in space and time and for processing activities and forces (*DP* 167). If punishment enacts power on the body from a politico-cultural force outside the body, then discipline coerces the body from within (169). In Foucault's words, discipline consists of “elaborating procedures for the individual and collective coercion of bodies” (169). Games of truth, then, are the contained cultural implementations of the broader concept of “discipline.”

In both cases, discourse is key. Foucault gives the example of Mendel in “Discourse on Language,” saying that the community of biologists could hardly be faulted for refusing Mendel's now-foundational discoveries about genetics, since Mendel's work went against the accepted discourse of their discipline (224). Mendel worked outside the established rules of their game, and it took some time for the game to catch up and adapt to his work (224). Foucault summarizes his findings by saying that “It is always possible to speak truth in a void; one would only be in the true, however, if one obeyed the rules of some discursive 'policy' which would have to be reactivated every time one spoke” (224). Speaking truth and being “in the true” are, in Foucault's theory, different tasks, since both forms of truth are only ever valid relative to something external. “Speak[ing] truth” has no context to give that truth meaning, but “be[ing] *in* the true” (224, emphasis added) is relative to the rules of a particular discipline. Discursive rules build shelters of context and practice for the production and distribution of truth. Disciplines, or games of truth, set rules and limitations on what can be true and false and they determine the

accepted procedures for generating truths and falsehoods. These boundaries allow certain types of discourse in and keep other kinds of discourse out.

Power to define and structure discourse entails a power over individuals. In *Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault writes that “Thus conceived, discourse is not the majestically unfolding manifestation of a thinking, knowing, speaking subject, but, on the contrary, a totality, in which the dispersion of the subject and his discontinuity with himself may be determined” (55). A person does not speak; a person is composed of speech. People do not produce discourse; they are produced *by* discourse. To combine Foucault's theories from *Archaeology of Knowledge* with *Discipline and Punish*: a discipline structures the truths and untruths of a discourse. It sets a boundary around acceptable and unacceptable speech, writing, design, etc. A discipline discursively structures the dispersed, discontinuous subject. Subjects are discourse; disciplines structure discourse; therefore, disciplines structure subjects. In *Foucault's Discipline*, John Ransom draws a parallel between Foucault's conception of individualization via discipline and John Locke's understanding of property. In Ransom's understanding of Locke, individuals possess both external property and internal abilities (18). Therefore, Locke reasons, “individuals come to possess themselves in much the same way as the fruits of a cultivated field belong to the farmer,” and society respects that double possession (18). Ransom says that discipline works similarly (18). Subjects beholden to external disciplines (say, the discipline of the first-person shooter game) eventually internalize the discipline and find their abilities, skills, preferences etc. shaped by those external disciplines, “and so Foucault is led to the claim that disciplinary power 'manufactures' individuals” (18). The claim that disciplines structure subjects relies on a series of syllogisms, but consider a practical example.

Literary study is a widely accepted discipline. It involves a specific discourse that accepts certain types of evidence, interpretations, assumptions, and artifacts as unproblematic. Scholars of literature examine primary texts, frequently through the lens of secondary texts that are meant to guide their thinking and method of evaluation. In this text, for instance, I have chosen Foucault as a secondary theorist through whom I am attempting to read a particular cultural object, and I seek out this object in texts, as opposed to plants, physical artifacts, or mathematical formulae. The literary scholar, versed in his discipline and its discursive conventions, will tend to shy away from certain types of interpretations. I edit my texts away from making claims about authorial intent (a convention instilled in me, coincidentally, by Foucault), and I do my best to keep my interpretations within a realm of logical possibility. What I consider “logically possible” is itself defined by my discipline. In writing within these narrow sets of conventions, assumptions, etc. (in other words, these rhetorical rules), I am training myself to accept and interpret the world through them. My available moves in any given act of rhetorical play are limited by the game of truth in which I play. My vision is narrowed by my emphasis on rhetoric and composition, just as my method of writing and research were narrowed and molded by my training as a literary scholar. I have accepted my discipline and, in turn, accepted its limits on my discourse. I have become a docile body that produces texts within my discipline. These texts will in turn structure the discourse of other docile bodies. The beauty of working with Foucault, however, is that, knowing my status as a disciplined subject, I can examine the constraints of my discourse and work to resist, expand, or alter them. Chapters Three and Four will work toward the goal of resistance.

The power that disciplinary discourse holds over the human experience of the world is frighteningly omnipresent. Yet discourse tries to elide itself; it masks its significance through its

self-multiplication and its banality. Discourse encourages transparent play; it urges immersion in the flow of culturally replicating statements and truths. Foucault's project, both in "Discourse on Language" and in his career as a whole, is to provide a set of methods (and examples of those methods) to critique the too-easy immersion of discourse. In sum, Foucault wants to return focus to the subject-as-subject, and thus to break the illusions of cultural discourse. He writes:

Although the statement cannot be hidden, it is not visible either; it is not presented to the perception as the manifest bearer of its limits and characteristics. It requires a certain change of viewpoint and attitude to be recognized and examined in itself. Perhaps it is like the over-familiar that constantly eludes one; those familiar transparencies, which, although they conceal nothing in their density, are nevertheless not entirely clear. (AK 110-11)

To summarize, then, significant discursive statements are never totally transparent, nor totally opaque, but they are easy to miss. The archaeologist's task is to provide that "certain change of viewpoint" necessary for recognizing and examining the statement (111). Foucault exposes power-knowledge relations *as power-knowledge relations*, not as simple expressions of truth, and in doing so, he allows for the possibility of critique and resistance. Here again, Iser and Foucault's terminologies align. For Iser, the breaking of the textual illusion and subsequent exposure of the reader-as-reader gives the literary text its significance while for Foucault, the recognition of discourse's danger is its own breaking of illusion, and it allows for the possibility of resistance. In both cases, oscillation offers a way forward. For Iser, that oscillation is interpretive, while for Foucault, it is discursive.

A Genealogy of Immersion

Neuromancer is one of the gospels of new media scholarship. Five years before Tim Berners-Lee proposed the World Wide Web, then called simply a “mesh” (Berners-Lee), William Gibson wrote about cyberspace, “A consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation... A graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system” (51). *Neuromancer*’s main character is Case, a hard-boiled noir antihero bathed in the neon lights of a near-future setting. When Case accesses *Neuromancer*’s internet-analogue he “jack[s] into a custom cyberspace deck that project[s] his disembodied consciousness into the consensual hallucination that [is] the matrix” (5). Gibson describes the experience as transcendent, an act of abandoning the meat-body and dissolving into a neon world of pure consciousness:

He closed his eyes.

Found the ridged face of the power stud.

And in the bloodlit dark behind his eyes, silver phosphenes boiling in from the edge of space, hypnagogic images jerking past like film compiled from random frames. Symbols, figures, faces, a blurred, fragmented mandala of visual information... (52)

Cyberspace itself is hallucinogenic, soaked in neon and elementary shapes drawn from early 3D rendered animation:

[A sphere of pale gray] flowed, flowered for him, fluid neon origami trick, the unfolding of his distanceless home, his country, transparent 3D chessboard extending to infinity. Inner eye opening to the stepped scarlet pyramid of the Eastern Seaboard Fission Authority burning beyond the green cubes of Mitsubishi

Bank of America, and high and very far away he saw the spiral arms of military systems, forever beyond his reach. (52)

This is the *ultima thule* of immersion: immersion that abandons the body, leaving it an empty vessel far away from the transcendent glory of the operator's unshackled mind. In many ways, this vision of the immersive experience seems to be the brass ring for technologists and science fiction writers alike. Later movies from *Tron* to *The Matrix* would imagine a habitable alternate reality within computers, and video games of all stripes set themselves in fully immersive digital worlds.²²

Immersion has a peculiar pattern of rhetorical play. Recall that, in the action of rhetorical play, power oscillates between subject and text. Rising textual power represents illusion formation. The subject entrusts the text with the power to guide and structure her experience of the text. Declining textual power is illusion breaking, when the subject becomes aware of herself and reclaims some degree of power over her interpretations and experiences. This constant swinging between illusion formation and breakage defines any media experience—except for the totally immersive experience. The waveform in the case of total immersion (as imagined by a science fiction text like *Neuromancer* or *The Matrix*, since no totally immersive medium has yet been invented) would be an almost perfectly flat line. The interpreter's awareness would never turn to herself as an interpreter. She would never look at the medium, because the medium would be perfectly transparent. The illusion would be perfect and unbreakable. She would be like Case: a consciousness in cyberspace, bereft of body or computer. In total immersion, the interface melds with the perceiver and thus vanishes. Total immersion is a state of domination.

22 Including the recent *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag* in which the bulk of the game, set in the 18th Century Caribbean, is framed as a game being explored and play-tested by an evil in-game corporation that bears humorous similarities to Ubisoft, the real-world publisher of the *Assassin's Creed* franchise.

Total immersion in text is perfect subjection to the text. In the act of becoming perfectly immersed in the medium, one totally subjugates oneself to the text, complying smoothly and immediately with the medium's demands and never stopping to question those demands or consider the power flowing around oneself. To observe the power, to notice the ways in which one is manipulated by the interface, is to break the illusion. Evaluation requires opacity; it is a rhetorical judgment that breaks the illusion of the consumed text in order to evaluate it. Evaluation critiques and breaks the illusions in which it is suspended. But the perfectly immersive medium is never broken. Foucault talks about domination and resistance in “The Ethic of Care for the Self”: “This analysis of relations of power constitutes a very complex field; it sometimes meets what we can call facts or states of domination, in which the relations of power, instead of being variable and allowing different partners a strategy which alters them, find themselves firmly set and congealed” (114). If rhetorical play is endemic to human interactions with media, as the first chapter posits it is, then an oscillating power relation between subject and textual object is a requirement for the dynamic flow of power. A medium capable of disabling the subject’s illusion-breaking ability (in other words, a medium that is *perfectly immersive*) would stop the cycle of rhetorical play and substitute, instead, a state of domination. The perfectly immersive medium, by its very nature, dominates.

Consider *The Matrix*. It presents a vision of immersion in which the perfect illusion is the film's primary antagonist. For Neo and the other cyberpunk revolutionaries, power comes not from guns or muscles, but from the ability to see the simulation *as a simulation*. The film's training sequence is not focused on developing fighting skills—those are simply downloaded—but rather on gaining the ability to see the matrix for the text that it is.²³ The climactic moment in

23 The now-famous endless waterfall of green characters is, one character tells Neo, the raw code of the matrix. The matrix, a literally perfect simulation, is, at bottom, a text made up of constantly scrolling typographic

the film comes when Neo dies and, recognizing that death is just another line of code able to be seen and broken, resurrects himself (that he does so with the help of true love's kiss does not diminish the scene's rhetorical impact). At-vision, or illusion-breaking, is the source of Neo's power. He can stop bullets and (in a sequel) fly like Superman simply because he can see the text *as a text*.²⁴ In this particular vision of total immersion, the ability to evaluate a text (in this case, the entire perceived world) is the first step in learning to code that text. Listening critically can lead to transformative speaking.

We have not yet reached a *Neuromancer* level of immersion, though with devices like the Oculus Rift virtual reality headset and advances in the medical field of brain-computer interface, we seem to be moving steadily closer. Although *total* immersion, a la *Neuromancer*, is still the stuff of science fiction, many video games aspire to be immersive experiences. The word “immersive” is common in the gaming community, though its definition can vary widely. Many players use “immersive” and “engaging” interchangeably, considering a game with strong characters and an interesting setting to be “immersive,” even if that game powerfully foregrounds interface. Game companies tend to overuse the term “immersive” in their marketing materials. Video game journalist Jason Schreier, in an article considering his preference for non-immersive handheld games to immersive console games, writes that “A search for 'immersive' in my email inbox brings up ~800 press releases” (Schreier). An “immersive game,” in my understanding, strives to remove the player from the real world and place her in a virtual world instead. In Schreier's phrasing, an immersive game “want[s] to shut off the world and put my head in a box” (Schreier). A medium might make itself more immersive by shifting focus away from the user interface (that constant reminder of the game world's unreality), by offering an

characters.

24 After his resurrection, Neo sees his surroundings as objects made literally of flows of code.

open and inviting virtual world, ripe for exploration, or, as is the case for virtual reality headsets, by literally blocking out the world around the player. Current immersive games most often employ the first two techniques—disappearing interfaces and open worlds—but companies are quickly developing the third.

Neuromancer offers more than a cyberpunk take on the future: its discourse of immersion uses pre-existing cultural beliefs about our relation to our media and crystallizes them into a futuristic vision of the internet. *Neuromancer* suggests that enthusiasm for the concept of immersion significantly predates the internet and three-dimensional video games. In other words, “immersion” is a new term for an old phenomenon. This section will chart the development of “immersion” as a discursive object, beginning long before the metaphor of immersion was used, and ending with the decline (and potential resurgence) of immersion as a video game marketing concept. The point of charting the formation of immersion as a discursive object is to demonstrate that immersion is not a thing—it has no external existence—but is rather a mode of rhetorical play. It is a name given to a particular way of approaching particular types of media. Immersion is a way of speaking about media, and that way of speaking can determine people's experience of media. It is an experience given name (and thus form) in experience. It is an object formed by the speaking aloud (or the reading silently) of rules, and, once formed, it becomes a new body of rules for further speaking and reading and playing.

In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault writes that the formation of a discursive object can be charted through three questions: “First we must map the *surfaces* of their *emergence*” (41, emphasis preserved), or what changed in the discourse to give rise to a new object. Second, “We must also describe the authorities of delimitation” (41), or who gets to preside over the object's discourse. Finally, “we must analyse the *grids of specification*” (42,

emphasis preserved), or the ways in which the object is “divided, contrasted, related, regrouped, classified” (42) etc.

Immersion as a discursive object emerges from several surfaces: it emerges from texts performed for listeners, from demographic and technological shifts in the landscape of reading, and from material practices related to books and reading techniques. For Foucault, the formation of an object begins with differences occurring that demand the naming of a new object. The hypothesis I present here is that the difference leading to the emergence of the object “immersion” was *not* virtual reality or any other digital technology but rather the widespread adoption of silent reading.

Silent Reading: New Power Over Rhetorical Play

Reading silently, as opposed to reading aloud or listening to another reading aloud, offers the reader a great deal of agency, and agency, as I will demonstrate, is a requirement for becoming immersed in a text. Silent reading did not directly spur the creation of “immersion” as a discursive object,²⁵ but it provided the necessary foundation for its eventual emergence. Silent reading did exist in the ancient world, as Frank Gilliard demonstrates, and while most noted silent readers were powerful and privileged, it did not appear to be particularly uncommon (692). Cicero makes occasional mention of it, and Gilliard also finds moments of silent reading onstage in Euripides' *Hippolytus* (691, 690). Gilliard concludes that, at least within the first four centuries of the Common Era, “the predominance of orality does not mean exclusivity, either in writing or in reading” (694).

25 When I say “immersion,” I ought to say “immersion-in-text,” since one can be immersed in many things, from water, to a daydream, to debt. In this section, “immersion” will be used in place of the much clunkier phrase “immersion-in-text.”

Silent reading became a scholastically common practice in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, as Paul Saenger demonstrates (115). He finds in ninth through twelfth century illustrations “authors... shown dictating their works,” and that “In the thirteenth century, scenes of literary composition began to change” (115). Instead of taking dictation, saints “were often portrayed silently copying the divine text from an exemplar usually held by an angel” (115). In addition, Saenger notes shifts in monastic architecture around this same period. Thick stone study carrels—which would have contained the sound of oral reading—gave way to open libraries with benches and tables instead of isolated carrels, and books began to be chained in place for silent reading, rather than the old model in which books were taken away to be read aloud (117). These architectural changes began around the end of the thirteenth century (the reference collection of Oxford University’s Merton College, for instance, began in 1289) and spread throughout the fourteenth century (118-19).

These shifts in reading practice were significant, says Saenger, because they opened the door to private reflection and the heterodox interpretations that so often accompanied it (118-19). Saenger's analysis of this shift in reading practice is worth quoting in full:

The transition to silent reading and composition, by providing a new dimension of privacy, had even more profound ramifications for the culture of the Middle Ages. Psychologically, silent reading emboldened the reader, because it placed the source of his curiosity completely under his personal control. In the oral world of the twelfth century, if one's intellectual speculations were heretical, they were subject to peer correction and control in the very act of their formulation and publication. Dictation and public *lectio*, in effect, buttressed theological and philosophical orthodoxy... Reading with the eyes alone and written composition

removed the individual's thoughts from the sanctions of the group and fostered the milieu which the new university heresies of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries developed. (118-19)

The shift in literary performance, then, brings with it a new measure of individual control over the text. The reader can do more than adjust his own interpretation and imagination of the text, he can adjust the text itself. He is limited only by the speed of his eyes and his mind; his tongue no longer slows his processing of the text. Certainly, a monk reading aloud to himself in a carrel could navigate the book at will, flipping back a few pages to check a reference, skipping forward to the next relevant section, but silent reading allows even more moment-by-moment control over the text. The risk of surveillance is also significantly lessened. The monk no longer risks a superior hearing him reading something unorthodox. The central oculus of the Panopticon closes with the advent of silent reading. No one can tell that the monk is reading "Song of Songs" for the third time that day. The monk has a much greater degree of individual power.

Individual power over a text is one primary ingredient for an immersive textual experience. A truly immersive experience, one in which the subject forgets about the strictures of interface and becomes fully submerged in the text's fiction, requires more than a text designed to be read transparently. That is, certainly, a precondition. Texts that draw attention to themselves as texts are more difficult to lose oneself in. One cannot *lose* oneself effectively if the text keeps *locating* the reader as a reader. A commentary on the Bible, for instance, locates the reader as a scholar and invites active critical consideration rather than aesthetic involvement with the words of the Bible. But a truly immersive experience also requires some form of agency on the part of the subject. The subject must be able to adjust her experience of the text in order to better synchronize herself with the text's expectations of her method of rhetorical playing. Consider the

oscillating model from the previous chapter. If one accepts that texts have implied subjects—Iser's implied readers, for instance—who are best able to experience whatever the work is designed to convey,²⁶ then it stands to reason that for immersive texts, the implied subject would be as immersed as possible in the text. If *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* is built to be an immersive experience (as its marketing campaign and game structure suggest), then the implied player of *Skyrim* is, by the game's design, immersed in the game.

The implied subject (who is not a real person but rather a way of understanding the text's potential effect) will play the text in a particular way. This would be the implied play of the text, the mode of playing that would best evoke the text's unique type of immersive experience. The actual subject, then, would attempt to adjust his type of play to match his perception of what the text “wants.” The subject cedes power to the text in order to supplement the immersive experience. A listener, hearing an oral recitation of *The Iliad*, might try to shut out distractions and concentrate on the words of the bard. She might close her eyes, or lie down, or concentrate hard on imagining the waves and curls of the sea. She adjusts her performance of the words, but she cannot adjust the bard's performance. He will speak at his own pace, will emphasize what he pleases, and will tell his tale in what order he likes. The listener has no power over the text's performance, only over herself. If, however, the reader is able to manipulate the text as well as her playing of the text, she will gain the ability to adjust the oscillation of her play-action to better match the most immersive frequency of the text. Agency over the text allows the reader to influence (no matter how mildly) the oscillation between subject and object. This ability makes

26 With an argument such as this, one necessarily flirts with the intentional fallacy. For Iser, the implied reader is not a feature designed or created by the author but instead a useful heuristic for thinking about a text, and it holds the same significance here.

resistance a true possibility—as it did for fourteenth-century monks—but the immersive text is seductive. It wants to be lived in. It will draw the subject into itself.

On the other hand, of course, agency over a text allows readers the power to resist the text's draw. Chaucer, in “The Miller's Prologue,” offers his reader agency over the text (an interesting move in an otherwise oral frame narrative). If the course matter of the Miller's story is too vulgar, he invites his reader to “Turne over the leef and chese another tale;/ For he shal fynde ynowe, grete and smale,/ Of storial thyng that toucheth gentillesse” (3177-79). The reader has the power simply to skip sections that might cause offense. Chaucer's line assumes a solitary reader (not necessarily a silent reader), or at least Chaucer optimizes his text for the solitary reader. Solitary silent reading allows readers the power to adapt the text to their desires: either to become invested and immersed, or to resist and refuse the text's power over them.

Transitional Chaucer: Reading, Escape, and Visions

Immersion does not emerge from the advent of silent reading, and neither does it find its start in Chaucer's work. Chaucer, however, provides a crucial link between the advent of silent reading and the beginning of immersive reading. Chaucer's career began at a point in literary history when silent reading had solidified itself in elite life and scholarship; French royalty had begun building extensive libraries, and “In miniatures, [Charles V] was painted seated in his library reading with sealed lips in silent isolation” (Saenger 120). So, as a member of the literary elite, and doubtless in touch with French reading practices, Chaucer was likely a silent reader himself. Chaucer, of course, popularized English vernacular literature, and he produced a large corpus of popular and influential secular works, but he also gives insight into the slow

development of disembodied reading of a kind that lets the mind escape what William Gibson describes as “the prison of [one's] own flesh” (6).

Chaucer never described immersive silent reading, but he describes its forerunner: reading that leads to a dream vision. Chaucer's “The Book of the Duchess” begins with a lengthy description of the insomniac's malaise. The narrator cannot sleep, and as a result, he cannot bring himself to care about anything. In a desperate bid for sleep, he decides to do some leisure reading:

So whan I saw I might not slepe
 Til now late this other night
 Upon my bed I sat upright
 And bad oon reche me a book,
 A romaunce, and he it me tok
 To rede and drive the night away. (ll. 44-49)

So the narrator reads for a while, relating the story to the reader, and after he has finished reading, he makes a plea to the gods of sleep, and “sodeynly, I nyste how,/ Such a lust anoon me took/ To slepe that ryght upon my book/ I fil aslepe” (ll. 272-75). This reading practice is a far cry from monks reading chained books in a library. Chaucer's narrator is in his chambers, reading a privately owned book to help him sleep. He seems to read for content, for the story, rather than as a form of study. Scholars estimate that “Book of the Duchess” was written in 1369-72 (Wilcockson 329), and here, in the mid-fourteenth-century, Chaucer provides evidence that the shift in reading habits Saenger describes has indeed reached England. Consider *Troilus and Criseyde*'s famous “Go, litel bok” section of Book V. Chaucer addresses his book and considers the ways in which it might be interpreted, and in this section he contrasts “And red

wherso thou be” with “or elles songe” (V.1797). He allows that his “litel bok” might be “red... or elles songe,” implying a silent “red” and an oral “songe.” Since Chaucer appears to allow for the possibility of silent reading of his works, it stands to reason that he would be reading silently himself.

Silent reading, for Chaucer, is not an immersive experience, but it triggers one. What is virtual reality besides a waking dream? The dream of immersion, the fantasy of an interface-less medium, the perfectly immediate virtual world, is the fantasy of the lucid dream vision. Gibson describes cyberspace as “a consensual hallucination” (51), and what is a dream vision besides a consensual hallucination? Chaucer cannot be the true father of the immersive medium, but his model of the vision triggered by media adds another element to what the practice of silent reading began. Silent reading in the monasteries provided agency and power over a text, and the Chaucerian dream vision contributes the element of escapism. The dream vision provides an escape from depressed insomnia for the narrator of “The Book of the Duchess” and his means of accessing that fantasy is the book. Chaucer’s narrator also wakes up holding his book:

“Therwyth I awook myselve/ And fond me lyng in my bed;/ And the book that I hadde red... I fond hyt in myn hond ful even” (1324-1329). The return to consciousness, and the description of waking up holding the book, suggests that the narrator's mind has wandered away from his body and his text, and now, at the end of his dream vision, his mind has returned to his body and text.

Immersion is a fantasy of separation from the body. After Case betrays an employer in *Neuromancer*, his ability to access cyberspace is forcibly removed. Gibson writes that “For Case, who'd lived for the bodiless exultation of cyberspace, it was the Fall. In the bars he'd frequented as a cowboy hotshot, the elite stance involved a certain relaxed contempt for the flesh. The body was meat. Case fell into the prison of his own flesh” (6). In parallel, “The Book of the Duchess”

imagines a separation between the frustrated reader and his immersive dream-vision. The book allows the Chaucer-figure to literally escape his insomniac state into a fantasy.

The names that technologists choose for their virtual reality devices are surprisingly revealing. The name of Sony's recently announced virtual reality headset proves the long-standing connections between immersive media and the form of the dream vision. Their new device is codenamed "Project Morpheus," and their promotional website's eye-grabbing heading reads, unsurprisingly, "Breathtaking Immersion" (Sony). Where Chaucer's narrator bargained with Morpheus to send him to sleep (and thus to dream) in "The Book of the Duchess" (l. 242), Sony gives their virtual reality platform his name. Clearly, the discourse of the dream vision is alive and well.²⁷

So too is the discourse of mind/body separation. Sony's primary competition is another virtual reality headset, originally funded through Kickstarter. This device is called the Oculus Rift. The Rift calls itself "the first truly immersive virtual reality headset" (Oculus), and the press quotes they use on their Kickstarter page are revealing. One outlet calls the device "the closest we've come to Star Trek's holodeck," and another journalist wrote that "we found ourselves entirely absorbed; a gaming experience with a level of immersion genuinely unlike anything else we have ever encountered" (Oculus).²⁸ Yet, for all the talk of total immersion, the headset's name suggests a subtle difference. "Oculus," Latin for "eye" is logical enough, and "Rift" connotes the rift between the reality of the body and that of the mind.

The Oculus Rift creates a rift between lived reality and game reality. The device is a rift; a divider between the user's awareness—their attention—and their body. The rift divides the

²⁷ "Project Morpheus" is likely a placeholder name, but that does nothing to diminish its referential significance.

²⁸ The quotes are from the outlets *Gamespy* and *CVG* respectively, but in trying to find primary sources, I could find neither article using the provided links or a search engine. The only available source was the Oculus Rift's Kickstarter page.

subject and the object. It splits off the body from the experience of the mind. This kind of experience led one tech journalist to lead his article on the Rift with the headline “I Wore the New Oculus Rift and I Never Want to Look at Real Life Again” (Limer). One satirical blog cropped up after the Oculus Rift became popular: “White Guys Wearin' Oculus Rifts” (jbasher). The blog is nothing but pictures of mid-thirties white men wearing the chunky VR goggles, generally grinning from ear to ear. Besides the obvious jab at the typical demography of game designers and journalists,²⁹ the blog's humor derives from the mind-body rift inherent in the Rift. These men are smiling, clearly in awe, but without the ability to access their private realities, they look ridiculous. They lean back in chairs, grip armrests, and beam triumphantly at nothing. A rift exists between the mind and body, at least in the discourse of immersion, and it makes people look silly. The Oculus Rift, Project Morpheus, and the generations of headsets that will inevitably follow them are intent on turning themselves into generators of dream visions. Project Morpheus indeed.

Carried Away: The Emergence of Immersive Reading

Up to this point, I have demonstrated that shifts in medieval reading practices laid the groundwork for an immersive mode of rhetorical play, even if no trace of the discourse of immersion in text exists before the Renaissance. The printing press brought with it the popularization and mass marketing of books, for the first time allowing citizens outside of monasteries or the ruling elite to access a wide array of books. With this popularization came an eventual shift in reading practice. Silent reading became commonplace for nobles and clerics in the mid-fourteenth century, but according to Elspeth Jajdelska, it took until “the end of the

29 The Rift is not yet publicly available. Backers of the Kickstarter project received early models, and game and tech developers have been allowed to order development kits.

seventeenth and beginning of the eighteenth centuries” for silent reading to spread widely (23). The thesis of Jajdelska's monograph *Silent Reading and the Birth of the Narrator* is that in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, silent reading became a common enough practice that readers began thinking of themselves as “non-embodied hearer[s] and imagined writer[s],” instead of “embodied speaker[s] and audience[s]” (7). While I am skeptical of Jajdelska's absolute binary between speaking and hearing, her historical research and arguments regarding shifts in actual reading practices are thoroughly grounded. She claims that a binary exists between silent and oral reading, writing that “it is not possible to occupy a position halfway between them, where the reader is half a speaker and half a reader” (8). While such a hybrid position sounds alien to contemporary minds, I find it strange that Jajdelska simply dismisses the possibility without further investigation.

She points to a scholarly consensus that a major style-shift occurred between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (12), then suggests that altered reading practices were responsible for such a shift (13-14). Her most convincing evidence is the growth in “connection between elements within texts and the development of terms which point to notional locations both within and outside the text,” which would make sense if readers imagine themselves as hearers or readers, rather than oral speakers (15). This section of *Silent Reading* is haunted by Ong's “The Writer's Audience Is Always a Fiction,” though Jajdelska only cites *Orality and Literacy* (6, 37). Silent reading allows the imaginative leniency to imagine oneself as a reader. Just as with the monks, the mass ability to read silently gives a great deal of power to a very large number of people. The early modern period presented the first time when extensive reading became possible for lay people: many scholars differentiate between “intensive” reading, or a close, extended focus on a small number of books, and “extensive” reading, or faster, more

cursory readings of more books (Jajdelska 21). When books became widely available and easily manufactured, extensive reading became possible on a wider scale. Not only could lower classes (though certainly not *all* classes) have more access to more books, they could read them silently, without fear of discovery or being overheard. They could adjust their playing of the text based on their own desires, rather than being locked into the oral patterns of grammar, style, and poetic structure. A vocal performance requires a set method of reading, but silent reading can be as quick, as slow, as irregular, as cursory, or as thorough as it pleases.

With this sudden explosion of power comes panic, however, and it is this panic that gives the first evidence of immersive reading as a discursive object. The final ingredient for immersion-in-text is a pleasurable loss of control. Immersion in games and books is enjoyable because readers are guided along, just powerful enough to influence or control their simulated surroundings, but ultimately out of their own control. They cede control of their imaginations to the structure of the text. Readers accept the text's rules as their own, and the negotiation between their own power and that of the text creates the enjoyment of reading or playing in an immersive world. The ceding of control can only come about in the presence of the other two preconditions: the individual agency that accompanies silent reading, and the perceived separation between mind and body that accompanies the dream-like text. Without agency, the loss of control would cease to be pleasurable, and the reader would be unable to effectively lose herself in the text. She could not adjust her play-action to something comfortable and pleasurable. And without the dreamy separation of mind and body, the subject would be too aware of herself as a recipient. She cannot keep one eye on the text and the other eye on herself while still maintaining

engagement.³⁰ Naturally, the pleasure that comes with ceding control of one's imagination will strike many polemicists as dangerous.

One of these polemicists was Richard Baxter, a puritan-leaning ejected minister and author of *A Treatise of Self-Denial* (1660) (Keeble). Baxter's characterizations of books, especially secular romances and the dangers they presented, reveal a great deal about his understanding of books' immersive qualities. True to the title, Baxter's book regards different practices and pleasures that good Christians ought to deny themselves. No wonder, then, that Baxter includes secular books not once but twice. In the first instance, he protests against "False Stories, Romances, and other tempting Books,"³¹ which include mostly romances, other fictions, and miscellanies (126). These books, Baxter writes, "ensnare us in a world of guilt, by drawing us to the neglect of those many, those great and necessary things that all of us have to mind and study" (126). Baxter's logic is obvious enough: secular leisure reading takes time away from holy study. But consider the words he uses to describe the books' effects: books "*ensnare us... draw[...] us*" (126, emphasis added). Secular romances seem to be agents with power: they ensnare readers and draw them away from God. On the next page, Baxter enlarges further on the effects of books: "it dangerously *bewitcheth* and *corrupteth* the minds of young and empty people, to read these books. [Books]...*steal away* the heart from God" (127, emphasis added). Baxter's colorful verbs highlight books' power over their readers: readers are helpless in thrall of these bewitching, corrupting, ensnaring objects that draw readers to them so relentlessly. Only God, he implies later, should have such a power. God has power over humans, since "though our carnal delight in News and History be a sin in us; yet God doth sometime make it an occasion of

30 This is one reason why the player's virtual body is absent in many first-person perspective video games. The player's virtual body is effectively a camera with a gun strapped below it, meaning that when a player looks all the way down, to where her feet should be, she sees nothing. No legs, no torso, just the ground.

³¹ In quoting Baxter, I have preserved his capitals but modernized the orthography.

Good, by *leading us to* that holy truth” (166, emphasis added). The human subject remains essentially inert, a vessel to be acted upon, but rather than being ensnared, stolen, or drawn away by a book, the subject is led by God to truth. Books, for Baxter, are perilous objects because they do what only God should.

Baxter protests secular literature again in the chapter “New, Vain Histories, and Other Mens Matters, &c.” (164). This chapter’s language is similar to that from his chapter on romances. Vain histories are to be avoided because “Many school-boys, and young effeminate wits are as much *poisoned* and *carried away with* reading Romances, feigned histories and tale-books, and play-books, as by almost any piece of sensuality” (165, emphasis added). The phrase “carried away with reading Romances” is a perfect representation of the loss of agency that accompanies the immersive mode of rhetorical play. Our own culture regularly uses similar phrases, like “getting lost in a good book,” “being sucked into a book,” and “being transported to another place.” All of these phrases highlight the loss of personal agency. The reader becomes lost (presumably from his awareness of his surroundings). The reader is “sucked in,” like a ship into a whirlpool. The reader is transported by the book’s power—not his own. The same language is still deployed when talking about virtual reality. One writer, describing his experience with the Oculus Rift game *SoundSelf*, wrote that “there was no denying I’d stepped into *SoundSelf*’s world. *It swallowed me whole*” (Grayson, emphasis added). Consider how similar our own terms (“lost,” “sucked in,” “transported,” “swallowed whole”) are to Baxter’s: “bewitched,” “ensnared,” “drawn,” “stolen away,” “carried away.” Thus, I argue that the discourse of immersion began around the end of the seventeenth century.

Samuel Pepys was an enthusiastic leisure reader, and his diaries reliably recount what the diarist read before bed each night. His account of December 7th, 1660 consists of two sentences,

one summarizing a trip to the Privy Seal, and the other: “I fell a-reading Fuller's *History of Abbeys*, and my wife in *Great Cyrus* till twelve at night, and so to bed” (59). Sometimes Pepys' wife read to him aloud, and sometimes Pepys read silently, as we can assume he and his wife did on December 7th. Pepys' word choice is telling, however. He “*fell* a-reading,” showing the same type of language that Baxter lobbed at books and that present-day writers and speakers still use. If Pepys *fell* to reading, he began an action that placed him out of his own control. When one falls, one loses one's agency and is subjected to the laws of physics. When Pepys falls a-reading, one can argue, he places his mind in the care of his book and is subjected to its rules. Pepys does not always “fall a-reading,” but he uses the phrase with some regularity, suggesting it was a common part of his cultural discourse. A final amusing note on Pepys' discourse of immersive reading: he writes on May 18th 1660 “Back by water, where a pretty, sober, Dutch lass sat reading all the way, and I could not fasten any discourse upon her” (30). It is unclear whether the Dutch lady was too immersed in her book to respond or whether her absorption simply provided a convenient screen between herself and Pepys' advances. In either case, immersion is common enough that Pepys makes an implicit connection between her committed reading and her refusal to talk to him; a young lady lost in a book does not seem to strike Pepys as strange.

The EEBO database dates the first use of the phrase “fell to reading” to Thomas Lupton's 1581 *A persuasion from papistris* (Lupton), with another use two years later in Foxe's *Actes and monuments* (Foxe). The phrase “lost in a book” appears not at all, though the phrase “lost in thought,” a kind of textless immersion, appears first in 1675 (Otway). The word “immerse” crops up in the seventeenth century as well, first as a scientific term in *The two booke of Francis Bacon* (1605), then as a metaphorical term in *The Christians manna* (1613).³² EEBO finds no

32 “the Soule (immersed in Sense) from apprehending truly...” (R.N. 15).

uses of these strikingly immersive words between 1473, the database's earliest records, and these dates. While these first usages may not prove the emergence of the immersive mode of rhetorical play, they do suggest an emerging discourse of being surrounded, caught up, *lost* in something greater.

Richard Baxter used immersive language as a protest against books, and Pepys employed a casual discourse of immersion, but Francis Kirkman provides an insider's perspective of early immersive reading.³³ Kirkman's *The Unlucky Citizen* is an imaginative memoir, based loosely on his own experience as an "unlucky citizen," and one of Kirkman's earliest tales is of his childhood reading habits. Kirkman began his life-long literary career by reading still-classic Renaissance plays like Greene's *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*³⁴ and Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* (which gave young Kirkman nightmares) (B6v), but he eventually discovered knight errant romances. He was hooked: "I was contented beyond measure, and (believing all I read to be true) wished my self Squire to one of these Knights" (B6r). He read everything he could find, borrowing from schoolmates and lending borrowed books to others (B6r). He read "All the time [he] had from school, as *Thursdays* in the Afternoon, and *Saturdays*" (B6r, emphasis preserved). Kirkman is unlike Baxter in that he does not use loaded immersive diction. Kirkman gives little detail of his actual reading process, only the books that he read and the effects they had on him. But those effects are more than enough evidence of immersive reading.

Kirkman was Baxter's school-boy bewitched by secular romance. Young Kirkman was under the spell of the knight errant so much that, "being wholly affected to [knight-errant

33 I am grateful to Elspeth Jajdelska for mentioning both Baxter and Kirkman; she uses them as evidence of what types of citizens would have purchased what types of books, but both Baxter and Kirkman, when examined further, provide excellent evidence of early modern literary immersion.

