

# reading avatars and writing walkthroughs

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Video games are traditionally seen as the enemy of the serious student, a waste of time and a cause of youth violence. This paper examines how reading avatar creation and writing walkthroughs can link gaming to writing classrooms. I will show how World of Warcraft (WoW) can be an acceptable medium for a multiwriting project. The old definition of literacy, "an individual's ability to read, write, speak in English, compute and solve problems at levels of proficiency necessary to function on the job, in the family of the individual and in society" (National Institute for Literacy qtd. in Steinkuehler) seems outdated in a postmodern world where print media is usually accompanied by pictures and video. As James Paul Gee notes, "In the modern world, print literacy is not enough. People need to be literate in a great variety of different semiotic domains...The vast majority of these domains involve semiotic (symbolic representational) resources besides print (18). Gee believes digital technology, including video games, is not in competition with traditional literacy, but instead engages new literacies. New Literacy Studies focuses on the recognition and production of meaning in "a given semiotic domain, with particular attention given to sense making in multimodal, multimedia spaces such as those enabled by digital technologies" (Steinkuehler 298). Composition can take many forms then: videos, presentations, discussion boards and blogs. By utilizing multimodal projects, students learn literacy skills that translate from the composition classroom to their lives.

In an essay aptly titled "Against School", veteran teacher John Taylor Gatto claims that his time inside New York's public schools made him an expert in boredom. He writes,

"Boredom was everywhere in my world, and if you asked the kids, as often as I did, why they felt so bored, they always gave the same answers: They said the work was stupid, that it made no sense, that they already knew it" (152). Most of his students felt that they "wanted to be doing something real, not just sitting around" (152). Gatto acknowledges that lethargy was also prevalent in the teacher's lounge, but was usually attributed to the draining effect of dealing with students. Gatto's essay reveals his dissatisfaction with the stasis of the schooling system. He urges educators to find ways to encourage "curiosity, adventure, resilience, the capacity for surprising insight—simply by being more flexible about time, texts and tests" (153). I read this piece with a group of first year writing students and they agreed with Gatto. They feel disconnected to their teachers and assignments, which is a major reason they view school as a struggle rather than a place to grow intellectually. Digital technology offers a way to bridge the gap between school and their interests. Selfe and Marek state, "Rather than having an empowering, invigorating experience, our students, raised on visual media, more often than not find school irrelevant and boring—a burden to be endured in order to obtain the certificates that will enable them to pursue their goals" (30). By allowing those who prefer working with visual media the opportunity for open composition instead of text only essays, real learning can happen while exploring new discursive traditions.

Robert L. Davis and Mark F. Shadle describe in *Teaching Multiwriting: Researching and Composing with Multiple Genres, Media, Disciplines and Cultures* an alternative method of composing. They speak directly to compositionists who are looking for new ways to stimulate learning and inspire critical thinking. As with Gatto's sentiments, Davis and Shadle seek to break away from the traditional research paper because "all of them are written in the same form; it may be a formula you believe can help students but is one you know too well. None of these papers will be as written as well as you could write it" (2). How do students perform for teachers who know more about a subject and have seen it written about in so many different ways? By allowing students to work with something they are familiar with, like video games, we can judge their work based on something they might be an "expert" in.

In order to encourage ownership of projects, Davis and Shadle allow open composing, in which students "may find and follow questions they care about. Such questions, engaged with growing fascination, help students enrich and improve their work and rejuvenate teachers who guide students into mysteries and are often led by student research and discourse into places that they have been before" (3). This symbiotic system of inquiry frees teachers from their role as authority figure, and instead allows students to explore subjects they relate to and can even teach the class about. Their argument is based around the assumption that opening up composition to different genres, media and cultures gives "students choices about how to research, write and present their discourses in complicated relations to their subjects, purposes, audiences and occasions" (3). Students are directed to map out a line of inquiry that interests them and immerse themselves in gaining a deep understanding of their subject.

