Tech Writing, Meet Tomb Raider: video and computer games in the technical communication classroom

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ABSTRACT This article examines the common genre of the usability study in technical communication courses and proposes the incorporation of computer and video games to ensure a rhetorical focus to this genre. As games are both entertaining and educational, their use in the technical communication classroom provides a new perspective on multimodal literacies that is appropriate to meet the needs of twenty-first-century learners. This article both describes a theoretical rationale for the inclusion of video and computer games in the classroom and also offers suggestions for their practical pedagogical incorporation.

Introduction

A young woman sits in front of a flickering computer screen, brow furrowed, pondering what to do next. ‘Okay. I want to get past the guard, right, but if I just walk right past him, he’s going to see me and immediately open fire. I could sneak past him though.’ She pauses, concentrating intently as she considers the divergent paths ahead of her in the game. ‘Well, I guess even though I have to double back and go around him, I don’t have enough ammo right now, so my best plan of action is to take the longer path and go back around.’ Satisfied with her decision, she resumes the game as the others in her group look on attentively and scribble notes on pieces of paper.

This scene could take place in any college dorm room across the country. In this case, though, the action happened not late at night in the dorm, but rather in the classroom itself as part of the course curriculum. These technical writing students were greeted on the first day of the semester by a classroom lab equipped with a variety of computer games, along with PlayStation and Xbox console gaming systems loaded with titles such as Metal Gear Solid, Tomb Raider, Quake, and Half-Life. Their task: to compose a group game walkthrough, an instructional document stepping a reader through multiple game missions (while also stopping to describe the myriad side quests along the way), that would then be usability tested by another team in the class. The aim was to provide students with a strong grounding in the genre of an instructional document while at the same time assisting them in considering the rhetorical situation such a document entailed, particularly with regard to the novice audience that would be partaking of the walkthrough. Overall, the experience was a success, and this article shares some of what I learned along the way about best practices for using games in teaching technical communication.

In this article I discuss my experience using PC- and console-based games (Half-Life, Tomb Raider, You Don’t Know Jack, Metal Gear Solid, and Quake) to teach usability and rhetorically informed revision practices in a semester-long technical writing course. First, I discuss some of the theoretical underpinnings of incorporating games into the classroom. Next, I note many of the practical considerations instructors should pay attention to when teaching using games. In particular, I outline potential pedagogical problems instructors may encounter when using games in the classroom, including gender issues, group dynamics, plagiarism, and material conditions necessary for the success of the project. As well, I offer potential solutions to some of these issues, many of which also operate as learning opportunities for the students in negotiating group work,
ownership of their writing, and ethical gray areas in intellectual property law. Finally, I close by offering a vision of the revolutionary promise of video and computer games in education.

Usability and the Technical Communication Classroom

For some technical writing students, the prospect of spending an entire semester reviewing the traditional assignments – résumé writing, usability studies, even software documentation – is met with a sense of begrudging obligation. As Moeller and McAllister (2002) point out, many college students enroll in technical writing courses with a limited view of what writing is like in this field: ‘Students usually believe, initially at least, that their work needs to be ‘technical’ – related to numbers or highly specialized theoretical or applied scientific knowledge, for example, in order to be good’ (p. 191). At the outset many assume that learning to compose in the technical writing classroom simply entails the production of a series of lock-step genres of writing, each discrete from the next: the memo, the résumé, the lab report, the instructional document, and so on. How then can technical writing instructors excite students about the fundamentals of technical writing, while also introducing students to the rhetorical notion of revision for a particular audience? One answer is the use of video games to teach the usability study genre as well as to teach the importance of rhetorically based revision processes in writing. Enriching the study of technical communication genres with the rhetorical art of techne, or the means of learning through skillful craftsmanship, helps instructors guide students to see their involvement in the ‘creative, ingenious, tricky, [and] unpredictable’ task of playing games as a fruitful method to strengthen their writing skills (Moeller & McAllister, 2002, p. 204).

