

TOWARDS A CRITICAL GAME-BASED PEDAGOGY

IN COMPOSITION

By

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## ABSTRACT

### TOWARDS A CRITICAL GAME-BASED PEDAGOGY IN COMPOSITION

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This thesis outlines and examines core concepts of game-based learning as identified by James Paul Gee, and Kurt Squire, among other scholars. These findings are then connected to the contemporary, transformative threshold concepts of composition—as explored in *Naming What We Know*. This connection seeks to argue game-based pedagogy may be an invaluable tool for introducing critical perspectives to composition students in order to better equip them with critical thinking strategies and cultural critiques, while improving their writing skills. A theoretical framework is presented in the form of four “Pillars” of a Critical Game-Based Pedagogy: Literacy, Identity, Social Learning, and Multimodality—all key components of a critical game-based curricula which centers expanded definitions of literacy, resists social constructions, encourages cooperation, and practices a wide variety of multimedia composition strategies. The concluding discussion attempts to illustrate these concepts through anecdotal reflections on teaching, particular games, and their relationship to digital humanities—including a supplementary digital platform hosting this research.

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## INTRODUCTION

Video game have always been at the center of my life. When I was a child, video games allowed me entrance into virtual worlds which inspired my imagination alongside my insatiable reading habits. I grew up with games like *Pokemon*, a series which is dependent on textual description further prompting me to read constantly, expand my vocabulary, and developing a literacy for its rules and complex concepts. As a teenager, video games became an artistic and intellectual site for deeper thinking, managing data, and maintaining my sanity as a troubled adolescent in an unhealthy home. In games, I also discovered parallels and political commentary on past and present events which contextualized social issues, even while fictionalizing them.

Role-playing games, like *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*, challenged what I thought games as a medium could accomplish—acting not only as entertainment, but as unique opportunities to create and inhabit identities outside the “Real Life.” As an adult, through many years of immersion in the artistic, intellectual, virtual worlds of video games, I have come to see their incredible teaching potential, while also being hubs for community and cooperative efforts.

It is my educated belief that video games are not only an exemplar medium for communicating artistic vision, cultural commentary, and narrative craft, but also a site to exercise personal experiences, beliefs, and literacies with few, if any, risks. Over the last few years, I have begun to make greater connections between video games—what and how players learn to play a video game—and how novice writers become immersed in

new worlds of knowledge, language, and action. In thinking about how certain games, and perhaps all games, require its players to *read* its images, signs, concepts, specialized language, and other elements which could be called a *literacy*. Further, in seeking shared knowledge from the surrounding gaming community, I have observed that this literacy and specialized language is used to form communities of *social learning*—all writing, reading, and researching for themselves and for each other. In this project, I explore the theoretical connections between the applied practice of games, learning through gaming, and its application to first-year composition. I attempt to identify key concepts in game-based learning and triangulate a connection between them and contemporary theories of composition and critical pedagogy, resulting in a pedagogical framework I call Pillars of a Critical Game-Based Pedagogy.

In the last twenty years, video games have been adopted into cultural and artistic legitimacy, emerging from the dimly lit basements of obscurity and cultural disdain into the review sections of respected magazines and newspapers. Contemporary titles such as *The Last of Us*, *God of War*, and *Red Dead Redemption 2* are lauded as narrative masterpieces, comparable with work that rivals the best produced and critically acclaimed films. Significantly, the demographics of gamers are changing—and as audiences change, so does the content of the medium. Today, video games are now a ubiquitous presence in pop culture and mass media. The video game and games journalism industry are multi-million-dollar enterprises with corporations like EA and Blizzard dominating the market with multiple franchises and pulling in millions from legions of dedicated fans, often at the expense of overworked game developers. In turn, like other forms of media, games

have become more than just entertainment commodities; they are also objects of intellectual, artistic, and academic study.

American linguist and scholar, James Paul Gee has written extensively on video games—and their potential for learning and teaching in works such as *What Video Games Have To Teach Us about Learning and Literacy* (2003), *Good Games and Good Learning* (2007), and, most recently, *Unified Discourse Analysis: Language, Reality, Virtual Worlds, and Video Games* (2015). It is this body of work, which created what can now be defined as “game-based learning,” that inspired this project. Realizing that the connections I’d made about learning and video games had been meticulously articulated by a respected academic, I felt my ideas legitimized before even conceiving this project. Game-based learning is a pedagogical perspective and practice that draws from principles in games, but does not necessarily reconfigure an existing curriculum, into, for example, a “game” structure. Indeed, the discourse on games and learning continues to be a problematic littered with neoliberal capitalist schemes far removed from the principles of the game-based learning Gee had originally described and is also largely scant of scholars pushing for the integration of politically and socially critical game-based orientations in teaching.

On the other side of this educational and cultural phenomenon, the term “gamification” has entered both disciplinary and institutional sites. Its definition, and its connection to game-based learning is fraught with detraction, misuse, and appropriation. Institutional and corporate entities have taken note of these trends and experimented with their own variations of “gamification,” in a variety of institutional sites such as schools

and workplaces (AMAZON GAMIFYING WAREHOUSE). These gamifying practices are attempts to incentivize work through visual displays of progress, artificial achievements, and other practices. Ideally, these practices are meant to increase the “fun” of work or curricula. *Atlantic* contributor and game theorist, Ian Bogost (2011), observing gamification being appropriated by corporate elites with no real appreciation for the art of games, renames gamification as a gimmicky form of exploitation: “‘Exploitationware’ [is] a more accurate name for gamification’s true purpose.” Bogost, as both a designer and lover of games, is understandably frustrated with the corporatization of what he sees as a magical and artistic medium capable of transcending static media. Bogost’s writing is salient to this project, which separates “gamification” from game-based learning and game-based pedagogy. Like Bogost, my aim is to use game-based learning as an approach to critique and resist exploitation and other forms of oppression, including racism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, and white supremacy.

While it is true that both game-based learning and gamification are grounded in the concepts, design, engagement, and mechanics of games, gamification often overlays visual elements and game mechanics into an existing structure (e.g., school grading or work performance), where game-based learning takes the principles of games, which engage, teach, and transfer knowledge, in order to create new avenues of practice.

In my more recent years of gaming, I have acquired a taste for increasingly challenging games—games that are, by design, unfriendly to players and are inordinately difficult. In these games, failure by death is generally not framed as critical failure, which dooms the player infinitely. Games such as *Dark Souls*, *Bloodborne*, and others require

that the player learn the patterns and layouts of levels (game environments) to prevent the mistakes which led to their previous, and many subsequent deaths (e.g., “Game over” screens). These games are also often obscure and feature hidden mechanics (controls, rules, statistics) that are not explicitly revealed, if at all. The inner workings of the games, crucial to the success of the player, must be *decoded* through reading item descriptions in-game and often seeking the help of online communities for guidance. Meanwhile, in many games, including *Dark Souls* and *Bloodborne*, the player creates, or *composes* an avatar which they use to navigate the game space. *Identification* with this avatar is often intended to be a vicarious or surrogate embodiment of the player, forming an immersive bond which engenders an emotional investment in their progress through the game’s narrative and becoming stronger, more capable, and more skilled to survive in often hostile and dangerous environments.

Significantly, the games I have mentioned are surrounded by dedicated online communities on platforms such as Reddit, and detailed and informative Wiki pages. This network of community and shared knowledge indicates common endeavors of creating and sharing knowledge, which can be paralleled to concepts in composition studies relating to literacy. As I began to put these musings together about the games I love and my academic field of study, I observed connections between these themes and their applicability to composition pedagogy. This connection became clearer as I reflected on the two semesters I spent teaching first year composition.

Although I had not integrated game-based pedagogy into these courses, I was already practicing many of the principles I discuss in this thesis. For example, I provided

extensive feedback on student writing and encouraged ongoing, iterative revisions and resubmissions throughout the semester. In implementing this approach, I began to see students loosen, relax, and take on renewed identities. Many said that they hated writing or felt they were “bad” at writing. These narratives, of course, were engrained after years of rigid high school writing experiences, which had emphasized writing as the creation of perfect products, rather than the development of writers who move at variable speeds and through a diversity of different routes. Like new players in a challenging game, I observed that these novice academic writers initially felt they lacked the literacies necessary to navigate the daunting nature of a college environment, where they felt expectations of high performance (i.e. perfect grammar) were unrealistically high. However, students’ fear began to wane as they took advantage of the many opportunities I provided them with to make revisions to their writing. As in games, students were always presented with the chance to try again, just as a player can continue and experiment with other approaches and strategies to overcome challenges. The literacies they developed in my composition courses led me to question what other literacies could be explored through such a pedagogical schema, including *critical literacies* which directly address issues of intolerance and oppression through active engagement with social justice. This engagement may entail discussion and interrogation of, among many themes, social constructions of identity oppressive structural and political ideologies, heteronormativity, colonialism, representations in media, and the influence of discourse in culture.

But, to my surprise, this intersection of game-based learning, composition teaching, and social justice proved to be a largely unexplored area of study. This sparked my interest, as I saw it as an opportunity to make an academic intervention, bringing together my intellectual and ideological interests. Before I could answer these questions, I wanted to first, outline and identify key themes of game-based learning, second, triangulate connections between this scholarship and contemporary composition theory, and lastly, articulate a framework for enacting a Critical Game-Based Pedagogy in composition. These are the questions which drove my research:

1. What does the broader scholarship have to say about game-based pedagogy in the writing classroom, and how can this scholarship connect to research and scholarship on threshold concepts about writing?
2. What does Critical Game-Based Pedagogy look like? How should instructors critically engage students in composition in practices, assess them, and encourage transfer?

In this project, I have attempted to provide comprehensive answers to these questions. The purposes of this project, then, are to outline and interrogate the broader conversation of game-based learning and practices, and enter this discourse by connecting the work of key figures in game-based learning and their contemporaries, including James Paul Gee, Kurt Squire, Ian Bogost, and Emma Kostopolus I also attempt to connect these theories of game-based learning with the transformative theories of writing and literacy development described in two seminal texts: *Naming What We Know*

(2016), a collection of short, conceptual essays compiled and edited by Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle, and *Multiliteracies For The Digital Age* (2004) by Stuart Selber. The former argues for teaching with a mutable guideline of concepts which have the potential to change student dispositions towards writing, reading, literacy, rhetoric, and the social and ideological influence of text and discourse. The latter text calls for an expanded view of literacy, which extends student understanding of digital literacy beyond the “instrumental” fluency of using computers and technology to include a critical awareness of the material, social, and political implications of their production. In making connections across these areas of theory and scholarship, my hope is that the whole of this thesis project triangulates the seemingly disparate fields of game-based learning, digital literacy, and contemporary composition theory to offer a fresh perspective on how a Critical Game-Based Pedagogy can be applied to the composition classroom.

To achieve these goals, I propose an architectural pedagogical schema for a Critical Game-Based Pedagogy that is supported by three theoretical Pillars. This overarching structure is grounded in *literacy* development, and supported by the three Pillars of *identity*, *social learning*, and *multimodality*. This schema, as a conceptual model, is the culmination of my experiential, textual, and analytic research in this project; it expresses a foundation on which best practices in a Critical Game-Based Pedagogy can be built. Though I have chosen to use the visual and verbal rhetoric of “pillars” or “architecture” to describe my conceptual model, these Pillars should be understood as mutable, flexible, and interdependent. For example, while *literacy* is the main principle, it

is dependent upon the shaping elements of *identity*, *social learning*, and *multimodality* to be exercised, learned, or taught.

I begin this project with a literature review, which outlines key theorists and concepts of game-based learning, gamification, and Threshold Concepts of composition on which this project is based and then condenses into a theoretical framework, or Pillars of a Critical Game-Based Pedagogy. These Pillars will be elaborated in the following Theoretical Framework chapter. I hope this framework will guide readers to the socially, culturally, and politically critical orientation I suggest for Game-Based Pedagogy. In ultimately enacting this schema by incorporating game-based learning into a composition classroom, my purpose is to provide opportunities to critique and oppose racism, sexism, heteronormativity, ableism, and other forms of cultural and social oppression. A discussion chapter will follow this Theoretical Framework to elaborate on the Pillars through the context of video games and the potential applications for a composition classroom.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review begins with what I've considered essential game-based learning theories by James Paul Gee and Kurt Squire. I begin with these works to frame conceptual concerns which are foundational to game-based learning and teaching. While the project's ultimate aims are to discuss, analyze, and critique the literature of game-based learning in its application to composition pedagogy specifically, the texts discussed in this chapter, including James Paul Gee's *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy* (2003), *Unified Discourse Theory* (2015), and Kurt Squire's *Teaching and Participatory Culture in the Digital Age* (2011), will remain relevant throughout, as themes of social learning, literacy, identity, and multimodality greatly influence scholarship informed by their work. Scholar Stuart Selber's text, *Multiliteracies for a Digital Age* (2004) rounds out a discussion of these texts, providing significant scholarship in proposing a critical orientation in teaching computer-mediated digital-based literacy and multimodality.

I will also forge connections between the principles in learning through games described by Gee and Squire to the transformative threshold concepts of composition explored in Linda Adler-Kasner & Elizabeth Wardle's *Naming What We Know* (2016). The collection's contributors discuss the transformative power in redirecting student disposition towards writing, often reflecting the principles of learning in games described by Gee and Squire. In that the nature of this project is "critical," I will often cite the work of critical pedagogues, including Paulo Freire *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1993, 2000),

and Henry Giroux's *On Critical Pedagogy* (2011), whose influence cannot be understated in the framing of this chapter and for this project, holistically. Moving forward, I begin this review by discussing the term "gamification" to further distinguish it from "game-based learning," the latter being the subject at hand in this chapter. A brief overview and description of "gamification" is necessary to orient our discussion before moving on to discuss relevant literature.

### On Gamification

While the term and concept of "gamification" has entered the discourses of education, business, management, phone applications such as *Habitica*, and even labor, "game-based learning" draws upon the design elements and principles of games themselves, such as customization, situating meaning, player collaboration, multimedia interaction, and reframed failure. These design elements, or "design grammars," are seen as opportunities to amplify student agency in their own learning. Drawing from either digital video games or traditional games such as board games or table-top role-playing games (e.g., *Dungeons and Dragons*) can encourage, supplement, or better incentivize engagement as student/players attempt multiple routes and strategies to achieve better outcomes. Gamification, on the other hand, emphasizes game design as a structure for curriculum, rather than as teaching or learning principles. To clarify, *gamification* and *game-based learning/pedagogy* are separate, but related concepts. To help distinguish these two concepts, I turn to a gamification text, which further illustrates the fundamentals of educational gamification, *The Gamification of Learning and Instruction*

*Fieldbook*, (2014) by Karl Kapp, Lucas Blair, and Rich Mesch, who describe gamification as, “[u]sing game-based mechanics, aesthetics, and game thinking to engage people, motivate action, promote learning, and solve problems” (52). The authors outline various types of gamification, as well as differentiating it from the games themselves. While this field book is interesting and germane to discussions of game-based learning and gamification, it speaks to a routinely prescriptive, rule-based and structure-oriented Game-Based Pedagogy, rather than one that is rooted in criticism, rhetoric, and the field of (digital) humanities. A clearer distinction between gamification and game-based learning comes from Cathleen Martin and Benton Tyler in “Character Creation: Gamification and Identity,” an article to be later discussed in greater length. In the introduction to their article, the authors write:

As opposed to game-based learning, which implements games and game design principles into a professor's pedagogy, gamification applies game activities vis-à-vis an overlay of typical gaming elements onto a standard curriculum... We employ the following gamification techniques: displaying progress via boss fights and badges, employing narrative elements to create a cohesive semester-long story arc, and implementing level-based grading system with experience points (XP) (1).

Martin and Tyler’s distinction between gamification and game-based learning is important for understanding why I have centered this project in game-based learning, rather than in gamification. Although elements of gamification may manifest in a game-based pedagogy, each approach has objectives and presentations that are ostensibly

separate. However, it is relevant to discuss this distinction as they are both related and sometimes intersecting concepts in discussions on game-based learning.

I emphasize discussing this distinction, as the aim of this project is neither to propose a direct gamification or to propose that a game-based pedagogy will make writing *fun*. As Joshua Daniel-Waruiya points out in “Gamification Makes Writing Fun,” a chapter in *Bad Ideas about Writing*: “[Gamifying] rehearses a common, yet misleading conception of fun as something like easy pleasure. To have fun means people feel as though they are not working hard, or even not working at all, simply because they are escaping the monotony of hard work to the adventure of a whimsical game. This process is sometimes described metaphorically as chocolate-covered broccoli” (316). More simply put, despite the often-lauded promise of student entertainment when gamification techniques are applied to existing course structure or curricula, these outcomes are subjective. As such, while “fun” may be a byproduct of a game-based pedagogy, it is not the goal, nor the aim of pursuing or enacting it in a composition classroom. Further, after clarification of this distinction, we move now to game-based learning and its most famous key theorists, James Paul Gee and Kurt Squire, whose writing and ideas about game-based learning have shaped the discourse and practice of game-based pedagogy.

As a lifelong gamer, while studying gaming's relation to composition studies, discovering influential American linguist James Paul Gee's academic work on game and learning, and soon after, Kurt Squires' on the teaching and learning potential of video games, helped to bridge my personal and intellectual interests of gaming and writing. Gee's theories of literacy, identity, social learning, and multimodality in video games in

tandem with contemporary composition theory in threshold concepts, is the core of this project. Gee's texts, *What Video Games Have to Teach us About Learning and Literacy* (2003) and *Unified Discourse Analysis: Language, Reality, Virtual worlds, and Video Games* (2015) attempt to connect design elements in video games, which incentivize and reward learning through a variety of social, cognitive, embodied, linguistic, and psychological channels. I will first begin by outlining Gee's writing on literacy in video games, drawing from both aforementioned texts.