With the advent and rise of the Internet, "the best methods for sustaining a discussion, sharing results, or collectively pursuing questions, outside of a small set of real-time friends, may also be online, in discussion forums and chat rooms" (Davis and Shadle 18). Hybrid and online classes, as well as online portions of traditional classes engage students in new ways. Knowledge comes from new sources that were once inaccessible or too hard to find. Constance Steinkuehler writes about a new generation of scholars "who have grown up with [computer] technologies and tend to readily publish their work online (primarily, blogs and Web sites) long before publishing in traditional print journals (if they publish there at all)" (616). If scholars are changing the pace and medium of submitting their work, why can't students? Technoculture is constantly shaping and reimagining our society, and can be embraced using Davis and Shadle's multitext model.

Writing classrooms offer a unique opportunity for students to improve their skills while exploring something they love. According to the Electronic Software Association (ESA) data for 2007, 65% of American households play computer or video games. The odds are in a college writing classroom most students have been involved in gaming at some point. They may not play WoW, but the idea of writing a walkthrough can be modified to accommodate their game of choice. Gaming is also a predominantly social practice, with 59% of gamers playing with other people in person (ESA). Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs) bring people together; as many as 40 players might fight one boss. The computer and console game industry had a combined sales total of 9.5 billion dollars in 2007 (ESA). I bring this up simply to show that video games are a pervasive influence on college students' lives and a social nexus, thus offering an interesting medium to explore alternative projects. Cynthia L. Selfe writes:

Composition teachers, language arts teachers, and other literacy specialists need to recognize that the relevance of technology in the English studies disciplines is not simply a matter of helping students work effectively with communication software and hardware, but, rather, also a matter of helping them to understand and to be able to assess -- to pay attention to -- the social, economic, and pedagogical implications of new communication technologies and technological initiatives that affect their lives. (432)

Blizzard's globally popular (MMORPG) World of Warcraft (WoW) is the world's most popular in this genre. According to a December 24th, 2008 PC World article, the number of subscribers playing worldwide surpassed the 11.5 million mark. WoW is more than a computer game; it is an online experience that combines fantasy elements with real world aspects. It allows gamers to create an avatar, or virtual self, and implant it in the fictional world of Azeroth to fight creatures, complete quests and battle other players. WoW, originally sold in 2004, offers an open ended structure where new content is continually added, which differs from most games that have a clear beginning and end. Its popularity stems from the "rich tradition of alternative worlds that science fiction and fantasy literat-

ure provide us" (Steinkuehler 298). So, someone who is delighted by the character of Gimli in Tolkien's world can transform themselves into a dwarf and wander around in a strange and exciting place.

One of Gee's claims is that "video games recruit identities and encourage identity work and reflection on identities in clear and powerful ways" (52). The player forms a connection with their avatar because they create, mold and bond with their virtual self. Schools do not place emphasis on identity creation; rather they function as a place where personalities are discarded and replaced by the school self. An obsession with an audience has most writing students focusing on how best to please their teacher instead of expressing their language. Customization of an avatar is a highly personal experience. Gamers can visualize how they want to be perceived and create an avatar that projects a new identity.

Games as complex as WoW offer an opportunity to customize an avatar. Each character class and race has different attributes that dictate how the game can be played. Blizzard gives very detailed descriptions of class mechanics on their website. For example a rogue is "a lightly armored melee class capable of dealing massive damage to their enemies in a flurry of attacks. They are masters of stealth and assassination, passing by enemies unseen and striking from the shadows, then escaping from combat in the blink of an eye" (Blizzard website). Whereas the warrior is a "raging berserker or an iron-clad juggernaut, capable of withstanding tremendous attacks while protecting their allies from harm" (Blizzard website). Both classes are melee, which requires hand-to-hand combat, but their play styles are quite different. A rogue must be sneaky and patient because if detected their leather armor offers little protection. A warrior on the other hand is expected to charge in first to battle and kill everything in a rage induced spree. In order to choose a character most new users do some research via Blizzard's website, discussion boards or databases like thottbott.com.

