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## Place for video games : a theoretical and pedagogical framework for multiliteracies learning in English studies

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A PLACE FOR VIDEO GAMES: A THEORETICAL AND PEDAGOGICAL  
FRAMEWORK FOR MULTILITERACIES LEARNING IN ENGLISH STUDIES

By

Ethan T. Jordan

A DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

(Rhetoric and Technical Communication)

MICHIGAN TECHNOLOGICAL UNIVERSITY

2011

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This dissertation, “A Place for Video Games: A Theoretical and Pedagogical Framework for Multiliteracies Learning in English Studies,” is hereby approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY in RHETORIC AND TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION.

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To my family



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## Abstract

Students are now involved in a vastly different textual landscape than many English scholars, one that relies on the “reading” and interpretation of multiple channels of simultaneous information. As a response to these new kinds of literate practices, my dissertation adds to the growing body of research on multimodal literacies, narratology in new media, and rhetoric through an examination of the place of video games in English teaching and research. I describe in this dissertation a hybridized theoretical basis for incorporating video games in English classrooms. This framework for textual analysis includes elements from narrative theory in literary study, rhetorical theory, and literacy theory, and when combined to account for the multiple modalities and complexities of gaming, can provide new insights about those theories and practices across all kinds of media, whether in written texts, films, or video games. In creating this framework, I hope to encourage students to view texts from a meta-level perspective, encompassing textual construction, use, and interpretation.

In order to foster meta-level learning in an English course, I use specific theoretical frameworks from the fields of literary studies, narratology, film theory, aural theory, reader-response criticism, game studies, and multiliteracies theory to analyze a particular video game: *World of Goo*. These theoretical frameworks inform pedagogical practices used in the classroom for textual analysis of multiple media. Examining a video game from these perspectives, I use analytical methods from each, including close reading, explication, textual analysis, and individual elements of multiliteracies theory and pedagogy. In undertaking an in-depth analysis of *World of Goo*, I demonstrate the possibilities for classroom instruction with a complex blend of theories and pedagogies in

English courses. This blend of theories and practices is meant to foster literacy learning across media, helping students develop metaknowledge of their own literate practices in multiple modes. Finally, I outline a design for a multiliteracies course that would allow English scholars to use video games along with other texts to interrogate texts as systems of information. In doing so, students can hopefully view and transform systems in their own lives as audiences, citizens, and workers.

## Chapter 1

### Introduction: Video Games, English Studies, and a Changing Discipline

Video games are perhaps the most popular form of entertainment in our culture, as Ken McAllister notes: “Since 1992, according to some studies, the computer game industry has outgrossed the Hollywood movie industry on a regular basis” (18). Scholars of my generation and beyond have grown up with gaming as another avenue for entertainment, and for many, the reading of literature has taken a backseat to other media such as video games. Thus, while literature and written works continue to carry academic value, interactive media like video games nonetheless carry enormous personal value for students. According to recent surveys, around 70% of college students (both male and female) play video games (and contrary to what most would believe, more women play games on home computers than men) (Weaver). The increasing proliferation of video games as *the* major art form of our time might cause English scholars and teachers who might wish to include them in their work some trepidation, especially since the printed word is seemingly the basis for English as a discipline. The inclusion of video games into the English department can be particularly difficult for instructors who may not be familiar with them. This may be due to a number of possible factors, including (1) the generational gap they may feel between themselves and students, who have most likely been playing games since their infancy; (2) technological hurdles of navigating complex computer gaming literacies and gaming devices (for instance, a modern video game controller includes two joysticks and up to 14 unique buttons, each mapped to specific



functions in numerous contexts); (3) lack of theoretical and practical knowledge of the visual and aural design of video games, which use written text sparingly; and (4) a seeming lack of connection between written literary texts and video-game playing. In short, the use of video games might seem to threaten the disciplinary identity of English studies.

Why, then, would English scholars seek to include video games in their scholarship and teaching? Certainly, the popularity of gaming is a way to seek common ground with students, or to tap into student interest in them. However, as I will argue in this dissertation, a key reason for adding video games to the textual framework of English studies is because they are texts, and as such are very much akin to the literature, argumentative writing, and films currently in use in the English fields. Because video games are texts, they can provide important insights into the nature of storytelling and the activity of readers, both in enacting and interpreting the text and the literate practices involved in doing so. In this dissertation, I argue for the incorporation of video games into the English curriculum, highlighting the theoretical concepts already present in English studies that make the use of video games possible, and combining English pedagogical theories and practices that will help literature and composition instructors make the most of the gaming medium.

The inclusion of video games in English studies would not only create links between current work in literature and composition, but it would also create new opportunities for exploring narratology, rhetoric, and multiliteracies in gaming's multiple modes and genres. By synthesizing these divergent perspectives in English studies, instructors in these disciplines might not only gain a fuller understanding of narrative

theory, rhetorical theory, and literacy theory, but also allow English scholars to use these concepts to interrogate all kinds of texts as narrative, rhetorical, and literacy texts. While some scholarship in the fields of literature, rhetoric/composition, and literacy have attempted to address video games from these perspectives (see Alberti; Alexander; Colby, Shultz and Coby; DeWinter and Vie; Johnson; Journet; Lacasa, et al.; Mactavish; Moberly; Robison; Selfe, Mareck, and Gardiner; Sheridan and Hart-Davidson; Smith and Deitsch; Whalen; Zovera), few have done so in a way that allows for detailed analysis of games as primary texts that simultaneously tell stories and persuade players through rhetoric, leading players to engage in visual, aural, and written literacy practices (or multiliteracies).

The push to use video games in English curriculum (as evidenced by recent special issues in composition, rhetoric, and literacy journals) is not simply due to their popularity or rapid growth as an entertainment medium, but rather because video games are a medium that makes concrete what Cynthia Selfe and Anne Mareck note about the knowledge required for today's students: "Young people's literacy activities in the semiotic domain of gaming may prepare them to operate, communicate, and exchange information effectively in a world that is increasingly digital and transnational—and in ways that their formal school does not" (30). The impetus for adding games to the curriculum is a response to the changing technological landscape of our society and our increasingly digital communication practices. In order to prepare students for this new landscape, English scholars can use gaming to help students develop the meta-level knowledge of texts and the way they are structured, used, and interpreted. By examining video games as complete texts that are simultaneously stories and persuasive expression,

scholars can engage students in complex literacy learning in multiple domains. In order to undertake such an argument, I also argue that English studies must reevaluate the discipline's long-held notions about "texts" and what they mean for students and our world. Also, it seems clear that English pedagogy is not yet fully equipped to deal with the complexities of gaming, especially in terms of the visual, aural, and interactive nature of gameplay. As such, I argue that a hybridized theoretical and pedagogical framework compiled from current English theories and practices can be supplemented with film and video game studies, creating a transmedia theory and pedagogy that can take advantage of what video games have to offer both the English discipline and its students. More specifically, I apply the concepts of narratology, film theory, aural theory, reader-response theory, rhetorical narrative theory and criticism, procedural rhetoric, multiliteracies theory and pedagogy, and procedural literacy to a specific video game, *World of Goo*, in order to help English instructors become better equipped to deal with the richness and complexity of video games and use them in their courses. In doing so, I also create a framework for English pedagogy that focuses on the complex literate practices of all kinds of texts, including written works, films, and video games. This framework is employed in an integrated media course of my own design, which includes multiple media in order to engage students in literacy learning.

Much like composition scholar Johnathan Alexander, I believe gaming can be made an integral part of our work as English scholars, creating a means to "engage with students [in] a more provocative and productive examination of contemporary literacy practices" (37). By examining the learning that takes place within gaming and how that learning occurs, we can discover more about how texts help us learn and become literate

in multiple modes. We as instructors can create classrooms where students interrogate their own learning processes through video games in order to examine how that learning can be created in other contexts or in other ways. Also, by looking at the rhetorical and persuasive content of games, we can ask students to critique how that rhetoric plays out in the culture that creates them. Understanding not only what a game is asking players to value but also how those values are used in the real world seems to be very much akin to other rhetorical instruction in the English fields. More than just subject matter for traditional writing experiences, gaming can be used to examine narrative itself, and the way modality and narrative are connected to create specific mode-based stories. Because gaming is rhetorically persuasive storytelling, students must undertake a variety of complex literacy practices, and adapting theory and pedagogy from the English fields that addresses all of these aspects can help instructors foster multimodal literacy learning.

## Growing Up on Gaming

My connection with video games began long before I began studying English Literature and later English Composition. I grew up in the late 80s and early 90s, when video games began to move away from the arcade boom in the 1970s and infiltrated homes through video game consoles. Since my family had fairly limited funds, we actually acquired an early game system (the Atari 2600) secondhand from a garage sale (long after it had already been released). The games were simple – pixels floating around in shapes that vaguely resembled people or spaceships; games of this era were never “ended” in a traditional sense. Instead, these games increased difficulty until the player surrendered (or was told to come to the dinner table). Later, around 1990, my brothers

and I received a secondhand Nintendo Entertainment System (NES). Many of my childhood memories relate directly to game-playing with my older brothers, such as the joy we felt playing, of all things, a Civil War game for the NES called *North and South*. Players fought battles against each other, invaded forts and trains, and claimed territory (one on the side of the Union, the other on the Confederacy). We didn't care which side actually won the "War Between the States," as long as it was ours. As I will describe later in this dissertation, this game certainly makes rhetorical claims about the Civil War—claims that my brothers and I were still able to learn and pick up on (such as the importance of money to win a war), or the fact that the in-game cavalry literally cannot "retreat" from the battle.

My own sense of the complexities and richness of gaming began with those early experiences, and, I believe, have had an indelible effect on not only my later game-playing, but my understanding of the ways in which all texts are constructed, used, learned, and interpreted. Learning the rules, codes, and cues that a seemingly elementary game like *Super Mario Brothers* (NES) involves is no easy task, even though it is one of the simplest and most fundamental game experiences. Much in the same way as literature and film, video games are textual constructions that involve complex "reading" and "writing" practices. In *North and South*, "reading" that bags of money delivered by trains and transformed into army units are necessary to win and that players should "write" by placing units near the railroad route are complex activities. Game "reading" and "writing" is also based on conventions established from earlier texts, as the basic principles of *Super Mario Brothers* are continued in modern sequels, and as such an understanding of the former games enriches the latter. As King and Krzywinska describe,

the act of gaming need not be viewed as somehow less than reading a book or watching a film, as they put it: “Games are, generally, much more demanding forms of audio-visual entertainment” (23). In essence, because of my early and present gaming experiences, I have a perspective on these texts that is certainly different from those who might not have grown up with them as avenues for entertainment. I also believe that my experiences with gaming affect the way I use and interpret texts in other modes as well. For instance, in watching a film or reading a book, I often think of the available or possible kinds of action that can take place, much in the same way as I often test out video game buttons to determine their use. Even in a written text or film, I may be figuratively “pressing all the buttons” to determine what might come next.

Upon entering graduate study, I was actually surprised that games were being studied at all in an academic sense (much in the same way that young people probably do not imagine that such a thing as a “film scholar” exists). Even more surprising to me was the fact that *English scholars* had been discussing gaming and how it might inform the teaching of writing. The use and discussion of video games is becoming fairly common throughout the English fields, as McAllister describes: “Less frequently—much less frequently [than offering game development programs and courses]—programs in rhetoric, cultural studies, media arts, and communication sponsor courses that examine computer games in particular social and theoretical contexts like gender and race politics, literary and film studies, and postmodernism” (25). While a more specialized field of “game studies” is still emerging and will emerge over time from what Zach Whalen describes as an “academic ghetto,” it might seem odd to find English to be the home for studying video games. However, I would argue that putting video game analysis into the

English department is not entirely farfetched, and is actually a perfect place for their study. Video games are explicitly rhetorical texts that tell stories, and players engage in multiple literacy practices with them. Because English scholars tend to view them from only one of these viewpoints, the discipline has not yet seen their full potential.

Before I begin discussing the current work in English on video games, it might be helpful to examine one area where English courses already include multimodal textual analysis: film. The visual/aural medium of film has been a staple of English studies for decades, and the use of film demonstrates how English scholars might view the textual “work” of both students and instructors in English studies from a unique perspective.

## **Film and the English Department: Expanding the Concept of “Text”**

The inclusion of film courses in English departments at institutions without film majors has become fairly commonplace, demonstrating the awareness of the importance of analyzing visual media in English studies. However, the initial inclusion of film into English departments was not exactly welcomed. Early articles on film and English studies reveal a sort of resentment toward the infiltration of film into the English fields, as literature scholar Harold Schneider describes in a 1975 article: “insofar as language departments teach courses in the Art of Film, in Filmmaking, and in the History of Film, I believe they have wandered into alien fields, those best left to Speech and Drama, Film and TV, and Art Departments” (qtd. in Self 15). Likewise, Pauline Kael warns of the dangers of ruining the film experience for students as early as 1969: “If you think you can’t kill movies, you underestimate the power of education” (qtd. in Silva 45). In spite of these early objections, film courses continued to rise in popularity within English

departments. Robert Self describes the speed with which film courses began to appear: “Some 139 departments of English taught film courses according to the 1973 American Film Institute's Guide to College Courses in Film and Television; a decade later the AFI Guide set that number at close to 200 -- more than a 40 percent increase. Throughout the 1970s graduate programs in film began to graduate a significant number of doctoral students, many of whom found jobs in English departments” (15). The rapid proliferation of film as an entertainment medium in the early half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and its later development into an academic field seems to echo the rise of the video game in the 1980s and game studies today.

Film was once used merely as an aside for English scholars, particularly those concerned with literature and film adaptation. Indeed, a strand of film study known as adaptation studies continues today as its own specialized part of literary studies: for instance, a *Hamlet* scholar references the playing of a certain line within Olivier's film adaptation, but this reference is always tied to the study of the written text. However, this usage of film became less frequent when film study began to take more of the focus, as Dudley Andrew describes in a 2009 survey of film studies: “[films] immediately showed themselves to be more than mere illustrations within scholarly debates; they fueled every discussion that engaged their scarcely manageable images and narratives. This multiplied the stakes and consequences—the excitement—of taking films seriously, ultimately producing the lectures, courses, articles, and books whose debates make up a fertile field, if not a discipline” (913). Much like film, video games are beginning to be “taken seriously” by the academic world, and video games can become the primary texts for scholars, rather than mere asides used to illustrate concepts. If we examine games as



whole and complete texts, rather than using parts of them to illustrate concepts, English instructors can take video games seriously in order to expand what “texts” mean and do for both students and society.

In using film as an analogy for the situation of video games in English departments, the question of what students in English courses are actually learning begins to come to the surface. Because of modern technologies and new media, English scholars might begin to grow concerned about what an expansion of the term “text” means for our discipline, which deals almost exclusively with written works. However, this can certainly be viewed as a positive change for our perception of textuality and what that change might mean for students, as Robert Scholes emphasizes the need to reevaluate the “work” of English:

In an age of manipulation, when our students are in dire need of critical strength to resist the continuing assaults of all the media, the worst thing we can do is to foster in them an attitude of reverence before texts. What is needed is a judicious attitude: scrupulous to understand, alert to probe for blind spots and hidden agendas, and finally, critical, questioning, skeptical.... To put it as directly, and perhaps as brutally, as possible, we must stop ‘teaching literature’ and start ‘studying texts.’ All kinds of texts, visual as well as verbal, polemical as well as seductive, must be taken as the occasions for further textuality. And textual studies must be pushed beyond the discrete boundaries of the page and the book into the institutional practices and social structures that can themselves be usefully studied as codes and texts. This is what a reconstructed English apparatus ought to do. (16-17)

While this observation seems fairly revolutionary, it was made over 25 years ago, long before the Internet and most modern digital media. It seems clear that asking students to become critical readers of all kinds of texts is far from an absurd notion at this point in the English discipline, where students are commonly asked within English courses to create and critique digital texts. Asking students to examine texts in this way has worked toward deconstructing the traditional canon of literary texts, and as such can seem threatening to literature programs. However, such a move toward textuality (rather than literature or writing) can work toward liberating the discipline to explore aspects of texts that might be more meaningful to students. Likewise, such a view of texts incorporates an examination of the social forces that help to create them, moving toward a sociocontextual view of textuality that can offer more insights than insulated critique. In this way, both film *and* video games become important artworks for analysis and discussion in English courses, supplementing rather than supplanting written texts.

## Surveying the Discipline: How Have English Scholars Incorporated Video Games?

While the practical hurdles involved in adding video games to the English curriculum require practical solutions for overcoming them, the inclusion of games into English departments begs a number of theoretical and pedagogical questions. English studies scholarship has attempted to answer these questions thus far in a number of important ways. For a variety of reasons, scholars in most cases have strayed away from in-depth discussion and analysis of gaming texts as a whole, opting instead to analyze specific *aspects* of video games that point to their own concerns within composition or

literature. The problem with studying games in such a fractured way is partiality; if a scholar describes only the writing that takes place within a certain video game, that description neglects the fact that the game might also include far more instances where writing is not necessary at all. For example, if a game asks players to type in certain contexts but mostly requires the player to navigate complex visual worlds or aural cues, how can we ignore these aspects? While many of the discussions in English studies are helpful in discussing the complexity of video games and the practices within and surrounding them, they all produce a *partial* understanding of the activities involved in gaming. These three aspects of gaming: their narrative structure, their ability to persuade players rhetorically, and players' complex literacy practices, have been examined separately by English scholars in a number of texts. However, each of these discussions is not giving a full picture of what gaming does and means for players. By recombining theories already in use by English scholars into a theoretical and pedagogical framework specifically designed for the study of video games along with other texts in English studies, English literature and composition programs can embrace a multimodal view of textuality that is required for students in an increasingly digital world.

Video games have already begun to enter discussions within English studies, and as such, it is important to examine the ways they are currently used in order to produce new insights. In recent scholarship, video games are primarily viewed from the lenses of narrative, rhetoric, cultural studies, and literacy in one of four ways:

- 1) as contexts, places, or subjects for writing practices (usually in online gaming)
- 2) to some extent, places for narrative activity—as in Debra Journet's work on narrative action in gaming

- 3) as cultural artifacts that reflect the culture that produced them—as in discussions of violence, power, and misogyny in cultural studies
- 4) as containing valuable literacy learning principles that can be extracted and applied to English classrooms

While each of these perspectives certainly builds upon previous work and creates new starting points for further analysis, I argue that it is their divergent approaches that have thus far prevented a full use of the potential of gaming to provide new insights into multimodal literacies, storytelling, and rhetorical narrative theory in English studies. The discussion that follows is meant to describe the possible limitations of viewing games in these four ways and the future implications of analyzing video games according to the specific framework chosen. In discussing the recent scholarship on gaming in English studies, I will show how the divergent viewpoints expressed by narrative, cultural studies, rhetoric, and literacy scholars, rather than remaining separated from one another, can be melded together to provide a customized theoretical and pedagogical basis for using video games alongside other texts within English courses.

## **Gaming: A Problematic “Subject”**

One of the more problematic uses of video games in current English courses is the use of video games as contexts, places, or subjects for writing practices, most often in massively-multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs). This use of video games in English courses, while not necessarily negative in their specific contexts, certainly is far from what I believe video games can do for students in terms of creating the conditions for literacy learning. A number of English scholars advocate either using existing video games as writing contexts, or actually creating a text-based writing game

for students. In “A Pedagogy of Play,” Colby and Colby propose an English composition course where students play the game *World of Warcraft*, and during which, students will be “researching and writing various self-determined documents related to the game, creating a learning feedback loop in which they ‘probe, hypothesize, reprobe, and rethink’ (Gee, 2003, p. 90)” (301). The playing of the video game here is directed toward the “production of rhetorical texts for a gamespace community” (Colby and Colby, “A Pedagogy of Play” 301), emphasizing the notion of “public writing” within the game world. The texts created are meant to respond to rhetorical situations in the game and hopefully enact meaningful changes in the game society. Matthew Johnson sets up a similar argument for “public writing” by demonstrating how online games create opportunities that are far different from the traditional decontextualized writing course: “unlike conventional academic spaces and workspaces, the playspace in which gamers write is comprised of textual exchange that is self-motivated; the writers themselves collaboratively construct them” (270). The problem with this use of gaming is that it neglects the fact that students are *required* to play a video game. The texts are not produced organically by the gamespace community.

The assumption that writing in composition courses is actually capable of social change is somewhat misguided for Johnson, since in actuality, most “public writing” within composition remains insulated after the course is over. The danger of this kind of assignment rationale is that it creates expectations that are not entirely realistic: “if an assignment is designed to ‘bring about progressive societal change’ and no such change can be definitively measured, we run the risk of inadvertently communicating to our students that the writing does not, in fact, matter” (Johnson 272). While I find the use of

online gaming as a place for first-year writing to be somewhat missing the point of using video games in English classes (since it may ignore the rhetorical persuasion of the text itself, or the significance of the game story), there are some positive aspects advocated by these researchers. For instance, the assignment structure in these online courses is not an ordered list of tasks that need to be completed in order for students to pass, but instead is conceptualized as a “studio-like space for students to work through those [rhetorical] strategies on their own” (Colby and Colby 305, see also Sheridan and Hart-Davidson 327). Asking students to create texts within a studio space is intriguing as a “game-like” course structure, and this could be an essential element in adding video games to English curriculum.

The issue with this instrumental use of video games in English pedagogy is that they are not based on video games themselves but on the online societies they create and how those societies can be influenced through in-game and out-of-game texts created by students. In essence, the game is used as a receptacle for traditional writing in an online space. However, some scholars also create their own online spaces geared toward writing, as David Michael Sheridan and William Hart-Davidson describe the construction of an online game of their own in “Just For Fun: Writing and Literacy.” The game creates exigencies for writing that are completed by players and evaluated by other players: “the game itself would not deploy sophisticated *nonhuman* intelligence; instead, it would leverage *human* intelligence by providing an immersive environment—a world—that included the kinds of structures necessary for rich social interaction. The *game* wouldn’t be conscious, but it would invite consciousness into it” (Sheridan and Hart-Davidson 325). The game described, called *Ink*, is a perfect example of the way online gaming is

used in these courses, as they create an opportunity for social interaction through text and public writing in online spaces. While this is certainly a valuable concept, especially for composition courses that seek to have students write “public texts,” this use of video games is a purely instrumental one – the game is used as a teaching interface at best and a repository for written texts at worst. However, instructors using games like *World of Warcraft* in this way seem to be simply taking advantage of an online community that includes millions of people (and one that could be replaced by any other online community), a ready-made context for public writing. Such a course interrogates online communities, rather than the games in which they reside.

Ann Jackson Zovera advocates using gaming as the subject matter for the narrative-based first-year composition course, and while this is certainly a fine focus for a course in first-year writing, such an incorporation of gaming into the course has little to do with gaming at all. It seems that one could replace video games with social networking, texting, or any other activity that is popular with students. In this way, gaming is simply a topic for writing traditional narrative essays, and it assumes a great deal about how much students know about gaming: “because Jerome [a student Zovera says would be considered an ‘at risk’ student] considers himself to be a game wizard and a master storyteller, he is able to construct stories in video games and is able to tell his friends about these stories later in casual conversation. If Jerome is able to construct stories in video games, he should be able to construct stories when writing narratives in his first year composition course.” Such an assumption does not necessarily hold up in all instances; students that happen to be gamers do not necessarily automatically create cohesive narratives about that gameplay (although they are certainly “capable” of doing

so). While such a use of gaming in the classroom may help “keep student interest” in the writing course, it may not use gaming in a way that deals with the opportunities the medium affords.<sup>1</sup> Instead of using gaming narratives as “models” for students to write narratives of their own, why not examine the way video games construct narratives for players?

## Storytelling in Books, Storytelling in Games

Because of the many years spent reading and analyzing literature, perhaps the most obvious move for English scholars to make is analyzing video games as a storytelling medium. In a discussion with video game developers, Colby and Colby ask the game designers about the connection between gaming and the teaching of writing, and the interviewees respond in similar ways, as Jane Jensen answers: “It’s hard to imagine a game that, by playing it, would teach writing. I think a better exercise might be to dissect a game and try to plot out [its] branches – or, as already mentioned, try to outline a game yourself.” Other respondents discuss that the “‘heart’ of the game is a story,” or that gaming is essentially “written.” Thus, rather than describing the need for a video game that is developed specifically to teach writing and reading practices, the video game developers instead advocate the use of all games as “written” texts that tell stories which are then “read” by players.<sup>2</sup> This is exactly the kind of move toward a more inclusive textuality (rather than exclusively examining literature or argumentative essays) that English scholarship can and should embrace; viewed as another composed narrative text for analysis, video games seem to fit well in English theory and pedagogy. Students examining video games as narrative texts learn how to do fine-grained analysis of



storytelling techniques, as well as the verbal/aural/interactive resources used in the narration.

Gaming is an explicitly narrative-based activity, one where players enact a composed story within the game space, and as Debra Journet argues, the story continues outside of the game world, where there are both “stories in the game” and “stories about playing the game” (94). Players often describe the detailed activities of gaming after playing, especially since individual players might make unique choices in order to complete game activities. Because many gaming activities allow players to achieve the objectives of the game from multiple avenues, each gameplay experience (while still enacting the same story) can be highly individualized. By examining the individual response of players, Journet sees narration as an “interactive” textual activity, as she notes: “There is within literary studies a ‘hermeneutic’ strand of theory that focuses on interpretation and reader-response and on narrative as rhetoric, as well as a robust theoretical discussion, much of which has been located in the human sciences, that examines narrative as a form of action rather than as mode of discourse or representation” (95). Thus, through a discussion of reader-response criticism, Journet relates the reading of a written text to the playing of a video game by responding to players’ activity in creating and enacting the narrative experience in each mode, making a clear link to literary study. By expanding the concept of “studying literature” to “studying texts,” the movement from written to interactive narrative begins to take shape. Storytelling in gaming is an important element that will be used in creating a pedagogical framework for video games in English studies, and by examining the player’s activity in enacting the

game's story, students can gain a greater understanding of how narrative "works" in all kinds of texts.

In making video games another area for textual study and critique, the activity of the English scholar would make a similar move from close-reading (the major activity of English literature students) to "close-playing," which Edmond Chang describes as necessitating "careful and critical attention to how the game is played (or not played), to what kind of game it is, to what the game looks like or sounds like, to what the game world is like, to what choices are offered (or not offered) to the player, to what the goals of the game are, to how the game interacts with and addresses the player, to how the game fits into the real world, and so on" (6). Indeed, this is the kind of fine-grained analysis and discussion that the study of English literature fosters. Close-playing, close-reading, and close-viewing can become the staples of narrative work for English studies. Players can examine the "metastory" in gaming that structures the individual player's experiences into a cohesive narrative that is meaningful for them, as Journet notes: "Even more important, though, to my own experience of game play as situated, embodied learning was the experiential narrative that arose out of my own actions as a player" (101). Video games set up a sandbox-like experience, where there is both freedom and limitation, where smaller pieces that are composed by players fit into a larger whole that is carefully designed. The key for the study of gaming in the English department is to see how close-playing can become one of many tools for students to engage in the "work" of the English degree, as Journet describes the similarities between English students and gamers, who are both asked to "find patterns among details, to organize information in relevant ways, and to map relationships using a range of semiotic systems" (106). In

analyzing the narratives that are built into and emerge from video games, English scholars can demonstrate for students that they are not necessarily learning “texts,” but instead are learning skills in analyzing and critiquing those texts in order to understand narratives and their use in multiple modes and contexts. In other words, being able to play a *Super Mario Bros.* game is not about learning everything there is to know about it, but instead it is about learning what the game is asking players to do in specific contexts. Likewise, the overall curricular goal of reading a Shakespeare play or writing an academic essay is less about that specific play or essay than it is about gaining a meta-level understanding of textual production or reception. Once English students become adept at finding patterns and organizing information in video games, they can perform similar analyses of other texts and systems in the world.

## Critiquing Gaming Culture: Insights from Cultural Studies

Cultural Studies in English dealing with video games bring critical theory to the video game text, asking what social and political forces are at work within them and critiquing the society that produces and consumes them. Ken McAllister’s *Game Work: Language, Power, and Computer Game Culture* brings the cultural and economic issues involved in game production and design to the forefront, as he uses multiperspectival cultural studies, which “actively investigate the relationships of cultural artifacts ‘within the three dimensions of: (1) the production and political economy of culture; (2) textual analysis and critique of its artifacts; and (3) study of audience reception and the uses of media/cultural products’” (42). These three dimensions offer insights into the power relationships involved in gaming from the perspective of players, the texts, and most

importantly for McAllister, the culture that creates them. Less about video games themselves, cultural studies critiques of games aim to explore the way hegemonic power is reproduced in video game texts.

Cultural studies analyses of gaming aim toward positive social change, as McAllister notes: “The only outcome that is expected of the grammar of gameworks is that it be used to change these [dialectical] struggles through critique-driven action” (65). As instructors and scholars, we have the unique position to discuss gaming texts from a perspective outside that of the game developer, which is far too enmeshed within the computer game complex. While McAllister’s work brings up a number of key issues about gaming and culture, for me, the focus on the “computer game complex” takes the analysis too far away from the texts themselves. While an understanding of the forces that produce games is essential, I believe that McAllister’s work misses a key component of the video game: the text itself. While it is essential for my pedagogical concerns that students not neglect the power structures involved in games, I also would like them to focus in particular on *what* is produced: the game text, and more specifically, how that text is structured. Later in the dissertation, I will describe how Cultural Studies comes into play in my theoretical and pedagogical framework through multiliteracies pedagogy, which emphasizes “critical framing” as a key part of student learning. Once the students bring a critical eye to the text, they can begin to “redesign” the text and hopefully bring about positive social change (see the New London Group).

Another cultural studies critique advocates that students gain an understanding of the subjectivities players bring with them and how they construct themselves and their avatars (player-created characters) accordingly. In order to create a fuller understanding

of the cultural forces at work in gaming, Jennifer DeWinter and Stephanie Vie argue that “students need to develop critical awareness of their own subject formation and their positions in new media environments. Such awareness is a necessary component of new media literacy” (313). Especially in online gaming, players have choices over how their avatars will look, and these choices can be fruitful in discussing the ways games allow or disallow certain kinds of characters or character creation. For instance, most women in video games are physically fit, attractive, and given clothing choices that leave them half naked. (A term called “breast physics” actually exists in popular gaming culture, especially when male gamers discuss the “realism” of female characters.) Examining these choices for female characters, or rather the lack of choices, can lead to classroom discussions of misogyny and feminist critique. Students can also analyze player avatars and game characters on home console games, even going so far as to change their activity as players in light of a character’s representation (see Williams 255). Gamers not only can learn to critique the games they play and how they construct players to perform certain actions, but they also can critique how they construct themselves within the gamespace. Fostering critical media literacy in students through cultural critique is what leads to active reconstruction of texts and greater awareness of players’ subjectivity, and while cultural studies is certainly helpful in this regard, it is also important to remember that this is only one aspect of games. As such, a cultural studies scholar might stop at critiquing Lara Croft’s body in *Tomb Raider*, neglecting important elements of the game as a result.

The purpose of cultural studies’ focus on a critical examination of video games is liberation; by understanding and analyzing how games reinforce dominant power

structures, players hopefully gain the tools to make critical and social change, particularly by exposing cultural and ideological assumptions in games. Kevin Moberly discusses the way video games can make visible the invisible forces in our culture, as he describes:

Computer games, in this sense, have the potential to not only make students aware of how popular culture uses violence as a surrogate to convey and reinforce the value-systems it privileges but to make them aware of what is arguably the more insidious, violent discourse of consumerism that is disseminated through works of popular culture like computer games. Populated with a wealth of objects of every size, shape, function and description, MMORPGs like *WoW* [*World of Warcraft*] present players with the digital equivalent of what, in his 1968 work, *The System of Objects*, Jean Baudrillard (1996) characterized as the dizzying proliferation of consumer goods from which the discourse of consumer culture is constructed. (296)

For example, the 2005 game *Resident Evil 4* operates in a similar way, emphasizing discourses of racism, consumerism, and colonialism. Through the game's visuals and audio, *Resident Evil 4* constructs players who are made to kill demonized foreigners and maintain dominant power relationships through violence. The collection of treasures is a vital activity in the game, as it allows the player to purchase more powerful weapons and items which are required to complete the story. The acquisition of money occurs through violence: when a player kills an enemy, the enemy's body dissolves into liquid and leaves items such as gold coins, gold bars, or precious stones. Also, treasures are hidden throughout the game and found through exploration. An easy method for players to obtain these treasures is to purchase a "treasure map" with the locations of these valuable

items. Indeed, the colonialist pleasure of traveling to a foreign land to find valuable treasure is certainly an intrinsic gameplay element in *Resident Evil 4*, and in true colonialist fashion, players are rewarded financially for killing foreign enemies. This is just one example of a gaming text that can, within an imagined virtual world, illuminate discourses within our real world.