34 Kirkman references only "Fryar Bacon," but all other titles including "Fryar Bacon," besides Greene's play, were published too late for Kirkman, aged forty in 1673, to have read as a child.

romances], and reading how that *Amadis* and other Knights not knowing their Parents, did in time prove to be Sons of Kings and great Personages; I had such a fond and idle Opinion, that I might in time prove to be some great Person, or at leastwise be Squire to some Knight” (B6r-B7v). Richard Baxter's puritanical fear seems to have been justified. Young Kirkman was a literary changeling, stolen away from his parents to live in a romance-fueled fairyland. When he sees an actual knight one day, clad simply in a doublet and breeches, young Kirkman refuses to believe that such an ordinary man could share title with the armored, be-weaponed knights of his imagination (B7r). Kirkman muses “I wonder I did not become another *Don Quixot* [sic]” (B7r, emphasis preserved). Later, upon hearing an acquaintance talk about the likelihood of reincarnation, Kirkman begins to consider his past life. He hypothesizes: “If I was alive, in former Ages, and was that very valiant *Don Bellianis*, it may well be, for else how should I be so well acquainted with his Story,” but upon further consideration, he realizes that “others did formerly write the worthy Histories of the Knights of their times by Inspiration; even so I have done” (C3v-r). In other words, reading and writing fiction about glorious knights is second in realism only to having actually lived as those glorious knights. Media carries Kirkman away into speculation. He loses days at a time in his books. They enchant him into thinking he is another person, that he has lived other lives, and that those lives have been the same fantastical lives from his books. At the very least, he chooses to use these forms of discourse to describe his experiences. Kirkman may never describe himself actually reading, but the effects of his immersion are plain to see.

The discursive object “immersion” emerged at the end of the seventeenth century, as Baxter, Kirkman, and Pepys demonstrate. One final note on immersive reading: Kirkman writes in his preface to *Unlucky Citizen* that his own book has been written with an eye toward

straightforward, immersive reading. The reader will find no “hard *cramping Words*, such as will stop you in the middle of your Story to consider what is meant by them” (B2v, emphasis preserved). He says that “Here you shall onely read a plain Story, such as you would have told; for I intend to write as freely and as naturally as I would tell a Tale to you” (B2r); no dictionary required. “Cramping words” would break his readers' illusion, and when the “Story” is all that counts, anything that distracts from the story should be avoided. The old immersive language reappears, however, when Kirkman writes that, “having in few words satisfied [his reader] in [his] Reason of the Title, [he] shall *fall* upon the matter in Hand,” but that the reader “must not expect any laborous Piece, or rhetorical Expressions” (B2r, emphasis added). Labor and rhetoric are, in Kirkman's understanding, the opposite of pure Story, and if a reader must stop to think of what words mean, then the author has failed to provide an immersive text.

The rhetoric of immersion solidified throughout the next century, aided by the emergence of the prose novel, and by the end of the eighteenth century, immersive reading had become widespread enough for one polemicist to lament that “I have actually seen mothers, in miserable garrets, *crying for the imaginary distress of an heroine*, while their own children were *crying for bread*: and the mistress of a family losing hours over a novel in the parlour, while her maids, in emulation of the example, were similarly employed in the kitchen” (*Sylph*, qtd. Vogrinčič 104, emphasis preserved). The scene could have been written by Richard Baxter himself. Not only are women losing productive hours in the company of books, they seem to be replacing their real concerns (starving children!) with the imaginary drama of novels. If one were to interview the hypothetical mother, stuck in her miserable garret, she might describe a life along the lines of Francis Kirkman's childhood. Her books surround her with an alternate reality, a blessed relief from hungry children and cold garret, and in this separate textual reality, she can suffer the

controlled pains and programmed pleasures of the novel rather than the endless and unconfined pains of her lived reality. The miserable mother and distracted maids also give evidence that silent, immersive reading had filtered through all ranks of society by the end of the eighteenth century. By the middle of the eighteenth century, a new word appeared to describe the craze for reading: bibliomania. Erin Hollis describes it as “a term coined in the eighteenth century that encompasses both the need to collect books *and the effects of being too caught up*³⁵ *in reading*” (n.p., emphasis added). Bibliomania represents less a change in practice of immersive reading and more the solidifying of a pre-existing practice.

Yet “immersion-in-text” is not a practice. As I established at the beginning of the chapter, “immersion” is a discursive object, not a thing or a specific technique. The practice of immersive textual play owes its existence to a discourse, to a way of talking about rhetorical play. All of the historical sources I have thus far cited have been traces of a larger object. Nowhere have we seen “immersive reading” itself; no writers have described their moment-to-moment experiences of reading. Kirkman regrettably neglects to describe what oscillating patterns emerged from his childhood readings. Instead, their discourses leave traces of reading practices that are, themselves, created by discourse.

The same discourse of immersion that emerged in the Renaissance continues to structure contemporary understandings of reading, playing, and watching. Tracing a separate emergence for immersion-in-film, immersion-in-television, and immersion-in-games is unnecessary, since all of these media make use of the same discursive object as reading. This does not mean that film, television, games, and novels have identical manifestations of immersion—immersive practices change with the medium—but the *discourse* of immersion, and the ways in which that

35 Hollis, writing in 2011, continues to replicate the discourse of immersion—bibliomania describes being *caught up* in the act of reading. Again the agency of the subject disappears, and the book becomes an engulfing force.

discourse structures individuals' approaches to texts, is equally applicable to any medium.

Immersion still requires agency on behalf of the subject, a heavily structured textual object, and the willingness of the subject to submit himself to the rules of the object in exchange for transportation into the world of the object.

In this section, I have traced some of the differences that allowed “immersion-in-text” to emerge as a discursive object. The shift from oral to silent reading in the fourteenth century gave readers more agency over their texts and more privacy with which to read them; the tradition of dream vision poetry, especially as imagined by codex-focused medieval authors like Chaucer, added to silent reading the possibility of escaping from one's body into a coherent alternate world inspired by (and later created by) text; finally, the widespread acceptance of silent reading in the late seventeenth century allowed more people to read for leisure (as opposed to study or meditation), and to immerse themselves in texts as a form of escape.

The Trouble with Immersion

“Immersion is dangerous,” science fiction authors tell us again and again. “Immersion is dangerous; it blindfolds you to the issues of the real world,” says *The Matrix*. “Immersion is dangerous; it distracts you from life beyond your TV parlor,” says *Fahrenheit 451*. “Immersion is dangerous; it anesthetizes you to the suffering and oppression of your world,” says *Brave New World*. None of them is wrong, exactly, but most science fiction warning of the dangers of immersion imagines the immersive experience—whether that takes the form of the matrix, the TV walls, or the feely—as a sheltering, external place cut off from the dystopian exigencies of the “real world.” Virtuality is so seductive in fiction because it is a pretend-utopia, distracting and isolating its inhabitants from what *really* matters: the shadowy tyrants ruling the real world.

The immersed slaves in their various virtual worlds are harmless because they are “filed away,” placed outside of the flows of power, removed from the dangers of the real world by the comforting falseness of the game. In *The Matrix*, humans are kept immobilized in gooey pods stored in orderly towers. The television show *Futurama* uses this basic image to satirize contemporary elder care: the elderly are sent to the “Near-Death Star,” where they are immersed in virtual reality retirement homes, then literally put in drawers and filed in massive filing cabinets (“A Clone of My Own”). These dystopias, however, are not dystopian enough. These fictions neglect the disciplinary force acting *within* the immersive medium as well as outside it.

Immersive texts are enthralling because they offer an escape from the intimidating, sometimes painful disciplinary structures of the “real world.” Games in general, and immersive games in particular, are seductive because they offer a measure of felt power; they allow us to make something broken work again. Ian Bogost writes that “You don’t play a game to experience an idea so much as you do so in an attempt to get a broken machine to work again” (“Squalid Grace”). Helping Gordon Freeman solve a puzzle in *Half Life* is satisfying because it allows the player to *fix* something, to improve a world. Games make performing—producing a text (in this case a performance) in service to a powerful speaker—feel like coding. Acting within games is made to feel powerful, even though the power is strictly contained within the text. Video game players rescue princesses, save kingdoms, defeat invasions, and build functioning worlds—but then, this is nothing new. Games openly bill themselves as escapist entertainment.

Immersive games especially allow their players to escape into different worlds. Francis Kirkman, writing about his life in 1673, recalled that “I had had seven years of trouble, I did consider in general, that in my child hood I was bred up and educated by severe Parents, and a harsh School-master; that the time of my Apprentiship was an absolute Bondage, under a rigid

Master, and farr worse Mistress” (A3r), and the reader can easily see why he liked to imagine himself living past lives as knights and squires through his romances. His immersion in secular romances provided a refuge from his severe parents, schoolmaster, and the bondage of his apprenticeship. But while Kirkman immerses himself in romances, he also immerses himself in the disciplines and discourses of the romances' authors. In escaping one set of harsh masters, he voluntarily places himself in subjection to another set. Kirkman's example seems harmless enough—after all, who would complain about being subjected to the pleasurable discipline of Cervantes?

On the other hand, subjection to the pleasurable discipline of Facebook is more obviously problematic. Escape into the immersive text temporarily trades one disciplinary force for another. Immersion's danger lies more in its ability to subvert human agency (using subjective agency as a tool to shape a text to one's immersive pleasure, rather than enhancing the agency required to critique and remove oneself from the text) than its distraction or its non-productivity. Immersion, like Foucault's “Inclination,” simply wants to be experienced transparently. The immersion-seeking subject just wants to experience a medium without the baggage of an interface or an intervening body, as the design of the standard virtual reality headset and interface suggest. The Oculus Rift demonstrates perfectly the mechanics of disciplined immersion. The user is visible—sometimes hilariously visible, as “White Guys Wearin' Oculus Rifts” demonstrates—to all but himself. The subject is visible externally, but is dodging self-awareness. Instead, the disciplinary object, in this case, the game being played via Rift, comes to the fore. Foucault could hardly have invented a more perfect demonstration of discipline. As he writes in *Discipline and Punish*,

Disciplinary power, on the other hand, is exercised through its invisibility; at the same time it imposes on those whom it subjects a principle of compulsory visibility. In discipline, it is the subjects who have to be seen. Their visibility assures the hold of the power that is exercised over them. It is the fact of being constantly seen, of being able always to be seen, that maintains the disciplined individual in his subjection. (187)

A crowd-funding campaign for the Rift set its funding goal at \$250,000, and by the end of the campaign, the startup had raised nearly two and a half million dollars (Oculus). Oculus Rift was bought by Facebook for two *billion* dollars (Kovach). It should come as no surprise that Facebook, a company obsessed with gathering user information for potential advertisers, invested in a device so involved with issues of disciplinary visibility and transparency.

Transparency is a key idea when discussing the disciplinary uses of the immersive medium. In the oscillation model of rhetorical play from the first chapter, transparent reading foregrounds the object and keeps the subject in the background. In Lanham's terminology, transparency defines the "through" end of the at/through matrix; transparent media focus attention on the content, the "stuff," at the expense of the style or "fluff." Transparent media are those that obligingly duck out of the viewer's way: realist art; plain, simple written style; and minimal user interfaces. Jay Bolter and David Grusin's *Remediation* opens with a compellingly simple explanation of media transparency, or in their terms, "immediacy." They begin with virtual reality and discuss the logic of immediacy: "Virtual reality, three-dimensional graphics, and graphical interface design are all seeking to make digital technology 'transparent.' In this sense, a transparent interface would be one that erases itself, so that the user is no longer aware of confronting a medium, but instead stands in an immediate relationship to the contents of that

medium” (23-24). That video games should bill themselves as transparently escapist should be no surprise. The mistake lies in believing them.

Immersion is seductive. In 1997, Janet Murray wrote one of the most influential texts on immersion in the humanities: *Hamlet on the Holodeck*. Still cited today, I suspect that the coming renaissance in virtual reality (heralded by the Oculus Rift and Project Morpheus) will rediscover and reapply Murray's book to a new generation of VR devices and games. Murray begins the book by establishing a fundamental opposition between positive and negative uses of virtual reality (21, 25). Feelies and TV parlors are negative because they are simplistic and indulgent (“In this dystopian view, the new entertainment technologies are a means of stripping away the language and culture that give life meaning and of reducing us to a state of bestiality” (21)), while *Star Trek*'s holodecks are laudable because of the complex and cultured narratives they enable (24-26). But Murray sees few problems with the interfaces themselves. After all, she surmises, all media are basically the same:

Eventually all successful story-telling technologies become 'transparent': we lose consciousness of the medium and see neither print nor film but only the power of the story itself. If digital art reaches the same level of expressiveness as these older media, we will no longer concern ourselves with how we are receiving the information. We will only think about what truth it has told us about our lives.
(26)

Murray, here, is probably not suggesting that medium changes nothing—after all, her most recent book, *Inventing the Medium*, is dedicated almost exclusively to the power that interface and media have over content. The above quote, I suspect, is meant to be taken at the very broadest level; it concludes the first chapter and places medium in the larger context of human

narrative. Nevertheless, “how we are receiving the information” (26) is one of the most fundamental determiners of that information's power over its recipients. New media scholarship in the 1990s tends to adopt this same wide-eyed optimism about digital technologies. The intervening decade has, I suspect, made us a good deal cannier about our adoption of new technologies (even if no more hesitant to adopt those technologies).

If a work's medium—at the broadest level of cultural understanding—changes nothing, then Murray reasons that one may as well make the medium as transparent and immediate as possible. Murray focuses primarily on narrative and thus reasons that if content is all that matters, then the history of media must be a history of the pursuit of transparency, and not only transparency, but immersion (99). For Murray, the point of narrative is to be enchanted. She writes that “A good story serves the same purpose for adults [as a teddy bear for children], giving us something safely outside ourselves (because it is made up by someone else) upon which we can project our feelings” (100). She calls this feeling “enchantment” (99). It is hard not to hear echoes of Richard Baxter's word “*bewitcheth*” behind Murray's discussion enchanted digital spaces. Both authors, obviously, are working within the discourse of immersion.³⁶ Many of Murray's lessons in this chapter are dedicated to preserving immersion. She asks: “How can we enter the fictional world without disrupting it? How can we be sure that imaginary actions will not have real results? How can we act on our fantasies without becoming paralyzed by anxiety?... We need to define the boundary conventions that will allow us to surrender to the enticements of the virtual environment” (103). These are perfect questions for the designers of perfectly immersive interfaces, since they seem tailor-made to dodge the kind of resistant rhetorical play outlined in the first chapter. To rewrite Murray's questions: “How can we live

36 Murray's chapter is entitled “Immersion” (97).

purely in the Object? How can we avoid breaking our own illusion? How can we avoid consciousness of ourselves as participating subjects?” Or, to return to a particularly powerful quote by Foucault, “I would like to feel it all around me, calm and transparent, profound, infinitely open, with others responding to my expectations, one by one. All I want is to allow myself to be borne along, within it, and by it, a happy wreck” (“Discourse on Language” 215-16).

Toward the end of the book, she writes—with palpable frustration—that “Academic theorists reduce literature to a system of arbitrary symbols that do not point to anything beyond other texts” (274). Indeed, in the first chapter, I literally charted a system of wavelengths as a way of understanding literature. Murray’s protest stems from a desire for more pragmatic modes of engagement with reading practices: “But in our ordinary lives, we do not experience the world as a succession of signifiers any more than we experience it as a succession of car chases. In our ordinary lives, we turn to stories of every kind, again and again, to reflect our desires and sorrows with the heightened clarity of the imagination” (274). In some ways, *Hamlet on the Holodeck* and this dissertation form an oscillating structure similar to the one sketched in the previous chapter. Murray (writing in the heady 90s) is attuned to the benefits of narrative, the healthy artistic enjoyment that comes from immersion in well-rendered and enlightening media experiences. I am more interested in the dark side of those media experiences, immersed as I am in a period of widespread government surveillance and a video game culture that seems determined to stay in its angry adolescence forever. *Hamlet on the Holodeck* advocates illusion forming and argues for its promise. I, on the other hand, am writing with that optimism and widespread acceptance of immersion as an academic background, and so am intentionally advocating illusion breaking as a critical and pedagogical practice. Murray and I represent two

tendencies, two locations along a spectrum, and most media experiences will (and should) oscillate between our two locations.

The trouble is that, since the techno-optimism of the late 90s, the language and potential of immersion have crystallized into something less ideal than Murray's holodeck. The word "addiction," for instance, has lost its stigma and is used ad nauseam in descriptions of and praise for video games. Addiction is a form of domination. It congeals power and prevents the addicted subject from moving beyond the addiction's requirements. The language of addiction suffuses game marketing and journalism. Out of curiosity, I searched the internet for "most addicting games." Within the first five search results (and the first result outside of the tellingly-named "addictinggames.com"), I found an article on GamesRadar entitled "Just one more level! The 25 most addictive games of all time." Its first heading reads: "Can't stop won't stop." The copy beneath the heading continues the language of domination: "No matter what time it is, no matter where we're supposed to be or what we're supposed to be doing, these games can keep us in our chairs for days at a time, locked away with our gaming systems just playing the hours away. Addiction in digital form awaits those who read this list..." (Fanelli). Outside of the common language of domination and discipline (which are, themselves, key features of the mainstream gaming's game of truth), the words are chilling. Who wants to be "locked away" "in our chairs for days at a time" playing games like *Angry Birds*, *Candy Crush Saga*, and *Peggle* (numbers eleven, ten, and seven, respectively) (Fanelli)? Horror films have been made on flimsier concepts. And yet the language of addiction has become not only commonplace, but desirable, not only desirable, but high praise. Domination has been packaged and structured to induce craving.

One cannot escape the strictures of discipline and surveillance within games, books, movies, TV walls, feelies, or goo-filled virtual reality pods, because those media are just as discipline-heavy as the so-called Real World. Video games as entertainment are what Baudrillard calls “a simulation of the third order” (12), a simulation that exists to cover the fact that, ideologically, the simulation is the truest expression of reality, whereas the purported reality works to cover its own falseness (12). Baudrillard's famous example of Disneyland resonates with today's escapist video games: “Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, whereas all of Los Angeles and the America that surrounds it are no longer real, but belong to the hyperreal order of the simulation” (12). Escapist games have become our omnipresent Disneyland: simulacra that create false distinctions between “reality” and “simulation” in order to cover the fact that, in fleeing to escapist space, one only escapes into a more pleasurably constructed disciplinary space.

Games present a simplified world, a simulation with defined rules that ape chaotic reality. One has power in a game because one understands its rules. One wins by playing most skillfully by the rules, by streamlining one's movement through disciplinary structures, and by finding the most desired behaviors, then practicing and honing those behaviors into a perfect performance of conformity with the rules. When Foucault said that “Power is not an evil. Power is strategic games” (“Ethic” 129), he may not have known that he was writing literally as well as figuratively. Power is a game—literally.

And yet, power is not necessarily an evil. Games as disciplinary objects, as reality simulators, as inescapable escapes, are not evil. They exert power over their players, but in a Foucauldian world, power is omnipresent. The flows of power are everywhere, running through office break rooms, lines at the post office, and traffic lights, in addition to games and other

forms of interface. But the fact that games are so frequently billed as transparent sources of escapist fun—a means of escaping oppression—presents a serious problem. Games must be examined critically to examine the ways in which power flows through and around them. Otherwise, we are easily blinded to the potential dangers and abuses of digital games—especially immersive ones.

Not all games are immersive, of course. But, based on developments in game hardware, marketing, and design, immersion appears to be a driving goal for developers and publishers alike. New game consoles are inevitably more graphically powerful, and the games designed for those consoles often boast greater and greater degrees of realism. Games are growing more expansive: upcoming game *No Man's Sky* boasts so many distinct planets that it would take *five billion years* to see them all, even at the clip of one planet per second (Pereira). Devices like the Oculus Rift, Project Morpheus, and the imitators that will inevitably follow are drawing players further and further into the screen. So although not every game will hold immersion as its primary goal, immersion seems to be guiding the development of the gaming industry. Players have an appetite for immersion. *World of Warcraft* has sold over fourteen million copies and made billions from subscriber fees (“Blizzard Entertainment Statistics”); *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* has sold over twenty million copies (“Skyrim: The Elder Scrolls V Statistics”). This is hardly surprising. Since before Chaucer, readers and listeners have escaped into fictional worlds via whatever media they had available. Even cave paintings, lit by torch in the darkness of the Lascaux or Chauvet caves, could have been early immersive experiences, surrounding viewers with shifting images of prey and predators. Immersion is nothing new. But new technologies allow immersion new authority and control over their subjects, making the consideration of resistance—and not just discipline—a necessity.

Perfect immersion is not yet possible, and perhaps it never will be. It relies on the familiar Western illusion of the independence of mind and body. Its metaphors imagine a mind set free from the body, whether to freely explore Gibson's neon internet or to be imprisoned in *The Matrix*. Perfect immersion is, in many ways, a disciplinary dream, an Eden in which the Tree of Knowledge goes untouched. The subject remains blissfully ensconced, perfectly and contentedly subjugated to the will of the encompassing system. The subject endlessly performs, speaks forever within the game's rules, and never oscillates back to evaluating or coding. The system preserves perfect authority and dominance over its subjects. Power ceases to flow between social actors. Without oscillation between textual and subjective power, and without movement through the speaking and listening matrix, the text petrifies. It ceases to be a holodeck and becomes a prison.

Perfect immersion does not exist—at least not yet. Rhetorical play continues to be an oscillation between the player and game, a series of illusions formed and broken. Immersive games offer oscillations with high degrees of textual power: the wave is long and shallow, with few dips into *at* vision, few recognitions of the subject-as-player. But the illusion still breaks, if only occasionally. The interface still intrudes, if only slightly. The cool medium never drops to absolute zero; the oscillation never becomes a flat line. Games are disciplinary structures, but they require players' engagement to function. Players do not need to submit to games' discipline, and, in the next chapter, I will argue that the act of play in itself is a rebellious one. Play offers resistance to established ludic structures, it presses at boundaries, it destabilizes systems, and it (occasionally) expands the bounds of the game.

CHAPTER THREE

SERIOUS PLAY: RHETORIC AS RESISTANCE IN FEMINIST GAME DESIGN

...my identity becomes my body which becomes my fashion which becomes my writing style. Then I perform what I've written in an effort to integrate my life, and that becomes my identity, after a fashion.

-- Kate Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw* 1.

Video games, seen from the vantage of Chapter Two, look positively dystopian. They represent an entire genre of media, a multi-billion dollar industry, predicated on player obedience, widespread surveillance by automated systems, and the relentless pursuit of positive feedback (gained from the pleasure of a level beaten, equipment gained, an enemy killed, etc.). Games are uniquely tailored to discipline and enthrall their players. And yet, my purpose is not to denounce games but to tout their importance and their potential.

The previous chapter examined the "Rules" element of rhetorical play and how it drives the ceding of power by the player to the game of truth. I studied the phenomenon of "immersive gaming" as a kind of limit-case, a form of play that seeks to escape the oscillation between illusion forming and illusion breaking in order to live purely in the illusion. In this chapter, I will turn to the Subject and study how the player can resist the disciplinary pull of the textual object. In the act of resistance, the subject resists the object's illusion formation, and in this act of resistance, the subject breaks the illusion and recognizes herself as a subject interacting with a

text. Resistance, in this model, accounts for the oscillation of attention back toward the subject. Resistance, illusion breaking, self-awareness—all of these are made possible by the act of rhetorical play.

This chapter proposes that if textual rules create discursive structures to limit and guide the available actions of the player, then the act of play must press against those rule structures. In other words: rules discipline, but play resists. Disciplines are “games of truth,” and the rules of those games are discursively constructed. Resistance, in this model, takes the form of self-consciously stylistic, parodic, and playful discourse creation. By subverting, remixing, and exploiting dominant discourses, writers can resist and even expand the boundaries of the discursive disciplines in which they find themselves. In other words, subjects can explore and resist disciplinary boundaries through the act of rhetorically-conscious play. This chapter will explore feminist and transgender resistance to the overwhelmingly patriarchal and heteronormative background of mainstream Western video games.

This chapter introduces feminist theory for three primary reasons: feminist interpretations and negotiations of Foucault generally acknowledge that Foucault fails to fully account for the possibilities and results of resistance to power. In the last chapter, Foucault’s emphasis on rule structures was useful, but now, as I examine the other side of rhetorical play, his strong emphasis on discursive objects and their power becomes something of a liability. I return here to the critique that Foucault paid too little attention to subjects and too much to disciplinary objects. Thus, feminist criticism, which has in many ways picked up where Foucault left off, will both anchor and extend my examination of resistance to disciplinary structures. The second reason for working with feminist criticism is, essentially, Judith Butler. Butler and Foucault share an understanding of power as a generative and positive phenomenon. Butler’s work with

“performativity” and the discursive generation of gender is playful. In the introduction to *Gender Trouble*, Butler writes that “feminism continues to require its own forms of serious play” (viii), and an examination of how feminism’s serious play impacts and alters the disciplinary structures that surround it will form the backbone of this chapter.

The final reason for employing feminist critique in this chapter is perhaps the simplest: contemporary feminist, queer, and transgender activists are engaged in widespread resistance to cultural forms of patriarchy, heteronormativity, and racial bias that have become foundational pillars of the games industry and gaming community. More people than ever are playing video games. The Entertainment Software Association, the U.S. video game industry’s trade association (“About ESA”), found that, in 2014, almost sixty percent of Americans played video games (ESA 2). The average age of the game player is thirty-one, and, perhaps most surprisingly, men and women play games in almost identical proportion: fifty-two percent of American game players are male, while forty-eight percent are female (3). When examining the most frequent game purchasers, the gender split is perfectly even (4). Yet within the industry, men, specifically white heterosexual men, are catered to almost exclusively. So-called “triple-A games,” or video games with the highest development and promotional budgets, overwhelmingly star straight white men. In an article in *Gamasutra* (a games industry publication, focusing on game design and business), Innes McNeil calculates that, out of 288 video games released in 2013, the male-to-female protagonist ratio was an abysmal 8.5:1.³⁷ Worse than the industry bias is the gaming community’s widespread misogyny.

Games journalism is rife with stories of female journalists and developers being harassed, belittled, and disregarded, and nothing better represents the toxic atmosphere of “gamer culture”

³⁷ This figure counts only male-only and female-only protagonists; some games have protagonists of both genders, while some protagonists are not gendered at all.

than the harassment of Anita Sarkeesian. Sarkeesian is a feminist media critic who created “Feminist Frequency,” a video blog devoted to examining tropes about women in pop culture. In 2012, Sarkeesian began a crowd-funding campaign to expand her “Tropes vs. Women” series to cover video games (Sarkeesian, “Tropes vs. Women in Games Kickstarter”). At a TEDxWomen talk in 2012, she said that her purpose in creating the “Tropes vs. Women” series was to give people a vocabulary to discuss problematic treatments of women in popular culture, and her “Tropes vs. Women in Video Games” series was pitched as simply that: an extension of an earlier series into the medium of video games (TEDx Talks). But almost as soon as the crowd-funding campaign had started, Sarkeesian was targeted for severe and wide-ranging abuse. In her TEDx talk, she said that she had “gotten used to sexist insults and sexist slurs, usually involving kitchens and sandwiches” (TEDx Talks), but the abuse she received for “Tropes vs. Women in Video Games” was of an entirely different caliber. Her social media sites were flooded by death and rape threats; her Wikipedia page was vandalized with pornographic images; she was repeatedly sent pornographic images that harassers had created, featuring her likeness being raped by video game characters; her social media pages were flagged en masse as spam, fraud, or even terrorism;³⁸ one harasser even created a game in which players could click a picture of Sarkeesian to add photoshopped injuries (Sarkeesian, “Image Based Harassment”). This hate campaign was incited by nothing more than a woman wanting to discuss sexist tropes in video games. The positive result of the harassment campaign—if such were possible—was the flood of counter-donations to her crowd-funding campaign. While it had initially sought only six thousand dollars in donations to create a five-video series, by the end of the campaign,

³⁸ Harassers repeatedly flagged Sarkeesian’s social media pages for containing objectionable content when they did not, hoping to use automated filtering systems to forcibly remove Sarkeesian’s web presence.

Sarkeesian had raised nearly \$160,000 (Sarkeesian, “Tropes vs. Women in Video Games Kickstarter”).

Other women in the games industry have been subjected to similar treatments.³⁹ Even apart from these stand-out examples of harassment and abuse, again, incurred by nothing more than pointing out problematic treatments of women in video games, the gamer community as a whole is rife with commenters and bloggers eager to demean or disprove Sarkeesian’s basic thesis that mainstream video games have a problem with sexist tropes. Sarkeesian argues, over the course of her first three videos, that the “damsel in distress” trope—an extremely frequent motivator in mainstream games—objectifies women by reducing them to an end-goal bereft of agency or personality (“Damsel in Distress (Part 1)”). Gamers’ objections to Sarkeesian’s arguments run the gamut from obscenity and abuse⁴⁰ to rationalizations of individual games’ use of sexist tropes, to ad hominem attacks on Sarkeesian herself, to the frequent call for women to simply make their own games if they dislike the state of the industry. Of course, some commenters support Sarkeesian or support feminism generally but question Sarkeesian’s methods or backgrounds. None of this is to suggest that Sarkeesian’s work is above criticism or debate, but rather to point out the constant refrain of sexism and misogyny in the video game community.

After I wrote the first draft of this chapter, a massive misogynist hate-campaign named “Gamergate” shook gaming culture. The “movement” began with Eron Gjoni, the ex-boyfriend of independent game developer Zoe Quinn, publishing a blog post about their breakup (Stuart).

³⁹ Jennifer Hepler, a writer for game company Bioware, was targeted for saying that she didn’t enjoy playing most games as much as she enjoyed participating in the narratives (Polo), and Melissa McEwan was excoriated for pointing out that the game *Fat Princess* was both misogynistic and fat-phobic (McEwan).

⁴⁰ A disturbing but by no means unusual example of such abuse: “I’LL RAPE YOU AND PUT YOUR HEAD ON A STICK IF YOU EVER TOUCH MY VIDEO GAMES” (TEDx Talks).

The details of Gamergate as a movement are trivial, and gallons of digital ink have been spent summarizing and analyzing the debacle, but suffice it to say that Gamergate is a vigorous renewal and spreading of the hate-campaign against Anita Sarkeesian described above.

Gamergate supporters claim to want to bring ethics to game journalism, but the movement is defined on almost every level by the abuse of women associated with the games industry including Quinn, Sarkeesian, and game developer Brianna Wu (Stuart). *The Guardian*'s Keith Stuart summarizes the movement: "Leaderless and chaotic, this ragtag community of self-identifying 'hardcore' gamers sees its culture under threat from insidious outsiders – usually feminists and academics – who are challenging the industry on its sometimes questionable representation of violence, minorities and gender." I have seen many comments for myself disparaging academic consideration of video games, and to resist these anti-intellectuals brings me great satisfaction.

To severely understate the matter: games have a problem with representation. In a 2014 interview, James Therien, technical director of game publisher Ubisoft, said that although his company had wanted to add a female protagonist to an upcoming game, they decided not to because "it would have doubled the work on [animation and costumes]" (Burns). Game companies are, of course, free to choose protagonists as they wish⁴¹—games are an art form, and artists (even corporate artists) should be able to decide what to include in their works. But the fact that the company *wanted* to include a female protagonist, but could not, suggests that representing women was a luxury, a tertiary feature that they could afford to cut.

Game giant Nintendo, around the same time, made headlines by refusing to include same-sex relationships in their off-the-wall life simulator *Tomodachi Life*. For a game meant to

⁴¹ Ubisoft's own *Assassin's Creed III: Liberation* featured a biracial female protagonist whose most distinctive skill was switching between the personas of a slave woman, an aristocratic woman, and an assassin.

amuse by simulating real-life friends of the player, preventing players from representing themselves or their friends with their real-world sexualities was a startling refusal. Nintendo's official statement was even more alarming than Ubisoft's. They claimed that "Nintendo never intended to make any form of social commentary with the launch of 'Tomodachi Life'" (Associated Press). The mainstream games industry clearly has a problem with representation if the mere inclusion of homosexuality is considered controversial "social commentary." The list of other problems with representation in the games industry would require a dissertation of its own.⁴² All of this is to say: video games could use some resistance.

That resistance is emerging primarily through the indie games movement. More people than ever have more access to more game creation tools⁴³ and the means to widely distribute their games. This chapter will examine games that play with disciplinary boundaries in order to critique the interface. The games examined in this chapter draw attention to the player. They provoke reactions, refuse easy answers, and align the act of play with the act of resistance. In the act of rhetorical play, this chapter is most concerned with downward oscillations: movements of power from the text to the subject. The subject can take power over the media in which she is involved, and this momentary reacquisition of power allows the subject moments of resistance and illusion-breaking. Breaking out of an immersive text overthrows the dominating impulses of that text. Some texts, especially the critical games examined in this chapter, help the player practice resistance-play and, in so doing, emphasize the critical, illusion-breaking portion of rhetorical play.

⁴² For instance, there were apparently more severed heads on display at the 2014 Electronic Entertainment Expo than there were female presenters (Riendeau).

⁴³ At present, my computer has four different game creation programs installed, all of which were free.

Following the literature review, this chapter will first examine *The Stanley Parable*, an indie⁴⁴ game that calls players' attention to the ludic structures that constrain them and, in this way, invites critique and resistance. Then, after introducing Judith Butler and the importance of performativity and "serious play," I will study the work of two transgender game developers, Anna Anthropy and Porpentine, as representatives of critical gender-aware gaming. Ultimately, I will argue for rhetorical play as a powerful means of cultural resistance.

This chapter will continue to use Foucault as its grounding theory, particularly Foucault's understanding of discipline and the generative bio-politics of power, but some gaps exist within Foucault's scholarship. Most significantly, Foucault's analysis of resistance is dwarfed by his discussion of discipline and surveillance, even though resistance is a necessary corollary to discipline. Discipline exerted without resistance becomes domination. Power requires counter-power for its very existence, which is logical, given Foucault's understanding of power as a kind of relation between entities ("Ethic" 123). Because of the "strictly relational character of power relationships" (*History of Sexuality Volume I* 95), resistance is requisite, and this "multiplicity of points of resistance" can "play the role of adversary, target, support, or handle in power relations" (95).

Given this privileging of resistance, it seems strange that Foucault spends as little time on it as he does. Frances Bartkowski studies this absence in her article "Epistemic Drift in Foucault." Noting Foucault's fondness for groups of four, Bartkowski writes that "The tripartite axis of power-knowledge-pleasure is missing a fourth term, which is everywhere present in the text but rarely directly discussed: resistance" (44). While Foucault might characterize resistance as a subset of power—power pushing back against power from a subjugated position—

⁴⁴ Short for "independently published."

Bartkowski pursues Foucault's preference for the ear over the mouth. The receptive sense organs, she notes, seem to have pride of place in much of Foucault's scholarship: "In *The Birth of the Clinic* Foucault marked the gaze as the source of determining and determined power. In *The Order of Things* it is resemblance. In the *History of Sexuality* it is the receptive ear that structures and sifts what will enter the domain of the axis of power-knowledge-pleasure" (44). She characterizes Foucault's theory as "another patriarchal history of sexuality, which may know itself as such but gives no voice to its 'other half'" (45), just as Foucault paid most attention to the empowered evaluating functions and less to the un-empowered performing subjects.

Within the Foucauldian rubric established in the Introduction, the previous chapter worked mostly with the un-empowered acts of receiving and performing within disciplinary boundaries. It studied the rule structures and game features that prompt obedience and, in the limit cases of total immersion, domination. This chapter turns to the other side of the rubric and considers how independent and critical games can empower both reader and writer. The independent PC game *The Stanley Parable* works hard to get the player to *evaluate* its rigorous ludic discipline: the player is meant to listen critically and wrest power from the game even as they play within the game's rules. The game encourages resistance to discipline by forcing the player to practice critical play. The transgender game designers Porpentine and Anna Anthropy both speak with power: they code, both literally and in the context of my rubric's terminology. They write powerfully about their own experiences as trans women through the medium of the game, and, in turn, they use inventive game mechanics to draw their players toward powerful evaluation rather than docile reception.

Mary Flanagan's *Critical Play: Radical Game Design* examines a vast number of games and game genres as socially-engaged art pieces. Her purpose, stated broadly, is to examine

games “as means for creative expression, as instruments for conceptual thinking, [and] as tools to help examine or work through social issues” (1). Her project considers a wide variety of game types: domestic games, board games, language games, performative games, locative games, and computer games (v), and in each chapter, she studies traditional art pieces alongside selections of games to draw conclusions about how games function as socially-aware works of art. Flanagan casts a significantly wider net than I do, and in fact, her definition of “critical play” is extremely broad: “Critical play means to create or occupy play environments and activities that represent one or more questions about aspects of human life... Critical play is characterized by a careful examination of social, cultural, political, or even personal themes that function as alternatives to popular play spaces” (6). In other words, critical play engages and comments on the real world in some fashion. Flanagan is interested in artists and artworks that use games and play to advance some kind of real-world issues.

Games offer serious advantages as socially-engaged artworks; Flanagan writes that “Because they primarily exist as rule systems, games are particularly ripe for subversive practices. A hallmark of games is that they are structured by their rule sets, and every game has its ‘cheats’—even play itself, pushing at the boundaries of a game system, could be said to involve a kind of subversion” (11). This chapter is primarily interested in this form of subversive play: play that tests boundaries, breaks illusions, discovers the limitations of the disciplinary and discursive system that surround it, and ultimately, play that allows the player to resist by drawing attention to the game’s medium. In other words, I am interested in play that breaks its own illusion. The oscillating structure of rhetorical play requires some level of interruption and critique, but some games provoke that rhetorical breakage more strongly than others.

Other writers have discussed the presence of LGBTQ players and cultures within mainstream games. Lee Sherlock's "What Happens in Goldshire Stays in Goldshire: Rhetorics of Queer Sexualities, Role-Playing, and Fandom in *World of Warcraft*" examines the development of a queer community in and around the *World of Warcraft*, from in-game queer pride events to fanfiction to fan-created pornography. Sherlock's work is essentially a survey "not just concerned with in-game content on a representational level but also a wide network of online texts and spaces that shape how queer sexualities are performed, embodied, experienced, and talked about" (163), but contrary to my work in this chapter, Sherlock is interested in "'queer reading' as a private, individual phenomenon through a consideration of LGBTQ guilds/player groups, role-playing, and queer online fandom as they intersect with *WoW*" (163). This chapter hopes to study queer playing as a powerful *public* phenomenon, and it concerns a much narrower slice of practices than the wide array of speech-types that Sherlock discusses.