Creating an avatar is a process that demands a user to understand multiple literacies. To pick a class and race, players must have a deep understanding of what each offers. Edmong Y. Chang claims that avatar creation is a mode of writing. He writes "even the process of creating a character in WoW is a narrative, and the choices the player makes will determine what the character's name is, what that character looks like, how the character is played, where that character begins the game, and what roles that character will take in the world" (6). As I will show later, a hunter fighting Balgaras the Foul has a different experience than a priest fighting him. Therefore, even if two students wanted to write a walkthrough about the same fight, the avatar they use will change their strategy.

WoW draws heavily on the good and evil dichotomy. Priests offer an interesting insight in the dual nature of humanity. A holy priest is a healer who tends to other character's wounds, while a shadow priest is a formidable killer. Concerning priests: "Just as the heart can hold both darkness and light, priests wield powers of creation and devastation by channeling the potent forces underlying faith" (Blizzard website). To denote their "badness," shadow priests are given a special aura, called shadowform, in which they glow bright purple and their damage is increased.

As Gee notes "one of the things that makes video games so powerful is their ability to create whole worlds and invite players to take on various identities within them" (139). Taking on the role of a shadow priest proved to be a challenging experience in WoW. There is constantly a shortage of healers and most of my guild mates complained that I was being selfish by playing a healing class in a DPS (damage) role. Gee offers insight into the cultural dynamics of good video games. He says "what counts is determined by a wider perspective than just a character's own goals, purposes, and values, as these are shared with a particular social group" (142). Indeed in my guild, they believed that a priest is doing "right" by helping the larger group accomplish goals together, by healing my fellow adventurers, instead of being a damage class.

One of the most active areas of the WoW community is the vast resources and commentary available on the Internet outside the game. The complexity of game play and constantly shifting dynamics open up many aspects of WoW to debate. Chang describes the action of "close play" or critical play, in which gamers do more than just play the game, they play it critically. Although he points out the cultural nuances to WoW (Trolls have a Jamaican accent, Tauren are unmistakably Native American) I will use critical play in a different way here. To play and write critically about WoW for a composition class includes arguing game mechanics using evidence from the game. Many writing students have a hard time arguing something they know little about. The WoW community works together to create a comprehensive body of knowledge that is constantly debated and updated. There are whole databases online, such as Thottbott and Wowhead, where players can write descriptions where items can be obtained, or how they completed difficult quests.

WoW also offers discussion points for classroom lessons. While teaching a high school freshman literature class, I said in passing, "You know, supply and demand," to which my students had no clue what I was talking about. Instead of some dry example about widgets, I recruited Steve, an avid WoW player, to help me explain the simple mechanics of supply and demand. In WoW players can pick two professions where they can either gather or craft goods to sell on the auction house (AH). The AH operates as a virtual marketplace. The currency is gold, silver and copper and each realm has its own economy which is largely based on the amount of people playing and how hard it is to obtain an item. I said to Steve "How much does primal might (an item used for crafting goods) cost on your server?" He replied, "40 gold." I then asked him, "So if you had a primal might to sell at the AH, and the lowest price listed was 40 gold, what would you put yours up for?" He said "39 gold." I asked him why. He said that if you want to sell the same thing, you had to charge less than everyone else. I asked him what happened to the price of primal might when a lot of people were selling it. He said "The price goes down." And when there isn't any listed at all? "You can charge whatever you want." Steve was a bright kid. The light bulb clicked and he said "Oh...so that's supply and demand. If there isn't a lot of supply the price goes up and when there is it goes down."