It is no surprise that many students spend a great deal of time outside of the classroom playing games of some sort, whether on consoles such as Sony’s PlayStation line, Microsoft’s Xbox, or Nintendo’s Wii, in multiplayer online role-playing environments like World of Warcraft or EverQuest, on personal computer systems, or on handheld systems such as the Nintendo DS or the Sony PSP. Thus, incorporating video games into the classroom is an ideal means of capturing students’ attention and indulging their creativity while at the same time teaching them important aspects of technical writing. Such a requirement also pushes students to move beyond the comfort of print-based essayistic literacy and incorporate additional modes of literacy such as the auditory or the visual. Multimodal composing processes like these attempt to address a growing need in contemporary higher education pedagogy today: preparing students to best succeed in an increasingly technological world that exploits not only alphabetic but also visual and auditory literacies.

Units on usability are often challenging for students who are just beginning to negotiate the overall parameters of the technical communication classroom. Most of these students are taught to consider the rhetorical situation – their audience, their appeals, their exigency, and their claims and evidence – when composing documents in the technical communication classroom. Instructors may ask students to visualize a novice audience, one unfamiliar with the technology under consideration, in order to write clear, detailed instructions in software documentation projects. Paradoxically, many students may themselves be unfamiliar both with the technology they are to investigate, as well as with the overarching goals of effective technical communication in a rhetorical construct. As a result, such students have difficulty meeting the needs of an unfamiliar audience. Thus the usability test itself may be the most important part of the revision process in a rhetorically focused technical writing class. Usability testing offers opportunities for writers to test out their documents on real-world users and discover where these audience members make mistakes, are confused, or desire more information. On the basis of the results of the usability test, the original author(s) of the document can then revise and improve their instructions.

However, usability is itself a contested term within the field of technical communication. Bevan et al (1991) describe the usability of a product as a combination of measured performance and assessment of the physical, mental, and affective state of the user. The many possible techniques for evaluating usability include soliciting an expert’s opinion on the document, performing a detailed analysis of user interaction, and carrying out an analysis of user interaction using a rubric or checklist as a guide (Bevan et al. 1991). Dumas & Redish (1994) insist that usability testing meet five main points. First, a usability test must aim to improve the usefulness of a
product. As well, the participants should include ‘real users’ doing ‘real tasks’ that are recorded and observed by testers, who then analyze the data and arrive at conclusions based on that analysis. Finally, the analysis should lead to specific recommendations that seek to alleviate any problems observed in the usability test.

Dicks (2002) cautions instructors to understand that classroom-based usability testing operates under particular constraints that make it a difficult concept to teach well. These constraints include the relatively small sample size used for most usability tests, the task-orientation of the test, and the difficulty in finding users who are truly representative of the intended audience of the document. His advice is salient for any instructors planning to integrate a usability unit into their technical communication curriculum:

As more and more university-level, technical communication courses and texts have usability components added to them, it becomes very important that professors discuss the limitations of usability testing and that they introduce at least enough information about inferential statistics so that people do not believe that they are demonstrating universal truths based on sample sizes of four users. It is also important that they discuss all of the usability characteristics, rather than focusing too heavily on ease of use, task oriented testing for procedural information. (Dicks, 2002, p. 28)

If presented to students in this manner – that usability studies, like all other experiential data, can be analyzed in multiple ways and are subject to bias – then usability can be an important and, I believe, necessary part of standard technical communication curricula. While usability can be difficult to teach, computer and video games can enhance the learning experience of students working to understand the importance of usability in technical writing and communication.

**Teaching with Games: why?**

Video and computer games are particularly well adapted as a vehicle for teaching usability in technical writing classes. Gee (2005) describes how even – and, perhaps, especially – complex games motivate players to immerse themselves in the gaming environment; as a result, they learn difficult concepts while enjoying the process. The assignment described in this article incorporates Gee’s concepts into technical writing pedagogy by embedding usability education in the pleasurable kinesthetic learning process gaming provides. As students first encounter their chosen game, they adapt along the way to the details of maneuvering characters, completing the objectives of the individual levels, and, finally, successfully beating the game. After game-play, students write a walkthrough for an audience unfamiliar with the game, then trade their walkthrough with another student group to test its effectiveness. Particularly for games with branching storylines, students must consider all the potential needs and questions of their intended audience – for example, explaining what to do if a novice player gets stuck or takes a wrong turn. As a student group watches while another group uses their walkthrough to play the game, the authors can immediately see where they need to revise their instructions, thus cementing the necessity for clear, detailed instructions and thorough revision in technical writing.