This is not to say that every game can be used in this way, as Chang notes: “Not all games are created with critical, political, and intellectual questions in mind, if at all, nor are all games played critically, politically, or intellectually. . . . Games make visible, make intelligible, make actionable the descriptions, interactions, and logics of the real world. It is this power and responsibility that critical gaming as practice and as theory must attend and realize” (Chang 9). The possibility for critical examination of gaming is that it will ask students to attend to similar cultural issues in their world. However, it is important to note that this kind of examination cannot be prescribed, or that there is no specific formula for creating positive social change. These are the specific critiques of critical pedagogy, which attempts to “liberate” students through a set of pedagogical practices like de-centering classroom authority and asking students to investigate their own complicity in hegemonic power. However, a number of critics have brought up the limitations or problematic nature of this pedagogy, as Elizabeth Ellsworth notes that it is impossible to “unproblematically bring subjugated knowledges to light when I am not free of my own learned racism, fat oppression, classism, ableism, or sexism” (308). Byron Hawk also describes how students may find a pedagogical method that seeks to investigate power relations to be just as restrictive and disempowering as other traditional skills-and-drills teaching, as he explains how “establishing a pedagogical method as a

universal law simply reproduces its own resistance” (210). In this way, critical pedagogy might seem to create liberation, but it can also be prescriptive in the same way as traditional pedagogies. For my own framework, critical pedagogy comes into play in asking students to investigate issues of power within texts and the contexts surrounding them, but these investigations are tied to students’ own experiences with and interests in the text. However, as I will describe later in this dissertation, the pedagogy of Multiliteracies is far less prescriptive in terms of *requiring* students to produce social change. Instead, students are given opportunities to learn, and the hope is that the learning creates possibilities for social transformation. Thus, while a cultural studies viewpoint is vital to a full understanding of games and how they work in our world, it is also important to look at other aspects, such as the text’s construction and the reader’s choices in enacting the game story.

## Gaming and Literacy: Are Video Games Like English Courses?

Literacy scholarship involving video games creates a number of metaphors and concepts, not all of which necessarily work in all situations. The most common metaphor is that a video game is similar to an English course, in the sense that both create learning. However, when one considers the inherent differences between video game design and English curriculum or course design, the uses of video games as entertainment in students’ personal lives, and the institutional context of higher education (which is not likely to be forgotten, even when games are involved in the classroom), such a metaphor seems to be a bit of a stretch. However, the available scholarship on literacy instruction and gaming has a number of benefits for our work as educators, such as: reevaluating



how courses can help students learn more effectively using the learning principles of video games (as in Gee, Robison, Alberti, Colby and Colby); valuing students' "out-of-school" literacies just as much as "in-school" learning (Smith and Deitsch); breaking down the dichotomy between "reading" and "writing" as situated and contextual literacy practices that can work simultaneously (Gee, Alberti); and attempting to seriously consider "play" and "fun" as important components of literacy instruction (Chang). All of these elements are important for my synthesis of English theories and pedagogies in order to create a specialized framework for video game work in English.

If a video game player uses complex pattern recognition (as I've discussed earlier), players must glean what information they can based on patterns of information acquired earlier in the game and must apply that "read" knowledge almost instantaneously after learning it. Literacy scholarship in the past few years has attempted to take advantage of this aspect of video gaming in order to create better learning in classrooms. Perhaps the most pervasive theoretical viewpoint with which to discuss video games and English studies has come from New Literacy Studies,<sup>3</sup> particularly the work of James Paul Gee. *What Video Games Have To Teach Us About Learning and Literacy* is a seminal work in that it sets up the major concept of much of the video game literacy scholarship that follows it: video games teach players well, and what makes that teaching so effective can be examined and codified for use in the English classroom. Gee not only demonstrates the complexity and active participation players have with games, but he also advocates for designing literacy curricula and courses so that they create similar experiences. The question of how much video game design actually influences major pedagogical changes to English courses is problematic here, since it seems unclear

whether game design is able to apply directly to course design, or for that matter, has been applied to create different kinds of English courses. However, the work of Gee and other New Literacy scholars includes a few key concepts which I will describe below, and they are vital to any discussions of literacy and gaming: 1) video games are examples of the *situated* learning that should happen in schools; 2) games create critical learning experiences which allow players to critique game design; 3) and they contain “design grammars” that control how players learn within the gamespace. Each of these elements seem important to my own framework because they emphasize the structure of the game experience, the player’s activity in the game experience, and the way they can create new insights into literate practices.

First, the concept of situated learning implies that instead of teaching video game players concepts or skills outside of the context of their use (which Gee and other researchers would say is happening in traditional English literacy classrooms), video games ask players to learn in specific contexts and apply that knowledge within them. Gee’s work certainly points toward video games as more than mere child’s play, but he also makes a powerful argument about the way literacy learning does not make sense when taught in a socio-cultural vacuum (see also Lacasa et al. 343; Gee, “Foreword” x). Instead, video games demonstrate for Gee the importance of situated learning through their placement of players in virtual worlds that require specific input according the situation at hand. The situated learning takes place because of what Gee calls “connectionism,” where players are active “pattern-recognizers” (8). By recognizing the complex system of cues the game requires, players begin to understand how to apply

knowledge learned in certain situations. Gaming, for Gee, is a contextual process of knowing what the game is asking players to do at the right place and time.

In addition to viewing gaming as a situated literacy practice, Gee also describes how video games create *critical* learning experiences, where players examine the design of the video game from a meta-level, understanding the limitations of the gamespace and the abilities they have within it. Video games create highly situated domains for critical learning, as players begin to see the “semiotic domain as a *design space*” (40). In this way, players are aware and learn about not only the actions required in playing the game, but the design parameters of that gamespace and how it has been designed and constructed for them. Likewise, players can actively “redesign” the game for their own purposes or to suit their own needs. In other words, players can complete the game in a number of ways, using multiple tactics, but will always reach the final goal of the game, whatever it may be. At the same time, game playing requires players to understand the construction of the text from a “meta” level, examining the design space of the game and what it allows them to do within it.

Critical learning also occurs through awareness of a video game’s internal and external “design grammar.” This concept emphasizes the way games are designed to allow and disallow certain “readings” and kinds of “writing” specific to the grammar at work, as Eve Deitsch discusses: “In adventure games, there’s always something important that is said in a conversation that won’t come up again until you need it in a puzzle later” (qtd. in Smith and Deitsch 56). Once again, this kind of literacy work emphasizes the complex activities involved in gaming, the design elements that create the game experience, and the way players learn specific strategies for succeeding within the

game based on those design decisions. Knowing what to watch for, listen to, or remember in relation to other information presented in the gamespace is (for both New Literacy scholars and myself) a literate practice. Concepts of situated literacies, critical learning, and design grammars are all essential to Gee's plea for better literacy instruction, and these are the specific ideas that will be the most helpful in incorporating New Literacy Studies into my pedagogical and theoretical gaming framework in this dissertation. By asking students to examine the situated literacies involved in gameplay, the critical learning that takes place, and the design grammars that make the learning occur, English scholars can enrich students' abilities in critical thinking and create similar experiences in classrooms.

My main criticism of Gee and other literacy scholars who work with games is that the relationship between game learning and classroom learning is not a one-to-one relationship. While I would agree that looking at video games' design principles in order to strengthen literacy instruction to create more interactive and situated learning is a positive thing, I must question whether this analogy has yet had any real impact on course design. This analogy is implied in a number of recent articles on gaming and literacy, such as John Alberti's "The Game of Reading and Writing: How Video Games Reframe Our Understanding of Literacy," in which he argues: "the interactivity of video games, understood as part of a radical reassessment of literacy in the digital age, points to a fundamental re-conception of writing pedagogy and of the metaphors we use to understand reading and writing in ways that can dramatically reinvigorate the writing classroom" (260). Games are used in this context for a very specific purpose: to help English instructors change their courses to be more game-like, specifically by describing

the way games involve simultaneous “reading” and “writing.” Robison makes a similar claim in her piece about game developers and their relationship to course developers: “video game designers and developers discuss and approach their design processes in many of the same ways writing teachers do” (360). Once again, games are used in a way that makes them models for what courses can and should do: create situated experiences that help students learn critically. While using games to demonstrate possibilities for more game-like course designs is helpful for highlighting what courses are not “good” at doing (such as creating real-world contexts for student work), much of this scholarship does little in terms of outlining what such a course would look like, or how precisely it would be different from courses taught now. Thus, while there is certainly an analogy to be made between game design and course design, the discussion of game design never really seems to be applied on the side of actual course design. This dissertation is meant to outline some possibilities for how English courses can incorporate a game-like structure, while not necessarily adopting game design principles wholesale.

Thus, I believe English instructors and scholars must interrogate the notion that the design of video games is akin to literacy curriculum design, or that courses should be “games.” However, a number of scholars have highlighted the concept of “fun” and “play” (obvious terms for video games, but not-so-obvious terms used to describe a college course), as Alberti questions: “Aren’t novels, after all, seen as ‘games’ that readers ‘play?’ They require active participation, hours of work, and result in experiences that range from the amusing to the disturbing to the tedious. As with all forms of ‘serious play,’ from aesthetic experiences to hobbies to even scholarship itself, novel reading complicates and enriches the notion of ‘fun’” (263). Thus, we see the reverse analogy

here, where traditional literacy instruction (in the form of novel reading) is compared to playing a game. This concept certainly places emphasis on the “interactivity” involved in reading a novel, and as such, one can certainly see how gaming is somewhat related to a reading experience. This relationship is perhaps more important for my pedagogical and theoretical framework, since it does not attempt to change courses in a drastic way, but rather it is an attempt to find relations between texts and teaching with an eye toward fostering metaknowledge of those relationships. I will highlight the application of this concept to gaming even further when discussing narratology and reader-response criticism in the next chapters.

For my own framework, focusing on the activity of the reader in the literary experience is similar to the focus on the player in the gaming experience. However, in the case of the writing classroom, the analogy is a bit different, as Robison describes: “For a writing instructor, this is the difference between showing a model of a scientific lab report and coaching students through the process of writing one. . . . In a game design context, it becomes important not only to show that process of writing a lab report but also to explain why that particular process is good. Even more, it has to be fun” (367). Making the writing of a scientific lab report a “fun” thing for students might be easier said than done, but the need for some larger goal (beyond finishing the course, getting a good grade, or completing a degree) seems to indicate a gap in traditional instruction that gaming can fulfill – that of winning. The question then becomes, how do students “win” the course? Scholars like Alice Robison work to answer this question, but it still seems a bit vague: “A deep understanding of a rule-bound system helps set the stage for ‘meaningful play.’ Those rules enable creativity. The trick is finding a sweet spot

between a rule-based system and meaningful interactivity with that system” (361). Likewise, Colby and Colby complicate the metaphor of course as game by noting an important problem: “A major difference, however, between the gamespace and most composition classrooms is that games are voluntary; as Caillois (2001) wrote, ‘a game which one would be forced to play would at once cease being play’” (“A Pedagogy of Play” 304). Thus, while video games can certainly be incorporated in English pedagogy, the “play” involved is still academic work, and discussing and analyzing video games will never actually be a “game.” However, using gaming principles, English scholars might be able to design a course in a game-like way. As discussed earlier, the concept of a studio-like space for writing assignments and course activities can be a simple way to incorporate game design into English courses without relying on the concept of “winning.”

The use of video games in English courses will not necessarily be “fun” either, and indeed, many video game experiences can be far more frustrating, confusing, and difficult than fun. Instead of the concepts of “fun” and “play,” perhaps scholars should focus on “fulfillment” or “enactment” as a guiding term. (For instance, if the player’s game character dies at the end of a video game, and the player is unable to prevent this action from occurring, the player can hardly be considered as having “won” the game.) Regardless, viewing gaming from a literacy perspective has another vitally important possibility: removing (or at least highlighting and complicating) the separation of “out-of-school” learning and “in-school” learning, thus giving students’ popular activities a degree of academic credibility. In this instance, playing video games might not just be something students do after the “real” work of school is done (see Chang 3). Gee and

other New Literacy scholars expand on the concept of literacy as more than a singular skill that is further enhanced in school, but rather as an expansion of students' repertoires to include other literacy practices (such as playing video games). Thus, New Literacy scholars opt for viewing literacy almost as a portfolio of different situated literacies. Valuing in the academy what students value in their personal lives offers immense opportunity for us to change and grow as educators, as Deanna McGaughey-Summers and Russell Summers note: "we should consider, as compositionists, how we are illiterate with respect to new technologies as well as how we might devalue certain kinds of literacies on the basis of our own involvement in larger cultural narratives and controversies" (122). While valuing "out-of-school" literacies within our classrooms is certainly a positive thing, the danger is that students might also neglect the necessary academic literacies that allow them to succeed in school. The task of English scholars is to demonstrate not that gaming is entertaining, but that games can help us learn more about the nature of storytelling, rhetoric, and literacy across media.

## **Gaming as Storytelling, Rhetorical Persuasion, and Literate Practice**

By examining the use of video games in English scholarship thus far, we can see how each concept, storytelling, rhetorical persuasion, and literacy, is vital to an English pedagogy that includes and explores all of the ways video games can refine and create new understandings. Instructors can use this combined theoretical framework in order to create new theories and pedagogical possibilities for using video games along with other media in English studies. In doing so, I work to answer the following questions:



- 1) How are video game texts constructed to tell stories or make arguments?
- 2) How do video game players participate in the textual experience and create meanings?
- 3) How are video games used to persuade audiences?
- 4) In what kinds of literate practices do video game players engage?
- 5) How can English scholars foster literacy learning across multiple media?
- 6) How can this kind of literacy learning prepare students in their future lives as academics, workers, and citizens?

In the next three chapters, I will describe a hybridized theoretical basis for using video games in English pedagogy. This framework for game analysis will include elements from narrative theory in literary study, rhetorical theory, and literacy theory. The goal of these chapters is to demonstrate the way in which the theoretical concerns of English scholars are not completely divorced from gaming as a medium, and when combined to account for the multiple modalities and complexities of gaming, can provide new insights about those theories and practices across all kinds of media, whether written texts, films, or video games.

Using video games within English studies requires instructors to look closely at the theories that already inform their teaching and practice. Likewise, I must examine my own theoretical backing for the use of video games in English courses, in order to see exactly how video games might fit into English curriculum. Certainly game production seems a bit beyond the scope of English studies (and indeed any program without a computer game programming department). However, the key for English scholars lies in analysis. This dissertation seeks to demonstrate not only that a comprehensive analysis of a gaming text is possible using combined elements from English theories and pedagogies,

but that the application of narratology, rhetoric, and literacy theory to video games can reciprocally inform those theories and pedagogies, extending and creating new insights about how English scholars think about narrative, rhetoric, and literacy in all kinds of texts.

As a general research method for this dissertation, I will be using textual analysis, a method which, according to Catherine Belsey, recognizes the fact that “[t]here is no such thing as ‘pure’ reading: interpretation always involves extra-textual knowledge. Some of this is general, part of the repertoire of knowledges that constitutes a culture; some of it is personal, a matter of one’s own interests or biography; and some of it is derived from secondary sources” (160). Likewise, a “pure” playing experience does not exist either; all video game playing relies on either other play experiences or textual residue—those textual experiences outside of the game that stick with audiences, whether from films, literary texts, or other video games. My play experience of a particular video game is then informed by those texts’ interactions with each other. In this way, all textual analysis deals with the relationship between audiences and the texts. This might lead to a fear that English scholars can never really understand the meaning of a text, in that one can never fully understand all of the subjective intertextual activities going on inside audiences’ minds. However, as Belsey points out, texts are not infinite in their meanings, because those meanings are not “independent of the signifier” (164). Textual meanings are directed in a number of ways, either through intertextual references or social experiences that are meant to give texts a specific set of possible meanings. A textual analysis of a video game (in this case, the puzzle/adventure game *World of Goo*) must ask

questions about what the text invites players to experience, as well as how the text is structured to create those experiences.

In determining the method for such an analysis, it seems that using concepts familiar to English studies scholars seems most appropriate and beneficial. In this dissertation, I will use specific theoretical frameworks from the fields of literary studies, narratology, film theory, aural theory, reader-response criticism, game studies, and multiliteracies theory to analyze video games. These theoretical frameworks will in turn inform the pedagogical practices used in the classroom for textual analysis of multiple media. Examining a video game from these perspectives, I will also be using analytical methods from each, including close reading, explication, textual analysis, and individual elements of multiliteracies theory and pedagogy. By combining these theoretical frameworks, I develop a hybrid theoretical framework for gaming that includes varied perspectives offered by the fields of literature, rhetoric/composition, and literacy. It would be impossible within the space of this dissertation to give a full view of each of these concepts and their multiple uses within English studies; instead I will be giving a brief sketch of the key issues, problems, and advantages involved in applying these ideas to games. By undertaking an in-depth analysis of *World of Goo* in the three chapters, I demonstrate the possibilities for classroom instruction with a complex blend of theories and pedagogies in English courses. This blend of theories and practices is meant to foster literacy learning across media, helping students develop meta-level understandings of textual construction, use, and interpretation, as well as their own literate practices in multiple modes.

## Chapter 1 Notes

1. Jonathan Alexander makes it clear that this is certainly a valid discussion for English composition: “How, then, can we productively use students’ interest in and knowledge of such games in the composition classroom, in which many of us have to instruct students in more “traditional” and academic literacies? Generally, when we think of engaging students in discussions about technology and the new media, such as gaming, we have tended to think in terms of issues, such as gaming and violence or stereotypical representations of gender in gaming narratives and visuals. Indeed, a growing body of research is devoted to exploring sociological dimensions of gaming (see in particular the work of Henry Jenkins), and a writing course taking as its focus such themes could easily be developed” (52).

2. . Some researchers might take issue with the idea that all video games are narratives; however, Journet argues “even a game like *Tetris* that lacks an explicit narrative component, elicits narrative-like, motivated action on the part of the player” (107). Thus, while the game may not be telling a story, the player’s story in the game remains. This concept will be discussed further in Chapter 2.

3. In so-called “Old Literacy” models, students learn distinct “skills” that can be applied generally or acontextually. Brian Street and James Paul Gee instead describe a more sociocontextual view of literacy, which I will describe in Chapters 4 and 5 of this dissertation. See Street, *Social Literacies* and Gee’s discussion of ideology in literacy: (*Social Linguistics* ix, 21, 22).



## Chapter 2

### How Do Video Games Tell Stories? *World of Goo* as Narrative Text

Literature courses in English departments are usually concerned primarily with the textual analysis of literary texts and, excluding certain kinds of poetry, most of those texts are narratives. Composition courses similarly have emphasized the construction of stories, either through students' personal narratives or creating a "story" with persuasive rhetorical argumentation. In connecting English studies to gaming, the move to analyze video games as narrative texts is perhaps the most natural and obvious. However, in order to create a framework for games in English, I must interrogate *how* video games can be considered narratives and the significance of viewing them as such for English theory and pedagogy. In creating an English course that includes a comprehensive way to analyze video games, I must also find theories and pedagogical practices suited to the way English teachers teach. In addition to recruiting the strengths of English instructors, I outline the concepts that can supplement those practices to include more visual or interactive media like video games.

In order to examine how English scholars can view games as narratives, I will discuss narratology, which in its earliest forms dealt with the structural analysis of storytelling. First, I will examine what makes video games fit the structural criteria of narrative. Secondly, I will discuss ways in which narrative film theory can supplement a theory of narrative with more of the visual and aural elements of game storytelling, elements that might give English instructors pause before considering video games for their courses. Then, I will examine the concept of a "transmedia narratology," which might give English scholars a different view of not only the narrative possibilities in

gaming, but in other modes as well. I will end the discussion of narrative by complicating these earlier concepts with an examination of the contentious argument within game studies between ludology (a term from games studies describing the study of games of all kinds) and narratology (or the study of storytelling). In essence, this chapter is about creating a more complex view of narrative for English studies, viewing all narrative texts as systems of information in which readers/viewers/players must enact and perform distinct operations. Narrative texts, therefore, structure the receiver of the text to undertake thought processes or actions that make the story work. In creating a way for instructors to make these structures more explicit, students can begin to examine the structures for other textual systems and how they operate.

## **Structural Analysis of Narratives and Gaming: Are Games Stories?**

To begin analyzing game narratives, I begin with one of the fundamental methods in narratology: structural analysis. Christian Metz asks in “Notes Toward a Phenomenology of the Narrative”: “how is a narrative recognized, prior to any analysis?” (86). Thus, while one might “know a narrative when they see it,” the question is: what makes a narrative a narrative, or what gives a narrative its “narrativity”? Metz makes a number of distinctions, noting that narrative must have a “temporal sequence” that has a “beginning and an ending,” and that it must be a “discourse” which in its telling creates an inherent “unreality” (86-90). These four conditions (time, beginning and ending, discourse, and unreality) are met in the media Metz describes, particularly literature and film, but in the case of video games, it is necessary to interrogate these conditions, especially since some believe that video games are not narratives at all.

How can video games qualify as narratives? Certainly, many video games are structured in a temporal sequence that begins and ends, hence the traditional “problem-solution” structure of many video games: something is missing (be it a magical sword or a princess) and when it is found the narrative effectively ends. Likewise, the notion of time is similar to that of a novel or film, in that there is time within the story (such as a few months), but that time is rendered within a few hours or reading, viewing, or, in the case of gaming, playing time. However, some might question this assumption, since many video games lack this temporal structure, more particularly puzzle games or online games like *World of Warcraft*. Sports and simulation games are usually brought up in this context, although I would argue that distinguishing the end and beginning of a race or sporting event (even a simulated one in a video game) is fairly straightforward and uncomplicated. Puzzle games or seemingly never-ending games like *World of Warcraft* may instead be a different kind of discourse, as Metz describes: “every narrative is, therefore, a discourse (the converse is not true; many discourses are not narratives – the lyric poem, the educational film, etc.)” (88). Puzzle games offer a different kind of gaming experience, one that is not explicitly narrative-based.<sup>1</sup> Thus, even though many games may lack a temporal element, most are in fact based in a specific timeframe and are often what one might think of when thinking of “video games.”

Likewise, English scholars may question whether video game narratives are “told” in a traditional sense. While it would seem that there is usually no particular narrator (which narrative films often lack as well), video game narration involves a presence or narrating force that is composing the story for players, even though players have a degree of control over how that story is told. Metz illustrates this point in talking



about the viewer of a narrative film: “In a sense, he is leafing through an album of predetermined pictures, and it is not he who is turning the pages but some ‘master of ceremonies’” (89). In other words, while video game players are free to roam the grounds of a particular place in the narrative of the game, their placement into that world comes from a “master of ceremonies,” a narrational force that is telling the story. Video games, however, allow the player to “turn the pages” in some ways, but usually not in ways that alter the narrative significantly. Finally, video games are inherently “unreal” when enacted by players. Video games are selective experiences that choose parts of reality, such as gravity or ballistic physics, but leave others out (such as the inability to be shot by several bullets in real life and recover completely). “Dying” in a game is not final, but rather a short hurdle to completing the experience. Even as games become more and more realistic, they remain decidedly *unreal* for players, since most will not confuse gaming with real life. Even a game like *Second Life*, which allows players to roam freely in an online world, is less a video game than an online networking space, more akin to Facebook than a chess game. Certainly, the vast majority of video games fit the criteria for narrative that Metz describes, and more abstract games could more fruitfully be studied by game theorists rather than English scholars. Video games, in most instances, are bound by temporality, clear beginnings and endings, are a discourse or telling, and are unreal, fitting the narrative criteria.

Video games then become one of many of the different ways human beings tell stories, as Roland Barthes notes: “Narrative is first and foremost a prodigious variety of genres, themselves distributed amongst different substances – as though any material were fit to receive man’s stories” (109). Barthes breaks narrative into three distinct units,

or “levels of description”: “functions,” “actions,” and “narration” (113). “Functions” refers to the notion of cause and effect, where something happens because of something else. “Actions” refers to a force or character that causes those effects, and “narration” places those effects within a larger story and context, or “discourse” as Metz described earlier. Barthes explains the relationship between these concepts as building on each other: “a function only has meaning insofar as it occupies a place in the general action of an actant, and this action in turn receives its final meaning from the fact that it is narrated, entrusted to a discourse which possesses its own code” (113). Applying this taxonomy to video games, it is clear that video games have cause and effect, that the “actant” or character controlled by the player causes things to happen within the story world. These actions taken by the player become significant not only in their initial happening (such as when players make Mario jump on an enemy) but because of their place within the discourse (where jumping on an enemy allows the player to complete a level, and therefore, the story). According to these basic tenets of structural analysis, video games are certainly narratives. However, it must be said that Barthes and Metz are dealing with written narratives, and Barthes sees narrative as being inherently about language: “‘What takes place’ in a narrative is from the referential (reality) point of view literally *nothing*, ‘what happens’ is language alone, the adventure of language, the unceasing celebration of its coming” (113). If narrative is inherently about language, how can we come to a better understanding of narrative in more visual and aural media, like video games? Is there a “language” of video games? To examine in more detail the way narrative works within video games, I turn now to film theory, particularly the narrative film theory of David Bordwell.

## Film Narratives = Gaming Narratives?

David Bordwell is one of the leading film scholars in the world, and his co-authored textbook with Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction*, is the most widely used film text in the United States. One of Bordwell's primary concerns is narrative theory, and his text *Narration in the Fiction Film* sets up a basic framework for the study of film narratives. By using narrative film theory, English scholars can gain a new level of understanding about visual and aural aspects of storytelling, and in this particular case, about gaming narratives. In using this theory, I highlight David Bordwell's description of narrative as an *activity* performed by viewers of films (and, I would argue, video game players). Bordwell defines narration as "a *process*, the activity of selecting, arranging, and rendering story material in order to achieve specific time-bound effects on a perceiver" (xi). Here, we see the emphasis on the player's involvement in the narrative, since the material is made for the viewer to actively unfold the story: "film cues the spectator to execute a definable variety of *operations*" (29). Gamers likewise execute operations on the game text, but in a far more literal way than in films.

In applying Bordwell's film theory to video games, one might argue that this implies that video game authorship can be disregarded—I would argue the opposite. Viewing narrative as a system of operations performed by readers/viewers/players not only places emphasis on video game players (in the sense of giving power to readers and viewers over authors or directors in film and literature), but it also places greater emphasis on the game makers' awareness of how players will enact the narrative. In other words, while players perform the narrative, the creators of the game's narrative world control the players' performance by allowing or disallowing certain activities within the

game space. Such a view of film narration is, for me, a perfect example of how narrative film theory can inform the understanding of gaming narratives. Video games, like films, are created in such a way that they actually require not only mental but physical operations to be performed by players. Moves are executed by audiences, and the narrative emerges. Likewise, readers of written texts similarly perform such operations, although it is far more common to think that the narrative “exists” in the written form alone. In this way, audiences are active participants, rather than absorbers of the video game narrative, much in the way that Bordwell gives film viewers more credit as spectators than most would: “we should consider film viewing a complicated, even skilled, activity” (33). Video game playing, like film viewing, is equally complex (rather than mindless button pressing), since gaming “asks us to tune our sensory capacities to certain informational wavelengths and then translate given data into a story” as we would a film (Bordwell 47). Sounds, images, and character movements in gaming environments work to help players construct the story of the game, and this is what viewing narrative as a system makes explicit—a narrative text (like a video game) creates a place for audiences to enact stories.

The “story” of a video game, when viewed through Bordwell’s theory of film narration, is something the player is actively looking for, searching for a “set of events occurring in defined settings and unified by principles of temporality and causation” (34). Once again, the story requires a setting, cause and effect, and a temporal continuum in order to be considered narrative. Bordwell also makes an important distinction between the “story” and “plot” of a narrative using two distinct terms, “fabula” (or story) and “syuzhet” (or plot). The rationale behind these terms is that they distinguish more readily

between story and plot, and Bordwell uses these terms to make clearer one of the goals of film viewers: using plot events to learn the larger story of the film. For Bordwell, the fabula (or story) can be described as a “pattern which perceivers of narratives create through assumptions and inferences. It is the developing result of picking up narrative cues, applying schemata, framing and testing hypotheses” (49). The fabula deals with the larger story, including the background story elements that are not shown in films, such as characters being born and raised, their histories, and their pre- and post-film experiences. The “syuzhet” or plot can be described as the “actual arrangement and presentation of the fabula in the film” (50). In other words, the plotted events viewers see presented in the film (syuzhet) do not make up the entire fabula, but are instead chosen and selected for viewers, who are then expected to interpret and organize that information into a fuller picture of the fabula.

This distinction between the fabula and syuzhet works for video games as well, since, as Bordwell notes, “syuzhet patterning is independent of the medium; the same syuzhet patterns could be embodied in a novel, a play, or a film” (50). Video games select certain story moments (usually called levels), which are the plot/syuzhet patterning of a larger story/fabula. In this way, games similarly ask players to piece together the background story from the levels (as plot events) presented. These elements are the basic components of the narrative in a general way, meaning that the fabula and syuzhet are not particularly filmic or ludic (game-like) until what Bordwell calls “style” is applied. Combined with the fabula and syuzhet of the film, style is what makes a film “filmic,” as Bordwell defines style as the film’s “systematic use of cinematic devices” or the “steady flow of applications of cinematic techniques—*mise-en-scène*, cinematography, editing,

and sound” (50). Without style, fabula and syuzhet patterns can be applied to any medium, since two narratives could contain the same overall story and significant plot points (as is the case with most film adaptations of novels), but with vastly different styles, these two narratives could be quite different from each other.

Video games have style. Bordwell’s components of film style (*mise-en-scène*, cinematography, editing, and sound) all come into play in video game narratives, and they cause players to make certain choices over others during gameplay. Using Bordwell’s definition as a guide, I would define video game *mise-en-scène* (translated “putting into the scene”) as the virtual objects (props), settings, costumes, lighting, and staging of the game world. For instance, a video game set in the future would include overly geometric spaces full of metal and glass, costumes that seem other-worldly or suitably “futuristic,” and depending on the space involved, the settings would be lit in a particular way (usually in pale blue, green, or purple, which are common in “futuristic” settings). Video games can also have distinct art styles, where characters can appear to be rendered in specific ways. For instance, *The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword* is an adventure game that employs a painted pointillism effect for backgrounds, such as grass, water, and ground. *Okami* features settings that appear to be drawn in ink, and characters perform actions through Japanese calligraphy. Video game characters also have particular ways of moving and acting within the space (staging), giving players information about their character. For instance, if a game is staged in a third-person, over-the-shoulder perspective, the main character dominates the frame regardless of where the camera can be moved by the player. Games have distinct cinematography, either in their use of camera angles or the employment of a player-controlled camera system. While “editing”

in the traditional film sense does not occur often in video games outside of cinematic cutscenes (non-interactive mini-movies), it seems clear that sections of video games are edited to produce certain effects. For instance, when a level occurs at one location and then moves to another after it is completed, we often do not accompany the game character on the journey to the next level. Thus, the game has been edited in order to cut out time or to emphasize action over exposition (this is known as ellipsis in film editing). Game sound includes music and sound effects that can highlight the setting (such as cicadas chirping in an outdoor sequence at night). Patterns in video game sound design can cue players, much in the same way as film sound. Thus, Bordwell's conception of film style can be fruitfully applied to video games. While I will discuss these style elements in more detail later in this chapter, for now it seems clear that narrative film theory can inform game analysis in English studies through an examination of video game narration; the *syuzhet*, *fabula*, and style applied to a game narrative all allow players to create meaning, and meanings are game-specific because of the game's style and *syuzhet* patterning.

What can be learned about video games by using narrative film theory? Certainly, by examining the relationship between a game's *fabula*, *syuzhet*, and style, English scholars can come to see how its narration "works," in the sense that we understand how its construction asks players to respond. By looking at that construction, students can describe how games tell stories by creating a system of relations within the text upon which players perform operations. Bordwell defines narration in fiction films as "the process whereby the film's *syuzhet* and style interact in the course of cueing and channeling the spectator's construction of the *fabula*" (53). In other words, players are

cued to fill in the story details (either back story or an emerging future story conclusion) based on the plotting of the game (the selected and presented story events) and the game style. As an example, a detective film often starts after a crime is committed, leaving the rest of the film's syuzhet to deal with finding clues that will fill in the missing fabula information (or who committed the crime). Likewise, a game works in similar ways, since the player can spend time learning more about characters' back stories while also moving the story forward in time.

Video game narratives can also play with story time in similar ways as films: for instance, the Playstation 2 game *God of War* presents its entire narrative action in flashback, since the initial cutscene for the game actually presents the chronological ending of the story. Game narratives also control the flow of information to players, and as such can be restricted (in that it presents information solely through the eyes of a single character), or less restricted, where the player knows more about the story world than individual characters. In the case of the first-person shooter video game *Halo 2*, players are given more of an unrestricted view of the story world (which includes an ongoing battle between humans and aliens), since they are required at certain points to play from the first-person perspective of a "hero" on the human side and a "villain" on the alien side. The more unrestricted view in this game narrative creates a sense that the human and alien races are not vastly different from each other (as the same human player is asked to "become" them both, or see the world from their perspective). In essence, this narrative asks players to question the nature of good and evil as a matter of perspective, and this narrative form echoes Clint Eastwood's recent *Iwo Jima* films *Flags of Our Fathers* and *Letters from Iwo Jima*, where the viewer is shown a battle from the



perspective of the American soldiers in the first film and from the Japanese soldiers' view in the latter. Responding to narrative cues, an active film viewer, literature reader, or video game player constructs the story in a way that is controlled by the parameters set by the narration. Bordwell also notes that "viewers acquire particular prototypes, templates, and procedures *socially*" (149), emphasizing the socially-constructed nature of viewers' knowledge, which they then apply to the text at hand. Later, I argue that those who play video games similarly respond to cues from game texts based on social forces, which I will describe in both my discussion of rhetorical narrative criticism and multiliteracies as lenses for game analysis. In essence, viewing games through the lens of narrative film theory can help English scholars examine the way game texts are constructed to cue players to enact the narrative in particular ways.