Break the Rules to Progress: The Stanley Parable and Foucault

I established in the previous chapter that video games can be frighteningly effective disciplinary tools. They structure players' experiences of time, space, and interaction, and most mainstream games bend these powerful methods of control toward player enjoyment, engagement, and money spending. But not all games are so interested in immersing the player in a comfortable disciplinary space. The indie game *The Stanley Parable* presses the player to consider her own choice and agency *as a player*, sitting behind a keyboard, playing the game. Few games address the player directly, preferring instead to let the player-character act as a substitute for the player herself. *The Stanley Parable* lets the player practice active resistance by rewarding exploration and non-compliance with intrigue, humor, and a sense of agency over the

game-world. The game's narrative constantly calls this game-given agency into question, leaving it unclear whether the player actually has any choice at all besides deciding when to stop playing. The narrative makes clear that *The Stanley Parable* itself is a game of truth, disciplining and punishing the player.

The Stanley Parable exists in two iterations: a 2011 release made using Valve's Source Engine⁴⁵ and a 2013 remastered release with new content and visuals. The original mod was made by just one developer, Davey Wreden, and one voice actor, Kevan Brighting (Wreden). Artist William Pugh joined Wreden to develop the game's expanded HD re-release (Yang). While I have played both releases, this chapter discusses the expanded standalone game release. *The Stanley Parable* is a first-person game set—at least at first—in a mundane office environment. As the player explores the environment, a professional-sounding narrator with an English accent describes what the player-character is supposed to do, and the player must choose whether to follow the narrator's instructions or disobey. The game has no combat, no enemies, no weapons, and no puzzles. The player has next to no ability to affect her environment beyond walking through it. Wreden said in an interview that, insofar as the game has a core mechanic, it's a series of choices between structural forks (Yang). For instance, the first choice, which the player returns to again and again, is between two doors. As the player walks into the room, the narrator says "When Stanley came to a set of two open doors, he entered the door on his left" (Wreden). If the player chooses to disobey the narrative and enter the right-hand door, the narrator intones "This was not the correct way to the meeting room, and Stanley knew it perfectly well. Perhaps he wanted to stop by the employee lounge first, just to admire it"

⁴⁵ The 2011 *Stanley Parable* is considered a "mod," since it repurposes an existing game engine and resource set. Valve's Source game engine is a free game development tool designed for developers of first-person shooters ("Valve Technology").

(Wreden). After the player walks through the shabby lounge (and hears the narrator comment on the pointlessness of the detour), the narrator states that “Stanley took the first door on his left” (Wreden). The player can, again, either comply with the narration and enter the door, or refuse to comply and enter the door at the end of the hall, and again, the narrator and the game respond to the player’s choice (Wreden).

Each play-through of *The Stanley Parable* only takes a few minutes, and after each ending, the player is returned to the starting position: a small, dingy office, staring at a blank computer screen with a single flashing cursor. The game encourages the player to replay the game by offering a multitude of different endings. Some of them are suspiciously happy: complying with the narrator’s every command results in Stanley turning off a massive “mind-control” program and being released into a bucolic field. Some endings are dismal. If the player chooses not to turn off the mind-control machine, the narrator (who boasts of having god-like power over the narrative) begins a self-destruct countdown. The room offers a variety of apparently viable exits and solutions: an open door, a power console, various keyboards and buttons, etc. As the player scrambles to make sense of what must be a puzzle (only to have each potential solution prove hopeless) the narrator mocks her: “Did you just assume, when you saw that timer, that something in this room was capable of turning it off? ... Why would you think that, Stanley? That this video game can be beaten, won, solved?” (Wreden). That narrative ends with an explosion.

Discipline and submission are on almost constant display. The most straightforward narrative (in which the player simply complies with the narrator’s commands) leads through a literal Panopticon: the mind control room. The room is a massive circular chamber surrounded on all sides by hundreds of video monitors displaying feeds of Stanley’s coworkers’ offices. The

player stands on a series of slender columns in this room and is allowed to simply watch the (empty) office cells.



Fig. 8: The mind-control facility (“2014-The-Stanley-Parable.jpg”).

The commentary on surveillance and control could hardly be more obvious. But this room, the game suggests, is not the true exercise of power. Recall that this is the easiest narrative path to find: one simply does what the narrator says and ends up here. The Panopticon is treated as a false prize, a discovery made too easily. How is this panoptical mind-control facility a secret if the player can simply walk there? By isolating such a powerful image of surveillance and control and presenting it as a secret too poorly guarded to be taken seriously, the game implies that the

actual source of control, the actual mind control machine, is harder to find. In fact, the sum-total of *The Stanley Parable* would suggest that the actual mind control machine is the one in front of the player herself: the game console. *The Stanley Parable* dissolves any kind of easily-identified, top-down disciplinary machinery into a series of Foucauldian moments in which the interface presents itself and demands to be acknowledged as a source of control and discipline. The game dissolves control into the back-and-forth relationship between the player and the narrator: *The Stanley Parable* presents power not as a monolith but as a relationship. The player and the narrator lose and take power almost constantly. Defiance of the narrator is a moment of apparent player agency, but the narrator almost always recovers control of the game by recontextualizing the player's "wrong" choice, punishing the player, or restarting the game. *The Stanley Parable's* principle conflict is an oscillating power relationship between the player and the narrator, the speaking embodiment of the game's hegemonic rules. The longer one plays, however, the more apparent it becomes that the narrator holds all the power. The rules have scripted every interaction, accounted for every kind of deviant behavior.

Over and over, the game foregrounds the player's fundamental lack of choice. At one point, a new female narrator takes over and urgently tells the player that the only way to exercise any true control is to literally quit the game (Wreden). Failing to quit results in Stanley's death. The game is hardly subtle, but the ways in which it foregrounds discipline and control allow the player to catch a glimpse of the ties that bind her in every game. In one path, the player is taken to what appears to be Stanley's apartment, only to find it a blank mockery of a real apartment with a mannequin instead of a wife and a few plain appliances. As the player enters the "apartment," the narrator begins an altered version of the game's opening monologue: "This is a very sad story about the death of a man named Stanley" (Wreden), and every so often, the

narration pauses and waits for the player to press an indicated button. After the narrator's first line, a text prompt appears on screen greeting the player as "Employee 427"—Stanley's employee number—and instructing him to press an indicated button. Until the player inputs the correct button, nothing happens. The player is locked in the tiny apartment and can affect nothing inside it. The narrator gradually places more and more attention on the figure of the player. After pressing a button to advance the dialogue, the narrator says "Look at him there, pushing buttons, doing exactly what he's told to do" (Wreden). The game uses rhetorical play to blur the line between the player and the player character; the player is meant to feel herself becoming Stanley, that sad worker drone, content to press buttons when told. As the narrative blurs the line between Stanley and the player, the room gradually transforms into the office from the beginning of the game. Besides the obvious indictment of games as opiates, this ending draws attention to the game's player. The button prompts are presented not as an environmental interaction (like pulling a switch or opening a door) but as plain-text commands like "PRESS 'LT' TO QUESTION NOTHING" (Wreden). These references to the player's own controller—rather than any in-game artifact—foreground the absence of choice in the game. As with so much else in the game, this ending reminds the player that agency is an illusion and that the only choice is submission to the narrative.

After playing through a few of the narrative paths, one might begin to wonder about the possibility of play as a destabilizing factor at all. If every ending of the game is preordained and every choice scripted, can the game be considered play at all? It must be—it is, after all, free exploration constrained by the systemic and narrative structures of the game's rules. Just because the player has relatively little power over the game does not negate the ability to *play*. Players are free to play rebelliously, and the game acknowledges and encourages rebellion. For example, one

hallway in Stanley's office building holds a broom closet. There is no secret door here, no alternate path, no hidden screen or shocking discovery. It is only a broom closet. But the longer the player stands in this empty space, the more upset the narrator becomes. He eventually becomes so upset that he declares that the original player has died, and calls for anyone around the player to come take over and continue playing (Wreden). In a game defined by making choices and walking down paths, the refusal to make a choice or to progress is rebellion. As always, however, that rebellion has been plotted, voice-acted, and coded.

The Stanley Parable's genius is in casting the decision not to play at all as a form of play. The broom closet is a moment of rebellious rhetorical play. "What happens," I wondered as I entered the broom closet for the first time, "when I do this?" Play presses against the rules, tests them, and finds out what will happen. In this case, I discovered that refusal to play is sometimes rewarded too. This question, "What happens when I do this?" is a method of probing that I repeated as often as possible throughout my experience with the game.⁴⁶ When I was ushered into a planetarium-style room full of stars and shifting auroras, I simply sat for minutes on end, watching the auroras shift and waiting for something to happen.⁴⁷ I experimented with the game by waiting, employing the same method of not-playing that I had learned in the broom closet. My moments of play were oscillations back toward the subject: I took power over the game experience and forced it to respond to my choices. The game, in return, pressed back, gave visual and aural feedback, and tried to catch me up in its fictional world again. *The Stanley Parable*

⁴⁶ Since first reading a version of this phrase in Aarseth's *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* "Let's see what happens when I do *this*" (4, emphasis preserved), it has become wedged in my mind as the archetypal question of the exploring game player.

⁴⁷ In this case, nothing happened, although the narrator repeatedly begged me to return to the room, even though nothing would happen.

holds a mirror up to the ever-oscillating act of rhetorical play and allows the player to watch herself in the act of rhetorical meaning creation.

The game, however, does not always practice what it preaches. The player is meant to feel empowered to resist and subvert, but because the action is always taking place within the confines of the game's script—even in those moments when the player is supposedly subverting and destroying the game itself—the game's rules always hold power. The player can scrabble against the rules, throw herself against them, and even appear to win for a time, but ultimately, the player is always subject to the game. This should come as no surprise; to exit a game's rules, to escape the clutches of its system, would be to cease playing the game. Play can always resist, but never triumph. The player can subvert, but never escape—until, of course, she ceases to play. But the game foregrounds a remarkably Foucauldian play environment, and by allowing the player to explore this rigidly controlled and constantly scripted space, *The Stanley Parable* never stops reminding the player of her own disciplinary surroundings.

The Stanley Parable, then, is a critical game that encourages players to experiment with choice, agency, discipline, and resistance, and even though it settles for a series of nihilistic conclusions about the absence of choice or agency in games, it allows players to practice seeing power and resistance flowing through games. Mainstream, big-budget games tend to hide their methods of control, but *The Stanley Parable* makes them apparent and demands that players confront them. Its method of confrontation is not simply to demonstrate a dystopian disciplinary system—an overwhelming number of games are already set in fascist dystopias—but rather to force the player to recognize herself as a crucial piece of disciplinary machinery.

To use Iser's language, *The Stanley Parable* gains its rhetorical power from its almost constant illusion-breaking. In Lanham's terms, it forces the player to look *at* the game much

more than it allows her to look *through* it. When the narrator sputters that “You’re not Stanley; you’re a real person” (Wreden), a figure/ground switch occurs in which the player ceases to role-play Stanley, trapped office worker, and instead recognizes herself as a real person, playing a game. *The Stanley Parable* suggests that resistance and self-conscious illusion-breaking are closely bound. The game encourages players to explore the game’s boundaries by disobeying, exploring, entering forbidden areas, or simply finding out what different buttons do. This boundary exploration extends to probing the boundaries of the player. *The Stanley Parable* includes the player as part of its interface, and in doing so, participates in rhetorical illusion-breaking. Just as immersive games make the disciplinary apparatus inherently pleasurable, critical games isolate the disciplinary apparatus by exposing the seams between player, game, and interface.

Rhetorical Play as Resistance: Butler and Transgender Game Design

The Stanley Parable has essentially nothing to say about gender. The only character one actually *sees* is Stanley, a white male, and women have only very minor functionary roles. Stanley’s wife is heard a few times, and a female narrator briefly plays the foil to the primary male narrator, but other than that, the vast majority of the game is seen through the perspective of a white male listening to, obeying, and resisting another male. But, as the many feminist scholars working with Foucault point out, gender and resistance are tightly bound in Foucault’s scholarship. *The Stanley Parable* engages resistance and power from one angle, but the feminist writers discussed here have a different approach to Foucault’s writings about power.

Feminist writers tend to either apply Foucault’s writings about power (especially the biopolitics of individual discipline and surveillance) to feminist subjects, as Sandra Lee Bartky does

in “Foucault, Feminism, and Patriarchal Power” and Susan Bordo does in “Anorexia Nervosa: Psychopathology as the Crystallization of Culture,” or they consider how pieces of Foucault’s philosophy fit into or cause problems for feminist theory. The former category generally applies Foucault’s theory to real-world women’s issues.⁴⁸ The latter category is best exemplified by Nancy Fraser’s “Michel Foucault: A ‘Young Conservative’?” which questions Foucault’s relation to humanism using Habermas as a critical lens, and Nancy C. M. Hartsock’s scathing “Postmodernism and Political Change: Issues for Feminist Theory,” which takes Foucault and other postmodernist philosophers to task for watering down real political discussion with pointless anti-Enlightenment rhetoric (43). Hartsock’s basic claim is tough to deny: a truly diverse and inclusive feminism needs to proceed from the voices of the marginalized, and denying the possibility of knowledge or power does nothing to promote “the changing of power relations and the development of subjectivities grounded in the experience of the dominated and marginalized” (53). Hartsock does, however, exaggerate Foucault’s theory in several places.

While comparing Foucault to Richard Rorty, Hartsock argues that Foucault, “like Rorty, has come to the conclusion that if one cannot see everything from nowhere [the Enlightenment position], one cannot really see anything at all” (44). Foucault would indeed reject “the gaze from nowhere,” but nowhere does Foucault deny the possibility of seeing “anything at all.” In fact, Foucault’s theory proceeds from a multiplicity of seeing. The whole idea of surveillance is predicated on seeing from both a centralized Panopticon and from the individual perspective. Surveillance proceeds, at least potentially, from the central tower, but more often surveillance occurs within the selves themselves. Foucault dissolves the Enlightenment’s all-seeing eye into

⁴⁸ Bartky, for instance, considers makeup and fashion as forms of internalized discipline enacted constantly by women on their own bodies (64), while Bordo breaks anorexia into a series of social and personal axes, inspired by Foucault’s work with “social practice chang[ing] people’s *experience* of their bodies and their possibilities” (91, emphasis preserved).

billions of self-seeing eyes, a network of eyes watching one another and themselves. Second, and perhaps more problematically, Hartsock writes that, in Foucault's meta-reasoning, "once reason has been exposed as biased rather than neutral, the very possibility of knowledge must be abandoned" (44). While Hartsock is correct that Foucault places "reason" with other culturally dependent phenomena and rejects its universal authority, Foucault never implies that "the very possibility of knowledge must be abandoned" (44). As with seeing, knowledge in Foucault's theory pervades human interaction. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault states that "power produces knowledge... that power and knowledge directly imply one another... that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge" (27).

Like many authors, Hartsock assumes that power is inherently oppressive, even evil, when Foucault sees power operating throughout any social or discursive situation, flowing in both directions (*History of Sexuality Volume I* 94).⁴⁹ Power is inevitably co-present with knowledge, and even the oppressed exercise power in acts of resistance (*HoS* 95). Hartsock, of course, is not ignorant of Foucault's stated positions. Rather, she is unsatisfied with them: "On this point [the rejection of Enlightenment values], as elsewhere, Foucault's case is more complex [than Rorty's]. He explicitly rejects the values of the Enlightenment and recognizes that a stance of ignoring power relations implicitly endorses domination. This he refuses, *yet despite his efforts, these values creep back in*" (45-46, emphasis added). The italicized phrase summarizes a great deal of feminist response to Foucault's work. In spite of his attempts to expose the flows and tendencies of power, and in spite of his belief in the transformative power of critique and resistance, patriarchal power seems to seep back into Foucault's work. Perhaps this results from

⁴⁹ Hartsock uses Marshall Berman's words to indict Foucault: "There is no point in trying to resist the oppressions and injustices of modern life, since even our dreams of freedom only add more links to our chains; however, once we grasp the total futility of it all, at least we can relax" (34 qtd. in Hartsock 45).

his relative inattention to resistance, or from his refusal to provide any sort of handbook for resisting oppressive power. But Hartsock still has a point. Foucault's theories of disciplinary power can be useful, as many feminist appropriations (most notably *Gender Trouble*) demonstrate, but Foucault should not be a substitute for engaged political activism.

Feminist writers like Hartsock remind us to use scholars like Foucault responsibly, to apply them to particular projects for particular purposes. In my work, Foucault helps elucidate the disciplinary and discursive boundaries that structure the rhetorical play of the interface. For Judith Butler, Foucault makes it possible to inquire about political and disciplinary discourses, and "To expose the foundational categories of sex, gender, and desire as effects of a specific formation of power" (x) using Foucault's genealogical method. But Foucault is not Butler's only touchstone, though his conception of positive, generative power heavily influences Butler's own conceptions of power. Butler acknowledges in the preface to *Gender Trouble* that "The complexity of gender requires an interdisciplinary and postdisciplinary set of discourses in order to resist the domestication of gender studies or women studies within the academy and to radicalize the notion of feminist critique" (xiii). Throughout *Gender Trouble*, Butler uses a dazzling array of gender theorists, psychoanalysts, literary theorists, philosophers, and anthropologists to assemble her core arguments about performativity and the insufficiency of a biologically-determined bipolar sex and gender model. Butler exemplifies a responsible application of Foucault to feminist theory. The secret here, as in so many other places, seems to be moderation and careful application.

Broadly speaking, Foucault works to elaborate how "games of truth" work, while Butler is interested in how one plays those games and how game-play defines and is defined by the limits of the body. Performativity is play. Gender comprises a set of disciplines, a set of "games

of truth,” and the participants of these games have power over how they play. In what amounts to the thesis of the book, Butler states “That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the very acts which constitutes its reality” (136). One must always play—there is no escape from the game. Further, the subject itself seems to be nothing but its own performance; it has “no ontological status apart from” (136) how it acts, or how it plays within its gendered games of truth. Butler writes that “Obviously, the political task is not to refuse representational politics—as if we could. The juridical structures of language and politics constitute the contemporary field of power; hence, there is no position outside this field, but only a critical genealogy of its own legitimating practices” (5). In other words, there is nothing outside the game’s magic circle, but players can learn the game’s rules. Players, in Butler’s model, *become* the game-play, the enacting of or resistance to the game’s rules. More than that, participants in the world of representational politics can actually press at the disciplinary boundaries:

The sexuality that emerges within the matrix of power relations is not a simple replication or copy of the law itself, a uniform repetition of a masculinist economy of identity. The productions swerve from their original purposes and inadvertently mobilize possibilities of “subjects” that do not merely exceed the bounds of cultural intelligibility, but effectively expand the boundaries of what is, in fact, culturally intelligible. (29)

Power relations, from this perspective, appear almost genetic, replicating across generations of play-performances and shifting in their intelligibility with each generation. Rhetorical play can create productive resistance by shifting what it means to be “culturally intelligible.” Thus, resistance can consist of play that troubles the field of power relations and expands that matrix—

even if the actual expansion is negligible on its own. Butler gives hope that meaningful resistance is possible, since the counter-power of resistant performativity can become its own substitute for subjective agency: the ingredient usually cited as missing from Foucault. If performative play constitutes the self, then the resistant performance is a kind of self, and if resistant performance is possible, then agency within a network of power relations is also possible.

The play of performative gender is not the same thing as rhetorical play. The former is a mode of identity performance, a kind of persistent writing-of-the-self, while the latter describes how meaning is created in the moment-by-moment consumption of media. However, Butler's description of the soul's formation bears some strong resemblance to the oscillation between transparency and opacity that forms the core of rhetorical play:

The figure of the interior soul understood as 'within' the body is signified through its inscription *on* the body, even though its primary mode of signification is through its very absence, its potent invisibility... The soul is precisely what the body lacks; hence, the body presents itself as a signifying lack. That lack which *is* the body signifies the soul as that which cannot show. (135, emphasis preserved)

In the first half of the oscillation, the body is absent, invisible (the two terms are not synonymous, of course; invisibility suggests something present-but-unseen), or, to return to Lanham's term: transparent. The body is transparent. In the second half of Butler's subjectivizing oscillation, the soul and body undergo a figure-ground switch, and the soul becomes the presence, the signifier: "In this sense, then, the soul is a surface signification that contests and displaces the inner/outer distinction itself, a figure of interior psychic space inscribed *on* the body as a social signification that perpetually renounces itself as such" (135).

That perpetual renunciation is its own kind of oscillation, a constant restatement of the primary figure-ground switch between body and soul, transparency and signification. This is all well and good, but what application does this understanding of body-soul politics have to this chapter's exploration of playful resistance? Butler connects this figure-ground switch of present soul and absent body to the disciplinary enforcement of gender: "The redescription of intrapsychic processes in terms of the surface politics of the body implies a corollary redescription of gender as the disciplinary production of the figures of fantasy through the play of presence and absence on the body's surface" (135). The oscillation of presence and absence—that constant renunciation—not only supplements the description of gender, it *defines* the performance of gender. Just as the rhetorical play of meaning creation is a constant oscillation (described elsewhere as a wave or a vibration), gender vibrates between transparent bodies and signifying souls, and the terms of this vibration are determined by disciplines, games of truth. The performance of gender parallels the act of rhetorical play: a vibration between extremes held within disciplinary rule structures.

Butler provides some guidelines as to what resistance to those disciplinary rule structures might look like. She provides drag as an example of a resistant (or troublesome) performance. Since "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame" (33), then stylizing the body to perform the unexpected constitutes an act of resistance. Indeed, "drag fully subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space and effectively mocks both the expressive models of gender and the notion of a true gender identity" (137).

Catherine Belsey's "Constructing the Subject: Deconstructing the Text" likewise considers the formation of a postmodern subjectivity simultaneously discursively bound and

constructed *and* capable of agency in the face of ideological oppression (358-59). Her formulation first asserts that the subject “is constructed in language and in discourse and, since the symbolic order in its discursive use is closely related to ideology, in ideology” (358) thus both grammatically and ideologically the subject (358). Within that subjected position, however, Belsey is challenged to explain how the ideologically-contained subject might resist the dominance of that ideology (358). Where Butler proposes expanding rule boundaries by resistant performativity (*Gender Trouble* 29), Belsey argues, via Lacan, that “The subject is thus the site of contradiction, and is consequently perpetually in the process of construction, thrown into crisis by alterations in language and in the social formation, capable of change. And in the fact that the subject is a *process* lies the possibility of transformation” (359, emphasis preserved). It is perhaps unsurprising at this point that that process’s form resembles an oscillation.

The subject is constructed in the context of numerous contradictory discourses, and those contradictions lead fragmented subjects to attempt to reassemble themselves, and “these incompatibilities and contradictions within what is taken for granted which exert a pressure on concrete individuals to seek new, non-contradictory subject positions” (359). The subject is thus rhetorically constructed. Not only does the individual engage in rhetorical play when she interacts with a text, according to Belsey and Butler’s discursive conceptions of subjectivity, the subject is actually *composed of* rhetorical play. The subject plays herself into existence—what Butler would call performing—through the oscillation between illusion forming and breaking. It stands to reason, synthesizing Foucault with Belsey, that if the subject is discursively constructed, then the subject is herself a text, and if texts are enacted through the oscillating process of rhetorical play, then the subject herself is constituted, *is*, rhetorical play. We literally play ourselves dramatically and ludically.

This leads Belsey to highlight the importance of indeterminacy—the gaps and rifts in the textual performance—in literature and critique: “The object of the critic, then, is to seek not the unity of the work, but the multiplicity and diversity of its possible meanings, its incompleteness, the omissions which it displays but cannot describe, and above all its contradictions” (365). These moments, Belsey says, open space for the reader to recognize the implicit ideological critiques in the text (365). These promising multiplicities and contradictions hold the potential for readerly resistance and empowerment. In the recognition of a contradiction or an internal critique, the reader can break the illusion and step outside herself, becoming an observer rather than a participant. The illusion will wait for her. For some critics, however, Butler’s conception of resistance is insufficient, and Belsey’s description of postmodern discursive subjectivity is needlessly obtuse.

Serious Play: A Defense of “Ludic” Feminism

Martha Nussbaum’s article “The Professor of Parody” faults Butler for underestimating the possibility of power and resistance, but Nussbaum’s arguments are flawed. She attempts to summarize Butler’s theory of parodic critique: “We are doomed to repetition of the power structures into which we are born, but we can at least make fun of them; and some ways of making fun are subversive assaults on the original norms” (6). Part of Nussbaum’s critique is based on a misunderstanding of Foucauldian power relations. She assumes that because resistance is a resistance to power, resistance cannot also be power. She asks, “where does this ability [the agency to resist] come from, if there is no structure in the personality that is not thoroughly power’s creation?” (8). The answer is that agency is a form of power enacted against

a different form of power. Discourse speaks against discourse. Resistance is a type of power relation, not a negation of power.

Nussbaum's point that strikes closest to home—at least for the purposes of this dissertation—is that Butler's version of feminist resistance accomplishes nothing:

Butlerian feminism is in many ways easier than the old feminism. It tells scores of talented young women that they need not work on changing the law, or feeding the hungry, or assailing power through theory harnessed to material politics. They can do politics in safety of their campuses, remaining on the symbolic level, making subversive gestures at power through speech and gesture. This, the theory says, is pretty much all that is available to us anyway, by way of political action, and isn't it exciting and sexy? (13)

Put another way, Butlerian feminism makes nothing happen. This is the same critique that Hartsock leveled at Foucault, and it bears consideration. Performance, play, critique, cross-dressing, game-making—these are all well and good, but they disregard the material conditions in which many women find themselves. Transgressive performance on its own does little to help survivors of abuse, the unjustly imprisoned, or the hungry. This is in some ways true, but it is also unfair. Butler's feminist project in *Gender Trouble* concerns one specific form of injustice: cultural insistence on determined binary genders. Nussbaum tries to dismiss Butler's emphasis on troubled genders by reducing intersex and transgender personhood to a statistical blip: "Butler's brief exploration of Foucault on hermaphrodites does show us society's anxious insistence to classify every human being in one box or another, whether or not the individual fits a box; but of course *it does not show that there are many such indeterminate cases*" (8, emphasis added). This misses Butler's point entirely and spectacularly minimizes the existence of intersex

and transgender people. Many women counting themselves among the supposedly insignificant number of “such indeterminate cases” (8) have used precisely the same kinds of performance and provocation that Butler endorses to loudly and powerfully announce their presences to the world. Nussbaum may condemn what she calls “Judith Butler’s hip quietism” as a philosophy that literally “collaborates with evil” (13), but the transgender designers cited in this chapter demonstrate that speaking and creating texts for others to play can be powerful acts.

Teresa Elbert’s “Ludic Feminism, the Body, Performance, and Labor: Bringing ‘Materialism’ Back into Feminist Cultural Studies” goes further than Nussbaum by dismissing not only Butler’s feminism but the whole postmodern feminist emphasis on discourse, instability, and *jouissance*. Elbert calls it “ludic” feminism because of its preference for play and pleasure, but also, one senses, to derogate and trivialize postmodern feminist critique. Elbert frequently draws the unfavorable contrast between the supposed frivolity of ludic feminism and the serious “work” of materialist cultural feminism. Like Nussbaum, Elbert believes that ludic feminism accomplishes nothing, or even worse, that it destabilizes the few linguistic safeguards that women have. In one memorable example, Elbert writes that by emphasizing the instability and slippage of language, ludic feminism would turn a woman’s refusal to consent to sex, her “no,” into meaningless mumble, or worse, a “yes” in disguise (34). Clearly, implying that ludic feminism encourages rape is a terrible misreading of her subject. She assumes, in this example, that ludic feminism has just one trick, the deconstruction of language, when ludic (or literally any other) feminism would recognize in the woman’s “no” *more than* an unstable, slippery word: it is a gesture toward a pre-existing ethical imperative, a performance of linguistic power, a moment of resistance in the same constantly-negotiated Foucauldian power relation that Elbert disparages elsewhere. The refusal of consent is a full stop, no matter one’s academic tendencies.

Elbert has a fondness for such limit cases. At the end of her article, she looses a barrage of accusations that ludic feminists are failing economically and socially oppressed women around the globe: “Will such ludic theories help feminists formulate a historical explanation so that we can develop collective social struggles against the economic exploitation and suffering of women... forced by economic necessity into severely underpaid ‘women's work’ or oppressive forms of unpaid domestic work?” (41).⁵⁰ The implied answer, of course, is no, since ludic feminism is just that: a game, an excuse to play with academic words and pointless pleasures. I realize that I am on the business end of Elbert’s pointing accusatory finger, since my work in this chapter is a literally *ludic* feminism, so I feel the need to defend my theoretical position even if the divide between ludic and cultural feminism is artificial in the end. One of Elbert’s key problems with postmodern feminism is that it takes its view of power from Foucault, assuming that power is distributed and omnipresent, and that power relations are defined by a constant microeconomics of power and resistance to power. From this starting place, Elbert interprets Foucault’s theory of power to be disconnected and weightless: “Contrary to Foucault and Butler,” Elbert says, “power is not some kind of a-causal, contingent, and free-floating series of rules and injunctions generating its own demise” (39). But contrary to Elbert, Foucault’s conception of power anchors itself *always* in specific historical formations; after all, the whole project of *The Archaeology of Knowledge* was to set up a procedure for considering the formation of discursive objects *within specific historical contexts*, even to the point of favoring the background context over and above the object itself. In *Archaeology*, Foucault writes that his

⁵⁰ Writing seven years after Elbert, Nussbaum’s “The Professor of Parody” echoes this series of hammer blows: “insofar as Butler’s ideal suggests that these symbolic gestures really are political change, it offers only a false hope. Hungry women are not fed by this, battered women are not sheltered by it, raped women do not find justice in it, gays and lesbians do not achieve legal protections through it” (13). Nussbaum and Elbert share a common rhetorical strategy.

objective is “To define these objects without reference to the ground, the foundation of things, but by relating them to the body of rules that enable them to form as objects of a discourse and *thus constitute the conditions of their historical appearance*” (47-48, emphasis added).

Foucault’s other works showcase similar historical grounding. *Discipline and Punish* is almost neurotic in its consideration of historical detail. *The History of Sexuality* relentlessly anchors itself in social, cultural, and historical contexts. One senses, throughout Elbert’s article, that she objects to Foucault partially because his work resists the totalizing impulse.

Elbert prefers totality to multitude, mostly because totality can be productively opposed (18-19). She does, however, attempt to redefine “totality” to better placate her ludic opponents. Her redefinition of totality is self-defeating, however, since it involves reconceiving of totality as “materialistically (not discursively) always self-divided, different from itself and multiple. It is traversed by differences within, by difference, and, at the same time, produces a logic of connection that operates through this self-division” (21). In other words, she defines *totality* as *multiplicity* with the logic that because connections exist within the multiplicity, it still functions as a whole entity, a totality. This logic implodes when she attempts to argue that the totality of “patriarchy” “is continuous on the level of the structure or organization of oppression and discontinuous, that is, heterogeneous, in its historically specific and conjunctural practices” (21). The “structure and organization of oppression” cannot be “continuous” or homologous while their expression, their “historically specific and conjunctural practices” (21) are different. The only commonality, the only totality, is the existence of oppression, and what good is a concept like “totality” when all it can do is gesture to a single, impracticably broad concept as “oppression”? How does such an enormous abstraction do more to help the oppressed than ludic feminism’s linguistic microphysics?

Finally, perhaps my most significant objection to Elbert's "Ludic Feminism" is her insistence on the insubstantiality of play. She frequently contrasts play with cultural criticism, implying that one is productive and the other silly. Take, for instance, her quick mention of the Rodney King trial: "The verdict in the Rodney King trial—for many of us—was not a local, contingent, arbitrary, and aleatory play of power; rather, it was part of the systematic exercise of inequality, injustice, and oppression against African Americans in this country" (9). Her implication is quite pointed: play, the domain of comfortable, middle-class academics (8), has no business being applied to something as pressing and problematic as the savage beating of an African American man by police officers. The assault on Rodney King was not a game. The application of game-based terminology can cheapen abuses like those suffered by Rodney King, John Crawford III, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, Freddie Gray, and other victims of a racist and patriarchal disciplinary structure. Held within academic terms, however, scholars and critics are better able to understand the exertions of power around that assault if we consider the rules, performances, and linguistic formations that frame injustices and their fallouts. In other words, I suspect that most so-called "ludic feminists" would agree that material injustice holds a higher ethical imperative than the discursive object, but, crucially, we would also assert that how one talks about something matters a great deal. Discourse shapes material outcomes. A discourse that emphasizes the right of citizens to live without fear of lethal police responses, for instance, will lead to different material outcomes than an accepted discourse that highlights the rights of police to use deadly force against any perceived threats. Speaking and listening are powerful actions.

The critical games to follow present a powerful counterargument to Elbert's devaluation of play: the women behind such trans-activist games as *Dys4ia* and "All I want is for all of my friends to become insanely powerful" use games and play to attest—powerfully and

energetically—to their experiences as women suffering cultural oppression. They use games as a medium to do the very thing Elbert wants more feminists to do: “to radically retheorize postmodern difference itself and to articulate what I call a resistance postmodernism that will be the basis for postmodern materialist feminist culture critique” (10). In no way am I claiming “ludic feminist” as a label for my work (or if I am, it would be to reclaim the title’s literal meaning: a feminist work interested in games and their parallels with power relations). I only want to validate the theoretical assumptions on which my work relies in the face of a powerful counterargument.

Animal Cross[Dress]ing: Drag as Transgression in Animal Crossing: New Leaf

The final line of *Gender Trouble* is a metonym for the book’s entire project: “What other local strategies for engaging the ‘unnatural’ might lead to the denaturalization of gender as such?” (149). *Gender Trouble* considers the way in which gender is enacted, and the conditions of power that pressure gendered performances. Like Foucault, Butler is interested in how conditions arise and the ways in which we speak those conditions of power into being. Butler can help resist linguistic injustice, to advocate for transgender and intersex people, and to turn the critical gaze on modes of gendered performance. Butler’s theory, then, seems uniquely situated to consider feminist representation in games and the ways in which games talk about gender. Games can be useful tools for laughing at and playing with gender. They can provide a safe space to experiment with gender and with non-normative performances.

Some games, like *Animal Crossing: New Leaf* (2013) allow players to very gently experiment with drag by discovering gender-specific interactions and animations. *New Leaf*, released for the Nintendo 3DS (a handheld game console), is less a traditionally-construed video

game than an idyllic life simulator. The player character is a human in a small town full of animal-people, tasked upon arrival with acting as the town's mayor. Gameplay consists of talking with different characters, improving the town, collecting items, fish, fossils, and bugs, and customizing the player character and house. The game has no ending, no win condition, no combat, and no point system (besides, arguably, money or other collectibles). Gender in *New Leaf* is simultaneously intrinsic and performed. Before deciding anything else, the player selects a gender by describing his or her name as “cool” (if one wants to play a male character) or “cute” (for a female character) (Nintendo). From the very beginning, gender in the game is discursively defined; it has no extrinsic reference, only cultural ways of speaking (“cool” vs. “cute”). Nearly everything in *New Leaf* can be changed—even one's facial features⁵¹—but never gender. Gender is permanent. Gendered signifiers are omnipresent: boys' speech bubbles have a blue background, for instance, while girls' speech bubbles are pink. The person-icon on the menu screen has a pink shirt, a skirt, and a bobbed haircut if one plays a female, and a blue shirt with tan shorts and a short haircut if one plays a male. But *New Leaf* allows players to do something that no prior *Animal Crossing* game has: it allows cross-dressing.

In previous games, clothes would automatically become a shirt and pants for boys, or a dress for girls (Anthropy). In *New Leaf*, however, dresses stay dresses, even when boys wear them. This does not mean, however, that the game has made fashion non-gendered. When a male character expresses interest in buying a skirt or dress from the clothing store, the shopkeeper asks innocently “Oh, my, shopping for a present?” (Nintendo). If the player asks to try the item on, the shopkeeper says “Oh... Well, I guess it's okay to be a bit more adventurous sometimes” (Nintendo). The shopkeeper's tone is surprised, even taken aback. She is hesitant (“Well, I guess

⁵¹ Skin color, however, cannot be easily changed. While characters can “tan” by spending time on a tropical island, the only available skin tone is white (Nintendo).

it's okay,") but ultimately permissive. The hesitance signals to the player that he has encountered a cultural boundary. The moment presents a cultural boundary and acknowledges when the player exceeds it. The game still permits the crossing, but it draws attention to the boundary anyway. In a dialogue interaction with one of the town's citizens (dialogue is recycled between citizen characters), the character asks if the player character wears makeup, and if a male character answers in the affirmative, the citizen responds "Well, there's nothing wrong with that. It's 2013. Boys are wearing makeup. I say deal with it!" (Nintendo). Just as when trying on "women's" clothing, the game references a cultural boundary, then generously allows the player to cross it. Transgression seems to be possible, but the game's permissiveness defangs it. It repackages drag as a kind of low-calorie transgression, a simulation of transgression deprived of its weight and impact.

Transgender game designer Anna Anthropy, writing about *New Leaf*, says that "[*New Leaf*] doesn't remove gender signifiers, but allows the player to mix and match different [sic] gender signifiers however she wants to. that's closer to the ways we externalize our identities" (Anthropy). For Anthropy, a trans woman, that power to accurately externalize her identity was freeing—to a point. She points out that these minor "transgressions" are still sponsored and allowed by a major multi-national corporation (the same corporation that left queer pairings out of *Tomodachi Life*) and that "as long as we're playing *animal crossing*, we can't change or contradict the rules nintendo has decreed" (Anthropy). Players can apply gentle pressure to cultural boundaries, but those boundaries are only indicated, never shifted.

Judith Butler asks "what kind of gender performance will enact and reveal the performativity of gender itself in a way that destabilizes the naturalized categories of identity and desire" (139), and *New Leaf* certainly fails to destabilize identity and desire. While it does

encourage awareness of performative gender, for instance by applying “female” animations to male characters while they wear skirts or dresses (for instance, running with arms extended and elevated), *New Leaf* still considers originally male characters as male in all other respects.