The branching play most current games offer forces students to move beyond mere linear thinking and consider multiple options and consequences. As a result, they are required to consider the rhetorical effectiveness of their game walkthrough document; they must consider issues of audience, such as the prior knowledge that audience may or may not have about the game. Similarly, as an instructional document, student groups should provide a rationale for the path they have chosen to outline. As an example, walkthroughs available for the Wii game *The Legend of Zelda: twilight princess* range from all-purpose guides to completing the game to more targeted guides to completing Link’s mini-games, capturing all of the available Poe Souls, finding all of the heart containers, and even a ‘minimalist challenge’ for completing the Cave of Ordeals under a particular set of restrictions. Each walkthrough assumes a different purpose and potentially even a different audience, and the authors of these walkthroughs have made specific rhetorical decisions while at the same time working within the constraints of the walkthrough genre.

The many different options for composing the game walkthrough highlight its effectiveness as a rhetorical document, one that asks authors to make targeted decisions about audience, purpose, exigency, and constraints. Buse (1996) examines the narrative structure of games, arguing
that games hold fascinating educational potential because they provide players with options for participation: ‘Participation, as a term, has the advantage of skirting the bounds of both free will and determinism, and should be taken to have at least two meanings here: first, the literal playing of the game, and second, the “enunciation” of the game/narrative by the viewer/player’ (p. 165).

Indeed, ludology, or the study of games and game-play, is a discipline that points to the many possible narratives available in sophisticated games as evidence of their worth for academic study. Games offer players the opportunity to actively create the narrative they participate in and to step into the mind and mannerisms, in a sense, of the character they have chosen to play.

While the branching narratives of complex games offer students opportunities to move beyond linear thinking processes, games are also valuable in academia because of their inherent multimodality. Multimodality is commonly defined as communication activities that entail the use of more than just print-based textual material, instead incorporating music, sound, images, color, and the like. One of the clearer definitions of multimodal texts is offered by Takayoshi & Selfe (2007), who describe these texts as those that ‘exceed the alphabetic and may include still and moving images, animations, color, words, music, and sound’ (p. 1). Defined in opposition to the traditional texts that are privileged in the college classroom, multimodal texts encourage students to incorporate a variety of visual and auditory elements that each function independently of each other, but combine to create meaning when combined as the sum of all the parts. Perhaps multimodality can be best visualized using a musical metaphor: a musical score is composed of separate channels – alto, soprano, bass, tenor – all operating independently, but which together create elements like ‘rhythm’, ‘melody’, ‘harmony’, and ‘counterpoint’. An individual could listen to each discrete unit alone and appreciate them musically, but when brought together as one musical composition, each of these units combines to make the overall experience richer and more complex than any one layer could offer.

In recent years, instructors have been encouraged to include more activities and assignments that ask students to reach past the boundaries of traditional classroom essayist literacy toward more multimodal texts. This push toward multimodality in higher education has been described alternately as a change that promises to be significant, far reaching, and disruptive (Takayoshi & Selfe, 2007); a paradigm shift that will bring new approaches to research, publication, and teaching (Daley, 2003); and a tectonic shift that will bring about deep structural change to educational pedagogy (Yancey, 2004). These metaphors paint a picture of inevitable alterations that will transfigure our approaches to teaching in an increasingly networked society; they also portend the upheaval, the messiness, of such a shift. And, in many cases, the idea of teaching not just alphabetic literacy but also visual and textual design along with auditory production and analysis is daunting. It is daunting because of this messiness, but also because it asks instructors to become familiar with multiple literacies with which they might not be comfortable. For example, Daley describes the ‘profound silence’ that greeted her when she suggested to a faculty member in an English department that they explore multimedia writing in the college classroom together (p. 40).