## The Problem of Interactivity: New Media Complications

The primary issue involved in viewing video game narratives from the same perspective as film narratives is that they are particularly *not* films. While we gain perspective on gaming texts by looking at their form, structure, and style and comparing them to film form (particularly the concept of the player's activity in enacting the narrative), the specific aspects of video games that make them a unique medium still need to be addressed. Here, I turn to discussions of narrative across media, which seek to examine the affects of the medium upon the narrative told. I echo Debra Journet's sentiment in "Inventing Myself in Multimodality: Encouraging Senior Faculty to Use Digital Media," where she questions: "I am still enough of a New Critic (another remnant of my generation) to believe that form and content are inseparable—that textual

structures are not just containers but are themselves constitutive of meaning. And as a poststructuralist, I also understand how the form/content relation is complicated by media. So what happens when meaning is constituted within new forms and new media?” (111). I also believe that much can be learned from the formal properties of video games, but I must complicate my earlier discussion of video game narrative by questioning how the medium of the video game affects narration differently than films and literary texts.

David Herman explores the concept of “transmedia narratology,” which seeks to describe the relationship between story and medium, as he notes: “although narratives in different media exploit a common stock of narrative design principles, they exploit them in different, media-specific ways, or, rather, in a certain *range* of ways determined by the properties of each medium” (51). Such a concept makes sense when examining the ways a particular story can be translated from one medium to the next. This seems to come up even more today, since texts can proceed in a manner such as occurred with the epic poem *Beowulf* in 2007: a work of literature is written and revered for hundreds of years; later, it is adapted for a computer-generated 3-D film (complete with 3-D glasses), and to accompany the release of the film, an action video game based on that film is released. To say that narrative is highly medium-dependent seems ludicrous in this sense, since it can seemingly transfer across a number of platforms: the poem, film, and video game all share the same basic plot structure. At the same time, however, it seems equally absurd to say that all of these narratives are exactly the same, since each is changed by the medium in which the narrative is placed. However, to insist that narratives are completely dependent on medium and instead “be viewed as socio-symbolic transactions instead of inert, preexistent structures” ignores the fact that “stories have a ‘gist’ that can remain

more or less intact across fairly dramatic shifts in context, style, degree of elaboration, and so on” (Herman 53-4). The *Beowulf* story can remain intact across the three different modes, but clearly the narrative told by the video game is one of pure action, since it focuses on Beowulf’s combat exploits. Nevertheless, either through cutscenes or the style of the game, the story maintains the general story of the poem.

Instead of viewing narrative as completely dependent on medium, Herman argues for “synthesis,” which suggests that stories create meaning in themselves: “in referring to story logic, I mean to suggest that stories do not merely have but also constitute a logic, narratives being not just semiotic structures but also strategies for structuring and thereby making sense of experience—for problem solving in the broadest sense” (56). Narrative film theory brings a similar concept to the idea of narrative, in that viewers attempt to “solve” the problem of fabula construction by attending to the syuzhet and style of the film. Problem-solving structures and video games go hand-in-hand, only in a much more explicit and literal way within video game story logics. Players actually perform the problem-solving, which then opens up the story. This brings up the key difference between the “new” and “old” media, as new media involve and/or require “interactivity” from participants. Thus, in viewing video games as problem-solving activities, English scholars can emphasize how all narrative texts require audiences to engage in problem-solving activities to unfold the story.

However, in describing the “interactivity” of new media texts like hypertexts, Marie-Laure Ryan makes an important distinction (one that is helpful for me in understanding how video games narratives work), as she notes the way hypertext “cannot be taken literally [as an open, constantly transforming work]” since the possibilities exist

in the hypertext because the author “deliberately chose to include lexia with contradictory content in his [or her] database” (341). Video games work in a similar way, since the possibilities for story construction and problem-solving are heavily controlled by the game world. In other words, video games are not completely open and “interactive” narrative spaces. Such a claim assumes that players have few limits when it comes to enacting the game narrative. Rather, I would argue the opposite. Game narratives are heavily controlled, as players often have a limited number of options when solving narrative problems.

The core of video game play relies on limiting players to specific problem-solving strategies, as Ryan describes: “as with a jigsaw puzzle, the dynamics of discovery differ for every player, but they do not affect the structure that is put together” (342). A recent Playstation 3 game called *Heavy Rain* takes advantage of this concept, as it has a structure very closely resembling hypertext or a choose-your-own-adventure novel. However, in the case of this particular game, the number of different outcomes and story possibilities is so vast that each player is said to have a different narrative experience. Such a game text seems to move beyond the somewhat instrumental use of narrative in gaming as an excuse to move to the next level. Nevertheless, most games are limited in their level of “interactivity.” The notion of interactivity is usually what might make English scholars uneasy about incorporating video games into courses; however, I would argue that video games offer players a far less “interactive” experience than would be assumed. Instead, games are designed to cue players into enacting controlled narrative outcomes, much like other media. The key for English studies is to teach students how to examine and analyze storytelling structures.

## Complicating Game Narratives: Game Studies Critiques

While a narrative theory of gaming offers a number of insights about the structure of the story and the participation of players in enacting that story, it seems clear that viewing them solely from a narrative perspective is somewhat incomplete. Games can have storylines that simply would not be compelling in any other medium and still remain exciting for players. The emerging field of game studies offers insights into the problems of viewing games as narratives, insights that must be discussed and addressed in order to deal more fully with video games in English courses. For instance, Andrew Mactavish argues that games are not simply interactive narratives which give the player pleasure through the narration itself. Instead, players are rewarded through visual/aural technological spectacle: “sensational effect is now, more than ever, one of the central components of gameplay” (35). For Mactavish, the classic game *Half-Life* (one of the key texts in most discussions of video games<sup>2</sup>) demonstrates this concept of spectacle—players continue forward in the narrative to find more spectacular technological rewards; the immersion players experience in gaming through sound and visuals is a self-conscious celebration of technology. Thus, the game story is less important than the visual spectacle it unlocks for players as reward. For me, such a conception of gaming as spectacle seems to lack a clear definition for what “spectacle” means. If we take spectacle to mean the visual imagery in gaming, then one could easily make a similar claim about written texts or films, which have their own medium-specific ways of creating “spectacle”: readers of a Shakespeare play look for the spectacle of language, or action film viewers appreciate ever more exciting action sequences. It seems clear that arguing

against game narratives in favor of spectacle misses some of the point of the fictional experience, which can very much be about spectacle itself.

However, a far more problematic issue brought up by game studies scholars is the debate between narratologists and ludologists, between viewing video games as a storytelling medium (in the same family as written and filmed texts) and studying them as games (making them more akin to chess than to a novel about royal politics). Espen Aarseth writes a fairly scathing piece about the push for narrative theory in game studies, as he asks: “Are games texts? The best reason I can think of why one would ask such a crude question is because one is a literary or semiotic theorist and wants to believe in the relevance of one’s training” (47). Certainly, I may be guilty of this same kind of thinking, since I was trained in literary and later composition, new media, and literacy theory. Nevertheless, it seems clear from the earlier examination of narratology that there is a strong narrative basis for video games. However, perhaps I should clarify that I view narrative as a distinct *part* of video games, much like narrative is part of film. Individual filmed shots are given meaning when placed in a story structure, much like gameplay elements are similarly given meaning in narrative context. Beautiful visual images and sound can be shown in a film, but their reason for being is related to a narrative in some way. Likewise, video games can include game rules that are difficult to express in a narrative sense: “although nonnarrative and nonludic elements can be translated, the key elements, the narration and the gameplay, like oil and water, are not easily mixed” (Aarseth 51). For Aarseth, examining games as narratives misses a core gameplay component of the gaming experience—I would agree to some extent, but it seems as though Aarseth misses the fact that game narratives are also important for players.

Adventure games are the only game genre that Aarseth concedes might be considered narratives, but he nevertheless maintains that while these games are story-like, they still do not in the vast majority of cases “contain good stories” (51). Instead of focusing of game narrative, Aarseth advocates for viewing games from the lens of “simulation,” which he describes as: “the key concept, a bottom-up hermeneutic strategy that forms the basis of so many cognitive activities: all sorts of training, from learning to pilot a plane to learning to command troops, but also the use of spreadsheets, urban planning, architectural design and CAD, scientific experiments, reconstructive surgery, and generative linguistics. And in entertainment: computer games” (52). Simulation as a concept seems intricately tied to learning, in the sense that video games require players to learn and practice movements or strategies after learning them. Such learning, as I argue later in this dissertation, can also be fruitfully examined through the concept of literacy, particularly that of the New London Group’s multiliteracies. Likewise, simulation as an overriding lens for game analysis neglects the narrative aspect of gaming much in the same way that narrative perspectives neglect simulation.

While the concept of simulation is an interesting one for thinking about video games (since it moves closer to interactivity, the way games must be *played*, rather than read or viewed), I must disagree with a few of Aarseth’s points. First, Aarseth argues that simulations are an “alternative mode of discourse, bottom up and emergent where stories are top-down and preplanned. In simulations, knowledge and experience is created by the player’s actions and strategies, rather than recreated by a writer or moviemaker” (52). I must disagree with this idea, in that it seems to give players far too much power. Indeed, even if a video game experience is somewhat emergent (allowing for players to

improvise or change the game), that experience is also heavily controlled by the game designers, who craft the game in such a way that it also crafts the experiences possible within it. Players can do “whatever they want” with a human character who can move and shoot weapons, but unless the player solves the already constructed narrative problems within the game, the player will not unlock more of the narrative. The metaphor of the “sandbox” comes up more and more in discussions of gaming, where game designers create a sandbox experience (or the space and tools for players to play). Nevertheless, the game designers still limit what experiences are possible within that sandbox world.

Thus, to say that the game experience is not a “recreated” experience created by the game designer seems a bit naïve. *God of War*, an action game mentioned earlier, works on this principle of “recreated” experience specifically because it places the player’s actions as having already happened in the story, which begins the game proper in flashback. Video games control their players as much as players control games. Thus, when Aarseth argues: “When you put a story on top of a simulation, the simulation (or the player) will always have the last word” (52), I must disagree by noting how players are cued to perform the actions of the game. Narratology gives scholars a way of understanding how those cues work and how players react to them to create the game experience. Most players who work against solving the game’s narrative problems will not get far. Likewise, the game designers plan and design narrative texts to push players toward particular kinds of learning, cutting off the possibilities. For instance, in an edited film, the cut from one shot to another also cuts off the thinking about that particular shot. In creating a game system that inhibits certain behavior, the game designers limit the



thinking about those behaviors. Thus, if a game system does not allow a player to manipulate paintings on walls within the game world, they will cease to explore them. Video game stories are enacted by players, much like in other media, because of the rules of the system, and the story is very much a part of that system.

Another issue that Aarseth has with narrative-based perspectives on gaming is that they are focused solely on adventure games, which is part of the reason he sees narrative studies as infiltrating ludology: “The weak and repetitive tradition of adventure story-games such as *Myst* and *Half-Life* should not be given our privileged, undivided attention, just because they remind us more of the movies and novels we used to study” (54). While this certainly rubs me the wrong way as a somewhat personal attack on English studies scholars researching video games, it also brings up a point; those who discuss video games within our fields do select certain video games over others to discuss. (Puzzle games are often neglected from discussions of game narratives, for instance. However, the particular game I have chosen to examine in this dissertation is, in terms of game genre, a puzzle game.) As such, I must specify that I have my own prejudices and preferences when it comes to games, just as most literary and film scholars have their own tastes.<sup>3</sup> In discussing video games, perhaps I should clarify that I am referring to a specific kind of video game—one that implies or creates a *fictional world*. Henry Jenkins makes a number of claims meant to reach a sort of agreement between the narratologist and ludologist camps, and these claims are important to mention here, since they make important distinctions for how narrative can be applied to game analysis while making an effort to incorporate the ludologists’ concerns. Jenkins notes that “1. Not all games tell stories”; “2. Many games do have narrative aspirations”;

“3. Narrative analysis need not be prescriptive”; “4. The experience of playing games can never be simply reduced to the experience of a story”; and “5. If some games tell stories, they are unlikely to tell them in the same ways that other media tell stories” (119-120). These claims make a case for narratological study of fictional video games while simultaneously conceding to some of the ludologists’ claims that video games are not *just* stories.

Henry Jenkins’ middle ground between narratology and ludology advocates the study of games as “environmental storytelling,” where the game narrative works in one of four ways: the game story “can evoke pre-existing narrative associations; they can provoke a staging ground where narrative events are enacted; they may embed narrative information within their *mise-en-scène*; or they provide resources for emergent narratives” (123). In this way, games can remain games, but their storytelling properties come through. For English scholars, such a conception makes sense, as one can examine the way narratives in gaming can allude to other narratives, create a place to tell stories using the game’s storytelling framework, use game style to tell stories, or allow players to make new stories from those resources. As an example of emergent narrative in gaming, I know of a family member’s young nephew who would play the violent open-world game *Grand Theft Auto III* as a simple driving simulator, where he would stop at traffic lights, *not* run over pedestrians and prostitutes, and simply practice driving in the game’s elaborate sandbox-like urban world. In this way, the player can create his or her own story within such an open-ended environment. However, once again it seems clear that the game’s narrative limits what kinds of emergent narratives can be created within it.

Responding to the claim that video game stories are “bad” (as a number of scholars both within and outside of video game studies claim), Jenkins sees “spatial narrative” (or narrative based on the creation and exploration of a game world) as being a different kind of storytelling: “Spatial stories are not badly constructed stories; rather, they are stories that respond to alternative aesthetic principles, privileging spatial exploration over plot development” (124). This concept of spatial storytelling certainly ties in with the discussion of film narrative theory, in that the film narrative requires certain activity from its viewers. That activity (of responding to visual and aural cues from the *syuzhet* and style and testing hypotheses in order to construct the *fabula*) is somewhat different than the activity of game playing, but it nevertheless requires activity from players to enact the narrative. Environmental storytelling requires players to respond to different kinds of cues, but the goal remains the same: piecing together and discovering *fabula* information. In addition, Jenkins’ taxonomy allows for emergent narratives, where players create their own *syuzhet* or *fabula* in order to create individualized stories.

However, I would argue that players often do not have as much freedom as Jenkins describes. Many games not only do little to encourage emergent narratives but they often discourage them completely. The game *Ico* for the Playstation 2 is a perfect example, since the game exhibits strong control over players, who are required to carry a character along with them at all times. If the player leaves the female character alone for too long, she is captured by evil spirits. Thus, the game narrative disallows an individualistic emergent narrative. Later in the game, the player is separated from the female character, and as a result is unable to save the game’s progress until she is found.

Because of this game dynamic, players are encouraged to forge a strong bond with the female character, and this is a perfect example of the way game designers can be seen “less as storytellers than as narrative architects” (129). The “partnership” aspect of *Ico* creates a particular narrative, one that requires players to engage in specific activities over others which may be more familiar (since such “escort missions” are uncommon in games). In a recent gaming course I taught, many students found this game to be unpleasant, simply because they were unable to explore the game world and solve problems without the female character.

In finding a middle ground between ludology and narrative, Jesper Juul’s perspective in *Half-Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds* makes a compelling argument that game *fiction* is mediated by game *rules*, and as such each are dependent on each other. This argument makes sense within my framework of narrative, reader-response criticism, and multiliteracies, since it incorporates narration and the learning involved in game rules. Both narration and learning are dependent on the player’s activity in enacting the narrative and learning the limits of the fictional world and its rule-based limitations, as Juul notes: “In video games, the rules are initially hidden from the player—this means that the player is more likely to use the game world to make inferences about the rules” (176). If a player finds a weapon or item of some sort, that player will make the claim (or test a hypothesis) about the use of that item in order to complete the game’s cause and effect chain (see also Bordwell for a discussion of viewer hypotheses). Juul also concedes that video games are difficult to interpret based on rules alone, as the ludologists claim. Instead, he argues that fiction in video games gives meaning and provides opportunities for interpretation, “[e]ven if games are not

exclusively fictional worlds” (191). In this way, English scholars can fruitfully examine the fictional narrative in video games and the way that fiction can “can cue the player into understanding the rules of the game” (Juul 196). Once again, such a statement fits perfectly with my own conception of an English studies framework for games: the fictional game text cues players into enacting a story and learning how to enact that story through rules of the game system. In the next section of this chapter, I will apply these concepts to *World of Goo* in order to demonstrate the kinds of learning possible by viewing gaming from a narrative lens.

## **World of Goo as Story: Narrative and the Video Game**

*Snow falls in a cave filled with animated white orbs, each with a pair of eyes. Some of these balls move back and forth while hanging on a gelatinous strip between two cliffs, while other balls lie below sleeping (based on the ZZZZZs emanating from them). A sign pulsates with an exclamation point, begging me to click it with my mouse. The sign reads: “This cave looks like it's been undisturbed for thousands of years ... / Until now! / When the pipe broke through the ceiling above, the sunlight must have blinded these rare Albino GooBalls. / They didn't seem to notice when it began to snow. / Maybe they would wake up if they had something to jump onto.” I begin dragging the goo balls down toward their sleeping friends, dipping lower and lower until they start to wake up and climb onto the gooey chain. After they've all joined the group, I'm at a loss for what to do. A quick look around, and the pipe above grabs my attention. I begin building a goo ball structure higher and higher until the pipe begins to suck them in...*

As a Humanities scholar, I wrestle with trying to find ways to describe and analyze video games. Their technical basis seems to place them more within the realm of computers and technology, rather than something humanistic. Furthermore, how can I ask English students to examine a video game? Certainly, a video game like *World of Goo* could be analyzed and dissected for its coding, its construction on a literal level. However, this method is simply not the way to determine its fuller meaning, just as examining the typesetting of a novel does not necessarily offer insights into it. The coding of a video game is hidden from players (both metaphorically and literally, since video games are heavily encrypted pieces of intellectual property), and as such players can only examine what they experience of the game. I also struggle to find ways of analyzing video games that encapsulate all of their media-specific affordances. As I have argued earlier, I believe the theories and pedagogies of English studies are particularly suited to analyze texts of all kinds, using a combination of narrative, rhetoric, and literacy. The game example described above, according to literary theory, would offer some insight into the meaning of *World of Goo* through the language of the text on the signs given to the player. There is plenty of text in this game, often subtle, often ironic, and sometimes quite moving. However, I would also argue that this game tells a story, that it is a narrative. Narratology and literary theory offer clues into how this story is told and what effects it might have on players. Thus, in undertaking a narrative analysis of *World of Goo*, I will attempt to answer the following questions: how is *World of Goo* constructed to tell a story? Why is the interpretation of that story important to the player's experience of the text? In looking at this particular text, I hope to illustrate how the use of

narrative theory can be essential in creating a framework for textual analysis in English studies that interrogates the way stories are constructed across multiple modes.

Before diving into an examination of what *World of Goo* has to offer as an example for English scholars, I must note that my choice of this particular text is not random, and I have a number of reasons for choosing this particular game. First, the game is fairly easy to control, which makes it easy to pick up and play with only one click of a mouse or controller button. This is an attempt to bridge any possible gaps between those students and instructors who are experienced at playing video games and the less experienced. Second, the game is quite unique because it is technically in the puzzle game genre, a genre where narrative and rhetoric are almost universally ignored. Finally, the game is fascinating to me as a player. It is simply entertaining, enjoyable, sometimes frustrating, and quite powerful. In choosing this game, I want to examine how it works from a narrative standpoint, as well as the reader-response, rhetorical narrative theory, and literacy viewpoints I will discuss later in this dissertation.

First, I must examine the structural components of the video game story world, or diegesis. The diegetic world of any narrative, as I've discussed earlier, relies heavily on temporality, cause and effect, unreality (or fiction), and discourse. *World of Goo* introduces a temporal element from the very start of the game, as a menu greets the player displaying a small world floating on screen. The outer edge of the globe contains five separate areas, each displaying one of four chapters. Chapter 1 is titled "The Goo-Filled Hills," and when players start the chapter, they are told that it takes place in summer. Already, players have a sense of the timeframe of the story, indicating that this game will have a four-act structure corresponding with each season, most likely during a

year. While such a structure suggests story time, it also indicates how players should feel about the game they are about to play, prompting possible interpretation of what the “time” in this game means. Since the game begins in summer, and if summer suggests happiness, warmth, and youth, then Chapter 2 of this game (called “Little Miss World of Goo”) suggests a progression of time into something more autumnal. If these seasons metaphorically correspond to a human life, autumn would describe a descent into old age, or winter. Spring would indicate birth or infancy, and summer would signify youth. Of course, the game consists of goo balls, not humans, but certainly the connotations of what “summer” means for the player are important to the player’s interpretation of the text. Causality enters into the game in a big way, as each individual goo ball is used to build chains, bridges, and other structures that help the balls get to their goal. Thus, each move the player makes adds to the cause and effect chain and in turn affects the story; the player enacts how the balls get to their goal, and the story moves on as a result. In terms of fiction, it seems clear that the world of *World of Goo* is not exactly like our own, since the balls of goo are anthropomorphic and the world they live in seems more in the realm of fantasy. Likewise, the events in the game obviously are not real, and are therefore part of a fictional world. Finally, the game is a discourse, in that it tells a story. It enters into narrative discourse, as well as a gaming discourse that has previously been described as simulation (see Aarseth). In other words, there are messages communicated by the game, and these are communicated through the gameplay as a discourse, a way of “telling” that is unique to the medium. Thus, there is a clear difference here between the narrated and the narration, which combined with the game’s temporality, cause and effect chain, and fictional world, places *World of Goo* squarely in the realm of narrative.



As a narrative, it becomes important to examine the how the game structures and creates a form for that narrative. Using David Bordwell's narrative film theory, I will delineate the difference between story, plot, and style in *World of Goo*, and how those elements work to create players' understanding of the game narrative. If playing a video game, like film viewing, can be considered a "complicated, even skilled, activity," where we as players are asked to "tune our sensory capacities to certain informational wavelengths and then translate given data into a story," as Bordwell suggests of films (47), then the story or fabula is never fully given to players. Instead, we as players must piece together our knowledge of the full story based on the clues and information given to us from the specific events of the syuzhet, or plot. Applying this concept to *World of Goo*, there seems to be a larger story structure in place based on the plotting of the individual levels, as the plot events in each suggest a larger concept about civilization in relation to the story. Each level of the game is then another piece of the syuzhet, which we use to hypothesize about the story at large (fabula).

The levels of the first chapter of the game seem to correspond to initial stages of civilization, where the emphasis is on the natural environment moving toward an agricultural age of the goo balls and finally ending with the creation of the "World of Goo Corporation." This corporation, the player is told, uses goo balls to produce and sell products ranging from soft drinks to cosmetics. The next chapter moves the goo balls toward an industrial revolution through the discovery of "Beauty," a refined goo ball that is used as a high powered energy source. This leads to the third chapter, where the goo balls are a "Cog in the Machine" of the corporation. The pinnacle of this production line is the creation of "Z Product," which launches the goo balls into the 3<sup>rd</sup> dimension and

also into the information age. Within the third dimension (where the “Information Superhighway” is created), the goo balls eventually destroy the World of Goo Corporation by turning its own technology against it. Finally, the goo balls build higher and higher in the epilogue, where they start again in a new world, indicating that they will begin the cycle of civilization once again. Thus, each chapter of the game asks the player to fill in and interpret more of the fabula based on syuzhet events. Each “plotted” level of the game provides more information about the story that comes before it. In looking at *World of Goo*, the structure of this fairly complex story takes shape from many streams of information: text, images, sounds, and procedures. This is often what English scholars refer to as multimodality, where a text is made up of multiple media and genres. I will examine each of these aspects as they relate to the narrative of *World of Goo*, but more specifically in terms of style, which is a major component to narrative according to Bordwell’s narrative film theory. Style gives shape to the basic plot events, which in turn tells the story in a medium-specific way. A conception of style in a video game would include all of the elements of film style (*mise-en-scène*, cinematography, editing, and sound), as well as text and procedures that are included in games.

## Goo Style: Narrative “Telling” in Video Games

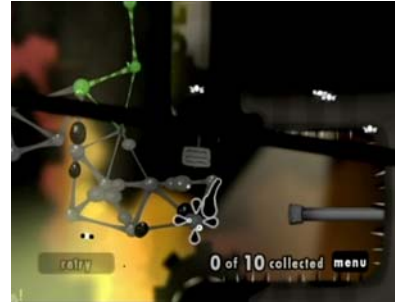
In terms of style, I first will examine the written narration of *World of Goo*, as it is a driving force for the story and also contains stylistic elements of its own. As the name of each level appears (along with a subtitle), players are immediately provided with story information; for example, level 3 of the first chapter (which I describe in the epigraph at the start of this analysis) is titled: “Hang Low – Wake Up the Sleeping Goo.” Each of

these titles and subtitles offers gameplay clues (in this case, that part of the goal of the level is to reach the sleeping goo balls below so that they will “wake up” and join the chain of goo), but the titles also offer story information. Players may begin to question, why are these goo balls sleeping? Why do I need to wake them? In addition to the individual level titles, the most common source of textual information in the game comes from an unseen narrator, known only as “The Sign Painter.” The Sign Painter is a distinct character and important figure in terms of story in the game. He or she is responsible for providing a great deal of the story for players, reinforcing the imagery, sounds, or procedures in the game, while at the same time providing a level of ironic humor. For instance, in the level “Ode to the Bridge Builder – It Looks Harder Than It Is,” the Sign Painter writes: “As the sun set over the last of the hills, one of the Goo Balls seemed to say ... / ... that life sure seemed like a giant physics simulation! / ... but as he fell into the spikey death pit below, he knew it probably didn't matter.” Often, the game’s textual narration winks to the audience and almost constantly reminds the player that he or she is, in fact, playing a video game, one that is partly a “physics simulation.” (Gamers often discuss the merits of the latest and greatest “physics engines” in first-person shooters and action games. These refer to the coding structures that control gravity, lighting, surface textures, mass, weight, and other aspects of the game’s physical environment.) In this way, the narration of *World of Goo* involves the player’s sense of humor, which for Rabinowitz signals a move that the audience must make as well, since it “engages . . . the ‘Rule of Ironic Distance’: when a work of art distances itself from its readers by calling attention to its authorial level, we are encouraged to actualize the work’s potential for irony” (319). Certainly, if a game is able to make players laugh, they are most certainly

entering into transactions with it; such an in-joke further requires that we bring some of our own knowledge (here, of physics engines) into the text. Stylistically then, irony and humor are a way of narrating this particular story, which without a sense of humor, can seem to be overly dramatic when the player considers the animated or childlike imagery of the goo world. The humor is a way of telling, of making the player aware of the game's conceits.

The stylistic visual imagery of *World of Goo* works toward helping players interpret the narrative of the game. As I mentioned earlier, video game *mise-en-scène* I define as the virtual objects (props), settings, costumes, lighting, and staging of the game world. *World of Goo* contains a number of important props, such as pipes, which become a repeated element, or motif, within the game. A pipeline carries goo balls to their destination, which for most of the game is to the World of Goo Corporation. In this way, the goo balls further resemble oil or fuel, since they are sent via a pipeline. This visual iconography is reinforced later in the game when we are told that goo is an energy source for the corporation. Likewise, the backgrounds and objects in the game move from pastoral to industrial as the game narrative progresses and the player becomes a “Cog in the Machine.” The use of blades, mechanical contraptions, ovens, and other industrial objects become important not only for reinforcing story information, but for cueing players as well. For instance, blades, saws, spikes, and other sharp objects are to be avoided at all costs from a gameplay standpoint, but they also indicate the danger of the game setting. Likewise, the goo balls themselves (which are almost exclusively round), are set in stark contrast to their harsh and pointy surroundings, demonstrating a principle from Molly Bang’s text *How Pictures Work*: “We feel more scared looking at pointed

shapes; we feel more secure or comforted looking at rounded shapes or curves” (70). The smooth, rounded hills and valleys at the start of the game are replaced by angular, industrial objects and settings (see Figures 2.1 and 2.2 below).



Figures 2.1 and 2.2: Rounded pastoral settings give way to angular industrial settings. (*World of Goo*)

The lighting of the levels likewise changes according to the narrative, since the bright, high-key outdoor lighting gives way to harsher, low-key lighting (or at least simulated low-key lighting) seen in the industrial levels. In other words, the vision of the player is not as obscured at the start of the game, while later in the story the use of low-key lighting can obstruct the player toward the goal. In addition to props, settings, and lighting, the staging of characters in the scene helps us comprehend the story and our role as players. For instance, if the goo balls are ever separated from each other, this indicates that they are meant to reunite with each other, and their staging emphasizes that separation. These visual aspects together allow audiences to make a number of associations with the images, bringing to mind the “emotions attached to remembered experiences” (Bang 73). Thus, the images are meant to give players a particular feeling or feelings, as well as reinforcing and giving players visual narrative information.

Cinematography enters into gaming in a number of ways, and the use of cinematographic techniques is determined in part by the game genre and camera system

employed in the game. For instance, first-person shooters rely on the player to control camera movement, but that is not to say that the cinematographic elements of framing, photography, and duration (as described by Bordwell) do not still come into play. In the case of *World of Goo*, the game uses cinematographic framing at the start of each level, where the camera tracks across the environment. This is done not only to show the player the lay of the land from a gameplay standpoint, but also to communicate story information. In “Ode to the Bridge Builder,” the camera begins the level by focusing on the pipe (the goal) and the sleeping goo below it. The camera then zooms outward, showing goo balls on the left side of a large chasm, and this is where the player begins. The zoom outward emphasizes the distance between the two sides of the canyon, and the camera then zooms forward toward the player-controlled goo balls. Though quick, such a simple camera movement orients the player toward the completion of the goal, and it also communicates the need for the goo balls to cross the chasm. After the initial camera movement, the player is free to control the camera (in any direction along the two-dimensional plane), and this ability is also cinematographic, in the sense that it allows players to reframe the image and find other story information. In this particular level, if players search along the bottom of the chasm, they will find a pulsating image of a rectangle with two eyes. When it is clicked, the player is told that the image is “MOM,” and it asks if the player is “coming home.” The players’ control over the camera allows the possibility for more than the traditional film frame, but that is not to say that it is fundamentally different. The image is still framed, either by the game itself or by the player, who works to decode and interpret the embedded story information within the game.

As an example of visual style in *World of Goo*, a level in the first chapter called “Chain – Balance” is particularly helpful in terms of demonstrating how the combination of text and image provides story information. The level begins by showing the player a wide shot of the environment (see Figure 2.3 below):



Figure 2.3: Two groups of goo are separated by ancient wall (*World of Goo*).

On the left and right are sleeping goo balls, which the player is meant to “wake up” (based on previous experience waking other goo balls). These goo balls are staged on either side of the screen, emphasizing their separation. The pulsating sign in the center reads: “The goo balls on this side didn’t seem to like the Goo Balls over there on that side ... / I don’t know, they look the same to me. / Totally delicious. / - the Sign Painter.” The language here holds specific meanings: anger, separation, war, and possibly racism. The *mise-en-scène* also reinforces these concepts: the large spire in the center of the screen is carved, seemingly by the goo balls themselves (since it resembles a crude rendering of several goo faces). The fact that it is made from weathered stone worn reinforces the concept that the goo balls on the left fought with the balls on the right long ago (based on the fact that they are now sleeping), and thus a wall was erected to separate them. Particularly, the Sign Painter’s statement that they “look the same to me” orients us both above and outside of the world of the goo balls. We are observing them, and the audience

may ask what could have caused such a division. This is at once a way of communicating the goal of the level (to use the new “chain” of goo above to provide “balance” between the two warring goo tribes), but also a way of communicating deeper ideas about the ridiculousness of war and division, of a common humanity of goo, or “gooity” if you will. The player then uses the spherical “wall” between the goo factions and carefully balances a structure above it in order to bring the two sides together toward a common goal: reaching the pipe.

In terms of editing, the most common editing technique used within the game is that of ellipsis, where the game plays with time in order to focus on particular plotted events over others. The goo balls within the game are on a continuous course toward their goal, but we as players are not always with them on their trip. The pipeline in which they travel is fairly continuous, until the balls encounter an obstacle that they cannot traverse without the player’s help. These are the moments that players actually see, and almost every level begins with an establishing shot (which we’ve seen in each of the examples I presented above). Following the establishing shot, the player is then given control and the level begins. In addition to the temporal relationships established by the level editing, the levels can match graphically, which is a way of inviting comparisons between one level and another. For instance, the level “Fisty’s Bog” and “Misty’s Long Bony Road” are virtually the same in terms of the establishing shot and level layout, but the *mise-en-scène* and imagery are drastically different. The two levels here are not necessarily “shots” in the traditional film sense, but they still are plot events that are presented in order to ask players to compare them. In this way, players see the “Fisty’s Bog” level and its placement in the plot soon after the creation of the World of Goo Corporation set in direct



contrast to “Misty’s Long Bony Road,” which occurs after the World of Goo Corporation’s discovery of a new energy source and the opening of a factory in the south. (See figures 2.4 and 2.5 below.)