Female characters have less opportunity for transgressive cross-dressing; they are never given the “cross-dressing” dialogue from the shopkeeper. Female characters do, however, adopt a “male” running animation (running with arms swinging down by the sides, rather than up by the head, as in the “female” animation). So while women can perform drag, it is not noted by the other characters. Finally, *New Leaf* characters hairstyles are limited only to the selected gender. Female characters cannot have “masculine” haircuts and vice versa.

Animal Crossing: New Leaf has isolated moments in which play presses at cultural boundaries, but they are ultimately rendered toothless by the game’s simultaneously gentle and judgmentally permissive treatment of gender-troubling. At best, *New Leaf* can be considered a safe training-ground for male-to-female gender troubling. It provides a welcoming environment that acknowledges the cultural taboo without criticizing the player, and it even allows players to present themselves to other players in their cross-gendered attire (representations of other players’ characters can be found in a segment of the town).

Ultimately, however, *New Leaf* is not a powerful expression of cultural resistance. It encourages a safe form of play, one in which risks (like performing traditionally female gender markers in a purportedly male body) are neither encouraged, nor punished, nor rewarded—they simply exist for the player’s satisfaction. *New Leaf* fails to break any illusions. Certainly, one would not expect it to engage in *Stanley Parable*-like feats of player-provocation, but *New Leaf* seems to go out of its way to preserve its game-created illusion of safety. Even as it gestures toward a potentially rebellious action—male-to-female cross-dressing—it simultaneously recasts

the action as acceptable within the game-world. The shopkeeper casts rebellion as simply “adventurous,” and who doesn’t like adventure? As soon as the act of rebellion is introduced and flagged, it is assimilated into the game’s friendly world. The game’s illusion stays unbroken, and the player can carry on, safe to be “adventurous” within a world that will never question or react to the reclaimed act of resistance. The game manages to gesture toward resistance without breaking the core illusion of a friendly, accepting world. So although the potential of transgression can be seen as a step in the right direction, it could also be seen as the retention of textual power by the game and the subtle denial of player agency. Critique is harder when gender transgression is sanitized and recast within a fundamentally conservative system.

Other games, however, powerfully foreground resistance to disciplinary power. Specifically, the critical games made by developers Anna Anthropy and Porpentine work to foreground the experiences of transgender individuals using the medium of video games. These games participate more fully in Butler’s enterprise of troubling gender, and they do so by relentlessly reminding the player of the interface and the interaction between player and system. In other words, these activist games draw attention to the medium itself and challenge the player to consider the performance, the act of rhetorical play, as a site of meaning-creation.

Transgender Feminism

Even accepting Butler’s well-worn claim that gender is performative and constructed (though that construction also expresses itself bodily; it is not solely a matter of action or accoutrement), transgender issues can be challenging to approach. The apparent paradox is that, although gender is constructed in a way that simulates—but is not constituted by—a fundamental binary, binary terms still dominate the discourse. This chapter is guilty of that: “masculine” and

“feminine” pepper my commentary, though I sometimes hedge by walling them off with scare-quotes. In other words, how does one refer to a multiplicity? Because although the title of Kate Bornstein’s gender-based memoir calls her a “*Gender Outlaw*,” not all transgender people will identify that way. Katrina Roen, in her article “‘Either/Or’ and ‘Both/Neither’: Discursive Tensions in Transgender Politics,” suggests that this divide between binary language and non-binary identification is reflected in a cultural divide between a radical postmodern refusal of the binary and a liberal emphasis on material conditions and pragmatism (503). The term “passing” is key to Roen’s discussion. She writes that “According to some transgenderists, passing as the ‘other sex’ is the ultimate sell-out. Here, passing is portrayed as complicit with normative gendering and therefore as contrary to the gender-progressive ethic of transgender politics” (501). The implication, for the “radical” camp, is that passing amounts to keeping one’s head down and trying to avoid abuse (501). On the other hand, the liberal camp would retort that, given the dangers to transgender people within a too-often hostile culture, passing is a necessary coping mechanism, a way of living happily, even if not radically (502).

The simplest answer is simply to ask, to refer to trans individuals by the terms they choose. Porpentine’s page “~what’s a porpentine~” says that “i’m a fem organism in oakland who makes everything” and that “i <3 the feminine.” Based on her self-identification, I feel relatively safe in referring to Porpentine using exclusively feminine terminology. Roen likewise, in her interviews with transgender people, found that they placed varying importance on passing: “Research participants who politicized their transgendered [sic] identities... effectively accused those who wish to pass of false consciousness... However, while some transpeople devalue passing, others hold passing in very high esteem” (504). Porpentine speaks to her own definition

of femininity openly on her Ask.fm page, a website where anyone can ask her questions.

Someone asked “what is femininity?” to which Porpentine responded

answer 1: that which is punished by misogyny

answer 2: you know it when you see it

answer 3: an innumerable set of emotions, aesthetics, archetypes, behaviors, etc that are toxic when compulsory and limited to tradition, and beautiful when evolving and mutating and freely chosen (“ITS ME PORPENTINE”)

Femininity, for her, is defined by its oppression (here, misogyny) and by its practice: “beautiful when evolving and mutating and freely chosen.” Femininity is amorphous and subjective. The second answer absorbs the other two: “you know it when you see it.” Porpentine’s flexible femininity allows more expression and easier categorization (since it places the onus of categorization on the transgender individual, rather than on the observer) than either side of Roen’s binary. Roen breaks approaches to passing and transgender identification into the both/neither and the either/or camps. The former is more often endorsed by politically radical transgender people and the latter by the liberal pragmatists. Both, however, rely on the individual’s access to financial and social capital that many transgender people will not have. Being self-identified as genderqueer, genderfluid, non-gendered, intersex, etc. “depends on how possible it is to be out” (511) whereas passing—choosing the either/or—“is therefore influenced by class, race, education, and so on” (511) since it so often relies on reassignment surgery. There is no easy answer. I have no solution. Instead of choosing a stance and imposing it on the two transgender designers discussed here, I will try to listen to them, reflect their identifications, and acknowledge that their gender performances are nuanced, fluid, and valid.

Working with transgender issues can contribute a great deal to a feminist approach to texts. Jonathan Alexander's "Transgender Rhetorics: (Re)Composing Narratives of the Gendered Body," published in *CCC* in 2005, discusses the incorporation of trans issues into a writing class. At the heart of Alexander's article is the exhortation "to trace the genealogy of gender as a disciplinary construct of power and knowledge in our society" (47), and he accomplishes this by arguing "that trans theorists and pedagogical activities inspired by them can remind us to complement our understanding of gender performance with a sense of gender as a material and embodied reality" (47). Alexander is cagey about Butlerian performativity; it seems to neglect "a sense of the *embodied*-ness of gender identity" (56). This perception stems more from perceptions of Butler's work than from *Gender Trouble* itself; Butler might even dispute the nature of "embodiment," since the body is itself a written entity: "it becomes impossible to separate out 'gender' from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained" (3). Still, for the transgender individual, the nature of the body has an urgency that surpasses the theoretical or academic. So even if one is to accept the theoretical textual nature of the gendered body, one must simultaneously accept the pressing materiality of the dysphoric experience. Again the notion of ethical listening returns. Whatever the academically correct approach to discussions of gender, embodiment, and performativity may be, the ethical imperative returns to *listening*. Especially with a group as abused and misunderstood as transgender people, those writing about trans-ness—using it, if one is to be totally honest—must work towards a radical acceptance, a knowing subjection to the authority of the transgender speaker. This is a space in which the ethical power relationship becomes one of receiving, accepting the speaker's power and voice.

The transgender designer's text encourages rhetorical play. If the oscillation begins with radical acceptance, the willing ceding of rhetorical power to the designer's text—in other words, the willingness to let the transgender speaker draw his, her, or their own boundaries—it can evolve into a practice of power and resistance. The texts examined here encourage the player to actively critique and question the texts; they foster resistance to their own ludic discipline. In other words, to practice the kinds of resistance to gendered discipline that these texts seem to encourage, the reader must participate in Krista Ratcliffe's "rhetorical listening." In the introduction, I suggested that rhetorical listening is actually an oscillation between passive acceptance of textual authority, what Ratcliffe describes as "standing under" the flow of discourse (205), and active consideration and critique of that text's content and style, what Ratcliffe terms "interpretive invention" (202). That oscillation is key here. It is more difficult to express the passive acceptance of textual authority in writing; what follows here is mostly "interpretive invention," but that does not make the ethical imperative to listen any less important.

As I read through Porpentine's Ask.fm page, I was arrested by one of her answers. Someone asked about her legacy, and she answered that "trans fem work is fragile. the memory of it erodes, people take it for granted, your work gets plagiarized, *academics rewrite history*. when you have a lot of pride in your work, it can sting" ("ITS ME PORPENTINE," emphasis added). I acknowledge the probability—perhaps the inevitability—that my record of Porpentine and Anthropy's works will rewrite them for my readers. By contextualizing them as resistance, rhetoric, and objects participating in a particular model of reality, I am reframing these games as something potentially other than what they are. I have tried to respect the creators and the

struggles they have expressed in the medium of games, but I encourage the reader to seek out and play these games for him, her, or themselves.

Critique and Frustration in Dys4ia

Anna Anthropy⁵² may be best known for *Dys4ia* (2012), a brief browser-based game inspired by Anthropy's hormone treatments during her transition from male to female (Anthropy). *Dys4ia* is actually a series of extremely short games, around three dozen or so,⁵³ divided into four sections: "Gender Bullshit," "Medical Bullshit," "Hormonal Bullshit," and "It Gets Better?" (Anthropy). The game is controlled solely with the keyboard's four arrow keys. Each mini-game (hereafter referred to as a vignette) is a metaphorical representation of a portion of Anthropy's transition. In "Gender Bullshit," for example, several games represent Anthropy's pain when presented with masculine pronouns while others detail her thwarted desire to be treated as a woman. In one vignette, pictured here, the player guides a simple green icon-character through a hall of opening and closing doors toward an open bathroom stall.

⁵² Named in the game's credits as "Auntie Pixelante"

⁵³ Depending on what one considers a "game." Some vignettes are non-interactive and so might not be considered "games."



Fig. 9: A screenshot from *Dys4ia* (“*Dys4ia* Screenshot”).

The game’s text gives just enough instruction and context for the vignette to make sense, and simple elements of game design help make the task more intuitive. The player-icon and objective-icon are the same color, and they contrast with both the purple background and yellow light from open doors. From start to finish, the vignette might take fifteen seconds. The game proceeds whether the player succeeds or fails—an unusual trait for a video game. Most games prevent players from continuing until they overcome a stage, but for *Dys4ia*, failure is a crucial part of the game. In an interview, Anthropy said that the game “was a story about frustration—in what other form do people complain as much about being frustrated? A video game lets you set up goals for the player and make her fail to achieve them. A reader can’t fail a book. It’s an entirely different level of empathy” (Kuchera). Some vignettes are literally impossible. One recurring game-type sees the player trying to guide an irregularly shaped block through a gap—

but the shape of the block literally cannot fit through the gap. The player's inability to comply with the game's demands reflects Anthropy's frustration with cultural requirements she could not meet. In many cases, the player will fail even winnable stages simply because they are difficult. But the game keeps going. *Dys4ia* refuses to enforce ludic discipline. It does not care about rewarding players for winning or about increasing a player's skill at the game.

Dys4ia uses a blocky, Atari-2600-esque art style, a droning, distorted soundtrack, and rudimentary controls to preclude the possibility of immersion. The moment the player becomes comfortable with a game vignette, it ends, and he finds himself thrown into the next game. Each vignette demands that the player learn to play all over again, and this constant re-learning requires an acute awareness of the controls, the screen, the objects one inhabits and controls, the objectives, and the obstacles between the player and the objectives. In other words, *Dys4ia* constantly grounds the player in "at-vision." The blocky visuals and non-diegetic sound prevent immediate identification or immersion, and by forcing the player to identify and learn each segment anew,⁵⁴ Anthropy keeps players continually off-balance. Play, here, is a constant negotiation of an unfamiliar system; one must learn a new game (or at least apply existing skills from other games; *Dys4ia* uses plenty of tropes and details from existing games like *Pac-Man* and *Breakout*) thirty or so times before finishing the game.

Dys4ia excels in breaking the player's attention by subverting traditional game reward structures. Just as *The Stanley Parable* found the possibility for resistance in inaction and stasis, *Dys4ia* turns players' assumptions about completion and reward into moments of rhetorical awareness. Most mainstream video games reward players after they complete a stage or overcome an obstacle with something pleasurable: perhaps a piece of equipment, an advance in

⁵⁴ For the most part. Some vignettes are remixed and re-presented later in the game.

the narrative, or simply a reaffirming graphic. *Dys4ia*, however, makes frequent use of an inverted structure: it punishes success. In the vignette describing the author's discomfort with shaving her face, the player must direct a razor across a stubbly upper lip. After shaving all the whiskers, a bloody wound appears on the mouth and the player hears an "ouch!" from Anthropy (Anthropy). Completing the vignette's objective actually wounds the game-character. Another vignette describes the effect of Anthropy's hormonal medication on her body. The player must press the down key to drop pills from a pill bottle into the waiting mouth below, and as she does so, a percentage score next to a liver-shaped icon decreases (Anthropy). Mainstream games frequently task the player with preserving the main character's health, and, moreover, generally display player health at the bottom left or right of the screen, just where it is in *Dys4ia*. *Dys4ia* subverts this trope by requiring the player to actively injure the game's protagonist.

Other vignettes present impossible situations or give insufficient time to complete their tasks. Clearly, these are meant to frustrate the player and, in turn, help them understand the frustrations of the transition process. The frustration also serves to draw attention to the game's design. Why, the player might wonder, would the game make it so difficult to sneak past other women in the restroom? Why was I punished simply for passing in front of a character? The failure, here, demands awareness and consideration. The game oscillates between involvement and critique. In one moment, the player is involved with the challenge of the vignette—perhaps trying to navigate an unwieldy pair of breasts through a field of spiky pain-icons (representing the physical tenderness that accompanied Anthropy's hormone treatment)—and in the next, failure can lead to a moment of at-vision in which the player recognizes that his inability to avoid pain-indicators parallels the game creator's inability to avoid pain (Anthropy). Anthropy uses moments of rhetorical breakage to convey a deeply personal experience.

These experiences are impossible without an unstable, exploratory form of play. A player who already knows the vignettes' requirements and controls can pass easily, almost thoughtlessly, through the game. Trying, experimenting, and failing are all required for the game to have its desired effect. The game forces players to resist binary gender distinctions and, across the transitioning period that the game represents, the player witnesses familiar gender defamiliarize before his eyes. The game emphasizes this disintegrating gender normativity by remixing and re-deploying vignettes throughout the game. In an early vignette, the player controls a razor shaving stubble from the protagonist's upper lip. Later, the player again controls a razor, this time shaving the hard-to-reach cleft between the protagonist's breasts. Finally, in the victorious "It Gets Better?" chapter, the player again controls a razor running across the protagonist's chest, but there is no hair to shave (Anthropy). The razor is pointless, and the player has nothing to do. Contrary to the usual expectation that accomplishing a task wins the game, the surest sign of victory in this vignette is the absence of a task. The task is done. The transition is complete.

Dys4ia, then, revels in turning common video game tropes on their heads. Failure does not halt the experience, damaging the player-character is often required, and the greatest sign of triumph can sometimes be having nothing to do. *Dys4ia* playfully resists the rules of its disciplinary structure (in this case, commonly accepted game mechanics) and in so doing, breaks the player's illusion and allows for the exercise of critical power. If indeterminacies are gaps in the text, spaces in which the subject can supply his or her own meaning, then the indeterminacies in *Dys4ia* are cavernous. The game returns interpretive power to the player by breaking the graphic, auditory, and playable tropes that might contribute to an immersive experience. If immersive, mainstream games mostly consist of players ceding power to the text and relishing

the illusions formed around them, then *Dys4ia* works to do the opposite, preventing illusion formation.

The text is structured in such a way that players must provide their own interpretations to make sense of the frequently metaphorical vignettes. Oscillation still occurs: involvement with the game and comprehension of its imagery is required to make sense of the metaphors, but the oscillation is defined by declining textual power and increasing subjective power. The rules seem to be in place only to be broken. Transgressing the common rules of arcade-style games is a requirement in *Dys4ia*, and this transgression enables critique and power retention by the subject.

The game produces a powerful critique of binary gender by engaging the player in explorations of the protagonist's shifting body and asking him to "help" Anthropy maintain and alter her body. Anthropy gives the player power to explore and alter the transgender body, and this self-conscious complicity with the transgender individual demands that the player recognize and consider the boundaries and no-man's-lands of binary gender. *Dys4ia* may not convince its players of the constructed nature of biological gender, but it fosters an environment in which exploration and resistance is possible and encouraged.

Dys4ia is an example of a game that Butler would likely consider a destabilizing performance of gender. The player, by dint of playing the game and controlling the protagonist (and even parts of the protagonist's body), performs an unstable gender identity, and must—through gameplay—negotiate that instability and its many difficulties. While *Dys4ia* is not the parodic drag performance that Butler discusses, it does "enact and reveal the performativity of gender itself in a way that destabilizes the naturalized categories of identity and desire" (139). Moreover, it involves the player with this unstable revelation and forces an element of reflection and complicity with the emotions and identities expressed by the game.

Dys4ia exemplifies the kind of rebellious game design enabled by a newly-democratized world of game design. Prospective game designers have a huge number of game design programs from which to choose, and many of those programs are free. *GameMaker Studio* and *Unity*, two professional-grade design programs, are completely free, charging only for export to mobile platforms. These programs, and the many other free design programs, are all extensively documented with active development communities. Many sources of free art and sound assets exist online, and many more are available for purchase. Using game development software does, of course, require a functioning computer and time to learn the software, but making video games has never been cheaper or easier than it is today.

Anthropy wrote that each vignette in *Dys4ia* only took a few hours to create: “at some points i was making up to three a day. most days i managed two or three” (“dys4ia”). The art is simple enough that nearly anyone could create something similar, and the game design is never more complicated than pressing in a direction to make an object onscreen move. There is no artificial intelligence to program, no multiplayer to design, and only a few words to write. *Dys4ia* is perhaps most significant as a representation of a historical moment. For the first time ever, creating digital games is becoming affordable and easy enough that almost anyone can learn to do it. Games like *Dys4ia* can exist outside of traditional publication structures and so can pursue their own critical and artistic ends without worrying about sales figures or marketing.

Twine and Rhetorical Play

Anthropy programs many of her games (but not *Dys4ia*) in a program called Twine, one of the most democratized and user-friendly game creation tools available. Twine might more accurately be called an interactive fiction creator, since it allows users to create branching

hypertext narratives in which links move the reader between screens of text. Although more advanced developers (like Anthropy and Porpentine) can add graphics, music, and other features to their Twine games, most Twine games are plain text. One could argue that the Twine tool does not generate games but rather interactive fictions or hypertext narratives; after all, Twine fictions do not necessarily involve a win condition or a necessary element of skill. But according to Salen and Zimmerman's definition of "play," "free movement within a more rigid structure" (304) Twine fictions still make play-experiences possible.

Creating a Twine game involves laying out and connecting a series of "cards," each of which represents a screen of game text. Each screen links to another screen by links embedded in the text. A screen can contain as much or as little text as the designer pleases, and a designer can link to an unlimited number of other screens. A simple game might present the player with a pair of choices at the end of each passage, perhaps giving an option for the player to go left or right. But because Twine is based on hypertext, links can go anywhere. A single detail embedded in the text might lead to further details, a new series of events, or authorial musings. The platform is extremely malleable, and because it is based on HTML code, it can be extensively modified and expanded.

Game designer Porpentine works primarily in Twine, and her games are hallucinogenic, surprising, sometimes frightening experiences. She uses text-based games to press the player into acts of resistance, excess, and generative violence against restrictive gender norms. More importantly, Porpentine's rhetoric intentionally snaps the player's attention between the text and the player, making the oscillation of rhetorical play less of a wave and more a series of spikes. Her game "All I want is for all of my friends to become insanely powerful" in particular uses an unexpected figure-ground switch to transform the game's rhetorical play-space and delight the

player. “All I want” casts the player (referenced, as is usual for Porpentine, in the second person) as a futuristic assassin carrying out a series of hallucinogenic assignments. Before each mission, a “pod” drops from the apartment’s ceiling, and, for the first half of the game, the pod contains a black suit and other business accessories (Porpentine). In one sequence, the player enters a mansion and finds tar filling the room. With no other option, the player-character drowns in the tar and awakens back in her apartment. In another, the protagonist destroys a makeup shop, lights it on fire, dies in the flames, and reawakens in the apartment (Porpentine). The apartment serves the same purpose as Stanley’s office in *The Stanley Parable*: an apparently stable beginning to a series of changing adventures. It quickly becomes transparent, and Porpentine knows that the player will eventually stop reading the opening passages, since they do not change between missions.

Porpentine takes advantage of the opening’s transparency to create a striking rhetorical moment. At the beginning of the game, the “apartment” screen looks like this:

White carpet. Black ceiling. Glass **walls**. All your **furniture** is obsidian.

On the glass coffee table is a **catcher's mitt**.

You recline with a cold glass of milk with ice in your air-conditioned apartment.

Drink that milk

Fig. 10: The apartment scene (“‘All I want’ Apartment Screenshot.”)

The player sees this description many times before the end of the game. The colors reflect the setting. Monochrome defines the oppressive episodes of the game's first half. On one assignment, the protagonist finds "The black factory ruin [that] still functions on auxiliary power./ Giant crushing machines. Conveyor belts. Vats of rubbery black fluid" (Porpentine). Early episodes highlight self-destruction via conformity: in the factory, the protagonist lies on a conveyor belt and is crushed. In a restaurant, s/he chews glass and stabs her/himself with a screwdriver in lieu of sex (Porpentine). The episodes dramatize routine and sexual conformity using vivid sense-descriptors to intensify the sensations, and the second-person perspective heightens the visceral impact: "Feel [the glass shards] cutting open your gums... Your hand hangs limply from your arm, a big green-black bruise spreading along your wrist" (Porpentine). Amidst the carnage, the game's monochromatic background fades from the player's consciousness.

After a series of dark, monochromatic episodes, all conducted in silence, the pod that contains the assignment's equipment (usually a black suit, watch, GPS, etc.) drops from the ceiling (Porpentine), and "Oh No" by Marina and the Diamonds begins playing. Poppy and energetic, the song features lyrics like "I know exactly what I want and who I want to be/ I know exactly why I walk and talk like a machine/ I'm now becoming my own self-fulfilled prophecy" (Marina and the Diamonds). The music is accompanied by text describing the new assignment's equipment: "1 shiny magenta dress/ 1 pair of space tights/ 2 silver bracelets/ 1 amethyst ring (large)/ 1 pair of purple sneakers/ 1 pink MP3 player with a nebula cover" (Porpentine). The game's second act essentially repairs the damage of the first half: the protagonist dons makeup in the reconstructed makeup shop, soaks the factory with citrus-pink goo, and pills turn the mansion's black tar into pink slime (Porpentine). The alterations are reported to be the work of

“queer cyber hackers tampering with the pod systems” (Porpentine) and the entire game can be read as an act of queer cyber-hacking.

Near the end, a figure-ground shift surprises the player by recasting the game’s monochromatic color scheme in pink and bright color. When the protagonist opens a pod, as s/he has so many times before, instead of seeing a list of equipment, the game’s background instantly turns pink. Clicking on details from the apartment, “White carpet. Black ceiling. Glass walls,” (Porpentine), reveals their new version (see Fig. 11): “Pink carpet. Galaxy ceiling. Christmas lights are strung along your walls” (Porpentine).

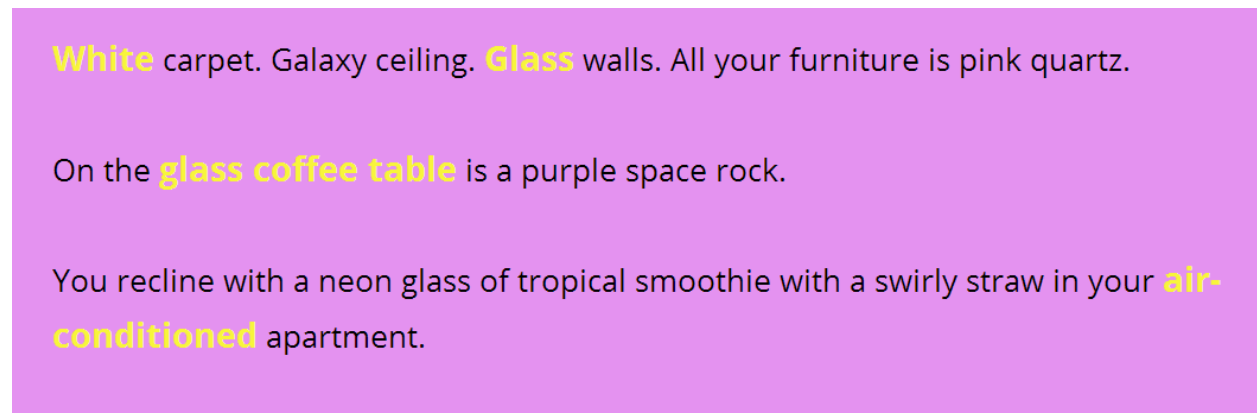


Fig. 11: The apartment scene, post-transformation (“‘All I want’ Apartment Screenshot 2.”)

In the figure above, yellow words can be clicked to reveal their transformed versions. When I played the game for the first time, the color shift took me completely by surprise; I found myself grinning without exactly knowing why. In retrospect, the pleasure came from the figure-ground shift: the background literally became my primary focus, and the sudden flash of pink, after

dozens of screens of black, was a thrilling surprise. The game's content clearly establishes the opposition between monochrome and neon color, but the player likely does not expect the game's literal background to change. Most of Porpentine's games have a standard black background, and a flat black background has been a standard in text-based games since text games like *Adventure* (1976) and *Zork* (1977). The black background is such a standard that players are likely to forget about it almost immediately. By snapping the background from default black to surprising pink, Porpentine forces players to look *at* the background. The illusion of transparency shatters.

The shattering of transparency accompanies the player-character's transformation: the apartment, the most frequently returned-to passage in the game, has been converted to the side of the "queer cyber-hackers" (Porpentine). The game represents a literalized resistance paired with a ludic resistance. The queer hackers have taken power by literally changing the language, and the player assists this aesthetic revolution by clicking the terms and driving the action forward. The queer vandalism is aesthetic, but the aesthetics have healing powers. Healing the broken makeup store is accomplished by clicking the phrases "Smear some lipstick across your lips./ Twist mascara across your eyelashes./ Brush your nails with polish" (Porpentine). Porpentine charts a course between the two feminist camps described earlier: resistance is both literally and figuratively ludic. The player and designer resist by participating in a boundary-blurring textual game built on a strong rhetorical foundation. But the game also envisions real resistance: the heroes of the game are vandals and hackers. For Elbert and Nussbaum, the game is likely not political enough; it fails to organize protesters, lobby legislators, or raise funds for social justice. What "All I want" does, however, is speak powerfully into the face of a hateful and angry digital mob. If Gamergate supporters and misogynistic harassers attack Anita Sarkeesian for simply

talking about women in games, how must they treat Porpentine who creates exactly the sort of socially-aware, gender-troubling, intellectually-oriented indie games that “hardcore” gamers claim to hate? Game design is powerful. “All I want” and indie games like it are acts of resistance against both gender-policing disciplinary structures and against a gaming culture obsessed with reinforcing that disciplinary structure. The sharp oscillations engendered by “All I want” and other trans-activist games use rhetorical play to shake the player. Frustration, surprise, and figure-ground snaps are all tactics that work to shake the player out of immersive complacency and show them the dangers of immersion and domination.

Twine games occupy a key position of resistance and potential within the current game-design scene. Twine is free, easy to learn, and quick to use. It requires no programming language, allows creators to post their games anywhere on the internet, and its flexible hypertext system has tremendous potential and flexibility. A designer could, for example, make a hypertext fiction that imitates a non-hypertext short story and link the nouns to descriptions and characters’ memories. Twine in many ways feels like the fulfillment of 90s new media scholarship’s obsession with hypertext fiction’s transformative promise. In “All I want,” Porpentine places responsibility for the game’s changed theme on “queer cyber hackers,” and one can imagine the queer game design scene in a similar way. Designers like Anthropy and Porpentine are creative dynamos, using largely free and user-friendly tools to create tools of resistance, games that encourage players to expand the boundaries of cultural intelligibility while challenging the accepted modes of ludic discipline. Cara Ellison, in a column for *PC Gamer*, considers the empowering possibilities of games like “All I want”:

[“All I want”] needs you to realise that your life is changeable, and you can do it through text, subtext, the textual bonds we make between each other. *You can*

change the way the digital landscape lies, if you realise how your constraints work: how the world of words is structured around you. Or perhaps, it is

ignorance or disdain of boundaries: or just deliberately forgetting there are any.

Yes, it is like seeing the matrix. Like seeing the source code, or the ordered node map in rows, all linked together. (Ellison, emphasis added)

Ellison gestures toward the Foucauldian and Butlerian underpinnings of the queer game design movement. Practicing critical awareness of games' discursive conventions empowers the individual to press against those conventions. Critical awareness and play, then, are tightly bound. Play reveals boundaries by exploration, experimentation, and rebellion. Critical awareness can proceed from that unstable, resistant play, if one can break oneself (or be broken) out of the seductive illusion of the game-space. Rhetorical play must take place within the constraints of an interface, but that play can become aware of its borders and seek to test, or even overthrow them. Queer rhetorical play trains the player to evaluate games, to play powerfully and with awareness of the disciplinary structures. In turn, many queer designers—especially Anthropy—encourage players to become coders, both literally and figuratively. The queer indie game movement wants to make players powerful resisters of the mainstream.

Games can challenge dominant power structures by exposing the game's discourse to an exploitive, exploratory, experimental act of rhetorical play. Players press against the discourse and see not only where the rules are, but also where the seams in the rules are. *The Stanley Parable* demonstrated that inaction and refusal to engage can be more powerful than active resistance. *Dys4ia* exemplified the power of frustration and failure to inform and instill empathy as well as to motivate and punish. "All I want" turned a figure-ground switch into a moment of

exhilaration, and in doing so proved that the background, the context, the assumptions, should never be assumed.

Conclusion: The Move from Playing Games to Making Games.

I have thus far considered play and games from the perspective of the recipients: players and readers. I have attempted to set out a rhetoric of game-play as discipline and resistance, but now I will turn my attention from the player to the creator. For the rest of this chapter and the next, I will consider the player less than the designer. I will discuss how games and play can be leveraged to resist oppressive disciplinary structures and to assist students' understanding of writing and rhetoric.

Software engineers are no longer the only people with the tools and expertise to make games. With tools like *GameMaker Studio*, *Twine*, *Unity*, *Stencyl*, and a legion of others, anyone with time to learn can create games. This development led Anna Anthropy to write *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters* in 2012, which argues that for too long, game development has been limited to a single demographic: middle class white males who make and market games to other middle class white males (Ch. 1). She notes the same disturbing trends in gender and racial representation that I noted at the beginning of this chapter: "The problem with videogames is that they're created by a small, insular group of people" (Ch. 1), and that the solution to this imbalance is to throw open the gates of game creation to everyone. She wants to see games with less demand for hyper-specialized knowledge and skill, games that anyone (not just people who have played games for years on end) can play. In addition, she says, "Games must become more personal" (Ch. 3). They should concern more than men shooting men, aliens, and robots. Anthropy's vision is of videogames as a fully developed artistic medium, one that exists to

leverage its particular affordances and strengths, including “exploring systems and dynamics... communicating relationships... [and creating] a kind of theater in which the audience is an actor and takes on a role” (Ch. 1), for a variety of artistic purposes, not merely the power fantasy that most AAA games indulge.

Her book lists a variety of game creation tools, from modifying existing games (as *The Stanley Parable* did to *Half Life 2*) to hacking games, to using game-creation software to make entirely new games. Game creation for Anthropy is a liberatory experience, one with intrinsic value to the game creator, even if it never reaches an audience: “You’re a zinester, after all. Whatever you’re doing is right because you’re doing it, and that’s valuable. Don’t worry about being brilliant or original—just make sure you’re creative” (Ch. 7). Anthropy espouses a philosophy that will be familiar to any composition theorist: she’s an expressivist. Self-expression and the process of creation are more important than any effect on the audience, to the point that she holds up the so-called “crap games” movement (which is exactly what it sounds like: a movement advocating for short, simplistic games made very quickly) as an ideal (Ch. 5).

Yet Anthropy is also engaging in a form of social epistemic reasoning. The wave of personal ludic expression that she hopes to unleash will accomplish a distinctly political goal. If enough people express themselves through games, she suggests, then the voices of the oppressed will be heard (and played) alongside the more politically powerful voices of white male software engineers (Ch. 1). Social equality can be promoted through expressive games. Anthropy’s answer to the misogynist gamers who attacked Anita Sarkeesian for pointing out gender inequality in games is to drown them in games. The cultural conversation around videogames can be changed solely by adding more and more diverse games to the medium. It’s a heady

message, and I will explore it and its connections to more traditional composition theory in the following chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR

PLAYING THE CLASSROOM: USING GAME DESIGN TO TEACH SOCIAL EPISTEMIC RHETORIC

Prose, under such a proceeding, cannot be approached with the scientific attitude alone.

Preoccupation with form, with the play attitude, is immediate and continual. A performance is played. The text must be re-created. Surely, some such pedagogy as this is desperately needed in English classes in America today.

--Richard Lanham, *Style: An Anti-Textbook* 101

In the previous chapter, I suggested that Anna Anthropy is a composition theorist by another name and that game making ought to have a happy home in the composition classroom. The call for incorporating new media, like games, into the list of what students should learn in composition has been repeated for decades. In 2004, Kathleen Blake Yancey called for just such additions in her opening address for the 4Cs, “Made Not Only in Words: Composition in a New Key.” She argued that composition classrooms risk rendering themselves obsolete if they fail to go where the students are and teach what students need to learn, which, in this case, entails writing in more spaces than the traditional word processor document. One quote in particular frames my approach to teaching new media:

Pages have interfaces, although like much that is ubiquitous, we don’t attend to such interfaces as we might. The fact that you have one interface governing the

entire text, however, does provide a frame. What is the frame for (and thus the theory governing) a composition in multiple parts? [...] how do we create such a text? How do we read it? How do we value it? Not least, how will we teach it? (796)

My first chapters evaluated her questions about reading and valuing these new kinds of compositions, and this chapter will seek to answer her final question: “how will we teach it?” I hypothesize that teaching writing as both creating and being created by rule structures will give students an easily transferable framework for understanding the requirements not only of the particular assignment or genre being taught but the nature of the rules governing those assignments and genres. In other words, teaching writing as a game should enable students to discern rhetorical and disciplinary rules operating in the discourses around them.

This emphasis on teaching games as a route to transfer involves two paired actions: consumption and creation. So far, this dissertation has focused primarily on the first category, studying the interpretation of interface, the disciplinary structures governing game-play, and the techniques of critique and awareness implicit in critical games. This chapter turns its attention to the second category: creation. Critical, evaluative reading is certainly crucial for students in a socially engaged writing classroom, but critical reading deprived of writing risks passivity. This chapter will present a new take on the first chapter’s oscillation-based model of rhetorical play, this time focusing on game as constraints on consumption and play as constrained creation. Rhetorical play can be used to create as well as to consume, just as it enables the oscillation between immersion and critique. Students in an ideal composition classroom will oscillate between observing discursive constraints and creating new texts responding to and testing those discursive rules. This chapter also aims to balance composition theory with composition

pedagogy, since it is in applied pedagogy that composition theorists test and refine our theories. This chapter's primary artifact is a set of pedagogical texts I created for an Advanced Composition course taught in the fall of 2014. The prompts, rubrics, guides, and descriptions I offer here are intended to put the broader lessons and theories of this dissertation into practice. Balance is my watchword: I aim to balance theory and application, creation and consumption, work and reflection.

Theoretical Background

In this chapter, I will draw from primarily social epistemic composition theorists such as James Berlin, Ira Shor, and Nedra Reynolds. Of the most commonly accepted schools of composition theory, social epistemic rhetoric connects most strongly to the issues of power and resistance on which this dissertation is predicated. My goal here is to build a course on reading, writing, and power relationships, and social epistemic rhetoric best fits that agenda. Berlin writes in "Rhetoric and Ideology" that "social epistemic rhetoric is an alternative that is self-consciously aware of its ideological stand, making the very question of ideology the center of classroom activities, and in doing so providing itself a defense against preemption and a strategy for self-criticism and self-correction" (668). Social epistemic rhetoric assumes that ideology is omnipresent, no matter the speaker's political stance, and that ideology is inseparable from human discourse. We are constantly immersed in ideology, just as we are always enmeshed in power relationships. Power relationships, constructs of ideology that they are, exert tremendous force on speaking and writing situations. When I speak to students in class, they do not generally speak over me because an ideology has instilled in them the belief that teachers hold more power and require more deference than students. Given an alternative ideology, perhaps one that

assumes that teachers are simply another kind of student, the power relationship would differ, and thus the discursive situation would differ. The classroom discourse of such an egalitarian ideology would alter my speech both in content and style. Ideology is an omnipresent modifier and creator of discourse. Berlin writes more broadly that “ideology provides the language to define the subject (the self), other subjects, the material world, and the relation of all of these to each other. Ideology is thus inscribed in language practices, entering all features of our experience” (669).

Such a conception of the ideology and language initially casts doubt on the possibility of ever being able to teach writing through the lens of ideological critique. If ideology is everywhere, everything, and everyone, what can possibly be said about it? Writing about or even considering such overwhelming cultural formations initially seems impossible, especially in the case of the classroom. Since ideology pervades the classroom, focusing the class on that same constitutive ideology presents a challenge. Berlin responds by breaking ideology into a navigable set of interactions: “the dialectical interaction of the observer, the discourse community (social group) in which the observer is functioning, and the material conditions of existence. Knowledge is never found in any one of these but can only be posited as a product of the dialectic in which all three come together” (678). Social epistemic rhetoric, in this case, begins to resemble the model I put forward in the first chapter: knowledge is a performance created and sustained by an oscillation. For Berlin, the oscillation is dialectic, the discursive interaction of the self, the community, and the world (678). The original question remains, however. If social epistemic rhetoric takes ideology as its most important subject, can it truly expect to either understand or influence the omnipresent ideology?

