REVIEW ESSAY

USING GAMES TO MAKE SOMETHING: OF OUR STUDENTS, OUR PEDAGOGIES, OUR FIELD

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Gee, James Paul, and Elizabeth R. Hayes. *Language and Learning in the Digital Age*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2011. 159 pp. $39.95. ISBN 9780415602778.

Steinkuehler, Constance, Kurt Squire, and Sasha Barab (Eds.). *Games, Learning and Society: Learning and Meaning in the Digital Age*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2012. 464 pp. $37.99. ISBN 9780521144520.

Squire, Kurt. *Video Games and Learning: Teaching and Participatory Culture in the Digital Age*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 2011. 253 pp. $30.95. ISBN 9780807751985.

Thomas, Douglas, and John Seely Brown. *A New Culture of Learning: Cultivating the Imagination for a World of Constant Change*. Lexington, KY: CreateSpace, 2011. 137 pp. $12.95. ISBN 9781456458881.

If there's one thing that writing instructors are known for it's innovation. Compositionists, because of our connection between academia and industry, the humanistic and the technical, the creative and the practical, are often some of the first to explore and adopt new technologies. In 2000, Susanmarie Harrington, Rebecca Rickly, and Michael Day published *The Online Writing Classroom*, providing insights into how teachers of writing could incorporate digital technologies into their instruction; in 2004, Anne Francis Wysocki, Johndan Johnson-Eilola, Cynthia L. Selfe, and Geoffrey Sirc captured our imagination with *Writing New Media*, a compilation of innovative techniques for incorporating multimodal instruction and assignments into our pedagogies; and in 2007, Heidi A. McKee and Danielle Devoss's *Digital Writing Research* helped us move one step further by introducing methodological insights into researching technologically advanced texts. These are just a few examples of how our field welcomes technology into our theories and practices. And our tendency toward early adoption only makes sense. After all, technology is a means to a societal end of innovation and survival (Gehlen 214). To survive and succeed in a changing world, we must embrace new technologies as part of the future. Early adopters are often innovators, those willing to accept and experiment with new technologies as they arise. It therefore follows that compositionists—rhetorical, linguistic, and writing scholars who often specialize in technological areas—would be innovative as well. This innovation is perhaps most prevalent among those who specialize in new media studies, which often "attracts innovators, iconoclasts, and risk-takers" (Manovich xii). From encouraging multimodal composition to visual and digital literacies, our field is centered on the very idea of change.

Those who embrace digital technologies now find themselves facing a new technological and pedagogical tool: games. From games-based learning to game narrative construction, visual and multimodal perspectives on games to the rhetorics of gaming culture and community, writing instructors and researchers are

beginning to experiment with the power of games both inside and outside of our classrooms. The titles I review today— James Paul Gee and Elizabeth R. Hayes' *Language and Learning in the Digital Age*; Kurt Squire's *Video Games and Learning*; Constance Steinkuehler et al.'s *Games, Learning, and Society*; and Douglas Thomas and John Seely Brown's *A New Culture of Learning*—will perhaps be best enjoyed by writing instructors who already identify as early-adopters of technology, who embrace change and incorporate multimodal forms of writing into their curricula. However, these books may also be useful to those who have a personal or professional interest in games of various forms (e.g., video games, board games, and card games) and are intrigued by how lessons we can learn from games can be applied in writing pedagogy and scholarship. As I'll discuss in this essay, there is a call for rhetoric and composition scholars to consider the adoption of games and games-based learning into higher education. In the writing classroom, games can help build digital literacies and creativity, teach students about problem-solving and innovation, and encourage participatory learning communities in our classrooms. In short, games can help us *make things*.