James Paul Gee

### Literacy

In Gee's *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy* (2003), he presents thirty-six principles, in detail, of learning. However, at the center of Gee's main argument in *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy* is literacy and identity—and their inherent relationship with one another. Gee writes, “[l]iteracy requires more than being able to ‘decode’ (words or images for instance) and because it requires people to be able to participate in—or at least understand—certain sorts of social practices, we need to focus on...” (18). Players of video games are made to understand the rules of the game that are presented *explicitly* through tutorials and *implicitly* through players' attempts to read through the signs and symbols presented to them during gameplay. The tutorial process may also include elements such as instructions for how to operate the point of view (camera<sup>1</sup>) controls,

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<sup>1</sup> The perspective displayed on-screen, which may be fixed or dynamic.

character/view movement actions, and fundamental mechanics, such as game menu navigation, shooting, driving a vehicle, or saving game progress. Indeed, this is often a lot to keep track of, especially for inexperienced players, regarding their familiarity with particular hardware apparatuses or game genre. Familiarity or fluency in a role-playing game does not necessarily transfer to the experience of playing a first-person shooter, for example. However, understanding the rules, basic gameplay mechanics, and recognizing staple game elements like a main menu or boss fights<sup>2</sup> does not make the player entirely literate in a game without first-hand experience, and often with a significant investment of time. Gee would call this experience “embodiment,” and “situated meaning,” or, in other words, meaning that is contextualized by the experience of playing, or for the purposes of my argument, of instruction in composition.

Gee explains that game tutorials or free play in the game space is a process of contextualization, which may also be referred to as situated or embodied meanings: “The embodied nature of video game stories brings out a crucial feature...meaning (sense, significance) is itself situation specific and embodied...[G]ames are particularly good examples of how learning and thinking work in any semiotic domain when they are powerful and effective, not passive and inert” (81). Because of the necessarily interactive nature of games, tying meaning to words and concepts is less a matter of memorization of descriptive definition, but extends also as a functional “mechanic,” or fundamental concept of engagement in the game. Functional, mechanical literacy, then, can be

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<sup>2</sup> A challenging foe in video games usually encountered at the end of a level or after defeating weaker enemies.

understood as a player/student’s understanding of concepts that can be directly applied (such as how to move in the game world, or how to correctly format an essay according to the latest MLA standards.)

It is relevant to refer to an older text by Gee, “Literacy, Discourse, and Linguistics: An Introduction” (1989) to build on this line of thinking. In the article, Gee posits, “[a]ny socially useful definition of ‘literacy’ must be couched in terms of the notion of Discourse. Thus, I define ‘literacy’ as the mastery for *fluent* control over a secondary Discourse. Therefore, literacy is always plural: *literacies...*” (9). Gee’s argument, here, reflects his more recent scholarship in that a literacy or fluency in a game world, or in a disciplinary domain, for example, requires a similar fluent and adeptness in a plurality of literacies. Later in this chapter, I connect Gee’s notion of plurality in literacy to Stuart Selber’s multiliteracy scholarship.

To restate Gee’s argument about this plurality, when player/learners are immersed in the secondary discourse of the game world, presented to them through symbolic, metaphorical, and rhetorical signs, they become more literate—more fluent in a secondary discourse and in a new semiotic domain. This immersion into semiotic domains and discourses inform the creation of the new identities that are necessary for taking on these new skills. Deeply connected to this literacy is an emergent formation of identity when student/players enter new semiotic domains.

### Projective Identity

Gee argues that students/learners, upon entering new subjects, new courses, and new ideas, are entering a new rhetorical, linguistic, disciplinary domain, or more

concisely put, a new “semiotic domain.” A student, then, must adopt or create a *new* identity with the skills (or the capacity to learn new skills), language (and the capacity to speak specialized language), and perspective (and the capacity to perceive new concepts) to adapt to their new situation, and must become literate in order to thrive in that situation and socially engage in its discourse. Gee explains what he calls a “tripartite theory of identity” in learning with video games as an interaction between the player’s real-world identity, the identity of the avatar<sup>3</sup>, and the projection of identity that occurs between.

At the center of his analysis, Gee identifies three kinds of identities shared between the player/learner and the avatar being played in a game, a virtual identity: “A virtual character in the virtual world,” (49) also called an avatar, who the player inhabits, taking on the role and skill set of the character, sometimes with opportunities throughout the game to develop, change, and improve them. In a later work, *Unified Discourse Analysis: Language, Reality, Virtual Worlds, and Video Games* (2015), Gee expands on the discussion of avatars, and their uses and functions. Sometimes, players make choices or decisions that affect the character, other characters, the arc of the story, or even the world they inhabit. Some games hide the consequences of these choices well, waiting until later in the game’s narrative to reveal their consequences. For example, in the 2018 action-role playing game, *Assassin’s Creed: Odyssey*, the protagonist encounters a priest attacking sick villagers, warning that their survival would spread disease across the island. The player is presented with a choice: kill the priest or kill the villagers. Choosing

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<sup>3</sup> A visible or abstracted representation of the player, which that player controls. Sometimes the player creates this avatar, and other times they character is already created.

the former seems to be the right ethical choice, but later in the game, the player learns that sickness has spread dramatically over the island, potentially killing many more. In many ways, the player takes ownership of the character they have created.

The second identity is the “real-world” identity of the player and learner. I’ll use myself as an example: A student, a queer white person in their late twenties, a lover of cats, a gamer, a line cook. These are identities that I have either adopted or was born into in the real-world. Naturally, while most players are not magic users, marksmen, bandits, bards, or wanderers roaming post-apocalyptic wastelands, inheriting these roles and personas becomes more than escapism; it becomes an ongoing project of decision-making in gameplay, which is often informed by a player’s own embodied experience as a “real-world” person. This “project,” Gee suggests, or “projective identity” is at the crossroads between these two identities: “‘Project,’ meaning both ‘to project one’s values and desires onto the virtual character’...and ‘seeing the virtual character as one’s own project in the making, a creature whom I imbue with certain trajectory through time defined by my aspirations for what I want that character to be and become....’” (50). So, where does this lead us? Why should customization of a game character have anything to do with learning? Gee concedes that learners, through enacting an identity, more deeply immerse themselves in the semiotic domain they are entering. Gee’s argument, at its core, points to the idea that our projective identities move beyond and through boundaries that static media cannot—we move *through* games, rather than consuming or experiencing remotely or vicariously through to the end, as we do while watching a film or reading a book. In discussing semiotic domains, through both gaming and educational experiences,

the player/student becomes literate in many semiotic domains, from English composition, to creating an avatar in role-playing games such as *The Elder Scroll Online*. In considering the latter, however, Gee writes:

This tripartite play of identities (a virtual identity, a real-world identity, and a projective identity) in the relationship ‘player as virtual character’ is quite powerful. It transcends identification with characters in novels or movies, for instance, because it is both active (the player actively does things) and reflexive in the sense of the player has made some choices about the virtual character... (53-54)

After dedicating a large amount of time, energy, and thought to the project of creating a character, or the process of forming a character’s identity—in this case, of a student learning to write—a student’s engagement will more likely be secured and valued. Gee provides examples of these concepts playing out in the context of a science classroom. Students, taking on the identity of a scientist, will *learn as a scientist*, rather than a student, without official research credentials or degrees. In taking on the language, practices, social customs, methodological techniques, and skills of a scientist, and enacting them through a classroom experiment, for example, the student more deeply engages in the learning of scientific principles and concepts—they enact the identity of a scientist.

With a great deal of investment in their avatar/identity, players/learners begin the process of positive (and negative) input feedback. In games, inputs (cognitive, aesthetic, logical, narrative-choice, and tactile effort and action), achievements, and success all

attain are amplified. Even small amounts of effort yield results. Seeing and feeling the character, the player embodies and has created becomes stronger as they move through a story is a rewarding experience.

In *Unified Discourse Analysis* (2015), Gee further expands on his analysis of projective identities and player avatars: “In playing a game, we players are both imposed onto by the character we play... and impose ourselves on that character” (97). More plainly, the interaction of “real-world identities” and “virtual identities” are at the same time symbiotic and at odds with one another—both feeding in to the other in a cyclical fashion. Beyond identities in themselves is the interaction between identities in socialization. In *What Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy* (2003), Gee also points out the social learning taught in games, and how it might apply outside of the game space.

### Social learning & Affinity Groups

Connected deeply with literacy and identity are the concepts of social learning, cooperation, collaboration, or, what Gee calls “Affinity Groups,” otherwise understood as communities of practice. Only multiplayer games depend on direct interaction between players. Much of this social interaction, through which gaming requires some level of literacy in the game’s specialized language—including symbols, concepts, techniques, and strategies. . Not all games are equal in their introductions or tutorials in which new players come to terms with new ideas and languages. In what Gee calls the *distributed principle* (33), the *dispersed principle* (34), and the *affinity group principles* (35), he notes that, often, to in order to access the resources which may extend a player’s fluency

or understanding within the semiotic domain of a game as complex as, for example, *World of Warcraft*, *Dark Souls*, or *Bloodborne*, they must tap into a vast, networked social community of other players who have been collecting, testing, and sharing their own “research” and strategies in online forums and on social media sites.

As mentioned in his discussion of identity, Gee calls this sort of network an “affinity group:” “Members of an affinity group bond to each other primarily through a *common endeavor* and only secondarily through affective ties, which are in turn, leveraged to further the common endeavor” (206). A shared vested interest in the game and a desire for the acquisition of a meta-level understanding of it, then, is the endeavor of this community; their bond is strengthened by their passion for, or affinity with, the game itself. Gee continues his definition and analysis of affinity groups, stating that “[m]embers of the affinity group have *extensive* knowledge, not just intensive knowledge. By ‘extensive,’ I mean that members must be involved with many or all stages of the endeavor; able to carry out multiple, partly overlapping functions; and able to reflect on the endeavor as a whole system, not just their part in it” (206). I believe this point is crucial in an understanding of the social mission of affinity groups and online communities found on fan sites, message boards, and threads in subreddits on Reddit. If a user/player/learner has knowledge, tips, and advice, they distribute that those things as participation in the greater system of the game itself and its surrounding community. Anecdotally, my own experience in gaming reaffirms that support and advice from such communities is vital overcoming difficult roadblocks during gameplay.

Finally, Gee emphasizes the social nature of learning, as evidenced in games. He highlights massively multiplayer online games (e.g., *World of Warcraft*) and competitive first-person shooters<sup>4</sup> (e.g., *Halo* and *Counter-Strike*, respectively). These games are played with other people through the internet, and sometimes locally on one to a few gaming systems. I have fond memories of attending LAN (Local Access Network) parties, in which attendees would all bring their own Xbox console to link together in a local network to support two to four players on each system. We may have been using the internet to connect us, but we were also sitting side-by-side with one another—teammates and opponents.

Gee describes the experience of playing early, text-based online role-playing games, referred to as MUDs (Multi-User Dungeon): “Players moved through dungeons, role playing different types of characters, but the universe through which they moved was composed entirely of text. Players read text that told them what their surroundings were, what was to be done, and what the effects were of various actions they had taken” (180). Compare these graphical and mechanical limitations to today, or even ten years ago, in which players move in beautifully rendered, 3D environments with hundreds, if not thousands, of visual customizations, equipment, weapons, spell animations, and more. Massively multiplayer online games prioritize social elements for the success of the player, often requiring groups to form in order to accomplish greater quests, of which solo players could not accomplish on their own. Gee describes this necessarily

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<sup>4</sup> Games played in first-person (looking through the eyes of the character) with a weapon on screen, and sometimes competing against other online players.

collaborative effort in play and communication: “The [players] can talk to each other by typing in words or through technology that allows them to speak their words into a headset and be heard on the other players’ computers. Players can talk to each other in their roles as fantasy virtual characters (their avatars) or in terms of their real-world identities or they can switch between the two” (180). Indeed, the multiple avenues for communication can make even the shyest gamer a social butterfly when playing, for example, the role of a flamboyant and exuberant sorceress.

Further, Gee posits that these social interactions do not end and are not limited to direct communication, but spill into other, grander social schemas, such as auction houses and a fluctuating, player-driven economic markets: “When a certain items becomes scarce (e.g., a certain piece of armor or certain type of sword), the price goes up. When something is common, the price goes down. In some cases, players of such games go online to auction sites such as eBay and buy and sell virtual items from the games for real money” (181). In a critical game-based context, an interrogation of this market’s significance, not as it applies to economics, but, perhaps, under Marxist critique, may present a valuable cultural artifact and object of study. This being said, an important question emerges in considering the complex virtual systems that exist in an activity designed for play and enjoyment: What drives players to organize and collectivize in this way? Creating community may be one of the goals of collectivized knowledge and language, which Gee elaborates on in more recent works. His work throughout his career in linguistics on discourse communities informs this analysis as it applies to video game communities, such as the dedicated community surrounding *World of Warcraft*. In

*Unified Discourse Analysis* (2015), Gee expands on his thoughts of affinity groups in intersection with this endeavor of shared knowledge:

In the massively multiplayer game *World of Warcraft (Wow)* (and others) some players engage, on internet sites, in an activity called ‘theory crafting,’ sometimes written as ‘theorycrafting’... the study of a game like *Wow* as a system (seeking to understand how its underlying statistical models, variable interactions, and game mechanics work at the deepest level... Players use the knowledge they gain from sites devoted to theory crafting to improve their play, and many contribute their own data and an analysis to these sites that have become collaborative and communal repositories of knowledge (30-31).

In some cases, these groups have strict standards for what data can be shared, including rigid formatting and content limitations. Self-curated, self-maintained communities that collect, collaborate, and publish independent data without professional or institutional credentials, Gee would argue, are a prime example of the way games (and learning) are inherently social. The endeavor for these groups moves beyond the intention to share in an interest and provide tips to newcomers, but also encompasses a desire to distill a game’s core mechanics scientifically and mathematically to determine strategic and beneficial strategies for new and “veteran” players. Sites such as *Elitist Jerks* is such a repository of data, guides, and in-depth analysis of “theory-crafting” interactions and work. These kinds of communities, however, would not be possible without readable media to become literate in—connecting us back with Gee’s strong focus on multimodal

and critical, conceptual literacy. Gee writes, “[s]cience itself is a collaborative and communal effort. Theory crafters discuss their work with each other and build<sup>[5]</sup> on each other’s work, sometimes disputing and contesting results, across the globe...” (33).

Gee cites some examples of the specialized language and in-game literacy which players need in order to develop and/or research to make progress, especially in role playing games, which use numerical statistics alongside mathematical dimensions, affecting play: “Average weapon damage can be calculated by adding the high and low ends of the damage range, then dividing the two. Weapon DPS<sup>[6]</sup> is calculated by taking the average damage and dividing by the weapon speed...Crits—melee crits are a chance to add 100% of the weapon damage...” (32). To the unassimilated reader, or even a gamer who plays primarily racing game or farming simulators<sup>7</sup> (yes, these exist, and are very popular) these words and calculations might as well be another language—and they are, when situated in the context of *World of Warcraft* and other similar games. On the other hand, devoted fan communities surrounding *Farming Simulators* are literate in the realistic specs of farming equipment, which *World of Warcraft* players perhaps have little to no fluency in. This idea encapsulates Gee’s central arguments: Learning depends on the development of literacy and identities, through which the formation, dispersal, and collaborative project of sharing knowledge occurs. This leads us to another core concept expressed and explored by Gee and others: *Multimodality*, or the aesthetic and conceptual

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<sup>5</sup> “Builds” are player-created arrangements of character/avatar skills, equipment, and statistic which serve particular roles in a game with both advantages and weaknesses.

<sup>6</sup> A term used often in online role-playing games, referring to “damage per second,” or the point value of damage given over the duration of an attack or spell, for example.

<sup>7</sup> Slow-paced, realistic games that emphasize process, management, and data collection.

myriad of modes and mediums expressed and presented in games, and how this might apply to teaching and learning.

### Multimodality

Video games are inherently multimodal. Players take in and interact with (and often manipulate, change, and create) a variety of medias and stimulus when engaging with a game: Visuals, audio, tactile eye-hand coordination, reading, solving problems and puzzles, mastering the use of weapons and their recoil patterns (how shooting affects aim and movement), aiming, climbing, and other maneuvers, etc. Other games, such as classic puzzle games like *Tetris*, while stripped back to simple visuals and game mechanics of fitting together falling blocks, require players to *read* each block to become familiar with and literate in their function for and against each block. Seen another way, these blocks, and facing shapes are the signs and symbols that represent their uses, which the player must learn to place accordingly. Gee, in a concluding note of his introductory chapter, “Semiotic Domains,” is wise to concisely integrate multimodality into the broader understanding of literacy: “The content of video games, when they are played actively and critically, is something like this: *They situated meaning in a multimodal space through embodied experiences to solve problems and reflect on the intricacies of design and imagined worlds and sign of both real and imaged social relationships, and identities in the modern world*” (40-41). This analysis from Gee casts a wide net, capturing the many dimensions of engagement and interactivity communicated through games—and their potential to teach. In this way, it perhaps synthesizes this review up to this point, which has covered Gee’s game-based-learning connections concerned with literacy,

identity, and social learning. With an understanding of these concepts from Gee's analysis, we move to a veritable marriage of these ideas as an expression of multimedia-enhanced, multifaceted engagement, or multimodality. Multimodality is a perspective which combines the interconnected elements of literacy, identity, and social learning. In describing multimodality in its relation to games and learning, Gee presents his multimodal principle:

In video games, meaning, thinking, and learning are linked to multiple modalities (words, images, actions, sounds, etc.) and not just words. Sometimes at a particular point in a game, multiple modalities support each other to communicate similar meanings... Sometimes they communicate different meanings, each of which fits together to form a bigger, more meaningful and satisfying whole (106).

Gee provides several examples from games, which challenge players to *read* the problems presented and to *respond* to them using skills and modes learned in the game. These examples illustrate the way video games teach transferable skills that remain useful throughout the course of a game (107). In another example, in *Bloodborne* and the *Dark Souls* series, players come to recognize and memorize enemy attack patterns, and learn to time their attacks to counter and parry an oncoming blow—this parry triggers a chime-like sound, communicating an opening for a death blow; in *Bloodborne*, this death blow is called a “visceral attack,” causing significant damage to an enemy. Here, *reading* the animations of an enemy, hearing the chime, correctly timing and controlling a character, all work together in conjunction to perform an action. Further, to reiterate this concept

differently, in the appendix of his learning principles, Gee's multimodality principle restates and reframes its original description: "There are multiple ways to make progress or move ahead. This allows learners to make choices, rely on their own strengths, styles of learning and problem solving, while also exploring alternative styles" (223). This gaming concept can be applied in the context of a composition classroom, as often students are faced with many choices and decisions as they switch between different modes of writing.

