

LUDIC RHETORICS AND THE LANGUAGE OF PLAY

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

I.	Introduction to Ludic Rhetorics.....	1
II.	Theories of Play in Composition.....	30
III.	Huizinga’s Magic Circle and Play’s Symbolization.....	75
IV.	The Language of Play.....	113
V.	Ludic Outcomes.....	162
VI.	Bibliography.....	206

List of Figures

4.1	<i>Yearbook Yourself</i> Photo	130
4.2	Lame Pun Coon 1	134
4.3	Lame Pun Coon 2	134
5.1	Grading Rubric	182
5.2	Customized Grading Rubric	183

Chapter One: Introduction to Ludic Rhetorics

“How does play happen? How is it that a game board and a pair of dice, or a game program on a hard drive, or a baseball, a bat, and an empty lot somehow ramify into the experience of play—an experience of endless pleasure and variety that defies ordinary description?” (29)
Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman
Rules of Play

“We can play any games we want. We can create any future we can imagine.” (344)
Jane McGonigal
Reality is Broken

Introduction: Visualizing Play

What does it mean to play? And what does play mean? The five chapters of this dissertation propose an answer to these questions by making the argument that play—like words and images—is a resource utilized by humans to symbolize and express attitudes, to share ideas, and to persuade others of the veracity of their beliefs. Play is especially important for the field of rhetoric and composition today, and that importance is evident in current conversations about twenty-first century composing. Computers and writing scholars claim that play can help create more active, critical, and engaged learners (Anderson, “Low Road”; Rouzie, *At Play*; Shipka, *Made Whole*). Researchers in the emerging area of gaming studies claim that gameplay is not only fun, but also educational, persuasive, and social (Bogost, *Persuasive Games*; Gee, *What Video*; Taylor, *Play Between Worlds*). Building from this work, I contend that teachers, scholars, and students of rhetoric and composition stand to benefit from the theorization of play because of the composing possibilities created by its various symbolic forms. As humans play in digital environments such

as videogames, social media platforms, and wikis, their play composes such persuasive symbols as avatars, memes, and tags.¹ While such playing is not exclusive to digital environments, digitization makes that play endlessly repeatable and adaptable to a variety of rhetorical contexts and situations. To unleash the creative potential of all this playing, what is needed is an awareness and appreciation of play's rhetorical possibilities.

In the pages and chapters that follow, the words “ludic” and “play” may appear to be used interchangeably, but my usage makes a key distinction. Johan Huizinga, one of the earliest theorists of play and language and author of *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (1938), remarks, “Latin has really only one word to cover the whole field of play; *ludus*, from *ludere*, of which *lusus* is a direct derivative” (35). Moreover, he points out that the etymology of the term lies in the realm “of non-seriousness, and particularly of ‘semblance’ or ‘deception’” (35). When I use the term *ludic* in these pages—most often in reference to ludic rhetorics or, later, the ludic mode and ludic outcomes—I mean it in the broad sense described by Huizinga. In other words, it refers to the “whole field” of play, the various and often competing beliefs and attitudes that are expressed through discussions involving play in rhetoric and composition. While some argue that deep cultural biases have prevented the field from taking play seriously enough (Colby and Shultz Colby; Rouzie, *At Play*), others point to the many ways in which apparently non-serious activities like playing videogames are deceptively

¹ I discuss these specific forms in greater detail in chapter four. In basic terms, they refer to: 1) the characters people use to navigate virtual worlds, 2) an idea that is mimicked and shared through images and text online, and 3) keywords used to code data.

² Burke is, in fact, cited quite often by theorists of games and play, largely due to his broad view of rhetoric based on symbolization. In particular, see Brian Sutton-Smith's *The Ambiguity of Play*, as well as Ian

productive and culturally important (Lanham, *Economics of Attention*; Selfe and Hawisher, *Gaming Lives*). “Ludic” in these pages covers the wide range of things said about play in the field of rhetoric and composition, including both the ways it has and has not been taken seriously.

“Play,” on the other hand, refers to the human *activities* of playing. Those activities often create pervasive and persuasive symbols, what I later refer to as the “language of play,” or the ways play’s various symbolic forms are used rhetorically, most especially in the composing spaces made possible by digital new media. While “ludic” refers specifically to the things said about play in rhetoric and composition, defining the activity of play will require that I incorporate work from outside the field. Brian Sutton-Smith, the prolific educational theorist who researched and wrote extensively on play, claims, “In forty years of pursuing the meaning of play, it has become apparent to me that an understanding of play’s ambiguity requires the help of multiple disciplines” (*Ambiguity of Play* vii). On one hand, it is doubtful that any one person could define play once and for all. On the other hand, anyone who has ever played participates in its definition.

To discuss play rhetorically, it is useful to rely on a broad, macroscopic view of rhetoric, such as the definition offered by Kenneth Burke in *A Rhetoric of Motives*: “*the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols*” (43).² If play is rhetorical, then the language of play must include the ways play is used symbolically to do the stuff of rhetoric: shaping

² Burke is, in fact, cited quite often by theorists of games and play, largely due to his broad view of rhetoric based on symbolization. In particular, see Brian Sutton-Smith’s *The Ambiguity of Play*, as well as Ian Bogost’s *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Video Games*.

attitudes, forming beliefs, expressing emotions, and persuading others. In many ways, there is already a belief among some scholars that play is rhetorical in the broad sense that Burke describes rhetoric. Albert Rouzie, for example, argues that play is a “significant rhetorical element” in composition and communication (*At Play* 189). Patricia Dunn argues that educators should take seriously what the fun and pleasure of play have to offer student learning (*Talking/Sketching/Moving* 150). Daniel Anderson argues that opportunities for play in new media environments create possibilities for experimentation and engagement (“The Low Road” 364). Cynthia Selfe and Gail Hawisher urge scholars to consider the “very human acts of composing, creating, communicating, and, of course, engaging in serious play” (*Rhetoric/Composition/Play* xviii). A broad conception of rhetoric allows for many kinds of symbol-making practices to be understood rhetorically. Rhetoric and composition scholars already consider the rhetoricity of symbols such as image (Fleckenstein, *Embodied*; Murray, *Non-Discursive Rhetoric*) and sound (Yancey, “Made Not Only”; Selfe, “The Movement”), and their work makes room for a rhetorical theory about play.

However, I contend that what is meant by the term *language* might be expanded to include play, right alongside the various other symbols used by humans to express themselves, including discursive writing, image, and music. Johan Huizinga hints at such possibility in his famous and little-understood treatise on play, *Homo Ludens*:

Even those activities which aim at the immediate satisfaction of vital needs—hunting, for instance—tend, in archaic society, to take on the

play form. Social life is endued with supra-biological forms, in the shape of play, which enhance its value. It is through this playing that society expresses its interpretation of life and the world. (46)

In other words, human play takes on various symbolic forms—the hunt, the dance, the joke—and these symbolic forms express meaning, embody values, and are used by people to make sense of the worlds they inhabit. While Huizinga does not actually call play *language*, I will suggest that he has laid the symbolic foundation for such a theoretical assertion.

Such a theory can help teachers and researchers understand the wide variety of concepts embodied by the word *play*. Just as language is always ideological, Sutton-Smith persuasively argues that the truths people claim about play tend to reflect their own beliefs, assumptions, and the cultural mythologies in which they participate. In biology and animal sciences, for instance, play is often talked about meta-communicatively through the way it embodies paradox (Batesson, *Steps to an Ecology*; Fagen, *Animal Play Behavior*). One dog might signal play to another through a bite that is “not a bite” (Schechner, “Playing”). Play is also discussed in terms of human sexuality (Betcher, *Intimate Play*), and in psychology it can be seen as deep immersion or transformation in dream worlds (Caughey, *Imaginary Source Worlds*; O’Flaherty, *Dreams, Illusions, and Other Realities*) or in the deeply engaged activities of experts “losing time” in activities they find deeply pleasurable (Csikszentmihalyi, *Optimal Experience*). Familiar to most in English studies, of course, are post-structural theories that conceive language as the “play of signification” (Derrida, “Sign, Structure, and Play”). Still others have discussed play and its connections to

chance, war, and the ideologies of sport (Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games*; Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*; Guttman, *Games and Empire*). Like rhetoric, play is everywhere.

Just as in other disciplines, the things teachers and researchers in rhetoric and composition say about play are inevitably vested in our ideologies and belief systems. Raul Sanchez claims the job of theory is the “rigorous and continual reevaluation” of guiding questions and objects of analysis (“Rethorizing” 237), and I contend that theorizing play can help teachers and scholars reevaluate what they believe they already know about what play is, why it is important (or not), and to what degree it factors in writing processes and products. Perhaps inevitably, conversations about play appear more than ever in composition scholarship since many now study the rhetorical and educational potential of videogames and their play (Alexander; Colby and Schultz Colby; deWinter and Vie; Gee; Johnson; Robison; Selfe and Hawisher). In the relatively short period of time when videogames have been legitimized as teaching tools and objects or sites of analysis, the field of rhetoric and composition has already formed many assumptions about play, often drawn directly from other disciplines. Theorizing play can raise teacher-scholars’ awareness of these assumptions and provide an opportunity for reevaluation and inquiry.

Moreover, a theory of play rooted in rhetorical concepts and practices might help scholars rethink their assumptions about language and composing in terms of play. How does play influence not only the ways composers invent, but also the ways they express meaning in textual products? Johan Huizinga once described symbolic forms of play arising like the “warps and woofs of a fabric” (*Homo Ludens*

10). As people play within and through the various social sites—what Huizinga referred to as a culture’s “magic circles”—their play gives rise to the creation of many kinds of meaningful objects and activities, such as carnival masks, jokes, and even sacred dances and rituals. Huizinga’s insistence that “all play means something” (*Homo Ludens* 1) provides a good reminder that, for any definition of play to be useful for rhetoric and composition, it must account for the ways play has both symbolic and rhetorical meanings. A carnival mask becomes a persuasive expression of power, or a joke becomes a way for friends to share their beliefs and connect emotionally.

Game designers of today have extended Huizinga’s remarks on play to discuss it as a kind of movement that gives shape to virtual environments. In *Rules of Play*, Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman claim, “Play is free movement within a more rigid structure” (304). Following Ian Bogost (“The Rhetoric of Video Games”), I contend that Salen and Zimmerman’s definition is useful to understand the way play actually shapes and composes texts within expressive mediums, such as games. Moreover, I contend that it allows readers to understand and visualize play as it actually happens within a variety of mediums. Play as movement within a rigid structure is broad enough to “count” anything that humans tend to identify as play—dogs running through an enclosed yard, children playing on monkey bars, a gamer navigating virtual spaces—while allowing rhetorical theorists to imagine what play refers to in the contexts of rhetorical compositions: a student composing an essay on 8.5 x 11 paper, a researcher shaping her argument to the constraints of an academic journal, or an administrator dressing up her language for an important

meeting. In other words, using Salen and Zimmerman's definition, it is possible to think of play as those forms created by composers moving within the "rigid structures" of different composing mediums—what game designers refer to as "possibility spaces" (Bogost, "The Rhetoric"; Juul, *Half-Real*; Salen and Zimmerman)—to create textual products that express their intentions, attitudes, and beliefs. Essays are shaped by the ways people move and create within constraints like word counts and citation conventions. Avatars are given shape as people move through the audio-visual interfaces of videogames. I return to Salen and Zimmerman's definition of play, as well as Huizinga's suggestive remarks on play's symbolization, in much greater detail in later chapters. For now, play as free movement within a more rigid structure should be noted as a starting point that allows me to move toward a theory of play as language, which will include the various ways ludic rhetorics are symbolized and expressed in a variety of forms and mediums.

Finally, special emphasis for play should also be given to new media composing because new media creates the possibility for composers to endlessly repeat and share their play products. In *The Language of New Media*, Lev Manovich argues that new media is a result of "the translation of all existing media into numerical data accessible through computers" (20). Such computability creates specific possibilities, including the ability for composers to endlessly mix and mash a variety of modes like image and text into multimodal compositions. In doing so, new media compositions like memes and avatars can be customized and re-appropriated for a wide variety of rhetorical situations as they are composed and

shared in online spaces. While the language of play is not exclusive to such new media compositions, they provide ample opportunities for and examples of play's many symbolic forms.

To summarize, this introduction has suggested three major claims that will recur throughout subsequent chapters. They are as follows:

- First, the things said about play in rhetoric and composition are vested in the field's ideologies and beliefs, and recent considerations of gaming necessitate the need to reevaluate those assumptions.
- Second, play is symbolized by the forms and texts that emerge and express meaning as people play within and through various cultural sites, or "magic circles."
- Third, the composing possibilities created by computable media emphasize and enable play, making it a particularly important concept for theory in the context of twenty-first-century composing.

In order to lay the groundwork for these claims in later chapters, the remaining pages of this introduction highlight some ways to visualize play in terms of composing. Specifically, I point to three broad ways that composing can be thought of as "free movement within a more rigid structure" (Salen and Zimmerman 304). When thought of as movement within a structure, play can be visualized as what composers do as they: 1) explore multiple pathways and possibilities, 2) experiment with the bits and pieces of old texts to create something new, and 3) experience content through interface design. My purpose in this section is not to give a

comprehensive overview of any and all areas in rhetorical theory where play manifests. Instead, I aim to draw from selected texts and concepts in order to show how the definition of play offered by Salen and Zimmerman provides a good starting place for theorizing play for rhetoric and composition. I then provide summaries of the four subsequent chapters in the dissertation.

Playful Composing from Exploration

Play as “free movement within a more rigid structure” (Salen and Zimmerman 304) can be visualized through the multiple pathways and possibilities composers create as they explore and make connections between ideas. As composers move freely within the rhetorical contexts where they invent and explore, they participate in the creation of ideas that are made from play. In *Homo Ludens*, Johan Huizinga claims that language is “permeated with play from the start” because it creates a “spark” between people and the worlds they inhabit (*Homo Ludens* 4). In other words, composers playing within various rhetorical contexts create ideas and make connections as they explore possibilities.

If play refers to movement, then pathways can be thought of as composed by play. For example, in *What Video Games Have to Teach us About Learning and Literacy*, James Paul Gee discusses the various ways videogames embody good principles of learning. One way is through how well designed videogames utilize the “multiple routes principle,” meaning there are “multiple ways to make progress or move ahead. This allows learners to make choices, rely on their own strengths and styles of learning and problem solving, while also exploring alternative styles”

(105). One defining characteristic of games in general is that they have clear, well-defined objectives that players aim to meet (Juul, *Half-Real*; Ferrara, *Playful Design*; McGonigal, *Reality is Broken*). However, game rules can be designed in such a way as to enable many different ways for those objectives to be met. While Gee's purpose is to argue that educational outcomes should be intentionally designed in the same way, it is possible to think of those pathways as *composed* by players. This means that the rule-structures of a game work in a similar way as the constraints of a classroom or writing situation, and players create possibilities as they move within variously rigid rule structures.

Gee's multiple pathways principle is related to rhetorical theories of invention that focus on the creation of multiple ideas and possibilities. One example is Matthew Newcomb's 2011 *College Composition and Communication* article, "Arguing at Play in the Fields of the Lord." Specifically, Newcomb points to the role of play in argument by excavating the rhetorical theories of Charles Sanders Peirce. Newcomb argues that Peirce's "Neglected Argument" relies on a conception of rhetoric that views play as exploratory wandering, a necessary first step to argument. This concept, claims Newcomb, uses play in order to move argument beyond rhetoric's traditional emphasis on logic and rationality. Rather than thinking of composers as searching for a single, true answer to a problem, the playful stage of inventing focuses on creating hypotheses for arguments. Newcomb suggests play may be the most important stage of composing because it is where ideas are created while composers wander freely and make connections between their thoughts and the social worlds they inhabit and in which they act rhetorically. I contend that the

“hypotheses” created by people as they muse at the beginning stages of argument can be thought of as composed by play.

If play is embodied by the possibilities people create within various rhetorical contexts, then evidence of play and its rhetoricity must be present in the texts they invent from those explorations. Collin Gifford Brooke's *Lingua Fracta: Toward a Rhetoric of New Media* also highlights the concept of play-as-exploration in the inventive stage of composing. Brooke considers how new media composing both recalls and reshapes the classical canons of rhetoric. In chapter three, Brooke borrows the term "proairesis" from Roland Barthes to reconsider invention in new media compositions in terms of creating new ideas and possibilities. In doing so, Brooke follows well-known critiques of the modern author concept, where invention and discovery are often discussed in terms of original genius of authorial intent,³ to arrive at a more playful conception of invention that focuses on the flexibility of language and the rhetorical possibilities created through the interplay of rhetors and audiences. Brooke claims, “One of the defining missions of rhetoric and composition is its insistence on the social, cultural, and contextual position of the writer; the participation of readers and audiences in the construction of meaning; of the author/inventor” (62). Invention happens as rhetors move about and explore within the various cultural contexts where language is used, from the play of language’s ambiguous meanings between rhetors and audiences. Such play is especially prevalent in new media compositions in that it becomes possible for composers and audiences to interact in many new and different ways.

³ Examples include Sharon Crowley’s *The Methodical Memory* (1990), Karen Burke LeFevre’s *Invention as a Social Act* (1986), and Anis Bawarshi’s *Genre and the Invention of the Writer* (2003).

Like new media, multimodal texts might be understood as resulting from the multiple pathways and possibilities composers explore when they create texts composed of many different modes. In other words, part of the multiple pathways explored during playful invention involves the ability for composers to consider the various kinds of modes and materials they might utilize. Sheridan, Michel, and Ridolfo suggest as much in their recent book, *The Available Means of Persuasion*. They argue that, although invention is traditionally understood as “the single rhetor’s attempt to fashion a single, word-based composition for a single, stable context” (73), multimodal rhetoric requires an expansion of invention that more fully considers the multiple pathways and possibilities offered to composers through new and emerging technologies in a variety of contexts. They argue, “Traditional models of rhetorical invention are fundamentally flawed because they fail to account for both the diversity and the materiality of available rhetorical practices (55). If a multimodal composition is conceived as a possible space where people write, then the various modes and media that ultimately compose it can be thought of as made from play.

The multiple pathways and possibilities explored to invent texts embody the “free movement” within various social sites where composers play, explore, and create. Whether it is through the creating of hypotheses for arguments, the rich inventive possibilities of new media, or the arranging of various modes and materials in multimodal compositions, play is involved in the creation of texts as composers create and explore so many pathways.

Playful Composing from Experimentation

The concept of play as free movement within a more rigid structure can be visualized through the experimentation composers do as they mix and mash various bits and pieces from other compositions. When composers are given the freedom to reappropriate materials from various sources for their own purposes, the possibility is created for them to transform something “old” into something “new.” Such experimental processes are sometimes referred to as “remix,” what Lawrence Lessig refers to as “a critical expression of creative freedom that in a broad range of contexts, no free society should restrict” (*Remix*). The ability to reappropriate the work of others opens the door for composers to experiment and create. When composers are given the ability to move pieces of others compositions around, to rearrange parts of old texts into new texts, they create new textual products composed from those free movements. In other words, they create texts composed by play.

Rhetorical theories of remix are based on post-structural conceptions of authorship that view all texts as necessarily composited from the tissues of various other textual products and performances. For example, in Roland Barthes's "The Death of the Author," he claims, “We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single, ‘theological’ meaning (the ‘message’ of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash” (146). This means that any and all claims to originality or ownership of language are necessarily suspect because any one use of language is related to every other instance of its usage. Since any new expression of language is by definition

composed from the past, all language must be a “mashup” of previous instances.⁴ Such a conception of authorship legitimizes remixed texts and emphasizes play, as the practice of moving pieces of other compositions about freely within one’s own to create something new is reconceived as the norm.

Such post-structural theories of authorship, which tend to be used to give legitimacy to remixed compositions, are particularly relevant in the context of digital new media. In Lev Manovich’s *The Language of New Media*,⁵ he describes “modularity” as one important result of new media’s computerization. Modularity means that new media texts are composed of many different media parts—images, words, and video clips, for instance—in which each part maintains its own discrete identity because of computerization. For example, if a composer were to use image-editing software to layer one image on top of another, or text across those images, she could do so without degrading the other pieces. This means that the possibility is created for the composer to freely and endlessly mix and mash media parts. When text is deleted from the image, the image itself remains unchanged because it is described with its own computer code. In this sense, creating a new media composition using image-editing software can be visualized as play in that a composer can freely move text within the space of an image, delete that text, and then move other texts or images back into the same place. Many different modes and media can be remixed endlessly in this way.

⁴ While Barthes’s essay has most often been read politically, in a recent *College English* article John Logie points out that “Death of the Author” was initially published in “The Minimalist Issue” of *Aspen: The Magazine in a Box*. In this context, Logie argues, readers can see that Barthes was part of an artistic revolution that questioned traditional notions of authorship in terms of “an increasingly multimedia artistic culture,” just as rhetorical theories of remix are doing today (“The Birth” 495).

⁵ A much more detailed discussion of computerization and new media is provided in chapter four.