Ian Bogost is of course one of the most recognizable rhetoricians who studies (and creates, and teaches, and criticizes) games, and his scholarship is often cited by those looking to gain a rhetorical perspective on the gameplay and social construction of video games. In his research, Bogost describes what he calls "procedural rhetoric" as "a subdomain of procedural authorship; its arguments are made not through the construction of words or images, but through the authorship of rules and behavior, the construction of dynamic models" (29). In other words, procedural rhetoric for Bogost is rhetoric that persuades audiences not via speaking or writing but rather through the use of procedure, or the rules and boundaries that define the game. "Persuasive games," as he calls them, are "videogames that mount procedural rhetoric effectively" (46). An example of such a game is *Sim City*, the popular simulation that, as Bogost points out, teaches players how to engage in real or fantasy-based scenarios based on its own

procedural rhetoric; it instructs users how to interact within its virtual world based on the game developer's own opinions of how the real world operates (258-260). Our writing classrooms might be seen in a similar light. That is, we teach our students through procedural rhetoric—by creating and asking them to adhere to particular sets of "rules and behaviors"; what and how our students learn is shaped, at least in part, by our course objectives and policies: the rules and procedures that formulate our classroom environments. Even if we strive to incorporate real-world assignments such as service-learning projects, our classrooms are ultimately rhetorically and socially constructed spaces. The rules we set, via our syllabi, our course structure, and our curricula, become our own procedural rhetoric; they become the way in which we shape our pedagogies to fulfill our ultimate goals. To that end, Bogost's research provides an entry point for rhetoricians and compositionists to join in the dialogue about games and gaming studies. That is, how might we reconsider our own forms of procedural rhetoric in our classrooms, and what can we learn from games that might shape new directions for our writing pedagogies?

This is just a starting point, however, as Bogost joins other writers and rhetoricians who have also contributed research to this growing sub-area of rhetoric and composition. One such example is Jan Rune Holmevik, who merged Gregory Ulmer's concept of electracy (to oversimplify somewhat, Ulmer used "electracy" as another way of positioning the term "digital literacy") with Stuart Moulthrop's call for game scholars to not just criticize games but also make something. "To put this very simply," Moulthrop writes, "an alternation of play and reflection is not enough. We must also play on a higher level, which means that we must build" (212). Jan Holmevik himself is an historian, writer, programmer, gamer, and rhetorician. In his own writing courses at Clemson University, he teaches students to explore their own histories with writing and then use that as a powerful form of improving their own digital literacies. In this way, he asks his students not just to think and read about writing, or even to simply write a response

to a given prompt, but—like many writing instructors—also to use writing as a way to *make something*. His focus is on helping students use play-based learning to build valuable critical thinking, problem-solving, social skills, and creativity. "It all comes back to this idea that we can do serious work through play;" says Holmevik, "that entertainment also has learning value and potential" (Hedrick 1 [interview]). Writing, then, becomes not simply an exercise in grammar and style but a powerful mode of self-discovery and meaning; students use multimodal approaches in their writing to ultimately *make something*. In his book, Holmevik presents a call for writing and rhetoric scholars to interact with, engage with, and build with digital and multimodal texts to make something—and he sees technology, such as gaming and programming code, as the means of bridging the chasm that often exists between work and play (3). In writing pedagogy this means not relying on standardized essay prompts but creating lessons and tools from gaming and technology to encourage our students to make meaning, to use writing as a way to bridge the gap between work and play, career and school, today and the future. Integrating games into our curricula is a means of teaching our students new ways of viewing the world.

Of course, Holmevik isn't the first rhetorician to discuss the importance of production in writing; he just might be one of the few to filter this assertion through the lens of gaming. Locke Carter, for instance, also urges rhetoric and communication scholars to *make* something. She argues that rhetoricians need to stop viewing the world from the sidelines, with criticism and theory, and step forward to create something productive that adds meaningful value to the field (36). This is essentially what Moulthrop argued when he called for game scholars to earn tenure and thereby legitimize the game studies field through the production of gaming artifacts (212); Kylie Peppler and Yasmin Kafai advocated for a similar approach when they urged educators to both use games in the classroom and have students create games as a form of building literacy skills (6-7). Gunther Kress also made a similar argument when he discussed the impact that visual design

has had on contemporary literacy practices. He urged technical communicators to focus on the future of "design rather than critique" (88); in short: build something. Ultimately, what these scholars and others suggest is that our field needs to *create, make, build*. And I believe that games are uniquely positioned to help us do so. From solving problems to constructing knowledge, to creating learning communities to building digital literacy practices, games and games-based learning can help writing students and instructors *make things*.