In short, Gee presents the bulk of conceptual and theoretical work on the connections between games and learning, which center primarily on the literacy and necessity of taking on new identities. What he has detailed through the texts I have reviewed are the foundational concepts for a game-based pedagogy, which reflect the four Pillars I have discussed in the last chapter: *Literacy*, *Identity*, *Social Learning*, and *Multimodality*. However, a pedagogical framework cannot depend solely on one thinker. In some ways, Kurt Squire took the baton from Gee upon publishing his 2011 work, *Video Games and Learning: Teaching and Participatory Culture*. Here, Squire expands on some of Gee's ideas on social learning, collaboration, and collectivizing research that are relevant to this project, and the rest of this chapter.

#### Kurt Squire: Ideology & Affinity Groups

Kurt Squire's *Video Games and Learning: Teaching and Participatory Culture in the Digital Age* (2011) is significant to this project in its extension and understanding of Gee's "Affinity Spaces," and its argument which proposes games may open a dialogue to

teach about ideology and politics, among other social and cultural themes. Squire's centering on the game series *Civilization*, as a cultural artifact and pedagogical tool for simulating geopolitical relations, colonialism, and ideology is germane to introducing a critical orientation in the context of teaching composition.

One of Kurt Squire's central themes and concerns in *Video Games and Learning* is ideology, and how a game systems and design may teach (or at least provoke) students/learners/players to reflect critically on social, political, linguistic, or thematic representations. Squire posits,

Games are 'ideological worlds' in that they instant ideas through implicit rule sets and systems (rather than by telling stories). The word ideological tries to capture that they are built according to theories of how the world operates (implicitly and explicitly). Every game makes value judgements about what is and is not important. I prefer the word *world system* because games are not (usually) abstracted rule systems worlds rich with representations (30-31).

While games are not the real world, and they do not directly affect global political events, often simulations entailing these actions can instill greater inquiry, and a critical perspective in students who may have limited or unarticulated political or ideological beliefs. Squire expands on this idea by providing an example of a turned-based<sup>8</sup> strategy game series, *Civilization*, in which the player controls the developmental, social, and

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<sup>8</sup> Turn-based refers to a feature in many role playing and strategy games, meaning the player must make decisions, usually while time is "paused," rather than in "real time."

political progress and actions of a civilization over a set number of turns representing hundreds, if not thousands, of years.

Squire describes how the series provides a miniature model of interactive microcosm for players to participate in and bear witness to the effects of geography, ‘broad policy decision, and technological advancement throughout time, of which are often determined by access to in-game resources such as iron, wood, silver, and other natural goods.

So, all representations have their slant, but games uniquely *force* players to control many of these assumptions directly. The most obvious example is how it models foreign relations in *Civ* (as in life) more advanced civilizations strong-arm less developed civilizations into sharing precious resources, giving access to military space, or joining in foreign conflicts. They might give away technologies or food in return for a friend United Nations vote (24-25).

In my experience with *Civilization*, I have also found resource scarcity and abundance of “strategic” or military resources, like nitrite (for firearms) and horses (for cavalry) largely determine a player’s or AI<sup>9</sup> opponents a military advantage. Sometimes, the opponent AI nations seem to have developed firearms and advanced artillery by the time my nation only recently “discovered” gunpowder and sanitation technology—and they always want to start wars. Of course, a video game depicting national interactions, warfare, and leadership lacks

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<sup>9</sup> Artificial Intelligence—Computer opponents (not the player)

the nuance and complications of real-world scenarios. However, even within the games, too, players may detect the game developers' biases and ideological tendencies. For example, attempting to resist engaging in war to maintain a pacifist foreign policy will likely make your nation a target, and sometimes other nations will officially disown your nation for having a weak army, even threatening war if they do not see your military grow. Additionally, winning the game is a matter of "conditions of victory" achieved through direct military domination, "cultural victory," or attracting more foreign tourists than other nations. In a game-based pedagogy, interacting with avatar creations or political simulations like *Civilization*, for example, students might discuss and write about the representations and concepts depicted in these titles as cultural artifacts. Further, when engaged in critical analyses of power, institutions, and ideas, students become, as Henry Giroux would argue, better prepared to engage in informed civic life and political action in the real world. These issues, inherently tied to identity, relate directly to the marginalized identities at stake when institutions use sociopolitical influence to pass oppressive legislation.

In contextualizing his discussion of *Civilization*, Squire turns our attention to the participatory nature of games and the fervent fandoms and communities that surround them: "Gaming forums are the Wild Wild West, where this intellectual work happens... In these forums, players post data from their games and examine others' data. They collect and analyze data across games and propose rule changes. As players gather superior strategies... they change the broader rule systems... [P]layers create their own

‘mods’ which are versions of the game with different rules” (34). The modding community, in fact, is an active and participatory venture of (mostly) amateur programmers and programming-tinkerers, creating and changing in-game content to experiment with current systems, but also creating more challenging, more absurd, and more diverse experiences; the skills required to mod games are self-taught and likely supported by similar fan forums and message boards. In many cases, modding communities extend the “life” of a game by creating original content to supplement and extend the base game, as in the case of *The Elder Scrolls: Skyrim* among others, whose dedicated modders create fixes and new content, which improves the “quality of life,” of games, implementing features fans want but developers have not included. Sometimes the modding communities increase the “lifespan” of a game far into the future with recurrent fan-made content mods that allow for new game experiences made by modders who have reassembled assets within the game to create, for example, new game scenarios. This production of content could not exist if it were not dependent on a community of practice who routinely collects, publishes, and disperses their knowledge to the broader affinity group.

Squire suggests that producing meaning is a process by which players/students continually set goals, strategies, and other elements, which are then distributed to other players/student within affinity spaces. Affinity spaces may come as an extension of peer-to-peer mentorship and continued meaning-making and production. While touching on important aspects of representation, identity, and meaning-making, though, he seems to overlook the problems and implications of a participatory, game-based pedagogy, as Gee

does as well. Squire, notes that strategy games like *Civilization* may challenge students to confront realities of colonization, and by introducing these topics into the classroom may engender critical conversations and assignments; however, the question of discussing real-world identities is still at large. Squire touches on the issues of colonization and representation but does not approach these topics from a critical perspective, informed by cultural studies. The potential in cross-disciplinary learning moments is perhaps opened when studying a game like *Civilization* either actively or as a static text or cultural artifact. Both Gee and Squire emphasize the participatory nature of affinity groups by calling attention to the way its members contribute their knowledge and research in collaborative processes of meaning-making. This process, however, would not be possible without literacy in the specialized language acquired through the immersion in the semiotic domains of gameplay or disciplinary sites of practice. In considering these key concepts in Gee and Squire's scholarship, we now turn to Stuart Selber, whose work, *Multiliteracies for the Digital Age*, further expands on a critical analysis of literacy, its plurality, and its connection to critical pedagogy.

#### Stuart Selber: Critical Digital Literacy

Terms, demographics, and media do not exist in a vacuum, but rather in a complex web of producers, receivers, and reproducers—all serving a purpose in their contribution to this feedback loop. In Selber's *Multiliteracies for the Digital Age* (2004), he outlines several modes of literacy: computer literacy, functional literacy, critical literacy, and rhetorical literacy. This review will focus primarily on the chapters "Reimagining Computers Literacy" and "Critical Literacy: Computers as Cultural

Artifacts, Students as Informed Questioners and of Technology.” As this chapter conceptually expands the ideas about literacy and ideology expressed by Gee and Squire, I will ground it in the material, economic, and social conditions of technology.

Selber argues that a critical, or “postcritical” stance in technological and digital literacy extends much further than mere “instrumental knowledge” of programming and user interface. He suggests that, instead, students should be encouraged to “recognize and question the politics of computers” (75). In tasking students to think critically about the discourse surrounding technology and its production, students engage in a critical literacy, moving beyond the subject position of consumers and receivers, and in turn become critics and producers of meaning.

Of course, this is only the start of developing a critical digital literacy. In a pedagogically game-based composition course, this might manifest in discussions and writing assignments focused on technology and software, not only as users as consumers, but also as critics of the narratives and discourses surrounding these products and technologies. Selber’s concerns do not end at the material products of technology in themselves, but rather is concerned with pushing students beyond the singular position of consumer. He argues that any use of technologies necessitates a grounded, contextualized framework, which recognizes the social, political, and even ecological implications of producing these technologies (the exploitation of workers, for example.)

Selber attends to the “aims” of such a critical literacy. His stance recognizes the social, political, and cultural relevance of power relations, conditions of production, and social construction in its interactions with technology and narratives about technology.

Selber concisely expounds upon the aims of a critical literacy: “Instead of reproducing existing social and political order, which functional modes tend to do, its strives to both expose biases and provide an assemblage of cultural practices that in a democratic spirit, might lead to the production of positive social change” (81). Here, Selber cites Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo (2000) and their adjacent view of literacy as inherently linked to reconstruction and social change. When we introduce computers in this discussion, Selber suggests that a critical student would become literate in decoding “common sense” narratives about technology as a contributing element in the discourse. This attribute of critical literacy actively engages in an “oppositional” or counter-discourse, which may detangle the common-sense narratives which surround technology, such as an innate link between technology and a utopian future, or that technology will always improve and enhance human lives. Like Freire and Macedo, Selber’s suggestion to reposition students in the role of critic is akin to the former’s educational model, which positions students as co-creators of knowledge, and not merely receivers or consumers. These narratives involving learning and technology may offer a bridge to progress that is inherently mediated by technology, or perhaps suggest that technology makes our social and professional lives easier to manage.

Contrary to this myth of easier human management, the neoliberal futurist narratives of technology as progress do not address socioeconomic issues of access, class, or the labor on which tech corporations depend—on the backs of vastly abused and underpaid workers—and yet, markets and institutions have made owning these devices necessary in order to engage in educational, social, cultural, and professional social

spheres with limited economically accessible alternatives. Critical students, according to Selber, recognize “technology” itself is not a monolith or a neutral subject in any discourse, but instead understand that all things involving human production and interaction are innately political. Instead of blindly accepting the position that technology exists in an apolitical vacuum, free of critique, critical students act against, question, and critique this assumption. As a counterpoint to narratives which argue that technology holds an apolitical position in culture, Selber suggests we consider technology as cultural artifacts, with a wide variety of values and cultural connotations. This is not to depict technology as an insidious cultural power, but rather a fraught one that is often treated as a neutral subject, free from critique or derision. Through applying Selber's stance, students may discuss the uses of technology, which intentionally exclude, suppress and repress marginalized and vulnerable communities, while at the same time exploring technologies developed to assist differently abled demographics

#### “Post-Critical”

Selber also argues for what he calls a “post-critical” stance when teaching in computer-mediated courses/classrooms. His post-critical stance moves beyond a fluency or adeptness in the use of technology or computers, and emphasizes meta-level thinking about the cultural, economic, and social dimensions of that technology:

... [A]lthough students will develop some extremely useful skills under an instrumental approach, they will have a much more difficult time thinking critically, contextually, and historically about the computer technologies are

developed and used within our culture and how such use, in turn, intersects with writing and communication practices in the classroom (9).

Like Gee, whose definition of literacy also entails meta-level thinking, Selber argues that grounding any teaching in a social justice orientation, which illuminates the material realities of technology's production and its social position, serves as another avenue for meta-level critical thinking. Selber argues for a multifaceted perspective of teaching, which not only prepares students to use the software and hardware they need fluency in in order to complete their assignments and participate in the social dimensions of a computer-mediated classroom (Email, learning management systems such as Canvas, Blackboard, and Moodle, forums for discussion and message boards, etc.), but also teaches them to acquire a greater awareness of their material and cultural implications. To get a broader view of cultural implications, we now transition to discuss scholars whose work and scholarship have taken influence from the likes of Gee, Squire, and Selber to develop and practice pedagogical methods of their own.

## Emma Kostopolus: Identity, Continued

### Queer Space

Until this point, my review has discussed game-based pedagogy and key scholarly figures who have explored it through conceptual lenses of literacy, identity, social learning, and multimodality. I will now transition to discuss scholarship which interrogates the question of identity and representation. While Gee and Squire provide fundamental concepts of practice and theory, they have generally lacked a critical lens and critique or discussion of intersectionality or inclusivity as it pertains to game-based pedagogy. However, Emma Kostopolus' thesis, titled, "Using Role-Playing Gamification to Create Safe Spaces for LGBT Students in the Composition Classroom," which was perhaps the impetus for this project, expands upon Gee's identity theory by incorporating queer theory and intersectional feminism. In her thesis work, Kostopolus negotiates a relationship between queer theory and video game representations, carrying this theory into her proposed role-playing gamification pedagogy. Citing feminist visual theory in Laura Mulvey's essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," and the scholarship of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Kostopolus foregrounds her analysis using this lens, before moving into game studies scholarship. Kostopolus centers her thesis on the construction of identity in role-playing games, citing Gee's scholarship on virtual, real-world, and projective identities. She points out, however, that video games and their relationship to identity may lead to "identity tourism," (9) in which people of privileged positions

assume marginalized identities, which are often harmfully exorcized and monolithic representations of real people.

Kostopolus argues that in the virtual space in video games, members of the LGBT community may feel less at risk when presenting themselves in ways which match their sexual and gender identity. In addition to the potential of empowering queer students (LGBTQ), representation of diverse bodies and identities may also further critical objectives such as acceptance (as opposed to tolerance;) in this, she concedes,

The continual creation and reinforcement of diverse identities in games allows both for members of the LGBT community to move through a game world with their orientation intact and to teach acceptance of non-heterosexual identities to people otherwise steeped in a culture of compulsory heterosexuality (9)

Unlike Gee, whose identity theory does not touch on the varied dimensions of “real-world” identity such as gender, race, and sexual orientation, Kostopolus addresses these matters directly. Drawing from queer theory, she argues that interrogating preexisting notions of gender “abnormality” and “normalcy,” compulsory heteronormativity, and gender essentialism as social constructs are critical topics worth addressing in a pedagogical setting. While Gee argues that learners entering new semiotic domains must forgo their real-life identities, I doubt Kostopolus would agree—students cannot so easily abandon facets of their identities such as race or sexual orientation. To translate the same philosophy in a classroom environment could encourage inclusivity and offer opportunities for learning acceptance and resisting homophobic, transphobic, heteronormative language in writing and in student behavior.

Kostopolus grounds her argument in examples, using several game titles whose queer or heteronormative representations are worth noting to discuss varying levels of choice and player agency regarding gender and sexual representations. These include *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, *Fallout 4*, *The Witcher Series*, and the *God of War* series. Kostopolus's third chapter, "Gamification," reviews a number of key gamification theorists, proponents, and detractors, centering Matthew Faber, whose article "Principles of Game-Like Learning" serves as a model which translates to her proposed composition teaching model. Central to this model is a reconnection of assessment and failure—and the benefit of reframing failure as an opportunity try again.

#### Failure in Games

Kostopolus' thesis also extends and expands upon the work of Gee and Squire with a clearer, more concise call for a critical framing and queer inclusion to a game-based pedagogy. Her work brings the discourse of game-based learning to a critical place rarely explored. Another subject Kostopolus identifies as a key component of a Critical Game-Based Pedagogy in composition is reframing failure as *reiteration*.

Reframing failure as reiteration encourages continual feedback and allows for continuous drafting and revision; Kostopolus details this process, stating, "[e]liminating the fear of failure and failure's attendant judgment is the first step in creating safe space for student expression" (35). Again, her emphasis on creating "safe spaces" for students recalls a theoretical centering in queer theory and a social justice orientation. Kostopolus emphasizes the importance of communicating to students that in a contemporary composition classroom, writing is a process rather than a product. To illustrate this

process, we might envision students going through a cyclic procedure of iteration (composing), drafting, revising, peer revision, and instructor feedback; student writers are in an ongoing loop of inventions, adaptation, and reception. In both video games and in writing, the draft and the virtual space allow the player/writer to experiment, try new things, and take risks, often with minimal consequence, even if they face a “Game Over.”

Gee also argues for a reframing of failure in *What Video Games Have to Teach Us about Learning and Literacy* (2003). Instead of finality or grade-gouging, failure should be thought of as an essential part of learning: “In video games, losing is not losing and the point is not winning easily or judging yourself a failure. In playing video games, hard is not bad and easy is not good” (175). In the *Dark Souls* series, the player creates an avatar, an undead hero in a dark fantasy world, seeking to restore lost humanity and slaying an



Figure 1

assortment of beasts, demons, and other ghouls along the way. Within the *Dark Souls* series, including its offshoot game, *Bloodborne*, death and failure become core aspects of

the game, of which the rest of its content revolve around. One screen that players will likely see many times during their play in any *Souls* game is the infamous “You Died” screen (see Fig 1) after being killed by an enemy or opponent player

The games journalism site, *IGN* describes a 2016 article by Chloe Rad entitled, [“How Dark Souls Made it Fun to Fail.”](#) Rad writes, “[t]rying, failing, and trying again is such a key part of the *Dark Souls* experience that From<sup>10</sup> named the first game’s PC edition *Dark Souls: Prepare to Die*. Death and rebirth are recurring themes in *Souls* lore, too, with the act of killing, assisting, taunting, and encouraging other players sewn into the fabric of its passive and active multiplayer.” Of course, most instructors would hope that their students’ experiences writing in their classes does not resemble a dark fantasy world where death and turmoil are standard.

Kostopolus’ thesis serves as another key work in grounding this project’s critical, inclusive orientation as it centers inclusivity of marginalized bodies and identities, expanding Gee’s projective identity, through the application of queer theory. Kostopolus’ proposition of creating safer spaces for marginalized students in composition classrooms lends itself to the reduction or elimination of the fear of risk and experimentation for novice students by reframing failure as iteration. Relatedly, Cathela Martin and Benton Tyler, writing at the University of Montevallo, focus their research on the classroom application of avatar creation as a critically focused exercise and classroom discussion

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<sup>10</sup> Fromsoft, the developer of the *Dark Souls* series.

that encourages students to interrogate identity representations, the social constructions which make up identities, and the consequences affiliated with certain identity categories.