Deciding to push my luck, I then opened up a question to the whole class. "Which is better for a warrior, being an Orc or human?" Hands shot in the air, and not just the boys. As the ESA reports states, 44% of online gamers are female. I got a variety of answers.

ers, but they were mostly opinions. Each one of my students had a laptop and wireless Internet, so I told them they had 15 minutes to write a compelling reason for their choice and evidence to support it. When I told them the 15 minutes was up, most of them groaned and asked for more time, they really weren't ready. As a class we came up with two answers. Orcs were better for DPS, but humans were better for killing rogues. They cited numerous sources where they got their information, including discussion boards. Just a week prior, most of them struggled with a one page argumentation paper. They used research and evidence to create a compelling character that they could relate to.

Gee states that he is an avid reader, but he was proud of his avatar "at the end of the game in a way in which [he] has never been proud of a character in a novel or movie, however much [he] had identified with him or her" (58). His time spent playing Arcanum, a precursor to WoW, was satisfying because it was reflexive "in the sense that once the player has made some choices about the virtual character. The virtual character is now developed in a way that sets certain parameters about what the player can do. The virtual character redounds back on the player and affects his or her future actions" (58). We ask students to write reflexively, but most have no connection to research papers, even if they get to choose the topic. The allure of WoW is that it brings to life an experience through text, sounds and visuals, where a player dictates who they want to be and what they want to do.

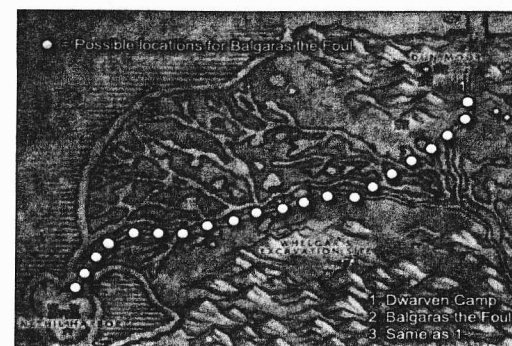
Based on my prior experiences both playing and using examples for WoW in the classroom, I decided that I wanted to make a connection between a writing assignment and the game. Davis and Shadle suggest that incorporating multiwriting in a composition classroom has many benefits. Their approach is designed to reach students who seem "full of potential but sometimes have trouble finding their voices or gaining persuasive power among their peers" (4). Composition is not a linear action; they claim their method "enacts texts as journeys that can transform both writers and readers" (25). This "altered practice of composition can grow from a reinterpretation of discursive traditions" (27) that create the missing bond between writer and their work. A frustrated group of early compositionists fought "to establish composition as a respectable discipline, [they] took on all the trappings of traditional academia-- canonicity, scientism, empiricism, formalism, high theory, axioms, arrogance and acceptance of the standard university department-divisions" (Sirc 6-7). Pressure from the rest of the academy forced compositionists to define and defend their position in the academy and this need for validation led to the use of traditional discursive traditions. But, what if an assignment can teach writing skills while also engaging the writer in a way that no research paper ever has?

The walkthrough is a how-to guide in some aspect of WoW. There are many out there already, but there is continually new content to discuss. The assignment asks students to call upon multiple literacies to produce a text that incorporates words, images and videos. As Constance Steinkuehler writes, "Gamers must continually 'read and write' meaning within this complex semiotic domain as every successful move within the virtual environment that requires participants to both recognize and produce meaning out of the overwhelming array of multimedia, multimodal resources that make up the game" (301).

Students can translate the literacies they learn playing a game into a text that explains their actions.

I want to use an especially good existing walkthrough to show the multiple literacies involved in this project. Jame's leveling guides from wow-pro (<http://wow-pro.com>) are free and the most detailed I have seen in this genre. I have used his guides and think they are exactly what Davis and Shadle mean by a multiwriting project. Jame writes in polished, easy-to-follow English. It is not flowery prose, but functional instructions, which might be useful for students who have struggled with clarity in the past. If a student wants to write a successful walkthrough, like those found in Jame's guide, they must pay attention to word choice, active voice and descriptive words. Writing a guide like Jame's requires the writer to be concise (the above example was one quest out of the thousands Jame writes about) and descriptive. In order to translate game play into writing, students have to describe their experiences to an audience.