Many scholars believe that games are the next step in our technological future—both in industry and in academia (see, for instance, Salen & Zimmerman). And by games, they don't necessarily mean simply video games. Board games, card games, dice games, even political "games" such as public speaking and debate, can be used as means of class construction and learning. What these games have in common is a rules-based structure that allows for experimentation, creativity, innovation, and play within a classroom environment. In a games-based learning environment, students must be allowed to play; they must be given a chance to approach learning in individually and collectively meaningful ways; they must be allowed to *make something*.

The four texts I review here today—Gee and Hayes' *Language and Learning in the Digital Age*; Squire's *Video Games and Learning*; Steinkuehler et al.'s *Games, Learning, and Society*; and Thomas & Brown's *A New Culture of Learning*—refer to our era as the "digital age." It is time, as these authors collectively and individually argue, for educators to embrace video games and games-based learning as part of our everyday writing pedagogies. In short, it is time for us to *make something*. This is not to say that we don't already have our students make meaning with their writing. Ann E. Berthoff, for instance, spoke about encouraging a "pedagogy of knowing," a pedagogical model that helps writing students make meaning of their work, three decades ago. However, what I—and what these authors I discuss today—believe is that games and game-based approaches to learning are uniquely positioned to help

further the ways our students *make something*, whether multimodal artifacts or constructive communities of learning.

To a certain extent it only makes sense that writing scholars will—and should—adopt games and gaming as part of our discipline. As games continue to evolve and increase as an industry, so will the societal and cultural need for composition scholars who have expertise in game mechanics, game tutorial development, game usability, gaming narrative, and even games-based pedagogy to step forward and become a part of this ever-expanding field. Perhaps more importantly, this also calls to a need for us to prepare our students for an increasingly technological era. If games are becoming a very real element of our students' lives outside of academia, and if a games-based culture will permeate their lives after graduation, then we have a responsibility to teach our students the writing and rhetorical skills that they will need to navigate this "digital age." This does not mean that we need simply to teach our students how to write video game narratives or game instruction manuals; instead, as these authors each claim from slightly differing points of view, games have the power to teach students valuable skills that will help them well beyond their years at the academy. In many ways, games are the counter-construct to standardized curricula. They provide customized approaches to learning that often incorporate collaboration and promote community. Standardized curricula often focus on the individual, from assessment to learning objectives. All students complete the same tasks and at the end of the semester we are asked to evaluate how well an individual has met a series of pre-constructed outcomes. Games-based learning, on the other hand, can still incorporate outcomes, but how students reach those outcomes is often more flexible and is built around the success of the entire learning community. Each member of the class works toward both individual and group goals to solve problems and construct meaning. And, not every student necessarily has to get there in the same way. For instance, one student may create a video while another designs a blog, and yet both may achieve the same course outcome which asked them to

demonstrate their ability to employ persuasive rhetoric. This customized approach to learning is just one way that games and games-based approaches can become useful in the writing classroom. It's also a way to increase the level of student engagement, critical thinking, problem-solving, and digital literacy.

Each of the authors takes a slightly different approach to arguing for the value of games-based learning, and whether readers accept these authors' claims will likely depend on their own pedagogies and personal views about games and technology. In *Language and Learning in the Digital Age* Gee and Hayes (now Elisabeth Gee) emphasize the power of participation, collaboration, and problem-solving inherent within gaming communities. Although their manifesto is somewhat short (159 pp.), it packs a punch, as they call to task educators who fail to focus on problem-solving, innovation, digital literacy, and preparing students for our technological world. They cite the success of various "passionate affinity groups," or "communities of people… who organize around their shared passion and not on the basis of race, gender, class, ability, or power" (80). These affinity groups, formed online and often within virtual gaming worlds, work in teams to solve problems, construct knowledge, and create powerful communities of learning; they *make things*. The authors—both professors of English at Arizona State University, he in literacy and linguistics and she in digital media and digital literacies—claim that these gaming communities have the power to change both their own practices of learning and the world around them by engaging in collaborative exchanges of information. They believe—and I tend to agree—that games-based learning is about more than just playing games; it is about "design, production, creativity, participation, and collaboration" (4). We must engage our students, they claim, in all of these aspects of games if we are to harness the full power of technological change. What's perhaps most interesting about their argument for the purposes of composition studies is the linguistic lens through which they stake their claims; the authors identify