#### Cathlena Martin and Benton Tyler: Avatar Creation & Class Discussion

##### Avatars and Identity

Within their gamification rationale, Martin and Tyler identify three main purposes of their assignment: to create safe spaces for students to construct identities through their character avatars, to open opportunities for critical discussion on identities within video games, and to, in turn, engage students critically in discussions regarding stereotypes (2). The authors argue that role-playing encourages student engagement and deeper exploration of identity, and cite drama scholarship to supplement this claim. In addition, the authors acknowledge the scholarship of both James Paul Gee and Kurt Squire as seminal in the field of educational gamification.

Martin and Tyler provide an outline of their curriculum, which focuses assignments on the construction of identity through character avatars and critical discussions about stereotypes and representations within video games. Their curriculum includes a timeline and a projected lesson plan, including presentation and discussion assignments, along with a grading rubric, translating traditional notions of public speaking into “charisma,” a common character avatar “skill” in role-playing games. The course includes a reading by Zachary Waggoner, a scholar I will discuss in more depth shortly. One of the reading included in their curriculum is an excerpt of “Videogames, Avatars, and Identity: A Brief History” from Waggoner’s 2009 book, *My Avatar, My*

*Self*. In this reading, students are introduced to Waggoner's definition of "avatar," which "[r]epresents the user within a game.

With an avatar, the player has choices in its creation and the avatar's characteristics—including but not limited to appearance, skills, or attributes—can be changed" (4). Students are tasked with "[c]omposing a character overview," including a name, bio, and description of the character and imagined or published game they exist in. Martin and Tyler do not directly use video games or software for creating avatars, but rather ask that students exercise their creative writing skills in lieu of digital avatar creating platforms. In their study, their students presented their characters and the class discussed their process, interrogating why particular aesthetic or identity-based choices were made. Students were asked to identify underrepresented identities in video games and potential explanations for this lack of representation (4). Martin and Tyler illustrate the interdisciplinary potential in cultural studies analysis, choosing to center assignments and discussions on social and cultural constructions of identity through representations in role-playing games. This theoretical approach corresponds with cultural critic Stuart Hall's theory of identity as a complex negotiation of the subject and its representations in media and in discursive, institutional knowledge, relating again to Gee's discussion of discourses and semiotic domains.

While Martin and Tyler did not assign video games or avatar creation software or apps to their students to create character avatars, games such as *The Elder Scrolls* series and the *Fallout* series are known for detailed player customization and freedom in their character creation mechanics, allowing players to create a detailed and unique character

avatar—customizing its gender and appearance the way the player sees fit. Modding communities also expand the possibilities of customization within these kinds of games beyond those designed by developers. These games, in particular, also represent problems or tension relating to race, class, nations, and political ideology through their science fiction and fantasy narratives. Presented as cultural artifacts, such examples may serve as useful vehicles for discussing and writing about these difficult subjects in a composition context. Scholar Zachary Waggoner, whose work informs that of Martin and Tyler, similarly utilizes an avatar creation assignment in his composition course to discuss identity construction, while also touching on themes of critical pedagogy relevant to this project.

#### Zachary Waggoner: *Morrowind*, Avatars, and Composition

Although relatively dated, Zachary Waggoner’s 2010 article, “Life in *Morrowind*: Identity, Video Games, and First-Year Composition” struck a deep chord with me—mostly because I have long considered *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* to be my all-time favorite game. While *Morrowind* has aged poorly in graphical terms, it is significant in that its influence on open-world role-playing games is unquestionable in regard to contemporary game studies. *Morrowind* tasks players with an overwhelming freedom and variety of customizable choices and a seemingly endless world to explore and become immersed in. No *Elder Scrolls* game can truly begin, however, without the player creating their avatar from a variety of choices in appearance, unique skills, and, in *Morrowind*, their astrological sign.

In Waggoner's article, he centers his concerns, like Martin and Tyler, on avatar creation and character customization. Citing Gee, Waggoner concisely summarizes Gee's project identity theory:

Gee's projective identity then is the liminal middle ground between the real-world identity and the virtual identity of the user: the avatar. It is through the space of this projective identity that virtual identities created and maintained within v-RPGs and the real world of video game user inform each other. Gee seems convinced that the liminal threshold between the user and the videogame avatar is crucial to any identity formation that occurs at the result of the v-RPG play. I believe there is evidence to suggest that the real-world identities of v-RPG users can indeed be impacted in a meaningful way (6)

Waggoner describes using *Morrowind* as an element of his First Year Composition course, which met in a "computer-mediated classroom," and allowed students to play *Morrowind* for an hour before thinking, writing, and discussing their experience.

Waggoner's rationale derives influence from scholar Barbara Duffelmeyer's (2002) work on critical pedagogy to contextualize the practice of avatar creation, citing, "[e]nacting critical pedagogy means thinking of students as participants and urges an appreciation of multiple points of view that permits students to become more aware of the cultural personal lenses through which they and others view the world" (8). Waggoner concludes that engaging students in the dense, groundbreaking role-playing experience of *Morrowind*

allows students to engage in reflection through participation, experience, and investment of time and effort in avatar creation during gameplay.

### *Application in Composition*

Like Martin and Tyler's game-centered experience in the classroom, Waggoner required all students to play one hour of *Morrowind*, and asked them to maintain a self-conscious awareness of the decisions they made when creating their character avatar (8). The results of this activity proved that the character creation practice reflected a surprising identification between each student and their avatars, many giving these characters names with deep personal significance: "The exercise helped the students understand how virtual gaming identities might seem 'real' to those users who invested time and energy in creating and evolving their avatars... [O]nly 21% of students believed it was possible for videogames to impact identity formation before this *Morrowind* gaming experience; 94% believed it was possible after the exercise..." (9). Reflecting on this article in 2019, I observe that even nine years ago, it seems video games had less cultural significance than they do currently.

After this exercise, Waggoner seems convinced by the radical shift in students' perspectives after identification with avatars they were allowed to customize to their aesthetic preferences. He then suggests possibilities of similar exercises for teachers seeking to explore culture or social constructions through games, citing war games, or massively multiplayer role-playing games (like *Wow*). In reflection on the experience of integrating avatar-creation into his first-year composition pedagogy, Waggoner notes, "[i]t seems clear to me the substantial inclusion of video games in first-year composition

textbooks is essential for any textbook claiming an ‘inclusive’ definition of popular culture. We need to pay immediate attention in composition studies to the way videogames impact learning, culture, and identities” (9). Waggoner’s exercise of enacting critical game-based learning to encourage reflective transformation *through* the use of games as a medium enacts the multimodal principles inherent in Gee, Squire, and others discuss in their work. To further expand on the value and relevance of multimodality in a critical game-based composition pedagogy, we turn to scholar Tina Arduini, who provides real-world examples of this concept playing out in a classroom.

Tina Arduini: *Multimodality and Cyborg Students*

As argued by Gee (2003) and others, video games are inherently multimodal. Players consume and interact with a variety of medias and stimulus when engaging with a game. Visuals, audio, tactile eye-hand coordination, reading, solving problems and puzzles, mastering the use of weapons, aiming, climbing, and other maneuvers, to name but a few examples. Through each of these examples, meaning is communicated in a variety of ways. This review now transitions to discuss scholarship that further explores the multimodal implications of games, and students *as gamers*, seamlessly moving between multiple modes to progress within a game.

Ferris State University scholar Tina Arduini’s article, “Cyborg Gamers: Exploring the Effects of Digital Gaming on Multimodal Composition” (2018) attempts to address the issue of multiliteracies, which include digital literacy. “By granting student experience in digital composition practices, multimodal composition instructors can

ensure effective exposure to the twenty-first century literacy requirements to become successful professionals.” Citing Gee and a handful of other scholars, Arduini concedes that digital literacy is an “essential addition to traditional alphabetic writing programs” (89). She then links the significance of digital literacy with the cultural prevalence of digital gaming, quoting statistics which suggest “72-97% of youths play video games in the United States” (89-90). Arduini goes on to assert, multimodal literacy is a skill that video games demand, as they are mediums which communicate in a variety of signs, symbols, sensory stimuli and user feedback (90).

Concerning the evocative title of her article, Arduini argues for the seamless fluency of students moving between various hardware and software apparatus, as if they are merely extensions of themselves. Borrowing from Donna Haraway 1985 essay, “A Cyborg Manifesto,” (she writes, “Haraway’s main argument: ‘Taking responsibility for the social relationships of science and technology...means embracing the skillful tasks of reconstructing the boundaries of daily life, in partial connection with others, in communicating all of our parts’ (Haraway, 1991 p. 181)” (92). This connection relates to Selber’s (2004) call for a wider, more informed and holistic view of technology and for the accountability and critical orientation necessary for a critical digital literacy. Like Selber, Arduini identifies the necessity for a plurality of literacy when engaged in computer-mediated educational sites, reflecting the plurality of pathways to meaning embodied in multimodal pedagogy.

Multimodality is also inherently tied to social learning and affinity groups. Recalling both Gee and Squire’s takes on the interconnected communities of practice and

distributed knowledge in gaming communities, Arduini suggests, “Gamers” are not lone actors, but are inherently tied to a large network of other gamers, the developers, programmers and producers of those games, and the ongoing currents of discourse, journalism, and affinity groups which support and surround gaming culture.

### Cyborg Students

Arduini provides an example of students with varying degrees of cyborg-like literacies in technology. One student, Jon, demonstrates a fluency in using multiple devices and the cross-compatibility between them. He says, “[y]ou get to take a game on the PS3 and transfer it over to the Vita and keep on playing” (93). The Vita is Sony’s handheld device, which games from a Playstation 3 or 4 can be “streamed” on, or as John says, “transferred” to, in order to continue playing away from the television. Arduini notes, “[b]y staying ahead of Playstation’s new and emerging interfaces, John illustrated his deep-rooted connection to the technology, further indicating his cyborgian relationship with gaming devices” (93). The competencies and technical skills learned through personal interest in these devices, Arduini argues, exemplifies an aspect of transfer, which carries over to other software, other applications, and other demands (94).

Another student participating in the study, Sam, recalls, “I used to [play games] back when I first got [a smartphone] but I outgrew it. I just use it as a phone now” (94). Here, Sam is referring to mobile games—of which there are many and perhaps are best for short experiences incomparable to console games. “Sam’s experience with the smartphone illustrate the cyborgian nature of game’s literacies epitomizing Haraway’s idea about the cyborg body: ‘The machine is us, our processes, an aspect of our

embodiment” (94-95). This observation is supported, by a communication with John, who states that the device used is dependent on the problem, but also his proximity to it; Arduini suggests John is “Exemplifying the cyborgian nature of their [the students’] relationship to their technological devices... as an almost physical extension of his body... John’s multimedia devices become natural gaming accessories. Like other gamers, John became fluent in navigating two technological devices at once so that he could more quickly overcome gameplay trials” (95). Arduini continues to argue that this relationship between the user and the technology suggest great skill and fluency in both—a fluency that is mediated by experience in digital games.

However, Arduini hopes to avoid falling into “technological determinism” by remaining critically self-aware of the “political, social, economic, and cultural relations” of technology, and the rhetorical power of discourse that surround these elements. Arduini concludes that to “[u]tilize student’s at-home literacies is an effective method of encoring student involvement in the classroom. When students feel as though they are already experts in a given area, they can be empowered to apply skills in meaningful ways” (100). Applying these skills in the composition classroom setting or for a multimodal, multimedia writing assignment which requires creative and technical thinking beyond alphabetic composition, and perhaps incorporating elements of video, sound, editing, or even programming to variable extents would likely be an example of multimodal composition. This stance of incorporating students’ previous transferred knowledge, too, is fundamental in a Critical Game-Based Pedagogy, and perhaps particularly in composition—encouraging students to explore and access a variety of

strengths to critique and produce meaning. With the concepts of literacy, identity, social learning, and multimodality in mind in the context of composition pedagogy, we now move to discuss its potential when integrated with threshold concepts of writing, as described by scholars writing in *Naming What We Know*.

### Threshold Concepts of Writing

Current and transformative scholarship from the field of writing studies which expand on extant notions of literacy, emphasize student agency and learning transfer.

<sup>11</sup>These are captured in Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle’s edited collection of essays, *Naming What We Know* (2016). This text explores principles of transformative learning in Writing Studies called *threshold concepts*. As noted in the preface, threshold concepts are “ideas that learners must ‘see through and see with’” (Kreber (ix). In other words, threshold concepts are fundamental principles that anchor disciplines or domains of knowledge, such as writing, cultural studies, or others, which can transform a student's knowledge or disposition toward an idea and alter their perspective permanently. The threshold concept “all writers have more to learn,” speaks to fears or preconceived notions that writers are born naturally gifted, rather than incrementally and tirelessly learning, and developing their writing skills. These concepts are flexible, responding to the interdisciplinary contribution and participation of learners and scholars alike.

Threshold concepts can be described through a series of adjectives. These adjectives, such as “provocative,” “transformative,” and “troublesome,” point to ideas in

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<sup>11</sup> Transfer- Applying skills learned previously to new situations

disciplines or fields that can clash with prior knowledge and challenge preconceived ideas or understandings about writing. Threshold concepts are therefore “liminal,” suggesting an indirect path between existing and evolving knowledge; this new knowledge becomes “[i]ntegrative and transformative,” pushing learners across intellectual or ideological thresholds, which “[lead] them to recognize new patterns of meaning around that concept” (*Naming What We Know*, (ix). What is important to note is the mutable, flexible, and adaptable nature of threshold concepts in each learners' experience, and the potential to discover and connect them to a variety of situations and types of knowledge (e.g., understanding of digital literacy, multimodality, identity, social learning, etc.) In the preface to *Naming What We Know*, Adler-Kassner and Wardle write, “[l]earning a threshold concept, in fact, might entail *unlearning* previous ideas about how language works and what groups of people do together with language” (x). The notion of *unlearning* ideas about writing may lead to a critical orientation that applies threshold concepts to composition studies and their potential and connection with critical pedagogy.

In the following paragraphs, I highlight key threshold concepts of writing found in this text, which can be connected with digital literacy and game-based learning and composition pedagogy. Because threshold concepts of writing are fluid, always responding and adapting to changing discourse of composition and writing studies, we can imagine the endless potential in writing about threshold concepts, and the transformative ideas in disciplines, which shape and reshape a student's knowledge in transferable ways. In that this project seeks to forge connections between threshold

concepts in composition and theories of game-based learning, it is important to review a selection of relevant threshold concepts that illuminate these connections. The following section begins with Charles Bazerman's overview of writing and its potential for meaning making and continual reflexive process of emerging literacy.

### Literacy, meaning-making, and ideology

Charles Bazerman summarizes and synthesizes the concerns of the threshold concepts presented in *Naming What We Know*, noting that “[b]y writing we can articulate and communicate a thought, desire, emotion, observation, directive, or a state of affairs to ourselves and others through the medium of written words... [A]wareness of this potential starts early in emergent literacy experiences and continues throughout one's writing life but takes on different force and depth as one continues through life” (21-22). Game-based pedagogy, too, centers multimodal, embodied experiences and situated meaning. Bazerman's thoughts on writing continue to be relevant throughout this chapter as they are concerned with the making of meaning and the transformational power of threshold concepts. As writers become aware of how text influences and is influenced by other texts, their disposition towards writing bears potential for significant changes that contribute to their academic growth. Indeed, “growth” is a subjective metric which is perhaps best based on informed self-assessment strategies, reflective writing exercises, and assignments.

Kevin Roozen introduces the series of threshold concepts by way of a central concept: “Writing is a Social and Rhetorical Activity;” this concept is significant in discussions of multifaceted web of rhetoric, literacy, and writing. This threshold concept

addresses the fundamentally rhetorical nature of writing—all writers, he states, “are engaged in the work of making meaning for particular audiences and purposes, and writers are always connected with other people” (17). This idea leads to an understanding of the inherently intertextual network of other writers and other texts, which make up the utterances of common speech and writing. Students grappling with this concept might extend and expand it to consider things such as genre awareness, rhetorical standards, and the constraints of differing kinds of writing (such as digital or multimodal writing.)

In unpacking with this threshold concept, students might begin to understand the ways in which even a private journal has an intended audience, and, by extension, that *all* writing has an audience. As suggested by Gee (2003) and Squire (2011) “affinity spaces” such as gaming forums (Squire 34) are “where this intellectual work happens... [P]layers post data from their games and examine others’ data. They collectively analyze data across games and propose rule changes [to game developers]” (34). Indeed, gaming forums are not composition classrooms, but this concept speaks to the innately interconnected, and often digitally networked, relationship between texts, authors, critics, and producers. As Kevin Roozen points out in another threshold concept, “Texts Get Their Meaning From Other Texts,” “[a]s a field of, writing studies has developed a number of names for the networks of text writers and readers create and act with including *landscape, sets, systems, ecologies, assemblages, repertories, and intertexts*” (44-45). Roozen's threshold concept is reflected in the affinity spaces, which support games and represents a wide system of networks and sites of discourse, both in print, and in digital spaces.

Stuart Selber (2004) also echoes the idea that interconnection should be anchored by a critique and interrogation of power imbalances: “The study of asynchronous communication begins to delineate the purview of a critical literacy that counterbalances functional approaches. It highlights the fact there are power relations associated with the development and use of technology...” (85). This notion of checking power and calling into question the possible, often likely, case of power imbalance and exploitation leads us to another threshold concept that informs this project: “Writing Enacts and Creates Identities and Ideologies.”

### Identity and Ideology

In describing this threshold concept, Tony Scott explores the creative and revelatory tendency writing often elicits. Writing engages student writers in critical thinking about cultural and ideological themes when guided by instructors and facilitators who value their civic literacy. Scott argues that no concepts or ideas we may discuss or write about in a composition course can escape the influence of ideologies, nor writing itself—everything is informed by ideology. Because of this, Scott suggests that we pay close attention to ideological tensions and “sites of struggle,” (50) with a critical consideration of the political and historical implications which surround identity and ideology as a way to investigate meaning and its construction in culture. These concerns also encompass instructors’ mentorship of students as they come into new domains of knowledge in the university and require a careful and serious consideration of issues relating to representation.