Such silence could possibly be the result of the stunning list of production and analytical knowledge that one must have to, at least according to Daley, read and write the language of media:

One needs some understanding of frame composition, color palette, editing techniques, and sound-image relations, as well as of the mobilization of generic and narrative conventions, the context of sound and images, sound as a conveyer of meaning, and the effects of typography. ... Multimedia also requires that attention be paid to design, navigation, and interface construction.

(Daley, 2003, p. 38)

Each of the elements listed above is certainly important when considering the analysis and production of multimodal text, but taken all together, they fashion a list that may seem overwhelming even to instructors experienced in multimedia composition. For a beginning instructor or even for a student, the list of elements Daley asserts as necessary for understanding how media creates meaning in a particular context may be too intimidating. Zappen (2005) finds that the intimidating prospect of a paradigm shift in technical communication is at once exhilarating and exhausting, ‘exciting because it holds promise of opening new vistas of opportunity for rhetorical studies and troublesome because it reveals the difficulties and the challenges of adapting a rhetorical tradition more than 2,000 years old to the conditions and
constraints of the new digital media’ (p. 319). We may very well be on the cusp of an entirely new way of thinking about literacy, about meaning-making in composing, and about the importance of digital technologies in the college classroom.

Whether or not educators agree that we should stretch beyond the traditional boundaries of our disciplines and begin to investigate, for example, materials from film studies, graphic design, or computer science in composition classes, one fact remains clear: students are already immersed in an environment that daily exposes them to multimodality. How can we as educators work with the burgeoning digital literacies our students bring to the classroom? These literacies showcase the comfort many twenty-first-century students have with computerized and online technologies, but they may also evoke the discomfort that students can feel when asked to critically assess the impact of these technologies on their lives.

Multimodality in the classroom can offer a space for students to create meaning using multiple media, including within the context of an assignment such as the one detailed in this article, the computer or video game walkthrough. As games have become so pervasive in our society, most students are already aware of video and computer games’ impact on the world even if they have never played a single game themselves. By taking the comfortable and familiar, then, and asking students to assess it critically beyond the simplest participatory level, game studies in the classroom push students to apply critical thinking to popular media and consider the multiple layers of modality operant in the games themselves.

Teaching with Games: how?

Incorporating computer and video games into the classroom offers many potential benefits, as outlined earlier: the possibility of increased student engagement and learning; the ability to move beyond mere modes or genre-based writing to richer, rhetorically informed composing pedagogy; and the incorporation of multimodal literacies that may benefit twenty-first-century student learners in particular. However, the use of games in education also involves careful planning and forethought as well as an institutional infrastructure sufficient to support an instructor’s pedagogical goals. The following section outlines some common teacherly concerns regarding the incorporation of computer and video games in the classroom.

As well, I finish by outlining a larger concern – namely, the latent threat that games seem to present to many educators. In addressing this perceived threat, my aim is to point out that, in many ways, the institutional infrastructure to support the pedagogical use of games is the most critical consideration involved in such a move. Yet – as with many other media embedded within the discourse of popular culture, such as fanfiction, Japanese anime videos and manga books, and graphic novels – games are still relatively new to the classroom and may be viewed with suspicion by institutions curious as to how these media can possibly help teach good writing. One must be prepared to meet with potential resistance to teaching with games while higher education struggles to understand the position of popular media and multimodal literacies in the classroom. Educational reform is always slow, but games are already poised to become a more readily accepted part of the college classroom in the future.

One potential concern when relying on an assignment such as the group game walkthrough is negotiating the dynamics of group composition. Computer game walkthroughs seem best suited to group work – each student brings his or her own particular strengths to the walkthrough project overall, so that even a class with mixed abilities, experience, and interests in computer and video gaming can accomplish the tasks set forth with a minimum of frustration. Learning in such an instance becomes collaborative and highly social. Yet Roskelly (1992) describes group work as ‘risky business’, revolutionary in its rejection of the teacher as the ultimate fount of all knowledge and its placement of the instructor as facilitator, coach, and leader (p. 125). As she notes, group work in the classroom enables the instructor to become a catalyst for students’ engaged learning, but a catalyst necessarily implies change (pp. 127-128). In fact, I would expand on Roskelly’s depiction by noting that in chemistry, a catalyst often hastens the speed of the overall reaction, accelerating change while remaining unconsumed by the reaction. Such a metaphor seems apt to describe the speed at which group dynamics take shape, especially in an assignment like this that requires students to work together for often lengthy and sustained periods of time.
The experience of one particular student in one of my past technical writing classes seems to me to exemplify the riskiness of group work; her depiction of what took place is an important cautionary tale, particularly in the wake of educational use of collaborative writing spaces such as blogs and wikis. The following anecdote regards this student’s group, where the members were assigned on the basis of self-professed strengths and weaknesses in game-play and writing:

I feel the group size was good, but I had some problems with just being thrown into a group. I feel that if my grade is going to depend on someone else’s work, then I should have the option of who to trust. In my group, I had an issue with [another student]. He tried to do everything. ... The next day, [he] would show up, doing things in his own way. Just changing how he decided to do things.

This student continued by outlining how her and the rest of her group-mates’ writing was superseded by the wishes of this one peer who continually made editorial decisions without the consent of the group: ‘I can honestly say that I did not see the final draft of our paper before it was posted, because after we were done, he went and edited again. I don’t know what to do. I can’t do anything to stop him.’ In this group, then, the members struggled constantly to give up some ownership of their own writing. At the same time, many of the members attempted to work toward a utilitarian goal of a satisfactory group project; even if their contributions to the project were eventually erased by the one member who had appointed himself as de facto group leader and editor, if their project was worthwhile overall, they said, it would be okay. Ultimately, this group’s project satisfactorily met the needs of the grading rubric and assignment, which pleased the group members, but this student in particular found the entire experience to be a struggle for power and control that she eventually lost.

Her story provides a poignant moment that is important both because of its implications for the decentered classroom that group game walkthroughs like these demand, but also because of the underlying gender relations that ultimately threatened to derail this group’s work. The number of women gamers continues to increase, perhaps in part spurred on by the increasing prevalence of strong female characters such as Samus Aran from Metroid, Lara Croft from the Tomb Raider series, Jill Valentine from the Resident Evil series, and Aya Brea from the Parasite Eve games. Yet the cultural stereotype of the video gamer almost always envisions the gamer as male, and even many of these strong female protagonists in the games themselves seem designed not only to fight but also to look good while doing so.

Female characters in video games fall along a sharp binary divide. On the one hand, they may be invisible, off-screen, awaiting rescue by the male protagonists, such as Princess Zelda from Nintendo’s wildly popular Zelda series and Princess Toadstool in early Nintendo games like Super Mario Brothers I and II. These female characters, while central to the narrative of the game itself, rarely appeared outside of the exposition and the end credits when the player had beaten the game. On the other hand, female game characters can be attractive and intimidating; when the first Tomb Raider game was released for the personal computer, as much attention was paid to Lara Croft’s breast size as to her fighting prowess. Indeed, ‘nude patches’ were quickly offered that allowed players to patch their games so as to see Lara running around the game naked. Kennedy (2002) describes Lara Croft as simultaneously the hero, the active participant in the game, and the heroine, the physical body to be looked at and desired. Whether nearly invisible, like Zelda and Princess Toadstool, or nearly invincible, like Lara Croft, women in video games rarely break free from the ‘female fantasy figure’ mold (Kennedy, 2002). In short, there has always existed a tension regarding depictions of women in games as well as playing games, and the student’s tale of powerlessness within her group (‘I tried to tell him to stop ... I can’t do anything to stop him’) reflects this tension.

This student group’s story, then, reflects the necessity for the instructor to model appropriate group work guidelines, to discuss with students the impact of group work and writing technologies on student ownership of writing, and finally to check in regularly with the student groups through progress reports that may help the instructor address problems with the group dynamic before they become serious. And, as student groups will be creating their documents within a rhetorical situation in which they imagine an idealized audience member who will be the recipient of the game walkthrough, it is also important to ask students to discuss their analysis of that idealized audience. If, for example, the group identifies their idealized audience member as a novice female
player, the instructor should be on the lookout for stereotypical discussions of what male or female game players are like and offer students the opportunity to explore these stereotypes in class.