evolving meanings of words such as "image" and "democracy" in our new digital era as the cause of the rise in focus on multimodal texts (111-115). That is, the authors provide an argument for games-based learning from a perspective of English professors who understand the social construction of language and literacy. To that end, the authors see our field move toward technology as a somewhat inevitable socially-constructed mechanism rooted in linguistic and cultural meaning.

Thomas and Brown, for their part, embrace Gee and Hayes' claims about the power of community in *A New Culture of Learning: Cultivating the Imagination for a World of Constant Change* but then take the argument a step further by including technology in all of its forms. The authors evangelize what they call a "learning collective" (52). They believe that learning happens when students work together in a non-standardized "culture of learning" in which new media become a tool for students to embrace lifelong learning practices (36-37). The authors assert that students must engage with the world around them to learn about and become continually inspired by the world and others in it—and technology has the power to help them do just that. Digital "technology has now made connecting personal interests to collectives possible, easy, fun, and playful," and the use of new media can help students find interest in learning through customized experiences that are focused on exercises in problem-solving and critical thinking (72). With customized learning experiences, students are much more able to use their imaginations to create, construct, and change the world around them: to *make things*. Much like Gee and Hayes's work, Thomas and Brown's text reads a bit more like a manifesto than a book, but that's not necessarily a bad thing. In fact, their enthusiasm toward improving the educational system as a whole (specifically, by rejecting standardized curricula and embracing technologically-based learning communities) makes for an inspiring read, especially for those who are already technology enthusiasts. Although not specifically in the field of composition (Thomas is an associate professor at the University of Southern California's

Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism and Brown was a cofounder of the Institute for Research on Learning), their message is ultimately quite close to that of Gee and Hayes in that they all share a passion for community-based learning practices. Learning, they all agree, does not happen independently from the cultures and societies from which knowledge is formed.

Indeed, games are a powerful way to build community-based, collaborative learning spaces—as Squire, associate professor of Educational Communications and Technology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, argues in *Video Games and Learning: Teaching and Participatory Culture in the Digital Age*. Games are also perfect examples of building participatory cultures. Like Gee and Hayes, Squire focuses on the social aspects of games, noting that they are "unique in that they are participatory. Games are complex systems that invite us to *play* with them. They are dynamic in that they unfold over time; most games evolve in response to our choices" (22). This, Squire claims, points to the true power of games: They are about making meaning and producing knowledge. If we teach our students to play with—and create—games in our curricula, Squire asserts, then our students will learn "to become *leaders, teachers*, or *authors* in the domains they are studying" (45). Games can help encourage students' natural inquisition for individualized learning by allowing players to construct their own meaning and experience (46-50). Once again we can see a clear message: Games help students *make things*: knowledge, meaning, community, choice, change. Squire makes some compelling arguments about the collective learning power of games; however, in the second half of his book he tends to navel-gaze a bit too longingly at his favorite game, *Civilization III*, so that non-gamers or those who aren't fans of historical educational software may become a bit tired by his discussion. However, Squire's point is ultimately quite close to Thomas and Brown's: The game-based "model of knowing is a *functional* or *pragmatic* way of knowing, because we make meaning through interacting directly with the world and observing our actions' consequences" (143). That is, games help us create our own meaning through action.