Giving play its due in the composing process of remixed texts, particularly those enabled by new media, creates the opportunity to rethink some traditional assumptions about authorship and originality. One such example can be found in "Plagiarism, Originality, Assemblage," where Johndan Johnson-Eioloa and Stuart A. Selber challenge the notion that remixed texts are either derivative or plagiarized. They instead advocate the view that, through assembling multimedia projects made from old texts, students create something new. By claiming that the image of the solitary and original author still dominates institutional policies on plagiarism, Johnson-Eioloa and Selber point to the need to theorize and understand how compositions like video mashups are crafted. Play, I contend, is central to such remix craft, as mashups are enabled by composers' freedom to remediate⁶ and reappropriate prior texts and forms in the face of new and changing rhetorical situations. Many have argued that such practices are crucial to teaching students twenty-first century composing skills (Fraiberg; Davis, Webb, Lackey, and DeVoss; Taylor; Ulmer, *Electronic*; Yancey, "Made Not Only"). The "freedom" to play during remix processes requires that composers' movements in one another's texts are understood as legitimate composing processes.

Some in the field have already begun to discuss remix in terms of play. Albert Rouzie, for instance, claims that hypertexts⁷ are composed with a sense of playfulness because links allow composers to be *bricoleurs*, arranging and

⁶ Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin define remediation as "the formal logic by which new media refashion prior forms" (*Remediation* 273).

⁷ Collin Gifford Brooke aptly critiques rhetorical hypertext theory and early claims that it rendered arrangement obsolete. Brooke argues that hypertext does not obviate arrangement, but instead makes different kinds of arrangements visible through the various patterns readers make as they move through hyperlinked texts.

rearranging well-known materials into the formation of something new. Rouzie describes hypertext as “self-consciously playful” (*At Play* 119) due to the ways it links authors with readers, reading with writing, and processes with products in performative compositions that are intended to be experienced as much as read (130). Further, he calls on rhetorical theorists to understand play as vital to the composing process and suggests that writing instructors should recognize and invite play into the composition classroom. Rouzie argues, “It is important that instructors, students, and the rhetoric and composition field begin to consider play as a significant rhetorical element of composition and communication” (189), and the freedom for composers to remix and reappropriate prior forms and texts is an important part of his claim. In other words, by not policing remix practices as academic misconduct or intellectual theft, but instead understanding them as legitimate composing methods made visible through electronic mediums, the opportunity is created to more fully realize the rhetorical potential of play in the composition of student writing.

Finally, play can be visualized as free movement within a more rigid structure when rhetoric and composition scholars use remix as a method for creating new knowledge. Jason Palmeri, for instance, uses remix to create a new history of the field that emphasizes multimodality as an ongoing and longstanding concern of writing instruction. His book, *Remixing Composition: A History of Multimodal Writing Pedagogy*, attempts to “resee our field’s history from the perspective of the remix artist, which is to make new a new history by juxtaposing samples from various other’s histories (13). While many scholars, such as Patricia

Dunn, have critiqued the field's reliance on the "primacy of language" (17), meaning its over-reliance on speech and alphabetic writing as *the* way of knowing and making knowledge, Palmeri assembles bits and pieces from diverse texts in the field's past—such as Flower and Hayes's work on cognition, Edward Corbett's work in classical rhetoric, and Janet Emig's work on composing processes—to create a remixed history that characterizes multimodality and non-alphabetic writing as established and ongoing concerns for rhetoric and composition.⁸ By using remix as a method to "resee" and transform the field's history, Palmeri⁹ creates a rhetorical history of composition that embodies his own experimentations with major texts and theories. Palmeri freely moves bits and pieces of the field's history in order to give it a new shape, one that is composed through his play.

The arranging and rearranging of bits and pieces of texts into remixed compositions represents the possibilities created when composers are allowed to move modes and media freely for rhetorical purposes. Whether it is through considering the results of computerization for new media, legitimizing composing practices like hyperlinking and video mashups, or using remix as a method to resee the field's history, play is involved in the creation of texts as writers experiment with new and varying combinations.

Playful Composing from User Experience

⁸ Just as Palmeri revisits old texts to claim multimodality has always been a concern in rhetoric and composition, I would contend that the possibility exists to do the same for play. One good example is Donald Murray's *The Craft of Revision*, where he claims that revision is "a profound form of play" (15).

⁹ Palmeri writes, "While I alone am listed as the author on the title page, this book might better be seen as a kind of remixed collage of the voices of the many colleagues, mentors, friends, and students who helped me *talk out* my ideas" (ix).

The concept of play as free movement within a more rigid structure can be visualized through the experiences users have when navigating interfaces, or those points of interaction between authors, readers, and texts. While interfaces are designed to direct attention and guide user experience, I contend that they are also composed through the interactions and inputs of those same users. Many scholars of new media note such a double logic when it comes to the interface. For example, in *Windows and Mirrors*, Jay David Bolter and Diane Gromala claim, “In every digital artifact, from spreadsheet to videogame, the physical shape, the interface, the look and feel are part of the user’s experience. Every digital artifact needs at times to be visible to its user; it needs to be both a window and a mirror” (12). Similarly, interfaces are both sites at which user experience is structured and are composed from the experiences users have while navigating freely within those sites.

As users experience web content through interfaces, their styles of play influence and become part of those interfaces. One example of this can be seen in the “like” features of social media sites like *Facebook*. When a user “likes” a page or image, not only does she create a record of her navigation, but she also makes that content more likely to appear to and be experienced by other users. In this way, an individual’s play is embedded in the interface and helps many other users compose it. This is one reason Collin Gifford Brooke claims that interfaces embody the “perspective” of users. He writes, “One of the things that new media interfaces do stylistically is to help us move from the abstracted, single perspective of the reader of a static text or the viewer of a painting to the multiple and partial perspectives necessary for many forms of new media” (114). Drawing from Richard Lanham’s

well-known argument in *The Electronic Word* that computer interfaces require users to oscillate between looking AT the surface of an interface to understand how it works and looking THROUGH the interface to experience its content, Brooke argues that interfaces and their design should become a primary object of analysis for rhetorical theory (15). Since computer interfaces are so vital to how users experience rhetoric in computerized contexts, the way those interfaces are shaped and styled is an important consideration for rhetorical theory and practice. I contend that play is a crucial part of how interfaces are shaped and styled. As users navigate content through an interface, they play with the interface's design and participate in structuring the experiences of other users.

However, as I have previously mentioned, neither play nor language is ever neutral. Made through play as users experience them, interfaces also embody cultural ideologies and beliefs. Richard Lanham points this out in *Economics of Attention: Style and Substance in the Age of Information*, where he argues that rhetoric might be thought of as the newest instantiation of economics because of the ways interfaces direct attention. While many refer to contemporary culture as an "information economy," Lanham points out that economies are most typically based on scarce resources. What is scarce in today's culture, Lanham suggests, is not information, but attention. Since the amount of information in today's culture is often overwhelming, the rhetorical power to grab and hold the attention of an audience is an important commodity and skill. In interface design, Lanham argues, "every element has been created from specific information keyboarded by master

illusionists” (5 emphasis added).¹⁰ These illusionists, in Lanham’s words, are “economists of attention,” design-savvy individuals who cope with the scarcity of attention by marshaling their rhetorical prowess to gain the attention of audiences within information-saturated environments. By building their illusions into the interface, composers exercise some degree of control over what users experience and how.

In that sense, interfaces can become sites where ideologies of race, gender, and economics are inscribed through play. In their 1994 article, “The Politics of the Interface,” Cynthia and Richard Selfe view computer interfaces as linguistic contact zones, as maps that enact “the gestures and deeds of colonialism, continuously and with a great deal of success” (482). The article is composed as a counter-balance to the overly optimistic views of computer technology in the mid-90s that viewed electronic environments as egalitarian and democratic. The authors seek to help teachers better identify some of the effects of colonialism associated with the use of computer interfaces. They argue that the omissions of ethnic and linguistic groups from interface design represent “interested versions of reality” (486). Considering Lanham, such interested versions of reality might be seen as part of the “illusions” interface designers create. One such illusion can be found in the graphical interfaces of desktop icons. When users access the content of computers through graphical user interfaces, such as a folder, they are navigating metaphors drawn from particular cultures and times. The familiar manila folder graphical interfaces of

¹⁰ Moreover, Lanham also points to games and their play as highly rhetorical: “The video gamer acts in his world. It is participatory theater par excellence. But he must also, to improve his performance, become a student of his own attention and the attention structure designed into the game. He must become, that is, an economist of attention, studying his performance even while he is immersed in it or in a high-frequency oscillation between the two states” (17).

Windows, for instance, are metaphors drawn from the logics of business culture. Due to repeated use and familiarity, however, the cultural logics embodied by desktop icons can fade into commonsense and deceive users into believing the interface is value-neutral.

The way interfaces are designed to structure users' movements as they experience texts means that they embody play and all that comes with it. Whether it is through directing user attention to what designers want them to see, adopting those same users' experiences into the interface's design, or building "illusions" of reality into cultural icons like graphical business folders, play is involved in the way users experience computerized interfaces.

In this introduction, I have presented a way of visualizing play in terms of composing by drawing from Salen and Zimmerman's definition of play as "free movement within a more rigid structure" (303). While rhetorical theories involving invention, remix, and interface design only rarely take play as their primary object of inquiry or analysis, this brief review shows that play is apparent in such conversations when visualized the way Salen and Zimmerman describe. While rhetorical theories of invention highlight the movement of composers creating and exploring multiple pathways and possibilities, rhetorical theories of remix highlight the benefits of giving composers the freedom to reappropriate and transform old texts into something new through their playful experimentations. Finally, the way people play and interact in digital environments is embodied by the design of interfaces that both compose and are composed by user experiences.

On one hand, this chapter has provided a partial introduction to ludic rhetorics, the various things that are said, assumed, or believed to be true about play within the field of rhetoric and composition. I will build on these opening remarks about ludic rhetorics in subsequent chapters by analyzing more explicit discussions of play in the emerging area of gaming studies. On the other hand, it has also provided a means of visualizing play as free movement within a more rigid structure. This visualization will be useful as my discussion of ludic rhetorics sets the stage for the language of play, a theory of how human play takes on symbolic, expressive, and rhetorical forms that are emphasized and enabled by the composing possibilities enabled by digital new media.

Chapter Summaries

In chapter two, “Theories of Play in Composition,” I create a rhetorical taxonomy of tacit play theories currently existing in rhetoric and composition, as articulated through explicit uses of the word *play* in the emerging subfield of gaming studies. I build this taxonomy through a rhetorical analysis of a 2008 special issue of *Computers and Composition*, titled *Reading Games: Composition, Literacy, and Video Gaming*, an issue launched in response to the “boom” of pedagogical research on gaming elicited from the work of James Paul Gee. My analysis is informed and structured by Brian Sutton-Smith’s landmark book, *The Ambiguity of Play*, in which he claims that academic disciplines embody various popular rhetorics of play rooted in the ideologies of particular conceptions of knowledge. In other words, various academic disciplines have concepts of play that are used rhetorically to justify truth

claims, persuade audiences, and advance arguments. As Sutton-Smith puts it, play “rhetorics are narratives that have the intent to persuade because there is some kind of gain for those who are successful in their persuasion” (*Ambiguity* 16).

Sutton-Smith’s book is perhaps the most expansive and thorough consideration of the relationship between rhetoric and play ever written, and it serves as a useful apparatus for analyzing how the word *play* is used in rhetoric and composition teaching and scholarship.

I argue that, while the term *play* is used often in gaming studies, it references several different theories of how and why play should or does matter in the teaching of writing. My position is twofold: first, what is meant by the term is always only one theory that alone is not sufficient to describe the complex relationship between play and language. Second, since these theories of play are used to advance claims, a more general theory of play is needed in composition scholarship. “Ludic rhetorics” include not only the conceptions of play suggested in rhetorical theories of invention, remix, and interface design referenced in this chapter, but also three related, but unarticulated theories of play in gaming studies: 1) experimental play theories that emphasize learning, pleasure, and safety, 2) subjective play theories that emphasize self expression, individuality, and motivation, and 3) and ambiguous theories of play that emphasize flexibility, chance, and transformation. Taken together, these ludic rhetorics highlight the complex and shifting relationships between play and language, creating the possibility to consider *play-as-language*.

In chapter three, “Huizinga’s Magic Circle and Play’s Symbolization,” I argue that Johan Huizinga’s little-understood masterpiece, *Homo Ludens*, provides a theory

of play-as-symbolic. While Huizinga's book is often cited in gaming studies, it is most often dismissed as an early, although interesting, treatise on play that too sharply divides games from reality and contributes to commonsense work/play or serious/play binaries. As Albert Rouzie puts it, "Educators have inherited deeply entrenched divisions between work and play, seriousness and frivolity, and order and chaos, which ultimately impoverish our culture's view of literacy" ("Dramatic Experience" 139). Reviewing the scant references to Huizinga's theory of play in gaming studies and game design more broadly, I point out that vast and wildly different interpretations of the text exist, many of which offer textual evidence to support one interpretation that seems to explicitly contradict another. Turning to Dutch scholarship on Huizinga, particularly the excellent work of archival scholar William Otterspeer, I claim that Huizinga's writing generally, and *Homo Ludens* specifically, cannot be fully understood or appreciated without an understanding of his synesthetic theory of language and his dialectical methodology. I provide an overview of those two issues and suggest how they can help scholars navigate the difficulties of reading Huizinga. In light of Huizinga's language theory and methodology, I also revisit translation errors in *Homo Ludens*, as well as the political and scholarly contexts in which Huizinga lived and wrote, to offer a new reading of Huizinga's treatise on play.

What emerges from my reading of Huizinga is a symbolic theory of play, one that suggests, "All play means something" (Huizinga, *Homo Ludens* 1). In short, Huizinga's symbolic theory of play, understood in its full linguistic and methodological complexity, takes play as a resource for humans to express

emotions and beliefs within a society's "magic circles," those rule-bound, cultural sites created by language that are simultaneously real and virtual, both embedded within and separated from the world at large. While Huizinga's conception of magic circle is often cited as evidence for his hard division between the real world and the game world, I put it in context of his symbolic theory of play to show how magic circles are cultural sites—such as baseball stadiums, online videogames, and public parks—within and through which the symbolic action of play emerges. I end the chapter by suggesting that debates about whether magic circles are within or apart from reality have grown tired and uninteresting, pointing to a new direction: taking Huizinga's theory of symbolic play as a starting point for theorizing play as a form of language.

In chapter four, "The Language of Play," I present a theory of how the symbolic activity of play is composed within the "possibility spaces" created by new media. Drawing from game design, language theory, and scholarship about new media, I build a concept of play as a form of non-discursive language, emphasized and enabled by the composing possibilities made open by the computerization of media. Drawing from Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman's definition of play as "free movement within a more rigid structure" (*Rules of Play* 304), as well as from game design concepts about how the rule structures of games create "possibility spaces" where players are enabled to unleash their creativity strategically to achieve goals (Bogost, "The Rhetoric" 120; Juul, *Half-Real* 69; McGonigal, *Reality is Broken* 21), I argue that rhetoric and composition scholars might usefully think of media using Huizinga's magic circle concept. In other words, various media are both real and

virtual rule-bound spaces that create the possibility for humans to unleash their creativity by using language strategically to achieve rhetorical goals. Thinking of play symbolically as a form of language, I inquire into the ways new media in particular create possibility spaces for play's symbolization.

While I do not advocate the adoption of a single, autonomous definition of what constitutes "new media," in this chapter I take definitions of new media based on computability as my starting point because computerization creates large possibility spaces for play's symbolization. Drawing from Lev Manovich's characteristics of new media in his book, *The Language of New Media*, I illustrate how the computerization of media creates the possibility of endlessly repeatable, adaptable, customizable, and potentially deceptive symbolic forms of play, including image-editing, the composition of memes, the creation of avatars, the phasing of virtual environments through periodic updates, and "gamified" texts that use the appearance of game-like structures to further corporate and political agendas. While my theory of play is not exclusive to either new media or computable new media—in fact, I point to several examples of old media texts where the language of play is apparent—computability creates the possibility for play's symbolic forms to be endlessly repeatable and pervasive. I end the chapter by suggesting what the language of play might offer new media studies and multimodal rhetorical theory more broadly.

And finally, in my concluding chapter, "Ludic Outcomes," I bring the language of play and its various symbolic forms to current conversations about revising the WPA Outcomes Statement (WPA OS) and the assessment of multimodal student

writing. While the WPA OS has a lively history of revisions, particularly as it concerns technology, many WPA researchers are considering ways the statement might need further expansion and revision in light of digital and emergent composing technologies—precisely those kinds of media that I argue create large possibility spaces for the language of play. With this in mind, I consider ways ludic rhetorics and the language of play might be articulated as outcomes for first-year writing, what I term “ludic outcomes,” those rhetorical goals for first-year writing that embody and lend themselves to demonstration through play’s various symbolic forms. Reflecting on my own experiences teaching game-based composition courses, I point to various kinds of ludic outcomes: those of 1) experimentation and error, 2) pleasure and reciprocity, and 3) hybrid, distributed knowledge. I discuss and define the various types of ludic outcomes mentioned here, suggesting ways they speak to existing outcomes for first-year writing as well as how they might help WPA researchers think through issues involved in revising the WPA OS.

While the issue of composing appropriate outcomes for new media and multimodal texts is difficult in and of itself, knowing if and how well teachers, students, and writing programs are meeting those outcomes creates additional difficulties. Scholars such as Jody Shipka note that, while new media and multimodal writing projects seem more and more common in the field, there is a veritable “dearth of scholarship devoted to assessment of multimodal and new media texts” (Negotiating W346). Since one way teachers determine if outcomes are being met is through assessment, I also offer strategies for helping students meet ludic outcomes and knowing they have met those outcomes through particular assessment

practices, such as creating multiple pathways for students to meet course and assignment goals, customizing grading rubrics based on the work individual students have done and still need to do, and borrowing evaluative concepts from game design. I end by briefly considering the ways videogames in particular embody and can potentially help articulate the field's core values and goals.

Taken together, these five chapters make the following conceptual arc for this project. While the first two chapters define “ludic rhetorics,” the ways play is involved in composing and the tacit theories of play that underlie specific uses of the term, chapter three moves toward a theory of play-as-language by recovering Huizinga’s symbolic theory of play. While my own theory emerges in chapter four—composed as a patchwork of tissues from the various play theories I have read and discussed in previous chapters—chapter five brings my thinking on play back to the core values of rhetoric and composition as articulated by the statement of outcomes for the teaching of first-year writing.

Chapter 2: Theories of Play in Composition

"If the principles of learning in good video games are good, then better theories of learning are embedded in the video games children in elementary and high school play than in the schools they attend. Furthermore, the theory of learning in good video games fits better with the modern, high-tech, global world today's children and teenagers live in than do theories (and practices) of learning that they sometimes see in school." (5)

James Paul Gee

What Video Games Have to Teach Us About
Learning and Literacy

"Once I let myself make a contribution more playful in my own composing, I was hooked. If I felt less alienated, more connected through infusing my work with electronic play, then so could others. But that motivation pales in contrast to my own need for pleasure. Without it, I had no future in English studies or in the field of rhetoric and composition. I felt pleasure in this eruption of play, and it made me feel hopeful about the vitality of rhetoric and composition studies." (4)

Albert Rouzie

At Play in the Fields of Writing

"If we lose sight of how students are composing meaning in electronic gaming environments and networked systems, among other contexts, or which rhetorical representations and practices they encounter as they work in and around games, or what motivates them to teach and learn in these language rich venues, we run the risk of ignoring a whole arena of serious language use and play. If we pay careful attention to these sites and to the productive ways in which they overlap with our own area of study and teaching, we can open new arenas for understanding the very human acts of composing, creating, communicating, and, of course, engaging in serious play." (xviii)

Cynthia L. Selfe and Gail E. Hawisher

Rhetoric/Composition/Play

Introduction: Videogames and Composition

Henry Jenkins defines convergence culture as the site “where old and new media collide, where grassroots and corporate media intersect, where the power of the media producer and the power of the media consumer interact in unpredictable ways” (2). When media converge, scholars studying phenomena such as language must cope with unexpected interactions that emerge as people make meaning, form beliefs, learn, and create new knowledge at those sites where old and new media collide, remediate one another, and transform.

While written and spoken words have traditionally been core interests for rhetoric and composition, the twenty-first century has seen the emergence of arguments to better understand the literacy practices involved in many different kinds of media (Kress, *Literacy*; Selber, *Multiliteracies*; Selfe and Hawisher, *Literate Lives*). Perhaps the most unexpected media to converge with composition’s academic culture are videogames. While scholars in a variety of fields have had interest in gaming for some time,¹¹ the text most responsible for the convergence of composition and videogames is James Paul Gee’s *What Video Games have to Teach us About Learning and Literacy* (2003). Gee, realizing that children often dislike school but are willing to invest huge quantities of time in difficult and often frustrating videogames, reasons that the gaming industry manages to sell millions of units because their games are embedded with “good principles of learning” that recall some of the best theories of cognitive science. In short, games are successful because they are good at “getting learned,” which means they embody sound principles of

¹¹ For this reason, the term “gaming studies” can be a very broad label. When I use the term in this chapter, I refer specifically to the study of videogames and videogame pedagogy in rhetoric and composition.

learning that are often eschewed by traditional education due to an over-emphasis on standardized testing and assessment criteria.