At the end of Rebeca Moore Howard's "Sexuality, Textuality: The Cultural Work of Plagiarism," she asks a question that cuts to the heart of social epistemic rhetoric: "Can we now engage in an act of metalepsis—can we, in Stuart Moulthrop's words, 'jump outside the game' (315)? Can we, once outside that game, do more than analyze it? Can we take action and opt out of our participation in this history?" (1217). Both Butler and Foucault might respond that "jumping outside the game" is impossible, since power relations are omnipresent, but that altering the rules of the game *is* possible. Butler writes in *Gender Trouble* that "The productions [of sexuality within power relations] swerve from their original purposes and inadvertently mobilize possibilities of 'subjects' that do not merely exceed the bounds of cultural intelligibility, but effectively expand the boundaries of what is, in fact, culturally intelligible" (29). In other words, certain ideological rules can be shifted and expanded, even if they cannot be truly traversed or broken. Berlin too believes that "We are lodged within a hermeneutic circle, although not one that is impervious to change" (679). There seems, then, to be a consensus about the dominance and alterability of ideology's rules, and it is largely the same consensus that previous chapters of this dissertation have asserted. Resistance to power is not merely possible; it is as omnipresent as ideology itself.

So far, I have discussed ideology and resistance as if they were two poles of a single system, but ideology is never singular. Cultural discourse always consists of multiple ideologies at war with one another (Berlin 679), and when one resists an ideology, one is not resisting in a vacuum. In the example I gave above, of the teacher-led vs. egalitarian classroom, resistance to the teacher's sole possession of power resists one ideology in hopes of instituting another. Egalitarian power-sharing is just as ideologically loaded as the ideology with which it conflicts.

The social epistemic classroom consciously locates itself within a real social discourse, a real set of dialectical realities, and attempts to make those realities its subject.

Social epistemic rhetoric is not without its risks for the classroom, of course. It invites skepticism and disagreements. It casts doubt on itself. It constantly scrutinizes the power of the teacher. Social epistemic rhetoric is not for the faint of heart. But given an open-minded group of students, this kind of openness to questioning and scrutiny can be an effective engagement technique. Rarely are students afforded the opportunity to consider their pedagogical surroundings as the disciplinary spaces they are, and offering them the power of observation and critique can be a significant opening act. Moreover, by adopting the class itself as a subject of ideological scrutiny, the classroom opens the possibility of resistance to traditional pedagogical power relations. The teacher becomes a guide and an implementer of accepted disciplinary practice, but she also becomes an investigator alongside the students. At worst, she works to pull the curtain of power aside and show her charges the hidden figure pulling disciplinary levers. At best, she becomes a co-learner, involved and invested in the process of deciphering the classroom's disciplinary coding alongside her students. Especially in a course interested in studying discursive power using Foucault, the classroom is a perfect object of study, since Foucault refers so often to its disciplinary authority. In any case, whether or not the instructor uses the classroom as a subject of study, teaching composition via social epistemic rhetoric carries with it more risk than the pleasurably self-focused expressionist course or the by-the-books current traditional class. As is the case with any rhetorical choice, approaching the classroom from such an ideologically inquisitive standpoint carries with it a certain amount of risk. Teachers working from this perspective should ready themselves to embrace nontraditional

assignments and expectations, and students should be prepared from the beginning to write and critique in perhaps-unexpected ways.

The grandfather of this conversation is doubtless Ira Shor. Shor's monograph *Critical Teaching and Everyday Life* heavily influenced Berlin, and "Rhetoric and Ideology" is in some ways a reduced and reapplied version of Shor's core theory which is, itself, heavily inspired by Freire's liberation pedagogy. Shor identifies himself as a liberatory pedagogue working in an abusive system to liberate his working-class students and to participate in what he frequently calls "consciousness raising" (23). Shor writes specifically about community and two-year colleges, and his pedagogical examples are all drawn from his time teaching at CUNY in the 70s (127). So while some of his institutional and historical context is not relevant for this chapter, his work is important for contextualizing social epistemic rhetoric.

The thesis of *Critical Teaching and Everyday Life* is straightforward: the working-class students who attend community colleges are caught in a series of abusive economic and cultural systems, but because of the constant distractions provided by electronic media, "most people are alienated from their own conceptual habits of mind" (47). Liberal arts courses (available from community colleges wanting to ape prestigious universities) present significant "transcendent possibilities" (26-27), or chances for teachers to liberate their students. Shor is vexed by questions like "Why don't masses of people engage in social reflection? Why isn't introspection an habitual feature of life? What prevents popular awareness of how the whole system operates, and which alternatives would best serve human needs?" (47). His pedagogy works to guide students toward those questions in a cooperative, dialogic atmosphere (94-95). Most broadly, Shor writes, "The building of a liberatory pedagogy begins from the facts of domination and social pressure. It is an enterprise supported by the refusal of teachers and students to surrender

their humanity or their future. Beneath false consciousness, there are resources which survive the acidity of mass culture, waiting for a reconstructed life” (87).

Shor’s use of liberation terminology verges on oversimplification. In “The Ethic of Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom,” Foucault points out that “if there are relations of power throughout every social field it is because there is freedom everywhere,” and that power relations do not merely allow for but *necessitate* resistance (123). In other words, from my theoretical stance, students can never be *liberated* from oppressive or problematic games of truth, but that they can be encouraged to *resist* those games. This is not an uncommon stance, of course. Juan Guerra’s “Putting Literacy in Its Place” suggests that the idea of “acquiring” critical literacy is simplistic and inaccurate, since it retains traditional power relations (teachers possess critical literacy and give it to those who lack it, namely, students) (1647). Instead, Guerra recommends teaching resistance, essentially, as process not product: eternally unfinished, always transitory, or in his terminology, “nomadic.” Along with Guerra, I refuse to characterize my pedagogy as “liberatory,” since “liberation” denotes a one-time move from domination to freedom, and power relationships are always more complicated than that. Instead, I aim to embrace a pedagogy of resistance: always working, never finished, always struggling, never liberated. In spite of these tonal differences with Shor, my goals more-or-less align with his: we work to help students critique their social contexts and speak powerfully about their own experiences. Further, Shor’s use of defamiliarization techniques and his insistence on careful analysis and empowering writing are all extremely applicable to my work.

Shor presents another challenge to my classroom praxis. Shor blames accelerated electronic media for students’ inability to examine critically the social systems in which they are caught: “Quickly perceived and unnaturally amplified beyond human scale, these media

monopolize attention. The slower conceptual skills needed to penetrate books and analytic discussions do not develop in the crowded milieu of mass culture. Acceleration creates only surface perception in people” (64). Leaving out Shor’s misplaced appeal to nature (“unnaturally amplified,” as if books do not also “unnaturally amplif[y]” attention), the argument is problematic for a chapter, like this one, that intends to use video games in the classroom. 2015’s video games, more than any games from Shor’s time, are a perfect demonstration of acceleration and distraction. Many popular games, like the *Grand Theft Auto* and *Call of Duty* series, are fast-paced and violent, mostly starring heavily-armed white men. Even apart from those, games are just the kind of quick, flashy, “quickly perceived and unnaturally amplified” (64) attention monopolizers that Shor abhors. And yet, Shor makes a point, later in the book, of turning systemic capitalism’s own artifacts against it through a process Shor calls “conceptual exercise” (106). Shor uses such bland objects as a hamburger and a school chair to press students into analyzing “the largely invisible commodity relations which deliver a fried piece of dead beef to our palates” (106). Shore writes that “The structural perception of social life depends on the command of analytic methods. To this end, techniques for rigorous scrutiny need to be integrated into the problem-contexts posed to the class” (106-7). Using the hamburger and the chair as starting points, students analytically observe the larger social and economic systems that surround and radiate out from the objects (106).

Accelerated electronic media are devious attention economists. Games in particular are built to attract and hold attention for long periods of time, and they are very good at what they do. Just as the hamburger is an efficient result of industrial food production, games are efficient artifacts of the accelerated attention economy. And just as the hamburger can be interrogated as a part of a larger set of interlocking systems, the video game can be likewise used to examine the

rhetorical and disciplinary tactics that grip and hold players' attention. One day in Advanced Composition, the class about which this chapter is written, I was teaching *Discipline and Punish*, in particular the four traits of discipline, and as we talked, I ran a PC game on the classroom's projector. We sat in the dark, and I handed the controller around the room, allowing students to play *Spelunky*, a platformer-style game starring an Indiana Jones-inspired explorer traversing procedurally generated tombs in search of treasure and damsels in distress. As students played, I raised each of Foucault's four traits of the disciplined subject in turn, asking students how the game was guiding their sense of space, their physical actions, and their understanding of time. Students examined the game screen, but they also watched players' hands twitching across the controller. The game—while clearly entertaining the students—also functioned as a subject of critique. It was at once an enthralling challenge to watch (could the student avoid the arrow traps, boulders, and venomous snakes?) and a chance to see a game broken down into several modes of control.

Teaching social epistemic rhetoric with games is certainly a risky choice. Games—particularly video games—are a culturally loaded medium. The demographics of gaming are more equal than ever before; forty eight percent of video game players are women (ESA, “2014 Sales, Demographic, and Usage Data” 3). But games still carry with them a certain amount of stigma. The stereotype of the basement-dwelling mid-thirties video game player dogs the medium, and many outsiders see only the frequently violent, frequently sexist content of mainstream games as representative of the entire medium. Those problems, however, are themselves reasons to engage with games in the composition classroom. Games are well-known and ideologically problematic artifacts that can cast light on a variety of rhetorical issues and techniques. If the goal of social epistemic rhetoric is to make ideology the subject of classroom

analysis and writing, then focusing a composition course on a medium with such powerful disciplinary techniques and such ideologically problematic subjects is logical.

New Media and Composition Theory

Besides social epistemic rhetoric, this chapter's other primary influence is composition theory focusing on teaching and learning using new media texts. Composition theorists have been writing on the subject of new media since at least the mid-seventies. In the October 1975 issue of *CCC*, Ellen Nold encourages her fellow composition instructors to take up the computer as a powerful tool for teaching writing, giving an example of a program that, using nothing more than a text box and a set of scripted responses, guides a student through uses of metaphorical language (270). Throughout the 1980s, composition articles focused mostly on the kinds of computer programs that could aid in the teaching of writing, but none (that I have found) wrote specifically about teaching students to write for the digital medium. In 1983, Cynthia Selfe and Kathleen Kiefer published the first issue of *Computers and Composition*, and at only ten pages, it barely ranked as a newsletter. In their opening editorial, they list a number of questions of interest to them and the two hundred other enthusiasts from that year's CCCCs. Most of the questions are general, or concern programs that help teach writing, but nestled in the fourth paragraph is the question "How does using a computer change the writing process?" (1). That question would become one of the guiding questions of new media composition theory.

As computers grew more common and more accessible to non-specialists, more teachers began advocating for their incorporation into the writing classroom. In 1990, Ronald Sudol suggested to *CCC* that "we ought to take advantage of this independent access to computers by offering composition courses designed for students who do their word processing outside

university facilities” (325). This is different than the articles of the previous decade. They tended to think of computers more as devices that could help teach writing and less as devices that demanded their own forms of writing instruction. Articles from the 90s reflect the growing ubiquity of the computer. In 1991, Cynthia Selfe (ever at the forefront of published research into composition and computers) and Gail Hawisher published “The Rhetoric of Technology and the Electronic Writing Class” which cautioned teachers to consider carefully the authority structures reified by the electronic environments that their colleagues seemed to be uncritically embracing (55).

Also in 1993, Stephen Bernhardt published an early attempt at deciphering the differences between electronic and paper composition: “The Shape of Text to Come.” In the mid-90s, composition theorists were beginning to work with the computer *as a means of composition*, rather than a kind of teacher's assistant or space for conferencing. Bernhardt posits that digital texts will be “situationally embedded... interactive... modular... navigable” (151-152), among other traits. His article creates a straw man of print communication, ignoring the facts that print also “invites readers to actively engage with it,” and that readers never “passively absorb information” (152). By the end of the 1990s, computers had become firmly ensconced in Western literate culture, and scholars were beginning to consider the ways in which they presented information. In other words, the late 90s saw a shift towards digital rhetoric and the user interface.

One of the most influential articles on composition theory and the interface has been Cynthia and Richard Selfe’s “The Politics of the Interface.” According to Cynthia and Richard Selfe, “within the virtual space represented by these interfaces, and elsewhere within computer systems, the values of our culture—ideological, political, economic, educational—are mapped

both implicitly and explicitly” (485). They give the example of early Macintosh interfaces (which included icons and metaphors that persist in contemporary interfaces) structured like the desk of a white-collar worker: “The objects represented within this world are those familiar primarily to the white-collar inhabitants of that corporate culture: manila folders, files, documents, telephones, fax machines, clocks and watches, and desk calendars,” (486). The interface is not a kitchen, nor a workbench, nor a restaurant (486-87), metaphors that would resonate more strongly with other professional groups. The interface, then, is a kind of implied language to be learned and internalized, whether or not that language is familiar or fitting: a Procrustean bed of the dominant culture. An interface is an expression of power. It exerts power over information and those who use it in equal measures.

Within the past decade, composition theorists have dealt increasingly with the fact that digital interfaces are inescapable. Some, like Michelle Kendrick, have followed Cynthia and Richard Selfe in examining the power that interfaces exert on their users. Kendrick examines online interface as a site in which whiteness is assumed and users besides “the average user” are ignored. Interface, for her, is a way of teaching the privileged that they are privileged. Other scholars like Teena Carnegie, Paula Rosinski, and Megan Squire focus on the rhetorical nature of the interface. Carnegie's article “Interface as Exordium” (2009) is a general argument in favor of teaching digital interfaces in the first-year composition classroom. Condensed, Carnegie reminds us that “To see the interface, we must see how it functions rhetorically through modes of interactivity to prepare the user/audience to accept particular world views and constructions of relationships, and for this we need to reshape our notion of the exordium and add interactivity into the discourse of rhetoric” (172). The exordium, in her view, evolves from the opening of a Ciceronian rhetorical structure into a kind of interface skin stretched across the web (165). Paula

Rosinski and Megan Squire use the theory of “Human-Computer Interaction” (HCI) to connect the teaching of interface to students' audience awareness (149). They find that “it was not just the 'human' (beliefs, attitudes, values, demographics) or the 'computer' (the software or hardware or other types of mediation) that mattered but rather the 'interaction' between the two that students came to view as central when considering audience” (150).

As digital media continues to increase in ubiquity and importance (it has become almost a cliché to advise humanities scholars to learn to code), to the point that the internet is no further than many people's pockets, composition scholars have responded by writing and compiling books giving advice and encouragement for the teaching of new media composition. *Writing New Media*, a collaborative book effort by Anne Wysocki, Johndan Johnson-Eilola, Cynthia Selfe, and Geoffrey Sirc, makes specific suggestions for engaging students with new media composition techniques and concerns, even including classroom activities and projects between chapters. New media composition studies has evolved in a variety of directions, including the games-based composition education cited elsewhere in this chapter and more thoroughly in the Introduction's literature review. The choice to teach using games, however, might appear questionable at first.

Why Teach with Games?

So why teach with games at all? They are ripe for disciplinary abuse, as Chapter Two demonstrated, and precious few of them are the works of critique and resistance that Chapter Three examined. In fact, many games work hard to prevent moments of frustration or potential resistance, participating in what Berlin refers to as “Acceleration... the pace of everyday experience—the sensory bombardment of urban life and popular forms of entertainment—which

prevents critical reflection” (680). The list of mainstream video games that fit Berlin’s criteria would be long. In an industry so infatuated with immersion, moments of critical provocation are cut to as close to zero as possible.⁵⁵ Series like *Grand Theft Auto* and the *Call of Duty* are fortresses of distraction and cultural reinforcement, and the widespread assumption that games are not smart enough to be subjected to cultural critique further discourages study. If a teacher could successfully convince students that games are actually fiendishly clever teachers, however, students might realize independently that *everything* can be critiqued. Beyond the critique of existing texts, however, games should still have an important place in the classroom.

I opened Advanced Composition with a game. On the board, I wrote three possible genres: horror, science fiction, and fantasy. “You have one minute to brainstorm and five minutes to write the first paragraph of a story. Your story must be in one of those genres.” They looked a little concerned but wrote diligently. “Now pass your paper to your neighbor. Read what you’ve been passed, then continue the story for another five minutes.” After playing the game, I asked my students to list as many of the rules constraining their writing as they could. The list was extensive. Their writing had been constrained by genre, time, their physical limitations, the stories and characters preceding players had established, prose style, and even my instructional authority. I gestured to the board and asked them to think of the whiteboard as a representation of all possible language: everything that could possibly be said. I then subdivided the board into increasingly small sections, each section representing another realm of discourse that our game forbid. Finally, I had sliced the board into a sliver, within which I drew a circle to

⁵⁵ As always, counterexamples exist, even in the “mainstream” games category. *Spec Ops: The Line* received critical praise for discomfiting and even disturbing players with its depictions of war crimes. One could also argue that critical reflection—moments in which immersion breaks into player reflection—exists even in “mindless” games like the oft-maligned *Call of Duty* series of militaristic first-person shooters. These moments, however, are often dependent on individual player reaction and are rarely used to truly sabotage the game’s core immersive experience.

represent their chosen genre. I filled in the circle with abstract shapes to represent the successive rounds of the game (the narrative and character developments, the time constraints, etc.), and finally I pointed to the maze-like empty space within all the excised sections of the board. This, I suggested, was the play area for their writing. They were all subconsciously aware of the limits of their play area, but within it, they were free to explore and try new things. Within that open space, characters could do new things, they could describe whatever they pleased, and they could advance the plot however they saw fit. Writing is playing, and discourse is a game that simultaneously restricts and propels the play of writing. Later, in office hours, one of my students used my “bounded play” explanation to talk about a personal statement she was writing, so the comparison was useful for at least one student.

Throughout the semester, we used rules and play as metaphors for the writing process, and these provided a coherent set of vocabulary for talking about what was happening in their thinking, writing, and revision processes. Throughout the course, I balanced critique (both of actual games and of cultural ideas and texts) with interruption, creation with consumption. My third and fourth projects are intended to balance these halves.

The Setup

My purpose in these two projects is to approach power from two balanced directions: speaking and listening. Inspired by Frances Bartkowski’s critique that Foucault privileged the ear over the mouth (45), I assembled a pair of prompts that would allow students to practice speaking and listening actively with and without power. Recall the matrix with which I opened the dissertation:

Table 3: Terms for empowered and un-empowered consumption and creation.

	Consuming	Creating
Un-empowered	Receiving	Performing
Empowered	Evaluating	Coding

The standard depiction of the therapist's office has the doctor evaluating (that is, listening with power) to the patient's performance (that is, speaking without power). But because power relations are always a microphysics involving constant power meeting constant resistance, these actions of power and resistance can shift from moment to moment. It is important, then, to teach students to recognize the flows of power between speaking and listening. This kind of pedagogy, while reliant on a postmodern set of assumptions (what Teresa Elbert might call "ludic"), would work toward the materialist aim of cultural critique.

Nedra Reynolds' article "Interrupting Our Way to Agency" advocates for "interruption" as an empowering speech act, one that acknowledges the powerful, patriarchal discourses and the social constructedness of speakers and writers but that also allows "women rhetors [to] draw attention to their identities as marginalized speakers and writers as they also force more attention to the ideological workings of discursive exclusion" (898). Reynolds' theory blends social epistemic rhetoric with resistance pedagogy. She acknowledges that "The definition of agency that I am working with here includes the post-structuralist concept of multiple and competing subjectivities while also allowing for the possibility of 'resistance to ideological pressure' (P. Smith xxxv)" (897). Reynolds' understanding of agency, and her means of promoting it, have

factored heavily into my design of this chapter's central projects. To interrupt is to resist within a consciously-acknowledged context. Interruption requires critical listening to the discourse at hand and a surprising or critical reapplication of those same discursive rules. Reynolds concludes her article with the suggestion that "Feminists in composition studies might want to investigate the kinds of interruption possible in written texts and the reader-writer relationship" (907). In designing the semester's culminating projects, I created a prolonged, interruptive experience that would balance eavesdropping and speaking as acts of power. Finally, I took to heart Reynolds' addendum that "Such investigation might lead to a cultivation of postmodernism-inspired discourses that offer other forms of participating in intellectual and political discussions besides the formal essay or written Standard English" (907). Neither the concept board nor the final game project were traditional essays (though both did require substantial reflective writing).

Writing seven years after Reynolds published "Interrupting Our Way to Agency," Jacqueline Rhodes' "Radical Feminism, Writing, and Critical Agency" works from a Foucauldian perspective "to identify, historicize, and articulate the intentionally resistant discourses of radical feminism" (1225). In the process of working with radical feminism (built on the same kinds of ephemeral texts that Anthropy praises in *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters*: manifestos, guides, and zines), Rhodes lays out a feminist application of Foucault similar to those espoused in *Feminist Interpretations of Foucault* and *Feminism & Foucault: Reflections on Resistance*. Foucault is insufficient, to Rhodes, because although his conception of power as diffuse and generative works, the assumption that resistance and agency are all but impossible does not (1226-27). Rhodes applies Foucauldian techniques to her project of making a genealogy of radical feminism, but I would draw attention to another of her projects. She wants to "retheorize student writers as active producers of the strategic discourses of resistance," and this

requires “an articulation of transgressive discourses [that] positions the writer-agent as neither a univocal ‘author’ nor a passive intersection of the discourses of power” (1225). In other words, students should come to understand themselves as both listeners and speakers, agents of power, agents of resistance, subjects of power, and subjects of resistance.

In their aptly-titled trilogy “Toward an Ethics of Listening,” Michelle Ballif, Diane Davis, and Roxanne Mountford approach listening as an ethical imperative. The trilogy opens with Ballif and Davis appreciating Krista Ratcliffe and Eileen Schell’s listening. Ballif writes that “they attempted to *listen* to us—on *our* terms, the terms of *our* conversation,” and Davis responds that “They listened, they negotiated, and they looked for ways to keep the conversation going” (931, emphasis preserved). Ratcliffe and Schell did not merely listen; they *interrupted*, and these interruptions were welcomed by the speaking subjects of Ratcliffe and Schell’s listening. Interruptions, far from being a negative disruption (as Mountford initially suggests), are “welcome additions to our conversation. They are interruptions insofar as they have broken the continuity of *our* ‘negotiation,’ inserting themselves into the parlor” (931, emphasis preserved). The interruption, in the case of the trilogy, actually invites response instead of curtailing it. The discussion demonstrates an ethic of listening using its dialogic format. The ability to read in distinct “voices” and observe as the writers address and invoke one another allows the reader to practice ethical listening. By inviting the reader to eavesdrop on their conversation, Ballif, Davis, and Mountford encourage rhetorical listening: the reader first receives their discourse, then evaluates and interrupts it. Toward the end of the piece, Davis reminds readers of the importance of their subject: “Listening is necessary only because there is an originary and uncloseable distance between the ‘I’ and the Other. And listening itself does not and cannot close this distance; it can only attend to it—but this is a lot; this is enormous” (937).

Pedagogical projects that address this “originary and unclosable distance,” then, are participating in a critical ethical project. By giving students a chance to practice receiving and evaluating, coding and performing discourse, the projects outlined here try to replicate the experience of reading a trilogy. They make the participant a recipient and a performer, a coder and an evaluator.

I designed the two projects at the center of this chapter to cycle students between empowered and un-empowered listening and speaking. The concept board required students to locate themselves as active listeners in cultural conversations they found problematic, and the game design project gave students the chance to interrupt that cultural conversation with a playable game. In the following section, I will summarize the course leading up to these two final projects, then discuss the rationale behind the overall projects, their draft structures, and my assessment techniques.

Pedagogical Background

These two prompts were created after months of reading, research, and planning. I taught these projects in the fall of 2014 in my section of English 3600W: Advanced Composition. The course began as a loose reflection of my dissertation, since I needed a way to test the applicability of my theories to the writing classroom. The course was themed around games and play as metaphors for the writing process, and I broke the course into four segments that more-or-less corresponded to the four chapters of this dissertation.

The first unit introduced students to contemporary rhetorical power through the lens of Richard Lanham’s *The Economics of Attention*. Lessons focused on studying at/through oscillations in games and other media, observing attention structures at work, and learning some

of the rules of classical rhetoric. The first unit culminated with a fairly open topic: students wrote think-pieces about some aspect of games or play. I encouraged them to use images and distinct formatting to economize their readers' attention, and although they were surprised by the idea of using images in an assignment for class, they quickly adapted to the new possibilities. Students used images as both decoration and evidence of their claims. Some students added backgrounds, found new typefaces, and even modified in-game images to introduce their writing.

The second unit shifted focus from Lanham and attention economics to Michel Foucault and discipline. Students read three chapters from *Discipline and Punish* ("Docile bodies," "The means of correct training," and "Panopticism") and considered the impact of disciplinary techniques in both games and the classroom. At the end of the unit, we read "The Ethic of Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom" as a kind of farewell to Foucault. During the unit, we discussed academic writing as a particularly disciplinary discourse, analyzing accepted academic styles, expectations, and processes (including the academic publication process which students quickly recognized as a surveillance apparatus). The writing project accompanying this unit was a rigidly defined academic article, longer than the think-piece and more restrictive in its requirements (seven to ten pages versus the 1,000-2,000 word think-piece). I required students to situate their articles within existing disciplines and academic conversations. Draft assignments like an annotated bibliography and "source hoard" (in which students simply listed as many potentially relevant article and book titles as they could find) located students' writing and thinking within existing academic discourses. Although they found the project difficult and much less fun than the first assignment, their literature reviews and narrowed topics demonstrated that they had successfully immersed themselves in existing discourses.

When assessing the second project, I wrote my comments in the form of page-long reader reports, modeled roughly on a set of reader reports I had received from *The Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* earlier in the semester. At the end of each reader report, I offered students the chance to revise and resubmit their papers for bonus points. Offering students the chance to revise and resubmit their papers immersed them more fully in the practice and discourse of the academic game of truth. The second project had one other aspect, however: a meta-project.

The meta-project, which we discussed throughout the unit, was for them to pay attention to how my requirements and the expectations of academic writing generally exerted power over their writing and thinking. At the end of the academic article's prompt, I included "A Note on the Meta-Discourse" which read:

Of course, not all of you will have to write researched academic articles in the future, and you might be wondering about this project's personal utility. As with most everything in this course, this project is meant to be looked *at* as well as *through*. The *through* project is fairly obvious: learn to write polished, well-researched academic papers by doing it. The *at* project is less obvious. In our discussion, and hopefully in your private reflection, you should consider the particular ways in which this project (and academic writing in general) forces you to research, write, and think. This project (and academic writing in general, again) enforces a particular kind of discipline. What is it? How is it being enforced? And most importantly, what other kinds of discursive discipline surrounds you?

This note was originally motivated by my recognition that several students in the class were seniors and thus unlikely to write full academic articles in the future, but it also helped to guide

our readings of Foucault and connect his theories to Lanham's. Although I did not require a written consideration of the meta-project, we frequently returned to the idea in classroom discussions.

The day after students turned in their second projects, we read a document I had written to introduce the second half of the course ("Introduction to the Second Half," found on page 333). I wanted students to see the final two assignments as a linked pair, two halves of a single overarching project. On a theoretical level, I wanted them to experience the balance of speaking and listening, but from a practical perspective, I knew that a single month wasn't enough to conceptualize, plan, and write a game from scratch. I hoped that the introductory document would help students understand the concept board assignment as, essentially, a draft of the final game project. The "Introduction to the Second Half" opened with four "Big Ideas":

1. From Lanham, we've learned that we're living in an attention economy and that rhetoric has become more important than ever.
2. Lanham also taught us that attention structures control how we interpret pretty much everything, from *World of Warcraft* to the printed book.
3. From Foucault, we've learned that discipline and power relationships are omnipresent.
4. But we've also learned that resistance to unethical games of truth is both possible and necessary.

I tried to summarize the major themes from the past two units in terms of power and attention, suggesting that rhetoric and power are more closely connected than our readings might have indicated. I also sought to address Rhodes' and Hartsock's critique (Rhodes 1226-27, Hartsock 43) that Foucault leaves little room for resistance or change in his "political anatomy of detail" (*DP* 139) by emphasizing Foucault's "Ethics of Care for the Self" with its focus on the freedom

and agency of the subject.⁵⁶ Going into the second half of the course, I wanted students to see and accept their own rhetorical power and agency. This introductory document was a sort of theoretical key to the writing and assemblage that the class would be doing for the next two months. The most important section of the document, however, is worth quoting at length. I spent many hours trying to condense my reasons for teaching game design in a writing class and came up with the following paragraph:

Game design is important; it makes explicit the issues of power and performance that are implicit in all writing. When you're writing an essay or article, it can be easy to ignore the fact that you're creating an experience for your reader using rules to encourage creative and interpretive play. But when you're making a game, creating rules and scripting interactions, you have no choice but to critically examine the power your game has over your player. So not only are you creating a fun and interesting text, one that's capable of communicating in a very different way than any other kind of writing, you're also experimenting with power and learning to write in a new way.

Looking back, this document was probably more intended for me than for them. Their focus was, naturally, on completing their strange new assignments. But condensing my rationale into a paragraph was a useful exercise for me and helped focus the way I taught both units. I referred back to it many times.

The final two projects attempted to mirror the balance discussed earlier in this chapter between listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The third project tasked students with locating themselves in a problematic game of truth and listening to the social conversation happening

⁵⁶ A period-long discussion of that interview served as the conclusion to our unit on Foucault and discipline. Students expressed surprise at Foucault's idealism and general positivity, which I appreciated.

around that subject. Following from the eavesdropping, analysis, and remixing in the third project, the fourth project moved students to the role of creators, requiring them to make text-based games around the subjects they chose for their third project. Within each of these projects, students shifted between listening and speaking several times. The third project resembles a chiasmic oscillation: students spoke, listened, listened in a different way, and then spoke again. The fourth project moved students even faster between listening and speaking by incorporating playtests (peer reviews of in-progress games) in which students responded to other students' games, and in turn, listened to others' feedback on their work.

Project Three: The Concept Board

To prepare students to make their games, I began by assigning a combination of concept art and bricolage. It was meant to immerse students in issues of their choice and make them familiar with new and significant discourses. Before settling on a bricolage project, I knew that I wanted the third project to be part proposal, part rhetorical imitation, part eavesdropping, but I wasn't sure what form the project would take. I was also wary of imitation. Something about driving students to parody and imitate existing cultural discourses felt uncomfortable, but it wasn't until later that I isolated the reason for that discomfort. After re-reading Geoffrey Sirc's "Box Logic," Kathleen Blake Yancey's "Composition in a New Key," and Rebecca Moore Howard's "Sexuality, Textuality," I had a late-night flash of inspiration. Students could practice listening, assembling, and arranging existing discourses by creating their own visual representations of an issue. They could become bricoleurs. I grabbed my phone from the bedside table and tapped out a note: "It's *social epistemic* in the best possible way. Real engagement with real discourses and social communities outside the writer's own." I jotted down four preliminary

draft titles: “Draft one: Consider and Conceptualize. Draft two: Explore and Eavesdrop. Draft three: Imitate and Accumulate. Draft four: Compose and Arrange (actually making the board/box/zine/whatever.)” These drafts changed slightly before the final implementation, but the skeleton remained the same. The full project prompt can be found on page 336.

Throughout the third unit, we worked through *Style: An Anti-Textbook* a few chapters per week. Lanham helped cultivate a sense of stylistic awareness, and every day, we consumed and critiqued different texts. Through Lanham’s insistence on having a good “ear” (Lanham uses the pejorative “tin ear” multiple times throughout *Style*), we “listened” to a wide variety of genres. In one memorable case, I shared an interview with a North Carolinian pastor, and we discussed his extremely distinctive speaking style: “it’s not about the food,” he said, speaking about his experience eating nothing but Olive Garden meals for six weeks, “It’s about the value. I wanted to get to 100 meals and it’s funny you called today; I reached 100 meals today. I made it to a hundred meals today” (Rothkopf). His repetition is characteristic of a pastor giving a sermon; he habitually repeated a core phrase several times with slight variations. As a class, we read sections of the interview aloud (one student’s animated performance was recorded and posted on our class website) to more fully understand the sound of his style.⁵⁷

Another exercise interrogated the use of style to create characters. In one of our class sessions held in *World of Warcraft*, I assigned students to visit the homelands of several playable species and report back to the group with dialogue samples from each species. We characterized the written style associated with each species and made lists of how the game’s designers intended us to view each species based solely on their written styles. Night Elves, we found, spoke in distant and mysterious language intended to create an aura of dignity and age. The

⁵⁷ We also found a news segment featuring the same pastor. Unfortunately, he only spoke a few times in the segment, but the few clips we heard sounded similar to his interview in Salon.

Draenei (a species my students nicknamed “Space Elves”) spoke in a similar way, but with intensified, often ridiculous, diction. The Pandaren sounded like badly parodied kung-fu masters, a trait with which many of us were uncomfortable. The next day, we created our own imaginary *World of Warcraft* species and made a style sheet for it. I regret that the *World of Warcraft* will never hear the Drogünei, a race of post-apocalyptic dragon Vikings, speak their clipped, angry syntax with its reliance on dark concrete verbs, nor meet their leader, Lord Gnarlbones the Elf-Chomper. In the first segment, students would consume and critique a style, then in the second, students would reproduce, parody, or interrupt the style. I used this two-part structure several times throughout the unit.

In a lesson plan paired with Lanham’s chapter “The Delights of Jargon,” we studied Walmart’s “2014 Annual Report.” As a class, we looked for jargon and characterized the report’s overall style. We were surprised to find that the first dozen or so pages were easily understood and (comparatively) free of business-speak and bureaucrat-ese. Closer to a magazine puff-piece than a business document, the report features colorful pictures, creatively formatted letters and viewer-friendly infographics. Once the reader passes page fifteen, however, the report shifts its tone completely. Gone are the friendly images, large, colorful fonts and out-of-context statistics. The typeface is tiny and hard to read: a minuscule blue sans-serif against a white background. It was here that we discovered the deluge of jargon: “Our gross profit rate decreased 3 basis points for fiscal 2014, when compared to the previous fiscal year, primarily due to our ongoing investment in price, as well as merchandise mix” (24). After we discussed the uses of jargon, I gave the class a brief primer on using Twine, the game design software used in the final project, divided them into groups, and gave them a single objective: make a game that plays with the jargon in the report. One group played on the obfuscating nature of the prose and forced the

reader to navigate a labyrinth of existing jargon to get to the point: that profits were down.

Another group decided to play with the pointlessness of jargon by making words connect to other passages containing those words, leading the player around in frustrating circles.

Although the third unit was focused primarily on listening as an act of power, in-class projects like the ones outlined above constantly reminded students that power goes both ways. Listening and writing are both acts of power, especially given the authority of an academic critique. Examining the Walmart “2014 Annual Report” in the context of stylistic critique gave students power: they were not merely *receiving* the information, they *evaluated* it. And when they made jargon games, they did not *perform* the text (that is, create without institutional authority) as they might have had I assigned them to make their own annual reports, they *coded* it (both literally and figuratively, since using Twine requires elementary coding skills). Of course, students were still performing, since their creation was cued by my institutional authority. Students constantly operate within several power relationships at once, in this case, taking power over a corporate text even as an instructor holds power over their actions.

The third unit’s culminating project was intended to immerse students in these power relationships by having them oscillate between the roles of speaker and listener. In the first draft, students wrote short pieces considering “games of truth” that they found problematic and worth resisting. In the second and third drafts, students immersed themselves in existing discourse communities. In the final draft, students spoke using the language of others. Following are descriptions of the theory driving each draft. The project prompt, given at the beginning of the month-long unit, gave descriptions and deadlines for each draft. Drafts were due each week on Sunday before midnight (this pace is normal for my writing classes: keeping drafts due every

week, at the same time, allows students to build whatever writing rituals and routines work for them).

Draft One: Consider

“Consider something from your personal experience that you think ought to be resisted. This could be pretty much anything, as long as it’s a problem that has some urgency and relevance to your experience. Your problem worth resisting could be as broad as unrealistic images of women in advertising or as specific as the expectation that all students complete unpaid internships to be competitive on the job market.

“Spend at least 750 words reflecting on one or a series of possible problems. Use the writing process to reflect on your life and the games of truth you play. Which ones are unethical? Which should be resisted? You should have at least a preliminary answer by the end of the draft. Choose carefully—you’ll be working intensely with this topic for almost two months.”

My primary objective in the first draft was to get students thinking about things to resist. In order for students to listen and speak with power, they would need an ideological subject. Based on the social epistemic understanding that all writing takes place in real social and ideological contexts, and the feminist and Foucauldian understanding that overbearing power demands resistance, I first required students to find something about which they could speak powerfully. It needed to be something relevant to their life experiences, since I wanted them to bring their personal passion and, more importantly, their own personal voices to their projects.

The Concept Board is, by design, a process of immersing oneself in a discourse. It requires a prolonged, dedicated act of listening to other voices, and before throwing students into whatever discursive seas they chose, I wanted to ensure that they would not lose track of their

own subject positions. Although social epistemic rhetoric's emphasis on external ideologies and discursive power structures is necessary, it should not overshadow the importance of the writer's own subject position. After all, as each chapter has discussed, rhetorical play—the actual moment-by-moment discourse—is located between the subject and the outside world. Speech and writing always happen within a larger social reality (a repertoire, to use Iser's term, that restricts and provokes the communicative act), but one must remember that half of the oscillation pattern is the *subject*, the self. “Draft One: Consider” is a moment of personal reflection, a brief inventory of one's own subject position, before the leap into the sea of existing discourse.