Scott cites James Paul Gee's 2008 text, *Social Linguistics* to further develop his analysis of the inseparable connection between identity and writing: "Gee points out that those who seek to create any education program in reading and writing must ask a question: 'What sort of social groups do I intend to apprentice the learner into?'"(48). Here, Scott reiterates that what Gee is also stating "There is no general literacy: literacy is always in some way involved in the negation of identities and ideologies in specific social situations" (48). Indeed, as we expand notions of literacy to encompass all varieties of symbols, gestures, practices, customs, and utterances (both verbal and nonverbal) we must also extend to encompass the development of disciplinary apprenticeship. Here, we see a synthesis of literature covered in this review, combining elements of social learning, literacy, and identity theory into a cohesive concept.

Scott's discussion reflects another, older text that provides a related iteration on a similar theme of identity and the necessity to adhere to social customs. English Studies scholar and critic, David Bartholomae, argues in "Inventing the University," (although his argument presents a stodgy and mostly outdated pedagogical perspective in composition), that students must, in many ways, recreate themselves or reshaped their identity to match the linguistic, philosophic, economic needs and demands that higher education requires. For first-year composition students, this is especially important. Bartholomae continues this discussion of students' ability to imagine themselves as already part of the ongoing discourse by writing: "What our beginning students need to learn is to extend themselves, by successive approximations, into the commonplaces, set phrases, rituals, and gestures, habits of mind, tricks of persuasion, obligatory conclusions

and necessary connections that determine ‘what might be said’ and constitute knowledge within the various branches of academic community” (614).

In connection with these threshold concepts of writing, we can see Bartholomae analysis reflected in the anchoring threshold concepts of writing, which emphasize its inherently social position. Heidi Estrem, another contributor to *Naming What We Know*, describes the threshold concept “Disciplinary and Professional Identities Are Constructed Through Writing:” “For many students in college encountering disciplinary writing for the first time, discipline specific writing threatens their sense of self because these ways of thinking and writing are so distinct from other more familiar reading and writing practices such as those valued at home or in other communities in which the students are members” (56). Both Estrem and Bartholome would likely argue entrance into new domains of thinking and writing require response to changing demands and the ability to practice and master specific skill sets in order to achieve greater immersion into a discourse community and maintain growth in writing.

#### “Inventing” the student avatar

To bring together the scholarship of game theory and writing studies, and to further contextualize the entrance of novice writers becoming literate in new semiotic domains, we can imagine the experience of beginning players in an online role-playing game: Both may face similar difficulties in the mechanical and communicative realms, and both must seek help and tutelage within their communities of practice for more knowledgeable peers, who already exist and thrive within these communities. In imagining themselves as members of communities of practice, beginning writers may

find that their confidence may surge as their anxieties about writing lessen. Bartholomae suggests that beginning writers, hoping to find entrance into academic discourse, must speak or write with a (somewhat) an inflated sense of authority: “To speak with authority, they have to speak not only in another’s voice, but through another’s code... they have to speak in the voice and through the codes of those of us with power and wisdom...” (622). While I may take issue with the assumption that instructors are inherently “wise,” they do have institutional power and often know how to “talk the talk,” which Bartholomae suggests students imitate in their own writing while seeking membership in different discourse communities. Kevin Roozen, too, discusses identity in the concept he proposes, which acts to further contextualize the expanded dimensions of identity that influence writers and their writing.

Kevin Roozen, in the threshold concept “Writing is Linked to Identity,” argues that the practice of writing leads to the formation of identity: “Through writing, writers come to develop and perform identities in relation to the interest, beliefs, and values of the communities they engage with, understanding the possibilities for selfhood available in those communities” (51). Roozen goes on to suggest that teachers and learners should not understate or undervalue the significance of the impact on identity that writing has not only students’ perception of themselves, but also on those around them, as they occupy a critical perspective of identity.

Relatedly, Paulo Freire postulates, “[t]his pedagogy makes oppression and its causes objects of reflection by the oppressed, and from the reflection will come their necessary engagement in the struggle for their liberation. And in struggle this pedagogy

will be made and remade” (48). This statement captures the essence of the seminal text *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, as a proposal to not only identify sites of struggle and oppression, but also to make these topics objects of study. Identity, then, is a fundamental principle, undergirding Freire’s work in this text. Roozen acknowledges that in “displaying our identities... we claim, challenge, perhaps even contest [the] communities with which we engage” (51). In the classroom, of course, not all students will have observed or experienced the same form or magnitude of oppressions, but this is where empathy, compassion, solidarity, and critical consciousness becomes more than theory—it becomes practice. Connected, too, to the ideas of identity, is student growth and the dispositional advantage of accepting failure as a normal part of learning in the process-oriented composition classroom. A process orientated pedagogy, then, must enact a critically-framed view of assessment. As Colin Brooke and Allison Carr explore—to subvert what students feel about failure and assessment is essential to transforming their beliefs about writing.

#### Reframing Failure in the Composition Classroom

Colin Brook and Allison Carr’s threshold concept, “Failures Can Be an Important Part of Writing Development” addresses the importance of framing failure as an opportunity for growth and repetitious attempts at success: “We often forget, however, that successful writers aren’t those who are simply able to write brilliant first-drafts; often, the writing we encounter has been heavily revised and fitted and sometimes the result of a great deal of failure” (62). Indeed, writing is not a skill that students are born with, nor is it a gift; writing is a continual process of practice, failure, and revision. What

Brooke and Carr address in this concept is crucial to any composition course, but also to other facets of academic and professional life. This threshold concept, too, can be learned through games and applied and reframed in a game-based pedagogy by reframing failure as reiteration as suggested by Gee (2003) and Kostopolus (2017). Brooke and Carr write, “[i]n the writing classroom, when assessment is tied too completely to final products, students are more likely to avoid risking failure for fear of damaging their grades, and this fear works against the learning process... [T]hey focus instead on what the teacher wants and simply hope to be able to get it right on the first try” (63). Assessment, within a Critical Game-Based Pedagogy framework, however, might look like an ongoing feedback loop between student and instructor, possibly mediated by digital platforms such as Google Docs. Assessment, in this way, is a process dependent on iterative attempts at success, and is not final. An assessment model that takes advantage of various technological and communication mediums, such as the one suggested, relies heavily on the encompassing notion of multimodality. Like Gee and Arduini, Cheryl Ball and Colin Charlton value multimodality, and better investigate its features into our understanding of writing.

### Multimodal Composition

*Naming What We Know* contributors, Cheryl E. Ball and Colin Charlton discuss composition’s inherently multimodal potential; they begin by defining multimodality. They write, “[m]ultimodal means ‘multiple + mode.’ In contemporary writing studies, a mode refers to a way of meaning making, or communicating” (42). Further, multimodality requires a flexible notion of literacy and fluency in reading and composing

a wide array of texts. However, Ball and Charlton point out a misconception that multimodal composition is exclusively tied to digital texts and posit that a variety of non-traditional academic visual and verbal texts contribute to the ever-expanding web of modes and mediums. Games, too, are not strictly digital. Board games, scavenger hunts, and other forms of classroom activity may take advantage of, for example, traditional paper and art supply materials.

In order for composition pedagogy to stay relevant and contemporary, we must expand our conception of what counts as composition. Diagrams, posters, infographics, charts, podcasts, edited video projects, and other modes of composition should be included among the more traditional alphabetic written texts. In a Game-Based Pedagogy in composition, a wide scope and variety of work created and produced by students is valued and legitimized—including, but not limited to the kinds of media I've listed. Imagining a curriculum which valued infographics and podcast projects as supplement to collaborative, written texts in a class wiki, for example, may be a way of imagining the potential for multimodality in composition classrooms. Ball and Charlton refer to previous threshold concepts, including Charles Bazerman's "Writing Expresses and Shares Meaning to Be Reconstructed by the Reader" (21) and Colin Brooke and Jeffery Grabill's "Writing is a Technology Through Which Writers Create and Recreate Meaning" (32) as integral to their own threshold concept. These ideas contribute to a connection of ideas that represent knowledge and writing as a network of mutable and multifarious building blocks. In a multimodal approach to learning and teaching, students and teachers understand that meaning is interpreted, created, and recreated. These are

steps in an iterative writing process that utilizes many modes, or applicable techniques, technologies, and mediums.

With the concept of expanding literacy to encompass the reading of all forms of media as texts in mind, multimodality lends itself naturally to multimedia projects and compositions, which may evolve beyond typographic, alphabetic writing. The contributors of *Naming What We Know*, and the threshold concepts they present, map a web of interrelated principles of reading and producing meaning as a fluid and changeable process that takes on many forms and mediums. Scholar Rebekah Colby would agree with Ball and Charlton and points out in “Game-Based Pedagogy in the Writing Classroom,” game-based pedagogy perhaps lends itself to the multimodal, multimedia-informed approach that Ball and Charlton emphasize. She writes, “[b]ecause multimodal texts are so pervasive in our culture, especially with ever increasingly ubiquitous computing, we should see that act of rhetorically effective meaning making as one encompasses all modes, not just writing. As such, writing teachers should see composing as not just the act of writing arguments but also an act of design that involves employing multiple modes” (62).

As noted earlier, these modes would include a wider array of kinds of creating and composing, including digital, visual, and audio forms. In considering this concept within the context Gee (2003) and Selber (2004), argue that as games teach through multimodal means, teaching and writing, too, may take form in a variety of meanings. However, it is important to keep the instrumental use of the technologies that make multimodal composition possible grounded in the social, political, economic, and

ecological implications that surround them. Perhaps this critical orientation would create space for self-reflexive meaning-making to be produced by critically literate students in, for example, a video or podcast composition.

### Game-based Pedagogy: Moving Forward

While game-based pedagogy remains a fairly young and developing field, particularly in writing studies, it is clear that the issue of intersectional inclusion and resistance to racism, gender binaries, heterosexist culture, ableism, and other concerns of social justice are not often addressed. Martin and Tyler's (2017) attempt to engage students with representation through avatar creation activities is a good start. However, they do not address the social construction of stereotypes, or the ways in which the avatar creation process represent issues such as racism and classism. Waggoner (2010) also misses an opportunity to address issues of social justice with his composition students. Despite students' positive change in perspective on the potential for identity formation through games, and some successful discussion of the creative choices they made when constructing their avatars, Waggoner fails to bring students' attention to the cultural, social, and political implications of choosing to be a white male human character over other identity categories in the *Morrowind* exercise.

While young scholars like Emma Kostopolus (2017) have directly interrogated game-based learning through queer theory in their work (centering marginalized LGBTQ students,) this is only the beginning. Gee's problematic identity theories have had a significant influence on future academics researching and practicing Game-Based Pedagogies of their own in their respective disciplines and across the curriculum. A

Critical Game-Based Pedagogy informed by Gee, Squire, Selber, and other scholars, such as those discussed in this review, in context with threshold concepts of composition, must remain committed to a reflexive awareness of the social and structural implications of its practices.

In considering the gaps in critical analysis within the existing scholarship on Game-Based Pedagogy, there is a wide-open field, rich in material and opportunity for radical social change by integrating threshold concepts of composition, described in *Naming What We Know* (2016), while enacting critical, digitally literate composition pedagogy gains feasibility and applicability. In the discussion section of this thesis, I hope to better illustrate potential examples of a Critical Game-Based Pedagogy in composition, based on the literature reviewed in this chapter. In reflecting on the state of existing and contemporary scholarship in Game-Based Pedagogy and its place in the humanities, Patrick Jagoda, scholar and contributor to *Debates in the Digital Humanities* (2016) writes on the significance *and* potential for games and education in an essay entitled, “The Dark Side of Digital Humanities.” In the essay, Jagoda suggests, “[w]e need new forms of graduate and undergraduate education that hone both critical and digital literacies,” (154) harkening back to the work of Gee, Squire, Selber, and others who have called for similar objectives. Jagoda concludes this essay with a passage that is both optimistic and grounded in realistic skepticism of games’ place in the humanities—and the lauded assumption that games will save the myriad of disciplines that make up the studies of humanities in general. In this closing statement, he writes, “[a]s I have observed repeatedly in this essay, games are no panacea for the digital humanities or the

future of education, but they are a key cultural form of our time and a critical site of negotiation in which humanists, artists, designers, technologists, scientists, and educators might experiment together with new ways of being in and changing our world” (212). Perhaps sentimental, but still balanced by a sense of realism, Jagoda’s concluding thoughts represent a contemporary, practical stance on the pursuit of a Critical Game-Based Pedagogy. In this call for a broader conception of what games could potentially achieve in the humanities, he calls also for a multimodal and multidisciplinary approach—all while relating back to Gee, Selber, Squire, and other highly influential scholars writing in the field of game theory. Perhaps, too, in any discipline, to teach a critical perspective on technology, and our relationship with it—its producers, and its products—is perhaps the best option for ensuring growth in this field of study.

In this literature review, I have outlined some of the major relevant literature in game-based learning and teaching and have broadened definitions of literacy to include both digital and critical dimensions, multimodality, and views of identity and ideology in games and writing. One of the main goals of this review was to demonstrate the great potential that exists in integrating contemporary writing studies and threshold concepts with the theories and work of Game-Based Pedagogy. Of course, as this is an emergent field of discourse in which scholars are actively writing and practicing, capturing the totality of perspectives would be difficult at best, and likely impossible, in a more realistic sense. In the following pages, I hope to further illustrate the potential applications of a Critical Game-Based Pedagogy and address the issues that were not

directly examined in this review for the sake of avoiding direct argumentation and interpretive analysis.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This project is anchored by what I have called Pillars, the guiding principles that ground and inform the theoretical and practical application of a Critical Game-Based Pedagogy in composition. Below, are brief outlines of these Pillars and the corresponding actions, skills, or perspectives; i.e., *expand, critique, identify, collaborate, adapt, etc.* Furthermore, I use the contemporary composition and writing studies scholarship in “Threshold Concepts,” discussed in Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle’s *Naming What We Know* (2016) shape and the content and function of each Pillar as in its connection to writing and first year composition.

Like these concepts, the Pillars of a Critical Game-Based Pedagogy that I propose seek to radically shift the dispositions of first-year composition students. This shift is made possible through the adoption of multiple literacies (including digital literacy), the centering of student identity, a resistance to intolerance, the privileging of student collaboration, and an openness to what is considered valid composition through the valuing of students’ diverse fluencies and the celebration mediums such as video, sound, and other multimodal projects *as* composition work. Moreover, this project seeks to expand upon threshold concepts by integrating game-based learning and pushing the discourse to include complex dimensions of identity and to foster a critical pedagogical position in composition teaching.

Drawing upon the theories and practices of game-based learning, digital literacy, and critical pedagogy presented by James Paul Gee, Kurt Squire, Stuart Selber, and other

supporting scholars, these Pillars, like threshold concepts are customizable, mutable perspective rather than hard, procedural set of rules.. I imagine the multitudes of variations that emerge within these Pillars to be rearranged to suit particular educational, disciplinary, and rhetorical situations, each informed and influenced by individual instructors' interests, values, and even preferred genres of games themselves.

### On the Pillars

An architectural visual that perhaps most resembles my concept of the Pillars is that of Grecian pillars, which support a larger structure. In this visual simile, the structure being supported is *Literacy*, equally supported by the Pillars of *Identity*, *Social Learning*, and *Multimodality*. A Critical Game-Based Pedagogy falls apart and deteriorates when political, social, and cultural implications are left out of discussions, assignments, and pedagogical practices. Students are at the center of this critical pedagogy, and teachers are collaborators, mentors, facilitators, and mediators, rather than directors, dictators, instructors, or sages. First, I describe these Pillars briefly, and include associated actions and adjectives which illustrate their purpose in the framework and in the broader understanding of a Critical Game-Based Pedagogy in composition. After the condensed descriptions of these Pillars, I will discuss each at greater length, citing associated literature and associated key concepts.

1. **Literacy:** Instructors assign readings and writing projects that *expand* what students already know about literacy, what it might encompass, and the vastness and variety of literacies—including multilingual skills, literacy in discourse communities of

interest and identity, and genre awareness. Students *understand* “text” is more than alphabetic in digital and paper spaces. Instructors *value & integrate* skills and knowledge students already have. Students are assigned to *critique and interrogate* meaning, power, and social constructions. Students learn that meaning is made through relations between producers and receivers of “text” and media. Students *read through* discourse and are equipped to critique and question what knowledge is valued and what is consequently delegitimized by cultural and institutional powers.

- 2. Identity:** Instructors and their assignments *encourage* the formation, identification, and transformation of identities in writing and the adoption/adapting of identities to suit particular situations, mediums, and genres. Students see what identities are at stake when power is involved. Students *interrogate* how ideology is embedded in all texts and has shaped identities. Instructors *encourage* student agency and growth through reiterative drafting processes and continual revision. Students engage in issues of social justice in their work, and *recognize* sites of social struggle. Instructors conceptually *reframe* failure as opportunity for reiteration and growth rather than deficiency.
- 3. Social Learning:** Students *practice* collaborative, peer-to-peer workshopping and writing assignments. Students engages and *supports* other classmates with projects. Students join an affinity group with others, for the duration of the course. Students *share and distributes knowledge*. Students *understands* how knowledge is shared and how research is built from networks of practice and data. Instructors encourage/assign group work and collaborative writing. Instructors allow students to

volunteer for roles and identities within group projects. (Speaker, Recorder, Encourager, etc.)

- 4. Multimodality:** Students *adapt* to changing demands and literacies. Students *move between a variety of modes*—alphabetic text, digital text, images, artwork, video, and others, and can use/accept all are forms of composing. *Students engage in any number of disciplinary skills* to achieve their goals and may “compose” in non-traditional mediums, such as audio or video content. Fluencies and skills students bring to class are *valuable*, even among new skills and literacies developed in the course.