Here is a sample section of how to complete one quest from his 30-40 Alliance leveling guide:



Included with the pictures are descriptions of the actions needed to take at each point. The guide is highly detailed with the yellow dots denoting the travel path and the orange dots represent where Balgaras the Foul is found. The purpose of the quest is to find and kill him to loot his ear. Jame offers text directions in addition to the map, "From there follow the road east until you get to an intersection, there go north until you see a camp with dwarves that have a few quests". A player obtains the quest in the dwarven city of Dun Modr. Each quest is accompanied by a description that tells a story. The in-game quest description reads:

Many of my soldiers died in the battle of Dun Modr. My own brother perished when the West Bridge over the Thandol Span was destroyed. Aye, the Dark Iron dwarves are a devilish breed. From what Roggo was able to gather, the leader of the thugs in the Wetlands is a warlock named Balgaras the Foul. He is quite a coward, sending his soldiers to do his bidding but hides in his camp on Direforge Hill, to the southeast.

If you can find the spineless scum, slay him and bring me his ear. I will reward you. <class>

If a player wanted to research the Balgaras fight, numerous online databases like thottbott.com allow space for players to give descriptions of their game play. First, a player can use Jame's guide to find Balgaras, and then following information given on Thottbott, proceed to fight him. An interesting point is that gonnabehappy, a hunter who posted about his fight with Balgaras, explains that he is Chinese, but living in Korea and English is not his first language. He writes in English because it is the lingua franca of cyberspace. He also states, "Oh, also something interesting, in china, all the undead characters have their bones covered with skin so they look more like a bunch of zombies..... this is because the chinese gov think the original looks are not consistent with socialism society's image." A student writing a multitext about this fight might want to include pictures of the creatures from the U.S. version of WoW and the Chinese one.

Gonnabehappy confesses that he died twice and completing the quest took him nearly an hour. Because he couldn't kill Balgaras on his first two attempts, he switched his technique to beat him. Gee states, "Good video games offer players ample opportunity to practice and even automatize their skills at various levels, they also build in many opportunities for learners to operate at the outer edge of their regime of competence, thereby causing them to rethink their routinized mastery and move, within the game, to a new level" (70). WoW does this in numerous ways. As a character levels up they are given new skills to learn. The monsters and bosses also become more difficult. Gonnabehappy had to push his competency to be successful, and he states, "It feels good after u solo him." The reward was so great that he went on Thottbott and spent time sharing his experience.

Reading avatars, or writing about avatar creation can enhance students' understanding of what professors mean by character and audience. WoW walkthroughs and online discussions are also two ways in which students can practice multiwriting and become literate in multiple literacies. Not everyone will be interested writing about video games, but I think there are so many other genres, disciplines and cultural projects available in open composing that each student can internalize their own work. Davis and Shadle have used this model for over twelve years and they claim that many of the faculty who were once resistant to their ideas at first, now "use multiwriting themselves, including the dean, when she teaches courses" (33). Ultimately, multiwriting offers us a "chance to participate

in these new cultural formations while practicing the crafts of writing and teaching in new ways" (Davis and Shadle 33). Students take their classmates and teacher on a journey that transcends the written word.

They "would like readers to see that practicing composition in new ways does not mean flouting tradition, acting carelessly, or coming at discourse from outside academic conventions. Instead [they] suggest that conventions can be revised or infused with a new sense of purpose by knowing some of their history and seeing that their use is often dependent upon rhetorical choices involving purposes, messages, audiences and occasions" (33). My examples suggest a deep understanding of the game is needed to write a coherent guide or argue game mechanics online. A multitext like Jame's requires the author to engage multiple literacies to produce a piece that is functional. By allowing open composition, students can find something that is meaningful to them and valid as a multitext assignment as posed in Davis and Shadle's model.

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