Figures 2.4 and 2.5: The similar staging and imagery of two levels invites comparison (*World of Goo*).

Obviously, the imagery in the second level (on the right above) differs greatly from the first. While the first level is bright and colorful, emphasizing the idyllic setting, the second is replaced by haze and death. The goo balls on the spiky floor resemble skulls, and “Misty” is a skeleton as well. The trees in Fisty’s level are replaced by barren hills in the distance. Fisty’s bog is now a dry lake bed after the corporation is created. The colors of the Misty level are desaturated in comparison to Fisty’s, as the bright blue and green becomes post-apocalyptic beige. Perhaps English scholars can think of individual levels as akin to individual shots (as in film). (However, it is important to note that video games can contain multiple shots, since individual levels can be broken down into different shots). Nevertheless, it seems important for English scholars discussing narrative and editing in games that there are relationships between levels, that those levels create new meanings in their combination and juxtaposition. In this case, it becomes clear that the World of Goo Corporation’s discovery of a new energy source synthesized from goo has drastic effects on the World of Goo as a whole.

Thus far, I have described the written and visual components of game style in *World of Goo*, but I now turn to sound and its effect on players. Because sound design is

often overlooked when discussing visual media, it is important to describe how sound works within narration, as it provides another channel for communicating story information. Michel Chion describes the way “audio-spectators” are placed in a “specific perceptual mode of reception” called “audio-vision,” whereby viewers of a film (or in this case, players of a video game) are actively making connections between sounds and images. In addition, the interactive activity of video games creates another bridge between sound and player input. For instance, when players perform certain procedures, they are given additional sonic information that reinforces their choice. Chion’s concept of “added value” names this phenomenon, as it is defined as the “expressive and informative value with which a sound enriches a given image so as to create the definite impression, in the immediate or remembered experience one has of it, that this information or expression ‘naturally’ comes from what is seen, and is already contained in the image itself” (5). Added value comes into play from the very start of *World of Goo*, particularly in the use of sound effects. As the game’s first level begins, the player may not be entirely sure what to make of the individual goo balls on the screen. Once players select a goo ball, they are greeted with a chirping sound, which continues until the goo ball is released. Combined with the visual reinforcement of eyeballs drawn on the individual goo balls, this chirping sound reinforces a key concept within the narrative: *the goo is alive*. The image on screen is therefore given added value by the chirping sound effect, reinforcing the idea that the sounds heard are “naturally” coming from the goo balls themselves.

In addition, the sound effects are used to indicate progress, since the goo balls make a higher toned “woohoo” sound for each link with another goo ball. A low toned

sound greets the player when a link is unsuccessful. These sounds then work toward indicating to players that upward progress is good or helpful, while downward progress yields failure and disappointment. In this way, the game's use of audio "rigorously frames" the image in a way that is not possible with just the image alone (Chion 7). In particular, one sound becomes an indelible one for players of *World of Goo*: the sound that occurs when the goo balls reach the pipe (the end goal of almost every level). This sound is a distinct inhalation sound, creating a moment of "synchresis" in which there is a "spontaneous and irresistible weld produced between a particular auditory phenomenon and visual phenomenon when they occur at the same time" (Chion 63). The sound becomes important for players because it signals the end of the particular level, where a player may be especially tense. The goo balls are sucked into the pipe (or at least the inhalation sound makes us "read" the visual image of the pipe as sucking in), and the player is greeted by the sound of cheering and applause (in a high pitch that seems to stem from the goo balls themselves). This reinforces the idea that players are somehow external characters to the goo, who are cheering them on. The positive sounds therefore lead to player to perform actions the goo balls like, rather than those that cause audible disappointment.

In addition to sound effects, the music of *World of Goo* also works to direct and guide the emotional responses of audiences. Music sets the tone for the game through the use of specific themes and allusions. For instance, the level mentioned earlier "Ode to the Bridge Builder" uses a distinctly Western-film theme, which the game's composer Kyle Gabler describes as "a variation on *Amazing Grace*, in the style of those old western soundtracks by Ennio Morricone." Combined with the bright earth tones, low-key

lighting, and a huge canyon setting, the music creates associations with exploration, new frontiers, and settlement. The music's cadence is akin to a fairly upbeat march, setting a tone that helps reinforce the player's movement toward the goal. Once the World of Goo Corporation is created, the tone of the music becomes progressively darker than the livelier, more upbeat, and jazzy themes at the start of the game. For instance, the level "Burning Man" takes place within the World of Goo factory, and its theme uses heavily industrial percussion (including sounds of metal, clanging, and hammering) combined with an ethereal choir. The theme in this song is what Gabler calls the "theme for 'progress' in the game" and a variation of this theme is used for "MOM's theme." However, the notion of "progress" within the game in both of these instances deals with destruction, one of the factory and one of the World of Goo Corporation itself. The song "Are You Coming Home, Love MOM" is almost elegiac in tone, although it contains the "progress" theme as well. The musical theme "Screamer" is dark and heavy, with screeching violin notes that sound heavily synthesized. The song "Best of Times" played at the end of the game sounds very much like a fantasy epic, with upbeat, pounding percussion under a choir once again. The use of the choir indicates a sense of togetherness, of shared destiny. In general, the use of sound and music in *World of Goo* demonstrates the way "sound, much more than the image, can become an insidious means of affective and semantic manipulation" (Chion 34). Our feelings about the creation and destruction of the World of Goo Corporation are guided in large part by the game's music.

*World of Goo's* fabula and syuzhet are heavily influenced by the game's style. Individual plot events (as levels of the game) contain their own written narration, visual

imagery, and sound design. The written text in the game creates ironic humor, winking at the audience in order to call attention to the game's construction and their complicity in enacting the narrative. The game's *mise-en-scène* creates a fantastic animated world, a world in which the goo balls are used by a corporation for energy in order to create silly products for chirping, homogenous consumers. Sprawling hills, dark industrial spaces, post-apocalyptic wastelands, and virtual computer worlds make up the goo world, each drawn with childlike imagery. The game uses staging and cinematography (even when controlled by players) in order to plot events and help players solve problems. The editing of the syuzhet emphasizes the obstacles the goo balls face, rather than their travels through the pipeline to the World of Goo Corporation. Finally, the sound design of the game reinforces the concept of "audio-vision," where the player is placed in a mode of reception that cues him or her to associate the sound effects heard as emanating from the game's diegetic world. The music in the game is also an important nondiegetic component of the game's narration. The player uses the stylistic elements of the syuzhet in order to piece together the larger story of the game. Based on this story, we can identify a number of complex themes, including the passage of time, civilization, progress, industrialization, environmental destruction, energy consumption, consumerism, and the power of nature. Such heady themes appear in an animated puzzle game, which demonstrates the power of games as a narrative medium.

## Ludology vs. Narratology: Distinguishing Narrative and Gameplay

I must make some distinctions about the difference between narrative and gameplay, in the sense that *World of Goo* does include explicit gameplay, which deals with the achievement of goals that do not necessarily require a narrative. Each level includes a number indicating how many goo balls must be sucked into the pipe in order to complete it. Such a nondiegetic element in the video game reminds us that the game requires certain goals to be met, goals that are set by some unseen narrative force. The gameplay of *World of Goo* consists almost entirely of moving small icons that can be connected to each other to form bridge-like structures between two different points or from one area to another. To say that the game has a strong narrative focus is not to say that the gameplay element is unimportant. As such, it becomes important to examine the place of the gameplay within the video game experience. While a number of games studies scholars have discussed the dichotomy between gameplay and narrative, the scholars that attempt to find a common ground seem to make the most sense for English scholars (see Jenkins, Bogost, Juul).

In an effort to strike a balance between narrative and gameplay, I reiterate Henry Jenkins' distinctions between the two, as Jenkins describes how "1. Not all games tell stories"; "2. Many games do have narrative aspirations"; "3. Narrative analysis need not be prescriptive"; "4. The experience of playing games can never be simply reduced to the experience of a story"; and "5. If some games tell stories, they are unlikely to tell them in the same ways that other media tell stories" (119-120). Certainly, we've seen that *World of Goo* does tell a story; I am neither arguing that all video games *should* tell a story in the same way as this particular title. However, it is important to note how the experience

of playing *World of Goo* is nearly impossible to translate simply as story. Certainly, one can describe how the narrative of the game proceeds, but the specifics of the player's input are gameplay events (in addition to narrative events). In other words, a video game level can simultaneously be couched within a plot event, but the gameplay itself remains part of the simulation or procedure required to complete the goal and advance that narrative further. Also, it seems clear that narrative of *World of Goo* is a media-specific story, one that emphasizes visual exploration, physics-based problem solving, and spatial storytelling. One could say that martial arts films do the same thing—they privilege aesthetics of fighting techniques and ever more exciting displays of combat over plot and character development. Video games like *World of Goo* offer experiences that similarly prize certain aspects of storytelling over others. Since much of the game involves the goo balls crossing dangerous terrain, the journey they take and the way the player guides them across that terrain create a story that is difficult to capture in another medium. What, then, is the distinction between gameplay and narrative in *World of Goo*?

Jesper Juul, rather than arguing for an antagonistic relationship between these concepts, claims that fiction cues players into hypotheses about the rules of the game, and gameplay and narrative therefore work reciprocally. As an example of this reciprocal relationship, I choose a particular level in Chapter 2, called “Welcoming Unit – Please Wipe Your Feet.” A large group of goo balls lies in a pool to the left, while a giant wall made of spinning gears leads to the “FREEDOM SCRAPER 3000” above them (see Figure 2.6 below):



Figure 2.6: The FREEDOM SCRAPER 3000 prevents access to the pipe (offscreen right) (*World of Goo*).

A sign next to the gears reads: “It only allows meticulously screened Goo Balls onto the main island. / You can't be too careful these days! / Especially since the power source for the entire world is located somewhere on this island. / But ... / Try not to snap the fragile worker cable, it appears to be made from heavily processed Goo. / - the free Sign Painter.” The fictional world begins to help the player understand one of the rules of this particular level: the goo balls cannot get past the “FREEDOM SCRAPER 3000.” The goo balls controlled by the player are not the “meticulously screened” goo, and therefore the player must find another method of bypassing it in order to reach the goal on the right. Likewise, based on previous experience, pink “balloon” style goo balls are attached to the top of the scraper, and a group of pink goo lies on a cloud to the left of the scraper with a sign that says, “These should be used for legally acceptable fun and recreation. / Not for circumventing security systems. / It's for our own good.” Once again, the game’s fictional world clues the player into the rules of the game, and as such the combination of these two is what creates the textual meaning. The player then may feel compelled to attach the balloons to the scraper, lifting it to allow the goo balls entry. While the player may certainly have come to these conclusions without the fictional world of the game (much like a novel reader may discover or guess at the ending of a mystery story without



paying attention to the specific clues offered in the text), the combination of rules and fiction create certain meanings over others. A game like *World of Goo* can be considered fairly emergent in its design, where the player is able to build whatever kind of structures he or she would like in order to complete the level. However, as I've demonstrated, the game's fictional world and the way it helps players understand its rule system is how the player enacts the text's narrative and creates meaning.

## Looking Ahead: Reader-Response, Rhetorical Narrative Theory, and Procedural Rhetoric

In the next chapter, I will apply reader-response criticism, and more specifically, rhetorical narrative theory, in order to deal with the thorny issue of players' interactivity with video games and their specific input into the text. In addition to accounting for the activity of the audience in the text, rhetorical narrative theory also provides a lens to discuss the social and cultural contexts for texts, couching them within certain contexts and showing how they are used in order to persuade audiences. I will also discuss the concept of procedural rhetoric as a necessary part of my theoretical and pedagogical framework in order to examine video games and other texts as persuasive expressions. What I seek to uncover is how English scholars can supplement their understanding of narrative, reader-response criticism, and rhetorically-based theories (such as rhetorical narrative criticism and procedural rhetoric) to suit the study of video games and other texts as well, creating a specialized way of discussing the simultaneity of narrative, reader-response, and rhetoric in many different kinds of texts. All of this analysis works to create the conditions for student learning on a meta-level and encouraging

understanding of the complex activities involved in textual construction, interpretation, and use in society.

## Chapter 2 Notes

1. As I mentioned in Chapter 1, Debra Journet maintains in “Narrative, Action, and Learning: The Stories of *Myst*” that while there is not necessarily a story involved in a puzzle game, the player creates his or her own story about playing it (94).
2. *Half-Life* is a 1998 first-person shooter video game, and is often cited as one of the best video games of all time. The game never “releases” the first-person viewpoint, allowing players to control the camera from the main character’s perspective throughout the entire game. Pre-scripted sequences occur within the game space, rather than cut-scenes, which were far more common at the time.
3. Ironically, the games Aarseth describes as being the “the future of gaming” and ones he says will shape “the future of human communication” are massively-multiplayer online games (MMOs), which for me are less like the vast majority of my video game experiences. Instead of performing or enacting a narrative with a distinct beginning and end, these games involve endless collection of objects and require players to undertake repetitive tasks with no end in sight. Instead of creating a text, these games seem bent on charging fees for player experiences which, of course, are never-ending in order to maintain the revenue stream. While players have a degree of autonomy and can create unique social situations within the game, these experiences are far less game-like and have little to do with the game or its narrative world and more to do with online interaction. The games are often compared to digital slot machines, which reward players for continued play, rather than problem-solving or enacting a story.

## Chapter 3

### ***World of Goo* as Rhetorical Narrative: Audience Interaction and Textual Persuasion**

As a player, video games are difficult to separate from my personal experience of them. While all texts require audiences to “enact” them through reading, viewing, or playing, video games are a medium that makes this relationship between text and audience much more explicit. Games require players to use them and make that “use” an element of the text’s story. In order to theorize the role of the player in the gaming experience (and the role of the audience in the textual experience at large), I will first discuss reader-response criticism, which can offer insights into how the player’s gameplay experience reciprocally affects textual meaning. In addition to creating meaning through player interaction, I also believe that the story told in *World of Goo* persuades players; it uses rhetorical principles to argue for a certain point of view or make claims about what we as players and audiences should value. Secondly, I turn to rhetorical narrative theory, a branch of reader-response criticism which places emphasis on the social contexts of narrative, and, most importantly, the way narrative texts are used to persuade audiences. In other words, the player’s interpretation of the game story is vital both to their experience of the text and meanings created, but also in gauging the rhetorical persuasion of the game against their own values and positions. Lastly, I will discuss the unique rhetorical persuasion of games through a discussion of procedural rhetoric, a theory that views game texts as systems that persuade by limiting players’ choices and interactions to create rhetorical expression. By exploring these three

concepts, I undertake an analysis of the role of the player in *World of Goo*, how the game's story is used to persuade them, and how the game's procedural system makes claims through allowing and disallowing particular choices in the game world. As I claim throughout this dissertation, these aspects can be fruitfully applied across multiple modes in order to demonstrate for students the construction and use of texts, with the ultimate goal of fostering meta-level awareness of textual expression.

## Reader-Response Criticism: What Do Players Bring to Video Games?

In examining the way narrative is constructed within video games, I have described many concepts that highlight how texts cue their audiences into performing certain operations on them. This ties my theoretical framework very closely with a specific branch of criticism within literary studies: reader-response criticism. In this section, I examine this concept in more detail to determine what is valuable for English scholars in using reader-response criticism to describe the player's role in creating the video game narrative, as well as the role of audiences in texts of all kinds. Thus far, I have described how *World of Goo* invites players to participate; now, I will describe how players answer that invitation. Several figures will be vital in this discussion, such as Louise M. Rosenblatt, Stanley Fish, Wolfgang Iser, Peter Rabinowitz, and James Phelan. Once again, this is a partial view of a vast discussion within English studies, and I will highlight concepts that will be most valuable for my analysis of this particular game text.

The concept of reader-response criticism is actually not new. Louise M. Rosenblatt's 1938 book, *Literature as Exploration*, outlines the concept of the reader's "activity" in the narrative, characterizing it as "exploration": "The word *exploration* is

designed to suggest primarily that the experience of literature, far from being for the reader a passive process of absorption, is a form of intense personal activity” (v).

Certainly, this ties in with the work of the narratologists I’ve discussed earlier, and Rosenblatt also shares the belief that texts are inert without a reader who “transforms them into a set of meaningful symbols” (*Literature as Exploration* 25). Like most of the other scholars noted in this chapter, Rosenblatt is not dealing with any texts other than written ones, but nevertheless I would argue that her conception of the “bare” text also holds true for video game texts, which remain a series of codes, images, and sounds until “unlocked” by the player’s input. This metaphor of the “inert” text without readers is even more explicit in gaming, where a game character obviously will not “move” without players. The criticism of such a viewpoint is that it appears incredibly naïve and reflects a certain “chicken or the egg” logic: which is more important, the created text or the person who reads it? Thus, to say that a text is totally meaningless without a receiver seems to neglect the author(s) of the work and the actual process of creating it, as well as the fact that the text does indeed exist. Another criticism could simply be that this viewpoint places far too much emphasis on receivers of texts and gives them all the power in the communicative process. Rosenblatt counters this concern by providing a metaphor for reader and text that takes into account their symbiotic nature: that of “transactions” taking place “between individual readers and individual literary works” (*Literature as Exploration* 27). Such a metaphor makes even more sense in the context of video games, since players actually play a video game with the expectation that they will have to “make it work.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, no one buys a video game expecting a passive

experience, and like all textual experiences, studying video games requires an understanding of how players “transact” with it.

Perhaps the most useful concept for work in English courses with video games and Rosenblatt’s discussion of reader-response is the notion of the reader’s experience of literature as “living through” rather than “knowledge about” (*Literature as Exploration* 38). Video games are a much more explicit form of fictional text, and as such players are literally controlling a character or characters that are not themselves. “Living through” highlights the sense of the “role” that the fictional text expects readers to inhabit. In other words, readers/players enter a specific kind of reception when they experience a text. For instance, literary critics schooled in New Criticism (such as I was during my undergraduate and graduate years) are heavily influenced by that schooling and therefore come to “read” texts in ways that fit with their community of practice (see Wenger). They are “living through” the literary text in a specific way, as a New Critic. Students schooled in the popular culture of images are similarly influenced. “Living through” a text in this sense involves not only the student’s adoption of the “role” the texts creates, but also the conceptual background they bring to it, as Rosenblatt notes: “what the student brings to literature is as important as the literary text itself” (*Literature as Exploration* 82). Video game players are not given “knowledge about” the subject of the video game (which counters the popular notion that playing a shooting video game will make the player proficient with handguns); instead, players are “living through” a textual experience that is created for them, a role that they are asked to inhabit for the duration of the game. Film viewers and readers of written texts similarly enter into a specific mode of reception to live through texts.

Rosenblatt's conception of reader-response criticism also highlights the particularity of the textual experience, as she reflects: "While I understood that language is socially generated, I saw that it is always individually internalized in transactions with the environment at particular times under particular circumstances" ("On the (Pendulum-) Swinging Eighties" 294). In gaming, this is exemplified in the way video games can react with other pop culture texts; for instance, the *Matrix* films spawned a whole generation of video games built on an ability to slow down time as the player wishes (usually called "bullet time"), as seen in games like *Max Payne*, *F.E.A.R.*, and *Red Dead Redemption*. The player's understanding of this game mechanic comes from a very particular moment in time and from other socially-constructed, pop-culture texts. Rosenblatt is not necessarily positing a one-to-one relationship between social forces and textual readings (as in "this reader has read \_\_\_\_\_, which causes them to read the text this way"), and I am also not making a similar claim. Players of the games mentioned above need not see films with the "bullet time" technique employed, but their experience of the game mechanic can be aided by their previous textual and social experiences with action films. As I mentioned earlier, this kind of thinking about texts and their individual readers might cause some concern, since it would seem that such a concept would cause a "pendulum swing to complete relativism" (Rosenblatt, "On the (Pendulum-) Swinging Eighties" 294). However, I agree with Rosenblatt that the way we interpret texts does not need to be completely relativistic; video game texts seem to invite this same criticism, where they are viewed as almost impossible to interpret due to each player's unique experience of the text. However, as I described earlier, video games limit their players in a number of ways, and the meanings that come from playing a video game are not



entirely up to the player. While players bring particular textual experiences to particular games, the player transacts with the game to limit those experiences.

How then, can English scholars “interpret” video game texts? Rosenblatt contends that scholars come together to decide how we can examine texts: “*If we agree on criteria for validity of interpretation*, however, we can decide on the most defensible interpretation or interpretations” (“On the (Pendulum-) Swinging Eighties” 295). The textual experience of players is always about making specific choices, about choosing what cues to follow or ignore. Those choices then determine the player’s interpretation of the game. What a game “means” therefore is up to the player, but it is also up to the text’s offering of specific avenues or choices. If an interpretation is not necessarily tied to the text’s cues, it will therefore be an “invalid” interpretation. In the case of a gaming example I mentioned earlier, to say that *Grand Theft Auto III* is not a violent game based on a young player’s use of it solely for driving practice would be an “invalid” interpretation because it is not what the text cues the player to do. The young player will never complete the game’s cause-and-effect chain without undertaking the violent missions offered by the game narrative.

The idea of shared determination for textual meanings and interpretations echoes a concept by another reader-response theorist, Stanley Fish, who develops the notion of an “interpretive community” where scholars agree together on legitimate readings of texts. However, in the case of video games, Jesper Juul points out: “There is no long tradition for interpreting video games, and hence no conventions or community for upholding a specific interpretation. I do not think this should be followed to a conclusion of blanket subjectivity; I think that having the tools for discussing games, and

remembering how we interpret other cultural forms, can prevent us from making naïve, literal interpretations of games” (193). One of the goals of this dissertation is to provide English scholars and teachers with the tools to discuss video games in order to teach students how to undertake complex and multilayered analyses of gaming texts. By using reader-response theory to discuss video games, the issues noted by game studies scholars concerning the interaction of rules and fiction can be effectively dealt with: “a reception-theory based analysis can explain the way that narrative and gameplay together determine the player experience in games that make use of stories. This approach can also answer the question: do we need to pay attention to the story in order to play this kind of game?” (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, et al. 184). Of course, I would argue that players absolutely must pay attention to (and enter transactions with) game stories.

Video game players, much like the readers that reader-response theorists describe, bring to the video game text a set of “‘interpretive strategies’ – shared rules and conventions – which readers internalize and learn to apply in particular situations, just as all speakers must proceed according to certain rules and regulations” (Regan 141). Gamers use these interpretive strategies to make decisions about how to proceed within games, much like readers of literary texts. The concept of interpretive strategies for gaming seems directly tied to game genres, which call upon players’ knowledge of genre conventions. For instance, a first-person shooter game asks players to use different interpretive strategies than a side-scrolling action game or sports simulation.<sup>2</sup> Each of these game genres requires players to bring their own previous knowledge to other games in the genre, with each building on the last. Literary texts in different genres do the same: reading epic poetry and detective novels from the 1940s are vastly different experiences

in terms of genre, and as such require readers to use a variety of interpretive strategies. Likewise, applying the interpretive strategies from the genre of the classical Hollywood film would not work on art film narration, for instance. Stanley Fish calls this ability to use different interpretive strategies “competence” (qtd. in Regan 142). Competence comes from learning interpretive strategies from texts and within interpretive communities, and this idea feels very much like the concept of literacy, which I will apply to video games in Chapter 4. Suffice it to say that the notion of competence, much like the concept of literacy, is not simply an acquired and decontextualized skill. Instead, competence comes from social interactions and forces that control what is an “‘acceptable’ or ‘appropriate’ interpretation” (Regan 142). As I mentioned earlier, I will not be using “competence” as a concept for game analysis, but rather, literacy. More specifically, I will discuss the concept of multiliteracies, since it includes the multimodal “competencies” or literate practices of video game players.

However, video game analysis is enriched immensely by a discussion of what readers bring to the game experience. Viewing a video game as a place for players to explore, transact with, and live through the text places greater emphasis on the experience of players but also the structures within the game (and outside of the game) that make that experience possible. Likewise, understanding the way games can be interpreted by players who bring their own knowledge, interpretive strategies, and literacies to game stories highlights the ways that textual meaning is socially determined, as well as constrained by the game text and game creators. Next, I will describe the way rhetorical narrative theory can further highlight the importance of genre and the social aspects of gaming texts and what they bring to bear on transactions between the text and the reader.

## Rhetorical Narrative Theory: How Do Texts Persuade Audiences?

Rhetorical narrative theory in literary theory seeks to discuss in more detail the way readers transact with texts to produce meanings, adding the individual's experience of the text (as directed by authors) as a vital part of the reading process. In applying this concept to gaming, I focus in particular on what rhetorical narrative theory adds to the interpretation of gaming texts by examining how readers participate in them. Peter J. Rabinowitz offers a definition of rhetorical narrative theory: "For rhetorical narrative critics a minimal definition [of rhetorical narrative] might be 'someone, using conventionally agreed-upon techniques, told someone else for some purpose that something happened' – a definition that places greater emphasis on the act (and the motivations) of telling itself" (306-7). The "conventionally agreed-upon techniques" involved in a rhetorical narrative critic's conception of narrative echoes Stanley Fish's concept of "interpretive strategies" that are produced by interpretive communities (which I will later call "literacies"). The "someone" and "someone else" in this definition points more specifically to a relationship between authors of the text, as well as both readers (or players) and the implied audience of the fiction (more on that later). Essentially, applying rhetorical narrative theory emphasizes the rhetorical situation, and while Rabinowitz is discussing musical texts in this particular case, I would argue that the same could be said for applying this theory to gaming, as it "can heighten our understanding of the importance of starting points—in particular the audience preconceptions of genre—in generating ... meaning" (Rabinowitz 307). As I mentioned earlier, an awareness of a video game and its genre conventions (as well as players' previous experiences with them) is vastly important for discussion of game texts.

Rabinowitz posits four major rules guiding interpretive strategies (or as he calls them: “menus of interpretive procedures for unlocking [or making] literary meaning”), and I think it is helpful to take a look at these concepts in depth in order to see how they might apply to video game texts. These rules for interpretive strategies are:

“rules of notice” (which tell us where to direct our attention), “rules of signification” (which allow us to draw the meaning from the details we notice . . .), “rules of configuration” (which permit readers to put elements into an emerging formal pattern and, hence, develop expectations and a sense of closure), and “rules of coherence” (which allow us to ascribe generalized meaning to the completed experience of the work). From this perspective, reading (and I’m using that term broadly to include listening and viewing) is always “reading as”: reading Chandler’s *The Long Goodbye* “as” a detective story is a significantly different experience from reading it as a political text or a psychological novel, each of which calls a different set of reading strategies into play. (313-4)

“Rules of notice” within a video game can be textual, aural, or visual, highlighting or directing the attention of players much in the same way as films and literary works. Likewise, in limiting the available movements or abilities of characters, games can further direct attention to certain aspects of the narrative. The details in the game (for instance, Nazi paintings in World War II shooting games) provide “signification” for players, indicating not only the Nazi Germany setting, but also surrounding players with threatening symbols that signify “evil.” Rules of “configuration” dictate that players will most likely end up further and further within enemy territory, finally getting to the source

of the evil. Players then reflect and draw meaning from the finished game due to rules of coherence – essentially all of the previous in-game experiences are meant to be part of a full textual effect: “Rules of coherence encourage us to read endings in such a way as to make them congruent with what has come before” (Rabinowitz 320). In other words, as players play video games, they expect each part of the narrative to fit into each other. Audiences create coherence, rather than finding it a priori in texts.

The importance of genre for Rabinowitz applies even to the distinction between high and low art, since “the difference between ‘popular’ and ‘high’ art is really a generic distinction in the way I’ve defined genre: that it stems less from differences in the textual features than in the interpretive rules that the reader or listener decides to apply” (321). Thus, even attempting to view video games (which may never shake the “low” art distinction) as “high” art is merely an application of particular rules to the texts. Recently, trashy artworks like spaghetti westerns from the mid 1960s have been given status as high artworks, demonstrating the contextual basis for genre distinctions. In this way, players of video games seeking to simply have fun in an imagined world will see the text in a different way than those looking for complex symbolism.

In addition to the interpretive strategies players apply to games, for James Phelan and other rhetorical narrative theorists, the interaction between text and reader is one of persuasion, since they view “narrative as having the purpose of communicating knowledge, feelings, values, and beliefs” (*Narrative as Rhetoric* 18). In other words, all texts attempt to persuade audiences using rhetoric. Composition theorists who use rhetoric as their main focus for writing instructions will not necessarily find anything unique about this idea. Certainly, essays and other nonfiction writing use rhetoric for

persuading readers to a particular point of view or to take certain actions. However, in order to discuss video games (which are almost exclusively fictional texts), English scholars must examine how rhetoric functions within fictional texts. James Phelan takes Rosenblatt's earlier concept of a "transaction" between reader and text and interrogates the metaphor's value: "What I want is a shorthand term that might include all these things—interaction, transaction, (gift) exchange, intercourse. Rather than search for another metaphor, I propose to let *rhetoric* function as this shorthand. . . . I want to refer to the complex, multilayered processes of writing and reading, processes that call upon our cognition, emotions, desires, hopes, values, and beliefs" (*Narrative as Rhetoric* 18-19). Such a concept makes perfect sense for me, since I subscribe to the Aristotelian definition of rhetoric as the "faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion" (qtd. in Atwill and Lauer 30). Phelan uses the example of Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* to demonstrate the rhetorical persuasion involved in the text: "we respond to Lizzy's final happiness not only for its mimetic power but also for its thematic significance, for the way in which it signals Austen's belief in both the necessity and the possibility of marrying for the right reasons in the face of all the pressures that operate on a woman to marry for the wrong reasons" (*Narrative as Rhetoric* 30). Such an interpretation of Austen's text seems perfectly fitting with the narrative world it creates. I also believe that video games persuade players, and Phelan's description of rhetoric as a concept for the way texts and readers create meaning works toward indicating the social forces involved in gaming, as well as the way readers bring their own knowledge and beliefs into play in the textual transaction.

A key concept in rhetorical narrative criticism deals with the “audience” of the text, and how the reader is expected to play multiple roles in reading (or playing) a fictional text: “to read something as fiction, we must not only join the authorial audience (which recognizes what it reads as an invented artifact and, hence, treats the characters as constructs) but also *pretend* to be members of the narrative audience (which takes what it reads as history and treats the characters as real)” (Rabinowitz 314). In gaming, this concept holds, since the player (even when inhabiting the body of a game character) joins the authorial audience in understanding the character is fictional and created by pixels or polygons. However, players pretend to be part of the narrative audience, since players attempt to identify with and “become” the character within the fictional game world. James Phelan also includes a “narratee,” which is the audience that the narrator of the text actually addresses within the fictional world, and this concept usually doesn’t apply in gaming (or in films) unless there is an actual narrator involved in the text. If this does exist in a game, usually the player inhabits this role as well, conflating the narrative audience and narratee concepts. Finally, Phelan includes the “flesh-and-blood” or “actual” audience, which is the reader or player (Phelan *Experiencing Fiction* 4-5). This audience is the audience that creates the rhetorical persuasion within the text, since individual players bring their own subjectivities to bear on the text’s values and beliefs. The player of a video game understands these different levels of the textual audience and puts him or herself into a mode of reception that incorporates them.

In order to perform rhetorical narrative criticism on texts, English scholars can examine the form of the text, which I have discussed in some detail earlier, but in the context of video game players, one can examine the form in relation to the way it is in the



“service of a set of readerly engagements that lead to particular final effects on the implied audience” (Phelan *Experiencing Fiction* 3). Looking at the form of a narrative text from this perspective focuses on how the text is set up for a player and what that set up leads players to experience. Such a rhetorical view of texts includes text, author, and audience in a relationship with each other, rather than leaning toward the New Critical text-only view, a reader-centric view that ignores the author, or an author-focused relationship that gives too much power to the authorial force. Phelan relates the “rhetorical triangle” of rhetorical narrative criticism in this way: “the approach assumes a recursive relationship (or feedback loop) among authorial agency, textual phenomena [the style and form of texts, as well as the conventions of genres] (including intertextual relations), and reader response” (*Experiencing Fiction* 4). In this way, the gaming text is the product of an author (a creator or group of game designers), who then produces a text that includes certain textual features or forms that may or may not be familiar to players, who then respond to the work by playing it. The gameplay of video gamers is a very literal form of “reader-response,” since it is an immediate response that can be “a test of the efficacy of those [the author’s] designs” (Phelan *Experiencing Fiction* 4). In creating this rhetorical triangle for textual analysis, Phelan and other rhetorical narrative critics create a framework that includes far more than structural analysis and reader-response criticism alone, adding in a profoundly ideological component (which comes from the input of audiences, but also from the author and text’s manipulation of the audience’s previous textual and social experiences).