While group dynamics are an important aspect of the video or computer game walkthrough assignment, another issue that emerges is that of intellectual property. As with any project that entails original research, students should be guided through a discussion of respect for and ethical use of others’ copyrighted materials, including already written game walkthroughs, images or screenshots from the games themselves, music from the games, and trademarked or copyrighted names. In an assignment like this, students will invariably reach a point where they have played their game for quite a while but have suddenly reached an impasse. Especially in games that offer challenging logic puzzles, student groups will attempt to figure the puzzle or problem out on their own but may indeed get stuck, unable to progress beyond this point and thus unable to progress in their game walkthrough. Should students then be allowed to go to a walkthrough repository such as GameFAQs.com and use walkthroughs written by others to complete the assignment?

The answer, of course, is up to each individual instructor, but I do think it behooves the students to try for a while until frustration and the lack of advancement in the game seems to reach a true impasse. After that, I have encouraged students to look only for the answer to their puzzle or only for the right direction to turn in a previously published walkthrough, then continue on their own beyond that point. However, I ask them to give credit where credit is due and cite the author or authors of the walkthrough that they used to address their problem. Such citation acknowledges that game-play itself is often a highly social activity, as evidenced by multiplayer online environments like EverQuest and avatar-based social spaces like Second Life. It also respects the work that other dedicated gamers put into the creation of their own walkthroughs, which students may discover a newfound respect for at the culmination of this project.

Occasionally, however, a student group will try to subvert traditional game-play and rely almost entirely on previously published walkthroughs, cheat codes, and so on. This is one reason I advocate having students play their games only in the class setting and in full view of the instructor, who can then gauge whether groups are succeeding or floundering as play happens in real time. As well, the instructor must let students know in no uncertain terms that simply copying and pasting sections of someone else’s game walkthrough is still considered plagiarism and therefore is a serious issue of academic dishonesty. I spend a day before we begin game-play going through a discussion of our school’s academic honesty code and student code of conduct, pointing out where our assignment falls in terms of plagiarism and academic integrity standards. As well, I talk to students about copyright, registered and trademarked names (such as Sony PlayStation® or Microsoft® Xbox), Creative Commons licensed materials, and educational fair use guidelines. I incorporate these aspects into the grading rubric by asking student groups to provide a reflective cover sheet describing their search strategies for any music and images used in their walkthrough, and by asking them to provide citations for any materials they used to assist them in the creation of their walkthrough.

Finally, student frustration may manifest in the form of uncertainty when playing the game in order to compose the walkthrough: how far should a student group play to be truly ‘finished’? While a player can go through the process of completing each level and ultimately beating the game, most computer and video games do not offer a simple path from beginning to end. In fact, the ‘end’ of many video games is in fact a new beginning, such as when a gamer completes Parasite Eve and is presented with an unlocked ‘EX Mode’ game. Here, the player climbs to the top floor of the Chrysler Building in New York, battling increasingly difficult monsters all the while, and at the seventy-seventh floor he or she faces the true boss of the game. One could say that the player cannot truly beat Parasite Eve unless he or she has actually played the game through twice. Most courses, though, will be constrained by the quarter- or semester-long academic format and will not be able to play a game through even once completely.

Even setting clear goals – such as a group committing to complete Level One of a game – may be difficult. First, because of the branching game-play most games offer, students will have to decide how detailed they want their walkthrough to be. Do they simply want to offer the reader the quickest path? Do they want to outline the easiest way to get through a level? Do they want to offer the path that offers the most exciting game play or perhaps the quietest to save ammunition? Should the walkthrough offer the reader information about multiple play options, and if so, what kind of support should they provide for players to pick just one? All of these choices are ones that
each individual group should make before commencing game-play. Second, because most class periods are between one and two hours long, give or take, students may be in the middle of game-play when class time is over. For games that offer the opportunity to save at any point, this presents no problem; however, for games with save points only offered at certain times or places, student groups may have to carefully gauge when and where they need to save to be able to continue during the next class. Informing students of the differences in game-play ahead of time and modeling different ways to save can help alleviate the potential frustration of a group who, unable to save at the end of class, has lost all of their data. Finally, student groups should either have hard-drive access to save their game data if playing a computer game, or a memory card to save if playing a console game. Instructors should check to see whether the computer systems are ghosted or refreshed and how often, then share that information with the student groups so that they know whether or not they can safely save materials such as ‘save files’ or their walkthrough on the server.