Finally we have Steinkeuhler et al.'s edited collection, *Games, Learning, and Society: Learning and Meaning in the Digital Age*—and by now we are primed for this compilation of articles that focus on everything from game design to cheating, game culture to gaming communities, games-based curriculum to mobile learning. Steinkeuhler, currently on leave from her position at the University of Wisconsin-Madison to serve as a senior policy analyst of games and learning in the Executive Office of the President, heads up this collection and is joined by her husband and colleague Squire, as well as Sasha Barab, a professor in the Teachers College at Arizona State University and strong advocate for game-inspired pedagogies. The three editors bring collective experience in both industry and academia to the forefront in this book, which provides foundations in games research, methodology, theory, and games-based learning. The collection even contains a piece by Gee and Hayes entitled "Nurturing Affinity Spaces and Game-Based Learning," which continues the discussion from their book on affinity spaces and learning communities.

Games, Learning, and Society falls into three sections: 1) "Games as Designed Experience," which focuses on game design and development; 2) "Games as Emergent Culture," which continues discussions such as those mentioned above regarding social practices, gaming communities, participatory spaces, and games-based culture; and 3) "Games as Twenty-First Century Curriculum," which provides guidance in creating educational games and games-based learning environments. At first blush this collection may seem a bit haphazard, but I have yet to find a book that provides such an inclusive look at games and learning. Each section—whether game design, game culture, or games-based curriculum—provides readers with an overview of games and how they relate to pedagogical goals, regardless of academic field.

This is a book about games that has been created by education scholars for a pedagogically-focused audience. This isn't a writing text; for composition scholars, this book is perhaps most useful in providing an overview of topics that aren't typically discussed in

our field, such as how to best design educational game experiences as a method of pedagogical scaffolding. Of course, like the other books I've discussed in this essay, *Games, Learning, and Society* will perhaps best be suited for composition instructors who are already interested in exploring the use of games and games-based learning principles into their curriculums. Yet I will say that while many other texts discuss game theory, game design, and even games-based communities (e.g., Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman), this is one of the only texts I have found that merges these concepts with a distinct focus on pedagogy.

In sum, all of these books are, essentially, calls to action, asking us to reinvigorate our pedagogies, take a few risks, and *make something*. Each book, I believe, would make valuable additions to the libraries of compositionists who evangelize "multimodal composition" or "new media," who embrace distance education or hybrid models of learning, and who are intrigued with evolving pedagogical practices and new technological tools. Early adopters of writing technologies and practices for developing new literacies will likely find these texts to be useful in discovering new pedagogical aims. As for others, I do realize that the difficult part about buying into any innovative practice is that at times it may seem flighty or faddish. However, all four of these books suggest that games and game-based communities and cultures are here to stay. And if we don't want to be left behind, then once again writing instructors and scholars need to step forward and embrace the next step in our "digital age," which very well seems to be games.

Some may say I'm overly optimistic about the role of games and games-based learning in composition pedagogy and research—and perhaps I am—but I believe that the four titles I review here today can contribute at least somewhat to the call for scholars in our field to "make something." Understanding how games can link with literary practices, multimodal composition, creativity, problem solving, critical thinking, and more can help researchers in rhetoric and composition make important contributions to our field: Make games with the knowledge of

what actually works from a basis of instructional design; make curricula with the understanding of the specific pedagogical moves that work best; make multimodal compositions utilizing a variety of materials and methods; make research that continues to explore these new technologies and pedagogies—and all with the confidence that the games from which these lessons are learned are firmly grounded within the rhetoric and composition discipline.

As my discussion suggests, there are indeed many ways that our field has—and should—become involved in games and game studies. From theorists urging us to consider the rhetorical impact of games to rhetoric scholars urging our field to *make something*, our field's innovative history certainly points to our inclusion in the new, technological field of games research. And while the rest of the world moves towards pedagogical and practical implementations of game studies both inside and outside of the classroom, these texts—Gee and Hayes' *Language and Learning in the Digital Age*; Squire's *Video Games and Learning*; Steinkuehler et al.'s *Games, Learning, and Society*; and Thomas and Brown's *A New Culture of Learning*—while not perfect, are certainly poised to help us begin to understand how, and why, our field should not be left behind.

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