What rhetorical narrative theory brings to textual analysis in English studies is a multilayered conception of the player’s involvement with a game that is produced by an

author or authors, and in which the player evaluates his or her beliefs, values, and desires in response to the rhetorical persuasion of the text. Phelan describes an audience's responses to three components of the fiction, the mimetic, the thematic, and the synthetic. In the mimetic, players of video games would respond to the characters of the fiction (relating them to their own experience), as well as the player's "judgments and emotions, our desires, hopes, expectations, satisfactions, and disappointments" (*Experiencing Fiction* 5). The thematic component deals with the ideas the text is presenting, as in the strongly ideological concepts embedded in the narrative world. Lastly, the synthetic component places the audience in more of an observational role, pulling back from inside the narrative to examine characters and the story told as "constructs" that are meant to elicit these responses (in a "meta" way, where players examine the construction of the story and characters from afar) (*Experiencing Fiction* 5). In working to create metalevel awareness of textual construction, an examination of the synthetic component of the fiction could provide a level of understanding about how the text works to elicit specific responses. Rhetorical narrative criticism assumes that the reader is meant to relate the text's embedded rhetoric to their own ideas, and the audience either rejects or accepts the ideas presented by the text. In other words, rhetorical narrative criticism (when applied to video games) assumes that players will either have their values challenged by the text (prompting change or rejection) or confirmed by the text (prompting reaffirmation and acceptance). Regardless of what happens, the text is rhetorical, in that it is attempting to persuade players. In order to discuss more fully what kinds of rhetorics are used in gaming, I turn to Ian Bogost's work on "procedural rhetoric," which may encapsulate a

kind of persuasion in gaming that has previously been left out of the scholarly discussion of video games and other texts as well.

## Procedural Rhetoric in Gaming: Persuasive Systems

Thus far, I have examined theories and concepts that come from work familiar to English scholars in the fields of literary theory and rhetoric, but one particular game-specific concept I must address. Ian Bogost's book *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames* outlines a powerful concept that goes a long way toward not only resolving the contentious divide between narratologists and ludologists mentioned in Chapter 2 but also redefining the view of video games as inscribed texts, clarifying particularly what that inscription medium is. The inscription medium of gaming, for Bogost, is "procedurality," which he describes as "a way of creating, explaining, or understanding processes. And processes define the way things work: the methods, techniques, and logics that drive the operation of systems, from mechanical systems like engines to organizational systems like high schools to conceptual systems like religious faith" (3). Bogost specifies that procedurality is not a purely mechanical or computational phenomenon. Rather, procedurality refers to an alternate mode of inscription, where one process signals another process, and so on.

Taking Aristotle's earlier definition of rhetoric as persuasion, Bogost combines procedurality and rhetoric to produce procedural rhetoric, which he describes as "a practice of using processes persuasively" (3). In other words, when the player of a *Super Mario* game jumps on an enemy (or a character that impedes the player's progress toward the goal), that character will be flattened and disappear. This act is a procedure, in the

sense that it creates a system: if a player jumps on an enemy, it will disappear, thus making the path to the goal easier. As a procedure, it is represented by distinct processes, which include the ability to jump, the world that requires that jumping, and the character's ability to use that jump to remove obstacles. Just now, I have tried to explain through verbal representation a procedural representation, and quite obviously, it is not the same as the real thing—as such, Bogost defines procedural representation as “a form of symbolic expression that uses processes rather than language” (9). This is what causes difficulty in describing a video game through other inscription methods (just as a recorded video of a video game is not the same as playing it). Much like a literary text or written essay uses particular inscription methods, so do procedural representations like video games.

Procedurality offers a new way to think about the rhetorical persuasion happening when players play video games. While English scholars might be tempted to argue that visual rhetoric would be the main avenue for understanding video games as rhetoric, Bogost argues that this is inadequate, since “[v]isual communication cannot simply adopt the figures and forms of oral and written expression” (21). He also notes that while visual rhetoric is certainly at work within gaming, “visual rhetoric cannot help us address the rhetorical function of procedural representation” (24). However, I would caution that to ignore the visual aspect of gaming misses out on a vital part of the gaming experience, especially in more recent gaming texts that make use of ever more realistic visual imagery. Incorporating a combination of visual, aural, verbal, and procedural rhetorics into an examination of video games can only add insights. Nevertheless, to focus only on the image and not the procedural basis for video game rhetoric would be similarly

inadequate. Thus, while a discussion of an image within a video game can be fruitful, it does not fully explain the process of which it is a part, and therefore cannot “make claims about *how things work*” (Bogost 29). For instance, a game mentioned earlier as a child’s driving simulator, the *Grand Theft Auto* series uses procedural rhetoric, in that it requires players to be criminals. In essence, not breaking laws within the *Grand Theft Auto* world leaves players powerless and stuck, since they cannot finish the game narrative.

However, while this game series is perhaps the most often cited for its violent and antisocial content, it nevertheless makes claims about how our society and its laws restrict citizens in many ways. Players only feel “freedom” through breaking laws.

As an example of a procedural rhetorical text, Bogost uses *The McDonald’s Videogame*, which is a simulation game about managing the franchise. However, in this game, players have limited options and are forced into unethical business practices to succeed. As Bogost notes, the game is certainly taking a clear rhetorical stance because it “mounts a procedural rhetoric about the necessity of corruption in the global fast food business, and the overwhelming temptation of greed, which leads to more corruption” (31). As mentioned in my earlier description of rhetorical narrative theory, the rhetorical persuasion within this game text is evaluated by players according to their own values and beliefs. Obviously, for most players in our culture, *Grand Theft Auto* games are far less likely to change players’ belief systems and turn them to a life of antisocial behavior than *The McDonald’s Videogame* might make them think twice about eating fast food produced through unethical business practices.

By looking at games according to their procedural rhetorics, English scholars can also reevaluate the concept of “interactivity” that is so often applied to games, as it

implies that players can actively change the gamespace. However, this is often not the case, since “many computational systems do not allow the user to raise *procedural objections*—that is, the player of a videogame is usually not allowed to change the rules of play” (Bogost 37). In other words, the player of *The McDonald’s Videogame* is unable to make the game show McDonald’s in a more positive light. *Resident Evil 4* (a zombie shooting game mentioned earlier) does not allow players to “cure” the infected native population, and therefore makes a claim for violence over intellectual problem-solving. Most games create worlds and use procedures to make claims, all the while disallowing objections or changes to those persuasive claims. This is another argument for viewing games as rhetoric, since Bogost notes how authors often make “rhetorical claims precisely to exclude opposing positions on a subject, not to allow for the equal validity of all possible positions” (37). In other words, games don’t allow audiences to respond directly, much in the same way that speeches, films, and written works disallow immediate responses from audiences. However, what video games and other rhetorical texts do allow are rhetorical textual responses, where audiences similarly make claims in texts of their own. Rhetorically, then, a video game is positioned very much like other texts in different modes, where the relationship between audience, text, and author are clearly defined. Likewise, Bogost argues that not only are video games rhetorical procedural texts, but that they are a mode of rhetorical expression: “By expressive, I mean that videogames service representational goals akin to literature, art, and film, as opposed to instrumental goals akin to utilities and tools. . . . As such, they represent excellent candidates for rhetorical speech—persuasion and expression are inexorably linked” (45). Like all rhetorical texts, video games seek to express ideas and persuade

audiences. By representing experiences through procedurality, video games make rhetorical arguments to which players respond through direct engagement.

In the same line of thinking as other theories I've discussed about narratology, reader-response, and rhetorical narrative criticism, procedural rhetoric deals with examining the choices the author or designer has made in creating the text and determining the meaning behind what has been allowed or disallowed by the text, as Bogost notes: "Interesting choices do not necessarily entail all possible choices in a given situation; rather, choices are selectively included and excluded in a procedural representation to produce a desired expressive end" (45). All texts "leave out" aspects of experience in favor of rich description or representation of those moments that create specific meanings. If a written text describes a character's thoughts in detail, other elements like the setting or physical descriptions are left out. Likewise, in limiting what is possible, a video game constrains meaning as well, since only selected meanings can be produced under the rules of the game. The selection of certain options over others, of making procedures lead to particular other procedures, is the persuasive rhetoric of video games. Bogost describes his interest in "videogames that make arguments about the way systems work in the material world" (47), where games persuade players to adopt a certain point of view (if only while in the gamespace). As I will show in the remainder of this chapter, I believe *World of Goo* is a persuasive game. While fun and challenging, the game asks players to reevaluate their own beliefs and values as a result of the procedures of the game, as well as the visual and aural elements of the narrative. Procedural rhetoric, perhaps even more than visual, verbal, or aural rhetoric, may be the primary rhetorical theory for English scholars to use in examining the persuasive and expressive power of

video games, since it builds on the concepts added by narratology, game studies, reader-response criticism, and rhetorical narrative criticism. This is not to say that visual, verbal, or aural rhetorics do not offer insights – sound and images play a vital role in *World of Goo*. Rather, in seeking an analysis of gaming narratives from these combined rhetorical perspectives (visual, verbal, aural, and procedural rhetorics), English pedagogy can incorporate a richer understanding of how games are structured for players to interact with them and be persuaded toward certain kinds of thinking or action.

### Rhetorical Narrative: Storytelling and Persuasion in *World of Goo*

In examining the narrative of *World of Goo* thus far, I've neglected an important element: the role of the player within that narrative. Who are we as players within the world of the goo balls? Louise M. Rosenblatt's concept of the readers of literary texts "living through" the textual experience can be fruitfully applied to video games in order to examine the role players are asked to inhabit when they transact with texts. The player's role in *World of Goo* is certainly not that of an individual goo ball. The game's choice of narrative point-of-view separates the player from the goo balls (as the game designers could easily have placed the player in a third- or first-person perspective and in direct control of an individual goo ball character). In addition to the game's perspective, the player's relationship with the narrator also provides insights into the role he or she is asked to play. For instance, players often are required by the game to seemingly betray the wishes of the narrator, such as in "FREEDOM SCRAPER" example in the previous chapter, where players are told by The Sign Painter that the balloons are "not to be used to circumvent security systems." However, this also can be viewed as the narrator



dropping information for the player in order to lead him or her to The Sign Painter's nefarious ends. Does the narrator wish for the goo balls to enter the factory in order to use them? Does the narrator then wish for the destruction of the World of Goo Corporation? For instance, within the factory, the player reads a sign that says: "These must be the robots that built this factory. / I thought they had all been torn apart and scrapped for parts years ago. / Oh look! / There's one left. / It's so cute! / But the pipe is right behind his head. / Well... / ... you can't stop progress." Because the player complies with the narrator and indeed does not stop "progress," or the destruction of the factory, it seems clear that the player is unwittingly an accomplice of The Sign Painter. However, because we as players are so closely aligned with the narrator, we are asked to reevaluate our conception of progress. As such, the seeming heartlessness of the narrator at times is something players have to evaluate according to their own beliefs and values by entering into transactions with it.

Looking at *World of Goo* using reader-response criticism, English scholars can begin to see how the interpretive strategies involved in puzzle games and other adventure games come into play. As I've mentioned earlier, puzzle video games are usually devoid of storytelling aspirations, aside from those the player creates during their play. *Tetris*, perhaps the most famously successful puzzle video game in history, is the usual example in demonstrating how video games do not need to have any story in order to become popular or be "good." *World of Goo* uses conventions of the puzzle game genre, and players' awareness of the puzzle game genre has drastic effects on how they interact and transact with the game to create meaning (see Rabinowitz 307). The first level of the game introduces the player to the puzzle mechanic of the game (a rule, as I've discussed

earlier), that the player must “Drag n’ Drop to build to the pipe.” Based on this initial rule, players of puzzle games would assume that each level would operate similarly, where the levels would grow increasingly difficult but continue using the same gameplay mechanic. While this is indeed what happens in the game in a general way (players drag and drop goo balls in order to help them reach pipes), puzzle game players may find the introduction of many of the story elements and gameplay changes to be novel and unique for the genre. For instance, as the player moves further in the game, the goo ball mechanics set up at the start of the game change dramatically, to the point where the gameplay of the first chapter and the gameplay of the fourth chapter are practically unrecognizable when compared to each other. Based on such drastic changes, players of the game who are avid puzzle gamers may feel betrayed by the curves thrown at them when playing *World of Goo*. Because the game betrays many of its puzzle-game genre conventions, the player’s awareness of those conventions makes that gameplay experience unique.

Based on the conventions of traditional adventure games (which emphasize problem-solving and exploration in order to complete a narrative), however, *World of Goo* begins to make more sense for players who have previous experience with them. As such, reading the game as an adventure game (in Rabinowitz’s conception of “reading as”) requires a different set of interpretive strategies, or ways of discovering and creating textual meaning. Once again using Rabinowitz’s rules for interpretive strategies [rules of notice, rules of signification, rules of configuration, and rules of coherence (313-4)], English scholars can examine what players bring to the text in order find and create meaning. I’ve already described in the previous chapter a number of the “rules of notice”

for this particular game, especially in the written narration on the signs left in each level, the sound effects and music within levels, or the visual components of the game's style. These elements cue players to make certain connections as opposed to others, and as such create meaning for players who make those connections. "Rules of configuration" let players of *World of Goo* make connections between levels, placing them "into an emerging formal pattern and, hence, develop expectations and a sense of closure" (Rabinowitz 313).

The destination of the goo balls from the very start of the game is unclear. As players, we don't know where they are meant to go, outside of "into the pipe." However, as the game proceeds, players make hypotheses about the order of the levels they encounter, and that something important will happen at the end of each chapter. While the goo balls' journey in the first chapter may be hazy at first, it becomes clearer as the player searches for the pattern in what they encounter, leading to a final level in each chapter that becomes far more significant than it would be otherwise. For instance, the first chapter begins on a sunny hill in the world of goo, and in the final level of that chapter, the goo balls travel out of a large stomach-like smokestack. Unwittingly, it seems, the goo balls have moved from a happy pastoral landscape into a smelly pit used for manufacturing. Based on Rabinowitz's "rules of coherence," which allow players to create meaning based on the playing experience, this level can provoke a sense of sadness, especially when the player is told after completing this level that the goo balls "knew they would never be back." The ending of this chapter only has meaning when compared to what the player has encountered previously within it. Looking at a simple puzzle game from such a complex perspective may begin to feel a bit like overkill (and

this is part of the issue when looking at video games, since our culture generally dictates that games are not exactly high art). Rabinowitz makes this claim based on players' perceptions of genre as well. Video gamers may not actually think much of the games they play (in terms of artistic depth and value), and as such their preconceptions of the game or the genre bring different readings to the text based on the "interpretive rules that the reader or listener decides to apply" (321). In this way, the player brings meanings to the game which do not necessarily reside within it, but instead make up part of the "rhetorical situation" of the text.

## Gaming Persuasion: Narrative and Procedural Rhetoric

What would it mean to view *World of Goo* as rhetoric? If we examine the game's story as "having the purpose of communicating knowledge, feelings, values, and beliefs" (Phelan, *Narrative as Rhetoric* 18), then the story is part of a rhetorical situation involving the author(s), the audience, and a message or purpose. What is the story of the game persuading us to value? In particular, I've described a number of themes that appear within the game, such as the destruction of the natural environment due to corporate greed, industrial pollution, and uncontrolled power consumption. The destruction of the goo world and the rise of the World of Goo Corporation go hand in hand. In addition to the environmental themes of the game, the anti-capitalist theme is evidenced particularly when the player enters the factory in Chapter 3. The first level of "Cog in the Machine" introduces the player to the World of Goo Corporation factory, where a sign reads:

This whole island is a factory!

It appears they are doing outsource work for World of Goo Corporation.

Probably building some kind of new hi-tech product.

... way over here on the other side of the world!

But where's the pipe?

Looks like that guy's giant head is in the way.

Possibly the result of poor local management.

Out with the old, in with the new.

That's what I always say. - the Sign Painter Management Supervisor.

While this adds story information for the player, it is also a thinly veiled argument about corporate greed and unethical business practices. The description of the workers in the factory “on the other side of the world” refers directly to American companies outsourcing, and the “poor local management” can refer to worker exploitation from those companies in foreign countries. The player, of course, is implicated in these business practices, and the game requires the player to join in the exploitation of workers.

Such an ironic statement about labor abuses works on several levels from James Phelan’s conception of audience response, where the player can respond to three different components of the fictional world: the mimetic, the thematic, and the synthetic (Phelan, *Experiencing Fiction* 5). In the mimetic, players of *World of Goo* respond to the fictional characters and relate them to their own experience, emotions, and values. Based on the flippant attitude of The Sign Painter (and by extension, the exploitative World of Goo Corporation), we as players may feel compassion for the robot head that must be destroyed, and we may have a more negative view of the narrator and the World of Goo Corporation as a result. Based on the thematic component (the ideas and ideology implied

in the work), the player has a choice about whether to agree with the narrator's view of "progress," or whether they disagree with the narrator's worldview, which implies colonialist notions of manifest destiny and poor treatment of workers. The synthetic component asks players of the game to look at *World of Goo* from a more distanced perspective, locating the level and the textual moment within a larger context as textual constructs that are meant to elicit these responses. Being located at the start of the "Cog in the Machine" chapter, the player may begin to relate more to the robot head that is about to be destroyed than to the corporation that sends the goo balls into the factory. The emphasis on exploitation and corporate malfeasance sets the tone nicely for a chapter that ends with the creation of "Product Z," which requires the use of goo balls as an energy source. Using rhetorical narrative criticism to analyze the possible responses of audiences, English scholars can examine what the text asks players to value or ignore, and especially what to accept or reject from the rhetorical argument of the text. In this case, players must choose whether to accept a model of efficiency and cost-cutting rather than a more "humane" treatment of workers (even if the workers are goo balls and robots).

Of course, the player cannot decide to treat this particular worker humanely. Players must destroy the robot in order to proceed through the level, and this brings me to perhaps the most significant element of the rhetorical persuasion in *World of Goo*: its use of procedural rhetoric. Once again, as Bogost defines it, procedural rhetoric is the "practice of using processes persuasively" in order to make claims about "how things work" (3, 29). In the game, the player often does not have "choice," in the sense that his or her decisions will change the goal of the levels or drastically affect the outcome of the

game. In particular, the theme of “progress” that pervades the narrative of the game is reinforced procedurally—the player literally cannot stop “progress” without stopping the narrative of the game. This concept is even spelled out in level names and other elements of the game style, such as the level name: “You Have to Explode the Head.” Once the player becomes complicit in the World of Goo Corporation’s plans, he or she may wish to stop “progress,” but the procedures of the game system disallow this. In this way, the game’s procedural rhetoric makes a claim about the inevitability of progress. As the game setting becomes more and more dystopic (even the when the game is turned “3D,” as an in-joke about video game graphics), the player may begin to think twice about our society’s conception of what “progress” actually means.

The game text is a system, then, that uses procedures to make claims about how the world “works.” Perhaps the most persuasive procedural representation in the game lies in the player’s ability to “save” more of the goo balls than is necessary to complete the goal of the level. When beginning the game as a whole, an indicator in the bottom-right corner of the screen tells the player how many goo balls must enter the pipe in order to proceed. However, if the player is able to allow more goo balls to enter the pipe, those goo balls are stored at the World of Goo Corporation grounds, where the player can build a giant tower into the sky (and other players around the world can do the same and have their results shown on screen—a virtual scoreboard of sorts). As a result, two simultaneous player responses can occur: 1) the player can feel compelled to “save” as many goo balls as possible in order to keep them from being “left behind” (as one of the narrator’s messages indicates that these are the “last of the goo balls” – making them more akin to finite resources like fossil fuels than a species), and 2) the player can feel a

sense of accomplishment and be rewarded for good play (the more goo balls saved become the material for the player to create their tower to show off to others).

However, players have another response that is part of the game's procedurality: they can ignore the goo balls that are left behind. In fact, a number of levels do not actually require a certain number of goo balls to be saved. For example, the final level of the first chapter, called the "Regurgitation Pumping Station," does not have a specific number goal. As players begin to move upward, a sign on the wall tells them: "You might be onto something. / It will be a tight fit, you might have to leave some behind ... / but that's probably ok, we're all in this together." Indeed, the player will not be penalized for leaving goo balls behind in this level, as only a small amount are required to complete it. In assuming the role of the savior of the goo balls, I find myself still wanting to bring the other goo along rather than stranding them inside the disgusting pumping station. However, the player simply looking to complete the level or goal quickly can simply detach most of the goo in order to escape the pumping station faster. In essence, the procedural rhetoric here makes the claim that there are two options, one that prizes togetherness and unity, and one that values expediency. While the player does have choice here, the power of this game and its procedural rhetorical expression comes from the fact that the player is asked to evaluate and choose how he or she will proceed in solving the game's problems. For me as a player, I find that my choice to save the goo balls (even when it is not necessary) is one that reaffirms my values, beliefs, and ethics.

As I've stated earlier, I believe *World of Goo* is a persuasive game. In order to create this kind of persuasive expression, *World of Goo* allows and disallows particular choices, procedures, and operations. As such, when English scholars examine what the



text allows or disallows, we can see the “desired expressive end” based on what those choices mean. Video games therefore offer particular experiences and meanings, which can only be produced based on the rules and fictional world of the game. I would argue the same for written or film texts, which have rules and limits, either through the limits of language, or the limits of the film frame. In terms of meaning, *World of Goo* would normally not be considered a very violent game. However, its depiction of the available choices for the goo balls deals with violence and cruelty to the natural world, the emphasis on productivity that creates that cruelty, and the constant consumption that will eventually mean the end of that world. The persuasive rhetoric of this particular game makes claims “about the way systems work in the material world” (47). The world of goo is meant to echo our own, and the claims it makes about energy, industrialization, corporate culture, consumerism, and the information age are meant to be evaluated by players’ own viewpoints and values. Based on the game’s storytelling, rules, fictional world, and procedural representation, English scholars can see how examining games from these perspectives can provide insights into the richness and complexity of games as a rhetorical and storytelling medium.

Video games can offer insights into how storytelling and rhetoric can be usefully reimagined to discuss other kinds of texts as well. Usually, English scholars separate these concepts, discounting the impact of the story from a rhetorical point of view, or the text’s rhetorical claims when viewed from a narrative perspective. If we begin to combine these concepts, we can see that narratives work rhetorically, and that rhetorical texts can use storytelling. In this way, fictional texts are not abstracted from the persuasive and contextual element of their use in society. *World of Goo* has meanings, and it also allows

players to generate them. However, they are particular meanings, created and made at particular times and in contexts. The game's view of civilization and "progress," while timeless themes in and of themselves, make persuasive claims that must be evaluated according to audiences' responses to them. In this way, I view games much in the same way as Ian Bogost, who sees them as inextricably linked to humanism: "Despite the computers that host them, despite the futuristic and mechanical fictional worlds they often render, videogames are not expressions of the machine. They are expressions of being human. And the logics that drive our games make claims about who we are, how our world functions, and what we want it to become" (340). Even though the narrative of *World of Goo* is set in a fictional world, the goo balls' "human" qualities, the destruction of their natural world, and the powerful corporation that abuses them can be seen as part of our world as well.

## Looking Ahead: Literacy Practices in Gaming

In the next chapter, I advocate for a multiliteracies perspective for video games and other texts in English courses. Using the concept of multiliteracies, (as discussed by the New London Group and New Literacy Studies), I analyze *World of Goo* as literate activity, activity that takes place in multisemiotic domains including images, sound, and text. Examining gaming from this perspective not only allows for a fuller discussion of the multiple modes of meaning involved in the gaming medium, but it also gives new insights into the way games are, through the players' activity, social and contextual practices. Examining video games from a multiliteracies perspective allows instructors to discuss the complex learning practices involved in gaming, as well as finding the "design

grammars” of games and other texts in order to create literacy learning. By analyzing the design grammar of *World of Goo* and the multiple literacies involved in it, we can examine possibilities for critical change in not only texts, but also systems of power in students’ academic or working lives. Making these complex forces and learning practices explicit for students can create possibilities for “transformative” practices that can help students in other arenas than just texts.

## Chapter 3 Notes

1. See also Regan: “[Iser] refers to the literary work as a *virtual* work, in the sense of its unrealized potential for meaning. It is the gaps and blanks of the text that give rise to communication in the reading process; the indeterminacy of the text increases the variety of communication possible. The reader's viewpoint, however, cannot proceed arbitrarily. The blanks in the text both induce *and* guide the reader's constitutive activity, triggering off responses or 'projections' in the reader's mind *and* simultaneously regulating or controlling the range and sequence of possible responses. Meaning in literature arises from the convergence or interaction of text and reader” (143-4).

2. See Juul: “Many first-person shooters of the late 1990s featured wooden crates that turned out to contain medical kits and other items that the player could pick up. For an inexperienced player, this is nonsensical and not cued by the representation: Only the trained player knowing the conventions of the game genre would understand it” (179).



## Chapter 4

### Multiliteracies: Multimodality and Social Practices in *World of Goo*

I recently taught a first-year seminar course with a focus on video games, and during a discussion of gaming rhetoric, one student objected to the idea that games were trying to rhetorically persuade him of anything. He responded, “If we weren’t taking this course, we wouldn’t be looking for this stuff.” This, I believe, sums up the importance of incorporating video games in English pedagogy, specifically to look at how “this stuff” is affecting players insidiously. In other words, scholars and players should be “looking for this stuff,” or looking for the systems created by texts and how those systems are used to persuade them. In order to see how the same rhetorical and social forces are at work in other texts and contexts, students can examine the storytelling and rhetorical persuasion of game texts. However, in this chapter, I advocate for the study of video gaming, and particularly *World of Goo*, as multiliterate activity, with an emphasis on the social contexts of gaming and how video games are social practices (in addition to rhetorical and storytelling practices). The New London Group’s concept of “Multiliteracies” provides a way of discussing texts that is particularly suited to video games, since it emphasizes multimodality and complex meaning-making through combinations of images, sound, and text, as well as the social practices and contexts that surround literate practices. Using multiliteracies, English scholars can help students identify the multisemiotic nature of all texts and the social construction of their “reading” and interpretation of them. By examining the “design grammar(s)” of a game like *World of*

*Goo* and the complex literacy practices involved in it, instructors and students can create conditions for critical change. Making these complex forces explicit for students can create possibilities for “transformative” design and metalevel understanding of textual construction and use, in addition to students’ own literacy practices in other modes.

Multiliteracies and New Literacy Studies build on the concepts of narrative and reader-response criticism I’ve discussed earlier, as Louise Rosenblatt describes her view of future “collaborative educational methods,” which “would include spoken and written interchange among students, the development of metalinguistic insight into their own and others’ linguistic processes, and the building of critical criteria” (“On the (Pendulum-) Swinging Eighties” 297). Certainly, these are some of the primary practices of multiliteracies theory and pedagogy, and “metalinguistic insight” is a vital concept for how multiliteracies theory and pedagogy can show how video games work as systems which players explore within their gameplay. First, however, I will discuss the move toward New Literacy Studies and a sociocontextual view of literacy learning, which will provide a background for a multiliteracies theory of video game literacy practices.

## **New Literacy vs. Old: Why New Literacy Studies?**

In so-called “Old Literacy” models, students learn distinct “skills” that can be applied generally or acontextually. Brian Street makes the distinction between New and Old Literacy, as he describes: “the implications of the New Literacy Studies for pedagogy are that we need to move beyond teaching children about the technical features of language ‘functions’ and help them instead towards awareness of the socially and ideologically constructed nature of the specific forms we inhabit and use at given times”

(*Social Literacies* 6). Street advocates instruction that deals with social and contextual uses of language, rather than the traditional “skills and drills” or “transmission” approach to language learning. Street’s description of the “autonomous” model of literacy is echoed by James Paul Gee, who defines it as “the claim that literacy (or schooling for that matter) has cognitive effects apart from the context in which it exists and the uses to which it is put in a given culture” (*Social Linguistics* 57). The autonomous model is an “Old Literacy” model because it assumes that simply teaching the components of the English language will lead to a full and productive ability to use it in any social or contextual circumstance. The concept of autonomous literacy creates difficulties for students who come from different backgrounds with their own set of social cues, as Street explains how the rhetoric of the autonomous model “demeans those adults who do have literacy difficulties and also because it raises false expectations of what they and their society can expect once they do improve literacy skills” (*Social Literacies* 14).<sup>1</sup> Rather than setting learners up for a fall, New Literacy scholars advocate the cultural basis for literacy, rather than an unquestioned and assumed language proficiency devoid of context.

Street also identifies the power involved in imposing a view of literacy on groups of people who lie outside the dominant culture, as the dominant group (or the group of power) is the group that determines the “normal” use of language (Street, *Social Literacies* 30; “What’s New” 77; Mao 85). For Street, discussing literacies in relation to the dominant culture would make the social structures involved in maintaining hegemonic power more transparent for students, thus giving them greater autonomy to critique, ask questions, and challenge dominant literacies: “An approach that sees literacy



as critical social practice would make explicit from the outset both the assumptions and the power relations on which those models of literacy are based” (Street, *Social Literacies* 141). (See also Gee’s discussion of ideology in literacy: *Social Linguistics* ix, 21, 22). In the case of video games, there is already an apparent power gap for students who like to play or study them. In many cases, a discussion of the importance of gaming is usually a way to assert the importance of the medium as an art form—a defense of gaming as something more than pulpy entertainment. Most gamers are keenly aware that their game-based literacies are not valued by the academy, so issues of power and authority come into play from the start. English educators could certainly use this issue as a starting point for asking students to interrogate power relations in their cultural context, moving slowly toward an interrogation of power imbricated within gaming texts themselves.

Gee makes a distinction between literacy *acquisition* and literacy *learning*, which he exemplifies in his discussion of a young girl using African American Vernacular English: “the child cannot be said to have failed to have acquired English *because* she came from an impoverished home, since she *has*, in fact, acquired English” (*Social Linguistics* 11). For Gee, the student’s seemingly “failed” acquisition of the dominant language is not due to a fault in the young girl’s faculties (the implicitly racist argument often used for minority students), but is instead due to our conception of literacy as the responsibility of the individual student rather than the social and institutional contexts that makes her acquisition of literacy deficient (*Social Linguistics* 22). While this is often the case with minority students or students with language backgrounds that are not valued by the academy, it also applies to literacies that are valuable to students outside of school

but which may not have value within schools. This is the case with video game literacies as well, since playing video games is usually not viewed as rigorous activity within most academic contexts. Gee discusses the way schools often do not allow students to acquire literacy (which Gee defines as “fluent control or mastery of a secondary Discourse”), especially the dominant literacy of power and success (*Social Linguistics* 144). Instead, students who have already acquired dominant literacies are allowed to use them in school to advance, while those who have not are not given opportunities to acquire it in context. For instance, a student growing up today with a computer in the home is vastly more prepared for schooling than a student without a home computer. Thus, while students who play video games acquire literacies, those particular literacies remain undervalued in the face of autonomous models of literacy in schools.

Etienne Wenger, a researcher specializing in workplace literacies, advocates the need for students to have more practice opportunities, where learners do not simply recite information that is of no use within their social world, but rather learners must use and act on information vital to participation within it. Learning, then, must be tied directly to the context in which the literacy is to be used, which is not necessarily the way schools operate. Instead, Wenger describes the way learning takes place within a “community of practice”: “the primary focus of this theory is on learning as social participation. Participation here refers not just to local events of engagement in certain activities with certain people, but to a more encompassing process of being active participants in the *practices* of social communities and constructing *identities* in relation to these communities” (4). Players of video games will usually be active in the social practices surrounding gaming, either online or with other players. However, examining video

games as constructed narrative texts or rhetorical expression require those same players to adopt different identities to fit in with the academic practices of the critical community (in addition to the “gaming identities” they may already adopt). By including video games in English Studies (within the context of New Literacy Studies), students can help create and develop these “interpretive communities,” allowing them to examine video games within English studies using tools from English theory and pedagogy, such as close reading, explication, textual analysis, and rhetorical analysis.

Gee makes a similar claim about the need for a social view of learning in *What Video Games Have to Teach Us about Learning and Literacy*, as he describes how video games create learning opportunities by immersing players in a world that requires certain literacy practices to move forward. Players must “read” the visual, spatial, aural, and procedural cues in particular ways according to the context: “Since reading and thinking are social achievements connected to social groups, we can all read and think in different ways when we read and think as members (or as if we are members) of different groups” (Gee, *What Video Games* 3). In this way, video gamers will react to visual cues (such as a door that is a different color, light leading in a certain direction, or a destructible crate that might hold items) in a way that fits their community of practice, while those outside the community might not recognize such video game conventions. English students examining video games as texts will be required to examine them in a way that is vastly different from playing a game with friends, for instance. This is not to “take their fun away,” in the sense of ruining video games for students, but rather to ask them to play them within different contexts to question their “common sense” views of video games.

Multiliteracies theory then unsettles this common sense to ask critical questions, creating more depth and breadth of understanding about gaming literacy practices.