#### Literacy as a Guiding Principle of a Critical Game-Based Pedagogy

Literacy is the central guiding principle of a Critical Game-Based Pedagogy in composition. Literacy is the guiding principle in many pedagogies and perspectives in composition but is also the most significant in the Pillars of a Critical Game-Based pedagogy, as all other supporting pillars feed into it in an interconnected, interdependent loop. As students’ literacy grows, so does their language and lenses for viewing identity, to participate in discourse communities through specialized language, often composing, reading, and communicating through a handful of multimodal acts. To better understand the connection between these Pillars, however, an in-depth discussion of Literacy’s place among the Pillars as the framework’s guiding concept is salient.

As Gee (5) and Selber (75, 8-12) have argued, expanding our notions of what counts as reading, text, and discourse is vital to a Critical Game-Based Pedagogy. Studying and

discussing the plurality of literacies in the classroom, students are encouraged to engage in multiple kinds of literacy in their writing.

As argued by Selber, literacy in technology and computer software and hardware should extend beyond instrumental knowledge (mechanical knowledge, design knowledge) to encompass social and political knowledge. This, then, is a critical/postcritical digital literacy, which accounts for all surrounding discourses of a technology beyond consumption. The subject positions of students are transformed from consumers and users of computers as tools, to critics, rhetors, and inquirers of the technology (25). This transformation may be considered a threshold concept, or an idea that ideally transforms a beginning writer's perception of a topic permanently, or in some cases, is a process of unlearning previous knowledge or opinion. Instrumental knowledge of software and hardware in computers is valued as well, but may not be the core of instruction in composition courses that are informed by a Critical Game-Based Pedagogy. Students already fluent in technology may tutor or guide other peers and their knowledge, and collaboration is valued.

Additionally, threshold concepts in composition also depend on literacy as a central theme and guiding concept. Students encounter potentially transformational concepts in writing when previous notions of reading and text are expanded and reformed. Students see writing as an inherently social and rhetorical practice (Roosen 17) that does not exist in a vacuum, but rather through a vast network of other texts, ideologies, audiences, producers, critics, and consumers. Critically, as Paulo Freire and Henry Giroux argue in their research on critical pedagogy, and the authors contributing to

*Naming What We Know* argue about threshold concepts, students *see through* text, creating and recreating meaning in their own writing and through dialogue in the classroom. As Giroux notes, a critical pedagogy “becomes a project that stresses the need for teachers and students to actively transform knowledge rather than simply consume it” (7). When students are aware of the power structures of race, class, gender, and other social constructions, *critique* becomes one of many literacies available to them. As such, this awareness or “situated meaning,” as Gee might call it, leads conceptually to a literacy of identity theories including, but not limited to, critical race theory, queer theory, and other varied forms of critically orientated lenses of inquiry. With a developed literacy in language, but also in the influence of discourse, students may also become literate in the related, critical issues of identity, and the linguistic, social, and cultural influences which construct it.

#### Identity as a Pillar of a Critical Game-Based Pedagogy

When the concept of identity is explored and interrogated through a Critical Game-Based Pedagogy in composition, students recognize the many identities they inhabit, and the identities they adopt when in particular, and often differing, rhetorical/educational/professional/other situations. However, it is crucial to ground this perspective in the material embodiment of students living in the margins—that is, those students who are underprivileged and/or underrepresented in dominant discourses. Moving beyond Gee’s problematic theory of identity, which suggest students can forgo their “real-world” identities to adopt new ones when entering new domains of

knowledge, students see the intersection of identities, and the interactions between them and the new practices, skills, and concepts they learn (Gee 53-56). As argued by *Naming What We Know* contributors Tony Scott and Kevin Roozen, students recognize that writing is inherently tied to identity and ideology (48-52). They recognize that no writing, nor any text/media is apolitical or neutral, and is always informed by identities and perspectives.

Kurt Squire expands on the idea that through a Game-Based Pedagogy and engagement with video games, students may become better equipped to understand ideology, abstractly, while also gaining an understanding of how these ideologies are embedded in video games themselves (30-37). Students are emboldened and encouraged through ongoing teacher/mediator feedback and accept that failure is not a finality, but rather an opportunity to learn and grow. Practically, this takes the form of iteration of drafts, which may be submitted throughout a course before final assessment and a subsequent letter grade. Failures are reframed as opportunities for students to grow as writers, as argued by Collin Brooke and Allison Carr in *Naming What We Know* (62-64), and seen through games such as *Dark Souls*, *Celeste*, and *Bloodborne*, in which player success depends on acceptance of failure as a part of the process of learning and development.

As Martin and Tyler suggest in “Character Creation: Gamification and Identity,” interacting with video games and discussing them presents opportunities to discuss social constructions of identities and the kinds of representation there is in media and One of Martin and Tyler’s assignments asks their students to “compose” a character (3), presents

it, and discuss their choices, and it is exemplar in its reflexive, creative process of student interactions, aesthetic/rhetorical considerations and requirements for sharing to an audience of peers. “composing” a character (3) presenting it, and discussing their choices when composing is exemplar in its reflexive, creative process of student interactions, aesthetic/rhetorical consideration, and sharing to an audience of peers. Zachary Waggoner’s assignment discussed in “Life in Morrowind: Identity, Video Games, and First-Year Composition” follows a similar route to achieve this critical discourse within a classroom setting. As I will note in my review of the literature, both Waggoner & Martin and Tyler miss an opportunity to more deeply interrogate social constructions of identity and cultural marginalization. However, their classroom practices illustrate the potential for critical intervention in composition courses’ classroom discussions and writing assignment topics.

#### Social Learning as a Pillars of Critical Game-Based Pedagogy

Students collaborate and share knowledge and understand that knowledge is dispersed through various channels in a cycle of producing, consuming, and reproducing. Students work together on projects and in peer-to-peer mentoring and workshopping of composition assignments after learning principles of peer review and feedback. Students learn that all writing is social and connected to other writers, texts, and readers. Students learn the value/methods of research and its innately social positioning. As argued by Gee (187-188) knowledge is distributed and shared within affinity groups, as also argued by Squire (69-75), noting that participation is a key element of learning through a Critical

Game-Based Pedagogy: “Learners should be empowered to seek out, leverage, and even create communities to further their interests. These spaces might take many shapes and sizes, but they are organized around this participatory ideal...” (75). Adjacently, suggested by *Naming What We Know* authors Kevin Roozen, and others (17-20), students understand that writing is an inherently social activity which depends on a network of other writers, other texts, and audiences. Students learn that there is no truly *private* writing, without audience. Even a personal journal or diary has an intended or imagined audience. Holistically, students realize that knowledge and writing is inherently collaborative in how it is distributed and should be encouraged and even assigned opportunities to collaborate and compose with their peers. Peer workshopping should be a core element of the composing and revision processes, before, during, and after tentative assessment.

#### Multimodality as a Pillar of Critical Game-Based Pedagogy

Students engage in a variety of composition tools and applications to produce meaning, including video, audio, graphics, and other multi-modal forms. Students see composition as not bound solely to alphabetic text and word processing, but rather, as a spectrum of different mediums and modes. Students might also play games directly or as objects of study, or beyond that, as opportunities to become closer to their classmates and form collaborative bonds. Allowing for multimodal engagement in different medias also creates better pathways to demonstrate how meaning is displayed, organized, and implied in a variety of ways. As Rebekah Shultz Colby cites from Cope & Kalantzis in “Game-

based Pedagogy in the Writing Classroom,” “[b]y playing games, students can better understand that ‘meaning’ is made in ways that are increasingly multimodal—in which written linguistic modes of meaning are past and parcel of visual, audio, and spatial patterns of meaning” (62, 5). Tina Arduini also argues for digital literacy and use of multimodal pedagogy, stating that engagement in a variety of technologies better prepares students for their professional lives (89).

Students play digital and non-digital games in class to experience situated meaning, as argued by Gee: “In the end, my claim is that people have situated meanings for words when they associate these words with images, actions, experiences, or dialogue in a real or imagined world...” (105). Gee’s observation indicates that students experiencing games may better understand the myriad of ways in which meaning is transmitted through different kinds of media and through distinct genres via tropes, standards, and recognizable forms.

These four Pillars represent the fundamental concepts that ground this project. I have briefly outlined the core topics to be detailed at greater length in the following literature review. In short, these Pillars are interconnected, interwoven concepts which work in tandem. However, as noted, literacy remains as the focus and to which all other Pillars lead. In the following Discussion chapter, I will elaborate on each Pillar, their context in games, and the potential for applying these Pillars in a critical composition pedagogy. The chapter will explore several games that have been mentioned in the preceding chapters as well as provide experiential teaching context for which informed

this project and helped to articulate the goals of a Critical Game-Based pedagogy in Composition.

## DISCUSSION

### Introduction

Because Game-Based Pedagogy seeks to engage students in a variety of multimodal practices that can promote agency and amplify feedback, instructors have the unique opportunity to introduce students to a variety of critical lenses and methods for critiquing power, which push the foundational theories from Gee and Squire into new territories. I imagine that an outcome of a Critical Game-Based Pedagogy in Composition would be the creation of writing projects that center students work in cooperation, co-authorship, data distribution, and cooperative research methods. When a Critical Game-Based Pedagogy is enacted in in a composition classroom in conjunction with critical reading and meaning-making strategies, many students may find themselves on a path to a plurality of literacies. Versed in language which emphasizes reflection and meta-level understanding of systems of power, design, and educational models, students may also come to discover transformational threshold concepts and insight into these social, cultural issues.

In the theoretical framework that I proposed, I introduced the four Pillars of a Critical Game-Based Pedagogy: *Literacy, Identity, Social Learning, and Multimodality*, and their connection to Stuart Selber's "Digital Literacy" and the threshold concepts of writing discussed in *Naming What We Know* (2016). These Pillars represent the center for my theoretical approach to a Critical Game-Based Pedagogy in composition. In my

literature review, I outlined a variety of fundamental and contemporary texts to illustrate the connection between threshold concepts as *transformative, lasting* ideas about writing, and as an opportunity to integrate critical themes into composition pedagogy. While Gee and Squire have laid a foundation for game-based learning theory, young scholars like Emma Kostopolus push past these humble foundations to begin the important critical conversations about identity, representation, queerness, and social justice that game-based learning needs. Her work was indeed the catalyst to this project—as before encountering her work, I felt the pursuit of this project would be fruitless. What I hope is that my project will continue the endeavor of shifting the discourse of game-based learning in the integration of a critical composition pedagogy.

In this chapter, I first attempt to further contextualize and illustrate the framework I propose through my own experience as a graduate teaching associate, teaching composition at Humboldt State University in the Fall semesters of 2016 and 2017. As I will discuss, my pedagogical perspective had not yet been articulated, but these experiences I had teaching greatly shaped the way I think about students, writing, and instruction. My observations from these experiences revealed to me the styles of teaching (and the types of media) that students respond to, and the pedagogical strategies that succeeded in getting them to engage actively in reading and writing assignments. Second, I attempt to address and problematize Gee’s “Projective Identity” theory, and highlight Emma Kostopolus’s work, which was revelatory to my own analysis. Third, I will elaborate on the Pillars of a Critical Game-Based Pedagogy through games that I have played, and, of which, I feel are most useful in demonstrating these concepts in action.

This section expands on themes reflective of the Pillars: Literacy, Identity, Social Learning, Multimodality, and their analogues in a composition pedagogy. Next, I will describe an imagined variation of a Critical Game-Based composition curriculum that attempt to integrate the Pillars of my theoretical framework in the form of a semester-long research project; this project depends on all four of my proposed Pillars of a Critical Game-Based Pedagogy acting together. Lastly, I will conclude with a reflection on the relationship between game-based learning and digital humanities, where I believe game-based learning will find its home, as digital humanities projects become sites for enacting social justice beyond computer screens, academia, and classroom spaces.

### Teaching Context

Before I had conceived of this project, I was afforded the opportunity to teach first-year composition for two semesters as a graduate teaching associate. Much of this work is deeply indebted to the experience of teaching and the praxis-oriented reflection conducted while instructing. As I was teaching, I began to notice students responding to particular ways of framing assignments, media, processes, and mediums. Notably, in each of these courses, I prioritized student engagement, collaboration, peer review, critical consumption of multimedia (YouTube, etc.,) and facilitated classroom discussion. These practices, of course, were augmented by my own technological tendencies and love of the internet and its many social facets. It is clear to me, now, that our interaction, analysis, and discussions of multimedia texts in class were early exercises in multimodality. Through centering issues of identity, and facilitating extensive conversations about literacy and multiliteracy, power dynamics in society, discourse communities, and other

central issues in composition studies, I began to see students transform and reshape their identities both as writers and as autonomous selves with greater self-awareness about themselves. Moving beyond the identity of a nervous, sometimes resentful writer, bruised and constrained by the limitations of the strict conventions of high school writing, I witnessed students transform into confident novices who felt genuine ownership of their research and academic work as it developed over the course of a semesters.

While I had not yet considered, theoretically formulated, or applied a Critical Game-Based Pedagogy in my composition classroom, I realized that students responded well to a multimodal, discussion-based approach to teaching—one that was likely in stark contrast to the traditional, dry lecture and slideshow approach they experienced in other courses. I attempted to contextualize topics of composition through daily viewings of news headline reports by *Democracy Now!* and other videos on culture and social justice issues found on YouTube. Each viewing of the news headlines (or other video content) was followed by ten to fifteen minutes of reflective, responsive writing. After this in-class writing, classroom discussion generally replaced traditional lecture time. Student interaction, discussion, and debate was centered in order to foster the co-creation of meaning and knowledge, rather than the passive absorption of the information I deposited into their knowledge banks (to allude to Freire's banking metaphor.) My discussion model, too, is deeply connected to the influence of critical pedagogy and Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which, like gaming, has informed and influenced my teaching, writing, and research for most of my academic career. Engaging with this text illuminate and articulated the importance of classroom discussion—and element of my

own teaching which I prioritized and centered throughout both semesters. It was this revelation which grounds my project and teaching philosophy as a whole. Student, their literacies their identities, and the interactions between are what is valued in a critical pedagogy. It is my hope that this integration of game-based learning into a critical framework for composition would align with this position. To see what students responded to in productive and transformative ways— focusing on personal identity, literacies, discourse communities, cooperation and group work, absence of true failure, and critical engagement with multimedia—has proven to me that such a practice could be possible.

### Pushing Beyond Gee

I have explored literature on game-based learning, gamification, and composition in the preceding chapters of this project. However, a question still remains: Why video games? As Gee and others have articulated, video games represent a medium which invites interactivity and embodiment in ways other forms of media cannot. We can imagine game environments as semiotic domains, governed by systems of language, images, sounds, tactile responses, (such as the vibration of a controller or the response of player input to an avatar's movement.) A player, or by analog, a student immersed in this semiotic domain is within an environment in which the rules, concepts, and skills are *situated* within a framework that contextualizes them.

For example, in *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*, players begin a new game as a yet unnamed, undefined avatar aboard a foreign ship. The player is tasked with registering with a kind of census or customs office, where they input their chosen name

and customize their appearance (including gender and race,) while also participating in an aptitude questionnaire that determines their character's statistical makeup and skills. This introduction is conveyed as a meaningful interaction that contextualizes their avatar/character's entrance into the game world, while hiding the abstracted, mechanical input of character customization within the narrative of registration at a customs office. In creating and adopting the role of a character that makes sense in this world, taking on new meanings, rules, and concepts is naturalized within the context of the game world and the identities available for the player to adopt.

To refer back to Gee's "Projective Identity" theory, this character creation feature involves a negotiation between the player's "real-world" identity, the virtual identity they inhabit within a game environment, and the ongoing "Project," which involves the values, beliefs, and aesthetic choices made by both the real-world player and the avatar they create. In this argument, Gee suggests that students must also create a new identity when learning within a new environment. For example, freshman English students must move *beyond* the identity of a senior high school writer and create a new identity within the context of a college composition course. As students shed and *unlearn* negative ideas about writing while grappling with threshold concepts, this identity creation becomes manifest. In the same way that *Naming What We Know* (2016) describes transformation and identity changes, I imagine a Critical Game-Based Pedagogy in writing capable of achieving similar results.

However, what has propelled this project is an attempt to push *beyond* some of Gee's limited conceptions of identity. When describing this negotiation of identities, Gee

claims, “[i]t has been argued that some poor urban African American children and teenagers resist learning literacy in school because they see school-based literacy as ‘white,’ as associated with people who disregard them and others like them” (55). This statement is jarring—not only because it is provocative, but also because after this claim he does not elaborate, or even cite any data that would support this argument. Rather than exploring the symptoms of structural, systematic oppression people of color are subjected to, or the effects of class on students, Gee’s claim lacks the nuance it deserves. While forgoing or changing real-world identities to suit new rhetorical and semiotic domains of knowledge is, in Gee’s view, pertinent to learning, this change must also be grounded by experiential embodiment. Students of color, disabled students, and others who are in constant risk of marginalization or oppression cannot simply divorce these dimensions of their identity which might constrain their disposition towards learning or higher education.

As valuable as Gee’s work is, including his “Projective Identity” theory, there seems to be a disconnect in his consideration of “real-world” identities, and the problematic argument that students must forgo their real-world identities to take on new identities when entering new realms of knowledge. Indeed, leaving behind, forgetting, or neglecting the real-world embodiment, which invariably determines access, ability, and privilege seems to be an abstract and idealistic, rather than an opportunity for all students. Coming from a critically oriented background, such a claim is incomplete if not simply problematic. In seeking scholarship that expands upon the foundation that Gee laid out, Emma Kostoplus’ thesis work, “Using Role-Playing Gamification to Create Safe Spaces

for LGBT Students in the Composition Classroom” elaborates on Gee’s original Projective Identity theory in meaningful, critical ways, which I discussed in the literature review. Her research and work is highly significant for the framing of this project—proving to me that there are others doing similar work, attempting to push the boundaries of what has already been established by the likes of Gee and Squire in the discourse of game-based learning. Her research directed me to the transformative and critical orientation that models of game-based learning were lacking—an orientation which could not only teach transferable writing skills, but also help to shift intolerant attitudes about race, gender, sexuality, and other dimensions of identity. Grounding analysis in a critical orientation, in my case, is essential to a Critical Game-Based Pedagogy.