Since Gee's book, research on gaming has addressed issues of rhetoric and design (Bogost, *Persuasive Games*; Robison), social spaces and ideology (Stromer-Galley and Mikeal; Taylor), literacy and gaming culture (Gee and Hayes; Selfe and Hawisher, *Gaming Lives*; Squire and Steinkuehler), and classroom practice (Alexander; Colby and Colby; deWinter and Vie). As gaming becomes both an object and a subject of inquiry in composition, questions eventually lead to play. What is the role of play in composing? Why is play so engaging? What cultural factors contribute to perceived differences between work and play?

Answering such questions is difficult because play has many different meanings. In "Remix, Play, and Remediation," the authors argue that crafting texts which "feel like" play can be more compelling and fun than traditional writing (Davis, Webb, Lackey, and DeVoss 189). Catherine McDonald argues that playing in digital environments is an act of creation, rather than consumption, that is more than "psychological compensation" ("Magic Canvas" 209). Finally, Matthew Newcomb draws on the work of Charles Sanders Peirce to define play as "purposeless wandering of the mind, done 'perhaps during a stroll,' which 'has no rules, except this very law of liberty'" (W46).

Since play seems to appear regularly in scholarship about new media and multi-literacies, inquiring into its various meanings might prove useful for understanding how and why play matters for rhetoric and composition. In chapter one, I suggested that play, loosely defined as "free movement within a more rigid

structure” (Salen and Zimmerman 304), can be visualized as composing through exploration, experimentation, and user experience. In this chapter, I take as my starting point moments when the term *play* is invoked in teaching and research involving videogames. I claim that uses of the term draw from broader cultural rhetorics about the subject that argue for different theories of play that currently exist in rhetoric and composition. Taken together, I label the conceptions of play in chapters one and two as “ludic rhetorics,” or the theories and ideologies invoked and given explanatory power through both implicit and explicit uses of the word play in the field of rhetoric and composition.

Research Questions

- What theories are embodied by the use of the word *play* in composition scholarship?
- What truths about play and composing do these theories claim?
- How might theories of play complicate, clash, or extend ongoing conversations in rhetoric and composition?

Method and Methodology

While my previous chapter illustrates that play is tacitly invoked by rhetorical theory, this chapter examines explicit deployments of play as a theoretical or explanatory concept in composition research. Discussions of play are most common within the subfield of computers and writing, particularly as it concerns gaming studies, or scholarly treatments of computer and videogames that involve

language, literacy, and the teaching of writing. It is in such discussions that the different play theories of composition are most visible and subject to critique.

I begin my survey of play concepts with a 2008 issue of *Computer and Composition*, titled *Reading Games: Composition, Literacy, and Video Gaming*, an issue launched in response to the “boom” in gaming research spurred by the work of James Paul Gee. While the issue is not specifically organized around play, explicit uses of the word appear in every article. I use this issue as my starting point to create a rhetorical taxonomy of play theories currently in the field. In other words, I do not assume that this taxonomy is an objective realization of play theories in rhetoric and composition.¹² Instead, I create the taxonomy as a method to reveal the differing assumptions and epistemologies upon which different theories of play rest. In doing so, I follow Keith Grant-David’s suggestion that the coding of data, including division and classification of text, is hermeneutic (283). Classifying theories of play is a method for interpreting how those theories are rhetorical; in short, how they persuade, shape beliefs, and become “true” within the field. By showing how these concepts embody knowledge and advance claims, I set the stage for the later chapters of this dissertation in which I theorize the “language of play” and its symbolic possibilities.

Computers and Writing and *The Ambiguity of Play*

¹² As Berlin states in *Rhetoric and Reality*, “It should be noted that none of the categories is monolithic; each offers a diversity of rhetorical theories. I should also add that this taxonomy is not meant to be taken as exhaustive of the entire field of rhetoric, but is simply an attempt to make manageable the discussion of the major rhetorics I have encountered” (6).

To create my taxonomy of play, I turn to one of the most persuasive statements ever written in contemporary play theory: Brian Sutton-Smith's *The Ambiguity of Play* (1997). Sutton-Smith argues that one reason for play's ambiguity is that the word is over-determined. He claims that, in addition to popular rhetorics, various academic disciplines embody rhetorics of play rooted in the ideologies of particular conceptions of knowledge. Therefore, to better understand play's ambiguity, Sutton-Smith approaches the subject indirectly by investigating its various cultural rhetorics.

While not a scholar of rhetoric, Sutton-Smith's views on the subject are fairly commensurate with rhetorical theory today. Sutton-Smith was heavily influenced by Kenneth Burke, whom he mentions meeting in the book's introduction.¹³ Among Burke's many contributions to rhetorical theory is his claim that rhetoric operates more broadly than through an individual rhetor's intentions. Burke's writings inform many aspects of rhetorical theory today. Carolyn Miller, for instance, speculates that Burke's concept of "piety" (*Permanence and Change*) may account for the recurrence of genre ("Genre as Social Action"). Richard Coe draws from Burke's definition of form as the arousing and fulfillment of an audience's desire (*Counter-Statement*) to argue that persuasion can be implicit and embodied by various symbolic forms. This broad, macroscopic view of rhetoric is used today to discuss the symbolic action of bodies (Hawhee) and national parks (Clark). Following this trajectory, Sutton-Smith uses the term *rhetoric* to refer to embodied,

¹³ Sutton-Smith claims, "The modern use of a rhetorical approach to matters of scholarship and science probably owes the most, ultimately, to two great scholars of rhetoric, Kenneth Burke, whom I had the good fortune to meet, and Ludwig Wittgenstein, whom I did not" (ix).

tacit identifications, divisions, and persuasions. He contends that various academic disciplines use ideological assumptions about play to give veracity to their beliefs and to persuade other scholars within their own disciplines that their arguments are valid and reasonable.

Sutton-Smith identifies seven rhetorics of play. These rhetorics correspond to larger ideologies about play that are used to justify truth claims in various academic disciplines (9):

1. The Rhetoric of Progress
2. The Rhetoric of Fate
3. The Rhetoric of Power
4. The Rhetoric of Identity
5. The Rhetoric of the Imaginary
6. The Rhetoric of the Self
7. The Rhetoric of Frivolity

Sutton-Smith's research questions about these rhetorics are complex. To what degree is play's ambiguity a result of its actual ambiguity? To what degree is it a result of the conflicting and contrasting cultural rhetorics through which it is deployed? Sutton-Smith admits that strong cases can be made for aligning with either position, and his point is not to arrive at a stable definition of play or to objectively define play rhetorics. Instead, he seeks to show the persuasive and ideological character of each worldview and, through a careful analysis of each, to arrive at a better understanding of the general concept of play. The seven rhetorics Sutton-Smith defines all have advocates. The rhetorics embody attitudes and historical beliefs and they function epistemologically. Sutton-Smith claims, "Rhetorics are narratives that have the intent to persuade because there is some kind of gain for those who are successful in their persuasion" (Sutton-Smith 16).

For example, the second chapter of *The Ambiguity of Play* is about the rhetoric of progress. Sutton-Smith claims that this rhetoric works to justify claims and form beliefs in areas such as animal studies (Fagen; Panksepp) and child development (Brown and Gottfried; Nelson; Singer and Singer). Scholarship in these areas takes the progress of play as axiomatic. Children and young animals play in order to test their limits, to see what sorts of behaviors work and which fail in their environment. However, Sutton-Smith points out that such research does not actually rest on hard, empirical evidence (24). The rhetoric of progress is deployed commonly because it supports the deeply held beliefs of researchers in these areas. Further, it helps them justify their truth claims. Because much of this research depends on historical and evolutionary progress to understand how children grow and adapt to changing environments over time, play is embedded in the heart of its ideological drive. Sutton-Smith's point is not to refute the possibility that play is progressive—much of his research actually supports it—but to show how the belief is used rhetorically to justify arguments.

My stance is this: if play rhetorics are as widespread and powerful as Sutton-Smith claims, then they should be evident in composition research whenever play is under discussion. Furthermore, it is useful to understand what kinds of rhetorics are deployed, and to what persuasive ends, in order to make the field's arguments about and theories of play as nuanced as possible. By drawing from Sutton-Smith's work on the rhetorics of play, I seek to provide such nuance through a taxonomy of play theories in gaming studies. Play is rarely—in fact, hardly ever—the primary topic of

discussion in such research, but the term is nearly always deployed in discussions of games.

To begin my investigation, I turn to *Reading Games: Composition, Literacy, and Video Gaming*, the *Computers and Composition* issue referenced in my methodology section. Taking Sutton-Smith's seven rhetorics as my conceptual apparatus, I argue that four of his rhetorics are invoked in composition as three rhetorical theories of play: 1) The Rhetorics of Progress and Frivolity, 2) The Rhetoric of the Self, 3) and The Rhetoric of the Imaginary. In the following sections, I provide an overview of the special issue before analyzing each theory in turn, focusing specifically on the theories' assumptions, truth claims, and relation to disciplinary issues in rhetoric and composition.

Computers and Composition 25.3: Reading Games

The specific focus of this issue is not play. Instead, following trends established by earlier research (Gee, *What Video Games*; Selfe and Hawisher, *Gaming Lives*), the guest editors seek to compose an issue about the import of videogames into scholarship and pedagogy. This issue is part of a trend in gaming studies that attempts to move away from familiar discussions of gender and violence in games that dominate mainstream media.¹⁴ The articles address issues such as games as educational tools, as multimodal compositions, and as discourse communities suitable as research sites.

¹⁴ Many in the field do discuss gender and violence, of course. For examples, see Cassell and Jenkins's *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games*, Kafai, Heeter, Denner, and Sun's *Beyond Barbie and Mortal Kombat: New Perspectives on Gender and Gaming*, and Gee and Hayes's *Women and Gaming: The Sims and 21st Century Learning*

The issue is organized around three themes. First, there are articles exploring key issues in rhetoric and composition embodied by gaming and gaming cultures. Simply put, this research continues the trajectory established by Gee's argument that games have a lot to teach scholars of literacy and writing. Second, there are empirical approaches to established online games such as *World of Warcraft* and *The Sims Online* that seek to show how textual production is motivated and enabled in virtual environments. Third, there are explorations of various contexts that have implications for both gaming and education, such as the composing processes of game designers and the development of educational games.

Let me be clear: this issue is organized specifically to highlight central questions for composition theory and pedagogy brought to light by videogames. Play, or an explicitly articulated theory of play, is not the main subject of investigation for the issue or its individual articles. However, the subject of play is always just beneath the surface in every argument, and my position throughout my analysis is twofold. First, what is meant by the term *play* is always only one theory that alone is not sufficient to describe the complex relationship between play and language. Second, since these theories of play are used to advance claims, a more general concept of ludic rhetorics is needed in composition scholarship. The term *play* is invoked often in discussions of new media and multimodality,¹⁵ and a broad conception of ludic rhetorics seeks to explain the various ideas that are expressed through the term's usages.

¹⁵ In "The Low Bridge to High Benefits," for instance, Daniel Anderson claims that opportunities for play can lead to active and engaged learning with multimedia (363).

Experimental Play and Rhetorics of Progress and Frivolity

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines frivolity as “lacking in seriousness” or importance and notes that it is “marked by unbecoming levity.” Despite admitting frivolity is both the oldest and the most widely believed of the play rhetorics, Sutton-Smith paradoxically devotes fewer than twelve pages to the frivolous. This rhetoric is defined by contrast from the serious and positions play as “nonsense” or unproductive waste.¹⁶ Sutton-Smith argues that it derives from Puritanical orthodoxy in which “work is obligatory, sober, serious, and not fun, and play is the opposite of these” (202). Play is, in this sense, a commodity, something afforded only to those who have the resources to *not* work. Play also demands suspicion, as someone who spends a great deal of time playing may be less than desirable. He may be a fool.

Sutton-Smith discusses frivolity only tangentially because it is primarily a popular rhetoric. In other words, many academics that study play assume from the outset that it has some value and cannot be dismissed as waste. However, this rhetoric is still pervasive throughout Western culture, and people who study play or games must often justify why the subject is worthy of serious academic inquiry. This pervasiveness is particularly evident in gaming studies, where many scholars have invested a great deal of time demythologizing the rhetoric of frivolity.

Albert Rouzie, for instance, in his *At Play in the Fields of Writing: A Serio-Ludic Rhetoric* (2005), argues, “Educators have inherited deeply entrenched divisions

¹⁶ In Jane McGonigal’s TED Talk: “The Game That Can Give You Ten Extra Years of Life,” she points out that the number one “unsolicited comment” she gets about her work is that playing games is a waste of time.

between work and play, seriousness and frivolity, and order and chaos, which ultimately impoverish our culture's view of literacy" (139). Rouzie is among a group of researchers who have recently brought theoretical attention to play by identifying the work/play split (Alberti; Colby and Colby; Consalvo). In a familiar post-structural move, such research deconstructs that binary and sometimes attempts to reorder the pair's priority. "The very principle of myth," writes Barthes, is that it "transforms history into nature" (*Mythologies* 129). Composition scholars have attempted to demythologize the rhetoric of frivolity and, in doing so, to dislodge it from nature and return it to culture and history.

Scholars such as Sutton-Smith and Ian Bogost argue that, in attempting to "heal" the work/play split, scholars have sometimes ignored work in other disciplines that has already considered the complex relationship between work and play. This includes Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* and even post-structural theory such as Derrida's "Structure, Sign, and Play." I return to these claims, and to the rhetoric of frivolity, in much greater detail in chapter three. I include it here because the healing of the work/play split has been an important move in gaming studies to justify the study of videogames. I have included this discussion alongside the rhetoric of progress because the rhetoric of progress is, in my estimation, the beginning of the "serious games" movement¹⁷ in composition, or the use of games to advance and support composition research and pedagogy. Scholars such as Gee, who argue for play as a progressive, depend upon the rhetoric of frivolity being undone. This is because one cannot logically hold the position that play is

¹⁷ According to Bogost, "Serious games are videogames created to support the existing and established interests of political, corporate, and social institutions" (*Persuasive Games* 57).

completely without importance and simultaneously maintain that it is important to learning. While the other theories of play I discuss in this chapter also depend upon this theoretical groundwork, they more often assume that play can be serious rather than going through the methodical steps to demystify the rhetoric of frivolity.

I have already mentioned the rhetoric of progress above, but a few points deserve repeating. The rhetoric is important in animal studies, seeing play as developmental in an evolutionary model. It is also important in child development, seeing play as progressive in a psychological model. The common ground between these two areas of study is that play is a “training ground.” While it might appear wasteful at first glance, a child playing with blocks is actually developing cognitive skills that help her become a better problem-solver in later life. A cub play fights with its siblings to practice the skills it requires for the hunt.

James Paul Gee, of course, argues that play can have this developmental character. When someone plays a videogame, her play literally helps her progress through the game space, and this is a type of expertise or literacy that Gee believes is under-utilized in schools. At least two of the articles in *Computers and Composition* likewise rely on the rhetoric of progress, and they point to an unarticulated theory of play. I refer to this theory as “experimental” because of its emphasis on learning and development through playing in relatively safe environments.

One example is John Alberti’s “The Game of Reading and Writing: How Video Games Reframe Our Understanding of Literacy.” Alberti argues that videogames, due

to their interactive¹⁸ nature, can be understood as part of a reconceptualization of literacy in the new media age, and he suggests that they may help transform metaphors of writing and fundamentally reshape the writing classroom (206). In particular, he points to three areas where computers and writing scholars might rethink their assumptions about reading and writing due to videogames: 1) authority in discursive communities, 2) the visual nature of writing, and 3) the relationship between work and play associated with writing. Alberti argues that the writing classroom is itself an arena of play, and he urges writing instructors to challenge their own assumptions about both play and the classroom in order come to terms with this metaphor. Alberti believes that pleasure, and thus play, should be returned to the center of writing instruction.

For Alberti, the work/play split described earlier is reflective of another binary in composition: product/process. While producers in the realm of creative and artistic expression are assumed to play during their process, the “serious” attention of critique is given only to the product. Similarly, in the composition classroom, the final product is traditionally the site of assessment, evaluation, and accomplishment. Alberti’s point is that more emphasis needs to be placed on the “process” end of this binary, and he uses that as a justification for taking games seriously. They serve as multimodal, new media sites where the process of play is not only visible, but also reveals its value as progressive. By understanding games and the value of developing skills through the process of play, reasons Alberti,

¹⁸ “Interactivity” is losing favor as a term to describe games, as noted by Jeff King and Tanya Krzywinka in *Screenplay: Cinema/Videogames/Interfaces*. Since people interact with all kinds of media, the term is no longer seen as necessarily unique to videogames.

computers and writing scholars can reframe their own understandings of literacy in terms of the traditional product/process divide.

Perhaps most revealing of Alberti's reliance on the rhetoric of progress is his suggestion that teachers use the metaphor of game space to describe the writing classroom. This metaphor not only serves to justify the presence of play in the writing classroom, but it further structures Alberti's unstated theory of play in at least two ways. First, it emphasizes the safety of play. Using a play space as a metaphor for the writing classroom is akin to what learning theory terms "sandbox learning." In *Good Video Games + Good Learning*, James Paul Gee claims:

Sandboxes in the real world are safe havens for children that still look and feel like the real world. Using the term metaphorically, sandboxes are good for learning if learners are put into a situation that feels like the real thing, but with risks and dangers greatly mitigated, they can learn well and still feel a sense of authenticity and accomplishment.

(39)

The passage from Gee suggests that, by re-prioritizing the work/play and product/process binaries, writing instructors put their evaluative emphasis on process, turning the writing classroom into a sandbox where students can try things out, fail, hit the reset button, try and fail again with the consequences mitigated from the real world.

Though the rhetoric aptly emphasizes both pleasure and process, its emphasis on safety is somewhat called into question by research such as T.L. Taylor's *Play Between Worlds*. Claiming it is difficult to disentangle the sensory

experience of gaming from the real world,¹⁹ she calls for “nondichotomous models” that emphasize integration (153). Moreover, recent work in rhetoric and composition emphasizes public writing and civic engagement. One excellent example of this is Gregory Ulmer’s “MEmorial” in *Electronic Monuments*, which he defines as “an institutional practice that asks students to utilize the Internet in the civic sphere” (xvii). Ulmer asks students to record the “unremarkable” into vernacular shrines as a composite of both text and image. Jessica Enoch and Jordynn Jack, in “Remembering Sappho,” take a similar stance by asking students to create public monuments that record women’s history.

While I believe that the public turn in composition is important and promising, I have a harder time believing it is safe. Public writing is, like play, sometimes dangerous. Writing that speaks to a genuine audience is subject to potential censure, ridicule, and misunderstanding. Public writing in particular always holds the possibility of danger because an authentic audience may not particularly like what the author has to say, or even the author herself. The theorizing of play in terms of safety, which is suggested through the rhetoric of progress, needs to be supplemented by concepts emphasizing the risks involved in public writing in order to more fully connect play with the so-called “public turn” in composition studies.

Further, experimental theories also claim play and learning are motivated by pleasure. This claim is well supported by research in psychology, such as Sherry

¹⁹ In *Alien Phenomenology*, Bogost points out, “Even if the experience of a Twinkie can be understood as a neurochemical unit operation, such an explanation does not describe the *experience* of sweetness” (62). By the same logic, even if a game space can be described as separate from the real world, this does not describe the embodied and sensual *experience* of playing games.

Turkle's previously mentioned claims about the "psychological compensation" of play (*Life on the Screen*).²⁰ Throughout James Paul Gee's work on gaming, he argues that learning is biologically pleasurable for humans because it triggers pleasure centers²¹ in the brain that reinforce and reward those behaviors that help people learn. For Gee, play is connected with learning in this biological sense. It is pleasurable and, if it aids learning, it is so pleasurable that people will deeply engage with those activities that enable them to both play and learn. This insight recalls the claim from "Remix, Play, and Remediation" that "because crafting the slideshow felt like play, I invested more time and more energy, and ended up with a product that is more compelling, and even fun, than an academic essay could ever be" (189). Arguments like this define pleasurable learning as the key motivating factor for play. If learners can find serious tasks that "feel like" play, then they are more likely to stay engaged with those tasks and potentially develop their proficiencies more effectively.

However, as Mia Consalvo's "Where's My Montage?" shows, pleasure and fun do not explain all possible play motives because gamers often stay deeply engaged with tasks that are unpleasant and boring. Consalvo begins with the popular belief, "hard work is rewarded," and questions if, and how, that belief is enacted across

²⁰ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's concept of "flow" describes one aspect of pleasurable play. In *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, he claims that people are at their happiest when they are completely absorbed in an activity that is so intrinsically motivating that nothing else seems to matter.

²¹ Gee claims, "Pleasure is the basis of learning for humans and learning is, like sex and eating, deeply pleasurable for human beings. Learning is a basic drive for humans" (*Why Video Games are Good for Your Soul* 4).

various media.²² She points out that television and film tend to compress hard work into short montages. For instance, in *Rocky*, all of Balboa's training is condensed into a three-minute montage, meaning the audience does not experience the tedium and boredom of repeating the same training tasks over and over again. Such long and hard training is, however, often a major part of gameplay. Similar to T.L. Taylor's work on "power gamers," Consalvo points out that many gamers grind through long hours of play—starting over when they fail—that they do not identify as "fun" or "pleasurable." Moreover, they are not necessarily learning anything new about the game, but instead repeating a training task time and again to develop their characters. Though experimental theories illustrate how learning is a deep motivation for play, they are less apt in accounting for other motives. My point is not to argue that play and writing cannot be safe and motivated by pleasure and learning, but to point out specific gaps left open by experimental theories. For a more rounded understanding of how play matters for composition, ludic rhetorics need more emphasis on social motivations.