Gee describes the learning involved in video gaming and extrapolates his concept to apply to all learning in particular ways: “Three things, then, are involved in active learning: *experiencing* the world in new ways, forming new *affiliations*, and *preparation* for future learning” (*What Video Games* 323). This kind of learning assumes active participants will be involved with others in a community of practice to learn concepts that will allow them to later learn others. Thus, while students in schools may be given the bare concepts or terminology for the course, that terminology will not be relevant unless it is placed into a social context that requires application: “If all kids have in school are verbal understandings and not situated ones, then, while some of them may pass paper-and-pencil tests, few of them will be able to solve real problems in the world” (Gee, “Foreword” x). Gee and other New Literacy scholars then see literacy as not simply a singular skill that is further enhanced in school, but rather as an expansion of students’ repertoires to include other literacy practices such as listening, filming, or in this case, playing video games — as a portfolio of different situated literacies. In addition, the focus in New Literacy Studies is on a social and contextual theory of literacy, where gaming literacy, therefore, might entail students playing and viewing games as critics, looking at them with an eye toward their design and structure, and transforming meaning or possibly changing social futures, as I will discuss later. Rather than creating a separate “gaming literacy” term, I turn to the New London Group’s concept of Multiliteracies in order to account for the complex and multimodal literacy practices involved in gaming and the contexts surrounding them.

## Multimodality, Multiliteracies, and Video Games

Why Multiliteracies theory? The reason I advocate using the New London Group's concept of multiliteracies for analyzing video games is twofold: first, the theory takes into account the multiple modes of meaning involved in literacy—acknowledging and, more importantly, *valuing* the way literate, meaning-making practices now take place in more arenas than just text (in the traditional sense of printed text). Instead, students are involved in complex blends of aural, filmic, alphabetic and gaming texts for specific literacy practices. As I've mentioned earlier, "text" in this theory can be far more multimodal than traditional literacy models allow, allowing for more medium-specific meanings that are embedded into texts (Fairclough 162). Indeed, different modalities introduce different literacies and literate practices, as evidenced by my earlier difficulty in "translating" a video game into text. The use of video games as texts in an English course thus requires a move beyond print-based models of literacy instruction. The second reason for my adoption of multiliteracies theory into my framework is that is geared toward social change and transformation, advocating that "literacy educators and students must see themselves as active participants in social change; as learners and students who can be active designers – makers – of social futures" (New London Group 7). Thus far, I have described how students can examine the way gaming texts are constructed to tell stories, persuade them rhetorically, and how they (and the experience of playing) create meanings. Now, I turn to the idea that students can create social change by transforming the social structures that produce and set up the consumption of video games.

The incorporation of video games in the English curriculum is not an attempt to pander to students' gaming experiences or their interest in them, but rather to view that interest and experience as an "asset," as a way of adding video games as another part of students' critical and literate repertoires. As the New London Group notes, an important component for ourselves as educators is that we should work to build criticality into our classrooms: "our role as teachers is not simply to be technocrats. It is not our job to produce docile, compliant workers. Students need also to develop the capacity to speak up, to negotiate, and to be able to engage critically with conditions of their working lives" (13). Likewise, asking students to engage critically with what they consume in their personal lives is similarly necessary for their own learning and engagement with other aspects of their lives. If students can examine the systems and networks of power in their personal lives (through engagement with pop culture texts like video games), they can also work to transform issues of power and inequality in their lives as workers and citizens as well. Gaming then, becomes a different way of viewing the world, and as the New London Group notes: "When learners juxtapose different languages, discourses, styles, and approaches, they gain substantively in metacognitive and metalinguistic abilities and in their ability to reflect critically on complex systems and their interactions" (15). By using video games in their courses, English educators ask students to juxtapose multiple modes of meaning and ways of learning, creating opportunities for students to develop criticality and reflection on other modes and learning styles. Understanding the structure of a video game can help students understand the structure of a novel, a corporation, or a system that similarly constrains meaning.

As a gaming discourse, *World of Goo* is a procedural expression that requires players to learn its “language” and style, as I’ve discussed earlier. The game’s artwork and physics-based puzzle mechanics are complex systems that players must learn, and this learning creates opportunities for viewing the world differently. For instance, the game creates a number of patterns for its puzzles (as well as the iconographic patterns, such as the pipe-shaped destination for the goo in each level): levers that appear in particular levels signal players that they will need to be manipulated in some way, gears and wheels hinder rather than help the goo in their goals. All of these aspects are learned by players and require application in complex blends. For instance, the level “The Red Carpet – get ready for the close-up” requires players to build upwards with goo balls until the structure built weighs enough to push down on a pressure plate controlling a lever that pushes down onto the goo structure, crushing them below. This then allows the red “beauty” goo to roll to the right side of the stage toward the goal. However, once the ball rolls to the right, it will fall down a crevasse unless players build a makeshift safety net or cradle for the beauty ball. This cradle will allow the ball to roll to the right and upwards to be broken up into smaller pieces that can fit into the pipe above the crevasse. The narrative and rhetorical aspects of the level show that the white albino goo balls (who are among the most ancient and rare of goo balls, as discussed earlier) are helping the corporation’s machine to roll out their newest product, and in choosing refined “beauty” goo over other kinds, the lever crushes the white balls after their task is complete—a play on the exclusivity of “beauty” and our fascination with it in our world. Once again, the player “can’t stop progress” and therefore must mercilessly destroy goo to proceed (see Figures 4.1 and 4.2).



Figures 4.1 and 4.2: The white goo balls push a pressure plate below, crushing themselves in the process  
(*World of Goo*).

However, also unique here are the “metacognitive” and “metalinguistic” abilities required to complete the level. Rather than being immersed in the story or in the building of the structures, players must pull back and examine what will happen to the beauty goo after it falls toward the crevasse. The building of a cradle or safety net requires planning and forethought, rather than immediate action. As such, the game demonstrates how video games like *World of Goo* can ask players to think on a “meta” level about the game and its design. Without doing so, the beauty goo falls. In turn, the metalevel awareness informs narrative interpretation and understanding of the rhetorical persuasion involved. Each aspect, story, rhetoric, and literacy, works to reinforce the other.

Another essential aspect of the New London Group’s concept of multiliteracies is that it accounts for both consumption and production of text as literate practice, gathering these ideas into the concept of “Design”: “We propose to treat any semiotic activity, including using language to produce or consume texts, as a matter of Design involving three elements: Available Designs, Designing, and The Redesigned” (20). Such a theory implies that all texts are somehow connected, and that each text is built on the last. This creates a massive intertextual chain, a seemingly never-ending cycle of transforming *Available Designs* (or available patterns of meaning, including grammar and orders of



discourse), *Designing* (or “reading” and “writing” in the broad sense, including viewing images, listening to aural texts, or playing video games), and *creating the Redesigned* (the meaning formed, which is never a “transmission” or the same as the original meaning) (New London Group 20-23). In the case of a video game, players may or may not have an awareness of the Available Designs of other video games (past experiences with games are the obvious means of acquiring them). Using whatever knowledge of the available designs they may have, players then Design the game by playing it according to their particular knowledge, skills, and interests. The Redesigned is created during a play experience (or Design), and the meaning created is specific and unique to the individual player and the socio-cultural context surrounding that play experience. For instance, a gamer encountering *World of Goo* for the first time in their home would play it much differently than an experienced player encountering it in a speed tournament on a college campus. The Redesigned is far different in each context, as is the Design of the text, and the Available Designs used to create it.

In addition to accounting for the multiple modes of meaning available in games, a multiliteracies view of semiosis relies heavily on the recombination of texts into new texts (intertexts), which seems to go against the deeply held view of originality in English studies. However, the concept of intertextuality as a component of multiliteracies has a number of implications:

- 1) it is impossible to create a text without other texts (and therefore other patterns of meaning or Available Designs to inherit – See Kress, *Literacy in the New Media Age* 6);

- 2) textual production is always social, since each text is produced and consumed in its own social and cultural context (Fairclough 173-4);
- 3) all “Redesigned” texts become new “available designs” for meaning making (New London Group 23).<sup>2</sup>

In the case of the *World of Goo* examples I mentioned above, the player encountering the game for the first time will attempt to understand it based on other texts he or she may have seen or played in the past, and likewise the Redesigned or meaning created can become a new Available Design for that player to use in other Designs of texts – in other words, the player may have never played a game like *World of Goo* before, but the play experience opens up possibilities for using that knowledge to play other games. For instance, the action game *Batman: Arkham Asylum* simultaneously blends unique gameplay elements from three separate games: *Metroid Prime* (exploration and discovery of items to unlock new areas), *Tom Clancy’s Splinter Cell* (sneaking and espionage), and *Assassin’s Creed* (fighting multiple enemies at once). The blend of these three elements creates a unique combination, but it nevertheless uses Available Designs (in the form of other games) to create the text. Players with experience playing the Batman game’s intertexts will bring a different play experience, or Design, to this particular text. This is the pattern of all literate activities, as one reading Shakespeare for the first time will not have the Available Designs (or conventions, tropes, and language) required to read it the same way as a Shakespeare scholar. The notion of Design as a basis for literate activity fits well in describing the literate practices of gaming, since the need to *play* games within a course further complicates the notion of “writing” in print-based literacy models. Is gaming “writing”? Certainly, in the multiliteracies classroom, play is a productive

activity, and I would argue that while it is not the same as writing, it is also not less than writing on a literacy level.

English scholars need to develop a means of discussing the complex literate practices within gaming, in order to help them in Design (whether creating texts or consuming them) and transformation of those practices; the first step is to develop a “metalanguage,” or a “language for talking about language, images, texts and meaning-making interactions” (New London Group 24). Gee discusses the need for determining the “design grammars” of texts,” which involve both internal grammars of construction and content and external grammars of use in society (*What Video Games* 30). The idea of design grammar deals with explicit rules about usage, which offers opportunities for analysis and production that aid in describing what the available design of the game is; once the design grammar is determined, it can be redesigned and transformed. This also includes a critical component—if students are able to determine the internal structures of disparate texts (whether in video games, films, or written texts) and the external rules of their use, they might be able to analyze or recombine them in transformative ways. Most students, especially those interested in gaming, are quite skilled in the “Available Designs” of video games. They have acquired the discourse of video game playing, but examination and analysis of gaming texts within an English course is aimed toward developing an explicit metalanguage for video game designs. Thus, students are situated as game players and critics, and they receive overt instruction by playing and analyzing games in order to develop a metalanguage. The metalanguage asks students within a literacy course about how games are constructed and used and how that design grammar “works” on players: “the metalanguage of design that we presented . . . is more in the

nature of a series of critical questions with which to locate variations in meaning-form in relation to variations in meaning-function” (Cope and Kalantzis, “Designs for Social Futures” 234). Therefore, metalanguage emerges from asking students to analyze and critique the way the game is structured as narrative text and its inherently rhetorical nature. Players then use multiliterate practices in order to play the game, which involves them directly in the game system and puts that metalanguage to work in context.

Because metalanguage comes from relating form to function in the text, my earlier discussions of narratology, film narrative, reader-response, rhetorical narrative criticism, and procedural rhetoric are aimed toward asking students critical questions about meanings based on form and the function they perform in the text. As I’ve described, the form of a level in *World of Goo* can give players narrative information (the goo balls are used by the corporation to produce “beauty”), all the while persuading them toward a certain point of view (that we often idolize beauty at the expense of others). At the same time, form requires them to look at the level as a system (which involves metacognitive awareness of the rules and available options available within it). In other words, the metalanguage of Design developed by discussing these concepts and applying them to texts creates a specialized framework for looking at video games, films, or written texts with an eye toward their form and function and how meanings are created from the interaction. In addition to the form relating to the structure of a level or of a game as a whole, the issue of how that game fits into a social or cultural context (or what Gee calls the “external design grammar” of use in society) is an important one. While the analysis of a game’s internal design grammar is fruitful in creating a metalanguage of

Design, multiliteracies theory also makes important contributions toward understanding how playing a game like *World of Goo* is also a *social practice*.

## Playing *World of Goo*: A Social Practice

The concept of *World of Goo* as a social practice brings to mind two meanings, the first is that it is something in which one participates with other players, and the second is that the game is something one learns by doing through repetition and training. Indeed, this second meaning is fairly explicit and natural to most—video games involve learning to control in-game characters using devices like gamepads or computer mice. Players who are just now entering the video game world during the most recent console cycle (the Playstation 3, Xbox 360, and Nintendo Wii) will be greeted with controllers that contain up to 14 unique buttons and two joysticks. Learning to use such complex devices requires practice in its most explicit meaning. Likewise, even using a computer mouse to play *World of Goo* requires familiarity with computer systems. The first meaning of “practice,” in which players are involved with others in some way during gameplay is somewhat more complex, but also more important theoretically.

While players can literally play with others either in person or online, the meaning of social practice as described by the New London Group implies something more about how society and culture affect the game and how players play. In “Designs for social futures,” Bill Cope and Mary Kalantzis describe how culture infuses all Design practices: “Design is a process in which the individual and culture are inseparable. . . .Other’s interests have already been expressed through Designings that have resulted in the Redesigned, and these, in turn, become Available Designs for the individual in their own

meaning-making. Culture is no more and no less than the accumulated and continuing expression of agency; of Designing” (203). Playing *World of Goo* is, in this way, a cultural practice in the sense that by Designing, players add to the continuing chain or web of culture. The gameplay involves taking in and assimilating others’ expressions based on previous Available Designs (as Bogost describes when he says that video games are rhetorical expression), then Redesigning the text according to their interests, continuing the cycle. This kind of continuous transformation of cultural meaning is a way of describing video game playing as a social practice, in that it recycles culture. The metaphor of recycling seems appropriate, since the way cultural production continues is not through repetition, but through change: “The breadth, complexity and richness of the available meaning-making resources is such that representation is never simply a matter of reproduction. Rather, it is a matter of transformation; of reconstruing meaning in a way which always adds something to the range of representational resources” (Cope and Kalantzis 204). As I’ve mentioned, each play experience is unique, and the myriad choices and actions taken by players create a particular reading of the text. In the case of gaming, the concept that meaning is never simply reproduced or transmitted is much more explicit – no two players may play the same way. However, as English scholars this viewpoint also illuminates the fact that the reading of any text is similarly unique—readers may skip over areas that are confusing, ignore words they may not know, or relish specific passages over others. Thus, all texts, even written ones, are similarly social and cultural; their meanings are transformed through Design.

Because gaming texts like *World of Goo* offer such possibilities for transformed meaning, the question becomes, what does the New London Group mean by

“transformation”? As Cope and Kalantzis describe, transformation can be thought of as a continuum of creativity: “Some Designs, or transformations, are more in the nature of cultural copies and are thus more predictable, more passively compliant and more neatly within conventional cultural boundaries. Others are more creative, more hybrid and complex in their cultural sources, and more reflexively conscious of their own replication of, or divergence from, their cultural and representational roots” (205). In creating a game like *World of Goo*, the developers of the game are keenly aware that they are doing something unique in creating a narrative-based puzzle game. Players of the game, however, are certainly doing something less creative and unique. In spite of this fact, this is not to say that all gameplay is a cultural copy. For instance, players who work hard to save every goo ball, as well as those seeking to complete the levels as quickly as possible, are transforming the game’s meaning, since these two choices are unnecessary to complete the game’s story. Most play experiences in first-person shooter video games might be considered less creative and more along the lines of “cultural copies” than a game like *World of Goo*. In other words, players of shooter games will often not Design in culturally transformative ways—these games simply reproduce patterns of violence and war as themes for conflict. If a problem arises in these games, shooting is often the only recourse. (However, some games that are lauded critically, like *Half-Life 2*, rely less on shooting to solve problems.)

Why then, should we view games in this way, as having levels of transformation possibilities? The issue is that we, as audiences (and consumers) of all kinds of texts, are the ones who decide what kinds of games we will play and value: “we are all deeply responsible for the immediate consequences of our Designing and, in a larger sense, our

individual and collective futures” (Cope and Kalantzis 205). Criticisms of gaming that decry their violent and misogynistic content are not wrong. Instead, they bring up a valid point about the kinds of texts we, as players and as citizens, create and consume.

Advocating for change in game designs is part of the transformation of meaning implied in the concept of Design, but as Cope and Kalantzis point out, the possibility also exists that games and other texts can become far worse in these respects: “there is also change in a positive and constructive sense, and there are changes in a myriad of miserable, exploitative, and humanity-denying senses” (205). According to Cope and Kalantzis, the real place where this kind of transformation comes is from the “lifeworld,” a concept originally developed by Jurgen Habermas, who describes the lifeworld as “the intuitively present, in this sense familiar and transparent, and at the same time vast and incalculable web of presuppositions that have to be satisfied if an actual utterance is to be at all meaningful, that is, valid or invalid. . . . The lifeworld forms the indirect context of what is said, discussed, addressed in a situation” (qtd. in Brookfield 238). The lifeworld is inseparable from our utterances and, I would argue, our Design experiences with texts. What we say is informed by the “presuppositions” that are held by our lifeworlds. Our individual backgrounds and experiences help to shape it, and our future utterances become informed by these contextual elements. Thus, if a person’s lifeworld is changed through Design and creating the Redesigned, then this is how we as instructors can “differentiate between transformation in the sense of cultural reproduction and transformation in the sense of creative change” (Cope and Kalantzis 206). If the game’s meanings seem to fit with students’ lifeworlds, then little or no change is present. If the



game challenges students' common sense conception of the world, or the lifeworld, then there is some degree of creative change possible.

The concept of the lifeworld and transformation fits perfectly with a number of concepts I've discussed within the scope of this dissertation. In particular, the notion of rhetorical narrative criticism implies that texts not only use but can also affect players' "judgments and emotions, our desires, hopes, expectations, satisfactions, and disappointments" (Phelan, *Experiencing Fiction* 5). These concepts are very much encapsulated in the notion of a "lifeworld," given that our readerly (and playerly) judgments about what should or will happen in texts and our reaction to them are largely culturally-based (see also Cope and Kalantzis 228). For instance, if a culture prizes conformity and adhering to tradition, those values will be expected to come through a text when played, viewed, read, or interpreted. As Cope and Kalantzis describe, any social change or transformation through literate practices (as in this case with playing *World of Goo*) comes first through the lifeworld, since it is the "raw material of culture; a shared set of assumptions about what is both practically achievable or good in the world, as well as what is practically useless or bad in the world" (206). When players Design in their literate practices with gaming, they therefore Design their society and culture, transforming either with a view toward positive social change that works toward the "good," or reproduction of culture that maintains inequalities and is "bad" according to their criteria. The key is that students encounter "difference," different viewpoints, ways of thinking, or ways of understanding the world, which are "the phenomena; the first impressions, the immediate appearance, of lifeworlds" (Cope and Kalantzis 208). In essence, asking students to examine video games in ways that are different from their

usual context can cause them to confront difference, in that they must suddenly make the familiar strange and evaluate it according to their lifeworlds. By confronting students with different viewpoints, they can create new meanings or strengthen their positions on particular issues or concepts, which in turn may lead to transformative change in society.

## **Multiliteracies Pedagogy: Moving Students Away from Their Lifeworlds**

In order to “make the familiar strange,” Multiliteracies pedagogy provides a way of asking critical questions using four distinct elements: Situated Practice, Overt Instruction, Critical Framing, and Transformed Practice. All of these elements work simultaneously and in conjunction with each other, rather than as separate concepts or chronological stages. The “datum point” for this pedagogy is the lifeworld itself, and this is where Situated Practice begins as well. Situated Practice is defined by the New London Group as a context where “teachers guide a community of learners as ‘masters’ of practice” (32). In the case of video games, a teacher in the context of an integrated media course will be initially involved in guiding students as players, much in the same way that a literature or writing course will guide students as readers and writers, or guiding viewers in a film course. As I’ve stated earlier, many students will be already immersed in the Available Designs of games and therefore be “masters” of the practice, and some will not. However, the important aspect is that all students are involved in the same practice and can use others’ “mastery” of the game, either from the instructor or other students, to learn the practice. Once all students are involved in the practice of the game, Overt Instruction comes into play in classroom practices that create “active interventions

on the part of the teacher and other experts that scaffold learning activities; that focus the learner on the important features of their experiences and activities within the community of learners; and that allow the learner to gain explicit information at times when it can most usefully organise and guide practice, building on and recruiting what the learner already knows and has accomplished” (New London Group 33). In many ways, my argument for the importance of narratology and reader-response criticism fit this concept, since I provide a vocabulary to give explicit information to build knowledge. In other words, an understanding of game *mise-en-scène* goes deeper than simply playing the game, but it can also help in interpreting and guiding the practice of game playing and analysis.

Critical Framing is another component of Multiliteracies pedagogy which, when combined with Overt Instruction, is meant to “extend students’ cultural and representational horizons beyond where they already are” (Cope and Kalantzis 2007). This is the concept of “making the familiar strange” which I described earlier, where the pedagogical practice is meant to “help learners frame their growing mastery in practice (from Situated Practice) and conscious control and understanding (from Overt Instruction) in relation to the historical, social, cultural, political, ideological, and value-centred relations of particular systems of knowledge and social practice. Here, crucially, the teacher must help learners to denaturalise and make strange again what they have learned and mastered” (New London Group 34). Once again, this kind of pedagogical practice can be related to the concepts of rhetorical narrative criticism, reader-response, and procedural rhetoric described earlier in this text. Students who apply these concepts to games within particular contexts can see rhetorical forces at work in the games they

play, in particular the persuasive arguments that the game's story or characters are making about social or cultural issues. For example, the game *Resident Evil 4* mentioned earlier is imbricated specifically in post 9-11 contexts of global terrorism, immigration, and war. The western game *Red Dead Redemption* tells a story of the death of the "Old West," where the "freedom" of the frontier is being constrained and modernized by the government, echoing fears and discussions in our current political climate. *World of Goo* is similarly involved in such contexts, specifically those surrounding the consumption of natural resources, corporate power, consumerism, and information technology. Without Critical Framing, such issues could remain under the surface, leaving students to learn only the specific details of the gameplay or system, rather than the contexts for that system in the larger world.

Asking students to examine issues of power, class, racism, and other critical questions can offer opportunities for students to step outside of their lifeworld (where *World of Goo* may just be a childish puzzle video game) to see games from a different perspective (as a text that is asking critical questions about our society and human nature). The need for Critical Framing comes from the fact that both Situated Practice and Overt Instruction are simply not enough in order to create change—as the New London Group Points out, “neither immersion in Situated Practices within communities of learners, nor Overt Instruction . . . necessarily gives rise to this sort of critical understanding or cultural understanding. In fact, both immersion and many sorts of Overt Instruction are notorious as socialising agents that can render learners quite uncritical and unconscious of the cultural locatedness of meanings and practices” (32). Students can certainly be immersed in a practice and receive Overt Instruction that adds to their

understanding and accomplishment of that practice, but without a critical component that asks questions about how that practice is embedded in social, political, ideological, or historical contexts, they will may be able to reflect on what makes that practice good, important, or valuable. Finally, students can take their experiences from all three of these pedagogical practices (Situated Practice, Overt Instruction, and Critical Framing) “back into the lifeworld in the form of Transformed Practice. This also means that the lifeworld is the datum point for the process of transformation that is the purpose of the education” (Cope and Kalantzis 207). Thus, Transformed Practice asks that students apply the newfound depth (through Overt Instruction) and breadth (through Critical Framing) of information back into Situated Practice, hopefully effecting change in how that practice occurs as a result.

### **“You appear to be incompatible with: THE WORLD”**

*I ignite a group of flammable goo balls shaped as a giant “Z,” which causes a giant gun to be pointed in the sky. A crowd of crudely drawn human characters watches in awe as the gun shoots a bright green laser into the sky. The laser creates a large square shape in the heavens, and then begins falling back to earth toward the crowd. “What is it?” one of them asks. Then it descends on the world, enveloping the world in a large green cube. A computer terminal pops on screen, congratulating me because “World of Goo is now 3D.” A warning message then appears in order to tell me that I “appear to be incompatible with: THE WORLD.” I’m told to seek “tech support” in the next chapter, called “The Information Superhighway.”*

In order to demonstrate the four components of Multiliteracies pedagogy, I turn to the next section of *World of Goo*. Once the player has helped the World of Goo Corporation open their factory and create “Product Z,” the product turns the goo world into a digital world of green and black “sweet free flowing information.” The player is told that “The Information Superhighway” was “abandoned a long time ago,” and the goo balls are now green balls of information, which can be flung or launched across divides, rather than requiring links to other goo balls. This is a marked change in the game rules as players have encountered them thus far—the gameplay has changed quite drastically. Players can adjust after a few moments, and in terms of studying this particular game, the Overt Instruction discussed thus far as narratology and narrative film theory would add insight into the construction of this particular level and its place in the story. This chapter takes place in the “winter” section of the story, a time of death, decay, and hibernation. The cutscene shows the launch of “Product Z” as it descends on the people below, and the world itself is trapped by the green cube of information (see Figure 4.3).



Figure 4.3: The World of Goo “trapped” in 3-D (*World of Goo*).

The metaphor here is not exactly subtle, but it gets the point across—this “product launch” is not a positive thing, nor is the transition from 2-D to 3-D (a possible in-joke about the prevalence of 3-D games like first-person shooters over video games that have a two-dimensional perspective, like this one). The *mise-en-scène* indicates that this is certainly a bad thing, as the dystopic beige color contrasted with bright electric green

creates an ugly mix. A later level in this chapter tells the player that they can “tighten up the graphics” and have up to “256 stunning colors,” but when the player does improve the graphics, they remain the same dystopic beige of Chapter 2, when the factory is initially created (see Figure 4.4 below).

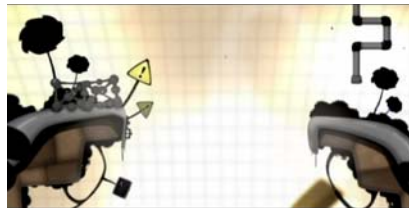


Figure 4.4: While technologically superior, the “Information Superhighway” remains post-apocalyptic beige (*World of Goo*).

The player is also given story or fabula information, indicating that the transition from 2D to 3D and the encasement of the world within “Product Z” happened long ago, where there was once “free flowing information.” All of this points to the notion that the “Information Superhighway” is no longer used, and that information is somehow enslaved. In an integrated media course, the use of Overt Instruction then adds depth into the construction of the game for students, since it details how the game uses narrative style and a diegetic world to create its story. These concepts are part of creating a metalanguage for analysis of this video game—the terminology provides new meanings and insights.

The use of reader-response and rhetorical narrative criticism in a discussion of *World of Goo* are part of the pedagogical practice of Critical Framing, especially since these theories highlight the contexts of the game and require players to relate their experiences, values, and judgments with those of the game system. For example, another level within Chapter 4, called “Alice and Bob and the Third Party – somebody is

listening,” demonstrates the notion of the narrative as rhetoric. In this case, the player encounters a cascading tower that has two human characters at the top – Bob and Alice (who each have Internet screen names) (see Figure 4.5 below). Green “information” goo moves right to left from Alice to Bob, and the player must build a tower of blocks in order to capture the goo balls and allow them to flow down the cascade (see Figure 4.6):



Figures 4.5 and 4.6: Bob and Alice chat online, while the player must “eavesdrop” and capture information (*World of Goo*).

A sign below Alice reads: “An old electronic surveillance system! / These were built a long time ago / ... to monitor communication between Highway Bandits. / But it was hard to know who's a bandit and who's not. / It's probably best to monitor everyone just to be safe. I wonder if it still works? / - the Virtual Sign Painter is Listening.” This level, like others in the game, has a multiple layers of meaning. On the surface (narrative level), the player is helping to capture goo balls for the corporation in order to get them into the pipe below, thus helping the balls move from one area to the next. These two virtual human characters are remnants from when users actually used the Information Superhighway. However, on a deeper (rhetorical narrative) level, the player (who has most likely chatted online or used the Internet) receives an in-joke about Internet surveillance and online privacy. Since the player appears to be working for the World of Goo Corporation, the player is the one involved in the surveillance in this case, literally placing a barrier between two characters so that they cannot interact. Thus, the player is left to determine



how he or she will internalize this level – is it humorous? Is it “just the way things are online?” Is this a veiled argument about network neutrality and the need for a “corporation-free” Internet in order to stop such surveillance? Later in the game, the player controls a viral infection that infects the World of Goo Corporation’s Information Superhighway, ending the corporation’s stranglehold over the goo world. Within the context of our globally-networked world, the issues of net neutrality, Internet privacy, and online security affect how the player will create meaning with this level. Instructors asking critical questions (thereby Critically Framing the game for students) can provide a place for students to encounter difference, contexts that players either reject or internalize into their lifeworlds in order to interpret other aspects of the game narrative (enacting Transformed Practice).

Thus, the use of Multiliteracies pedagogy for helping students undertake textual analysis is meant to foster “four ways of knowing, four ‘takes’ on the meaning or meanings that will provide students with multifaceted ways of reading the world” or in this case, the World of Goo (Kalantzis and Cope 241). Students may be engaged in the Situated Practices of gameplay, and they learn and generate meanings according to their own lifeworlds. Certainly, when most players complete World of Goo by using “MOM,” a giant spam computer, to destroy the World of Goo Corporation, the meanings they generate will come from their own lifeworld. An instructor using Overt Instruction in their pedagogical practices helps students add to those meanings by examining the “underlying system and structure; how meaning is organised, how meaning works” (Kalantzis and Cope 241). The goo balls’ journey (from free natural entities, to cogs in the corporation’s machine, to liberating digital goo balls that poison the system of the

corporation) is illuminated by examining the system of the game that organizes this journey. What reader-response and rhetorical narrative criticism adds is “Critical Framing,” which according to Kalantzis and Cope “interrogates contexts and purposes, adding breadth to one’s perspective on the lifeworld” (241), asking students to examine how their lifeworlds inform meanings and how those meanings would be different depending on the contexts and cultures reading them. All of this inquiry has the aim of Transformed Practice, where students return to Situated Practice with “fresh eyes,” examining the game with newfound lenses of analysis. In other words, once an instructor guides students through the aspects of Multiliteracies pedagogy, the text becomes different for students, in that its meanings become different. As a result, Multiliteracies pedagogy provides a possible way for students to use Transformed Practice to create social and cultural transformation, which leads to a discussion of how to bring criticality to students’ literacy practices.

### **“Portfolio Players”: Thinking Critiquely as Critical Design**

The pedagogy of Multiliteracies therefore points to the need for literacy instruction that goes beyond teaching skills or proficiencies. Three New Literacy scholars describe conceptions of literacy that move toward analysis of systems, and the cultural and social contexts in which they reside. Each of these ideas, as I will describe here, seem to point to a similar idea, of a critical examination of networks, intertextual chains, or systems, and it is this concept that I would like to combine and clarify here. James Paul Gee, in “New people in new worlds: networks, the new capitalism,” outlines the phenomenon of the “portfolio person,” where students “are not defined by fixed

‘essential qualities’, such as ‘intelligence’, ‘a culture’, or ‘a skill’. Rather they are, and must come to see themselves as, an ever changing ‘portfolio’ of rearrangeable skills acquired in their trajectory through ‘project space’ – that is, all the projects they have been in. You are, in this way, your projects” (43, 47). In terms of gaming, I would argue that players are also “portfolio people,” in the sense that they are not just taught to play the games they play (through in-game tutorials and instruction booklets), but rather are given the ability to learn and play all types of games, based on a portfolio of gaming skills acquired through “game space.” Players are, in this way, an amalgam of all of the games they play. Even within games, players acquire a “portfolio” of skills that they must apply in particular contexts.

In the case of *World of Goo*, players must learn not only basic skills in building structures with goo balls but also the many different species of goo balls and structure types in the goo world. Within the game, there are over 24 different kinds of goo balls, and players may have to use as many as 5 different kinds of goo in a single level, each with their own distinct properties. For instance, the level “The Third Wheel – hey look over there!” introduces a new kind of goo, yellow goo, which The Sign Painter describes as such: “A horrible new species of Goo Ball! It's the most vile of all ... / They are extremely rare, and as a result, have become quite lonely. / I think I read online somewhere that when they attach to other Goo Balls, / they sprout dozens of 'love spikes' that can grab onto almost any surface. / And won't let go. / The other Goo Balls try to avoid eye contact.” Reinforcing the idea of the separation of the goo balls, and the corporation’s desire to separate others through technology, the yellow balls are “vile” just because they want to connect to other goo (or so The Sign Painter read online). However,

this goo ball is one of many used in this level. The yellow goo is used to attach to green goo, which is able to attach and reattach to other goo as many times as the player wishes, unlike the standard black or grey goo that can only be attached to other goo once. Pink “beauty” goo is what the player must protect and save until the end of the level, and without it the player fails. In addition to yellow, green, black, and pink goo used in this level, “skull goo” or dead goo balls, are used to protect the pink goo from a thorny surface above. This complex combination of goo balls and an understanding of their use in this particular situation is a perfect example of the “portfolio player,” who has slowly learned each of these properties of particular goo through the game’s use of scaffolding, slowly introducing each new ball and adding to players’ repertoires. In this way, players of video games are, according to Gee, very much suited to the “new capitalism,” since it implies that “people see and define themselves as a flexibly rearrangeable portfolio of the skills, experiences, and achievements they have acquired through their trajectory through project space as team members of communities of practice operating as distributed networks to accomplish a set endeavor which then terminates the community” (“New people in new worlds” 61). Certainly, based on a game like World of Goo, players seem uniquely positioned to work in this way, applying different goo balls and strategies on the fly, according to the problem at hand.