Thus we come to the most important consideration of all when thinking about games in the classroom: what kind of institutional support is necessary to make such an endeavor successful? McAllister (2005) devotes a large section of the appendix to his book Game Work: language, power, and computer game culture to the idea of a ‘game night’, an evening of game-play for educators interested in exploring the rhetorical nature of video and computer games. Many of the practical considerations he outlines in this appendix also prove useful for educational use of games in the classroom. DeVoss et al (2005) outline the infrastructural support that can support – or disrupt – instructors’ abilities to teach multimodal literacies, including the use of games in the classroom. They point to breakdowns in the system as moments of rupture that should be shared with students to help them understand some basic and powerful issues that emerge when teaching, learning, or composing multimodal pieces. The computers and software available to teach with games are important; the server space and labs allocated to the gaming classroom are equally crucial. Perhaps even more importantly, the authors point out that local institutional policies and attitudes are fundamental in determining the success of a multimodal educational project. Sometimes, they point out, the system and policies for technology use are incompatible with instructors’ and students’ needs when composing multimodal projects (DeVoss et al, 2005, p. 33).

Overall, when considering implementing an assignment like the group computer game walkthrough project, it is essential that students have a dedicated space to focus on game-play and work on their projects over a sustained period of time. Game-play often requires several weeks’ worth of class time devoted to exploring the game systems and progressing through the game itself. The relatively high audiovisual requirements of most computer games necessitate up-to-date hardware in the classroom lab as well as accessible and skillful information technology (IT) assistance as needed. And ultimately, the instructor should be flexible – having backup plans for when technology fails to work in the manner desired and being willing to re-evaluate at different points throughout the term if necessary.

Conclusion

While there are many complicated aspects of teaching using games, certainly one of the main advantages is the engagement students feel when they are involved in the active learning process that computer and video games demand. Despite the fact that games have much to offer in the classroom, and in the technical writing classroom in particular, the fact remains that the use of games in teaching (particularly those not labeled as ‘educational games’, such as PlayStation, Wii, Xbox, and Nintendo console titles) is still relatively rare. In part, this reflects the idea that games are threatening to the established educational order. Gee (2005) describes the cost of incorporating games in the classroom as ‘the cost ... of changing people’s minds about learning – how and where it is done’ (p. 15). Often, games are viewed as extracurricular only and even as a distraction from more suitable educational pursuits such as reading textbooks or doing homework. Expanding learning beyond the temporal and physical boundaries of the traditional classroom is a task that higher education is still struggling with – trying to deal with online and distance education, for example, or asking students to participate in technologically mediated discussions on listservs, blogs, and wikis outside of class time.
Following Gee’s argument, Bogost (2005) contends that incorporating games into the classroom in many ways requires educators to reject the safety and security of much of our current understanding of pedagogy:

Anyone who believes that games can be educational tools that challenge and expand the horizons of knowledge transfer must also reject the twentieth century-style institutionalized education that stands opposed to them. And anyone who rejects institutionalized education in its current form must also embrace videogames as part of an alternative. This means that videogames serve a deliberate and disruptive role as agents of educational reform. And educational reform serves as a medium for the disruptive uses of videogames. (p. 123)

Just as many of the currently circulating metaphors for institutional change as a result of multimodal literacies reflect the idea of drastic upheaval, games portend a similar disruption and perhaps even dissolution of our notions of what higher education should entail. To many, games present a threat – to literacy, to the instructor’s authority in the classroom, to the familiar instructional materials of the classroom. While an instructor certainly would not want to bring games into his or her pedagogy without careful forethought, such consideration is no different from considering the move to using a different textbook, for example, or to using PowerPoint as a communication tool. In short, all pedagogical change requires prudent planning, with video and computer games as no exception. I hope that many readers will be moved to curiosity after reading this article and begin to consider more seriously what games can accomplish in the college classroom.

References


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