Even if teachers accept the rhetoric of progress' claims that learning transpires during the experimentation of play, this does not necessarily mean that games should be used in the composition classroom. Many teachers and researchers have, however, advocated such a move, citing the effective use of videogames in other arenas like history (Squire, DeVane, and Durga), K-12 education (Dyson), and even medicine and the military (Annetta). Such scholarship tends to assume that the

²² This approach is called "unit operations," theorized by Ian Bogost in *Unit Operations: An Approach to Videogame Criticism*. It is a method for the analysis of individual games and the comparative analysis of games with other expressive mediums.

cultural division between work and play has prevented videogames from being used as fully as they might be in writing classrooms. The logic goes that, if the work/play split can be healed, games might be more effectively utilized in education.

Rebekah and Richard Colby, for example, suggest ways and reasons to bring online role-playing games like *World of Warcraft* into the writing classroom (“Pedagogy of Play”). Colby and Colby draw from theories of gaming, particularly the work of Jesper Juul (*Half-Real*) to posit an “emergent theory of learning.” Juul describes games as existing on a sliding scale between two types of rule structures: progression and emergence. A game of progression has a large number of complex rules, often resulting in only a single win state. In other words, the player can only complete the game by making the correct moves in the correct order, and the way to master such a game does not change over the course of any given play session. Such games are initially difficult to learn, but become very easy once they are mastered. There are many ways to fail at games of progression, but only one way to win.

Games of emergence, on the other hand, embody the strategy of games like chess. The game has a very small set of simple rules that open a large “possibility space” for play (Bogost; “Video Game Rhetoric”; Juul *Half-Real*). In other words, they create many different possibilities for how the game might unfold. A true game of emergence has multiple, perhaps infinite, numbers of ways to reach the game’s final goal (if there even is one). Emergence games are easy to learn, but difficult to master. There are few ways to fail at a game of emergence, but many ways to win.²³ In Colby and Colby’s view, games of emergence, like *WoW*, present the player with

²³ Jesper Juul describes progression and emergence as a scale, with “progression games with emergent components” and “emergence games with progression components” between (*Half-Real* 72-73).

rhetorical choices; through the course of play, gamers have to assemble their resources and make strategic decisions about which course of action will be most effective. Their pedagogy asks students to play *WoW* over the course of the semester and write strategy guides that argue for the effectiveness of particular play styles. Students may also write a proposal to game designers or debate strategy with other gamers in online forums. In any case, their experience of play serves as a research site and training ground; students gather evidence for the textual products they will compose while practicing the same kinds of strategic moves required by writing.

For Colby and Colby, the priority of the work/play binary is erased once games are brought into the classroom. They reason that the classroom/gamespace distinction collapses once students use the tools of play to do the work of writing. Citing play theorists such as Huizinga, Colby and Colby point out that education was once seen as a form of leisure only available to the elite, that notions of education-as-work only manifested once middle and working class students entered the university (302). In this way, the work/play binary is a product of history and is deeply rooted in class structures. For Colby and Colby, any bias teachers have against bringing videogames into the writing classroom vanishes once the work/play split is healed.²⁴

The recognition that the work/play binary is based on class division is not new. In *The Language of New Media*, Lev Manovich points out that Karl Marx believed a true communist society would cease to recognize a distinction between

²⁴ Colby and Colby claim, “Imagining the classroom as a type of gamespace can further erase the work/play distinction” (303). I am skeptical that this split can be, or even should be, erased or “healed,” as many reasons exist for both maintaining this binary and recognizing it as cultural and historical. I return to this claim in much greater detail in chapter three.

work and play. Marx thought that, absent the motive provided by capitalism to work for economic gain, people would no longer maintain sharp distinctions between their motives for work and play. Manovich suggests that some of Marx's beliefs about leisure may be partially realized through interface²⁵ design. With the advent of home computers and the pervasiveness of graphical user interfaces such as *Windows*, Manovich suggests that many people use the same interface to play on their home computers as they do to work on the job (65). In this way, distinctions between work/play and public/private weaken.

Such experimental theories of play are informed by the rhetoric of progress in two ways. First, as articulated by Colby and Colby, it is a way to develop rhetorical skills by experimenting with such processes as discovering evidence and developing strategies. Second, play becomes a mechanism for societal progress and change. In other words, it is a democratizing force (particularly when embodied in technologies) that allows students to draw on a broader range of experiences from their home lives when composing than they might in more traditional academic modes. The potential problem with casting play in this light is, I believe, that it both ignores the voluntary aspect of play and runs the risk of falling into technological progress narratives that researchers of rhetoric and composition should approach with skepticism.

²⁵ Manovich: "In the nineteenth century Karl Marx imagined that a future communist state would overcome this work-leisure divide as well as the highly specialized and piecemeal character of modern work itself. Marx's ideal citizen would be cutting wood in the morning, gardening in the afternoon, and composing music in the evening. Today, the subject of the information society is engaged in even more activities during a typical day; inputting and analyzing data, running simulations, searching the Internet, playing computer games, watching streaming video, listening to music online, trading stocks, and son on. Yet in performing all these different activities, the user in essence is always using the same few tools and commands; a computer screen and a mouse; a Web browser; a search engine; cut, paste, copy, delete, and find commands (*Language of New Media* 65-66).

Cynthia Selfe's 1999 CCCCs chair's address provides good reasons for such skepticism. At the time of the address, Selfe argues, many in English studies see technology as "either boring or frightening," and technology is often isolated in the profession. Selfe calls upon composition specialists to pay attention to technology, since ignoring it "is not only misguided at the end of the 20th century, it is dangerously short-sighted" (326). Selfe's address asks compositionists to not only use technology in the classroom, but to think critically about the implications of that use through technology's connection to literacy. Using statistics drawn from federal funding, Selfe demonstrates that technological literacy plays a role in maintaining cultural violence and inequality, particularly as myths about literacy are deployed politically. Since new technologies are often distributed along familiar economic, racial, and class-based lines, ignoring technology runs the risks of allowing those divisions to run unchecked and to eventually disappear into commonsense.

The rhetoric of progress presents researchers with a similar dilemma. Viewing play as a democratizing force, mediated through new media technologies, runs the risk of ignoring the ways games such as *SecondLife* or *World of Warcraft* actually work to re-inscribe hegemonic divisions of race, class, and gender. Jennifer Stromer-Galley and Leslie Mikeal's work on *The Sims Online* provides a telling example of this pitfall. They argue that *The Sims Online* is a complicated space for feminist critics because it simultaneously reinforces feminine stereotypes while also providing opportunities to challenge those stereotypes. In other words, the game includes avatars and other in-game items that reinforce traditional gender roles—

such as the body types available to women—but the open-endedness of the game also allows the opportunity for players to critique those stereotypes.

My point is that bringing commercial games into the classroom does not mean that the work/play binary disappears or that the ideologies that inform that binary are no longer operative. Further, games are expressive media that carry their own ideological baggage into the writing classroom.²⁶ Failing to approach games from a critical perspective risks writing instructors participating in the maintenance of social hegemony and, in doing so, they disrupt the voluntary participation that is a hallmark of play theory more broadly.

The rhetoric of progress supports an experimental theory of play as safe, pleasurable, and democratizing. This theory supports several claims about the role of play in the writing classroom, such as the importance of process and the pedagogical potential of in-class gameplay. While much of the knowledge embodied by this theory is reasonable and valid, it alone cannot stand as a theory of play for composition and rhetoric because it does not fully address issues of audience, social motivation, and inequalities both inscribed on games and manifested through the distribution of technology.

Subjective Play and the Rhetoric of the Self

²⁶ Furthering the concept of games as expressive media is *Brown v. EMA*, a Supreme Court ruling from 2011 that overturned a California law restricting the sale of violent games. Games are now afforded full First Amendment protection. In the opinion, Justice Antonin Scalia wrote: “Like the protected books, plays, and movies that preceded them, video games communicate ideas—and even social messages—through many familiar literary devices (such as characters, dialogue, plot, and music) and through features distinctive to the medium (such as the player’s interaction with the virtual world).”

In this chapter, I am building a rhetorical taxonomy of play theories in composition as used by researchers studying gaming. These theories are suggested by the various rhetorics scholars use when they invoke the word play. Taken together, these theories encompass what I term as “ludic rhetorics,” or the things that are assumed, argued, and believed to be true about play in rhetoric and composition. While the rhetoric of progress expresses one theory of play, another theory is related to what James Berlin terms “subjective theories” of rhetoric that “located truth either within the individual or within the real that is accessible only through the individual’s internal apprehension, apart from the empirically verifiable world” (*Rhetoric and Reality* 11). In this section, I claim that a subjective theory of play is expressed in composition scholarship through Sutton-Smith’s “the rhetoric of the self.” In this theory, play is theorized as intrinsically motivated and as a powerful way to compose individual identity.

Sutton-Smith claims “rhetorics of the self in play focus on play as having its basis in the psychology of the individual player” (173). Such rhetorics might take the form of a psychoanalyst describing an individual’s psychic experience or a neurologist describing the firing of synapses and arousal. As one might expect of a rhetoric concerning the expressive potential of the individual, Sutton-Smith points out that the rhetoric of the self enjoys popularity during periods of romantic ideology because individual expression and the self are highly valued. Composition theory has often been informed by romanticism and the mythologies of today that are shaped by its powerful zeitgeist. Feminist scholars, for instance, have argued

that modern concepts of plagiarism (Howard), authorship (Robbins), and copyright (Woodmansee) have roots in romantic ideology.

The subjective theory of play expressed by the rhetoric of the self is similarly intertwined with romantic thinking. While this theory effectively highlights play as creative, voluntary, and agential, it risks reinforcing escapist myths. Albert Rouzie, for one, is well aware of this ideological grounding in his “serio-ludic” rhetoric. Rouzie argues that post-structural theory, in seeking to create a more nuanced account of the socially constructed self, spawns Berlin’s social-epistemic rhetoric that too narrowly focuses on political consciousness-raising and dismisses considerations of play. To quote Rouzie: “In rejecting expressivist rhetoric, adherents of social-epistemic rhetoric appear to have thrown the baby of play out with the bathwater of the romantic subject” (35). Rouzie does not mean that play is always expressivist or romantic, but that it has often been assumed as such and subsequently ignored by social epistemics. Following Rouzie’s apt observation, in this section I analyze the subjective theory of play in gaming studies and emphasize that a more general concept of ludic rhetorics should emphasize the social dimensions of play.

One good example of the rhetoric of the self is found in Jennifer deWinter and Stephanie Vie’s “Press Enter to ‘Say’: Using *Second Life* to Teach Critical Media Literacy.” Following calls by new media scholars such as Selfe and Hawisher, Gee and Hayes, Wysocki, and Cheryl Ball, who claim that students need new media literacies to prepare for the twenty-first century, deWinter and Vie begin with the premise that “skill-and-drill” multiple choice testing fails to prepare today’s

students to think and act critically. Their argument is that developing critical awareness of one's own subjectivity formation is crucial to new media literacy. They propose that "instructors can take a look to *Second Life*, a popular online simulated environment, as a dynamic text to engage students in questions regarding power, ethics, intellectual property, and community" (313). Following current trends in new media, deWinter and Vie claim that, in order to develop literacy for today, students need practice both producing and analyzing new media texts. They argue that participation in online communities provides a means to engage such practice.

It seems odd to say that an approach advocating students participate in critical literacy through online social spaces draws from the rhetoric of the self.²⁷ However, a subjective theory of play can be seen clearly through deWinter and Vie's conception of avatars. They ask students to create avatars for *Second Life* and then critically examine the intersection between their offline and online identities. While deWinter and Vie effectively critique elements of the rhetoric of progress by insisting the online environments are not "safe havens" and admit that discourses of power operate in and through them (318), they also claim that "avatars operate as projections of one's own self" (316). The authors ask students to engage in the complex interplay of avatar construction by attempting to compose the self through *Second Life's* limited player creation mechanic. They then provide a set of heuristics to help students critique the possibilities for identity in the online space. *Second Life*,

²⁷ It may be obvious, but is worth repeating, that many of the articles I cite in this section employ multiple theories of play. deWinter and Vie's argument is not void of social dimension. I cite it here to show the specific ways it articulates the rhetoric of the self through avatar. Discussions of play, including my own, inevitably overlap the simple distinctions I have made between theories.

for instance, does not allow for the creation of disabled avatars, a reality that severely limits their representational potential for disabled selves.

A subjective theory of play is suggested by deWinter and Vie's claims that avatars represent players' individual selves as projections of their will to play. In other words, by creating a digital body, the player's avatar is a virtual representation of the self, a position that critical theorists like W.J.T. Mitchell have previously critiqued. Mitchell claims, "Probably the most common and naïve intuition about literature is that it is a 'representation of life'" ("Representation" 11). Seeing avatars only as representations of the self embodies the same naïve intuition Mitchell references. I contend that avatars are better understood as interfaces, as "half-real" compositions that embody language, intentions, and ideologies from both the "real" and "virtual" world. Avatars are chimeras, simultaneously composed of the player's desires and the game's materiality. Avatars—even if intended as projections of the self—are composed with the symbols of others. Namely, they are composed with the images, colors, and textures coded into a game space, all of which have social dimensions.

As I see it, theorizing avatars as projections of the self is one way to claim that play is motivated by escape. On its own, there is nothing intrinsically wrong with escape as a motivation for play. Gregory Ulmer claims, "We avatar (verb) every day; we put our self into the prosthesis of the Internet" (xi). Symbolizing the self with an avatar is a way to let the self escape the rigors of everyday life, even if only for a moment, which can have many emotional and psychological benefits. Jane McGonigal argues that many players use games as escape—what has been referred

to as a “mass exodus”²⁸ to virtual spaces—because virtual spaces empower players to experience “epic wins,” outcomes so extraordinarily positive that they almost exceed the threshold for imagination and create intense feelings of optimism (“Gaming Can Make a Better World”). However, escape is only one motivation for play, and McGonigal also points out that players also engage virtual worlds specifically for the social connections they make possible (“The Game That Can Give you Ten Extra Years of Life”).

The subjective theory of play, expressed through the rhetoric of the self, highlights the individual side of play. In doing so, it effectively suggests both the representational possibilities of virtual environments and the psychological benefits of escaping to electronic worlds. However, its over-emphasis on the avatar-as-self might be supplemented with a more social conception of play. One such supplement might be to conceive of the avatar as an interface. As an interface, an avatar embodies the transformative and subversive character of play, similar to how Bakhtin describes carnival masks in *Rabelais and his World*. He argues that the mask is “related to transition, metamorphoses, and the violation of natural boundaries” (39-40). The carnival mask is how a person interfaces with the carnival at large to create a persona that violates the boundaries between the individual and the carnival because that persona is simultaneously composed of both. French play theorist Roger Caillois also argues that masks are evidence that boundaries between

²⁸ Edward Castronova writes, “I think the twenty-first century will see a social cataclysm larger than that caused by cars, radios, and TV, combined . . . The exodus of these people from the real world, from our normal daily life, will create a change in social climate that makes global warming look like a tempest in a teacup” (*Exodus to the Virtual World* xvii).

sacred and profane spaces are constantly violated.²⁹ While someone might don a ritual mask during a ceremony to commune with the gods, the mask is also donned to play as a demon during Halloween. The carnival mask is play's analog version of its digitized avatar. Avatars mediate the real and virtual worlds and transform selves into subversive agents who violate boundaries.

The rhetoric of the self expresses a theory of play that over-emphasizes individuality and escape, and this means it cannot alone meet the needs of composition scholarship and pedagogy. Composition needs concepts of play that assemble the avatar as both game and player. Or, to borrow from Jay David Bolter and Diane Gromala's metaphor, the avatar is sometimes as a window through which the self sees the game space, sometimes as a mirror reflecting the game and player to each other (*Windows and Mirrors* 12).³⁰ The point is, like work and play, these two positions are not mutually exclusive, but are instead perspectives that can generate and inform one another. To play, gamers interface through avatars as much as they represent themselves as avatars. Seen this way, avatars—symbolic of play—are both individual and social. This is a view more generally in line with contemporary theories of language.

Another feature of the subjective theory of play is intrinsic motivation.³¹ While play may take place within and connect to social spaces, play itself is motivated by the player's individual volition. For example, in "Public Writing in

²⁹ "It is fitting to give examples. The first and no doubt the most remarkable example is the mask—a sacred object universally present, whose transformation into a plaything perhaps marks a prime mutation in the history of civilization" (*Man, Play and Games* 59).

³⁰ Or what Richard Lanham refers to as "an oscillation between looking AT the expressive surface and THROUGH it" (*Electronic Word* 43).

³¹ Games are often characterized as *autotelic*, which means that they are a "self-motivated, self-rewarding activity" (McGonigal, *Reality is Broken* 45).

Gaming Spaces,” Matthew S.S. Johnson argues that the writing gamers do for gaming communities has a specific audience and purpose and is also capable of instituting “real, measurable change.” Because the writing emerges within a playspace, he reasons, it is self-motivated and reflects the amount of power held by gamer-writers. Examining MMOGs such as *Ultima Online*, Johnson argues that virtual environments work as public spaces where players can have real effects on their environment by interacting with other players through their writing and even have a direct influence on game design (278-280). While Johnson’s argument does show how play can help produce writing, he assumes that play is motivated from within. This assumption allows him to make the logical leap that writing about play is similarly “self-motivated.” He writes:

Gamers, motivated by seemingly simple “play,” participate in an enormous number of writing activities, creating a diverse body of texts: gamer-authors writing online journals (from both player-characters’ and games’ perspectives), strategy guides, walkthroughs, fanfiction, and blogs. They also participate in gaming forums and other online discussions and create their own websites. (271)

As I have shown in the previous discussion on the rhetoric of progress, theories that define play only in terms of intrinsic motivations are apt in that they highlight the intense pleasure of play. Still, other motivations for play abound. As I see it, many composition scholars and teachers understandably want to harness the intrinsic motivations of play for the writing classroom to make their students more engaged and motivated to compose well. At best, however, attempts to make play *the*

motivating factor for student writing are well-intentioned but poorly theorized attempts to get students to enjoy the writing they do in the composing classroom. At worst, it is a position that radically over-simplifies players' and writers' motivations and is ethically suspect. Some writers may not be motivated by play whatsoever. Some players' motivations may come from an array of outside factors.

The ethical implications of claims about motives are made clear by Kenneth Burke in his *Grammar of Motives*, where he most thoroughly outlines his dramatic method. Burke uses five terms to generate his investigation of motives and argues that statements about motive should include considerations of act, scene, agent, agency, and purpose (26). The purpose of this pentadic method is not to create correct statements of motives, but to create the ambiguity and anxiety that accompany copious and competing statements about motives. Since people cannot gain immediate access to the internal states of others, but can only make judgments based on symbolic actions, dramatism also serves as a system of ethics. For example, imagine that someone who previously did me harm later apologized. If I have already decided that he only wants to get on my good side so that I might lend him money later, I have made a statement about his motives. As long as I remain certain of this statement, I have already interpreted any action he can take toward me, decided how I should respond to him, and predicted how he will treat others. The pentad works as an ethical system by creating ambiguity regarding statements of motives. Such ambiguity generates anxiety and uncertainty. This uncertainty becomes a reason for people to be more emphatic and humane in their treatment of others.

In theorizing play as intrinsically motivated, gaming studies researchers attempt to provide both a stable and pleasurable motive for writing. However, the assumption that the writing gamers do is intrinsically motivated discounts other possibilities for their composing and risks diminishing social and contextual factors. Even in situations where students write within and about the virtual environments where they play—such as the *Ink* project at Michigan State University (Sheridan and Hart-Davidson)—intrinsic motivations do not fully account for student writing. Writing is nearly always complicated by external motives brought to any writing situation. Contemporary rhetorical theories of genre note this feature of writing. For example, in *Genre and the Invention of the Writer*, Anis Bawarshi posits that all writing is simultaneously motivated from within and from without, recalling Burke’s “paradox of substance” (*Grammar*). Genre, which includes not only the formal properties of texts but also embodies the people and material conditions involved in its composition, is a site of invention where both individual and social motives are always involved (5). Just as any theory of genre that does not account for both individual and social motives would be met with skepticism, any theory of play that only emphasizes internal motives has very limited utility for inquiry into rhetorical practices. This means that subjective theories of play do have value in rhetoric and composition, but they also require support and nuance from other theories.