While it would seem that gamers are analogous to workers in the new capitalism, the real problem with this analogy is that it neglects the “metalevel” understanding required to succeed in them. The student described at the start of this chapter (who objects to the study of gaming rhetoric because it isn’t really important without a course to study it, and that it isn’t really noticeable without one) is advocating that the practice

of gaming is enough, but the problem is that players are still being persuaded: “When students or workers are ‘in the zone’ of joint, embodied practice within distributed systems, they create and transform knowledge in practice, not just in theory, and they often pick up values, attitudes, and understandings without much overt thought or, at least, critique” (“New people in new worlds” 53). In other words, players of video games who do not study rhetoric and narrative can certainly play them and succeed in the situated practice and transform knowledge, but the lack of critical thought about what is required for success within the game or meanings created by the game can simply reproduce dominant ideologies and even transform meanings in very negative ways. For instance, if a video game is using standard “terrorists” as enemies, such a construction of “Americans versus terrorists” is hardly critiqued or questioned. As such, in video games (as in films and other media), “terrorist” becomes a catch-all term equatable to “Middle Eastern” or “Islamic.” As such, games continue to replicate the “terrorist” and “anti-terrorist” labels for game characters, neglecting the way they reinforce implied meanings like “Islamic versus American.”

Gee advocates for another level of criticality, which deals with critiquing the system that creates such problems: “our reformed schools with their new cognitivist curricula, are set to produce ‘portfolio’ people who can think ‘critically’, that is, engage in ‘higher order thinking’, but not ‘critiquely’, if I may coin a word, that is, unable to understand and critique systems of power and injustice in a world that they will see as simply economically ‘inevitable’” (“New people in new worlds” 63). This extra level of “critique” is part of the “metalevel” understanding the Multiliteracies pedagogy hopes to achieve, and gaming is an avenue for fostering this kind of critique (since the game itself

is a system that is couched in other social and cultural systems). Through Critical Framing students, can also think critically about the larger system that creates the in-game system. Gunther Kress also describes the need for students to move beyond “critique” and instead advocates for “Design” (in the way that the New London Group describes, but with more of a focus on production) as the most important way for literacy instruction to create critical and social change. For Kress, Design is a way of allowing students to not only critique texts and analyze them, but it is also a way for students to “understand and to have competent control of the representational system and its capacities” (“Design and transformation” 159). This sounds very much like rhetoric, particularly the Aristotelian definition that refers to “all of the available means of persuasion” (qtd. in Atwill and Lauer 30). Even if students have this level of understanding about the representational system involved in textual practice, they may not necessarily have the metalevel understanding of how that system is socially- and culturally-based. Design, therefore, offers a possible way of creating this metalevel understanding through production and consumption.

Instead of critique alone as a way of creating change, Kress offers Design as a continuation of critique for interrogating culture and society:

change, other than as that rare event of creativity, is produced via critique: that is, existing forms, and the social relations of which they are manifestations, are subjected to a distanced, analytical scrutiny to reveal the rules of their constitution. It is now essential to offer a critique of critique, by showing it to be a response to particular circumstances in a particular period, showing it as a

historical phenomenon and not as naturally there. (“Design and transformation” 159-60)

For instance, while students may be able to apply a particular theory to a text (as in this text, with narratology or rhetorical narrative criticism), they also need to understand how that theory is similarly imbricated within a context, whether political, social, or historical. Thus, my use of elements of New Criticism in this dissertation is certainly a result of my educational context—I began my education when a group of professors trained on New Critical methods of literature instruction began their careers. However, for a long time, I assumed this was the only way of looking at texts, the “naturally there” available method of critique. The “naturally there” idea refers to the lifeworld, in that my further education in other theories has changed my lifeworld to include other kinds of methods. Instead of critique alone, Kress argues that students must Design, or produce meanings using other texts as a basis for further production (echoing the notion of Available Designs and Designing): “The task of the critic is to perform analysis on an agenda of someone else’s Design. . . . Design takes the results of past production as the resource for new shaping, and for remaking” (“Design and transformation” 160). In other words, it is not enough for students to simply analyze texts—instead, they must be able to take those analyses and apply them to textual productions of their own, either in a response to those texts or creating texts of their own. While this can be difficult with gaming (since students will probably not be able to create a game of their own at this stage), students can nevertheless design video games that respond to the ones they analyze. If all game design begins with writing, this is certainly a possibility for English courses involving games. Thus, in order for students to have “equitable participation in social, economic and

cultural life” (Kress, “Design and transformation” 161), they must be able to have not only a full understanding of the text at hand, but also an understanding of how to use that text as part of further production and transformation.

In a similar vein to “thinking critically” and Kress’s concept of “Design,” Carmen Luke’s notion of “critical literacy” deals with a multifaceted view of literate practice in use in society, as she describes: “First, it [critical literacy] involves a meta-knowledge of diverse meaning systems and the sociocultural contexts in which they are produced and embedded in everyday life. . . . Second it involves mastery of the technical and analytic skills with which to negotiate those systems in diverse contexts. . . . Third, it involves the capacity to understand how these systems and skills operate in relations and interests of power within and across social institutions” (72). Traditional schooling, it would seem, is very well equipped to help students gain “mastery of the technical and analytic skills” of meaning systems, but it hardly deals with interests of power in social institutions or the sociocultural contexts of meaning systems. These neglected elements are what a Multiliteracies perspective can add: in the context of gaming, it would mean more than just mastery of the games themselves and analysis of their structure (as in narratology), adding details about the interests of power in the social institutions that affect their creation, and the sociocultural contexts of the uses of gaming. All three of these concepts (“thinking critically,” “Design,” and “critical literacy”) seem to point to the same thing: the need to move beyond mere analysis of textual systems and their construction and instead point toward a theory of how texts as systems work within larger social systems and are simultaneously affected by other systems and contexts. Certainly, the text is created by an author or authors who are likewise involved in sociocultural



contexts, and the player is similarly enmeshed in another context, while the game itself becomes another layer of context as well; texts are like boxes, within boxes, within boxes. In combining the ideas of thinking critically, Design, and critical literacy, I could call such an idea Critical Design, or something similar. However, I believe games studies theorist Ian Bogost provides an ample game-specific alternative concept: procedural literacy.

## **A Necessary Addition to Multiliteracies Theory: Procedural Literacy**

Carmen Luke advocates a literacy model that accounts for the way “ideas are connected by lateral links and pathways which exclude other knowledge options; and how the software in fact ‘teaches’ the user-learner certain cognitive mapping strategies” (71). In understanding texts and their meta-level design, Cope and Kalantzis posit six distinct areas of “design,” which include “Linguistic Meaning, Visual Meaning, Audio Meaning, Gestural Meaning, Spatial Meaning, and the Multimodal patterns of meaning that relate the first five modes of meaning to each other” (“Multiliteracies” 7). Certainly, all of these categories fit into the mode of video games, since players can hear spoken language, music, and sound effects, see images and gestures, and negotiate spatial relations in (often) three-dimensional space. However, as an addendum to the multiliteracies taxonomy of meaning (which breaks each of these six categories even further into subcategories, which ramps up the complexity even more), I would add Ian Bogost’s notion of “procedural literacy,” which follows from his concept of procedural rhetoric. In essence, learning procedural rhetorics requires players and critics to undertake specific literacy practices with video games. While some might argue that a

true understanding of the “meta” design of a video game would require knowledge of complex computer programming and language, Bogost argues the opposite. Since the programming codes and structure are hidden from players (through powerful encryption methods used to maintain the game production company’s rights over intellectual property), players are only given the finished gaming text. Players then can “address it from the top down through procedural literacy,” which is a practice of “learning to read processes as a critic. This means playing a videogame or using [a] procedural system with an eye toward identifying and interpreting the rules that drive that system” (Bogost 64). This kind of literacy is immediately involved in seeking metalevel awareness of the systems that underlie game texts, since players are actively looking for those structures in playing the game in the first place. Procedural literacy therefore might bring to multiliteracies theory and pedagogy a way of creating the kinds of critically thinking, Design, and Critical Literacy that Gee, Kress, and Luke describe. Gaming not only invites multimodal literacies, but also multileveled meta-awareness of those literacies during the gameplay.

Bogost delineates between two camps in literacy theory, the behaviorists (who see texts as teaching subject matter) and the constructivists (who see texts as teaching abstract learning principles) (239). Behaviorism assumes that players of a shooting video game are primarily learning to be better shooters, rather than interpreting a fictional text or playing a role within it. Conversely, the constructivists miss the fact that video games do not just teach players to be better learners in an abstract way, as Bogost describes: “constructivism risks total divestiture of the specificity of a *particular* videogame in favor of the general, abstract principles it embodies” (241). James Paul Gee fits in the

constructivist group, since his work in *What Video Games Have to Teach Us about Learning and Literacy* seeks to uncover the abstract and meta-level principles players use when playing video games. However, I agree with Bogost's position on the need to revise Gee's taxonomy, as he notes: "Videogames do not just offer situated meaning and embodied experiences of real and imagined worlds and relationships; they offer meaning and experiences of *particular* worlds and *particular* relationships . . . rhetorical positions are always particular positions; one does not argue or express in the abstract" (241-2). For English scholars, such a view of procedural literacy allows for a fuller discussion of not only the learning principles involved in gaming, but also the specific sociocultural contexts of game narratives and how games are learned and played in those contexts. English scholars can examine how a gaming text helps players learn, but what those players learn is just as important: "The procedurally literate subject is one who recognizes both the specific nature of a material concept *and* the abstract rules that underwrite that concept" (257). Going back to *World of Goo*, the player understands the rules of the game and the concepts required (the goo balls must get to the pipe), but a more procedurally literate player must recognize the more detailed aspects of the game narrative and the contexts surrounding it: environmental devastation, corporate power, consumerism, human progress, and computer technology. A multilayered concept of literacy that includes multiple modes of meaning must include procedurality, since it is another way to make meaning (and as Bogost argues, this meaning does not reside solely in video games).

Video games like *World of Goo* develop players' procedural literacy because they play specifically with an eye toward identifying and interpreting the rules of the system—

systems that either reaffirm or challenge students' beliefs and values (their lifeworlds). Players therefore evaluate these in-game systems according to their understanding of real-world systems, and adding a third layer of complexity, students in an English course surrounding video games and other texts (using Multiliteracies pedagogical practices) can interrogate these systems according to specific cultural moments and contexts. In other words, by examining *World of Goo* in relation to the historical context of its creation, students can gain particular insights about the game system and how it is informed by a particular place and moment. Later, the student hopefully can undertake transformative practices by advocating for systems that promote positive values, or that deal with issues of interest to them. While *World of Goo* is a video game, it is only partly a game, and partly a representation of systems within our culture; as such, the game's rules are the culture's rules as well: procedural literacy is "not just a practice of technical mastery, but one of technical-cultural mastery" and "should not be limited to the *abstract* ability to understand procedural representations of cultural values" (Bogost 245, 246). Certainly, *World of Goo* could be understood and evaluated according to its abstract rules (thus removing all of the *mise-en-scène* and storytelling as well), but a procedurally literate player can examine how its processes tell something about the context of its creation, since they can ask: "What are the rules of the system? / What is the significance of these rules (over other rules)? / What claims about the world do these rules make? / How do I respond to those claims?" (Bogost 258). Implied in these four questions are Multiliteracies pedagogical practices – the first question ("What are the rules of the system?") deals with Situated Practice, learning the game in a way that details its construction. The second question ("What is the significance of these rules?")

demonstrates Overt Instruction, probing deeper into the concepts of the game and creating metalanguage to understand them. The third question (“What claims about the world do these rules make?”) moves toward Critical Framing, asking how the games’ choices are socioculturally embedded. Finally, the last question (“How do I respond to these claims?”) can lead students toward social transformation, since it implies the Transformed Practice of bringing all of that newfound insight back to Situated Practice. In asking these questions, students studying video games in conjunction with other texts can design social futures, deciding what kinds of texts we will have and what kind of a culture will produce and consume them: “When we create videogames, we are making claims about these processes, which ones we celebrate, which ones we ignore, which ones we want to question. When we play these games, we interrogate those claims, we consider them, incorporate them into our lives, and carry them forward into our future experiences” (Bogost 339).

In the next chapter, I describe in detail how we as English instructors can foster this kind of transformed practice through an integrated media course using multiliteracies pedagogical practices. The course would interrogate multiple media, including written texts, films, and video games, in an effort to help students think critically, design, or practice critical literacy. My discussion and analysis of *World of Goo* thus far is meant to demonstrate the possibilities for combining narratology, rhetorical narrative criticism, and multiliteracies perspectives to look at all kinds of texts, encompassing textual meanings as social and contextual meanings, produced by authors, enacted by audiences, and affected by forces surrounding them. Likewise, by interrogating the system of *World of Goo* as text, I hope to show that all texts work similarly. Metaknowledge of how texts

work can only be helpful for students in their future academic, personal, or working lives, since this metaknowledge is about using different perspectives and points of view to create meanings. The final chapter of this dissertation is developed to show how to create the conditions for students to undertake meta-level analyses of texts to transform meanings.

## Chapter 4 Notes

1. This also refers to the idea of the “literacy myth,” which implies that the higher the level of literacy students acquire will translate to financial or social success: “People who take a sociocultural approach to literacy believe that the literacy myth . . . is a myth because literacy in and of itself, abstracted from historical conditions and social practices, has no effects, or at least no predictable effects” (Gee, *Social Linguistics* 42).

2. For more on intertextuality and multimodality, a number of New London Group authors discuss how modern textual analysis and production are self-reflexively intertextual: “Today, the expert is the one who sees and seeks the connection among related pieces of information, not the one who has the bare decontextualised facts. Hence, electronic reading and writing, a sense of intertextual connectivity, relational knowledge, and thinking laterally across associations” (Luke 73)

## Chapter 5

### Using Games to Teach Literacy: A Pedagogical Model for English Courses

In a recent news story about a teacher's use of a video game in a college course, Tom Goldman describes how "A teacher at Wabash College has been able to convince administration to include *Portal* on the required reading list." The point of this article is not that a video game has been included in a course to learn, but that an instructor pulled off the amazing feat of being "able to convince administration" to add the game to their "reading" list, one that "exposes students to poetry, the works of Aristotle, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, and now *Portal* as well." Such an article certainly places the video game as being somewhat outside of the purview of a college course—the texts on the required reading list are therefore "inside," and should certainly be included. However, the article notes how the game is being used particularly to explore issues central to the humanities, such as questions of self and identity related to Erving Goffman's *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. *Portal* begins as a training exercise for the player, who must navigate mazes and puzzles by creating portals in walls and floors, all the while learning that the computer in charge of the training exercise is trying to kill the player (or seems fairly indifferent about whether the player lives or dies.) The player then must pass the clean, clinical exterior of the testing areas (white walls, shiny floors, and stainless steel) and plunge into a dark, rusty, and industrial "backstage" where the computer resides in order to destroy it and escape. The instructor of the first-year seminar course, Michael Abbot, uses this game to demonstrate Goffman's concept of the "backstage machination and



onstage performance" aspect of humanity (Goldman). Using a concept I've described earlier, procedural rhetoric allows the game *Portal* to mount claims about human nature and technology, embedding these concepts in the player's activity of solving problems and navigating environments while discovering the truth about the game's fictional computer enemy. The fact that the player uncovers the "backstage" or true nature of the game's computer (who is not necessarily an enemy at the start of the game) is part of the game system, and the system employed by the game makes a similar argument as Goffman's work.

Looking at the video game in this way requires students to move out of their everyday experience, searching for connections between the text and the game (two kinds of media that produce meaning in very different ways). It is this kind of literacy practice (of comparing and interrogating different kinds of meanings) that is the point of using video games in an English course: giving students an opportunity to practice different kinds of literacies with other media than just text. Students in this course do not simply "understand" Goffman by playing the game, but rather they learn to recognize systems of the game as being similar to the "systems" of identity presented by Goffman. Thus, the students studying the game are required to adopt a certain point of view about texts (using procedural literacy) and how those texts are constructed to make meaning. As James Paul Gee defines it in *Social Linguistics and Literacy*, literacy is the "fluent control or mastery of a secondary Discourse" (144), where Discourse refers to "ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking, and often reading and writing that are accepted as instantiations of particular roles (or 'types of people') by specific *groups of people*" (viii). Gee also describes Discourses as "ways of being in the

world, or forms of life which integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, and social identities, as well as gestures, glances, body positions, and clothes” (127). In the same way, Brian Street’s *Social Literacies* makes the claim that not only is literacy learning about adopting new ways of being, but also interrogating the systems of power involved in those ways of being.

As I described in the previous chapter, Brian Street’s distinction between the “autonomous” model of literacy (literacy as a distinct skill that is transferred through teaching) and the “ideological” model (or viewing literacy as a set of socially-determined practices embedded in systems of power) asks both instructors and students to examine the social, political, and ideological bases of literacy practices: “all models of literacy can be understood within an ideological framework and . . . those termed ‘autonomous’ only appear on the surface to be neutral and value free” (*Social Literacies* 151). Instead, Street argues for instructors and literacy educators to take an “approach that sees literacy as critical social practice,” which would then “make explicit from the outset both the assumptions and the power relations on which those models of literacy are based” (*Social Literacies* 141). “Critical social practice” is a term for literacies that makes three distinct moves: first, that literacy practices require those using them to be aware of and investigate power relations and inequalities. Second, literacies are imbricated with and continually changed due to social influences. Lastly, literacies are practices, rather than finalized skills or competencies. Likewise, these multiple literate practices can be viewed as unique “ways of knowing,” “ways of being,” “reading as,” or “critical social practices,” in the sense that the practices of literacy change with context. These practices investigate or make transparent systems of ideology and social relations, and are

constantly changed and re-evaluated by learners. Gee and Street's concepts describe literate practices as contextual meaning-making that the reader adopts and tries-on, rather than a skill that they have acquired and carry with them. In order to provide a context for these kinds of literacy practices, I outline in this chapter a pedagogical model for a literacy course in English studies that incorporates video games as part of the discipline's textual framework, demonstrating how video games can be used along with other texts in English classrooms to engage students in the kind of contextual, social, and constantly changing literacy practices that New Literacy scholars like Street, Gee, and the New London Group describe. These practices, in turn, can help students interrogate how texts are created and used as systems, and how they can learn, critique, and redesign these systems.

In essence, the course I describe in this chapter is meant to foster a new kind of literacy learning, which is not to say that the literacies learned are themselves new, but that their recombination into a single course would be. In other words, I argue for a literacy course that encapsulates three distinct areas of English studies: narrative, rhetoric, and literacy, into a single concept, which could be termed **multiliteracies** (in the same vein as the New London Group). By multiliteracies, I mean asking students to view texts as systems of information, systems that are rule-bound, ideological, and socially constructed as much as they are the work of individual authors or groups of designers, and by doing so I encourage students to make connections between systems in texts and interrogate systems of power in their own lives. Multiliteracies is a conception of literacy that requires the student to learn and adopt many ways of knowing and being in the world for specific contexts. Much like the ideological models Street and Gee describe,

multiliteracies deals specifically with fostering “critical media literacy,” practices which interrogate the seeming “neutrality” of texts and meaning-making (Luke 72). In supplementing the New London Group’s notion of multiliteracies, I include medium-specific gaming literacies, or procedural literacies, as part of my framework. In creating such an integrated-media course, I hope to bring together many of the disciplines of English studies, which normally separates narrative, rhetoric, and literacy into separate categories or divisions. Instead, I argue for studying all kinds of texts (alphabetic, filmic, procedural) in a single course that teaches students about their literate practices in reading, writing, watching, listening, playing, and interpreting particular texts in particular contexts. This course would also require students to examine texts as systems that enable specific kinds of meaning-making practices and ways of knowing, all of which are used in society to persuade audiences. Readers likewise must engage in critical social practices or multiliteracies that interrogate not only how these texts are constructed, but also how they are part of larger systems of power in our world.

Students in such a course would read a narrative text, film, or video game, and investigate patterns of meaning in argumentative texts or structures for storytelling in literary texts, rhetorical persuasion and use of the texts in society, and the multiliteracies that readers practice in order to understand and interpret them. In other words, it would be a course dealing with the text in use in society and the learning required to understand its meanings, which are enacted by readers and embedded in contexts. Rather than separating into literature, film studies, composition, and gaming, this course would examine commonalities and differences across modes and genres, seeking a transmedia understanding of texts and their uses in contexts. Such a course would point toward an

understanding that all texts (including novels, plays, poems, op-ed pieces, research papers, Hollywood films, documentaries, animated short films, and video games) are constructed to create specific meanings (either in narrative or argumentation), are used to persuade audiences, and require readers to engage in critical social practices and adopt different ways of knowing.

## Rethinking Literacy: Why Should English Instructors Teach with Video Games?

In order to theorize a multiliteracies course, I turn to Gunther Kress's work *Literacy in the New Media Age*, where he describes "an encompassing theory of text, in which the texts of high culture could be brought into conjunction with the banal texts of the everyday" (120). The multiliteracies course I'm advocating accomplishes this task: to show how all texts work, rather than just the ones we may appreciate or laud as a critics. English composition instructors may require students to read nonfiction or argumentative essays they find particularly engaging, powerful, or persuasive, and these texts can be examined in the same ways as "high" literature or video games, for their narrative or argumentative structure and their rhetorical basis. Students who engage with these multiple levels of meaning then create new meanings as a result. Using *World of Goo* in a classroom similarly brings a "low" text into the "high" context of the classroom, and as such creates a vastly different classroom environment. Using a video game text in conjunction with other kinds of texts asks students to make comparisons from the very start, thinking about the different ways of being and ways of reading texts of all kinds. In this way, students are led to think about what "reading" and "writing" means for an

alphabetic text, as well as a film or video game. Even a printed page in a magazine or other visual text like a poster demonstrates the need for an understanding of the text's "reading path" or route the reader can follow (or is led into) (Kress 152). While it may seem patently obvious to say that a novel has a clear "reading path," placing a written text like a novel next to a film or other visual text highlights the fact that there *is* a reading path implied in the visual text as well. Likewise, video games like *World of Goo* have distinct "reading paths" based on their media-specific narrative structures and rhetorical devices, and students can practice other ways of viewing the world by engaging with them. The danger occurs when instructors in traditional autonomous literacy classrooms assume that all students have knowledge of a written text's "reading path," when that path is subject to a number of structural and contextual forces. A literacy course placing these texts in conjunction with each other aims to make such hidden forces plain. Thus, if students can learn not only to "read" a particular text, but to "read as" a literary critic or narratologist, that student is practicing multiliteracies, using different ways of knowing to produce meaning. As I will describe later in my description of the course and the assignments involved, this course then intends for students to explore the various forces at work on both themselves as audiences and the texts they read.

Because texts have changed, literacy courses must strive to take into account what new literacies are practiced to navigate them. Kress describes this necessity in a discussion of gaming: "Readers of such screens [in games] are used to a different strategy. To call it a freedom might be mistaken in that these games do have their rules, their conventions, and at the moment at any rate, the reader's real ability to be genuinely 'active' in constructing reading paths that are actually new is not existent" (161). Kress

hints at what I've been describing within this dissertation: that players of video games are trained to expect particular ways of "reading" the game world, and these expectations are not entirely up to them, since the meanings are designed for players. The reader cannot make their own paths within the gamespace, much in the same way as readers of novels cannot "create" their own reading path for a written text (in the sense of creating completely unique meanings). What is different then, is the video game players' need to interpret the game narrative based on other cues (such as the film narrative concepts described earlier or procedural narrative limitations), rhetorical devices employed in the game's procedural representation, and the players' multiliterate practices used to create the reading path along particular lines. Kress argues that the reading of a novel is far different from the "reading" of a video game, especially in the sense of what it asks the audience of the text to do: "The task of the reader in the first case [printed text] is to observe and follow a given order, and within that order to engage in interpretation (where that too was more or less tightly policed) the task of the reader of the new page, and of the screens which are its models, is to establish the order through principles of relevance of the reader's making, and to construct meaning from that" (162). What becomes clear from this evaluation of the reader's activity is that the player of a video game and the reader of the traditional printed text are both engaged in making meaning, but the reader of a new media text creates meanings in different ways, ways that are necessitated by the text, but not as heavily controlled by it.

An English course involving multiple modalities and kinds of texts would encompass many of the reading and writing practices required for modern textual interpretation and production. Of course, as Kress points out, current English courses do

not necessarily create environments that foster multiliteracies, and instructors can often feel a distinct divide between their own way of viewing the world and their students': "I am oriented to notions of 'completed text'; they are oriented to notions of 'information as it is supplied'" (163). This may be one of the primary reasons why, for instance, students in composition classes often feel like the paper they have written clearly expresses the many sides or facets of a particular issue and allows the reader to "make up their own mind" about the issue at hand. As a composition instructor, I've dealt with this issue and realize that my view of what the text should be is similarly skewed in the way Kress describes: I want a text that presents an argument that is not up to the reader, while students want to supply readers with information to make informed decisions (much like a video game provides snippets of relevant information that players must then apply on their own). My aim in creating a literacy course that develops multiliteracies is meant to make clear for students the way that both prolonged reading of traditional written texts and procedural literacies are unique ways of knowing, and both are required in the modern world: "such a form of reading [as in prolonged reading] now needs to be taught as a specialized task, not as *the* form of reading that defines what reading is" (Kress 174). As I've noted earlier, valuing students' abilities in reading video game and film texts would go a long way toward allowing them to understand what kind of reading and writing practices traditional English texts require. For example, in interpreting the visual and aural cues of films, viewers make assumptions and hypotheses about the meaning of (seemingly) significant objects, actions, or changes in the frame and sounds played synchronously with it. The notion of "active" film viewing feels very similar to the literary concept of "close reading," the primary activity of New Critical literary study.



Thus, what “close reading” is for literature students (which is a very specific, learned activity of paying close attention to specific literary techniques used within the text in order to construct an interpretation), is similar to the “learned activity” that is film viewing. Just as film viewers are placed in a specific mode of reception to recognize primarily visual patterns of meaning and construct meaning based on them, readers of literary texts in a course in literary criticism are also placed “on the lookout” for specific text-based patterns of meaning with which to construct their interpretations.

In order to make this distinction between reading practices plain, I argue that English courses must include all kinds of texts and engage directly with how readers/viewers/listeners/players interact with and interpret them. Similarly, an English course set up in this way can highlight not only the distinctions between modes, but students can also make connections between texts in terms of narrative storytelling, rhetorical persuasion, and their own multiliterate practices in producing meaning. The course I’ve designed is not set up to with the naïve assumption that by the course’s end all students will become skilled game designers, filmmakers, and novelists, much like English educators used to believe that “literature taught composition, that ‘unconscious absorption’ teaches how to write, significantly ‘as one acquires good manners by associating with gentlemen and ladies’” (qtd. in Miller 64). Rather, the aim of the course is to make students more aware of the way texts are constructed, used, and practiced. However, some may be concerned with the use of a video game in an English course, especially in terms of departmental or institutional constraints. Much like the article I described at the start of the chapter, some may be surprised at my attempt to add other kinds of media to the English classroom. While these doubts are valid in terms of asking

what the work of the English degree is meant to accomplish, I argue that the use of multiple kinds of media fits perfectly into literacy courses. Since Kress and other New Literacy scholars are certainly reacting to the changing conceptions of literacy in the face of our modern textual landscape, it is important to see what others might feel are the necessary components of literacy instruction for today's students.

A reimagined English course including video games as part of its primary texts would fit perfectly into new and emerging definitions and redefinitions of what "literacy" means in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. As established by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), the "21<sup>st</sup> Century Literacies Framework" includes a number of guidelines for what English instruction helps students do and accomplish. Using video games (in conjunction with a variety of other media) in an English course applies a number of these guidelines, which dictate that students in the English classroom should:

- Develop proficiency with the tools of technology
- Build relationships with others to pose and solve problems  
collaboratively and cross-culturally
- Design and share information for global communities to meet a variety  
of purposes
- Manage, analyze, and synthesize multiple streams of simultaneous  
information
- Create, critique, analyze, and evaluate multimedia texts
- Attend to the ethical responsibilities required by these complex  
environments

These guidelines for what students “do” in an English course are enlightening, especially in terms of the course I’m describing. In addition to the basic facet of developing students’ technological skills, the NCTE’s emphasis on collaborative problem-solving across cultural borders is especially helpful in setting up how such a course should operate. While this kind of problem solving can occur particularly in online gaming, the notion of narration as problem-solving described in my earlier discussion of narrative film theory can be immensely helpful for understanding how the reading, viewing, or playing of texts can help students learn to solve problems. In essence, by testing hypotheses and making connections between the plot of the narrative and its style, readers/viewers/players of texts make claims about the larger story at hand within the text. For instance, a reader of a text or viewer of a film can read about the details of the setting or see *mise-en-scène* objects and make inferences about the story, while players of *World of Goo* can examine subtle visual details in the game environment or written texts on signs in order to learn how to solve the game’s problems to move the narrative forward. A literacy course including multiple media is therefore immensely helpful for students’ literacy learning, as students use narrative information to solve problems.

Similarly, all of these activities (reading texts, watching films, playing video games) deal specifically with students learning how to “manage, analyze, and synthesize multiple streams of simultaneous information,” and it is this aspect of 21<sup>st</sup> Century literacies that are the most clearly aligned with expanding the notion of text in English courses to include video games. Indeed, as an undergraduate English student, I often felt that my work in the field was essentially about taking in streams of written text and trying to synthesize meanings in order to make claims about literature or argumentative texts.

However, as texts have expanded into new arenas, it is the simultaneity of information in other media that requires accommodation in English courses. Film and video games expose players simultaneously to images, sounds (including music and speech), and written text. Video games push the complexity further by creating *systems* in which this information resides, and therefore change according to the player's input. Recent video games, such as the western game *Red Dead Redemption*, have contextual musical scores, which change according to the player's actions. For instance, while riding a horse, a player may hear both a transition in the musical score (or change in tempo) and an in-game character asking for help. This in-game event can be reinforced visually by actually seeing the character and by the appearance of a small blue dot on the game's screen display map. As such, it seems clear from a text like this one that video games are fertile texts for examining how players learn to process this level of information to "read" and "write" meanings in the game. After learning more about the game system, players can even use this information to know whether or not the individual asking for help is really sincere. Within a matter of seconds, video game players are required to process a great deal of simultaneous information and synthesize this information to take action.

Likewise, readers of written texts or viewers of films also do the same kinds of synthesis and assimilation of information, but in different ways. An English course that involves all of these different ways of knowing would help create multiliterate students equipped for all kinds of texts in today's world, allowing them to "create, critique, analyze, and evaluate multimedia texts" in addition to written ones (NCTE). In other words, the addition of video games into an English course is a supplement to the existing framework

of English studies, and is not meant to supplant the basic framework of composing and analyzing written texts, which should still be an essential part of the discipline.

In addition to textual analysis and critique, the assignments and resultant designs created by students in such a literacy course would proceed along similar lines as most production in English courses, but with an emphasis on multimodality and combinations of print and non-print resources for particular contexts, purposes, and audiences. Students would work toward creating rhetorical texts of their own, with attention paid to the medium of communication and the way that medium affects the meanings made available to audiences. As such, the work of students in this course would follow similar guidelines laid out by the NCTE's 21<sup>st</sup> Century Literacies framework, emphasizing a broad spectrum of texts for analysis and multiple modes for student production of texts, where they are able to "use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information)." Obviously, students examining the use of music in a game like *World of Goo* can take advantage of this by using snippets of sound from the game, but they can also recombine and reuse the sound for their own purposes, perhaps to show connections between culturally- and socially-constructed meanings (such as the use of "Western music" in the level "Ode to the Bridge Builder"). Combined with screenshots, written text, or gameplay footage, a student presentation on the game is still very much in line with what English instructors want students to accomplish as they "gather, evaluate, and synthesize data from a variety of sources (e.g., print and non-print texts, artifacts, people) to communicate their discoveries in ways that suit their purpose and audience" (NCTE). While all of these outcomes seem appropriate to the aims and goals of English studies

courses, it becomes important to describe how instructors can help foster such literacy learning. Next, I turn to a discussion of educational design in order to determine if there are ways of changing course structures to be more “game-like” in their design and implementation in order to create an environment more suited to developing multiliteracies.