To use Jacqueline Jones Royster's phrase from “When the First Voice You Hear Is Not Your Own,” the “Consider” draft is meant—very broadly—to work with students' “subject position[s] as a terministic screen” (1117). I was hyper-aware, in the planning stages of the project, that without direction, students might gravitate to the traditional stable of “controversial” topics: abortion, marijuana legalization, drinking age, gun control, immigration, etc.. While the discourse around such subjects is extensive and stylistically animated, I suspected that students' investments in those topics would be more cultural than personal. In order to balance powerful speaking with powerful listening (coding with evaluation), students needed to find issues with some measure of personal investment, something in which their subject positions had a high stake. Royster writes that

In our nation, we have little idea of the potential that a variety of subjectivities—operating with honor, respect, and reasonable codes of conduct—can bring to critical inquiry or critical problems. What might happen if we treated differences in subject position as critical pieces of the whole, vital to thorough understanding,

and central to both problem-finding and problem-solving? This society has not, as yet, really allowed that privilege in a substantial way. (1121)

“Consider,” then, opens the project by claiming a specific subject position and, through that subject position, a broader problematic cultural discourse. “Consider” establishes the inherent worth of students’ understandings of the world, and in the following draft, those understandings find context and external expression.

Draft Two: Eavesdrop

“Now that you have an idea of what you want to resist, it’s time to listen in on what people are saying about it. Go to wherever people are talking (digitally—don’t literally eavesdrop on people; that’s creepy) about your topic and read around. Compile a few pages of representative quotes from all sides of the issue and arrange them on a small board (whether digital or physical) into whatever kind of pattern makes sense to you. Use images if you like, or if they’re relevant (perhaps political cartoons, diagrams, or just representative pictures).

“Write at least five hundred words characterizing the conversation around your issue—what are the major themes? What are the factions? How do people talk about the issue? What styles do they use? Where does the conversation happen?”

I first considered eavesdropping as an instructional technique during Timothy Oleksiak’s presentation “‘This Text is not for You’: Rhetorical Eavesdropping and Multimodal Composition” at the 2013 Conference on College Composition and Communication. Oleksiak proposed respectful listening as a way of participating in Anne Wysocki’s exhortation to “read generously” (1). In my notes on the session, I wrote “Generosity of this kind is basically returning to Shaughnessy as a kind of ethical approach. Why don’t we see more of this?”

Oleksiak, in his presentation, advocated teaching students a kind of “‘listening agency’ [that] requires us to seek communities of which we are not a part and to ‘eavesdrop’ on the way they communicate with each other” (1). There are two competing drives in Oleksiak’s theory, one ethical, the other based in power. On the one hand, his rhetorical eavesdropping (inspired significantly by Krista Ratcliffe’s theory of rhetorical listening) involves listening to communities outside our own (2). This conception participates in Jacqueline Jones Royster’s cross-boundary discursive engagement (though Oleksiak does not mention Royster specifically); rhetorical eavesdropping essentially creates new contact zones for the listener, and by using the digital platforms Oleksiak mentions, contact zones are only a click away (2-4). Rhetorical eavesdropping, from this perspective, is “generous” in that it allows those existing discourse communities to continue speaking unmolested (3).

The concept on which Oleksiak draws, Ratcliffe’s practice of rhetorical listening, was also conceived as a method of dealing with cross-boundary differences. In the article, Ratcliffe writes that she “want[s] to suggest that rhetorical listening may be imagined, specifically, as what Jacqueline Jones Royster has called a ‘code of cross-cultural conduct’” (196). Ratcliffe wants a better way to listen to individuals across gender and racial boundaries, so her theory of rhetorical listening is an attempt to create an ethical approach to the other via a metaphor of listening. My model of eavesdropping and interruption is similar to hers: she writes that “rhetorical listening turns hearing (a reception process) into invention (a production process), thus complicating the reception/production opposition and inviting rhetorical listening into the time-honored tradition of rhetorical invention” (220). Just so, the listening done in this draft will become invention by the end of the project.

Eavesdropping, ostensibly, seeks to understand the community under surveillance. But eavesdropping is also, obviously, a form of surveillance. Recalling Bartkowski's discovery, that listening to a subjected population places the listener in a privileged position of evaluator (45), rhetorical eavesdropping could still potentially be understood as a privileged action. Oleksiak is careful to distance himself from this exertion of power: "I don't consider myself a part of this community, but they exist and can be made intelligible *to* me, not, I insist, *for* me" (3). What is the prepositional difference between being made intelligible *to* and being made intelligible *for*? The latter implies an explanation tailored by a member of the community for the outside listener. To make a community intelligible *to* the listener, perhaps suggests a passivity and a lack of responsibility. The eavesdropper merely listens, rather than attempting to consume or comprehend. The intent is a noble one but still extremely difficult. The temptation to understand and make familiar could easily overpower an inattentive eavesdropper, and when one assumes familiarity with another community to which one does not belong, one remakes that community in one's own image. All of this is to say that eavesdropping on other communities—especially when those communities hold less privilege than the eavesdropper—is an inherently problematic activity. It still holds much potential, when paired with a sustained emphasis on generosity (itself a potentially problematic concept that puts the institutionally-empowered teacher or student in the place of gracious giver of generosity and understanding), but I opted to simplify my project by keeping the eavesdropping within the students' own identified causes and communities.

The kind of eavesdropping advocated by "Draft Two: Eavesdrop" does not necessarily create new cross-cultural contact zones. The discourses around students' causes are likely to be more grounded in students' personal experiences than what Oleksiak envisions. The draft's prompt lets some of the tension I feel about the ethics of eavesdropping leak around the edges. I

acknowledge that an inherent *creepiness* exists in eavesdropping when I differentiate between digital and in-person eavesdropping, but I also encourage students to turn existing discourse communities into shapes of their own design. So on the one hand, I let slip that I am not one hundred percent comfortable with the eavesdropping process while, on the other, I order students to remake the conversation however they see fit (which is what the Concept Board, at its core, is about). Again, a powerful tension exists between listening and speaking. Power rests uneasily on both acts.

Ethics aside, the purpose of the draft was to throw students into real discourse communities and see what the rest of the world had to say. Knowing that the causes they chose in Draft One would likely be personal and that their subject positions would guarantee some level of inherent (and not unwelcome) bias, I used Draft Two to counterbalance their speech with listening. But to prevent students from merely *receiving* the existing discourse, I had them remake the discourse in a shape of their choosing, turning them from receivers into evaluators. I have no illusions about the neutrality of this project. Listening to the existing discourse does not mean becoming “objective.” Objectivity has no place in these projects. To acknowledge the importance of the “subject position as terministic screen” (Royster 1117) means accepting the function of the “screen” metaphor in the first place: it filters, it separates, and it chooses its own social reality. Social epistemic rhetoric always tempers its focus on the real and pressing social/ideological reality with the acceptance of the reading/writing subject as inescapably part of that social/ideological reality.

Draft Three: Accumulate

“This is where you become a collector. Remembering the example of Joseph Cornell, who Geoffrey Sirc called ‘the ultimate collector’ (116), compile a mass of digital and/or physical objects that somehow speak to your experience of your issue. These can be images, quotes, words, videos, even objects or sounds. Collect anything and everything that even slightly resonates with your understanding of your issue; quantity is job number one here. Your eavesdropping quotes from the previous draft can be the start of your collection. Feel free to use Google image search, but expand beyond that. Search archive.org, Wikimedia Commons, Instagram, Tumblr, or physical places like second-hand stores, bookstores, grocery stores, etc. You’re looking not just for relevant pieces but interesting ones—the more interesting the better.

“Write at least five hundred words describing your collection. You might consider questions like the following: What did you find? What were your selection criteria? What images, stories, or aesthetics might your collection suggest? If your collection were the prop-house for a movie, what would the movie be like? Finally, how does your collection relate to the conversations you heard in Draft Two?”

“Accumulate” was the only draft prompt that changed significantly from its original conception. Before finalizing and assigning it, my plan was for Project Three to involve a significant amount of imitation. Based on Lanham’s *Style: An Anti-Textbook*, I originally planned for students to eavesdrop then parody the styles and subjects they found in whatever discourse communities they observed. But something about students writing parodies of real-world discourse communities made me uncomfortable.

I included rhetorical imitation in early drafts of the prompt for theoretically sound reasons. *Imitatio* has been a part of rhetorical training for centuries. *Imitatio* was used as early as

classical Greek pedagogy, in which students began by copying “the purity of speech of a given author” and worked up to rhetorical analysis, quoting, and imitation (*Silva Rhetoricae*). We had used imitation productively in the classroom earlier in the semester. Students had “translated” the academic content of Linda Brodkey’s “On the Subjects of Class and Gender in ‘The Literacy Letters’” into the succinct, demonstrative prose of Apple ad copy. Students imitated the short, concrete sentences of the ad to convey the complex meanings of one of Brodkey’s sentences, then we discussed the stylistic hallmarks of Apple’s copy. When students imitate existing prose styles, they become immersed in another way of speaking and are forced to experiment with different ways of assembling language.

Further, imitation-as-parody is one of the foundational resistance techniques that Judith Butler advocates in *Gender Trouble*. Parodying the written style of problematic discourses *should* operate as a kind of rhetorical drag, a way of donning the trappings of culture, identity, or discourse in order to gesture to the inconsistencies in the world that discourse imagines. After all, satirical publications like *The Onion* thrive by parodying the rhetorical style of newspapers, editorials, advertisements, and the like. Additionally, Butler holds up the parody as a form of play, a way of expanding the rules of an existing power structure from within by experimenting and pressing at the boundaries (29). Imitation seemed perfect for the project: it was playful, an accepted technique of exploration and resistance, and it would teach students something about written style to boot. By imitating the rhetorical style of their chosen discourse communities, students *should* have been killing two birds with one stone: simultaneously resisting problematic power structures while also practicing stylistic imitation and parody. It was a good idea.

And yet, something about it bothered me. Something felt *off*. I spent an hour walking through my neighborhood, brows furrowed, thinking about why the idea of my students playfully

parodying the existing conversations around their causes felt so unethical. The prospect that most troubled me was the realization that my students could become oppressors in their own rites, attacking (via parody) the voices of others speaking within their communities. Whereas eavesdropping observes from afar, imitation speaks in the voice of another. Imitation does not merely listen with power, or speak to be heard, it speaks *over* its subject. In some cases, the targets of such overwriting are powerful institutions unlikely to be damaged or even troubled by parody: a student objecting to unethical labor practices at a store like Walmart might productively imitate the company's annual report. Walmart would be unlikely to care. But because I had set no limits on the kinds of causes students could adopt, I faced the possibility of students shouting down individuals speaking from their own subjective positions. Imitation and parody make a claim to a voice one doesn't own; they extend beyond the subject position's terministic screen and imitate the subject position of another. This is not to categorically condemn imitation or parody as techniques of resistance, but within the context of my project, and given the freedom I wanted to allow students, I decided to make the more obviously ethical choice and embrace *interruption* instead of *imitation*. Instead of speaking in another's voice and risking turning them into a ventriloquist's dummy, I used Anna Anthropy and Porpentine as examples. Both game designers create powerful rhetorical and ludic experiences by speaking their own experiences in their own voices. Interruption claims one's own rhetorical power and asserts the authority and inherent worth of one's experience. Interruption would occur primarily in the final game design project. In the third draft of the third project, then, I decided to focus the students on an act of creative listening.

"Eavesdrop" tasked students with listening in on the conversation around their chosen cause, but "Draft Three: Accumulate" pressed them to listen *everywhere*. The collection and

bricolage aspects of the concept board were inspired partially by Geoffrey Sirc's article "Box-Logic." Sirc employs the metaphor of the box as an easy entrance into the world of new media composition, and in a way, Sirc's article can be read as one teacher's answer to Kathleen Blake Yancey's question about how to teach new media composition. Sirc suggests the artist's box as a model for student composition, specifically the box-art of Marcel Duchamp and Joseph Cornell (110, 114). Sirc wants to approach composition as poetry, a pedagogy that chooses the side of life in Elbow's dilemma "life is long, college short; do we teach to life or college?" (113). As such, "Box-Logic" tries to capture some of the poetic, bricolage-based spirit of Duchamp and Cornell. Sirc's project, like mine, involves the intertwined processes of consumption and creation. First the student collects objects, then arranges them within set parameters (130). Given my own dissertation's fascination with play within established discursive boundaries, "Box-Logic" was a natural inspiration.

"Accumulate" borrows much from Sirc's article. While the "Eavesdrop" draft required students to observe and gather text from specific sources, "Accumulate" encouraged them to range far and wide gathering things that they found *interesting*. Sirc uses Joseph Cornell, "the ultimate curator, the ultimate collector" (116), as the model for students' collecting: "Cornell loved his objects, 'happy to possess [them], but careful not to [...] destroy [their] enigma' (O'Doherty 258). *The materially interesting, then, is what should guide acquisition.*" (116, emphasis preserved). I wanted students to approach "Accumulate" differently than "Eavesdrop." I hoped that they would transition from reporters to curators. The prompt tries to underscore the differences between the two types of consumption, and in class, I urged students to begin their collections early.

At first glance, “Accumulate” looks almost redundant with “Eavesdrop.” In both cases, students go out into the world (whether digital or physical) and gather bits of discourse relating to the causes they’ve chosen. “Eavesdrop,” however, involves a certain level of fidelity to the cultural conversation, whereas “Accumulate” has loyalty to nothing but the student’s own artistic vision. As expected, some students gathered more artistically than others. Some stayed more-or-less within their overheard conversations, while others found initially-unrelated pieces and pressed them into conversation. While the latter approach is certainly more in keeping with my intentions for the project, the more limited former approach did not necessarily detract from students’ concept boards.

Final Draft: Arrange

“Now you become an artist, a bricoleur. Again, thinking of Joseph Cornell, arrange whichever items you like from your collection into a concept board, box, wall, whatever. Your objects’ arrangement should be intentional—you’re making an art-piece after all—but you’re free to compose your board however feels best to you. There are no limitations on the size or number of objects, the arrangement, or the medium.

“Write at least 750 words explaining your choices. Why did you use that arrangement? How does your board reflect your issue, your experience, or the game you plan to create? What’s the emotional or aesthetic tone of your concept board?

“Finally, compile all of your written reflections into a single document (you are, of course, welcome to revise these as you see fit). If you’d like to arrange that reflection in a way besides a linear prose document, you’re more than welcome to. You can make a second

reflection board, or add your written reflections to your concept board, or simply keep your written reflections in a separate plain document. It's up to you."

In each draft, students become different people. They stretch into new identities and creative roles. Here, in "Final Draft: Arrange," students return to the role of creator after two drafts spent as listeners and consumers. Rather than speaking into the void, however, students are working within realized discourses and with a (hopefully robust) collection of consumed artifacts. This draft is intended to transition students from the action of power-listening to interruption. Most of the concept board project focused on listening, and the entirety of the game design project revolves around speaking with power, so "Arrange" (which comprises the entirety of the third project's submitted product) serves as a logical fulcrum between listening and speaking. Geoffrey Sirc writes in "Box-Logic" that

That was Cornell's way: always starting with the box as frame, then "drift[ing] into his procedure of association, putting in and taking out, much as a poet invests his poems with words that later may be changed or eliminated" (Ashton 58). *I want students—designers, now, not essayists—free for such associational drifts; entering things naively, without countless rehearsals; trying to capture a mood or vision.* (121, emphasis preserved)

I took a significant risk when I made the concept board's draft structure something non-iterative. Students were forced to create an entire project in, essentially, one week, with the previous three weeks acting as research and preparation rather than active drafting time. Part of my motivation was the desire for them to dedicate their full attention to each of the processes outlined above without having to constantly return to the "real" project (which would have been some iteration of the finished concept board), but part of my motivation was based on Sirc's quote above. I

wanted students to “enter[...] things naively, without countless rehearsals” (121). Because these projects were predicated on a resistance to problematic games of truth, I wanted students to be daring in their arrangements, to make unusual associations (which I tried to prompt in the description of “Accumulate”), and to press at the boundaries of the assignment. By making “Arrange” its own draft, rather than a constant project running in the background of the other drafts, I hoped to stimulate a creative response to the discourses they had found.

My goal with “Arrange” was to press students to consider rhetorical arrangement outside of more traditional academic writing. Early in the drafting process, we had a class discussion about “Box-Logic” in which I asked students about Sirc’s “journey away from the linear norm of essayist prose” (114), and they responded with surprising depth that they didn’t consider essayist prose linear in the first place. They didn’t write in a linear order, and they knew that one doesn’t always have to read in a linear order. The concept board seems less alien if the “linear norm of essayist prose” (114) is a straw man. In fact, the kind of spatial arrangement required for the concept board bears a strong resemblance to the kinds of new media writing that many students practice outside of class. One of my students, several years ago, was an amateur graphic designer. Though it wasn’t required by a major or her classes, she enjoyed mocking up book covers and making attractive designs using Adobe Illustrator. Other students have been artists, and one student from Advanced Composition said later that she was a hobbyist web designer, fluent in HTML and starting to learn JavaScript. Even outside of these creative pursuits, students frequently use virtual arrangement devices like Pinterest and Prezi.

I did not mandate the use of any particular program or medium for the concept board, knowing that different students would have different needs and required affordances, but most students gravitated to Prezi for its ease of arrangement and its ability to guide the viewer’s

attention manually. Prezi was originally intended to be a flashier replacement for PowerPoint. Rather than displaying slides individually in a linear order, Prezi places all the text, images, video clips, and graphics from a presentation on a single flat plane. The presenter guides a virtual camera that can swoop over the space, zoom in, out, and rotate (with occasionally nauseating effect). Prezi's user interface is also extremely simple to learn, involving little more than dragging and dropping desired objects. Some students using Prezi made a guided path through their boards while others used it only as a composition medium and did not script any camera movements. Although using Prezi to forcibly guide the viewer's attention through the board was not in my original design for the project, I realized (as I saw students start to play with the feature) that it was another means of guiding and controlling attention. Because part of the course was about working to maximum effect within a limited play-area, I decided to allow them to take advantage of this new tool for controlling attention.

Why arrangement? Essentially, because arrangement cannot be assumed. Every new configuration of objects, words, or ideas results in a different understanding of the text. The move from word-processor writing to new media composition adds an entirely new dimension. What once was a pseudo-linear series of words, sentences, paragraphs, and pages acquires a second dimension: a concept board could begin anywhere, the center of the page, the margins, or the corners. As a class, we mapped bricolage-style compilations, mostly ads, and talked about their implicit arrangements. Students were able to detect the major shapes, and we mapped the eye's movement through a variety of bricolage pieces. We concluded that session by offering a variety of possible spatial arrangements (I asked students to come to the board and draw simple shapes, then for the rest of the class to consider what effect a bricolage board with that implied shape might have on the viewer), then posting the images on our online course page.

The final draft was accompanied by a textual work of bricolage: I asked students to compile their draft reflections into a whole document, and I invited them to arrange it however they pleased. Most students wrote traditional essay-style explanations with varying degrees of coherence, but a few students found creative ways to format and present their reflections. I insisted on keeping an aspect of traditional written prose in the project, since reflection is a crucial part of rhetorical awareness. Artistic arrangement is important, but if the student does not critically consider the *reasons*, implicit or explicit, for their compositions, then that student is not participating in full rhetorical inquiry. The reflection—however the students wanted to format it—was significant *not* because of its essayist or bricolage format but rather because of the cognitive attention it demanded.

Assessment Techniques

I designed a new assessment rubric to evaluate the third project, then modified the same rubric for the final game design project. Drafts were not graded but were counted toward the final score. Missing or late drafts resulted in deductions from the final score (the same policy that had accompanied both of the semester's first projects). The assessment rubric for the first and second projects were modifications of the UGA First-year Composition standard rubric, and while they had worked well for the two more traditional projects, the concept board and game design project required a different approach, one flexible enough to accommodate any potential student work. The rubric was broken into ten categories: five for the concept board and five for the written reflection. Each category was given ten possible points, and scoring the projects by category made the grading process quick and consistent between student papers. These categories also emphasized the process of creating the concept board, not merely the final

product. The assessment categories I chose corresponded to each draft, meaning that the work students had done assembling their board would more likely be reflected in their final grade. Students were given the rubric early in the drafting process, and we went through each category during class to make sure they understood my expectations. The concept board's rubric can be found on page 343.

The concept board was scored on the categories of Cause, Discourse, Collection, Arrangement, and Technicalities. The first four categories correspond directly to the drafting process. A successful concept board, as a personal statement rooted in some significant experience, should make the student's cause clear. It should give an indication of the discourse surrounding the cause. As a work of bricolage, the concept board needs an interesting and well-chosen collection of objects. Finally, the board must be arranged in a "logical, interesting, and relevant way." The "Technicalities" category referred to the presence or absence of technical difficulties (particularly for the majority of students who opted to use Prezi to compose and present their boards) and full Works Cited lists for the images students chose. Because bricolage involves borrowing existing media, I wanted to remind students that academic citation standards still applied.

Students' written reflections were assessed using five categories selected based on course emphases and issues I had pressed in earlier projects. The written reflections were scored in the following categories: reflection (the only category dealing explicitly with content), coherence, evidence, style, and technicalities. I expected students' reflections to be reflective. The document's purpose was to interrogate the rhetorical choices involved in both the concept board and the reflection itself. One student, in his reflection, wrote about the written style he had chosen to accompany the concept board. If the concept board was the "What," I reminded them,

then the reflection was the “How.” Coherence referred to the unity and organization of the written reflection. Especially since students were allowed to use their draft reflections in their final reflection (turning the final reflection into its own sort of prose bricolage), I emphasized that the reflection was, nevertheless, intended to be read as a single document. Reflections were scored on evidence, requiring students to use “significant concrete evidence to support [their] claims.” Given the importance of Lanham and stylistic awareness to the third unit, their written reflections were scored on style. This included audience awareness, authorial voice, and the intentionality of these stylistic features. Finally, the “Technicalities” category referred to grammar, proofreading, and citations. Many students had struggled with proofreading in their second assignments (which, by their collective admission, stemmed primarily from hurry), and we had discussed a number of proofreading strategies in class.

Project Four: The Resistance Arcade

The game design project was the course’s culmination, a project intended to draw together all of the experiments, techniques, heuristics, and critiques from the rest of the semester into a single capstone project. The game design project had a number of goals (drawn from the “Introduction to the Second Half” document, which was essentially my student-oriented statement of purpose):

1. To make explicit the issues of power and performance implicit in all writing
2. To foreground the ways in which writing creates experiences for readers
3. To encourage experimentation with setting rule boundaries and evoking playful performances from an unknown audience
4. To learn to write under new rules, in a new environment

5. To interrupt an existing discourse by speaking powerfully about a cause worth resisting.

Teaching game design in the writing classroom has been practiced by many excellent pedagogues. In the introduction to *Inventing the Medium*, Janet Murray writes that “Digital artifacts pervade our lives, and *the design decisions that shape them affect the way we think, act, understand the world, and communicate with one another*. But the pace of change has been so rapid that technical innovation is outstripping design” (2, emphasis preserved). Murray’s broad claim is that interface design (and I count games as a particularly interface-heavy medium) is complemented by a humanist approach, and that the pairing of these disciplines will result in improved interface designs and, thus, a better relationship between humans and their informational environment. In *Writing New Media*’s “Openings & Justifications” section, Wysocki and her collaborators list five “openings,” broad statements of purpose for the rest of their text. Among these are the needs to “define ‘new media texts’ in terms of their materialities... production of new media texts in writing classrooms... [and] strategies of generous reading” (3). The video game is certainly a new media text, and while defining its materiality was not a stated part of the prompt, our approach to the game assignment via industry-standard forms of writing certainly emphasized the “real-world” materiality of the product. Finally, the game’s emphasis on collaborative play-testing and decision making helped students to read one another’s texts generously (though “generous reading” was emphasized more heavily in the Concept Board project).

Danielle LaVacque-Manty’s “Drag and Drop: Teaching Students Things We Don’t Already Know” advances an almost paradoxical suggestion: teachers do not have to learn to program games themselves in order to teach game design. She writes that “we can acknowledge that our students have more experience in some realms than we do and invite them to develop

skills we don't teach them alongside the skills that we do" (115). Rhetorical skills, she says, are cross-applicable between media, and students can collaboratively teach one another the newest and most accepted design software more efficiently than teachers can (115-16). LaVacque-Manty teaches game design, encouraging students to use simple drag-and-drop design programs (*Game Salad*), more advanced programs (*GameMaker* and *RPG Maker*), or alternate-reality games (text-based games requiring no programming whatsoever), and her assignments also encourage students to make serious, critical, or persuasive games (119). Although I encountered her article after teaching the course discussed here, her pedagogical goal in using games, like mine, is "to expand students' understandings of what rhetoric is—where and how it operates, and why it matters—and what it means to 'compose'" (113). Ian Bogost likewise works to expand the definition of rhetoric.

Bogost's *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames* should be required reading for all studies of games and composition. Procedural rhetoric, around which the book is written, is "the art of persuasion through rule-based representations and interactions rather than the spoken word, writing, images, or moving pictures" (ix), and it finds its primary expression in video games. *Procedural* rhetoric differs from non-procedural rhetoric because it persuades via the experience of playing under a set of designer-made rule constraints (ix). Anna Anthropy defines a game as "an experience created by rules" (Ch. 3), so for her, all kinds of procedural rhetoric are games. Bogost is slightly more restrictive than Anthropy, classifying certain types of rule-created experience as true procedural rhetoric (those games whose rules *themselves* evoke an experience) and others as more traditional rhetoric bound into a procedural shell (games in which the rules contribute little to the game's persuasive power) (9). Specifically, "Procedural representation explains processes *with other processes*" (9, emphasis preserved), rather than with

text, images, videos, or sounds. Such games can be powerful artifacts, Bogost argues, because “If persuasive games are videogames that mount meaningful procedural rhetorics, and if procedural rhetorics facilitate dialectical interrogation of process-based claims about how real-world processes do, could, or should work, then persuasive games can also make claims that speak past or against the fixed worldviews of institutions like governments or corporations” (57). In other words, games can be rhetorical resistance against oppressive discipline.

Richard Colby’s “Writing and Assessing Procedural Rhetoric in Student-produced Video Games,” published in 2014, embraces Bogost’s definition of procedural rhetoric and strongly endorses the use of procedural game design projects in the writing classroom. He finds that “Asking students to assess and inscribe procedural rhetorics by having [students] produce video games is a productive pedagogy that fosters positive habits of mind including curiosity, engagement, and creativity” (43). My project, however, did not mandate that students create what Bogost or Colby would accept as procedural rhetoric. Creating persuasive rule structures can (but does not necessarily) require a deep knowledge of programming since it involves manipulating rules, not merely writing structured texts. It was important, then, to select game creation software that would allow students to both write text and create game rules.

Although my prompt allowed students to select alternative software if they wanted, I strongly encouraged the use of Twine for its simplicity and adaptability. The game “All I want is for all of my friends to become insanely powerful,” discussed in Chapter Three, was written in Twine by Porpentine, one of the program’s most prolific and inventive users.⁵⁸ “All I want” included many non-standard components (the changing background color and music, among other details), but the basic interface when playing a Twine game is plain text interspersed with

⁵⁸ A recent *New York Times Magazine* article about Twine games led with a picture of Porpentine, and in its list of ten noteworthy Twine games, five were authored or co-authored by Porpentine (Hudson).

hyperlinks. Twine games are HTML files, played in a web browser. They are, essentially, networks of small web pages. Although images can be added to Twine games, the platform is strongly text-oriented. My primary reason for suggesting Twine, however, was its ease of use. In order to understand the kinds of writing this prompt evoked, I should say a few words about how one writes Twine games.

The standard unit of measure in Twine is the passage. A passage represents, essentially, one screen of text, generally containing interactive and non-interactive text. Interactive text generally serves to link passages together.

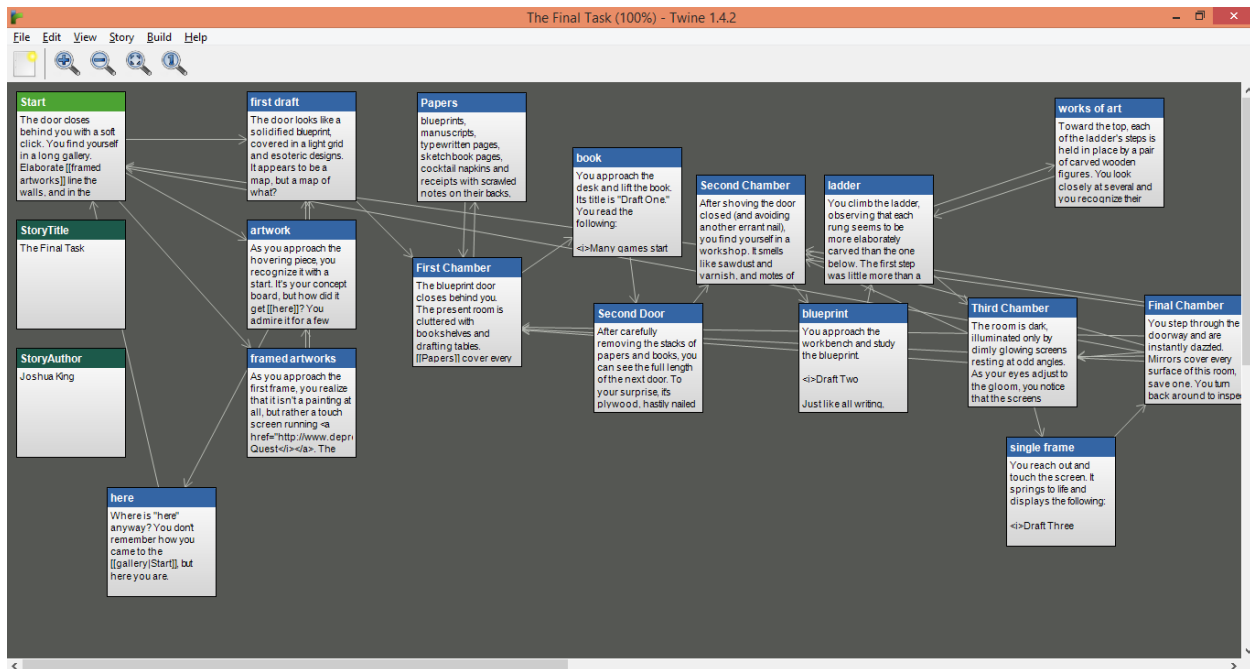


Fig. 12: The Twine interface ("Final Task Screenshot.")

Pictured above is the design view of my playable project prompt, “The Final Task.” The boxes are passages, and arrows show how the passages are linked to one another. Creating a link between passages involves nothing more than entering the title of the target passage in double brackets; typing “[Papers]” creates a link between the passage “First Chamber” and the passage “Papers.” One can write an entire story with no more programming knowledge than that, and a number of my students created entire games using nothing but links between passages. Twine does, however, offer many more possibilities. Because Twine games export as HTML files, designers can use HTML code to format and alter their games. In “The Final Task,” for example, I used simple HTML tags to create links from my game to Wikipedia entries and our class’s LMS front page. More advanced coding is also possible. Twine has a number of built-in macros. A macro, according to the Twine wiki, is “a piece of code that is inserted into passage text. Macros used to accomplish many effects, such as altering the game’s state, displaying different text depending on the game’s state, and altering the manner in which text is displayed” (“macro”). For example, a designer can add the macro “<<choice [[passage link text]]>>” to make the choice between passages irreversible. Once the player chooses, the game locks them into their choice (“<<choice>>”). More powerful tools also exist. Several student projects used variables and if/then statements to great effect. A simple example is the “if visited” macro. By adding the code <<if visited(“First Chamber”)>> to a later passage, I could display text that would remain invisible if the player had not visited the passage named “First Chamber,” then use the macro “<<else>>” to display alternate text that would appear if the player had not visited “First Chamber” (“<<if>>”). Variables are more complicated still. Designers can write code that sets variables to certain numbers, then write code in later passages that test the variables and alter the game’s state or display alternate text depending on the result of the variable test

(“variables”). The exact operation of variables, if/then statements and other macros is less important than their availability to game designers. Twine is an extremely adaptable software, and the development community is active and open. One of my students learned a tremendous amount of code in just a few weeks by joining a Twine forum, asking questions, and studying other designers’ code.

Twine is also heavily predicated on arrangement. Twine requires a sense of both rhetorical and spatial arrangement, though the rhetorical arrangement involves a great deal more thought, planning, and experimentation than the spatial arrangement. Spatially, one arranges passages in Twine’s design view (pictured above). But rhetorically, the designer must not only consider the arrangement of a single, linear text, but the arrangement of *every possible series of player choices*. The number of arrangements that Twine makes possible is, essentially, infinite. My playable prompt, for instance, is linear but recursive (to play the prompt, visit <http://www.philome.la/quarlous/prompt-the-final-task>). The prompt’s arrangement of virtual rooms is linear, first, second, third, final, with brief side-passages that detail some of the chambers’ content, but players are given many opportunities to return to earlier chambers and play through the game again. My playable prompt’s arrangement was designed to give students as many chances to easily find the prompt’s draft assignments as they needed, to the extent that the last section of the game was essentially a draft menu. I wanted to draw attention to the expectations of each draft by, first, giving a metaphorical representation of each part of the game-design process (planning, drafting, refining, and reflecting), and, second, by placing virtual documents in the game containing the actual prompt. In the passage “First Chamber,” players read “The blueprint door closes behind you. The room is cluttered with bookshelves and drafting tables. [[Papers]] cover every available surface: they're stacked on desks, poking out of

bookshelves, stacked in unsteady towers on the floor. At the center of the chaos is a single tidy surface: a desk, holding nothing but one slim [[book]]” (King). By clicking the word “book,” players are taken to the next passage, “book,” which begins with the lines “You approach the desk and lift the book. Its title is ‘Draft One.’ You read the following” (King). Then, momentarily abandoning the game’s diction and syntax, I included the prompt for the first draft. The linearity of the game makes it easy to follow and complete, and the game’s recursivity (the ability to easily return to earlier passages) makes it easy to find the assignment’s requirements.

Twine requires the designer to pay constant attention to a game’s arrangement; a mistake could send the player into an infinite, inescapable loop or catapult them from the beginning to the end of the game. The Twine designer creates an arranged experience, a means of limiting and directing the player’s available actions. This emphasis on arrangement is part of the reason the concept board stressed creative and spatial arrangement so heavily. By creating a visual experience via arrangement in the third project, students would be better prepared to arrange the passages of their games.

The creation of rules and structured experiences in Twine will not, however, necessarily result in an example of Bogost’s procedural rhetoric. It *could*, but because procedural rhetoric requires the designer to create rule structures that comment or critique, the base-level decision-tree structure that Twine lends itself most easily to will not be the most procedural choice for every project. The question then becomes whether a student project must exemplify procedural rhetoric in order to be considered successful. At least for this iteration of the project, the answer was “no.” This project foregrounded the intersections between readers’ experiences while reading and the power of the author to shape those experiences; it used game design software to make those intersections explicit. One might consider procedural rhetoric to be the ideal end-

point of this project. Students who learn and experiment with the software enough to create their own rules (as some students did), or who choose projects that naturally align their causes with Twine's simpler programming features (again, as some students did), will create procedural rhetorical artifacts. But because of the limited time allotted to this project, the course's focus on writing over programming, and my inexperience with projects of this type, I kept the prompt simple and avoided making Bogost's standards for procedural rhetoric a requirement.

The Draft Structure

The drafting process for the game design project bears little resemblance to the concept board's draft structure. The concept board guided students through a set of exercises in listening and speaking, but for the game design project, I wanted to emulate a real-world writing process. The game design project uses an extremely common process from the world of professional game design: iterative game design. Iterative game design would be familiar to any process-based composition teacher, as it involves pre-writing, multiple drafts, peer reviews, reflections, and a final proofreading stage. From a composition theory perspective, iterative game design looks almost quaint. It has such coherent, linearly-arranged drafting stages—nothing like the chaotic morass of revision, creation, and moment-by-moment planning that post-process theory assumes. And yet it is practically assumed in the game design world.

In 2009, game designer Will Luton wrote an article for Gamasutra (a well-respected website for game design professionals) entitled "Making Better Games Through Iteration." In it, he tracks a game his team was working on through the iterative design process. He compacts the process into the following model:

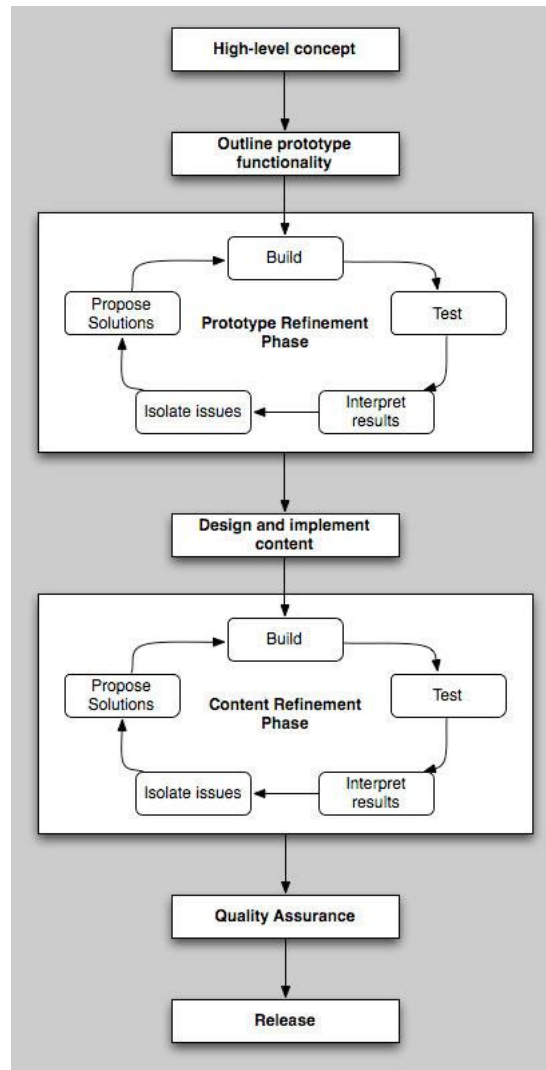


Fig. 13: Luton's model for iterative design (n.p.).