While I have shown that alternative concepts of avatars and social motivation reveal fault lines in subjective theories of play, I want to continue to stress Sutton-Smith’s point that “play is difficult to understand because it is ambiguous” (214). Whenever researchers in any discipline attempt definition, they are always

confronted by an abundance of evidence that potentially erases what they thought they knew. Play rarely holds still long enough for an easy definition to take shape, and this difficulty of defining play reminds me of a passage from my favorite novel: Paul Auster's *New York Trilogy*. The unnamed main character describes the act of reading a book that resists his efforts to give it meaning:

If I say nothing about what I found there, it is because I understood very little. All the words were familiar to me, and yet they seemed to have been put together strangely, as though their final purpose was to cancel each other out. I can think of no other way to express it. Each sentence erased the sentence before it, each paragraph made the next paragraph impossible. (370)

Ludic rhetorics often seem as though they mean to cancel each other out. By pointing to gaps and problems in any one theory of play, I do not mean to suggest that theory makes no valid or important claims. Writing assignments situated by experiences in virtual environments like *Second Life* and *Ink* can, I believe, produce student compositions that are authentic, effective, and pleasurable. What the gaps I highlight should indicate are the problems created by an over-reliance on any one theory of play. In building a concept of ludic rhetorics, I mean to include all the ambiguity and strangeness of play's many rhetorics in the same space even as they inevitably frustrate and confound.

Ambiguous Play and the Rhetoric of the Imaginary

In the previous chapter, I suggested ways texts might be visualized as composed by play when play is understood as “free movement within a more rigid structure” (Salen and Zimmerman 304). In this chapter, I have described theories embodied by the use of the word play in gaming studies. Moving forward in this project, I will build my own theory of the language of play, which is a theory of play as emergent symbolic action within the possibility spaces of various composing mediums. Toward this end, I conclude this chapter with a discussion of the rhetoric of the imaginary because I believe it most promisingly sets the stage for later chapters in this dissertation due to its emphasis on ambiguity and language.

Sutton-Smith writes of the rhetoric of the imaginary:

Gathered here are all who believe that some kind of transformation is the most fundamental characteristic of play. Not surprisingly, therefore, artists of all kinds are here. The heterogeneity of this rhetoric is illustrated by listing many of the concepts relevant to its description: imagination, fancy, phantasmagoria, creativity, art, romanticism, flexibility, metaphor, mythology, serendipity, pretense, deconstruction, heteroglossia, the act of making what is present or absent present, and the play of signifiers. It was not easy to choose a name for this rhetoric, for the very reason that it is not a simple category.

In other words, the rhetoric of the imaginary claims play is necessarily multivocal, dialogic, and always flexible. Sutton-Smith’s brief survey of key terms in the above definition is reminiscent of many key words in rhetorical and language theory, and

what is most useful is its emphasis on ambiguity. While other rhetorics participate in play's ambiguity through competing claims, theories that invoke the rhetoric of the imaginary claim ambiguity as play's defining feature.

Derrida's "Structure, Sign and Play" is probably the best example of this ambiguous theory of play. Derrida, critiquing philosophical systems erected to create knowledge and provide meaning, argues that to give a system structure is to fix meaning around a central organizing concept, one that "would limit what we might call the *play* of the structure" (278). Historically, as different dominant modes of metaphysical thinking rise and fall, different names for centers have come and gone. The central term of any philosophical system is ultimately an attempt to fix meaning. By mobilizing knowledge around a central structure, the "free movement" within that "more rigid structure" is limited.

Socratic Form provides an easily explainable example of what Derrida means. In "Book X" of Plato's *Republic*, Socrates distinguishes between "Ideal Form," the "image of the form," and the "image of the image." While Ideal Form is the actual, perfect concept of a thing (the true substance of a chair), the image of the form is the earthly object imitating the perfect concept. The image of that image is the artist's imitation of the chair. While no chair can reach the level of the Ideal Form, a chair made by a chair-maker stands only one remove from reality. The image of the image, however, the painting of a chair, stands two moves from reality, and is (for Plato) by nature deceptive and untrustworthy. Plato's system of reality is, of course, so well known as to hardly need repeating, but it serves as a good illustration of Derrida's point. Defining metaphysics around a central concept like Ideal Form

provides a hermeneutic framework through which to understand, judge, and critique both aesthetics and knowledge.

For Derrida, all systems of knowledge are organized around some central concept like Plato's. While Romantic thinking might be organized around imagination or the self, Enlightenment thinking might be organized around reason or rationality. The concept of such structure, claims Derrida, "must be thought of as a series of substitutions of center for center, as a linked chain of determinations of center" (279). These central concepts determine how knowledge is to be created and critiqued. According to Derrida, however, a moment occurs when the structure itself ruptures, "the moment when language invaded the universal problematic, the moment when, in the absence of a center or origin, everything became discourse" (280). This is the post-modern moment, the moment when language becomes the central structural concept. It is what Derrida calls the "structurality of structure," or the play of the structure, which refers to its simultaneous status as inside and outside, beginning and end, or "play constituted on the basis of a fundamental immobility and reassuring certitude" (279). In other words, making language the center of a knowledge structure disrupts the very fabric of that structure by lodging play into its heart. If language is multivocal, dialogic, always ambiguous, open to interpretation and misunderstanding, so too must be the structure. This is the subversive form of play's ambiguity.

To understand what Derrida means, it is useful to know something about semiotics, particularly as it descends from Ferdinand de Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics*. Saussure points out that a commonsense assumption about

language is that terms correspond to things, but there are several linguistic objections to this assumption. Saussure argues, “A linguistic sign is not a link between a thing and a name, but between a concept and a sound pattern” (66). Saussure creates the well-known “sign/signal/signification” triad to discuss semiotic meaning, where signification is a concept (a mental image of a tree), signal is the sound pattern (hearing the word “tree”), and sign is the whole of the two, the arbitrary and unmotivated relation between signal and signification. To put things in Derrida’s terms, the word *tree* is simultaneously tree and not tree. To make language the center of knowledge admits this semiotic play of signification and renders the center as center *and* non-center, reality *and* non-reality. It is this ambiguous theory of play, which emphasizes play’s involvement in the transformation of a *thing* into a *sign* (or more aptly, many different and ambiguous signs), which sets the stage for the language of play. Rhetorics of the imaginary emphasize play’s ambiguity and, in doing so, suggest how it is a resource for creating language.

One excellent example of an ambiguous theory of play can be found in Kevin Moberly’s “Composition, Computer Games, and the Absence of Writing,” where he argues that computer games incorporate composition into their gameplay. This not only requires gamers to read and make meaning of symbols, but to write and revise their play in response to those symbols (284). While the writing gamers do is typically seen as “play,” Moberly claims that videogames can not only teach students the fundamentals of composing and about the socio-political contexts where writing occurs, but also how reading environments influence how texts are written. In

particular, he discusses the adoption of “voice chat” by the popular MMORPG *World of Warcraft*. While users of the game have traditionally used text interfaces to communicate within the game, Moberly points out that the adoption of voice chat through headsets and secondary interfaces such as *Skype* have become increasingly common. For the game, the idea behind such a move is two-fold: first, it makes the game more accessible; second, it “effaces” writing.

Moberly’s argument relies heavily on “remediation,” a key concept in the study of new media. Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin describe it as the logic through which new forms refashion and reappropriate old forms (5). This means that “new media” are not complete and total breaks from older forms, but borrowings and remixes. One clear example of this is the “e-reader.” While a “new” media, e-readers use page layouts similar to traditional printed books, and some use graphics that simulate the turning a page. For Bolter and Grusin, this means that remediation involves a “double-logic.” On one hand, new media promise to provide the user a more immediate experience with content by erasing media. On the other hand, new media are hypermediate because they multiply media in the process of remediation (9). This, of course, recalls my earlier discussion about avatars and interfaces, but the key point I want to emphasize here is that, through the process of remediation, a prior form like writing can become “effaced” by the logic of immediacy. In other words, discursive writing in a text chat interface disappears, making it more difficult to recognize the role language plays in shaping the virtual environment of something like *World of Warcraft*. Through play, something that was

once writing is transformed into something no longer recognized as writing, but language is still experienced through that play.

Through remediation, writing is effaced by play because gamers are reading and writing, but doing it in forms that are not traditionally recognized as such. In this way, the rhetoric of the imaginary is suggestive of how writing and language might be transformed through play's ambiguity. In other words, writing interfaces are transformed by the introduction of a new form of play into the game space: voice chat. A conceptual leap from written to spoken language is not difficult, but theories of play's ambiguity push these transformations of language farther. Alice Robison hints at this very phenomenon in "The Design is in the Game: Writing Games, Teaching Writing." Through a collection of ethnographic data, including interviews with dozens of game designers, Robison suggests that composition instructors should take notice of how games are designed to appeal to their audience.³² In doing so, she asks that they broaden their conceptions of rhetoric, writing, and language to include aspects of games not traditionally seen as such, including the ways games interact with players and embody the intentions of game designers through rule-based interactions. Language—transformed by play's ambiguity—emerges in the form of a game's feedback systems and codes.

One way play transforms language in game spaces is found in Ian Bogost's concept of procedural rhetoric, or how videogames influence players using "the art of persuasion through rule-based representations and interactions rather than the

³² "It is the nascent field of game studies that has brought to bear the very quality that makes games unique: their ability to inspire a host of interactive meaning-making experiences designed with the purpose of engaging players in immersive, cognitively and socially complex worlds and situations" (Robison 359).

spoken word, writing, images, or moving pictures” (*Persuasive Games* ix). Bogost claims that games are rhetorical throughout and can embody the intentions, attitudes, and beliefs of their designers. Further, he claims that games are capable of disrupting and changing attitudes and beliefs about the world. Videogames, through computer code, represent processes from the real world, and in doing so mount claims about how those processes could or should operate (29). Game designers author arguments through the ways they embody real-world processes through computer code, and gamers experience and participate in those arguments through the act of play. Play and its ambiguity are codified by procedural rhetoric, a theory suggestive of how rhetoric, writing, and language are symbolized by feedback loops between players and games, enabled by computer code.

An example of this can be found in the *McDonald’s Video Game*.³³ Before entering the game, the player is told:

Making money in a corporation like McDonald’s is not simple at all!
Behind every sandwich, there is a complex process you must learn to manage: from the creation of pastures to the slaughter, from the restaurant management to the branding. You’ll discover all the dirty secrets that made of use [sic] of the biggest company of the world.
(n.p.)

Created by the Italian company “La Molleindustria,” the game is marketed as a “digital parody of McDonald’s.” It is a good example of procedural rhetoric because it specifically makes claims about McDonald’s business practices through the way the

³³ *The McDonald’s Game* can be played free online: <<http://www.mcvideogame.com>>

game's procedures represent processes in the real world, such as raising and slaughtering cattle and making hamburgers. The player takes on the role of a McDonald's CEO who has to make decisions such as whether to demolish rainforests, use their power to cause political corruption, or make burgers from genetically modified cattle. The game's processes make negative statements about McDonald's as a corporate entity, as the player essentially has to become corrupt and behave badly in order to succeed and turn a profit. The game's procedures mount claims, revealed to the gamer through feedback given during play, that economic and world disaster is inevitable when a corporation like McDonald's is powerful.

Bogost claims, "To address the possibilities of a new medium as a type of rhetoric, we must identify how inscription works on that medium, and then how arguments can be constructed through those modes of inscription" (24). Procedural rhetoric is inscribed through code, but experienced through play. In other words, the argument and its supporting claims are only made evident as a player's input invites feedback from the game, feedback which simulates processes like building a fast food empire in order to shape beliefs and change attitudes. While Bogost does not specifically define computerized procedure as language, I contend that his theory is suggestive of ambiguous theories of play expressed by rhetorics of the imaginary. Language such as "McDonald's is an evil corporation" is transformed into a feedback system that rewards players for demolishing rainforests to build slaughterhouses in the tropics. At the very least, the division between what is meant by *play* and what is meant by *language* is ambiguous in theories such as procedural

rhetoric, and I believe this sets the stage to theorize play-as-language and to inquire into the rhetorical and symbol-making practices such a language makes possible.

At this point, however, the language of play is only a possibility, created in the space made open by the rhetoric of the imaginary. In chapter three, I turn to Johan Huizinga's often-overlooked *Homo Ludens* as an early theory that I contend presents play-as-symbolic. In chapter four, I conceptualize the language of play, which is my theory of how play emerges symbolically in multimodal texts and is both emphasized and enabled by the possibility spaces of new media.

Conclusion: Contagious Theory

At the conclusion of *The Ambiguity of Play*, Brian-Sutton Smith claims, “because forms of play, like all other forms, cannot be neutrally interpreted, it is impossible to keep ambiguity from creeping into the relationship between how they are perceived and how they are experienced” (216). Ambiguity is necessarily a part of play, a feature that continuously bubbles up both within particular theories of play and as various theories are compared.

Following Sutton-Smith, it is important to remember that to not use these rhetorics when discussing play is practically impossible, and avoidance is hardly necessary anyway. Play and its rhetorics are as widespread as they are subversive. I have argued that four rhetorics of play—frivolity, progress, the self, and the imaginary—emerge in gaming studies as three theories of play: experimental, subjective, and ambiguous. My point in this chapter has not been to argue that any one theory of play is right, wrong, or objectively true, and I do not mean to

pigeonhole any one scholar or approach into a particular rhetoric or theory. Albert Rouzie rightly claims that many types of play can traverse and trespass boundaries, opening opportunities for creativity, exploration, and even joy (*Serio-Ludic* 7). Many, if not all, of the scholars I cite in this chapter traverse the boundaries I have drawn between their writing about games. If I have drawn these boundaries too thick and dark, it has not been to limit inquiry or to move toward some sense of certainty, but to highlight the many lines of inquiry play raises for composition theory and pedagogy. These include questions about pleasure, motivation, and language. My taxonomy seeks to disrupt the certainties of commonsense about play and raise questions, not to create stability or settle on answers with finality.

I am reminded of Susan Miller's excellent and enduring essay, "Writing Theory: Theory Writing." She writes, "Theories are particular discourses that arise in specific intellectual and material circumstances, conditions that importantly constrain their content and its implications, or range of significance, at specific times" (64). In other words, theory arises out of the very circumstances that require its creation and is always shaped by local conditions. Miller argues that theories, when understood as contextual and circumspect, are endowed with less power and prestige than theory has previously claimed. Further, she suggests that the pleasure and knowledge created by theory must always be read against issues of empowerment, and she claims that a theory's accuracy always relies heavily on its reception (67).

My way of reading Miller is that theory has the capacity to make us feel good about our knowledge, and this is something that should keep us both wary about

any particular theory and vigilant about the making of theory generally. In short, Miller's theory of theory helps remind theorists to guard against certitude and finality. How "good" or how explanatory any given theory is relies heavily on the rhetorical factors shaping its production, distribution, access, and reception. The play theories I have outlined in this chapter do, quite often, make their believers feel good and even certain. I remember, for instance, how good I felt upon reading James Paul Gee's theory of videogames and literacy. As someone who has always cared deeply about games and writing, it confirmed much of what I already held dear about both. Namely, Gee seemed to confirm for me the intimate connection between games and writing, between pleasure and learning. In the forward to *Gaming Lives in the Twenty-First Century*, Gee admits to the same pleasure: "I had intended, I must admit, *What Video Games Have to Teach us about Learning and Literacy* to be a virus that used games—an appealing and controversial topic—to spread views on literacy, learning, and the mind that I already believed" (xi emphasis added). Gee's work has been a powerful and appealing explanatory concept for understanding how learning and literacy are shaped and encouraged by games. Like him, I must admit that his theory—as well as much of the work in this chapter it has influenced—embodies many of the views I hold deeply.

The ability of theory to inspire such deep belief is, I believe, both medicinal and poisonous. Theory can indeed become virus-like. While the Merriam-Webster dictionary defines *virus* as "the causative agent of an infectious disease," inoculations introduce viruses to our systems. In terms of computability, a virus is a deadly thing hidden in a seemingly harmless thing, and Gee intends for his

“harmless book” on videogames to infect outdated educational practices.³⁴ But theorists should never forget the virus’ status as virus, as prolonged occupation inevitably becomes a sickness. Any theory, such as the one I am building, potentially describes a new contagion emerging from the coughs of an interlude.

³⁴ Gee writes, “As I played good video games, it became obvious to me that these games incorporated good learning principles—just the sort that were showing up in cutting-edge research in the learning sciences—at a time when many of our schools were returning to a skill-and-drill regime that deserted such principles, at least for poor children” (*Gaming Lives* xi).

Chapter 3: Huizinga's Magic Circle and Play's Symbolization

"To our way of thinking, play is the direct opposite of seriousness. At first sight this opposition seems as irreducible to other categories as the play-concept itself. Examined more closely, however, the contrast between play and seriousness proves to be neither conclusive nor fixed. We can say: play is non-seriousness. But apart from the fact that this proposition tells us nothing about the positive qualities of play, it is extraordinarily easy to refute. As soon as we proceed from 'play is non-seriousness' to 'play is not serious', the contrast leaves us in the lurch-for some play can be very serious indeed." (5)

Johan Huizinga
Homo Ludens

"Prime credit in play-theory terms for denying the puritanical and work contentions about play in modern times must go to Huizinga, who, in Homo Ludens, argues that play is a most fundamental human function and has permeated all cultures from the beginning. Furthermore, he says that social play, particularly contest, underlies and contributes to the characteristics of human culture as found in law, war, philosophy, poetry, religion, and art. In play, man creates a poetic world alongside the original world of nature . . . Nobody has claimed so much for play before or since." (202)

Brian Sutton-Smith
The Ambiguity of Play

Introduction: Seriousness and Play

Recent research in rhetoric and composition reveals a rising interest about how play might inform the composing process. Particularly since Richard Lanham's prescient argument that digitization, by calling attention to the ways textuality is always interfaced, requires continuous oscillation between motives of purpose and play (*The Electronic Word*), researchers have inquired about the possibilities of play

in the composition classroom. Such research tends to focus on the potential of particular technologies to enable play, ranging from word processors (Halio), to hypertext (Janangelo), to chat rooms (Rouzie, *Serio-Ludic Rhetoric*), and even to commercial videogames like *SecondLife*, *World of Warcraft*, and *The Sims Online* (deWinter and Vie; Colby and Colby; Gee and Hayes).

These scholars often respond to and argue against the rhetoric of frivolity in mainstream culture that theorizes play as “pure waste,” an activity that is unproductive and non-serious. Composition scholars who pursue inquiry about play often take the serious/play³⁵ binary as a starting point and question how teachers’ and students’ deeply held assumptions about both terms inform the writing classroom. Albert Rouzie has been the most articulate voice regarding the implications of the serious/play binary. He argues, “Educators have inherited deeply entrenched divisions between work and play, seriousness and frivolity, and order and chaos, which ultimately impoverish our culture’s view of literacy” (“Dramatic Experience” 139). Although Rouzie’s serio-ludic theory of play is explicated in various articles, the most thorough treatment is in his book, *At Play in the Fields of Writing* (2005), where he argues that some types of play are both enjoyable and educationally viable and that play is a productive source for writing and the teaching of writing.

Rouzie’s theory distinguishes three types of play: 1) “pure play” that is irrelevant to educational goals, 2) “destructive play” that is competitive and creates division, and 3) “serio-ludic” play that “blurs, traverses, combines, and challenges

³⁵ This is also often referred to as the “work/play” binary. Though “work” and “serious” are not necessarily interchangeable terms, I use the term “serious” because Huizinga uses it most frequently.

the work/play, serious/frivolous dichotomies” (“The Composition” 142). Play is intrinsic to language, suppressed by print conventions but emergent through digitization (26). Resolving the serious/play split through computerized composition allows instructors to invite classroom play, and such play allows for critique, reflection, engagement, and conflict resolution (7). Key to serio-ludic rhetoric is Rouzie’s insistence that play is “free, spontaneous, and may be humorous. It is voluntary and intrinsically motivated, often an active process of improvisation unfolding in real time” (115). Rouzie’s theory sounds, at first, like a subjective theory of play that relies on the rhetoric of the self, but it does not fit easily into any of the theories described in chapter two. Its focus on process recalls experimental theories, and its focus on subversion and boundary blurring recalls ambiguous theories. The complexity of Rouzie’s theory is embodied by the fact that is articulated as “serio-ludic,” simultaneously embodying both halves of the serious/play binary.³⁶

In this chapter, I revisit another theory of play that utilizes the serious/play oppositional pair: the unusual and little understood *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*, where Johan Huizinga claims, “All play means something” (1). Rouzie’s theory aptly emphasizes the role of play in the processes of composing, particularly in electronic texts.³⁷ However, I contend that Huizinga’s theory in *Homo*

³⁶ As Ian Bogost says, “When people complain that serious games is an oxymoron they miss the point: it’s *supposed* to be an oxymoron. When people hear serious games, this contradiction is foregrounded and silently resolved” (“Exploitationware” 141).

³⁷ This is not to suggest, however, that Rouzie does not view play as productive. He argues, “It is important that instructors, students, and the rhetoric and composition field begin to consider play as a significant rhetorical element of composition and communication that can move the reader toward a dramatic experience of reading a text and move the writer toward intrinsically motivated composing experiences enriched by the creative play element” (*Serio-Ludic* 189).

Ludens is an important and untapped resource for theorizing play and language: through a confrontation between competing worldviews—embodied by his serious~play dialectic—Huizinga creates a third view of *play-as-symbolization*. From *Homo Ludens*, play emerges as a resource for the expression of ideas, attitudes, emotions, and beliefs within a culture’s “magic circles.” The symbolic theory of play in *Homo Ludens* sets the stage for my theorization of the language of play, a theory for how human play is symbolized through various non-discursive forms in the possibility spaces of composing mediums that are emphasized and enabled by computability.