## How Can English Scholars Create the Conditions for Literacy Learning?

As I noted in the first chapter of this dissertation, a number of English studies scholars have described the need for English courses (or education in general) to be more like video games, particularly in the ways that video games teach players or create learning (see Gee, Colby and Colby 305, Alberti 260, Robison 360, Sheridan and Hart-Davidson 327). In order to determine how to use game-like structures for educational design, or to set up an English course in a game-like way, I turn to Etienne Wenger’s theories on educational design outlined in his text *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*. Wenger advocates that we view learning differently than most would believe, arguing that learning is something that “cannot be designed” (225), but rather it “can only be designed *for* – that is, facilitated or frustrated” (229). Viewed from this perspective, an English course using video games alongside other media to teach literacy would merely be a context in which learning can take place; a place for students to engage in practices and learn. Ideally, the students would be able to engage authentically in a practice, such as literary, film, or video game criticism, with students who are similarly aligned to take on these identities of participation. The course would be

a place for students to “try on” different identities regarding these media—for instance, engaging with the narrative aspects of a video game as critics, or creating multimedia presentations that respond to that text. Likewise, students could examine the social forces at work in the text’s use in society or its rhetorical persuasion, each creating new identities for students to adopt and practice.

The idea of learning as trying on new identities is vastly different from the concept of “training,” a difference Wenger describes as such: “Whereas training aims to create an inbound trajectory targeted at competence in a single practice, education must strive to open new dimensions for the negotiation of the self. It places students on an outbound trajectory toward a broad field of possible identities. Education is not merely formative – it is transformative” (263). This is an important distinction to make, since it seems clear that much education is actually training, and some may attempt to conflate the two ideas. Indeed, an English course involving video games and other media will require some training, in the sense that it is important to discuss and have students gain mastery of a certain concept, such as procedural rhetoric. However, this is not an end to the learning that should take place in the course—the students’ ability to understand a concept is fruitless without allowing them to apply and use that concept in practice: undertaking an analysis of a particular text using the concept. The learning that takes place in English classrooms should not be a matter of simply gaining competence in a particular idea or ideas, but rather should be based on the application of those theories to various texts in other contexts. Such a move away from “training” toward “learning” has a number of implications, such as assessment, which should be based on evaluation that mirrors “the structure of engagement in actual practice and the forms of competence

inherent in it” (Wenger 265). In other words, while one may evaluate students’ training through exams or quizzes, the students’ learning can better be evaluated by looking at application of the course material in practice. Because, as Wenger describes, “School learning is just learning school” (267), learning in an English course with a focus on multiple media works toward building students’ abilities not through mastery of a particular mode or genre, but through creating opportunities for learning multiliterate practices that can be used across all media. For instance, teaching students how to examine texts as systems (systems that enable and constrain readers/viewers/players in order to make claims) is vital for all kinds of texts, rather than just video games.

In order to foster the kind of learning that Wenger describes, the structure of the course I develop here would be a studio-like space for learning, or an attempt to maintain a constant balance between what Wenger calls “the planned and the emergent – that is, the ability of teaching and learning to interact so as to become structuring resources for each other” (267). What is key here is the relationship between learning and teaching is reciprocal, in that the teaching affects the learning, and in turn, the learning (the emergent) also affects the teaching. This is not to say that anarchy reigns, a fear that I myself have grappled with as an instructor trying to change and revise my courses to be more student-centered. The concept of a freeform classroom that grows on its own also leaves the fear that it will die on its own. As an instructor, I want my students to engage in different experiences with texts and find meanings, but I also feel a strong need to control the direction of those experiences. This tension between freedom and constraint should not give instructors fear, and in fact, creating a course in a game-like way requires rules and limits, much like a digital game environment or other text limits the available



actions of characters. Freedom, including emergent learning and teaching, can come from the imposition of restraints. Thus, it seems clear that a certain amount of writing will be required for students (since this is an English class after all). The key is to find ways of making that writing a part of students' literate practices with the texts in the course. For instance, an analytical essay is certainly part of literary, film, and game criticism, but an essay about how students would revise a particular game character or situation to change the rhetorical persuasion is also another way to create "experiments of identity that students can engage in while [in the classroom]" (Wenger 268). In my first-year seminar course with a focus on video games, I found that a remix assignment that asks students to change the game system to change the rhetorical persuasion involved netted better results and insights about procedural rhetoric than a traditional written essay. Instead, students produced more specific analyses, rather than vague or general insights that can often come from traditional essays.

Thus, the design of the course I describe in this chapter is not meant to be formless and completely student-controlled. Rather, the course should be set up in a game-like way by teaching students how to adopt identities of participation with the texts of the course, and then actually giving them opportunities to practice those identities in ways that create the conditions for learning. Instead of giving students all of the information available regarding game narratives, the course would give students a basic framework for narrative that they must apply in order to learn more about what narrative means in particular contexts. As such, the concept of a studio space for literacy learning is more about checkpoints, levels, and boundaries for the exploration of ideas, much like Wenger describes: "it is more important for students to have experiences that allow them

to take charge of their own learning than to cover a lot of material. A curriculum would then look more like an itinerary of transformative experiences of participation than a list of subject matter” (272). In other words, a course could be set up in terms of teaching narrative, rhetoric, and literacy, but the course perhaps should be better described as a place for students to try on identities as textual critics, rhetoricians, and literacy researchers. In designing the course this way, the hope is that while traditional curriculum doesn’t allow for the emergent or disenfranchised students who aren’t adept at or satisfied “just learning school,” such a course may recruit both in and out of school literacy practices.

## **An English Course in Media and Multiliteracies: A Pedagogical Outline**

In creating an English course that combines multiple media together to develop multiliteracies, I must first outline the structure of the “itinerary of transformative experiences” of the course (Wenger 272). However, a key issue comes into play before trying to structure the shape of the course, specifically, the texts that will be used. As the news story I discussed early in this chapter demonstrates, choosing texts can be a potential minefield, especially considering that this course is a bit different from other English courses. Thus, the choice of texts in the course is important, but I must remind instructors that the texts are actually not “the point” of the course. Once again, the course is not meant to teach students how to read Chaucer, or to give a history of a specific film genre. In this way, the pressure to choose texts that all seem to fit together thematically or historically is somewhat lifted—the texts are not as important as what they can do to help

students engage in critical social practices and ways of knowing. In this way, texts can be chosen not for their particular thematic content or the time period in which they were created, but instead for textual features that can be particularly illustrative of a concept or idea. Texts rich in media-specific features that can be fruitfully explored by students (that is, texts that require readers to decode and synthesize multiple streams of information) can be the most helpful in terms of allowing students to try on different identities of participation with them. For instance, a film that uses particular cinematographic elements like camera movement or shot distances can be more effective for teaching students about cinematography. Likewise, a novel that has a unique time structure or point of view can be particularly illustrative of literary conventions. For myself as an instructor, I would aim to have texts demonstrate particular concepts well, rather than fit together thematically.

In choosing a written text or texts, it would seem important to present texts that are prime examples of narrative structure or as being well suited to rhetorical narrative criticism (like Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*). Likewise, films could be chosen that are rich in the particular concepts the instructor wishes to demonstrate. A film with a unique narrative structure (like Christopher Nolan's *Memento* or Michel Gondry's *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*) or unique visual style (Jean-Pierre Jeunet's *Amelie*) can go a long way toward helping students find material to probe and interrogate. On the other hand, choosing a particular video game can seem difficult for instructors who are not players themselves or have limited experience with them. However, what makes the educational design concepts Wenger advocates helpful in this situation is the fact that learning and teaching work reciprocally. Depending on the materials used thus far in the

course, students can make connections between the texts they've seen in the course and offer suggestions for a particular game that suits them. Even before learning about procedurality or gaming rhetorics, students can be looking for connections, especially if they are told to look for them. And, once again, the video game can be chosen for other reasons as well, such as its rhetoricity, its popularity (and thus, a need to offer a scholarly perspective to a text that most gamers enjoy), or its uniqueness in the gaming world. My decision to use *World of Goo* as a text in my first-year seminar was chosen for just this reason. The game is unique, in that it creates a hybridized puzzle/adventure game genre, and as such I found it important for learning about game genres as well as narrative, rhetoric, and literacy. Most importantly, in choosing a gaming text, it is important to choose an accessible game, which is to say that a console game may be difficult to have all students in the course play it. Instead, PC or multiplatform games that are available on a variety of game systems may be best. *World of Goo* was also chosen for this reason: anyone with a computer, iPad, or Nintendo Wii would be able to play it (as well as afford it, since it is fairly inexpensive when students have access to one of these platforms). Likewise, the instructor may wish to not assign a violent first-person shooter in the course, and I would argue that this is perfectly reasonable, since instructors have an ethical responsibility for the content of the course. However, I would also argue that while choosing a game with violent content may cause issues of content, it can also be rewarding in terms of analysis. As such, it is clearly up to the individual instructor what texts are chosen, and those choices should serve to strengthen the learning opportunities in the course, rather than the just the thematic content.

In ordering the course, I have two specific ways of scaffolding the course content or perspectives with which students can look at texts: first, the material could be introduced all at once according to the specific concept at hand. Thus, the course would begin with a discussion of narrative that encapsulates all of the different media in the course, covering structural analysis of narratives, narrative film theory, and narrative across media (including game-specific theories dealing with the conflict between ludology and narratologists). These concepts could be introduced all at once, using short examples from individual texts, leading to a specific text that could be written, filmed, or interactive. In the same way, reader-response criticism, rhetorical narrative criticism, and procedural rhetoric could be introduced together in order to give students a perspective on the contextual and rhetorical basis for their textual interactions. A text could be chosen in this case for its particularly persuasive content according to rhetorical narrative criticism, or of “having the purpose of communicating knowledge, feelings, values, and beliefs” (Phelan, *Narrative as Rhetoric* 18). Finally, students could be asked to apply multiliteracies theory (newly defined to add procedural literacy) and attempt to identify and describe the social and contextual basis for the kinds of meaning-making involved in their literacy practices. Any text could be chosen here, but perhaps a text that uses multiple media like a film or video game may be most effective for reinforcing the notion of multiliteracies. This schematic for the course seems clear and simple, but it also may provide too much at once, causing students to wonder why they may be learning about concepts regarding film or video games when being asked to read a literary text.

In contrast, I would personally choose an alternative organizational pattern, one that builds concepts onto those previously encountered incrementally, adding complexity

as the texts become more complex in their use of multiple media. Thus, if the course begins with a literary text or texts, only those concepts could be described. So, for a literary text, narrative theory and structural analysis of narratives would be described, as well as rhetorical narrative criticism and reader-response theory. Multiliteracies theory would be used by the instructor to engage students in practices that give them a particular perspective on reading as a component of the multiliteracies framework. Moving to a filmed text, the concepts of narrative film theory could be added, and the instructor could refresh the concepts covered earlier regarding reader response, rhetorical narrative criticism, and multiliteracies theory for aspects of those theories that require students to try on identities as film critics and researchers. Similarly, the concepts of game narrative theory, procedural rhetoric, and procedural literacy could be added to provide a framework for game analysis. Once again, bringing new aspects to concepts already discussed in class, this organizational system helps reinforce concepts for students while adding layers of complexity based on more complex media texts. This is the course structure I would undertake myself, but my earlier description could certainly work as well. Most of all, the concepts of the course should reinforce the student's overall understanding of how narratives are constructed and later enacted by audiences, who in turn create meanings from them. By alternating textual analyses and adding new concepts to these frameworks, students can gain richer understandings of textual features and practices involved with them.

The classroom of such a course would be a mixture of brief lecture, text-based activities like reading discussions, film screenings, or gameplay workshops, and finally in-class discussion and debate. Group activities like presentations and workshops would

also be important elements. Like most other English courses, the students' experience of texts is central to the course. Likewise, it goes without saying that all students should be assigned to read, view, and play the texts assigned. While reading literary texts is an important component of such a course, the course can also be viewed as a context for students to examine narrative, rhetoric, and literacy practices. As such, the use of film and video games could be deemphasized according to the institutional demands of the course or departmental guidelines. This is not to say that film and video games are not important, but that institutional or departmental constraints may make their use difficult. In other words, I would ideally hope for a balance between all three modes, although I also understand that this may not always be possible in all contexts.

Regardless of the classroom limitations, I believe it is vital that students experience all three kinds of texts and examine them to allow them to practice the kinds of multiliteracies learning described earlier. In the case of film, a viewing event for a film is preferable to allowing students to view films on their own outside of class. While the latter is more practical depending on the class time involved, a viewing session held in class creates a better context for the kind of analysis the course should foster. In other words, the place and time of the film viewing can greatly affect the students' experience of the film. As for a video game text in the course, it is likewise imperative that students play the same video game, and that experience must be done outside of class in most cases (certain game texts can take over 20 hours to complete). However, in-class play activities or gameplay workshops can supplement the separation between class and home. In-class play involves allowing a student in the course to play a particular game in front of the class for a period of time, while students in the class take notes or look for details

and examples. Gameplay workshops could be small group activities, where students meet on their own or in class to play together. In these activities, groups could be chosen to look for specific aspects (such as sound, images, or interactive elements like rules or systems, as well as the larger course concepts) and a single student from each group could play for a certain amount of time while students observe. If possible, a more ideal situation would be for each small group to gather and play together, where the group could discuss and describe their play experiences according to concepts given to them. While gaming can also provide technical difficulties, it is important to choose a text that can alleviate these. As such, a game that is available on a number of platforms (PC, Mac, and popular consoles) would go a long way toward helping students experience the text. As a last resort, students could gather to play in dedicated labs with the game installed or meet with each other to play on their own consoles. Regardless of the method, the simultaneous reception of video games and other texts within the course are meant to foster specific reading, viewing, or playing communities of practice within the classroom.

For the assignments in this mixed-media course, I envision that they would mirror the multimodal and nature of the texts assigned and the multiliterate practices of students. In other words, the use of sound and images in a presentation or text involving film and video games makes perfect sense, and this also demonstrates the way meaning from different modes need not be “translated” into traditional written assignments. However, this can once again be an area where institutional or departmental constraints may cause instructors to choose more written than multimodal assignments. However, this does not mean that all of the course assignments necessarily need to be restricted to analytic essays or research papers. Instead, assignments could take written forms but deal with less



common activities like mapping narrative structures in texts, describing remixing possibilities for films, games, or literary texts, and presenting that material to the class. The instructor must, of course, relate information directly to students about the course concepts, describing theories of storytelling, visual design in film, or film/game storytelling techniques, for example. This should be done in an explicit way (via lectures, presentations, or directing discussion), but this does not necessarily require a teacher-centric pedagogy. Students can offer examples or present material, and activities like creating narrative maps, asking students to find examples of specific storytelling or visual techniques, or doing impromptu ethnographic research are ways of making the course more student-centered. Likewise, by incorporating multimodal texts, students can blend text, images, sounds, and film and game footage in presentations or as responses.

In addition to these possible assignments, the course could also be structured so that students complete similar assignments for each kind of text in the course, such as a short narrative mapping assignment for a written, filmed, and interactive text. This mapping assignment would demonstrate or highlight the text's construction in order to probe deeper into how texts are designed to tell stories. This could be created in the written form of a detailed outline of the text, or a visual map of the "reading path" of the text as the student sees it. In my first-year seminar course on gaming, I found that students embraced the mapping assignment because it was particularly *not* an essay—instead it focused on visualizing a complex story structure and condensing it to examine its functions. Following the mapping exercise, a personal narrative assignment could show the student's role in enacting the text, creating a snapshot of their response and evaluation of the text based on their lifeworlds. For a multimodal component, this could

take the form of an audio essay or filmed response, where students could narrate their play activity as it happens, edit significant portions, and analyze those activities in an aural or filmed text of their design. Likewise, students could film their play activity and similarly edit their recording to make arguments about the choices involved in their particular textual experience. Such an assignment could also take the form of a map of the intertextual references and influences of particular historical, cultural, or textual experiences on a particular text. Certainly, these contexts or influences do not create one-to-one relationships between texts, but they can provide an awareness of the multiple layers of information that affect readings (and this assignment could also fulfill a required research component depending on the department or institution). A “remix” assignment could follow, which would ask students to choose a significant rhetorical element of each text (such as audience, context, or purpose, rhetorical appeals such as ethos, logos, and pathos, or even the medium itself) and change it (or describe how they would change it) for that new context or audience. From this perspective, an assignment asking students to remix *World of Goo* into a short film or short story would ask students to analyze and change the narrative structure, and at the same time the medium-specific affordances of video games, written texts, and films could be highlighted. For a video game specifically, students could remix the game’s procedural representation, choosing to include or exclude specific choices in the game world. In this case, perhaps a student could describe limitations to *World of Goo*’s procedural system that would involve time limits, creating an ethic of expediency over “gooity” within the game narrative. This new game would then be about not only progress, but efficient progress. Likewise, a student could advocate that the player not leave behind any goo balls, creating the opposite rhetorical

effect. A final assignment might ask students to undertake a reading/viewing/playing experience with one of the texts already read in order to look for new avenues of understanding based on the course concepts. For instance, after discussing procedural rhetoric and narrative as rhetoric, how might students react to a reading of a literary text with “fresh eyes?” Having discussed and asked students to examine texts using a complex web of frameworks and practices (narrative theory, film theory, game studies, reader-response criticism, rhetorical narrative theory, procedural rhetoric, multiliteracies, and procedural literacy), students could examine familiar texts in unfamiliar ways.

Creating an assignment sequence that is similar across all three modes might be a way of creating continuity with the course texts and the students’ activity with them. Figure 5.1 (on the next page) is a brief schematic of the course design, including the assignments and major sequences of the class. Hopefully, the course structure I’ve described in this chapter is flexible enough to accommodate a variety of institutional or departmental circumstances, as well as allowing instructors of varying proficiency with video games and film to tailor the course to their specific strengths while still maintaining an emphasis on fostering multiliteracies in the class. Assignments can be dropped from particular sections, and each can be produced in either written texts (responses, analyses, reflections, and presentations) or multimodal ones. While I believe my particular course structure would be quite effective, it seems clear that the sections could be rearranged to put another medium first. Likewise, the course could blend the texts in ways I have not foreseen here. Also, the course could be given a thematic thread to tie together the various media, such as having students read a dystopic novel, film, and video game (of which there are many examples for each mode). Examining student’s ways of knowing

## A Multiliteracies Course: Narrative, Rhetoric, and Literacy Across Media

**Overt Instruction** - Instructor describes:   narratology/narrative theory  
reader-response criticism  
narrative as rhetoric/rhetorical narrative theory  
social/contextual literacies/multiliteracies

Adding medium-specific concepts:

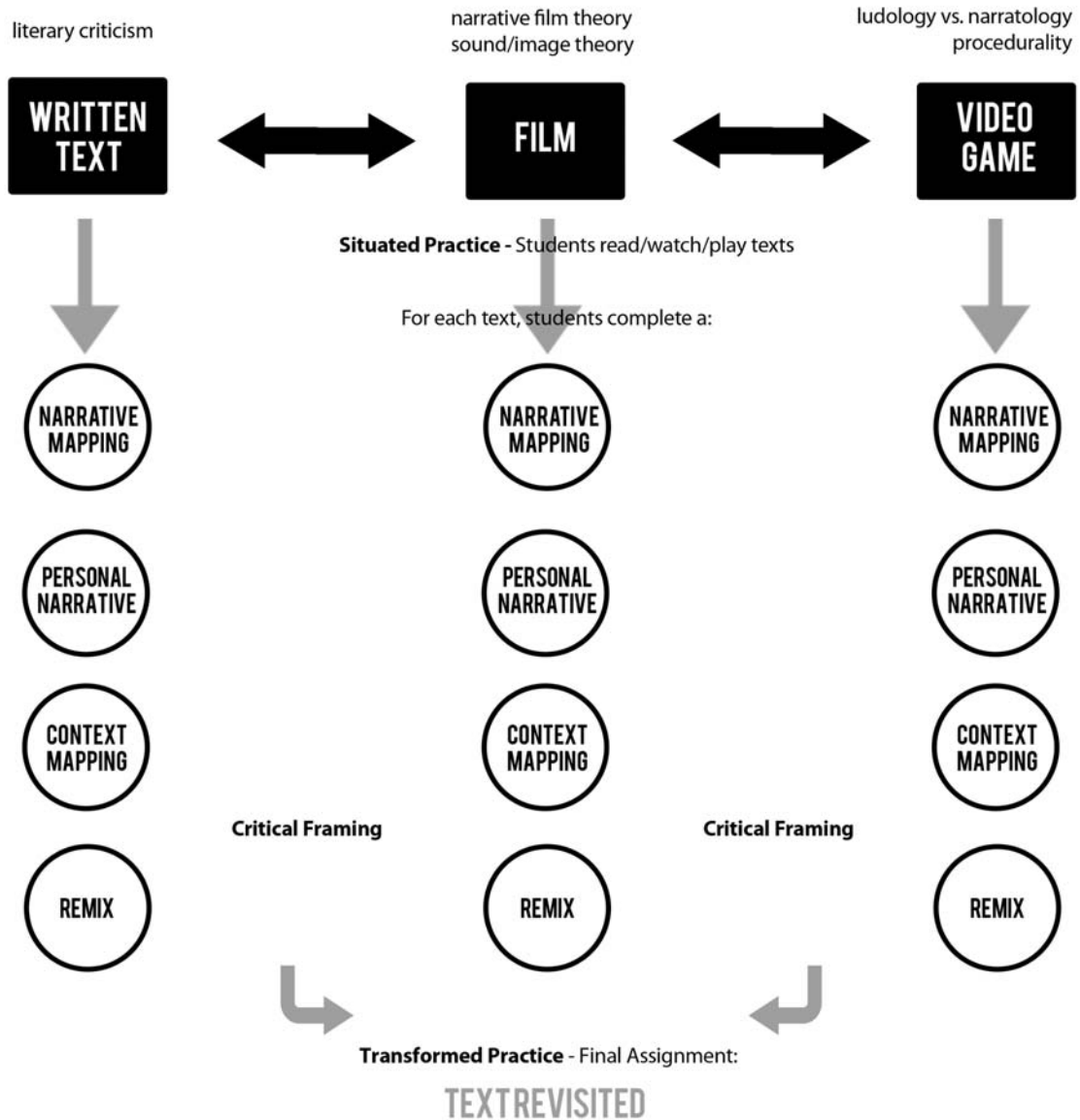


Figure 5.1: A possible Multiliteracies course design.

and critical social practices in reading and interpreting texts asks them to look at texts from multiple viewpoints and with different perspectives. Rather than separating these elements of narrative, rhetoric, and literacy, the course would try to give a more holistic view of texts and students' multiliterate practices in particular contexts.

## **Pedagogical Rationale: How Does This Course Foster Multiliteracies?**

In identifying how the course I've outlined in this chapter can work to create and foster an environment for literacy learning in multiple modes, I turn once again to the New London Group's pedagogical framework for multiliteracies. As a literacy course designed to add depth to students' experiences of all kinds of texts, the multiliteracies course I describe contains the four specific components of pedagogy described by the New London Group. Students are engaged in Situated Practice as literacy students by engaging with and examining texts, first as readers/viewers/players, and later as literary critics, narratologists, reader-response and rhetorical narrative critics, and literacy researchers. The course then is a way of developing students' repertoires and abilities with all kinds of texts (alphabetic, filmic, procedural), and the primary way this is accomplished is by having students read, watch, and play the texts assigned. Situated Practice in this course "works from a base of students' own interests and lifeworld experience" (Kalantzis and Cope 240). Students come to our classes as readers, film viewers, and game players, and tapping into these literate practices is the first way of encouraging students to develop richer understandings of other texts they may not have encountered. In asking students to read, play, or watch texts in the course I've described, students are already engaged in Situated Practice. In other words, the course strives to

meet students where they are and take advantage of students' already complex textual worlds.

In conjunction with Situated Practice, multiliteracies pedagogy includes Overt Instruction, which “explicitly uncovers and contrasts the hidden rules of meaning in various cultural contexts,” (Kalantzis and Cope 240). This aspect of pedagogy occurs within the multiliteracies course I’ve described through direct lecture, discussion, and description of various concepts within the course, all done in a very explicit way. This is the portion of the course where the material presented is very much teacher-led, but student-oriented, as the concepts are meant to enrich and add depth of understanding to students’ current textual practices. Discussions of narrative structure or procedural rhetoric create a vocabulary or set of vocabularies for students to discuss and analyze their meaning-making in multiple modes and genres. These vocabularies are then brought back to the Situated Practice of the text, and, according to Kalantzis and Cope, can create a new experience as a result: “the Situated Practice itself becomes something broader, more analytical, and more reflective” (240). In my classes, I strive to let students know that they are in fact proficient in literate practices, but that the course is meant to provide a vocabulary for them. Overt Instruction works in giving students the tools to probe deeper into texts than would be possible within their own lifeworlds. Especially in terms of narratology and narrative film theory, the course I’ve designed uses Overt Instruction in order to look at textual construction, since it asks students to investigate the design and functions of narrative elements like characters, settings, and stylistic components: “Overt Instruction examines underlying system and structure; how meaning is organised, how meaning works. It involves processes of concept formation, generalisation, and theory-

making quite unlike the meaning-making processes of pragmatic, everyday life” (Kalantzis and Cope 241). Thus, within the multiliteracies course, instructors are involved relating information about the way stories are told or highlighting visual elements of game design and film/game storytelling techniques in an explicit way, but as I’ve mentioned earlier, students can offer examples or present material, demonstrating specific storytelling or visual techniques within the texts assigned. Overt Instruction is therefore more than just drilling information into students—it’s about giving students frameworks with which to view texts in deeper ways.

In complicating an understanding of narrative in different media, the application of rhetorical narrative theory and reader-response criticism adds Critical Framing to the multiliteracies course, adding breadth of knowledge by expanding students’ awareness of the rhetorical persuasion and social construction of texts. In addition to Overt Instruction, the student is given a framework for examining how the text might work in other social or ideological contexts, interrogating the rhetorical purposes, audiences, and other contextual elements at play in the text. For instance, in using reader-response criticism, the student can examine their role in creating the textual experience in order to demonstrate how their reading of the text is partial, contextual, and ideologically-bound within their own lifeworlds. At the same time, a student could also examine how a reading might be changed by different audiences in different contexts. For instance, in my first-year seminar course on gaming, I’ve had several students from China, who were able to provide unique readings of particular texts or issues from their own cultural experience. These readings were juxtaposed in the class with Western ideologies and viewpoints from American students. One Chinese student used a project to describe the

textual features and storytelling elements that were commonly used in Chinese video games, which he described as placing more emphasis on cooperation with others, beautiful imagery or music, and story (as opposed to Western games, which he noted as largely individualistic, centering on dystopic images, and emphasizing action over unique storylines). Another student described his personal experiences with game piracy in Chinese and American culture, where, as he discussed, those in China who engage in piracy do not place as much value on intellectual property as opposed to physical property. Such viewpoints ask students to reevaluate their own beliefs when faced with alternate ways of being and knowing, as Kalantzis and Cope describe: “Critical Framing interrogates contexts and purposes, adding breadth to one’s perspective on the lifeworld. What cultural alternatives might there be in approaching this or that particular challenge in everyday experience?” (241). Thus, a personal narrative assignment where a student might describe their role in making the choices available within a video game and their evaluation of the game based on their lifeworld would be a way of bringing Critical Framing to the course.

Finally, Transformed Practice that goes back to Situated Practice with a "fresh perspective" on the meta-level construction and social influences on a text is meant to foster multiliteracies, or literacies of textual structures, forms, devices, styles, and systems. Within the course I’ve described, it would be just as important to reflect and reevaluate the theoretical positions and perspectives with which the students have been engaging and bringing to particular texts. In other words, since all reading is “reading as,” it becomes necessary for the course to show how students could actually “read” a text in a very different way as a result of the combined Situated Practice, Overt



Instruction, and Critical Framing components of multiliteracies pedagogy. Kalantzis and Cope describe the aim of Transformed Practice as a “journey away from the lifeworld” through Overt Instruction and Critical Framing, after which students either have worked toward the “transfer of acquired knowledge and experience to an unfamiliar cultural context . . . ; or return to the lifeworld of one’s original experience with fresh perspectives and newly relevant knowledge of underlying processes (the depth perspectives of Overt Instruction) or other worlds (the breadth perspectives of Critical Framing)” (241). In the multiliteracies course, the revisiting of a text with these new perspectives would examine the added “breadth” or “depth” of the multiliteracies framework, using elements from narrative theory, film theory, game studies, reader-response criticism, rhetorical narrative theory, procedural rhetoric, multiliteracies, or procedural literacy.

Transformed Practice takes place in the course I’ve described in two particular assignments, the first of which is a mapping of the intertextual references and influences of particular historical, cultural, or textual experiences onto a particular text, highlighting the social and textual forces at play in a particular work. Transformed Practice makes “intertextuality and hybridity” an important element for students, who would be “making the connections, recognising influences and cross-references of history, culture and experience – including different degrees and types of transformation of meaning, from close reproduction to significantly creative change” (Kalantzis and Cope 248). Students are engaged in more than just a reading of a particular text, but instead create a broader and deeper understanding of the forces and influences in which that text resides. Readers of texts are also enmeshed in the web of influences, whether they know it or not. The

mapping assignment therefore shows how culture and society add new layers of information to textual practices. The other assignment that uses Transformed Practice is a remix assignment, which asks students to "redesign" a text by adjusting the rhetorical audience, context, or purpose. In the case of film, students could literally re-edit a particular scene or create a trailer that changes the film's meaning. Students particularly enjoy remixing films into mock trailers, which give them an experiential knowledge of how meaning can be changed and edited in different ways. For a video game, students could adjust aspects of the game's procedural representation in order to change its rhetorical thrust, which would require students to explore the available choices for players and choices disallowed by the game, and more specifically how this system allows the game to make claims about our world and systems within it.

## **Conclusion: Redesigning Texts, Redesigning Systems**

The multiliteracies course outlined in this chapter is my hope for English studies, in that it works not simply toward teaching students how to analyze fictional or argumentative texts, but it also helps create an environment for multiliteracies. Multiliteracies then seeks to view texts as information systems, and in learning the social, ideological, and rhetorical contexts for these systems, students can question how systems work within their own lives as workers, citizens, and scholars. My proposal within this dissertation for including video games in the textual fabric of English studies is about finding a framework that encapsulates the way all texts simultaneously use storytelling, rhetorical persuasion, and are reader/viewer/player enacted. Readers then use multiliterate practices to create meaning. The question now is, what kind of meanings and

questions will they produce? What implications does the “new” English course have for the discipline as a whole? For me, I believe that the framework I’ve developed in this dissertation is certainly a work in progress, as other perspectives can certainly be brought to bear on textual analysis and production in multiple modes. The particular theories and pedagogical choices I’ve made in this discussion are also partial, incomplete, and centered on my own particular interests in developing metaknowledge as opposed to subject knowledge. Thus, other perspectives can fit according to instructors’ own institutional or classroom practices. Nevertheless, I believe the focus on viewing texts as systems of information that cue audiences, persuade them, and teach them specific literate practices is one that can be invaluable for today’s students.

As I’ve mentioned earlier, this course (and the theoretical framework that supports it) is meant to create designs for social futures, for social and cultural transformation. The relevance of this kind of teaching for today’s students should not be underestimated. As students encounter more complex systems of information or structures that constrain meaning-making possibilities, the ability to look at those systems from a meta-level is vital. Instead of simply absorbing and following the “reading path” of the system, students can hopefully work to interrogate how the system asks them to create meaning, enact it, and use literate practices within it. Thus, my use of *World of Goo* (and the use of literature, films, and games in the integrated media course) is a model for students, a way of trying on an identity and examining textual systems that are microcosms of real-life systems as well. Since all texts are created by authors and enacted by audiences, they are not created in social vacuums. Even texts about anthropomorphic goo balls can tell audiences something about themselves, about what they and their

society value, and how systems can constrain possibilities for those within them. Thus, the texts of the course and the theoretical and pedagogical frameworks for multiliteracies are dry-runs, mere opportunities for looking at fictional systems. *World of Goo*, in this context, is just one example of a textual system that forces audiences to create particular meanings while constraining other choices. What insights and metalevel understandings students develop in a course interrogating these fictional systems is up to them. All we can do as instructors is to create the possibilities for social transformation by adding breadth and depth to students' textual experiences, and as a result they can be more prepared to design social futures.



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## Appendix A: Permission to reprint images from *World of Goo* for academic use.

The following email message is from Ron Carmel, one of the developers of *World of Goo*. His permission to reprint images applies to Figures 2.1-2.6 and 4.1-4.5.

Re: Dissertation Permissions Monday, July 12, 2010 2:42:46 PM

From: ron@2dboy.com  
To: etjordan@mtu.edu  
Cc: contact@2dboy.com

ethan, feel free to take and use screenshots and videos, just give proper attribution.  
ron

Ethan T. Jordan wrote:

> Name:  
> Ethan T. Jordan  
>  
> Email:  
> etjordan@mtu.edu  
>  
> Body:  
> Hello:  
>  
> My name is Ethan Jordan, and I am currently working toward my PhD in Rhetoric and Technical Communication. I'm looking to use some screen captures and/or video of *World of Goo* in my dissertation. These images will only be used for academic purposes. I know that I am most likely covered under fair use guidelines for copyright issues, however I would love to have some kind of written confirmation from 2D Boy to show the Graduate School at Michigan Technological University.  
>  
> Thank you so much for your time, and for such a great game!  
>  
> Ethan T. Jordan  
> Michigan Technological University  
> etjordan@mtu.edu  
>  
>