This model is extremely close to the draft structure I designed (though I wrote the draft prompts before coming across this image). Students began by writing a design document, Luton's "High-level Concept" at the top, then they created two playable drafts of their game, tested each one with a structured peer review assignment (the second of which also served as Luton's "Quality Assurance" stage in which bugs and glitches are found and eliminated), then "released" their

games in a public event. I designed this particular drafting process not to make a statement about process or post-process writing instruction but to emulate what I knew of the industry that created the artifacts we had studied all semester. My intent was two-fold. I wanted to make the process as smooth as possible for students (none of whom had designed games before my class) and thought that using an established process would be more successful than inventing a new one myself. I also wanted students to experience writing in a new discipline from that discipline's perspective. As such, we read several articles by game designers about the game design process. In other words, the assignment was designed to use real-world, industry-standard rules and expectations for the writing process to explore the nature of writing's rules.

The industry-simulating draft structure was originally inspired by Alice Robison's article "The Design is the Game: Writing Games, Teaching Writing," published in the 2008 special issue of *Computers and Composition* dedicated to video games in the writing classroom. Robison's article "makes both conceptual and empirical arguments for why composition scholars and teachers ought to take notice of how video games are designed and developed in such a way as to make them so compelling" (360). Robison finds significant parallels between how professional designers make games and how writing teachers teach writing, and moreover, she finds that the game design process has significant lessons for writing teachers (359). One game designer she interviewed held a strongly "player-directed" focus when beginning his games; composition teachers would recognize such a focus as a strong sense of audience awareness (362). Specifically, the developer talked about starting work on a game by imagining what its players would say to one another: "I'm looking for the 'you have to play this game because X' and 'yeah what I really noticed was the way that the game does Y' statements" (361-62). In my drafting process, this manifested itself in both the design document and the first playtest.

Robison's article is overburdened with the designer's experience and contains surprisingly few connections back to the composition classroom; her article mostly serves to underline the existing connection between the game design studio and the writing classroom. As a secondhand account of a professional game designer, Robison's article succeeds, but it does relatively little to synthesize the game design project and writing project. All the same, my game design prompt is predicated—at least in part—on her connection between the industry-standard game design process and the writing assignment. For the full version of the project prompt, see page 345.

Draft One: The Design Document

“Many games start with a design document that serves to summarize and plan the game. Throughout the project, the designer/s can refer back to the design document for an overview of their goals, scope, characters, style, etc. You began making your design document in Project Three, and now you're going to finish it. Your design document should be short—around one page—and include the following information: A summary of the game's plot, a possible list of characters, how the player will interact with the game, what design software you plan to use, a rough idea of the game's structure (e.g. mostly linear, a set series of possible endings, a pair of forking paths, a halo of decisions with frequent restarts, etc.), the written style, and most importantly, a description of the game's intended impact on the player.”

The design document was, essentially, a kind of pre-writing. We had read a set of articles, two from the 90s, and one from 2014, that fundamentally disagreed about the nature and purpose of the design document. The older articles, both from *Gamasutra*, advocated for a nearly encyclopedic game design document, something that would be read by every individual involved with the game, from managers to artists to programmers to marketers, and that would answer

every possible question about the game. “Creating a Great Design Document,” written by Tzvi Freeman, can be summarized in a single commandment: elaborate. Most of his ten suggestions involve elaboration: “Describe not just the body, but the soul... Get into the details... Some things must be demonstrated... Not just ‘what’ but ‘how’... Provide alternatives” (Freeman). These are, unquestionably, excellent suggestions for both a design document and a first-year composition paper, but the document they imply is gargantuan, essentially a prose version of the game itself. James Sweatman’s 2014 article “Death of the game design document” directly contradicts Freeman’s thesis. Sweatman, a professional designer with six years in the industry, writes that “No one reads” design documents (Sweatman). “[H]ow many times are they actually read?” he asks, “All the time? 50 per cent of the time? Probably ‘never’ is the answer” (Sweatman). The comments section was full of other designers with the same complaint: they wrote carefully planned, thoroughly detailed design documents only to have them ignored by managers, artists, and programmers—the very people for whom they were written. So Sweatman suggests an alternative: a light, agile, collaborative document that can flex and change as the game does (Sweatman). Given the project’s time constraints, my students sided with Sweatman over Freeman, and combined with the listening, arrangement, and reflection they did in the concept board project, the design document was more condensation of preexisting ideas than the creation of a new plan.

The design document is essentially separate from the listening and interruption process, since its audience is only the designer’s future self (and the evaluating instructor). Its purpose is to be a support document, a place to plan and anticipate the coming project in a disciplined and coherent way.

Drafts Two and Three: Iterative Game Design

“Just like all writing, making a game happens in rounds of writing, review, and rewriting. For your second draft, you will make a playable version of your game, then your classmates will playtest it. This version will be rough, but it should be functional and have a beginning, middle, and end. The length is flexible, but it should be fairly substantial ([the playable] prompt, for example, will clock in at around twenty passages). Aim for a complete play-through of the game to take around ten minutes. Along with your game, write a short journal entry recording the choices you made and the reasons for those choices. How are you engaging the player? What kind of experience are you creating? How are you writing? How are you planning?”

The second and third drafts were straightforward except for a slightly altered timetable. Students had more time than usual to build a working game (ten days instead of the usual seven), but slightly less time to revise between the second and third draft (five days). Part of this schedule was determined by the occurrence of Thanksgiving Break, but it was also guided by a desire for students to have lots of time to learn Twine and hash out a rough draft. The reduced time between the second and third draft was based on the need to use Monday and Friday for playtesting. The drafting process itself, however, would be familiar to nearly any first-year composition teacher. Students built their games, tested them through peer review (or playtesting), revised based on that feedback, completed a second peer review, and wrote a final draft incorporating the peer reviewers’ recommendations. These drafts would have been traditional draft assignments were it not for the language and environment of game design. I phrased the peer reviews as playtests, not peer reviews, and the students were playtesters, not peer reviewers. In this section, then, I will spend more time discussing the playtest prompts and process than the draft requirements.

Students were more willing to revise extensively in this project than in any other. Revisions to their games were more extensive even than when students revised and resubmitted their academic articles for extra credit. And yet, every project in the class had incorporated peer reviews. Why were these so well-heeded? At least partially, I suspect that the novelty of the medium (and perhaps a certain amount of insecurity resulting from that novelty) drove students to embrace the peer review process. On another level, however, I suspect that the similarities between their actions in class and in the “real-world” of game creation lent the process an institutional legitimacy that allowed students to put more faith in the process. By taking on the roles of real game designers, rather than the familiar subordinate roles of students completing a project, students were able to throw themselves more fully into their and their peers’ projects. They were able to *evaluate* one another’s work (that is, listen with power) rather than simply *receiving* it. And when they returned to work on their games, they became *coders*, able to speak with institutional power, rather than mere performers for a class. The unfamiliarity of Twine as a written medium and a program further distanced their coding from the more traditional writing required earlier in the semester. The playtest questionnaires (available on page 349) focused attention on students’ games as powerful texts capable of creating new and significant experiences for an audience.

The first playtest began with students reflecting on their own games. I asked students to consider five questions about their own game: “What kind of experience do you want your player to have? After finishing your game, what should the player feel? What does your game do to evoke those experiences and emotions? What needs work? What questions do you have for your playtester?” I hoped that these questions would help students remember the power and evocative nature of their games. Additionally, these questions would give students a concrete

baseline against which to compare their playtester's impressions. I mirrored those questions for the section of the assignment intended for the playtesters. After playing the game once, playtesters were asked to respond to the questions "What emotions are you left with after playing the game?" and "How would you characterize your experience with the game? Who were you? What did you do? How did you feel about that?" Then students played the games through a second time. After they finished, they were asked the following questions: "How did the game evoke the experiences you had? What worked well? What could be improved? How?" Students then essentially compared notes. Designers saw how their games impacted their players and whether their intended effects had actually been created.

The second playtest, which took place five days after the first, had a more limited scope. It began like most workshops: students let each other know what their most significant concerns were for their games, played the games, then talked about their results. For the second playing of the game, however, I instructed students to play strangely, to make unexpected choices, in other words, to attempt to break the game. This was our "Quality Assurance" phase in which students helped one another isolate technical problems. This did not eliminate all technical problems from their final drafts, likely owing to the limited time available, but it did reduce the number and severity of glitches.

Final Draft: The Resistance Arcade

"The final draft includes not only your polished, thoroughly tested game, but also a 1,000 - 1,500 word critical introduction to your game. Over the course of several iterations, you have created a game, a disciplinary text that uses consciously-designed rules to create an experience for your player. That's a big deal! You've immersed yourself in both a new genre and the cultural

conversation around your issue worth resisting. Your critical introduction will reflect on both how you've navigated that new rhetorical space and on how you used your writing and design to create an experience for your players.

“Your critical introduction should be a deep, analytical exploration of the rhetorical and design decisions you made when crafting your game. This paired assignment is the culmination of this course (and as close to a final exam as you'll get), so you should reflect on your writing and design as rhetoric, discipline, style, and game.”

The game's final draft had no particular requirements beyond completion, but the way in which the final draft was submitted and exhibited requires some introduction. Students displayed their games in a university-sponsored event our class decided to call “The Resistance Arcade.” Without prompting from me, the class requested that we spend a day exhibiting their concept boards, and I agreed, pleased that they were invested enough to care about sharing their work with their peers. The day was successful (if slightly rushed toward the end), so when we began Project Four, I suggested that we exhibit their games too. Students met the idea with enthusiasm; they wanted to play one another's games, and most of them were excited by the idea of the public getting to experience their work. During one class day, students chose a title, created a Facebook event to draw their peers, and wrote an email to be sent to the graduate students' and English instructors' listservs. I was impressed by the audience awareness their promotional materials displayed. The Facebook page emphasized the fact that donuts and coffee would be provided gratis. The group creating the page explained that their peers would be more likely to show up if they knew free food was involved, and Facebook would be more visible and inviting to their target audience than an email. The mass email, on the other hand, made the event sound enigmatic and rebellious, inviting readers to join a nebulous resistance. Students proposed a

variety of titles themselves, but their final choice, “The Resistance Arcade,” was one I pitched absent-mindedly while they worked on their promotional materials. In retrospect, I probably should have stayed quiet and left the work to them, but I was caught up in the productive, collaborative spirit. My attempt to participate as a co-learner may have instead come across as the authority figure’s final word.

I secured some department funding to buy donut holes and a few gallons of coffee, and we reserved the English Department’s library for the event. Students arrived early, set up their computers, and got their games running. One student even accompanied her game with an iPad displaying her concept board. Though the event was slow at the beginning, by the end of our allotted hour, we had had over a dozen visitors including faculty, graduate students, and undergraduate students.

A public exhibit was an important part of this project’s theoretical backing. If the point of the game design project was to allow students to interrupt a problematic cultural discourse with their own playable narratives, then it was important for those interruptions to be witnessed by individuals besides the students and their instructor. By making their work public, my students and I took composition out of the classroom and into the same public view that rhetoric originally concerned. True, our modest exhibit was a far cry from a disputation before hundreds of Athenian jurors, but it was important for us to open my students’ writing to a public beyond the artificial audience of the instructor.

Matthew S. S. Johnson’s “Public Writing in Gaming Spaces” argues that although “civic participation remains comparatively elusive in the undergraduate writing classroom” (271), writing in public game spaces can be a solution, since writing in game spaces is often self-motivated and driven by real audiences and purposes (270). Ultimately, Johnson says, “we can

see gamer-authored texts as significant examples of public writing and the gamer-authors' practices as instances of civic participation not unlike that which many composition instructors hope to foster in their classrooms" (271). This kind of civic engagement is another way of approaching what I have engaged via Foucault: the ability to speak with power to real and pressing cultural conversations. Service learning classes are a common way to marry public writing and civic engagement, but I would argue that creating critical games (under whatever label one wishes: serious games, newsgames, art games, etc.) is another valid approach to public, civic writing. Johnson's article concerns writing in gamer-focused spaces: gaming forums, reviews, walkthroughs, etc. (278-79), but his principles arguably apply even more strongly for student-written games. He hedges some when returning to the question of whether gamer-authored texts actually change the world—they certainly influence some game series since some companies take fan writing into account when making sequels (278), but Johnson specifically admits that he is "not arguing that participating in *Seed* and other games will 'change the world'" (281). What, then, about student-created games? What if a class could pair a game-design section with a Lanham-inspired attention economics experiment in getting attention? Students could, conceivably, publicize their games and reach huge audiences through the internet. Their voices could interrupt existing discourses in very real ways.

In my Advanced Composition class's online meetings, we experimented some with public writing, discussing writing and articles about writing in the extremely public forum of *World of Warcraft* (in one notable case, a player none of us knew joined us for half of the class, alternately participating with interest and trying to distract us). But the purpose of "The Resistance Arcade" was different. We were exhibiting the students' work for no other purpose than to have their voices heard. And their voices were heard. I heard one male undergraduate

from outside of our class talking with disbelief about women's experiences of parties and dating after playing one student's game about rape culture. He had never considered such an experience, and for that player (and, I hope, for many more), his white male understanding of the discourse on sexuality was momentarily disrupted, interrupted, by a student's game. He had had a new experience, seen through another's eyes. The student had coded an experience for him, and he had received it. I had similar experiences as I played through their games: I saw through eyes besides mine, and the experiences were often profound.

The final draft also required a short critical introduction describing their games rhetorical impacts and intents. Richard Colby's "Writing and Assessing Procedural Rhetoric" emphasizes the importance of the written reflection accompanying the coded game: "Reflective practice asks students to connect rhetoric, research, and writing to these medias and modes, and thus, enriches their understanding of all of these concepts" (47). Colby's reflections take the form of "a student portfolio of shorter documents" (43), but given the short time available and the difficulty of creating games, I opted for a simpler, more straightforward reflection technique. I hoped that, given the more familiar genre of reflective academic essay, students could consider their experiences and their work using a more transparent genre.

Assessment Techniques

The rubric I used to evaluate my students' games (found on page 353) was adapted from the concept board project's rubric. The categories concerning the written reflection were identical, since the game's critical introduction was nearly identical to the concept board's reflection. Three of the five categories evaluating the game were different. I preserved the "Cause" and "Technicalities" categories, but I replaced "Discourse," "Collection," and

“Arrangement” with “Player Engagement,” “Creativity/Innovation,” and “Coherence,” respectively.

Although this rubric bears a strong resemblance to the concept board’s rubric, it had a slightly different purpose. Whereas the concept board’s assessment was designed to reflect the long and varied process by which the project was assembled (by making roughly half of the rubric’s assessment categories reflect the four stages of the project), the game design project’s rubric was intended to direct students’ attention to thematically relevant aspects of the project: the game’s unique power relation with the player (“Player Engagement”), the variety of engagement techniques allowed by the medium (“Creativity/Innovation”), and the importance of arrangement as a rhetorical canon (“Coherence”).

These categories were intended to communicate my expectations for students’ games. Based on our conversations about games’ power to create emotional experiences for their players, I wanted students to dedicate themselves to practicing this kind of experiential coding in their own games. “Creativity/Innovation” was intended to both reassure and pressure students to leave their comfort zones. The doubled title reflects my acknowledgement that not all students would make impressive technical innovations, but it also alerted students to my high standards for their work. I wanted them to press themselves either technologically or imaginatively while still being realistic about the time available and the varying degrees of technical sophistication between students. So “Creativity/Innovation” allowed for more traditional kinds of creativity (imaginative scenes, arrangements, modes of addressing the player, etc.) even in Twine, a more technical medium than programs like Microsoft Word. I hoped that including a “Coherence” category would drive students to arrange their games in such a way that any route through the game would make sense. None of my students had ever experienced writing in a medium that

allows for readers' interactions with the game, and I wanted to press them to arrange their texts deliberately. "A game with a 10 in Coherence," I wrote, "makes every part of the game feel indispensable; the player never has to wonder how s/he arrived at a particular passage."

This rubric is appropriate for this project and this course, but it might not work for every game design assignment. Plenty of professionally-made games would fare relatively poorly not because they were poor games but because they were not made around this course's principles. Overall, the rubric communicated a set of priorities to students and provided me with a disciplined, consistent set of criteria with which to score students' work.

Reflections and Conclusions

Like any writing, my pedagogical writing is a process, and these projects are drafts. They may not be first drafts, but my experience teaching them has led me to reflect on their weaknesses. Before I offer any broad conclusions, I will consider a few of the changes I would make to both these projects and a games-focused advanced composition course.

I would not necessarily require students to work on *the same* game throughout the entire course; rather, I might structure the course around a kind of game-related project-based learning. Project-based learning has existed since at least 1991, when Phyllis Blumenfeld and her co-authors at the University of Michigan published "Motivating Project-Based Learning: Sustaining the Doing, Supporting the Learning" in the journal *Educational Psychologist*. They originally proposed the structure (or, perhaps more likely, revised an existing structure) as a solution for low student motivation. Rather than focusing on an endless litany of low-level tasks, students would be more motivated to learn by having a single, far-reaching problem to resolve, or a project to pursue throughout the semester (370). The authors write that, through project-based

learning, “learners are motivated to persist at authentic problems, meld prior knowledge and experience with new learning, and develop rich domain-specific knowledge and thinking strategies to apply to real-world problems” (371). Throughout this chapter, I have emphasized the importance of students speaking with power about and within problematic discourses: what Blumenfeld et al call “real-world problems” (371).

Students *did* pursue a single problem for half of the semester, but the projects with which they explored that problem were split into two separate entities, rather than a single overarching project as “Motivating Project-Based Learning” suggests. Many, many other educational researchers have advocated for project-based learning, and I suspect that part of my students’ enthusiasm for the peer review process and their willingness to learn new kinds of coding on their own stems significantly from the wide-open assignment they were given.⁵⁹ Their project was to make a game—that’s all. The prompt and rubric communicated my expectations for the timing and end result, but they were on their own to explore the software, experiment with the medium, find other examples of successful text games (most students found their own favorite games by the end of the semester), and ultimately create their games. A future iteration of the class would extend this project-based structure throughout the whole semester. If I wanted my assignments to reflect my pedagogical theory as closely as possible, they would demonstrate that listening and speaking are halves of a rhetorical oscillation, a constant, ongoing, oscillating power relationship. In short, the full semester-long project should reflect this dissertation’s understanding of the game design and creation process as a reflection of the rhetorical game of truth.

⁵⁹ An entire journal dedicated to the subject exists: *The Interdisciplinary Journal of Problem-Based Learning*.

In the first chapter, I introduced an oscillating wave-form model for understanding the subject's interaction with the rhetorical object. Power fluctuates back and forth between the rhetorical object and the viewing subject in much the same way that a player experiences a game: in one moment receiving feedback from the game informing them of the rules and their behaviors, in the next considering themselves as players and seeing how the landscape responds to their presence. That oscillating model has structured this chapter as well. The rhetorical power relationship oscillates between subject and object. In one moment, the subject is a listener, subjugated to a guiding text. In the next, she speaks, interrupting the text and becoming her own source of rhetorical rule structures. The projects around which this chapter was built allow students to experience those poles, but a deeper rhetorical truth undergirds the structure of speaking and listening: oscillation. We live in neither one pole nor the other. Foucault's power relationship is always contested, always suspended somewhere between the contestants. When one pole, one empowered subject, or the other attains total domination, the power relationship evaporates because it is not an object but an energy, not a particle but a wave.

Listening involves speech. Even in Foucault's archetypal example of the empowered therapist consuming the language of a subjugated patient, the power relation only exists because the therapist has spoken the rule boundaries into being. Without the therapist's speech, the couch is only a couch, the therapist's office only a room. Speech pervades and structures listening.

Speech involves listening. Before the rhetor opens his mouth, he has listened to the expectations of his audience, his genre, his occasion, his purpose, in order to structure his speech. He speaks (or writes, or codes) within boundaries that are knowable only through listening (or reading, or playing). Without hearing his audience, the rhetor's language is powerless nonsense. Listening contextualizes and informs speech.

Rhetoric as a power relationship, then, is a phenomenological entity, suspended forever between poles. Suspended, perhaps, is the wrong word. Rhetoric vibrates. It sways, jerks, sashays, waltzes, charges, and saunters between power and resistance. I began the dissertation by writing about rhetorical play as a mediating action, a set of rules within which the subject plays. Interface is not a noun; it is a verb. To interface with something or someone is to enter a power relationship defined by a constant oscillation not only between having more or less power, but by creating and receiving language. Our ethical responsibility as researchers and teachers is to help students enact new understandings of language as a power relationship both by teaching critical reading and empowered writing.

CONCLUSION

LOOKING TOWARD HETEROTOPIA: USING GAMES TO CREATE POWERFUL TEACHING SPACES

I began this dissertation by proposing a broad model for understanding the creation of rhetorical meaning. I posited that meaning is made through a process I called “rhetorical play,” an oscillation of power between subject and object, player and game. Over the course of the following chapters, I explored the locations involved in rhetorical play and considered the disciplinary ramifications of game-like rule structures and transgressive, playful resistance. I considered speaking and listening as balanced actions expressible from positions of increasing or decreasing power. Much of this project has focused on the consumption of meaning: Chapter Two studied how games exert discipline on their players and Chapter Three examined the consumption of more rebellious, transgressive media. I concluded with an application of my theory to the writing classroom, returning to the balance of speaking and listening, power and subjection. Here at the end, I would like to return to Foucault one final time and apply to a new subject my understanding of the oscillation structure between the two foundational actions of the rhetorical game—forming and breaking textual illusions. Using Foucault’s concept of the utopia and heterotopia, this conclusion will consider the possibility of creating a new heterotopia in the classroom using the affordances of games which I will read as seductive digital utopias.

The Utopia

My wife recently surprised me with a copy of *Guild Wars 2*, a Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG) she plays with friends. I became an active player in the months that followed, playing for at least a few minutes almost every day and enjoying the immersive three-dimensional world, the dynamic quest structures, and the supportive, collegial social atmosphere. *Guild Wars 2* is a kind of digital utopia. Certainly, its war-torn fantasy world is a far cry from a traditional utopian world, but in function, in its ability to make me feel like a powerful and influential member of the world, it certainly feels like a utopia. Foucault's definition of the utopia of the mirror, from his lecture "Of Other Spaces," sounds hauntingly close to the digital game-world:

The mirror is, after all, a utopia, since it is a placeless place. In the mirror, I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface; I am over there, there where I am not, a sort of shadow that gives my own visibility to myself, that enables me to see myself there where I am absent: such is the utopia of the mirror. (24)

Guild Wars 2's world of Tyria is indeed a placeless place. Its virtual geography is staggeringly large, but I remain anchored to my laptop as I navigate its forests, cities, and battlefields. Further, and more significantly to this chapter's work, it also presents an unreal version of myself, a reflection of myself, as Foucault says, "in an unreal, [literally] virtual space that opens up behind the surface" of the computer's interface. Though Foucault delivered the lecture eventually published as "On Other Spaces" in 1967 (published posthumously in 1986), Foucault's comments seem prescient. My other self in *Guild Wars 2* bears no physical resemblance to my body. My avatar is named Seneca Ghostseeker, and he is a charr, a nine-foot-tall feline

monstrosity with massive horns, teeth, claws, and a flamethrower. Seneca is my placeholder in the utopia of *Guild Wars 2*; he is the shadowy approximation of my not-quite-presence. I experience the world from behind his back, and when I want to interact with the world or the other approximations of people within it, I do so through his monstrous body. When I cheer a victory or thank a helpful player, I cheer and thank via my mirror-body.

Guild Wars 2 is, in many ways, the epitome of the immersive digital game that Chapter Two considered. Nearly everything in the game works to keep me playing, progressing, exploring, fighting, and ultimately *paying*. Although *Guild Wars 2* does not require monthly subscription payments like *World of Warcraft* and many other MMORPGs (though it must be purchased initially), it *does* offer microtransactions: the ability to pay small amounts of real-world money in exchange for virtual items. Some of these are cosmetic—flashy armor, elaborate weapons, or virtual wings—while others are added storylines or boosts to in-game health, experience points, or gold. To get the most out of the game, it helps to spend a little money here and there: ten dollars to store more items in the bank, a few dollars for some extra slots in the portable inventory, etc. The longer one plays, the more important those add-ons become. My “bank” was full within a few days of starting the game. The game’s publishers, then, have a vested interest in keeping players immersed and coming back to the game every day. The game hooks players in both immersive and non-immersive ways. The most bold-faced attempt to keep one playing is the daily bonus one receives simply for logging in each day. The game rewards me each day for nothing more than existing within it. What a kind and generous world it is! How lucky I am to live within its warm, immersive embrace!

And yet I am rewarded, comforted, coddled in exchange for my obedience to its ludic discipline. The virtual utopia requires a toll: that I behave as I am supposed to behave. In some

ways, this is unproblematic. My agency within the game is limited, but I am used to this. At least here I can speak to other human players freely, unlike single-player games in which communication is either game-provided or delivered to a vacuum. In other ways, however, the virtual utopia's limitations are painful. If I choose to play as a female character, my avatar will almost inevitably be sexualized. While male armor resembles *armor*, female armor often looks more like fetish gear. Consider my two options for a male and female character of the sylvari race and Mesmer profession:



Fig. 14: Sylvari Mesmer male and female default character models (“Sylvari Mesmers”).

These are the default character models and outfits. When one first opens the character editor, these are the preselected options. The characters are almost laughably traditional: the male is green, the female pink. The male is taller. He has thin lips and a lined face. The female's lips are full and her facial features are heavily made-up. The outfits, of course, are the most outrageous. The male wears a long coat with pants and boots. The female wears a crop-top with a plunging neckline, a short flouncy skirt, a pointless garter, and knee-high lace-up boots. Here, before the game has even begun, *Guild Wars 2* determines the available range of gender representations.⁶⁰ The utopia within which I reside governs not only my self-presentation but also the gendered performances with which I am surrounded, and while I would *like* to believe that the corseted, battle-bikini-wearing avatars I see are either men intentionally performing in drag or women claiming agency over their digital bodies, I suspect instead that a large subset of male players simply enjoys watching their avatars' skirt-wearing backsides as they explore Tyria. This utopia is a dangerous one indeed, normalizing the patriarchal hegemony, the near-universal curative power of violence, and the deeply-ingrained progress narrative that suggests that, given nothing more than the application of time and repetition of actions, even the weakest person will eventually become a world-conquering hero. And yet I play on.

The fact that I still return to the game, despite my awareness of its capitalist structure, the seductive danger of its immersion, and its objectified female avatars is hopefully less a statement of my weakness than of my ability to critique and separate myself from the game. Feminist cultural critic Anita Sarkeesian begins most of her videos with a useful phrase: "It's both possible and even necessary to simultaneously enjoy media while also being critical of its more problematic or pernicious aspects" ("Damsel in Distress (Part 1)" 0:44). Critiquing media

⁶⁰ The charr are blessedly non-sexualized. My wife's female avatar has never had to wear a skirt, crop-top, or corset, but only, I suspect, because female charr were modeled without breasts.

becomes easier when performing rhetorical play, held in tension between the formation and destruction of illusions. Foucault's concept of the heterotopia fills out the other side of this spatial oscillation. The utopia revels in the creation and preservation of illusion, but the heterotopia requires the movement into and out of utopia.

The Heterotopia

If the utopia is the placeless place, the illusory world behind the surface of the mirror, then Foucault's heterotopia is its real-world equivalent. Foucault suggests that "There are also... real places- places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society-which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (24). The heterotopia is a liminal space, a real space in which other spaces are represented, idealized, replicated, or critiqued. Foucault gives the examples of the graveyard, the honeymoon suite (25), museums and libraries (26), as well as "rest homes and psychiatric hospitals, and of course prisons" (25). Other heterotopias might include Disney World or the arcade. After he introduces the concept of the heterotopia, Foucault does something quite remarkable. He returns to the utopian mirror-world and swivels his perspective to examine the other side of the mirror, the "real" side. He discovers, in the space of a paragraph, that the utopia and the heterotopia are two halves of a single spatial structure that feed and inform one another's actions:

From the standpoint of the mirror I discover my absence from the place where I am since I see myself over there. Starting from this gaze that is, as it were, directed toward me, from the ground of this virtual space that is on the other side

of the glass, I come back toward myself; I begin again to direct my eyes toward myself and to reconstitute myself there where I am. The mirror functions as a heterotopia in this respect: it makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there. (24)

Through the lens of the mirror, Foucault observes that the spectator's gaze moves from the unreality of the mirror and the awareness of the self-that-is-not-the-self, the mirror-self, the avatar, back toward the self-as-the-self. The heterotopia serves as a space in which rhetorical play happens. Its core feature is the oscillation between awareness-of-self and immersion-in-virtuality, the same oscillation around which this dissertation is constructed. If rhetorical play is the action, the heterotopia is the space best able to host that action.

In a way, many video games are already heterotopian. They are, to return to Juul's term, "half-real": "To play a video game is therefore to interact with real rules while imagining a fictional world" (1). The spaces in which game-play happens are also half-real. In Foucault's terms, they are "at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point" (24). But the oscillation of the heterotopia requires more than simply existing within the virtual world. Recall the siren's song of immersion; many virtual worlds (*Guild Wars 2* included) want the player to remain the shadowy mirror-self and to delay the reconstitution of the self, the recognition of the player behind the keyboard, for as long as possible. Mainstream immersive games want to remain utopian; the heterotopia is unstable and dangerous. Its liminality threatens continued engagement with the game's utopia.

Although video games are *ripe* for conversion into fully heterotopian spaces, they resist. I confess that I have comparatively few moments of self-recognition playing *Guild Wars 2*. It is difficult for my gaze to, as Foucault says, “return back to myself” (24) when the world of the game and my powerful avatar are so seductive. It happens, of course. I recognize when I navigate the various bank and store menus that I am engaging in the fantasy of easily acquired wealth and quick, profitable business transactions. When I overcome a difficult quest, I have flashes of recognition that I am being given something I crave in my academic and personal lives: the immediate reward and congratulation of overcoming a challenging obstacle. I recognize my own hunger for power and agency as I blast a crowd of monsters with my flamethrower and receive experience points as reward for my violence. But most of the time, my focus stays within the world: turning the rock-dogs against their centaur masters, guarding the gates of Nebo Terrace, and retaking the town after it falls to the centaur hordes. The potential for a truly liberating heterotopia exists within the power relationship between me and *Guild Wars 2*. The meanings waiting to be generated in the interplay between Joshua King and Seneca Ghostseeker are tremendous; watching my embodied absence interacting with a created world could open near-limitless indeterminate rifts in the aesthetic play experience. How, then, is one to bring forth that potential?

In other words, what kind of critical space best prepares the player to encounter her mirror-self and thus to engage in fully-aware rhetorical play? The classroom is, perhaps, a hackneyed or expected answer. It may even be a dangerous answer; after all, the traditionally-constructed classroom relies on much of the same disciplinary apparatus that games themselves do. The classroom surveils; it rewards some behaviors and punishes others; it relies on the self-policing of motivated subjects operating within spatially and temporally structured sites. The

classroom, however, can also be a place of tremendous flexibility and critical power, as I discussed in the fourth chapter. By engaging in the rhetorical play inherent in the heterotopia, students could be led to experience their games' interfaces *not* as heady utopias, always a step out of reach, but rather as real heterotopias, spaces ripe with the possibility for creative engagement and rhetorically productive attention oscillations. They could experience games as *real* spaces, split between two sides of a computer monitor, that feed and inform one another.

A ludic classroom, then, would take advantage of games' unique positions between realities and implement a series of foundational changes to transform itself into a playful heterotopia, an intentionally liminal space where player-students could be free to explore the gaps between virtuality and reality, utopia and heterotopia. Most pedagogical spaces are not heterotopias—they generally lack the unstable threshold position between the real and unreal required for a heterotopia to exist—but the classroom does correspond to a few of Foucault's principles of heterotopia. Using these as a foundation, and complementing them with the inclusion of a rich array of critically-framed video games, the ludic classroom exemplifies a heterotopia that fosters and encourages resistance to domination.

Principles of the Heterotopia

Foucault describes six basic principles of the heterotopia. First, “there is probably not a single culture in the world that fails to constitute heterotopias” (24). The heterotopia in any culture is, Foucault says, one of crisis or deviation, the former being more prevalent in “the so-called primitive societies” (24) and serving to isolate those in states of (generally sex- and gender-based) transition: “adolescents, menstruating women, pregnant women, the elderly, etc.” (24). The latter category, the heterotopia of deviation, keeps “individuals whose behavior is

deviant in relation to the required mean or norm” (25). Foucault’s categorization here is odd; many of his other listed heterotopias are not necessarily for deviants. The museum, the library, the cinema—none of these are particularly aligned with deviation. Certainly the prison and the psychiatric ward, those most liminal and separated of spaces, fit the description, but many other examples of heterotopia fall outside the crisis/deviant matrix. Foucault’s example of the garden (26) most strikingly belies the crisis/deviant heterotopia. Perhaps the crisis/deviant matrix refers more to early functions of the heterotopia and less to universal identifiers of the heterotopian space.

In a way, the traditionally-defined four-year college experience is a heterotopia of crisis. The graduating high school student leaves home for the first time and spends four years exploring new ideas in an environment unlike any she has yet experienced. College, in this narrative, is a kind of training for adulthood, positioned in the liminal space between childhood dependence and adult responsibility. This narrative, of course, proves a poor fit for many students and institutions. Nontraditional students, community colleges, online institutions, and even transfer students are left out of this common cultural imagining. So while the university will be heterotopic for some students—especially students privileged enough to attend college directly after high school and without having to balance college with a full work or family life—many other students will not be in that same position of “crisis.” The ludic classroom, then, would ideally create itself as a heterotopia for *all* students, not just the privileged “traditional” student.

Second, Foucault says, the heterotopia always “has a precise and determined function within society” (25). Here Foucault cites the heterotopia of the graveyard: its changing representations evince shifting social approaches to death. The graveyard evolves to fit sets of

social requirements (25). In other words, the heterotopia *does something*. What is the function of the ludic classroom heterotopia? In other words, to mimic the inevitable classroom skeptic, why are all these changes necessary, and what good will they do? First, the ludic classroom would defamiliarize a medium that many students are trained to avoid scrutinizing. When I first started teaching games in the classroom, I overheard a pair of students on the sidewalk after class complaining about my lesson. I was, according to them, overthinking things. After all, they're just *games*. Yet, as the second chapter demonstrated, games are powerful disciplinary artifacts deserving of more attention. By creating a space in which games can be fully heterotopian, uncomfortably liminal, and always rhetorical, the ludic classroom can live up to its potential as a powerful critical space.

The heterotopian ludic classroom is my best attempt at embodying what the dissertation's title calls a "rhetoric of resistance." In this space, students practice modes of transgressive and critically-aware play. They attend to the oscillation between illusion formation and destruction, learning to control the wavelengths of the media with which they engage. They learn to play by playing, learn to resist by resisting, and learn to write by writing. The core function of the ludic classroom is teaching awareness of and resistance to disciplinary domination. Students would learn to play the game of truth by practicing rhetorical play. Rhetorical awareness resists disciplinary intervention, and this playful heterotopian space encourages rhetorical awareness in both its design and its pedagogy.

Using the theater, the cinema, and the garden, Foucault states in the third principle that "The heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible" (25). Here, we encounter the immersive 3D video game again. The site in which game-play happens, whether the arcade, the living room television, or the

office computer, is naturally heterotopian in the same way that Foucault says the cinema and the theater are heterotopian (25). In “a single real place,” in my case, the laptop at my desk, contains many other illusory spaces: every city, forest, bog, and dungeon in *Guild Wars 2*, as well as the virtual landscapes of the many other games waiting on my hard drive. The prismatic space of the heterotopia is, perhaps, the strongest connection between the ludic classroom and the heterotopian ideal. By contrasting the coexistence of multiple spaces within a single space—and interrogating the disciplinary and ludic construction and contrasts of those prismatic spaces—the ludic classroom exposes every virtual space as a constructed disciplinary space. The ludic classroom forbids its inhabitants from taking space as a given or comfortably looking “through” immersive virtual spaces.

Foucault’s fourth principle, demonstrated with the examples of the museum, the library, and the festival, is that “Heterotopias are most often linked to slices in time” (26) which Foucault creatively calls “heterochronies.” The museum and the library, Foucault says, *accumulate* time (26). Their spaces engage with time in a specific way, whereas the festival intercedes in specific moments in time, rather than gathering and keeping time (26). This is to say that the heterotopia is a location in both space and time. The heterochrony parallels *kairos*. The heterotopia arranges itself to appropriate time in a specific way: “The heterotopia begins to function at full capacity when men arrive at a sort of absolute break with their traditional time” (26). Just as the heterotopia is liminal space, the heterochrony is liminal time removed from “traditional time.”

The ludic classroom would obviously be situated at a specific time (that is, the class meeting), but it should also allow for more kairotic moments via either social media or persistent online games. The latter would bring the heterochrony of the chance meeting (noticing, for instance, that a student is playing online and joining him or her to help or talk) into line with the

heterotopia of the game-space. None of this, however, quite lives up to the promise of the heterochrony. The class meeting is extraordinarily “traditional” in its relation to time: highly regulated and consistent, and as Foucault mentions in *Discipline and Punish*, pedagogical time disciplines student-subjects (152). Chance meetings are potentially kairotic, but they do not *break* with traditional time. Here too the game can intercede.

My brother-in-law is an avid *World of Warcraft* player. He has played for years, accumulating literally thousands of hours of gameplay, and during his most active periods with the game, he kept a weekly ritual. At certain designated times, he withdrew from the family, installed himself at his laptop, and went on “raids” with his guild. Although his physical body was located at the kitchen table—just feet away from the rest of the family—he was decidedly absent, staring into the monitor and speaking softly into his headset. He was raiding. Raids are coordinated attacks on challenging dungeons requiring at least five—and sometimes many more—players working closely together. The raid breaks with regular time and regular space; it removes the player from his physical space and his ordinary time. It is separate, other, almost sacred. We learned to schedule around raid nights.