Research Questions

- What are the current understandings of Huizinga’s theory of play from *Homo Ludens*? What was his theory of play?
- What was Huizinga’s methodology for creating his theory of play?
- What was Huizinga’s theory of language, and how is it related to play?
- What is the relationship between symbolization and magic circles?

Method and Methodology

I concluded chapter two by suggesting that ambiguous theories of play conceive of *language-as-play* that transforms writing and rhetoric into new forms such as electronic chats and computer processes. Language and play—each composed by the other’s ambiguity—become mutually transformative. In this chapter, I re-conceptualize Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens* as a theory of *play-as-symbolic*

by inquiring about Huizinga's language theory and methodology. My reading of Huizinga is dramatized through debates about his "magic circle" concept. Diverging from common readings of Huizinga, I present them as a given culture's "rule-bound" sites where play is symbolized. Huizinga's theory of *play-as-symbolic* bridges ambiguous theories of *language-as-play* to my theorization of the *language of play* in chapter four.

Stephen North's *The Making of Knowledge in Composition* provides both useful terminology and methodological insight for my inquiry in this chapter. North argues that much of composition's methodological diversity—and ambiguity—results from of a "methodological landrush" in which methodologies drawn from various disciplines compete to supplant "lore"³⁸ as the dominant knowledge-making method in composition studies. North claims that "The Scholars"—divided into "Historians," "Philosophers," and "Critics"—were the first on the scene, and are held together by their reliance on dialectic, which he defines as "the seeking of knowledge via the deliberate confrontation of opposing points of view" (60).

North's treatment of methodology is useful in this chapter for two reasons. First, North's over-arching purpose throughout the book is to call for methodological consciousness-raising. North writes, "It just plain isn't easy to look hard at what you believe, and to discover the very narrow limits of what you know" (n.p.). He calls on teacher-scholars to pay close attention to method and to articulate well the limitations of their preferred methods. In North's terms, I answer my research questions in this chapter as part critic, part philosopher. Critical inquiry

³⁸ "The accumulated body of traditions, practices, and beliefs in terms of which Practitioners understand how writing is done, learned, and taught" (North 23).

involves “knowledge about the meaning of texts, derived from the act of reading, articulated as critical analysis, and refined by dialectic” (119). Through a reading of *Homo Ludens*, I create knowledge about the meaning of the text through analysis and critique.

Second, North’s definition of dialectic describes how Huizinga makes knowledge about play in *Homo Ludens*. While American scholarship most commonly refers to Huizinga as either an historian or anthropologist, in this chapter I borrow a page from Dutch scholarship to consider Huizinga as a language theorist who builds knowledge through dialectic, springing from the philosopher’s “impulse to account for, to frame, critique, and analyze” fundamental assumptions (North 91). Huizinga’s theory of language, I argue, is crucial to understanding his symbolic theory of play.

Contrast and Synesthesia: *Reading Huizinga*

Johan Huizinga, much like his work, is difficult to pin down.³⁹ The difficulties of reading Huizinga are many, but among the complexities of approaching him are the far-reaching scope of his intellectual work and the range of his curiosity. Much of his writing remains to be translated in English, including his memoirs, correspondence, and critical collections of his numerous essays. At least two of his books, *The Autumn of the Middle Ages* and *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, have received a good deal of scholarly attention in history and anthropology, as Huizinga is an early theorist who considers the role of concepts such as subjectivity, imagination, and literary devices in the writing of history (Anchor; Krul). While

³⁹ Jane McGonigal refers to Huizinga as “the great twentieth-century Dutch philosopher of human play” (*Reality is Broken* 112).

much less discussed, Huizinga also conducted considerable work on Erasmus (*Erasmus and the Age of Reformation*), providing one possible—and largely unexplored—point of contact between Huizinga and historians of rhetoric.

His most thoroughly discussed work, however, is his unique examination of play and culture in *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (1938). While not common, references to Huizinga’s play theory do appear occasionally in rhetorical theory. Perhaps the most known rhetorical invocation of Huizinga’s work appears in *The Electronic Word: Democracy, Technology, and the Arts*, where Richard Lanham discusses the purpose/play binary as symbolic of divisions between philosophy and rhetoric. Lanham suggests that “the rhetorical analysis of culture begun by Huizinga” suggests the need to return rhetoric and play to the center of educational purpose (68-72).

Huizinga’s apparent faith in the serious/play binary is unfortunately the element of *Homo Ludens* that has received the most attention.⁴⁰ The serious/play divide is both central to understanding Huizinga’s theory of play and central to the misunderstandings that already abound. Ian Bogost writes, “Johan Huizinga struggled with the ambiguous link between seriousness and play in his classic study” (*Persuasive Games* 54). Huizinga’s struggle with the two terms and their relationship is central to the interpretive difficulty of reading *Homo Ludens*. Albert Rouzie claims that Huizinga’s work has had the “effect of divorcing play from material reality” (29). Game designer Jane McGonigal claims that Huizinga

⁴⁰ John Ferrara writes, “Huizinga’s ideas have influenced contemporary theories of play and game design, and his writings reflect the broad cultural predisposition to classify games as purely diversions from real life” (*Playful Design* 23).

demonstrated that all play is meaningful (*Reality is Broken* 112). In “Definition of Man,” Kenneth Burke argues that *Homo Ludens* “serves well as an instrument to warn us against an overly instrumentalist view of man’s ways with symbols” (“Definition of Man” 24). Brian Sutton-Smith claims, “Nobody has claimed as much for play before or since” Huizinga (202), and Roger Caillois critiques Huizinga’s failure to take seriously “games of chance played for money” (5). Interpretations of *Homo Ludens* rarely agree.

In this chapter, I argue that Huizinga purposefully and playfully maintained clashing points of view throughout his life’s work as an embodiment of his language theory and methodology. Huizinga’s theory of language—not explicitly articulated in any text, but emergent in much of his writing—*requires* dialectical tension as a necessary condition for the creation of language. Huizinga, I will show, believed that the tensions between different conceptions of knowledge—embodied by human sensory experiences—make language possible. Huizinga purposefully maintained tension through binary oppositions in his writing both as part of his dialectical method and as an embodiment of his theory of language.

Huizinga is primarily understood in America as an historian and anthropologist, as much of his work focuses on the transformations of culture across various periods (such as the Middle Ages and Renaissance), as well as explorations of particular concepts in different cultural settings (such as the chivalry in Christian Europe and ancient Japan). While both disciplinary understandings of Huizinga are necessary to understand his work, neither is sufficient to appreciate the broad scope of his scholarly inquiries. As I have mentioned, in the Netherlands Huizinga is

understood more broadly as a linguist, philologist, and theorist of language.

Huizinga scholar William Otterspeer claims that, in order to read Huizinga, “what is needed is an eye for that special whole that Huizinga was able to forge from ostensibly incompatible parts” (31). Huizinga’s central methodological move, I argue, is dialectic, the staging of encounters between opposing points of view in order to create new knowledge. Huizinga’s commitment to placing wildly different concepts and worldviews in the same writing space is reflected both in his life and his scholarly work overall. It is impossible, I believe, to appreciate Huizinga’s writing in general, and *Homo Ludens* specifically, in its full complexity without an understanding of his methodology. His methodology is, in turn, deeply enfolded in his theory of language.

Otterspeer’s excellent book, *Reading Huizinga*, provides a good sketch of Huizinga’s early life and how it influenced his scholarship. From the beginning of his life, Huizinga’s existence was marked by contrast. Huizinga’s father was raised in a devoutly religious household and—while religion, faith, and piety were key parts of Huizinga’s upbringing—his father fell extremely ill with syphilis and came to violently reject religion in favor of science. According to Otterspeer, his father’s turn from religion was key to Huizinga’s thinking throughout his life, as his family “settled into a framework of contrasts that would determine Huizinga’s thinking for the rest of his life: science versus religion, reason versus feeling, individuality versus community, change versus permanence” (25).⁴¹ To read Huizinga is to experience

⁴¹ This, of course, recalls the title of Burke’s *Permanence and Change*. Though it is clear from Burke’s citation in *Language as Symbolic Action* that he was familiar with *Homo Ludens*, when, how, and how much Burke read Huizinga is unknown. It is also unclear if Huizinga would have read Burke.

large and often confusing experiments with dialectical pairs. For Huizinga, creating tension between such pairs, as embodiments of contrasting worldviews, creates the possibility for transformation and the creation of humanistic knowledge.

Huizinga's work is indeed marked by oppositions—such as seriousness and play—and he is often seen as believing the divisions between terms are true and natural. However, I contend that Huizinga used the ambiguity between such oppositions as generative. Otterspeer, citing archival research, points to Huizinga's own notes on Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals*, where Huizinga writes, "Sensuality and chastity are not necessarily opposed; every good marriage, every true love, transcends any such contrast" (Otterspeer 26). The result of Huizinga's methodology is that it is often hard to reconcile different passages from the same text. Huizinga sometimes appears to be a staunch conservative, sometimes a progressive liberal. On one hand, Huizinga will discuss the universal appeal and truth of Christian faith; on the other, Huizinga spent a great portion of his life studying and practicing the religions of the Far East. He was part of "The Movement," a group of college students in the Netherlands who advocated "art for art's sake," and he wrote that to ignore politics in creative work "was a great mistake" (Otterspeer 31). Neither portrait of Huizinga is accurate, and yet both are essentially true. Reading Huizinga is pleasantly frustrating.

The contrasts that characterize Huizinga's life are analogous to his scholarship. Otterspeer claims that the contrast between "permanence and mutability" is the conceptual move that brings cohesion to Huizinga's work overall. Oppositions, for Huizinga, embodied conflicts between old and new ways of

thinking. Dialectic, as a language-based methodology for creating knowledge, was a means for bringing the old and new into contrast, a means of allowing culture to move forward without being overly certain of progress narratives. Huizinga reflects on this method eloquently in his last book, aptly titled *In the Shadow of Tomorrow*, which he translated to English while the Nazi's occupied his homeland:

We in our time neither ignore nor depreciate past glories. We know that at many periods many things have been better than they are today [sic]. Possibly certain particular relationships may one day reapproach older and more desirable forms. But we know: a general going *back* is out of the question. There is nothing but to go forward even if we stand appalled at the unknown depths and distances ahead, even if the near future faces us as a yawning abyss shrouded in dark impenetrable vapours. (27)

For Huizinga, the old is constantly in a state of transformation, being reborn through dialectical tension with the new. In this way, his historical work was meant to be both descriptive and creative. On one hand, he believed that historians must strive to present true and accurate accounts of the past. On the other hand, he writes, "Something is true in so far as it is valid for a certain period of time" ("Disavowal" 100). Historians both seek and create truth, making their histories objective and subjective, disinterested and political, discovered and invented. Huizinga writes, "If we are to preserve culture we must continue to create it" ("The Present Crisis" 38).

It is Huizinga's insistence that history is creative, even poetic, that makes him stand out among historians of his own time.⁴² His work is situated firmly within the rise of modernist thinking, as much of the scholarly work around him was rooted in rational, logical, and experimental methods for making and verifying knowledge. Huizinga's early training, however, was as a linguist. His linguistic training underscores his lifelong interest in the role language plays in creating and shaping beliefs; in other words, the creation of knowledge through language means knowledge is always cultural and rhetorical. Otterspeer claims that, "As a young linguist, [Huizinga] had opposed a one-sided, rational approach to language" (113), a perspective that informed both the work he produced and the work he was unable to produce. In *Homo Ludens*, Huizinga writes, "In the course of time we have come to realize that we are not so reasonable after all as the Eighteenth Century, with its worship of reason and its naïve optimism, thought us" (n.p.). Huizinga's insistence that humanity cannot be adequately understood or defined through a one-sided philosophical system based in logic and rationality not only provides the exigency for his inquiry into play, but also means that his scholarship is always attentive to language and rhetoric.

Like his methodology, Huizinga's language theory was also deeply rooted in contrast. While Huizinga never specifically articulated a theory of language in his published works, I contend that he relied upon a theory he sought to develop in a rejected dissertation prospectus entitled, "Introduction for a Study of Light and Sound." Huizinga's idea remains provocative today, even in light of radical language

⁴² Otterspeer: "The historian's task, in his view, was, to combine 'the greatest attainable objectivity' with 'strong subjective emotion'" (113).

theories that emerged from post-structural thinking. Otterspeer explains that in Huizinga's

research project on the origins of language, he divided the sensory impressions he intended to study, tactile impressions that he saw applied to perceptions of song and light, into contrasting pairs: sharp and blunt, bright and dull, light and heavy. He focused especially on the intensity of contrasts and the resulting effect, particularly in relation to light or colour and sound. He is concerned with 'shouting colours' and 'shrill light', or—an example he calls a 'particularly finely tuned expression'—'colours that swear at each other'. There, in that clash, says Huizinga, in those contrasts dissolved in synesthesia lies the key to the genesis and life of words. (102)

Essentially, Huizinga proposes that humans have the cognitive ability to think of their senses disparately—I feel with my hands, I see with my eyes—but they experience those senses as integrated. For Huizinga, *synesthesia* is a word that suggests the tension and conflict humans necessarily feel from their contrasting sense perceptions, and language paradoxically emerges both as a resolution and embodiment of that tension. In Huizinga's synesthetic theory of language, we can see his views on methodology and linguistics in their full integration: language emerges as a means to articulate sensory tension, and it therefore serves as an apt resource for working through the tensions embodied by contrasting terms. In other words, terms like seriousness and play are to language as sight and sound are to the senses: separated meta-cognitively, but integrated experientially.

Though Huizinga's proposal was rejected on grounds that his claims were impossible to verify (Otterspeer 32), he seems to take his own unverified theory as fact in much of his work. *Homo Ludens* is a prime example. In chapter seven, Huizinga suggests that many forms of expression tend to lose touch with play over time. Huizinga is specifically referencing academic—particularly the philosophy of science, or logical positivism—means of expression in his own time. His point, similar to arguments made by rhetorical theorists such as I.A. Richards and Kenneth Burke, is that science tends to reduce the ambiguity of language, to pin meaning down in order to transmit communication as unambiguously as possible. Remember Huizinga's synesthetic theory: language emerges to resolve synesthetic tension, but ultimately embodies it. In *Homo Ludens*, Huizinga writes:

The word-bound concept is always inadequate to the torrent of life. Hence it is only the image-making or figurative word that can invest things with expression and at the same time bathe them in the luminosity of ideas: idea and thing are united in image. But whereas the language of ordinary life—in itself a working and workmanlike instrument—is continually wearing down the image-content of words and acquiring a superficial existence of its own (logical only in appearance), poetry continues to cultivate the figurative, i.e. image-bearing, qualities of language with deliberate intent. (133)

Notice the variety of terms that reference sensory perception in this passage, including sound, image, touch, and sight. He claims that to call poetry “a literal playing with words and language is no metaphor: it is the precise and literal truth”

(132). Just as the rules of a game give play a particular shape—one set of rules ramifies play into the form of baseball while another set gives it the form of cricket—the “rule-bound” structures of poetic forms like the Shakespearean sonnet create possibilities for play as poets move freely within the spaces of those forms. For Huizinga, contrasting sensory perceptions are creative resources that are deliberately utilized in poetry. His interest in poetry resides in the way it consciously embodies synesthesia and play. For example, consider the opening lines of Shakespeare’s Sonnet 18: “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day? / Thou art more lovely and more temperate.” The word *temperate* simultaneously references two senses of the word: temperature (heat) and calmness (motion). Poets intentionally utilize such play on words to create poetic meaning. For Huizinga, this creative method is reflective of how language emerges more generally from contrasting sensory perceptions. Taste and touch are two different ways humans sense a kiss. Those contrasting senses are resources for language to describe the experience of a kiss that is simultaneously both senses.

I contend that Huizinga’s theory of play in *Homo Ludens* can only be understood through a consideration of his language theory and methodology. For Huizinga, language emerges from the play of human sensory perception. Further, he inquires into the nature of play through dialectic, putting binary oppositions—creations of language—into contrast. In short, Huizinga plays games *with* language in order to articulate knowledge about play *through* language. A lack of understanding about Huizinga’s dialectical methodology and synesthetic theory of language has led to partial understandings regarding his theory of play in *Homo*

Ludens that take only one side of the serious~play dialectic as his overall position. His position is simultaneously both and neither side of that dialectic.

Play and Games: Lost in Translation

Two misunderstandings abound regarding interpretations of *Homo Ludens*. First, many have suggested that Huizinga maintains a sharp distinction between seriousness and play (Colby and Colby; Rouzie, *At Play*). Second, others claim that Huizinga divorced play from material reality and believed it was “pure waste” of no material interest (Caillois; Ferrara; Lin and Chuen-Tsai; Taylor). Building from the previous section, where I explain misunderstandings of *Homo Ludens* in terms of Huizinga’s methodology and language theory, in this section I point to misconceptions regarding two key terms—*play* and *game*—and discuss a translation⁴³ “error” in *Homo Ludens* that embodies the debate regarding Huizinga’s position on the serious/play oppositional pair.

The terms “play” and “game” are often used interchangeably. In a work about either, it can be difficult to distinguish the two, as is often the case with Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens*. His theory of play is commonly confused with a definition of games offered by an early critique of his work: *Man, Play and Games* by Roger Caillois.⁴⁴ Caillois’s methodical account of game types creates a classification scheme for describing games comparatively and cross-culturally. To do so, he defines play as free, separate, uncertain, unproductive, rule-bound, and make-believe (9-10). For

⁴³ Otterspeer claims, “Huizinga himself has not always been fortunate with his translators. It would be a great boon if this book helped to create an awareness that many of his works still await discovery by the English-speaking world” (12).

⁴⁴ This critique is actually in a separate essay by Caillois, titled “The Importance of Games of Chance.” The essay is included in his book’s appendix.

Caillois, the terms “play” and “game” are roughly equal, with play manifesting as games on a sliding scale between uncontrolled fantasy (*paidia*) and conventionality (*ludus*). Caillois critiques Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens* for too closely associating play with mystery (4) and for not taking seriously games of chance played for money (5). Caillois and Huizinga are often cited together due to their roughly equal play concepts.⁴⁵ At first glance, Huizinga’s theory does seem quite similar to Caillois:

Summing up the formal characteristics of play we might call it a free activity, standing quite consciously outside “ordinary” life as being “not serious,” but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. (*Homo Ludens* 4)

From this definition alone, it is easy to label Huizinga’s play theory as non-productive and divorced from material reality. However, two key distinctions Caillois fails to realize belie this point of view. First, *Homo Ludens* is about play, not games. This subtle difference becomes important when we appreciate the second distinction: for Huizinga, play has its own ontological being. As a “thing,” it is objectively real in the same sense as gravity or dark matter. Evidenced by animal play,⁴⁶ it is older than humans and therefore predates language.⁴⁷ This means that to

⁴⁵ Jesper Juul claims, “Both Huizinga and Caillois describe games as being outside ‘normal’ life: They are assigned a separate space and separate time” (*Half-Real* 33).

⁴⁶ Robert Fagen’s *Animal Play Behavior* (1981) is likely still the most important book on animal play, where he argues that humans still feel play, but have lost the ability to sense it directly.

⁴⁷ Huizinga claims play “must have been present before human culture or human speech existed” (*Homo Ludens* 141).

study the play element of culture is to understand how a non-human thing is articulated and expressed by people. Baseball, for instance, is one expression of play: in other words, when playing with bats and balls is subjected to certain rule structures, that activity emerges as a game. For Huizinga, all humans play, and “it is through this playing that society expresses its interpretation of life and the world” (46). For example, many have claimed that the rules of baseball express deeply held beliefs in American culture about issues such as religion and social class (Daniel-Wariya; Evans; Kates). In this way, playing baseball is an interpretation of America as a culture of equality where everyone gets a “fair deal” and has an equal chance for success. Christopher Evans claims, “No other American sport has the symbolic meaning of baseball” (6) because it has so often—however problematically—been seen as an expression of the “American Dream.” The implications for Huizinga’s conception of play as expressive become apparent later in *Homo Ludens*:

When speaking of the play-element in culture, *we do not mean* that among the various activities of civilized life an important place *is reserved for play*, nor do we mean that civilization has arisen out of play by some evolutionary process, in the sense that something which was originally play passed into something that was *no longer play* and could henceforth be called culture. The view we take in the following pages is that culture *arises in the form of play, that it is played in the very beginning.* (46)

In other words, if people express their interpretation of the world through play, and if people have been playing since before the emergence of culture, then culture itself

must be expressed in part through play. The previous two block quotes provided embody contrasting statements about the character of play: natural/cultural. Huizinga insists that play “is an objectively recognizable, a concretely definable thing” (46). In this way, he distinguishes between play as a “real” thing and the way cultures express play. This means that when play is subjected to specific sets of rules created through human language it is expressed in the form of a swinging bat and a throw to first base. Play-as-thing is “connected with no material interest.” The play-concept, however, people’s symbolizations of play within rule-bound structures, is connected with material interest. While freely swinging a bat is play in a literal sense that may have no purpose and produce nothing, swinging a bat within the rule-bound context has a specific purpose (getting a hit) and produces things that have meaning and value within that context (a base runner). Huizinga claims that people play in rule-bound spaces of philosophy, art, writing, and even war.⁴⁸ The play-concept is a term for humans playing in order to do things in the world of language and symbol that contrasts with the literal play in the world of nature and object.