On the influence of video games, Kostoplus claims, “[b]eyond simply creating safe spaces for LGBT individuals to explore their identity, video games also function as powerful educational tools that can help sway public opinion and bring about greater acceptance and representation of non-heteronormative people” (13). Kostoplus does make note of one major limiting factor, however: Not all games allow for exploration, and instead, often delve into normative discourse that privileges toxic masculinity and compulsory heteronormativity. However, as the demographic of gamers expands, game developers and game genres respond in turn. This is evidenced by games such as *Gone Home*, *Night in the Woods*, and *2064: Read Only Memories*, which all involve narratives centered on queer characters, which is in stark contrast to the highly masculinized,

militarized, and normative AAA<sup>12</sup> titles. This is not to say, of course, that AAA games leave out LGBTQ themes as a rule. In titles such as *Assassins Creed: Odyssey*, for example, the player can choose to engage in homosexual encounters with NPC (non-player characters) according to their own tastes. I will explore this concept further in the next section as I attempt to better contextualize the four Pillars of a Critical Game-Based Pedagogy through a selection of relevant games.

### Pillars & Practice in Game Context

In my literature review, I referenced several games which have inspired my four Pillars of a Critical Game-Based Pedagogy in composition. I feel it is germane to elaborate on my own experiences with these games, citing a handful of titles that I feel best exemplify these Pillars, or are perhaps useful as critical tools or cultural artifacts—objects of study with great potential for classroom analysis. In the literature review, I discussed the multimodality and inherent multiliteracy of video games, along with the supporting scholars who echo this point, including Gee, who points out “[i]n video games, meaning, thinking, and learning are linked to multiple modalities (words, images, actions, sounds, etc.) and not just to words” (106). In this sense, video games often capture the Pillars in a continuous, recurrent, fashion that depends on the interaction between *Literacy*, *Identity*, and *Social Learning* and the multifaceted, multi-pathed route the player takes in learning or creating meaning.

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<sup>12</sup> AAA or “Triple A” games refer to video games with high production value, produced and published by major game companies, such as EA, Microsoft, Sony, Activision, and others.

Similarly, a Critical Game-Based Pedagogy in composition would take a similarly multimodal approach in its curriculum, its classroom management, its assignments, and other elements of instruction. For example, assignments may take the form of video essays or other media which does not strictly adhere to the conventions of textual composition. In this chapter, I will discuss titles which represent the Pillars through their gameplay, representations, or other elements. Some of these titles work as artifacts which are changing current in the discourse of video games relating to player accessibility, game difficulty, and previously unexplored themes within the context of generic conventions. No discussion about the Pillars as they apply to games would be fully featured unless there was some discussion of an avatar creation in a role-playing game—something that Gee and others have discussed at great length in connection with issues of embodiment, identity and representation.

#### *The Elder Scrolls Series: Identity*

*The Elder Scrolls* series take place in a fantasy world with a variety of playable races including elves, humans, and animal-like humanoids (bipedal, some with human physical characteristics) as well as customizable characteristics such as sex, height, weight, etc. Each race is distinguished by a set of distinct active and passive skills (for example, Humans have higher charisma, Elves are more skilled in magic, and the lizard-race Argonians can breathe underwater). In this imaginary world, rich with its own universe of lore, myth, religions, and politics, these games could be examined as a cultural artifact by analyzing the ways in which races are presented and the development

of subsequent implied cultural stereotypes that are designed for and performed by these races.

These games touch on topics such as imperialism, slavery, civil war, and colonialism, all with real-world parallels, ripe for study. *The Elder Scrolls* series are role-playing games, each of which begin with a narrative conceit which leads the player to create an avatar, potentially a character with a unique backstory and values decided by the player; this process of creation may be considered an act of composition and identity formation itself. How a player decides to compose their avatar, however, draws parallels to written composition—and these games, or games like it, may serve as source material both for discussion and written assignments in composition courses, but also as yet another avenue for engaging with critical themes and promoting social justice.

As Waggoner notes in “Life in *Morrowind*: Identity, Video Games, and First Year Composition,” “when selecting from the ten races possible in *Morrowind*, 94% of the students had very careful personal and/or strategic reasons for their choices... this exercise helped students understand how virtual gaming identities might seem ‘real’ to those users who invested time and energy in creating and evolving their avatars (infused with traits and characteristics important to their real-world identities)” (8-9). What Waggoner’s findings suggest is that students are already likely to be thinking about the choices they make when composing—whether in composing an avatar or a traditional written assignment. Students are weighing the consequences of the rhetorical moves, word usage, grammatical rules, and other elements, even if they are not aware of it.

By way of a Critical Game-Based Pedagogy in composition, these games could serve as tools for generating classroom discussion, as in the case of Zachary Waggoner (2010) and Cathlena Martin and Benton Tyler (2017). What these scholars demonstrate is that both direct interaction with a game's mechanics, like an avatar-creation within a game itself, as with Waggoner's assignment of one hour play in *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*, or Martin and Tyler abstracting approach by assigning textual description, each assignment led to discussion of the choices made by students. In both cases, the issues of representation and social constructions of identity, including race and gender, were briefly discussed, but perhaps could have been examined further. If an activity like this was coupled with a critical reading on race and representation by the likes of bell hooks, Gloria Anzaldúa, or others, students would not only be engaged in a multimodal medium like a video game, but their points of discussion in class, as well as their analysis in writing, may be enriched by this scholarship. By integrating lessons and discussions identity, social constructions, and discourse into a game-based composition course, the opening for critical interrogations of these topics through the context of games expand students' growing multiliteracies while pushing against normative discourse on race, gender, sexual orientation, and ability. Put differently, demonstrating that the avatar-creation process is literally a construction or composition of identities may further illustrate the kinds of aesthetic and abstract elements that make up representations of identity in media and in language.

An avatar creation activity has potential to engage all four Pillars: *Literacy* in *reading* media for its representation and social constructions, *Identity* in its centering of

both identity formation and demonstration of the literal construction of identities, *Social Learning*, in the interaction of personal choices and classroom discussion, and *Multimodality* in the learning that takes place between multiple mediums and of agency and action. Continuing with the idea of pushing against dominant narratives, I move on to discuss one of the more significant games I have played in recent years: *Celeste*, and its model for a reduced risk of failure, emphasis of the reiterative process of learning, and the eventual overcoming obstacles by trial and error.

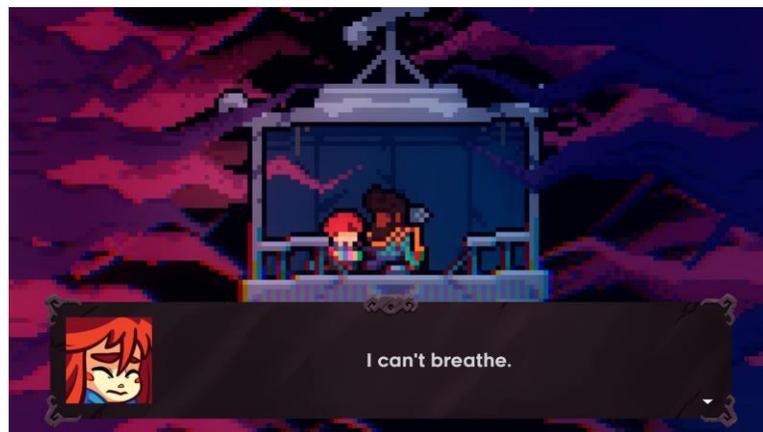


Figure 2

### Celeste: Literacy Identity & Reframing Failure

*Celeste* (2018) is a precision platforming game that elegantly aligns its narrative with gameplay and level of difficulty. To clarify, a platforming game, or a “Platformer” is a game in which players control an avatar across platforms, ledges, surfaces, moving objects, or space across levels. A classic example of a platformer games is the *Super Mario* series. The levels of platforming games are usually puzzle-like, prompting players

to think critically about distance, the speed at which the avatar moves or falls, and other related elements. *Celeste*, is one of those games, but it is also a difficult, charming game about a young woman, Madeline, who experiences depression and panic attacks.

Following what appears to be a breakup with an abusive partner, Madeline takes it upon herself to scale *Celeste* Mountain. This mountain represents, in many ways, the seemingly endless uphill struggle with mental illness and processes of recovery. We might also see students' relationship with writing, or even education in a broader sense, as a similarly difficult obstacle. The metaphoric and narrative challenge in *Celeste* is integrated expertly with the difficulty of its gameplay; being a "precision platformer" game, which task players to become adept at quick gripping, releasing, jumping, and dashing movements across levels, all with unique gimmicks that reappear throughout the game, challenge players to recall the literacy they have gained throughout gameplay.

What is significant about *Celeste*, outside of the enjoyment of its gameplay and its aesthetic presentation, is its resistance to the dominant discourse on mental health and corresponding ramifications. Very few games directly address mental illness or center characters experiencing issues of mental health in any realistic, or relatable fashion. Even fewer games, especially in the genre of platformer or "difficult games," provide players with options that address accessibility issues. As someone who has struggled with depression and anxiety disorders for most of my life, my personal identification with Madeline proved to be a significant motivator to succeed amid the difficulty of the game. But even with my strong connection to *Celeste*'s protagonist, there were moments that I felt I could not overcome the obstacles presented. Unlike most games, *Celeste* offers

players an “Assist Mode”, or accessibility options which can be toggled on and off, including invincibility, unlimited stamina for hanging on edges, and an increased number of dashes. Turning these options on is not presented as a “cheat,” but rather, an option for those who may be differently abled, or perhaps have little skill playing platformers, but would like to see the game’s narrative come to an end. I felt no shame in using these options when needed. Despite my *literacy* in reading and acting in the game’s signs, and symbols, I needed support. In this way, games such as *Celeste* push back against the dominant discourse of inclusive (or lack thereof) in video games.

*Celeste*’s “Assist Mode” serves as an analogue for the low/no risk of failure in my proposed Critical Game-Based Pedagogy in composition. Failure is merely a common feature of the game in which players are quickly reset to where they were when they failed—and in the classroom, this is represented in the open cycle of resubmitting assignment drafts with no risk of failure if an attempt at revision are made. With the help of “Assist Mode,” players can overcome particularly difficult obstacles. In the classroom setting, we might see these obstacles as barriers of literacy in database research, in using word processing software, or even conforming to college-level, or “academic” English writing standards. The “Assist Mode” of the class would manifest in the composition classroom as support from instructors, who, using the recurrent submission model I have detail, may also take a stance of patience, compassion, and communication. By employing an ongoing process of feedback and reiteration of written drafts, for example, students may not feel they are climbing a mountain alone, but rather, are supported by caring instructors and their peers.



Figure 3

### Civilization VI: Critical Literacy and Social Learning

As discussed by Kurt Squire in *Video Games and Learning* (2011) *Civilization* is a series of strategy games in which players control a civilization's progress from a godlike perspective. Strategy games are defined generally by several core features: the game plays out in turns sometimes limited to a finite number, the player has a number of available moves, and in this case, that is determined by how many "Units" or agents that can move, defend, attack, and so on. Strategy games also generally are viewed from top down onto a field of squares or hexagrams, as in the case in *Civilization 6*. Further, in this series, the player decides which technologies their civilization should research, military units they will produce, and the trade routes they establish to connect with other civilizations. Within this game is an encyclopedia of socio-historical information about political ideologies and policies, technologies, and resources, available for the players as they stimulate foreign policy engagements. For example, if a player becomes friends or

allies with another civilization's enemy, that civilization may declare a war or attack the player's military units or buildings without warning. Conversely, the player can choose to do the same thing to the AI<sup>13</sup> opponents. The first time I played *Civilization 2* as a child, I was enthralled by the incredible number of variables that affect the outcome of the player's choices. As a precocious child, simultaneously learning about history and technology in one computer game elicited a feeling of intellectual legitimacy, rather than guilt and a fear of wasting time.

As mentioned, this series of games presents players with ideological choices. If the player develops certain kinds of technologies, exploits particular natural resources, and enacts specific political policies, or "Civics," they may also have the opportunity to take on a new political ideology for their civilization, including fascism or communism. The player, too, at any time, can access the game's "Civlopedia," which works just like a Wiki page, containing information about every term in the game, including the civics. For example, in its "Fascism" page, an excerpt reads:

Marked by militarism, nationalism, modernism, repression, and opposition to Communism, fascist governments embody totalitarianism, in which the state seeks to control all aspects of both private and public affairs. In terms of economics, fascist systems might be considered socialism with a capitalist veneer; in the midst of the Depression it seemed the best compromise between

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<sup>13</sup> AI, referring to "Artificial Intelligence," or computer players (not the human player).

the boom-and-bust cycle of liberal capitalism (with its class conflict) and revolutionary Marxism (with its persecution of the bourgeoisie.)

While the *Civilization* series are not generally thought of as purely educational games, it is true that they contain a good deal of educational content. Like Squire notes in *Video game and Learning* (2011), games may frame and present information and content about thorny topics like politics and ideology differently, in ways which learners may find easier to understand. If, for example, students in a Critical Game-Based composition class were assigned gaming sessions *Civilization*, they might in turn produce reflective compositions about politics, policy, and ideology, and engage in discussions about how these themes are presented in interactive media through the game. In my own teaching I assigned students to complete a political compass questionnaire, and to explore other ideologies that reflect or oppose their own belief systems. Mediating this process through a game like *Civilization 6* would likely facilitate increased engagement.

The game itself embodies a questionable ideological premise in the way players can secure a victory. Conditions of victory include: Domination (the player/AI invades and occupies every Civilization's capital city,) Cultural Victory (the player/AI attracts more tourism than others—generally because they have hoarded “Great Works” of art and music and erected structures such as the Coliseum or Petra,) Religious Victory (the player/AI has spread their chosen or created religion to all other civilizations,) or Scientific Victory (the player/AI has won the space race, secures a moon landing, or becomes armed with nuclear weapons.) The conditions of victory available in these games presents a somewhat troubling ideological position. Often, victory in culture of no-

violent means is far more difficult than spending all available funds and resources on creating powerful militaries and starting wars to extort other civilizations for their resources.

Perhaps this is an intentional rhetorical move made by the game creators to elicit feelings of guilt, or to reflexively ask players to think about the effects of military force and occupation, resource-grabs, and other practices—but perhaps not. This ambiguity may also serve as an interesting point of conflict worthy of a critical composition course’s examination and discussion. In such a composition course, students grappling with the connection between text, writing, and ideology about presented by Victor Villanueva and Tony Scott in *Naming What We Know* (2016) might consider *Civilization* a text in itself, which invariably contains numerous ideologies.

Stuart Selber and his analysis on “Critical Literacy” as a reflective approach is necessary when teaching with or about technology and its place in culture. Selber suggests baseline questions for inquiry in a critical classroom: “What is lost as well as gained? Who profits Who is left behind and for what reasons? What is privileged in terms of literacy and learning and cultural capital? What political and cultural values and assumptions embedded in hardware and software?” (81). Indeed, these are questioning an instructor may want to consider if they plan on integrating *Civilization* into a composition course as either a simulation tool or as an object of study. Instructors might also attempt to address what Selber calls the “progress narrative” (127)—the western conception of the linearity of history and changes in society that are tracked in accordance with technological innovation. This could be contrasted with the linear gameplay of

*Civilization*, in which the history and progress of society progresses in a straightforward motion over the course of several hundred “turns.” As I outlined in my literature review, when discussing Selber’s view that teaching with or about technology, these discussions must always be grounded in criticism. We must remember to critique these “progress narratives” that take into account the material costs and exploitative nature of production of commodities and the discourse that surrounds them.

### Envisioning a Critical Game-Based Pedagogy Curriculum in the Composition Classroom

In earlier sections, I mentioned games such as *Dark Souls* and *Bloodborne* as examples of games that teach through heightened difficulty and reframed failure. These games exist in an asynchronistic multiplayer genre, in which players may “invade” another player’s game for duels or may be called in to help players in a difficult fight. In addition to this, players may leave “notes” in the game environment for others to find—with encouraging words, tips, and even intentionally deceitful advice, such as suggestions to jump from a ledge (which ultimately results in death.) The games developed by FromSoftware (*Dark Souls 1-3*, *Bloodborne*, and most recently *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice*) are infamous for their brutal difficulty, cryptic storytelling, and devoted fan base. Outside the games themselves exist online communities who collect data and share strategies and information the form of Wiki pages and Reddit threads. Like Gee (2003, 2015) and Squire (2011) have discussed, the efforts of such players is a true demonstration of the affinity group principle and an excellent example of the distribution of knowledge and meaning-making within a discourse community. If we consider online

spaces like these examples of affinity groups in action—collective research, writing, and collaboration—they can be considered models for what one possible variation of a Critical Game-Based Pedagogy in composition might look like.

In considering these communities as models for collaborative projects in a Critical Game-Based Pedagogy in composition, we might imagine assigning semester-long research also taking the form of Wikis, that ask students to collect and share information before a concluding written or oral presentation assignment. Such an assignment might emphasize critical concepts in the research process, including database navigation, understanding of the specialized language of keyword searches, or ability to determine the legitimacy of sources. In addition to these connections, a collaborative Wiki project could be linked to the threshold concept concerning the inherently intertextual nature of all forms of communication, as they are situated within a vast network of other texts, writers, and audiences.

As I have discussed, because game-based pedagogy engages students in a breadth of multimodal practices that can promote agency and amplify feedback, instructors have the opportunity to introduce students to methods for critiquing power structures. As Zachary Waggoner (2010) and Cathlena Martin and Benton Tyler (2017) practiced in their own classrooms, thinking about games and game mechanics, and playing games to open channels for critical discussion is not only viable in composition classrooms, but it is productive and engaging for students.

When enacted in conjunction with a critical lens that emphasizes reflection and meta-level understandings of systems of power, design, and educational models, students

may also come to discover transformational threshold concepts of insight in these social and cultural issues, along with those in composition. To hold, as Selber has noted, a post-critical stance and pedagogical approach to technology-mediated composition, a Critical Game-Based Pedagogy in composition utilizes multimodal approaches, including, but not limited to digital collaborative composition and collectivized research. This activity would likely be mediated through student generated Wikis and Google Doc writing, but also in studying and discussing games as cultural artifacts, among other practices. I will describe several activities, assignments, and areas of study that are relevant to a Critical Game-Based Pedagogy in composition, referring back to relevant literature as needed.