In a way, the MMORPG is always already a break from traditional time. The world of the MMO is oddly timeless. In *Guild Wars 2*, the same events happen over and over. My wife and I defended Nebo Terrace from marauding centaurs every night for almost a week before we succeeded; sometimes we played the same event multiple times in an evening. The centaurs are probably raiding the town again as I write this, again still as you read this. The same stories eternally cycle, and the player is invited to replay them endlessly. When I pass by the field with the sylvan hounds, I save them from attacking spiders. When I pass back by going a different direction, I save the hounds again. The game-world is governed by a strict sense of time (we

track upcoming game events with a website that combines a map and a clock), but that strict time is also endlessly looped. *Guild Wars 2* is not governed by the same temporality as the rest of my life, and when I immerse myself in the game, I can take advantage of its heterochrony, removing myself from my own rapidly-advancing time and replacing it with the game's timeless bustle. The MMORPG, then, engages with the heterochrony from two directions: it removes the player from traditional time in scheduled interruptions like the raid, and within the utopia of the virtual world, it replaces standard linear time with recursive temporal loops that give the illusion of temporality within an ultimately timeless system.

The ludic classroom has a precedent for this sort of split time, but it would make the heterochrony more apparent. Instead of the raid, the classroom has a regular meeting time, and instead of recursive temporal loops, the writing class has drafts. Drafts bear some resemblance to *Guild Wars 2*'s repeating events: they offer multiple opportunities to accomplish a set task, and with each repetition, the subject learns more about the parameters of the task. When defending Nebo Terrace, my wife and I learned to first complete two other events to diminish the centaurs' reinforcements, and this helped us successfully defend the town. Ideally, a draft serves much the same purpose, showing students their ideal processes, the approaches and heuristics that lead to a successful writing session. But the ludic classroom would intensify the drafting process's recursivity by phrasing the drafts as entirely separate loops, things to try once, then try in an entirely different way, then in a different way *again*. The assignments would have to be open enough to allow many approaches to the same question, and students would have to be primed to expect a comparatively radical assignment structure.

Foucault's fifth principle states that "Heterotopias always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable" (26). Participation in

most heterotopias is either “compulsory, as in the case of entering a barracks or a prison, or else the individual has to submit to rites and purifications” (26). Classrooms and games are alike in this respect: both require enrollment. Games require their own rites of access: some require the capitalist rite of purchase, others the digital rite of the download (at the very least, one participant in the play experience must have gone through a rite; certainly other “uninitiated” players can join the original, “initiated” player). The classroom demands more involved rites of initiation: economic rites of payment, but also bureaucratic rites of registration, not to mention the thousand and one rituals required of the college student. There are accounts to make, books to buy, buses to catch, etc. The classroom is both exclusive and compulsory, and, if anything, the ludic classroom ought to be *less* exclusive than its more traditional counterpart. When I taught Advanced Composition using *World of Warcraft*, our digital class occasionally got visitors. Other players would see us, a group of low-level avatars sitting in a circle talking about writing and rhetoric, and they sometimes stopped to investigate. Most of these incursions were brief, generally including a few perplexed iterations of “wtf,” but one particular visitor made an impression. He sat down with the other students in our “Circle of Learning” and participated actively for a solid thirty minutes, alternately trying to distract us and trying to participate in our lesson. The other students in our class accepted his presence and tried to build on his hesitantly-made points (which he frequently retracted to return to distraction and joking). What if, to emulate the oscillation between involvement and critique inherent to the act of rhetorical play, the ludic classroom likewise opened itself to outsiders in its online incarnation? The classroom is generally an impenetrable space, but if the ludic classroom incorporated the utopia of the MMORPG, it could make itself more penetrable, thus aligning it further with the heterotopia that “isolates [itself] and makes [itself] penetrable” (26).

Finally, Foucault says, heterotopias' "role is to create a space of illusion that exposes every real space... as still more illusory... Or else, on the contrary, their role is to create a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled" (27). Foucault has many examples of the latter, mostly in the form of colonies: Puritan settlements in North America and Jesuit colonies in South America (27). Of the former, Foucault has just one vague example, imprisoned in parentheses: "a space of illusion that exposes every real space, all the sites inside of which human life is partitioned, as still more illusory (*perhaps that is the role that was played by those famous brothels of which we are now deprived*)" (27, emphasis added). The only example of the illusory heterotopia is "those famous brothels," now dearly departed. After some brief research, I suspect that Foucault was referencing Le Chabanaise, a brothel that perfectly exemplifies the heterotopia. It was a single space in which many spaces were simulated; its sign read "Welcome to the Chabanaise: The House of All Nations" (Rosemberg) and its rooms were decorated with a variety of national themes (Barbier). The illusory heterotopia contained a Louis XVI room, a Moorish room, and a Japanese room, all connected by elevators (Barbier). Here was a space that truly contrasted illusion with reality: located next to the Louvre, Le Chabanaise hosted men like King Edward VII, Guy de Maupassant, and even Hermann Goering (Barbier, Allen) within its simulation-spaces. By pressing so many nations into the frame of a single *maison close*, the heterotopia of Le Chabanaise questioned the identification of all traditional spaces. Its utopian logic holds a mirror up to the real rooms and nations it simulated. That men like Edward VII and Goering moved through these real simulations makes the heterotopian action, the constant oscillation between reality and utopia, even more powerful.

When Foucault gave his lecture in 1967, Le Chabalais would have been closed for just over twenty years (Barbier). The brothel might be considered a liminal space, radically removed from the “traditional space” of the nuclear family. Immersive 3D video games function something like brothels: they are illusory heterotopias that charge the subject for participation in a ritual of power, pleasure, and discipline (of course, if video games are like brothels, then so are theme parks and a whole host of other heterotopian spaces). Like Le Chabalais, immersive 3D video games compact a huge number of simulated spaces into a single location. Games reveal “traditional” space to be an illusion, a culturally-reinforced arrangement of spaces. Culture groups similar space with similar space in pleasing, traditional arrangements, but video games can demonstrate that those culturally-determined spatial traditions to be illusions. When *Guild Wars 2* uses wrecked ships to build the city of Lion’s Arch, it calls into question the stability and permanence of real buildings (then when it renovates and rebuilds Lion’s Arch in an instant, after a content patch, it calls reality’s slow, accretive temporality into question). When it features buildings grown from plants, it questions traditional building techniques. And when players can teleport across the world with a single click, it questions the concept of linear space—already being undermined by other kinds of digital space (like websites linked by text instead of space). The heterotopia is a space that calls the concept of space into question. The movement between utopia and heterotopia, however, could be enhanced with a space designed specifically to explore spatiality.

The principles of heterotopia, especially heterotopia as a facilitator of rhetorical play, could be implemented in a pedagogical setting in a number of ways. Digital classrooms especially could be tailored to support the multi-spatiality of the heterotopia, but in the following section, I will propose one potential application of heterotopia and rhetorical play to the

classroom. The heterotopian classroom is not a cure-all; it aims primarily to enhance the preexisting pedagogical promise inherent in the games-focused classroom. I have named the applied heterotopian classroom the Metatopia Lab.

The Metatopia Lab

The lab is a space about spaces. Its design, layout, and choice of playable texts reflects its interest in exposing and experiencing rhetorical play. It is a heterotopia that contains utopias; its purpose is to facilitate power oscillations between student-subjects and game-texts. The instructor is a facilitator, a guide to attention, a game-master guiding players through a rich academic play experience. The space's function is to critique disciplinary spaces and underscore the activity of rhetorical play; the Metatopia is an unsettled space, a location defined by constant motion and perspective shifts.

The room itself is composed of layers of screens and real spaces. At the center of the room is the Utopia, a ring of twenty high-definition monitors facing one another. The computers are powerful gaming rigs with a variety of single- and multiplayer games installed. The monitors are of moderate size; they allow students to peer around them at their comrades on the other sides. The monitors are a little too low, and students must decline their heads slightly to see the screen. This allows most students to make eye contact with one another over the tops of their screens. Playing with a slightly tilted head forces the player to expend a little effort to immerse herself in the game. The instructor might remind students of their supplicatory postures as a reminder of discipline's impact on the body and the gesture. Finally, the shape of the Utopia defies the traditionally-structured Panopticon. In some computer labs, computers are arranged in an inward-facing ring, allowing a central instructor to surveil all the students nearly

simultaneously. The Utopia reverses this shape, placing greater responsibility and reduced surveillance on the students. This shape also unites students by placing them all in sight of one another, rather than dividing them into isolated units as in the panoptic model.

A flexible classroom called the Heterotopia surrounds the Utopia. The mobile furniture in this middle ring allows the classroom to be quickly reconfigured as required by the students or instructor: clusters of tables for group work, workshops, or game planning can quickly become a ring of desks surrounding one of the room's many whiteboards for an instructor-led lesson. Chairs roll smoothly around the room, quickly and quietly transitioning between engaging with the central Utopia and the surrounding Heterotopia. These tables have no built-in technology. Students can use laptops if necessary, but the Heterotopia provides contrast and a neutral space for reflection. Transitioning between the immersive-with-effort Utopia and the comfortable simplicity of the Heterotopia should be swift and easy. Removing oneself from the game to think on it, discuss it, or simply move into the next activity is a crucial spatial reflection of rhetorical play's core oscillation. By wheeling away from Utopia, one takes power over the game. The cessation of play is, perhaps, the most power one can take over the ludic disciplinary apparatus.

The Metatopia Lab incorporates a final layer intended to foster rhetorical play and critique: a series of whiteboards encircling the room onto which images, websites, or gameplay footage can be thrown. These are the Boundaries: markers of where the space ends, but simultaneously portals to other virtual locations, images, texts, etc.. Students in the Utopia could project their games onto the walls, or they could find significant images, helpful graphics, or create drawings. The Boundaries would be designed to provide a critical contrast with the immersive Utopia. If illusions form in the Utopia, they break in the Boundaries. If the Utopia is transparency, the Boundaries are opacity. Because of the Utopia's shape, students would have in

their view, at all times, their game, their colleagues sitting across from them, the Heterotopia, and finally the Boundaries. Student access to the Boundaries would allow students to “speak” silently, creating visuals for their colleagues to receive. The Boundaries would, ideally, be constantly-evolving bricolage spaces. The assemblage of images, words, ideas, and games would force contrast and evoke conversation.

This space literalizes the model of rhetorical play from Chapter One. Students become immersed in the Utopia, then their attention travels through the Heterotopia (defined, like rhetorical play itself, by the movement of attention between the proximal self in the utopia and the flesh-and-blood self outside of it), and stops at the Boundaries, the opposite wall of the room. There, they see a text designed to break immersion and encourage critique, and their attention travels back across the Heterotopia to their immersive Utopia. The movement of attention between Utopia and the Boundaries demonstrates the movement of attention and power in the act of rhetorical play. Physically, the students would enact this oscillation by tracking their heads up and down between their monitors and the projections on the far walls. One could witness their attentions oscillating by watching the nod: up for critique, down for immersion, back up again for critique.

The Metatopia Lab would be an overwhelming space. Distraction, in the Metatopia Lab, serves to quickly rotate attention between ideas and spaces, though, admittedly, it would take some getting used to and more than a little practice and negotiation for any given class to find its rhythm. The Lab would be exhausting, especially for the instructor. Keeping students’ gazes moving between their utopian shadow-presence and their physical presences would take frequent interventions and reminders.

The Metatopia Lab uses its space and the pedagogical practices enhanced by that space to create a persistent heuristic of critique, a lens through which to view media. The Metatopia would allow any potential heterotopia to be more easily explored and critiqued because of its spatial layering and forced oscillation. A film class booking the Metatopia Lab for a day would turn the space into a kind of Brechtian smoker's theatre, a critically-engaged heterotopia. "Of Other Spaces" includes the theatre as a kind of heterotopia (25), but the Metatopia would press students to consider critically both the nature of the film-viewing space and the film itself. Film clips could be projected around the room while students reference pages of film analysis techniques on their computers. They could look up to the screen across from them to watch the film, then back at their computers to find analytical techniques or to make notes on their observations. The move between allowing the film to form illusions for them and then critiquing those illusions on their computers would be a heterotopic oscillation, an act of rhetorical play applied to a different medium.

Video games and film, while they are both rhetorical media, capable of being rhetorically played, are not the same. Games are not player-directed films, just as films are not linear games. But both media occupy heterotopian spaces, both media are capable of immersing the subject (and thus, potentially, exerting domination over the viewer), and both media involve the subject in a power relationship. A space that foregrounds these traits would facilitate critical thinking for any class that deals with potentially immersive textual artifacts.

To return to the vocabulary established in the introduction, the Metatopia Lab is intended to shift students from receivers to evaluators. If the teaching of game design works to make students into coders, rather than performers, then the Metatopia Lab is that ludic classroom's spatial extension. The space is designed to return power to the subjects it houses.

The Last Word: Play

The core tension between joyful, anarchic play and restrictive, productive rules has run through every chapter of this dissertation, but I suspect I have given more attention to the latter than to the former. Even the term “rhetorical play” risks crushing the fun out of its verb. So here at the end, I hope to conclude with a reminder of why play is so important in the first place. Play holds such power and potential in the struggle with overwhelming disciplinary force because of its chaotic striving after freedom, its pleasure, its *jouissance*. Part of the problem, to be sure, is that play is so unstable and individual that it is difficult to map or summarize. Brian Sutton-Smith, after all, wrote an entire monograph entitled *The Ambiguity of Play* that concluded, basically, that play is impossible to identify or chart with any accuracy. Play is ambiguous. When I watch my wife play *Guild Wars 2*, I notice how differently she plays: she barrels ahead in a straight line, even if that takes her over cliffs or through oceans. I find the ramps or stairs down from the cliffs, even though I could easily survive the fall. She presses at the boundaries of the game more and optimizes her time at the expense of her immersion. The charr guardian Shah Stormbringer probably wouldn’t risk a fifty-foot fall from a cliff, but it saves time, so Jaime takes the leap. The nature of play is unstable, chaotic, and different from one moment to the next.

Play is also *fun*. The promise and the seduction of play stem from the enjoyment we take in it. Whether we play an instrument, a part in a play, or a video game, play entertains and energizes us. Even our pets play. My dog chases toys, herds my wife and me around the house, and plays hide-and-seek. My cats wrestle and chase laser pointers. My wife’s cat is a renowned hunter of string. In the discussion of play as resistance and the exertion of power, the *pleasure* of play must remain at least on the periphery of the discussion. Barthes devotes all of *The Pleasure of the Text* to the baffling and destabilizing enjoyment of text, but he understands the divide

between the experience of pleasure and its analysis: “What relation can there be between the pleasure of the text and the institutions of the text? Very slight. The theory of the text postulates bliss, but it has little institutional future: what it establishes, its precise accomplishment, its assumption, is a practice (that of the writer), not a science, a method, a research, a pedagogy” (60). I fear that my dissertation has demonstrated Barthes’ point. I have turned play into a method, a research, *and* a pedagogy (60). I could not have done otherwise. Play, both rhetorical play and ordinary play, always presses beyond the boundaries that contain it. Play resists the boundaries that motivate it, and I hope that here, at the end of this mammoth document, play will exceed the academic boundaries I have written around it. And it will. Of course it will. It is play.

And for you, my patient reader, I encourage you to seek out playful experiences and enjoy them, to find pleasure in the immersion and bliss in the breaking of the immersion. I hope you will find joy both intellectual and visceral in whatever games of truth and imagination you seek out. But most of all, I hope you play.

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APPENDIX A

PEDAGOGICAL DOCUMENTS FOR ADVANCED COMPOSITION ENGLISH 3600W

This appendix contains documents created for English 3600W: Advanced Composition, a course I designed and taught for the first time in the fall of 2014. The course's full title was "Writing and Rhetoric, Play and Games," and its purpose was to contextualize games as a form of writing and writing as a form of game design. The class studied games as texts but spent more time considering the disciplinary and stylistic ramifications of specific game design choices. Students were able to choose their own topics, and I intentionally left the idea of "games" very open-ended. The course culminated with the pair of projects presented below.

An Introduction to the Second Half of 3600W

Document's Pedagogical Goals:

- Prepare students for a pair of unconventional projects
- Cue reflection on recent course readings and assignments
- Encourage consideration of how units one and two are related
- Contextualize the Concept Board and Game Design projects within larger course goals

Document's Rhetorical Theoretical Goals:

- Draw students' attention to the interplay of reading, writing, and game design
- Create a persistent connection between discipline, rhetoric, and coursework
- Remind students that rhetorical reality is more complex than game-based models

Timing

Uploaded to course website and presented in class the same day as the prompt for Project Three

(10/20/2014)

So far, you've written about games in two very different genres: the think-piece and the academic article. For the second half of the course, we're moving from writing about games to making games. Making games forces us to think about writing and reading very differently than we ordinarily do. Here are some of the Big Ideas we've learned so far:

- From Lanham, we've learned that we're living in an attention economy and that rhetoric has become more important than ever.
- Lanham also taught us that attention structures control how we interpret pretty much everything, from *World of Warcraft* to the printed book.
- From Foucault, we've learned that discipline and power relationships are omnipresent.
- But we've also learned that resistance to unethical games of truth is both possible and necessary.

In order to make connections between those four ideas (rhetoric, attention structures, power, and resistance), we're going to plan and create playable games. Here's why.

Game design is important; it makes explicit the issues of power and performance that are implicit in all writing. When you're writing an essay or article, it can be easy to ignore the fact that you're creating an experience for your reader using rules to encourage creative and interpretive play. But when you're making a game, creating rules and scripting interactions, you have no choice but to critically examine the power your game has over your player. So not only are you creating a fun and interesting text, one that's capable of communicating in a very different way than any other kind of writing, you're also experimenting with power and learning to write in a new way.

Project Three is going to lay the theoretical and aesthetic groundwork for your game. Over the next month, you'll find a personal issue or experience that you want to turn into a game,

immerse yourself in the discourse around that issue, then accumulate and assemble a concept board as a starting place for your game. Your game should be based on an issue (a game of truth!) from your life that you think is worth resisting. We'll hold conferences during the third project where we can discuss possible game topics.

Project Four, the culmination of the course, will be the creation of an actual game. You're welcome to use any program you want, but I encourage you to use Twine (more on that later). It's absurdly easy to learn, it doesn't require art assets, and it's free. Your game will be built around your work in Project Three, but you have tremendous leeway to convey your message in whatever way you want. You can be as abstract, metaphorical, allegorical, realistic, etc. as you like. Your game will be accompanied by a short critical introduction discussing why you made the creative choices you made.

A Word on Rules and Reality

Speaking and writing in the real world are complicated, and the game metaphor is just a metaphor. Suggesting that audience, occasion, ethos, etc. all boil down to finite, definable rules is reductive. Reality, as always, is more complicated than the models of it that we create. But, all that said, our game-based model for writing is a good starting place for understanding the complex exchanges of attention and power that accompany all communicative acts. To quote Foucault, "when I say 'game' I mean an ensemble of rules for the production of the truth" ("Ethic of Care for the Self" 127), and, no matter whose truth you're producing, isn't that what rhetoric is about?

*Project Three: The Concept Board*Document's Pedagogical Goals

- Teach spatial arrangement as a form of composition
- Immerse students in individually relevant cultural conversations
- Prepare students for the final project
- Combine creative composition (the concept board) with critical reflection and analysis
(the written reflection)

Document's Rhetorical Theoretical Goals

- Provoke consideration of the interplay between listening and speaking
- Turn students into rhetorical listeners
- Critique problematic ideologies and cultural institutions
- Consider the impact of written/visual style on rhetorical effectiveness

Timing

- Prompt given 10/20/2014.
- Drafts due one week apart on Sunday nights before midnight.
- Concept boards presented in-class on Monday 11/17/2014.

Making a game is no small task, and one of the most important stages of game design is coming up with the initial concept. This project will lay the groundwork for your game. Here, you'll find a topic for your game, study the discourse around your topic, hunt for images and quotes that will inspire your game, then arrange all of this into a single concept board that you will refer to as you create your game in the final unit.

This project is one of “bricolage,” what the OED describes as “Construction or (esp. literary or artistic) creation from a diverse range of materials or sources. Hence: an object or concept so created; a miscellaneous collection, often (in Art) of found objects” (“bricolage, n.”). Bricolage, at least how we’re practicing it, is part collage, part collection, part curation, and part remix. I have a few reasons for making Project Three a concept board:

- At the simplest level, it’s a more interesting way to get you thinking about your game than just writing drafts, scripts, or game proposals.
- More theoretically: assembling material from the world (both digital and physical) will immerse you in the networks of power and language that your game will eventually simulate.
- Most theoretically: when you think about it, all literature, all art, all language is just bricolage. Doing a bricolage project is just making that fact more obvious.

So here’s the prompt: Over the course of several drafts, you will compile and arrange a concept board that reflects the subject, tone, and existing discourse around the subject of your game. You will also write a critical reflection describing the creative reasons for your selections and arrangements, and how those selections and arrangements might manifest themselves in your game. You can use whatever software or hardware you want to create the board itself: I

recommend Prezi or OneNote, since both of those allow you to move text and images easily and attractively. If you prefer to create a physical board or box, that's fine too.

Formal Requirements

Because the four drafts of this project build on one another, it's crucial for you to complete all of them. The usual rate of five points deducted per late or missing draft still applies. All work is due on Emma (either links or pictures will do), and once you've submitted a draft, avoid modifying it (since that will alter the timestamp).

Draft One: Consider.

Due Sunday 10/26 by Midnight

Consider something from your personal experience that you think ought to be resisted. This could be pretty much anything, as long as it's a problem that has some urgency and relevance to your experience. Your problem worth resisting could be as broad as unrealistic images of women in advertising or as specific as the expectation that all students complete unpaid internships to be competitive on the job market.

Spend at least 750 words reflecting on one problem or a series of possible problems. Use the writing process to reflect on your life and the games of truth you play. Which ones are unethical? Which should be resisted? You should have at least a preliminary answer by the end of the draft. Choose carefully—you'll be working intensely with this topic for almost two months.

Draft Two: Eavesdrop.

Due Sunday 11/2 by Midnight

Now that you have an idea of what you want to resist, it's time to listen in on what people are saying about it. Go to wherever people are talking (digitally—don't literally eavesdrop on people; that's creepy) about your topic and read around. Compile a few pages of representative quotes from all sides of the issue and arrange them on a small board (whether digital or physical) into whatever kind of pattern makes sense to you. Use images if you like or if they're relevant (perhaps political cartoons, diagrams, or just representative pictures).

Write at least five hundred words characterizing the conversation around your issue—what are the major themes? What are the factions? How do people talk about the issue? What styles do they use? Where does the conversation happen?

Draft Three: Accumulate.

Due Sunday 11/9 by Midnight

This is where you become a collector. Remembering the example of Joseph Cornell, who Geoffrey Sirc called “the ultimate collector” (116), compile a mass of digital and/or physical objects that somehow speak to your experience of your issue. These can be images, quotes, words, videos, even objects or sounds. Collect anything and everything that even slightly resonates with your understanding of your issue; quantity is job number one here. Your eavesdropping quotes from the previous draft can be the start of your collection. Feel free to use Google image search, but expand beyond that. Search archive.org, Wikimedia Commons, Instagram, Tumblr, or physical places like second-hand stores, bookstores, grocery stores, etc. You're looking not just for relevant pieces, but interesting ones—the more interesting the better.

Technical side-note: you probably don't want to try to fit your entire collection into an Emma document. Instead, create either a OneDrive or Dropbox folder (you have access to OneDrive through your UGA MyID account) and share it with me at kingja@uga.edu.

Write at least five hundred words describing your collection. You might consider questions like the following: What did you find? What were your selection criteria? What images, stories, or aesthetics might your collection suggest? If your collection were the prop-house for a movie, what would the movie be like? Finally, how does your collection relate to the conversations you heard in Draft Two?

Draft Four: Arrange.

Due Monday 11/17 by 9:00AM

Now you become an artist, a bricoleur. Again, thinking of Joseph Cornell, arrange whichever items you like from your collection into a concept board, box, wall, whatever. Your objects' arrangement should be intentional—you're making an art-piece after all—but you're free to compose your board however feels best to you. There are no limitations on the size or number of objects, the arrangement, or the medium.

Write at least 750 words explaining your choices. Why did you use that arrangement? How does your board reflect your issue, your experience, or the game you plan to create? What's the emotional or aesthetic tone of your concept board?

Finally, compile all of your written reflections into a single document (you are, of course, welcome to revise these as you see fit). If you'd like to arrange that reflection in a way besides a linear prose document, you're more than welcome to. You can make a second reflection board,

or add your written reflections to your concept board, or simply keep your written reflections in a separate plain document. It's up to you.

*Project Three Rubric*Document's Pedagogical Goals:

- Communicate project's standards and expectations clearly to students
- Provide a robust and efficient method of scoring unconventional projects
- Standardize evaluation criteria for a wide variety of student projects and approaches

Document's Rhetorical Theoretical Goals:

- Consider students' blend of speaking and listening in a disciplined and replicable way
- Confirm the significance of drafting as a process via criteria categories
- Create an ethical mode of evaluating student speech

Concept Board Rubric

Your concept board and your reflection will each count for half of your final score. Each will be graded in five different categories (meaning ten points per category).

Concept Board Criteria

Cause	Your issue should be easily apparent from your board. The viewer should have a sense of what you're resisting and why. A board with a 10 in Cause will have a specific, personally-relevant cause worth resisting. Your Collection and Arrangement will help make your Cause more apparent and understandable.
Discourse	Your board gives some sense of the existing cultural conversation around your Cause . Although it doesn't need to be encyclopedic, it should represent the major voices, trends, or sides of the conversation. A board with a 10 in Discourse will make it easy for viewers to see, understand, and evaluate both the content and the style of the existing Discourse . Arrangement , Collection , and Cause will all contribute to showcasing the existing Discourse .
Collection	Your board should Collect and showcase an interested and well-selected collection of objects, quotes, images, videos, sound clips, etc. The objects you select should be, at least in aggregate, relevant to your Cause . In other words, they don't have to be direct representations, but they should somehow represent, illustrate, or give some evidence of your Cause . A board with a 10 in Collection should showcase a large number of interesting and diverse texts, images, objects, etc. The objects you Collect will contribute to your viewer's sense of the Cause and the existing Discourse .
Arrangement	Your board should Arrange your Collection in a logical, interesting, and relevant way. There should be a coherent, obvious method of Arrangement , and the choice of Arrangement should reinforce both the chosen Cause and the existing Discourse . A board with a 10 in Arrangement will be easy for any viewer to follow and comprehend, and the chosen layout will underscore the author's relationship to her/his Cause .
Technicalities	Your board should have no technical difficulties (e.g. all links, images, embedded media, etc. should display properly) and must provide citations for all selected media in an attached document. Check the OWL at Purdue for information on citing images, films, sound files, etc. in MLA format.

Reflection Criteria

Reflection	Your written text should provide a deep and sustained examination of your Cause , the existing Discourse , and your selected Arrangement . This document should do more than simply narrate your experience of the project; it should reflect on your rhetorical choices and the ways in which those choices interacted with your chosen Cause . A written reflection with a 10 in Reflection will demonstrate that the author has thought seriously and productively about his/her concept board.
Coherence	Your Reflection should function as a single, sustained document. Each piece of the Reflection should clearly contribute to some larger, unified argument, realization, claim, etc. You are free to choose any arrangement (whether spatial or rhetorical) you find appropriate, but this Reflection should be a Coherent whole, complete with an introduction (of some kind), a conclusion (of some kind), and transitions between sections or ideas. A written Reflection with a 10 in Coherence will be extremely easy to follow.
Evidence	Your Reflection should provide significant concrete Evidence to support your claims. This Evidence could come in the form of quotes or images from your collection, references to particular parts of your concept board, or anecdotes from your writing/collecting/arranging process. A Reflection with a 10 in Evidence will have lots of specific, relevant evidence to support its claims.
Style	Your Reflection should have a clear understanding of its audience and should employ an intentionally chosen written voice. Your Style doesn't need to be clear, brief, or sincere, it does need to be deployed for a purpose. A Reflection with a 10 in Style will have an interesting, effective rhetorical style and a good reason to use its Style . Feel free to discuss your choice of written style in your Reflection .
Technicalities	Your reflection should be free of grammatical, proofreading, and citation errors. A reflection with a 10 in Technicalities will be thoroughly proofread (I recommend reading aloud, peer reviewing, or reading the paper in reverse, starting with the final sentence and moving backwards through the paper to the beginning) and have full and properly formatted citations.

Project Four: The Resistance Arcade

Document's Pedagogical Goals:

- Experiment with an existing profession's writing process
- Learn to incorporate basic coding into writing
- Write under new rules in an unfamiliar coding environment
- Understand the drafting process as a form of iterative design
- Critically examine the process of creating a written experience for a specific audience and purpose

Document's Rhetorical Theoretical Goals:

- Interrupt a problematic discourse with a powerful coded text
- Code a disciplinary text and consider its impact on the reader
- Gain insight into the mechanics of rhetorical play by creating a rhetorical game
- Recognize that all writing is fundamentally game-like and playful

Timing:

- Prompt given on November 17th
- First draft due Friday November 21st
- Second draft due Monday December 1st
- Third draft due Friday December 5th
- Final draft due Monday December 8th at the Resistance Arcade event

For the playable version of this prompt (“The Final Task”), please visit
<http://www.philome.la/quarlous/prompt-the-final-task>

Draft One

Due Friday November 21st by 9:00 AM.

Many games start with a design document that summarizes and plans out the game. Throughout the game design process, the designer/s can refer back to the design document for an overview of their goals, scope, characters, style, etc. You began making your design document in Project Three, and now you're going to finish it. Your design document should be short—around one page—and include the following information:

- A summary of the game's plot
- A possible list of characters
- How the player will interact with the game
- What design software you plan to use
- A rough idea of the game's structure (e.g. mostly linear, a set series of possible endings, a pair of forking paths, a halo of decisions with frequent restarts, etc.)
- The written style
- Most importantly, a description of the game's intended impact on the player.

Draft Two

Due Monday December 1st by 9:00 AM.

Just like all writing, making a game happens in rounds of writing, review, and rewriting. For your second draft, you will make a playable version of your game, then your classmates will

playtest it. This version will be rough, but it should be functional and have a beginning, middle, and end. The length is flexible, but it should be fairly substantial (the playable version of this prompt, for example, will clock in at around twenty passages). Aim for a complete play-through of the game to take around ten minutes.

Along with your game, write a short journal entry recording the choices you made and the reasons for those choices. How are you engaging the player? What kind of experience are you creating? How are you writing? How are you planning?

Draft Three

Due Friday December 5th by 9:00 AM.

Your third draft is a continuation of the second. Based on the feedback from your playtesters, plan and implement a series of revisions. Write a short journal entry describing and explaining the feedback you received and the changes you made to your game.

Final Draft

Due Tuesday December 9th by 9:00 AM.

The final draft includes not only your polished, thoroughly tested game, but also a 1,000 – 1,500 word critical introduction to your game. Over the course of several iterations, you have created a game, a disciplinary text that uses consciously-designed rules to create an experience for your player. That's a big deal! You've immersed yourself in both a new genre and the cultural conversation around your issue worth resisting. Your critical introduction will reflect on both how you've navigated that new rhetorical space and on how you used your writing and design to create an experience for your players.

Your critical introduction should be a deep, analytical exploration of the rhetorical and design decisions you made when crafting your game. This paired assignment is the culmination of this course (and as close to a final exam as you'll get), so you should reflect on your writing and design as rhetoric, discipline, style, and game.

*Game Design Project Playtests*Document's Pedagogical Goals:

- Encourage collaborative learning and revision
- Emulate real-world collaboration and revision practices
- Gather feedback from collaborators and revise accordingly

Document's Rhetorical Theoretical Goals:

- Enter a dynamic speaking/listening relationship with a collaborator
- Observe the results of the artifact's disciplinary coding
- Oscillate between receiving and evaluating, performing and coding

Timing:

- Both playtests were conducted during fifty minute class periods. Most students completed two playtests during the first playtest and more than two during the second.

*Playtest One*Questions for the Designer

What kind of experience do you want your player to have?

After finishing your game, what should the player feel?

What does your game do to evoke those experiences and emotions?

What needs work? What questions do you have for your playtester?

Questions for the Playtester

After the First Play-through:

What emotions are you left with after playing the game?

How would you characterize your experience with the game? Who were you? What did you do?

How did you feel about that?

After the second play-through:

How did the game evoke the experiences you had? What did the game ask you to do? Did you make choices? If so, how did they work? If not, did you feel engaged in the action of the game?

What worked well?

What could be improved? How?

Playtest Two Assignment

Round One

Find a partner who hasn't played your game yet. Either download their game on your computer, or switch computers.

Tell your playtester about your game so far and outline your most significant concerns. Give them a sense for what you're currently working on and any weaknesses you feel your game needs to overcome.

Play through your partner's game once, noting any additional concerns besides those your partner described. After both playtests have finished, talk for a few minutes about your findings.

Round Two

This time, play through your partner's game as unconventionally as possible. Make unexpected decisions, move back and forth through the game at random. In other words, try to break their game.

Not everyone will play your game as you expect them to, and this playtest is meant to press the boundaries of what your game will allow. If your game can withstand this unconventional playing, there's a good chance it will accommodate unexpected kinds of play. In the professional world, this is the bug hunting phase in which bugs and glitches are found and fixed.

*Project Four Rubric*Document's Pedagogical Goals:

- Communicate project's standards and expectations clearly to students
- Provide a robust and efficient method of scoring unconventional projects
- Standardize evaluation criteria for a wide variety of student projects and approaches

Document's Rhetorical Theoretical Goals:

- Balance respect for students' range of technical abilities with encouragement to experiment and take creative risks
- Highlight the importance of diverse player experiences and approaches via evaluation criteria
- Incentivize the interruption of problematic discourses

Game Design Project Rubric

Your game and your critical introduction will each count for half of your final score.

Each will be graded in five different categories (meaning ten points per category).

Game:

Cause	Your issue should be readily apparent from your game. The player should have a sense of what you're resisting and why. A game with a 10 in Cause will have a specific, personally relevant Cause worth resisting.
Player Engagement	Your game should make the player an integral part of the text. Your game, your disciplinary text, should use its rules to create a unique experience for the player. Even if the player is ultimately powerless, or is meant to feel powerless, your game should use its interactivity to do something that linear text could not. A game with a 10 in Player Engagement takes advantage of the playable nature of the text and makes the player feel involved. A game with a 1 in Player Engagement has minimal or meaningless interactivity (e.g. a completely linear game in which each passage leads only to the next passage and so on).
Creativity/Innovation	Your game should be Creatively written and presented. An Innovative game might try interesting things with variables, if/then statements, or interesting passage structures (loops, restarts, maze-like patterns, etc.). A Creative game might be written in a particularly interesting way, use an unexpected setting, involve surprising plot twists or details, or find other ways to be novel and unexpected. A game with a 10 in Creativity/Innovation lets the player experience they have never experienced before, or experience something familiar in a completely new way. A game with a 1 in Creativity/Innovation leaves the player feeling bored: it approaches common topics or experiences in an ordinary way and takes little advantage of Twine's affordances.
Coherence	Your game should make sense as a whole unit. Everything in the game should serve to create a particular experience and promote your Cause . Further, the parts of the game should be seamlessly connected. Passages should connect logically to other passages, even if the player doesn't take the route you first expect them to. No matter the choices your player makes, your game should feel smoothly connected as a single play experience. A game with a 10 in Coherence makes every part of the game feel indispensable; the player never has to wonder how s/he arrived at a particular passage. A game with a 1 in Coherence feels disjointed and (unintentionally) frustrating.

Technicalities	Your game should have few Technical difficulties (e.g. all your passages should be complete and should go somewhere, unless you mean for the player to start over; the game should be playable to completion, the player shouldn't see your code, etc.). If you use external media (quotes, images, etc), you must provide a complete and correctly formatted works cited page. If you borrow code from another game, you must cite that as well. Include the original coder's name, the project the code is from, and where you found the file (e.g. Twinery Forum, etc.). Using either the <<silently>> macro or the /%comment%/ tag (to hide the citation from the player while they play), your game should provide an in-text citation for borrowed code. The parenthetical citation should include the original coder's name and, if you borrow code from more than one of his/her projects, the title of the game you borrowed from.
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Critical Introduction

Reflection	Your written text should provide an academic introduction to your game and the rationale behind it. This document should do more than simply narrate your experience of the project (though the story of the project's development over time could certainly be germane); it should Reflect on your rhetorical choices, why you made them, and what impact they had on the finished product. The critical introduction is meant to “open the hood” of the game to showcase and analyze the game's design. A critical introduction with a 10 in Reflection applies the same level of analysis and critique to the author's own game as the author would apply to any other academic text (e.g. a Faulkner novel, Supreme Court decision, bill, academic article, or ad campaign).
Coherence	Your critical introduction should function as a single, sustained document. Each piece of the critical introduction should clearly contribute to some larger, unified argument, realization, claim, etc.. The critical introduction should include an introduction, conclusion, and transitions between sections or ideas. A written reflection with a 10 in Coherence will be extremely easy to follow.
Evidence	Your critical introduction should provide significant concrete Evidence to support your claims. This Evidence could come in the form of quotes or code from your game, references to particular moments in the game, or anecdotes from your writing/coding/revising process. A reflection with a 10 in Evidence will have lots of specific, relevant Evidence to support its claims.
Style	Your reflection should have a clear understanding of its audience and should employ an intentionally-chosen written voice. Your Style doesn't need to be clear, brief, or sincere, but it does need to be deployed for a purpose. A reflection with a 10 in Style will have an interesting, effective rhetorical style and a good reason to use its Style .
Technicalities	Your reflection should be free of grammatical, proofreading, and citation errors. A reflection with a 10 in Technicalities will be thoroughly proofread (I recommend reading aloud, peer reviewing, or reading the paper in reverse, starting with the final sentence, and moving backwards through the paper to the beginning) and have full and properly formatted citations.