If Huizinga’s theory of play as both natural and symbolic seems strange, perhaps a similar example in rhetorical theory will clarify.⁴⁹ In “The Rhetorical

⁴⁸ While Huizinga consistently maintains that war is a form of play, he maintains an uneasy distinction between different types of war. Huizinga claims, “We can only speak of war as a cultural function so long as it is waged within a sphere whose members regard each other as equals or antagonists with equal rights” (89). In other words, Huizinga believes that war where different parties see each other as fully human and agree to the same rules of engagement has elements of play. Huizinga eliminates what he calls “total war,” or conflicts where a totalitarian regime sees another culture as non-human and attempts to destroy it completely, from the category of play.

⁴⁹ In “Structure, Sign, and Play,” Derrida claims that “language bears within itself the necessity of its own critique” (284) precisely because of concepts that are both natural and symbolic. Derrida’s example is “incest taboo.”

Situation,” Lloyd Bitzer defines the rhetorical situation as a “natural,” objectively recognizable context that involves “persons, events, objects, relations, and an exigence which strongly invites utterance” (5). Rhetorical situations, according to Bitzer, arise naturally from “crisis situations” that invite, structure, and are potentially modified by appropriate and timely rhetorical discourse. Bitzer’s theory of rhetorical situations is enduring,⁵⁰ but has also been heavily critiqued for its emphasis on rhetorical situations as natural. Richard Vatz (“The Myth of the Rhetorical Situation”) and Scott Consigny (“Rhetoric and Its Situations”) claim that rhetorical situations must also be thought of as created and symbolized by language. The both/and form Huizinga attributes to play/play-concept is similar to the natural/symbolic tension embodied by Bitzer’s theory of rhetorical situations.

I contend that understanding Huizinga’s play/play-concept helps account for the very different readings offered of *Homo Ludens*, as Huizinga both divorces play from material reality while arguing for the play-concept as a central component of material reality. The dialectical tension of play/play-concept is further embodied by the editor’s note about the title of Huizinga’s most famous book: *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*. In the foreword, Huizinga reflects on his work and notes that, in an address given as the Rector of Leyden University in 1933, his subtitle was “The Play Element of Culture.” He claims that audience members always attempted to change *of to in*, but he insists the word choice maintains a key point of his inquiry: he wanted to “ascertain how far culture itself bears the character of

⁵⁰ Bitzer’s theory has, for instance heavily influenced contemporary rhetorical genre theory, due to his claim that, “From day to day, year to year, comparable situations occur, prompting comparable responses; hence rhetorical forms are born and a special vocabulary, grammar, and style are developed” (13).

play” (n.p.). Huizinga suggests that each preposition embodies a different logic. His preferred term, *of*, means culture arises through the form of play and never stops playing. *In*, on the other hand, suggests that culture evolves from play, implying that play eventually becomes separated from culture. Huizinga’s insistence on keeping “of” in his subtitle is, in my mind, evidence that he is always keenly aware of how play is integrated with culture from the very beginning, manifested and expressed through the play-concept.

Interestingly, the story of how and why the English translation of *Homo Ludens* maintains the incorrect subtitle may also suggest the importance of Huizinga’s synesthetic theory of language. The translator of the Beacon Press first edition notes, “Logically, of course, Huizinga is correct; but as English prepositions are not governed by logic I have retained the more euphonious ablative in this subtitle” (n.p.). Who is the translator of *Homo Ludens*, and why does that translator both acknowledge and defy Huizinga’s logical distinction? I argue that the translator’s choice is evidence of three things: 1) the difficulty of translation in general, 2) the specific difficulty of translating *Homo Ludens*, and 3) a nod to Huizinga’s methodology and language theory.

First, post-structural theory and semiotics point to the general difficulty of translation. Derrida claims, “The materiality of a word cannot be translated or carried over into another language. Materiality is precisely that which translation relinquishes. To relinquish materiality: such is the driving force of translation” (qtd. in Dobrin, Rice, and Vastola, “Introduction” 10). In other words, the meaning of any symbol cannot be perfectly disentangled from the material of its articulation. This

means that language is always transformed through translation. Gunther Kress's multimodal theory of semiotics echoes Derrida:

I assume that "translations" across modes *within* a culture are both possible and hugely difficult; from *image* to speech—the "evocation" rather than a description—of a painting in a conversation about an exhibition; or from *image* to *writing*; or from oral poetry to poetry in written form. I assume that translations across cultures, whether in the same mode (from *writing* to *writing*—from Russian *novel* to that *novel* in English; from *gesture* to *gesture*—from the "French" shoulder shrug of indifference to an English version) or across different modes are also possible, though always achieved with enormously difficult selection; at a considerable level of generality; and inevitably with significant changes in meaning. (*Multimodality* 10)

As any textual product is translated from one language to another, the meaning of that text is inevitably transformed. The transformation of meaning in *Homo Ludens* is at least partially embodied by the of/in contrast between Huizinga's forward and the editor's note.

This realization about translation in general points to more specific difficulties with the translation of *Homo Ludens*. Namely, as Otterspeer notes, Huizinga was fluent in a wide variety of languages and employed concepts and shades of meaning from those languages in his own writing. Huizinga was trained in linguistics and devoted much of his life to the diligent study of language. I see Huizinga as a theorist who constantly learned about and tinkered with the various

cultural knowledges and shades of meanings embodied by words in different languages.⁵¹ Language is both the hallmark of Huizinga's dialectical methodology and a feature that makes the reading and translation of *Homo Ludens* specifically so difficult. To read Huizinga is to experience meanings embodied by words in the vast quantity of languages he studied, spoke, and composed through. To translate such a theorist well would be no small task.

Finally, the of/in contrast maintained in *Homo Luden's* translation may be a nod to Huizinga's language theory and methodology. Again, the translator's name is not provided, but one note in particular is highly suggestive:

This edition is prepared from the German edition published in Switzerland, 1944, and also from the author's own English translation of the text, which he made shortly before his death. Comparison of the two texts shows a number of discrepancies and a marked difference in style; the translator hopes that the following version has achieved a reasonable *synthesis*. (n.p., emphasis added)

Note the additional difficulties raised by this note. Huizinga wrote the book in Dutch in 1938. During his exile by the Nazis—and after translating *In the Shadow of Tomorrow* into English—Huizinga attempts to translate *Homo Ludens* to English, but passes away before finishing the task. By 1944, a version of the text has appeared in German (this translator is unknown), meaning that the translation of the original

⁵¹ In chapter two of *Homo Ludens*, for instance, Huizinga discusses the various play-concepts embodied by different languages' usage of the word. "Nobody will expect that every language, in forming its idea of and expression for play, could have hit on the same idea or found a single word for it" (28).

1949 Beacon Press edition in English is a “synthesis” of a version translated from Dutch to German and an incomplete English version by Huizinga.

It is possible that the translator’s “synthesis” of disparate versions of *Homo Ludens* from different languages, as well the highlighting of the of/in contrast, is a means of nodding to the dialectical methodology that is so deeply integrated with his synesthetic theory of language. The translator of *Homo Ludens* is R.C.F. Hull, the same man who translated over “four million words” of C.G. Jung’s theories of psychology and the mind into a wide variety of languages (McGuire). Hull was himself no small celebrity in the academic world, owing largely to his well-known translation of Jung, translations so important that Hull is often credited as an editor or co-author. When Hull passed away after a long battle with coronary thrombosis in 1974, his life’s work was the subject of several scholarly articles in psychology, and the *Journal of Analytic Psychology* published several obituaries to Hull, written by experts in the field. A brief survey of these texts reveals a dedicated translator who gains deep insight into the texts he translates through his own research. I believe that Hull, faced with the difficult task of translating *Homo Ludens*, most likely took the time to learn something about Huizinga’s approach to scholarship more generally. Hull embodies this understanding about Huizinga’s writing by purposefully including both Huizinga’s reflections on the address given at the University of Leyden and his own note highlighting the decision to change the subtitle.

Hull’s obituaries note that he worked as a code breaker during World War II, was involved in the translation of Martin Heidegger’s *Existence in Being*, and

translated the correspondence of Sigmund Freud. According to William McGuire, Hull's contributions as a translator were so immense and respected in the scholarly community that Carl Jung wrote Hull to express his "gratitude for the immense work you have put into your translations. . . Your participation in your work is more than professional. It is alive" (qtd. in McGuire 83). Hull's colleagues marvel at how he "thought about every word, every phrase, and how he never shirked difficulties of Jung's style" (Fordham 84). Michael Fordham claims that Hull was particularly adept at pointing to nuances in meaning that might otherwise be lost in translation. I believe that by calling special attention to both the of/in point raised by Huizinga and noting that the English version is synthesized from different languages, Hull highlights nuances in *Homo Ludens*: namely, the way Huizinga uses a variety of languages in his work to create tension between competing conceptions of knowledge. Huizinga, believing that language emerges from synesthesia, used oppositions embodied by different conceptions of the same term to create new understandings of those terms. "Play" is one example.

Otterspeer writes, "In Huizinga's view, language came into being in the same way as poetry: as a lyrical mixture of sensory impressions. Synesthesia was the cradle of language" (Otterspeer 42). Understanding Huizinga's perspectives on language and method allows for a more complex reading of the serious/play opposition maintained in *Homo Ludens*, one that recovers Huizinga's theory of play-as-symbolic. This reading sets the stage for my own theory of the language of play in chapter four.

Beyond the Reach of Reason: Play's Nonsense

To this point, I have argued for the importance of the dialectical methodology and synesthetic theory of language in reading Huizinga. This insight provides the background necessary to understand Huizinga's theory of play as both natural and symbolic, embodied by his play/play-concept distinction. From binaries such as natural/symbolic and serious/play, *Homo Ludens* suggests a third perspective: play-as-symbolic.

In this section, I take a two-fold strategy to articulate my understanding of the theory of play in *Homo Ludens*. First, I read Huizinga in connection with his perspective on Enlightenment thinking and scientific knowledge. Second, I discuss Huizinga's attitude toward scientific thinking in terms of humanistic reactions against logical positivism, the philosophical school of science. Together, these readings provide the context of *Homo Ludens* necessary to understand Huizinga's symbolic theory of play.

In *Homo Ludens*, Huizinga writes, "Were I compelled to put my argument tersely in the form of theses, one of them would be that anthropology and its sister sciences have so far laid too little stress on the concept of play and on the supreme importance to civilization of the play-factor" (n.p.). Huizinga was responding to Enlightenment thinking that valued reason and rationality, the same sort of thinking that dismisses Huizinga's synesthetic theory of language as "non-verifiable." Huizinga further claims, "We play and know that we play, so we must be more than merely rational beings, for play is irrational" (4). Like many other elements in human culture—art, ritual, magic, and myth—play cannot be measured or

understood well from a purely logical perspective. Huizinga's purpose was not to define play as "irrational" or non-serious, but to employ the tension maintained by oppositions such as serious/play and natural/objective to create knowledge about various cultural forms of play.

Huizinga's deliberate use of oppositional pairs means that scholars who claim he divorces play from reality and material interest are in one sense correct. Huizinga claims, "The purposes [play] serves are external to material interests or the individual satisfaction of biological needs" (9). Play—an objectively real and quantifiable thing—is not necessarily connected with human material interest or need. However, by claiming that the sciences of his own time have laid too little stress on the *concept of play*, Huizinga argues that researchers have only focused on the logical, rational, scientific side of *play*. *Homo Ludens* counters these scientific attitudes toward play by staging a confrontation between play and the play-concept. In doing so, Huizinga employs a natural/symbolic opposition as the play~play-concept dialectical pair to create his theory of "man the player," or the "twin union of play and culture" (*Homo Ludens* 46).⁵²

Huizinga's work, I believe, responds to the cultural zeitgeist of logical positivism, the philosophical school that most embodies Enlightenment thinking. Suzanne Langer describes positivism quite negatively: "The only philosophy that rose directly out of a contemplation of science is positivism, and it is probably the least interesting of all doctrines" (14). Langer argues that positivism provides no

⁵² In the same passage, Huizinga goes on: "Play is primary. It is an objectively recognizable, a concretely definable thing, whereas culture is only the term which our historical judgment attaches to a particular instance" (46). In other words, play is prior to culture. Culture, however, always bears the character of play in the symbolic form of "play-concepts" which are particular, cultural expressions of play.

means of answering questions about art, myth, and ritual, and she suggests that each symbolizes experience through forms like sculpture, dance, and monuments (51). To Langer's list I add Huizinga's "play-concept," the symbolization of human experience through play and its various cultural expressions. The dialectical tension between scientific study of "play" and humanistic study of the "play-concept" is why Huizinga both says that play "lies outside the reasonableness of practical life; has nothing to do with necessity or utility, duty or truth" (158) and that "civilization is, in its earliest phases, played. It does not come *from* play like a babe detaching itself from the womb: it arises *in* and *as* play, and never leaves it" (173).⁵³ For Huizinga, serious/play is not a binary, but an always-ambiguous and perhaps unresolvable dialectical pair: serious~play. This is why the claim that Huizinga describes play as "pure waste" outside of culture is correct. It is also why claims that Huizinga describes play as the defining feature of culture are likewise correct.

To more fully appreciate how seriously Huizinga took his theorizing of play and culture, it is helpful to examine the context in which he wrote. According to William Otterspeer, Huizinga spent the last eighteen months of his life exiled from his homeland by the Nazis. This was particularly painful for Huizinga, whose work reflects the great pride he felt for the Netherlands. During those eighteen months, Huizinga tried to translate his work into English, and he died in the midst of growing expectations that his country would be liberated from German occupation. To separate Huizinga's work from this context is a mistake far greater than the

⁵³ As more evidence of Huizinga's integration of play with culture, he writes, "We should remember that this precarious balance between seriousness and pretense is an unmistakable and integral part of culture as such, and that the play-factor lies at the heart of all ritual and religion. So we must always fall back on this lasting ambiguity" (*Homo Ludens* 191).

supposed mistake he makes in separating play from material reality, as the material realities involved in the outbreak of World War II provide powerful exigencies for Huizinga's writing. This is especially true when it comes to play. Like many other rhetorical theorists, Huizinga insisted that the humanities must work to create systems of values and ethics that work against totalitarian thinking.

Huizinga's writing about play was deeply political, evidenced by essays collected in his last book, *In the Shadow of Tomorrow*. William Otterspeer refers to this book as an "epilogue" to *Homo Ludens* because Huizinga believed that the rise of modernism and rationalism had denied the role of play in shaping human culture through symbolizations of the play-concept. In other words, like Langer, Huizinga's perspective is that "rational" theories of humanity such as logical positivism become dehumanizing when not countered with humanistic theories of symbolizing practices such as art, myth, ritual, and the play-concept. Huizinga identifies the weakening humanities as a major threat to Western civilization in the midst of World War II. Suggesting "progress" has become conflated with rational theories of knowledge, Huizinga muses, "Who knows but that a little further on the way a bridge may not have collapsed or a crevice split the earth?" (56). In other words, though a culture may "progress" in terms of scientific and technological knowledge, that culture's vitality is threatened when humanistic thought declines.

As an example of his point, in his essay, "The Decline of the Critical Spirit," Huizinga discusses the use of pseudo-science to justify theories of racial superiority. He claims that such theories as racial superiority gain power because they are "uncontrolled by the critical impulse and preoccupied with a desire for self-

glorification” (86). He furthers this argument in another essay, “Science Misused,” distinguishing between “true science” and “quasi-science.” While true science attempts to create knowledge and technology for social good, quasi-science gains credibility and political power by masquerading *as science* in order to further ideologies embodied by “scientific” theories of racial superiority.⁵⁴ For Huizinga, quasi-science’s cultural and political influence is a powerful justification for humanistic study of the knowledge embodied by symbolizing practices such as the play-concept. Of the difficult task facing humanities in the midst of World War II, he writes, “There is nothing but to go forward even if we stand appalled at the unknown depths and distances ahead, even if the near future faces us a yawning abyss shrouded in dark impenetrable vapours” (“New Fears” 27). Huizinga’s political writings show that Huizinga’s purpose is not to divorce play from material reality, but to propose it as a way forward. If a culture arose in the form of play, as Huizinga argues, then play may also be a way to prevent the fall of a culture by continuously creating it.

Huizinga’s response to Enlightenment thinking and his political essays that argue for the importance of humanistic thought illustrate that he theorized play as deeply intertwined with humanity and vital to the creation and maintenance of culture. Contradictory readings of *Homo Ludens*, I believe, are a result of the apparent paradox that arises through Huizinga’s play~play-concept dialectic, as *Homo Ludens* provides ample evidence that Huizinga believes one perspective or the other. Through an understanding of Huizinga’s theory of language, his methodology,

⁵⁴ Huizinga also has a fascinating critique of bacterial and biological weapons, which extends his claim in *Homo Ludens* that “modern warfare has, on the face of it, lost all contact with play” (210).

and the political context in which he wrote, I contend that a third perspective of “man the player” emerges: the view of play-as-symbolic. This perspective suggests that people embody beliefs, attitudes, and worldviews through playing within a variety of cultural spaces and times.

This symbolic theory of play is suggested by Huizinga’s claim, “It is through this playing that society expresses its interpretation of life and the world” (*Homo Ludens* 46). Within various “rule-bound” cultural sites—sports arenas, sacred temples, and battlefields—play symbolizes such things as victory, gods, and death. In the next section, I claim that those “rule-bound spaces”—what Huizinga calls “magic circles”—are cultural sites within and through which the symbolic action of play emerges, both shaping and shaped by the material realities of a given culture.

Escaping the Magic Circle

In this section, I present Huizinga’s conception of the magic circle as evidence of his symbolic theory of play and argue that magic circles are simultaneously “real” and “virtual” worlds within which the rules of that space create the possibility for play’s symbolization. The symbolization of play in magic circles shapes and is shaped by both the real and virtual world. By presenting a both/and theory of magic circles as real and virtual, I believe scholars can “escape” tired debates about whether play is separated from or embedded within the real world. Huizinga’s symbolic theory of play suggests the players who enter magic circles—like the avatars and carnival masks discussed in chapter two—interface the real and virtual worlds that both compose players and are composed by their play.

First, the contrasting worldviews, which I claim are purposefully maintained in *Homo Ludens* through Huizinga's play~play-concept dialectic, are further embodied by scholarly debates about his most-cited term: the "magic circle" of game spaces. The term is often invoked in game design (Ferrara; Juul; McGonigal; Salen and Zimmerman) but also appears in scholarship on rhetoric, new media, and language theory (Calleja; Colby and Colby; Crick; Langer, *Feeling and Form*; Lin and Chuen-Tsai; Rouzie; Rush; Taylor) to "articulate the spatial, temporal, and psychological boundary between games and the real world" (Calleja 7). While scholars most often discuss the magic circle as a hard⁵⁵ boundary that marks where the rules of a game begin and end, some claim that Huizinga intended for the boundary to be permeable.⁵⁶ Huizinga introduces the term as follows:

All play moves and has its being within a playground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course. Just as there is no formal difference between play and ritual, so the "consecrated spot" cannot be formally distinguished from the play-ground. The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc., are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are

⁵⁵ John Ferrara: "Huizinga emphasized that the circle is a hard boundary separating the game world from broader reality: nothing comes out of the circle into real life" (*Playful Design* 23).

⁵⁶ Gordon Calleja claims, "For Huizinga, the term refers not solely to games but to a number of social contexts where social rules distinguish one particular type of social space from another. An important aim of Huizinga's work was to propose that play is not an activity that is limited to games but a salient aspect of all facets of human culture. A number of theorists in Game Studies have taken the concept of magic circle out of its original context which emphasized cultural pervasiveness and deployed it to signify a separation from reality" (340).

temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart. (10)

As I see it, evidence of magic circles divorced from reality *and* evidence of their integration exists in *Homo Ludens*, an observation that is not surprising after considering Huizinga's methodology and language theory.⁵⁷ However, I contend that debates about whether the magic circle creates a space divorced from reality or makes a playground within reality miss the point. In my estimation, two insights about magic circles are far more interesting: 1) Huizinga's use of the term highlights play's subversive form, and 2) as Huizinga must certainly have known, magic circles were seen as sites of symbolic action even before they appear in *Homo Ludens*.

First, Huizinga uses the term specifically for the purposes of *violating* boundaries. In other words, the rhetorical function of using "magic circle" over any number of other terms Huizinga might have used—play space, playground, sandbox, fantasy world, etc.—is that it highlights the fact the play and its conception manifests in places that are unexpected, such as politics, religion, and war.⁵⁸ Evidence for this claim can be seen in scholarship that evokes the term either before Huizinga or without any apparent knowledge of his play theory. Suzanne Langer, for example, devotes an entire chapter to the term in her *Feeling and Form*, and does so with no references to Huizinga or his play theory. Extending Cassirer's theories of

⁵⁷ Salen and Zimmerman also debate this dual evidence: "Huizinga calls play-worlds 'temporary worlds within the ordinary world.' But what does that mean? Does the magic circle enframe a reality completely separated from the real world? Is a game somehow an extension of regular life? Or is a game just a special case of ordinary reality?" (*Rules of Play* 96).