#### Research Topic Wiki

One potential curricular iteration for a Critical Game-Based Pedagogy in composition Students is a semester-long project in the form of a collaborative research Wiki project. This project would serve as an opportunity for students to practice valuable skills in research, writing, media literacy, communicating and coordinating with peers, and using creative and computer-based skills they might already have. This activity centers, among other Pillars, works towards goals of the *Social Learning* Pillar, while emphasizing student literacies and use of multiple modes and mediums. In that, this Critical Game-Based curriculum engages directly with the *Identity* Pillar, in the potential for students to form and adopt academic identities which do not require the foregoing of their “real life” identities, but instead depend on them for experiential context and the unique skills and perspectives they would bring to the group dynamic. This assignment, is linked with *Literacy, Social Learning, and Multimodality*, in its multifaceted approach to research

that emphasizes collective effort and critical reading practices with the aims of creating new meaning, connected poignantly with the *Multimodality* Pillar, as students simultaneously interact with several mediums, skill sets, and literacies.]

Using a Free Wiki sites, groups of students would work together, cooperating, co-authoring, and distributing data and research to work towards common goals. Through this semester-long assignment structure, a dedicated group of students independently and collaboratively researching a current event, issue, or topic (e.g., an election, local or university politics, the visual and linguistic rhetoric of the Alt-Right, the rise of right-wing nationalism in Europe, etc.) and contributing to a Wiki on the topic. The content contributed to the Wiki would necessarily include multimedia sources such as videos, audio clips, images, and more, which would supplement and expand their own textual and conceptual compositions within the Wiki pages. After a period, perhaps lasting the length of a semester, the groups would present their research and guide the class through their Wiki pages in a facilitated or co-facilitated lecture and discussion with the rest of the class. Weekly writeups of progress on the Wiki and its content would likely be posted on an online platform such as Moodle or Canvas to ensure accountability—and might also require feedback from other students (after discussing academic, but supportive etiquette and standards for review with the instructor).

This practice synthesizes Gee’s Distributed, Dispersed, and Affinity Group principles (211-212). These principles state that meaning and knowledge are necessarily shared or “distributed across the learner, object, tools, symbols, technologies, and the environment” to others outside of their semiotic or material domains (211-212). By the end of the

semester, the group itself represents an affinity group in that they are a small community of peers that share common goals and values, but that may not share a common “race, gender, nation, ethnicity, or culture” (Gee, 211). Such a classroom experience may engender other results which benefit the learning atmosphere, including the formation of close student-to-student, and an increase of class engagement and morale.

What I have observed from my own experience in the classroom is that when students feel they have personal or collective ownership over their research (because they have chosen the topic of research, conducted the research, and put effort into crafting their compositions) they are more likely to want to share in class and with each other. An experience of collaboration, too, is a semiotic domain many students may not be familiar with outside of the dreaded group projects and presentations they are familiar with from high school. Like other experiences that may be new to students in a Critical Game-Based Pedagogy, a collaborative research project represent new semiotic domains in which literacy and support are necessary.

#### A Logical Conclusion in Critical Digital Humanities

While composing this thesis project, I attended a course on Digital Humanities. In this course, our final digital project could take the form of various iterations of digital spaces and multimedia endeavors, such as podcasts, virtual tours, among others. I had conceived of an online, open-source site to publish my research before enrolling in this course and found an opportunity to achieve two things at once. While [the site](#), *Critical Game-Based Pedagogy* is still in construction, I hope find ways to not only host my research, but to invite fellow scholars of game-based pedagogy in composition and in

other disciplines in the humanities to share their research, their experiences, and their student testimonies. Currently, the site is live and includes links to the living documents that make up the chapters of this thesis text, a FAQ on the core concepts of game-based learning, and a description and visual representation of the four Pillars of a Critical Game-Based Pedagogy in composition that I have described. While the target audience for this site is narrow, I hope to find ways of reaching scholars who are seeking similar pedagogical endeavors.

The first assignment for this course was to design a research question, and to reframe that question fifty times. At first, this seemed impossible, or exhaustive at best. Despite these reservations, my research question from this class was invariably linked with this thesis project: “What best practices in digital humanities can be integrated into a Critical Game-Based Pedagogy in composition?” In the process of answering this question, the course provided me with many readings that were theoretically adjacent to those I discussed in the literature review, but, seeing as the chapter was already quite lengthy, I wasn’t sure how to adequately represent its authors and notable scholars.

These readings, and the direction of the course are directly oriented in social justice, accessibility, inclusivity. Several readings in particular seemed especially relevant to my project; one such reading by Anthony Bayani Rodriguez, “Teaching Guerrilla Praxis: Marking Critical Digital Humanities Research Politically Relevant,” (2017) argues for a “guerrilla praxis” in the digital humanities. This approach, he claims, necessitates studying political sites of struggle as they happen in the world, citing the recent issue involving the Dakota Access Pipeline as an example: “The political context

for the historic protest at the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation shaped the rationale behind the class project... The NODAPL protests were an opportunity for my students to combine their analysis of grassroots social movements with the political organizing of the NODAPL activity at the Standing Rock Reservation” (213).

Rodriguez’s pedagogical approach sets a high bar for the kinds of integrated critical and digital composition work that a Critical Game-Based Pedagogy in composition would likely pursue. Using a multimodal approach and a plurality of literacies in political ideology, writing, and social media interactions, students became involved in these issues in meaningful ways. Rodriguez also made note of his students’ research processes, including the use of a “Cloud-synced document (most commonly Google Docs), which [students] collectively assembled into a written report summarizing their findings” (213-214). Like I suggested in envisioning collaborative research projects in the form of affinity group spaces, Rodriguez’s discussion provides an example from the new digital humanities—a reemergence of the lauded, often misunderstood endeavors of digital humanities projects, and a critical pedagogical perspective that proves useful in the grounding of a Critical Game-Based Pedagogy in composition.

Relatedly, in an effort to change digital humanities, the movement “#transformDH” has appeared as digital humanities begin to emerge with a mission to resist the western, colonial, patriarchal traditions of academic epistemology. Alexis Lothian and Amanda Phillips discuss the efforts of these projects in their article, “Can Digital Humanities Mean Transformative Critique?” (2013). In their article, they observe:

Whatever its future, DH (digital humanities) has already proved its power to unsettle the old guard, inducing anxious and skeptical blog posts from high-profile critical and me-too conference panels spreading the word to far-off disciplines. The spirit of #transformDH is not to arrest this momentum, but to channel truly transformative direction—to avoid trading whiteness for more whiteness, heteropatriarchy for more heteropatriarchy, one imperialist hierarchy for another (16)

The same could be said of any attempt to shake up the academic conventions within a discipline—including composition—which has experienced its fair share of ambitious instructors hoping to revitalize composition, only to reproduce the same kinds of limiting structures that contributed to students' negative attitudes about writing. Lothian and Phillips point to projects, like Rodriguez's, that center the marginalized subjects that are routinely neglected or muffled over the sound and influence of whiter, straighter, and more able-bodied academics attempting to take advantage of hip, new ideas about integrating digital spaces into humanities curriculums. A reflective, reflexive approach to a Critical Game-Based Pedagogy, which seem inherently linked to digital humanities, is fundamental for instructors, including myself—we must always check our privilege and make space for diverse voices.

In short, the radical scholars shaping and transforming digital humanities should be seen as models for Critical Game-Based Pedagogy instructors should closely follow. As Stuart Selber, Rodriguez, and Lothian and Phillips would likely agree, digital literacy as a best practice of digital humanities is necessarily oriented in social justice and

resistance to oppressive western ideologies. In seeking best practices of digital humanities that align with a Critical Game-Based Pedagogy, I see that the four Pillars I have discussed are likely closely related. If a Critical Game-Based Pedagogy is another iteration of critical pedagogy, its practitioners, facilitators, students, and scholars must assume the identity of the hacktivist, the advocate, the social media provocateur, and other figures who can continue to disrupt the academe, while pulling into the center those critical voices that have been marginalized or undervalued.

## CONCLUSIONS

The best practices of a Critical Game-Based Pedagogy, like the threshold concepts they are inspired by, are perhaps infinitely variable and customizable according to rhetorical, economic, and dynamic situations. The four Pillars I have suggested are guides and a particular critical lens to be applied to future practices. Literacy remains at the core of each of these principles, and they are, while distinct, interconnected and dependent upon one another. Literacy in languages, computers, in cultural studies, in collaboration, and in critical thinking engage and equip composition students with a tool set of skills that will carry on beyond the composition classroom, into their respected disciplines and into their personal lives. Like in gaming, literacy, experience, and prior knowledge will transfer to other contexts—as is the case with skills gained when learning or read and write critically. This leads me to an important point: If students are asked to take risks in reshaping their identities, in learning, in taking on radically different ideas about literacy, in reading, writing, and in failure, so too must the instructor.

What is perhaps essential to the practice of game-based pedagogy, and especially a Critical Game-Based Pedagogy, is a patient and creative instructor who possesses a love for games and an ability to guide students as they become engaged in subjects and concepts they'd perhaps previously feared or ignored. The ideal critical game-based teacher in composition seeks to connect what they love about games to unlikely sites of struggle and discourse—always willing to encourage, consul, and guide student writers as needed. If we are to accept what can be learned from the Pillars as threshold concepts,

we must also accept their flexible and adaptable nature. These Pillars are philosophical principles and *guides*, not descriptive (or prescriptive) rules. Through games, and through this pedagogy, students can relax and transform their ideas about what failure is—not as a finite, or ultimate judgement of their abilities, but as an opportunity to reiterate and reflect on the decisions they have made in order to continue to develop in their composing abilities across diverse rhetorical situations. We see collaboration as a vital element of learning, both in composition and in other fields of study, as students accept and acknowledge that knowledge and writing are inherently social and interconnected within a network of other texts, writers, and readers. Students become critics of all texts, technologies, and assumptions and begin to see that these practices can be accomplished by using a variety of methods, across a variety of different platforms and mediums; they can come to see that composition occurs beyond the page in the notebook or sing screen of a word processor—visually, in podcasts, in video, and importantly, in video games. Students see, through these avenues, that meaning is produced and consumed in more than alphabetic terms.

As the discourse of game-based pedagogy continues to expand, so too do the opportunities for digital engagement, cooperation, and collaboration. I have created a website, [\*Critical Game-Based Pedagogy\*](#) as a meeting place for interested scholars and educators to interact and share their research and experiences using game-based pedagogy in composition and in related disciplines. Only this collaboration can take game-based pedagogy to new heights and further excite students about writing and critical thinking in ways that traditional higher education pedagogy cannot. For a Critical

Game-Based Pedagogy in composition to work, only instructors familiar with game (current games or even retro games) are recommended facilitators. This is a critical pedagogy and is not directive, procedural, or rule-based. It requires patience and creativity, adaptability, and flexibility. There are no textbook rules, and the best practices can only continue to grow and change with time. A Critical Game-Based Pedagogy in composition is more than possible—it is feasible and realistic. Even with meager access to technology and digital gaming capabilities, a composition classroom should be able to utilize Critical Game-Based pedagogy to engage students. *Steam* is a platform worth of instructors' times and use, as it hosts many independent games that do not require the top-of-the-line graphics and video processors to run, including older games, such as *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*. Instructors must be willing to experiment, they must be willing to take risks and try new approaches when teaching that perhaps students, may at first, be resistant to. Many students may not find games themselves interesting, but this does not make them invaluable as a site of study, even if they are not played directly by students.

While this project is thorough and wide reaching in its research and teaching philosophy, it is perhaps limited and constrained by several factors, including my optimism that is perhaps unfounded without practical experience in the composition classroom.

#### Limitations and Future Research: A Reflection

First, as I have mentioned, a significant limiting factor of this project is the fact that it is based almost entirely on textual analysis and conceptual frameworks, rather than classroom implementation. While informed greatly by my time as a graduate teaching associate at Humboldt State University, I have not yet attempted to enact a Critical Game-Based Pedagogy in a composition course. Because of this, my arguments may appear unrealistic at best, and hopelessly naive at worst. Like any attempt to enact critical pedagogy, it is perhaps this breed of optimism and passion which garners both disdain and attraction.

Second, my research is likely constrained by the lack of time to integrate a more diverse set of scholars; there is a homogeneity that is perhaps contrary to the inclusive and critical philosophy the project is founded in. A thorough feminist analysis on embodiment, representation, and related themes might have also strengthened my analysis. However, I feel that the breadth of topics presented and discussed in this project paints a wide picture of the various discourses surrounding game-based learning and its nascent entrance into composition pedagogy. This research was limited, too, by the narrow field of composition studies—a Critical Game-Based Pedagogy and teaching philosophy would likely be easily adapted to other humanities subjects, such as history, literature, and other social sciences.

Future research would likely entail practical case studies and qualitative research of the methods and principles I have argued in an applied classroom context. As the discourse continues to become richer and more varied, the conversation regarding game-based pedagogy in composition will likely complicate and greatly enhance the

possibilities for such a pedagogy. During the interim between my post graduate and terminal degrees, I will continue research and update the website regularly as I write, teach, and research in the field. As the website grows and develops, I hope to implement more robust features that would allow for outside contributions and collaborative projects, perhaps incorporating students and their work.

## APPENDIX 1: IDEAFEST POSTER AND EARLY PILLARS GRAPHICS

**PILLARS OF A CRITICAL GAME-BASED PEDAGOGY IN COMPOSITION**



**WHAT**  
IS GAME BASED Pedagogy?

Game-Based pedagogy is a perspective on teaching and learning which practices learning concepts in video games initially identified and discussed by American linguist James Paul Gee and scholar Kurt Squire, among others.

These ideas include players "reading" signs in games, taking on identities or creating new ones while learning the "literacy" of a game, collaborating with others and sharing knowledge in online communities, and taking advantage of multiple approaches to understand and CREATE meaning.

**CRITICAL** game-based pedagogy seeks to use these concepts **WHILE** teaching concepts that **CENTER** inclusivity and resist marginalization, bigotry, heteronormativity, sexism, ableism, and other forms of structural and social oppression. Connecting this approach to "Threshold Concepts of Composition" detailed in *Naming What We Know*, a collection of contemporary composition essays compiled by writing studies scholars Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle

**01 LITERACY**  
Expands definitions of literacy to include multimodal works, sound, video, etc, but also critical digital literacy/tools to value online sources and their validity, among other implications, such as grasping the ideological power of discourse and social constructions—language constituting meaning and reality, culture, etc).



**03 SOCIAL LEARNING**  
Students see the inherently rhetorical and social nature of writing, while collaborating in writing and research assignments, such as a semester-long research Wiki, taking influence from the Affinity Groups which independently collect and distribute research and findings in video games such as World Of Warcraft, whose dedicated fanbase influence changes made to the game by its developers.



**02 IDENTITY**  
Student agency prioritized, and the connection between writing and identity is centered. Students come to understand the power of discourse, social constructions, and the inseparable relationship between texts, readers, writers, and ideology.



**04 MULTIMODALITY**  
Redefining expectations and curriculum to include a wider range and variety of composing which is not limited to alphabetic or textual writing, but incorporates a variety of technologies, software, mediums, and modes which are all valued equally within a rubric determined by a class constituency.



For More Information,  
Visit <https://jke839.wixsite.com/criticalgbpc>

Figure 4

Ideafest Poster: Pillars of A Critical Game-Based Pedagogy

This image is the poster I submitted to Humboldt State University's 2019 IdeaFest, where students and faculty present their research for a large audience. At this event, I was given the opportunity to speak to my peers, colleagues, and faculty members about my research. I will also be submitting a condensed version of my Theoretical Framework on the Pillars of a Critical Game-Based Pedagogy to the Humboldt IdeaFest Journal in the near future.

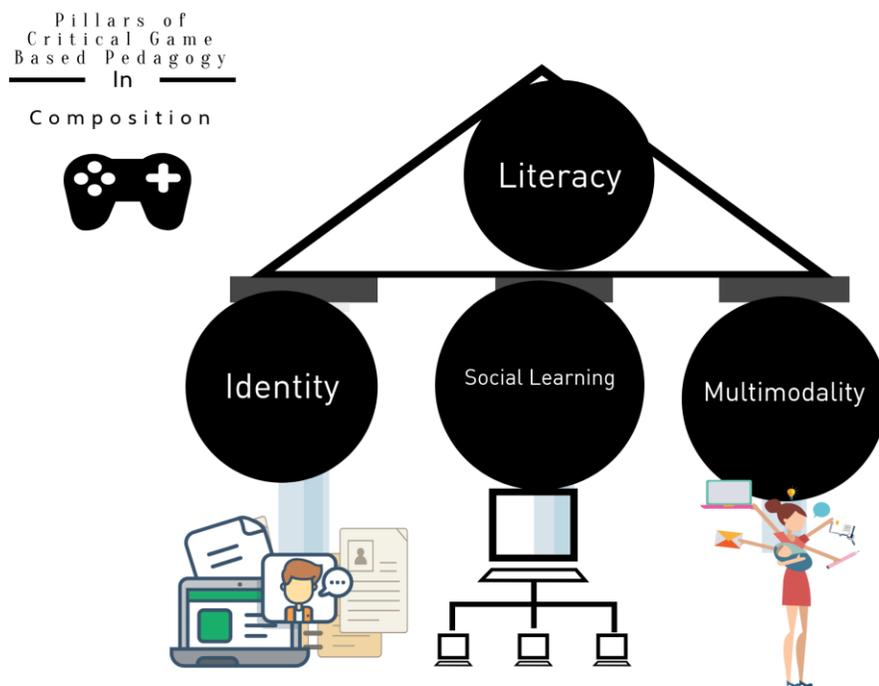


Figure 5

The above image is a representation of the Pillars I created in Piktochart during the early stages of this project. I presented this image to an audience of peers and faculty at Humboldt State University in May of 2019.

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