⁵⁸ This is not dissimilar from Burke's approach in *Rhetoric of Motives*, where he claims, "We seek to mark off the areas of rhetoric, by showing how a rhetorical motive is often present where it is not usually recognized, or thought to belong" (xiii).

symbolic form and the mythic consciousness, Langer discusses ritual dances as symbolic of sacred power:

Dance really symbolizes a most important reality in the life of primitive men—the sacred realm, the magic circle. The *Reigen* as a dance has nothing to do with spontaneous prancing; it fulfills a holy office, perhaps the *first* holy office of the dance—it divides the sphere of holiness from that of profane existence. In this way it creates the stage of the dance, which centers naturally in the altar or its equivalent—the totem, the priest, the fire—or perhaps the slain bear, or the dead chieftain to be consecrated.

In the magic circle all daemonic powers are loosed. The mundane realm is excluded, and with it, very often the restrictions and proprieties that belong to it. (191)

Like Huizinga, Langer's background information on magic circles comes from anthropological sources about tribal dance and ritual.⁵⁹ Langer's invocation of the term in *Feeling and Form* indeed illustrates that the magic circle intends to wall off the sacred world from the real world. Everything within the circle is symbolic of gods, demons, spirits, and the dead. Huizinga's conception of the magic circle as a space of play *necessarily* violates the magic circle's sacred boundary. When John Ferrara writes, "Huizinga emphasized that the circle is a hard boundary separating

⁵⁹ Huizinga writes, "The connections between playing and dancing are so close that they hardly need illustrating. It is not that dancing has something of play in or about it, rather that it is an integral part of play: the relationship is one of direct participation, almost of essential identity. Dancing is a particular and particularly perfect form of playing" (164-165). In this way, I see Huizinga's conception of play as compatible with Salen and Zimmerman's definition of it as "free movement within a more rigid structure" (*Rules of Play* 303). Dance is the "perfect form of playing" for Huizinga, I believe, because it is both marked by such free movement and is clearly expressive.

the game world from broader reality; nothing comes out of the circle into real life” (23), he makes this claim without realizing that, by placing play within the context of magic circles at all, Huizinga violates the so-called “hard boundary” that magic circles create. Huizinga’s point in using the term is to show that play is present in places we might not initially expect, places that people identify as serious, sacred, and even dangerous.

At the same time, Ferrara and others who claim that the magic circle divorces play from everyday life hint toward Huizinga’s symbolic theory of play. Ferrara claims, “Huizinga described games as creating their own reality” (22), just as Brian Sutton-Smith says Huizinga believes that, “in play, man creates a poetic world alongside the original world of nature” (202). These conceptions of Huizinga as divorcing play from reality hint at the fact that magic circle has been used to describe symbolization through dance, movement, and song before Huizinga’s use of the term to describe the symbolization of play. Therefore, the use of the term in *Homo Ludens* is intended to highlight play’s symbolic possibilities within the virtual worlds⁶⁰ of magic circles. Langer argues that, through symbolization, “what is created is the image of a world of vital forces” (*Feeling and Form* 193). Langer claims that images in virtual worlds are “semblances” of reality, meaning that they are composed through the aesthetic appeal of dance and “resemble” various things to different people (49).

⁶⁰ For Langer, “virtual space” is a “primary illusion of plastic art” where space is made visible and sensible. She claims, “The space itself is a projected image, and everything pictured serves to define and organize it” (*Feeling and Form* 77). Huizinga’s term for this was “identification,” “the mystic repetition or representation” (*Homo Ludens* 15) of a cosmic event through a magic circle’s space. I maintain Langer’s use of “virtual space” here because of its associative connections to gaming, and to avoid confusing it with Burke’s rhetorical concept of identification.

Similarly, Huizinga writes that “play is based on the manipulation of certain images, or a certain ‘imagination’ of reality (i.e. its conversion into images)” (4). Play, shaped by the social site of magic circles through the rules and customs that compose them—but also shaping those sites through the violation of boundaries—creates a semblance of something from the real world, an image that potentially resembles and means something to both players and audiences. Play enters the sacred space of magic circles from the outside world and brings that world along through symbolization. Just as play brings the real world into the virtual, “it adorns life, amplifies it and is to that extent a necessity both for the individual—as a life function—and for society by reason of the meaning it contains, its significance, its expressive value, its spiritual and social associations, in short, as a cultural function” (*Homo Ludens* 9). Play shapes and is shaped by the magic circle, and it symbolizes and expresses to and about the culture with which it is integrated.

Arguing about whether or not play is divorced from reality creates a rhetorical dilemma because it forgets that there are many motivations for play, including the “escape” to virtual worlds.⁶¹ I propose that the best way to circumvent this dilemma about the magic circle is by interfacing with magic circles, by oscillating between looking AT them as mirrors of the real world and THROUGH them as windows into a virtual world (Lanham; Bolter and Gromala), where the actions and players within create symbols: semblances of conflict, cooperation, violence, or joy. Just as there are good justifications for connecting the symbols of play with the social world, there are also good justifications for escaping to the

⁶¹ Gordon Calleja argues that games, like any other engaging activity, can be escapist, as “Escapism is an important and unavoidable aspect of our culture” (17).

fantasy of a virtual world from time to time. I believe theories of play should “show how *much* rather than how *little* exists simultaneously, suspended in the dense meanwhile of being” (Bogost, *Alien* 59). I play a videogame online to temporarily forget the pressures of my job; meanwhile, someone else plays with a co-worker; meanwhile, someone “farms”⁶² virtual goods to sell for real-world money; meanwhile, a teenager from South Korea teams up with a graduate student from Texas to go on a world-saving mission.

Conclusion: Toward a Language of Play

In this chapter, I have made the following claims:

1. Huizinga’s method for creating knowledge about play was dialectic, using dialectical pairs such as serious~play to create third perspectives
2. Huizinga’s dialectical methodology is deeply enfolded in his synesthetic theory of language, a belief that language emerges from the tension of contrasting sensory perceptions; his method and language theory are dramatized by the difficulties of translating *Homo Ludens*
3. By distinguishing between play and the play-concept, Huizinga conceives play-as-symbolization, a symbolic theory of how play creates meaning, evidenced by his political essays
4. Huizinga’s magic circle concept suggests both play’s separation from and its integration with the “real world”

⁶² This is a gaming term that refers to spending large amount of times in a game space repeating the same task in order to generate large quantities of a specific virtual item, often to sell to other users for real-world money.

5. Within the rule-bound spaces of magic circles, play creates semblances of reality: symbols that shape and are shaped by both real and virtual worlds

Together, these claims comprise my reading of *Homo Ludens* and my conception of the theory of play it articulates. These claims work to further my argument that Huizinga's play theory is an important and largely untapped resource for theories of play and language because his full theory has been obscured through misunderstandings about his methodology.

Huizinga's symbolic theory of play works conceptually to bridge my discussion of play and ludic rhetorics in chapters 1 and 2 with my theory of the language of play in chapter 4. Chapters 1 and 2 showed how ludic rhetorics appear tacitly in rhetorical theory and advance underlying theories invoked by the use of the word "play" in composition scholarship about gaming. Chapter two ended with an ambiguous theory of play that suggests the concept of language-as-play. Now, using Huizinga's symbolic theory of play, I move to make the case that ludic rhetorics are symbolized by the language of play, a theory of play as a form of non-discursive language that emerges as various symbolic forms within a culture's magic circles. The language of play, I argue, composes in the possibility spaces made open by computability, as they make play's symbolization endlessly repeatable.

Chapter 4: The Language of Play

“Why should the world wail over the loss of a play product, and look with its old callousness on the destruction of so much that dire labor has produced? It seems a very poor economy of nature that men will suffer and starve for the sake of play, when play is supposed to be the abundance of their strength after their needs are satisfied. Yet artists as a class are so ready to sacrifice wealth and comfort and even health to their trade, that a lean and hollow look has become an indispensable feature in the popular conception of genius.” (37)

Susanne Langer

Philosophy in a New Key

“Play is always play of absence and presence, but if it is to be thought radically, play must be conceived of before the alternative of presence and absence. Being must be conceived as presence or absence on the basis of the possibility of play and not the other way around.” (292)

Jacques Derrida

Structure, Sign, and Play

Introduction: Possibility Spaces

In a 2004 *Computers and Composition* article, “Show, Not Tell: The Value of New Media Scholarship,” Cheryl Ball makes an important distinction between *scholarship about new media* and *new media scholarship*. While the former takes new media as its subject, it primarily relies on the linear modality of discursive writing within the medium of print to make meaning and advance arguments. Such scholarship includes the traditional academic writing one might see in some of the field’s flagship journals, such as *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, *College Composition and Communication*, or even Ball’s own piece in *Computers and Composition*.

New media scholarship, in Ball's estimation, includes only those "texts that juxtapose semiotic modes in new and aesthetically pleasing ways, and, in doing so, break away from print traditions so that written text is not the primary rhetorical means" of advancing the text's argument and making meaning (405). Ball's reasoning for supporting new media scholarship—most typically in online journals like *Kairos* and *Enculturation*—is that semiotic modes beyond discursive writing are largely untapped resources for making academic knowledge. Ball's invocation of the old creative writing adage, "show, not tell," is suggestive of new media scholarship's potential to draw meaning from multiple modes that might provide composers with different rhetorical resources than print. Ball suggests that new media scholarship's value lies in the possibility it offers composers, and she calls on rhetoric and composition scholars to not only write about new media in the discursive mode, but to do their work in and through new media with many different modes.

However, print-based scholarship, composed primarily—but, of course, not exclusively—in the discursive mode has been and remains an effective and highly flexible medium to do academic work, such as building arguments and composing theories, drafting dissertations like this one, and sharing research findings with other professionals. Jay David Bolter has previously described the twenty-first century as the "late age of print," or a time when print remains indispensable, but may no longer seem so (*Writing Space* 1). Print remains central to rhetoric and composition even as the new media scholarship Ball describes proliferates. After all, the print medium's primary mode—discursive writing—is remediated by new media. It is important that theories of language and meaning developed for the late

age of print are both attentive to the implications of new composing technologies and mindful of the possibilities print offers that are refashioned and repurposed by new media.

Play, I contend, is a valuable concept for the possibility of such language theory. Advancing my previous discussions of language-as-play and play-as-symbolization, in this chapter I make a case for play-as-language. Following Ian Bogost,⁶³ I have suggested that Salen and Zimmerman's abstract definition of play is useful: "play is free movement within a more rigid structure" (*Rules of Play* 304). In game design, this "more rigid structure" refers to the rules of a game, rules that create a "possibility space" (Bogost, "The Rhetoric" 120; Juul, *Half-Real* 69) for potential actions within a game's magic circle. In chapter three, I argued that magic circles are cultural sites where play is symbolized. So, if a magic circle "frames a distinct space of meaning" (Salen and Zimmerman 95) that exists simultaneously in the real and virtual worlds, and if "videogames are an expressive medium" (Bogost, *Persuasive Games* 1), then magic circles might be thought of more broadly as framing the spaces of meaning created by media generally. In short, they are compositional mediums, a culture's writing spaces. In game design, the rule-bound spaces of magic circles are where players "unleash creativity" (McGonigal, *Reality is Broken* 21) through the strategies they employ to achieve goals. I contend that media in general can be thought of this way: by constraining some kinds of activities and making others possible, composers unleash their creativity and act strategically for

⁶³ Bogost writes, "The possibility space of play includes all of the gestures made possible by a set of rules. As Salen and Zimmerman explain, imposing rules does not suffocate play, but makes it possible in the first place" ("The Rhetoric of Video Games" 122).

rhetorical purposes. In short, different mediums create different possibility spaces for rhetoric, language, and play.

The magic circle of a printed medium, like *Computers and Composition*, includes such “rule structures” as word limits, headings, and conventions of style that constrain how the discursive mode can potentially operate within the journal’s possibility space. Composers unleash their creativity and rhetorical prowess by composing arguments within the writable spaces of print journals. The diversity of articles and approaches manifest in a journal like *Computers and Composition* suggests the play enabled by its magic circle, and the wealth and variety of knowledge in even a single journal is illustrative of the possibilities enabled by print’s space. In other words, seeing media as magic circles suggests that *scholarship about new media* and *new media scholarship* are composed within different possibility spaces. In this sense, it is not necessary to “break from” print because of its limitations, but to understand that all media are limited in ways that make possible specific kinds of rhetorical and symbolic activities.

What, then, are the possibility spaces of new media, and how might rhetoric and composition teacher-scholars act strategically to unleash their creativity therein? One way, I argue, is through play. In the following pages, I describe the “language of play,” a theory of how the symbolic activity of play is composed within the possibility spaces created by new media.

Research Questions

- What symbolic forms does play assume?

- What are the differences between “old” and “new” media? What possibility spaces do new media create for play’s symbolization?
- What kinds of rhetorical ideas might the language of play express through its symbolic forms?

Method and Methodology

To theorize the language of play, in this chapter I follow Gregory Ulmer’s concept of theory-as-heuretics, the concept of “treating theory not as a content or object of study but as a creative or generative poetics” (“Florida out of Sorts” 22). In other words, to theorize the language of play is to generate and assemble its pieces. To go about this process of creating, I braid four concepts into play’s language: 1) non-discursive form, 2) computable media, 3) emergence, and 4) magic circles. Taken together, these strands create the language of play as a form of non-discursive language that emerges as different media’s possibility spaces overlap. Having already argued for Huizinga’s magic circle concept as a simultaneously real and virtual space where play is symbolized, I illustrate how magic circles serve as a good heuristic for describing and analyzing language in new media and multimodal compositions.

Non-Discursive Form

The biggest obstacle in building the language of play is the problem of language and its definition. Language, as traditionally defined in the humanities, refers specifically to meaningful and articulate sounds, the accumulation of

phonemes into words and sentences. Writing, as a recording or codification of speech, also receives its seat at the game of language.⁶⁴ Although concepts of language have been broadening in fields like music, dance, and neuroscience for some time, discursivity as *the* form of language has had much more staying power in rhetoric and composition. However, to bring play to the symbolic table, I argue that the concept of language must broaden to include non-discursive forms such as sound, image, and movement. In this section, I claim that the language of play is symbolized through non-discursive form. Just as Cheryl Ball takes image, movement, and sound as “semiotic modes,” or resources for meaning, I suggest the concept of a “ludic mode⁶⁵” to define play as a resource for meaning that is symbolized through non-discursive form, or the language of play.

Susanne Langer’s 1942 *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study of the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art*, provides the theory of symbolization needed to create a language of play. Trained in formal logic, Langer—like Huizinga—was deeply situated in theories of knowledge and humanity that heavily emphasized logical reasoning and rationality. Langer sought to do no less than create a theory of humanity that included everything left outside of humanity by logical positivism. She writes, “The love of magic, the high development of ritual, the seriousness of art, the characteristic activity of dreams, are rather large factors to leave out of account in constructing a theory of mind” (38). To move toward such a theory, Langer

⁶⁴ As Peter Elbow notes in *Vernacular Eloquence*, what is defined as writing and language is more cultural decision than objective fact, as Western language theory has at times not considered such advanced writing systems as Wenyan to be language. In this sense, the concept of play-as-language is not nearly as radical as some of the restrictions that I have previously placed on language in general.

⁶⁵ In chapter three, I suggested that this is what is meant by Huizinga’s “play-concept.” It refers to play as a “resource” for meaning, which can be symbolized within various writing spaces.

creates a concept of symbolization that extends language and semiotic theory by theorists such as Ernst Cassirer and Ferdinand de Saussure in order to better understand what is specific and unique to human symbolization in general and the distinctions between different kinds of human symbols specifically. Both moves by Langer help in developing a language of play because they: 1) provide the clear and specific definition of symbolization that Huizinga does not, and 2) suggest what kind of symbolic form is taken by play.

First, Langer distinguishes between *sign* and *symbol*, a move that is somewhat of a break from semiotic theory in general and one that allows the inclusion of “reason, rite, and art” under the umbrella of symbolic action. Following the claim in Saussurian semiotics that “a linguistic sign is not a link between a thing and a name, but between a concept and a sound pattern” (*Course in General Linguistics* 66), Langer relies on the assumption that signs stand for mental concepts of things rather than the things themselves. Also like Saussure, Langer believes that the relationship between signs is arbitrary and unmotivated. However, unlike Saussure, who specifically resists using the word *symbol*⁶⁶ because of its connotations to the arts, literature, and obfuscation, Langer creates a distinction between “sign” and “symbol” that is central to her theory of the mind. Specifically, she distinguishes the senses in which each is “communicative” and how symbols in particular embody a defining feature of humanity.

⁶⁶ Saussure writes, “The word *symbol* is sometimes used to designate the linguistic sign, or more exactly that part of the linguistic sign which we are calling signal. This use of the word *symbol* is awkward, for reasons connected with our first principle. For it is characteristic of symbols that they are never entirely arbitrary” (68).

For Langer, while signs and symbols must have both psychological and logical aspects (53)—meaning that they must be *employed* to mean something to someone and that they must be *capable* of meaning something—they differ in terms of what they can mean. Langer claims that a “sign indicates the existence—past, present, or future—of a thing, event, or condition” (57). In other words, ashes in a fireplace mean that something has been burned, or a thunderclap signals the presence of a storm. For Langer, this type of signification takes on meaning primarily through experience and is the basis for some forms of animal intelligence, such as behavioral explanations of dogs learning through positive and negative reinforcements (59). My point here is to draw from Langer to articulate one type of meaning: signs as one-to-one (though fallible) correlations to a thing. Rising smoke signals a fire. Barking signals that a dog is near.

Symbols, on the other hand, are “*vehicles for the conception of objects*” (61). While taking something as a sign means it has announced the object for which it stands, symbols lead the person experiencing them to conceptions that are indirectly or associatively related to an object. A symbol does not necessarily *mean* an object; it evokes a conception *about* that object. For Langer, this is a key distinguishing feature of how human beings think and a crucial theoretical concept for understanding meaning in art. To say that humans think symbolically in Langer’s terms is to understand something about the emotional associations we experience through language. While rising smoke might signal a fire to me, it might also make me think of the smell of tobacco rising from my grandfather’s pipe, or make me reminisce about an old fishing story he used to tell when he smoked. Langer’s

concept of signs and symbols helps her advance claims about the possible meanings of art and ritual, as the meaning of a painting is highly symbolic and embodies emotional experience. I take play to be symbolic in the sense described by Langer, as evoking a mental conception about objects, things, people, and events in the world, what Huizinga might refer to as the “play-concept.” Throwing a ball is not only a sign that baseball is being played; it is also symbolic and can mean much more: associations drawn from the feel of thread on my hand, the sound of rawhide against leather, or the smell of an old mitt. It is my contention that theories of language should account for ludic mode, or play as a resource for symbol making.⁶⁷

Understanding play as symbolic, the second key distinction I take for the language of play from Langer is between discursive and presentational (or non-discursive) form. Langer argues, “Language has a form which requires us to string out our ideas,” a formal property of verbal symbolism she refers to as discursiveness (81). Written and spoken words are, of course, the most familiar forms of language people encounter on a daily basis (or at least the most familiar forms of language we recognize as such), and Langer describes the discursive in terms of its linearity. In other words, the discursive is articulated temporally as words are strung out one after another, meaning that humans understand language in terms of how words build upon one another in temporal chains to form more complex utterances. For Langer, this property of the discursive makes it an incredibly robust and useful symbolic form. Due to the way discursive meaning is experienced across the

⁶⁷ Just as gamers are often perceived to put their play ahead of basic human needs, Langer argues that symbol making is a “need.” “The symbol-making function is one of man’s primary activities, like eating, looking, or moving about” (*Philosophy in a New Key* 41).

dimension of time, it is extremely good for making arguments, following logical chains of reasoning, and for building theories, among many other things. Langer's insight provides a useful means of understanding the predominance of discursive form in academic circles, as discursive symbols create large possibility spaces for academic production. While Jason Palmeri's recent book, *Remixing Composition*, makes a compelling case that teachers and scholars of rhetoric and composition have been making a multimodal turn since at least the 1960s, many in the field have aptly critiqued the field's over-reliance on the discursive (print, specifically) and the potential dangers of making scholarly work irrelevant and teaching ill-suited to prepare students for the communicative landscape of the twenty-first century (Dunn; Gee, *What Video Games*; Kress, *Multimodality*; Fleckenstein; Murray, *Non-Discursive*; Sheridan, Michel, and Ridolfo; Ulmer, *Avatar*).

Langer, of course, was not a scholar of rhetoric and composition. However, as previously mentioned, she was part of a trend among intellectuals of her time to fiercely critique the limitations of logical positivism's conception of humanity. Langer's charge is that, since positivism treats anything that cannot be measured or projected logically as non-verifiable, positivism rejects the notion that anything which "cannot be 'projected' in discursive form is accessible to the human mind at all" and further assumes that "any attempt to understand anything but demonstrable fact is bootless ambition" (86). In other words, Langer critiques positivism on grounds that it limits the knowable to only the discursive realm and dismisses the ineffable as unknowable. Langer's contention is that semantic

potential extends well beyond the discursive and that the ineffable is a much larger part of the human experience than the discursive:

At best, human thought is but a tiny, grammar-bound island, in the midst of a sea of feeling expressed by “Oh-oh” and sheer babble. The island has a periphery, perhaps, of mud—factual and hypothetical concepts broken down by the emotional tides into the “material mode,” a mixture of meaning and nonsense. Most of us live the better part of our lives on this mudflat; but in artistic moods we take to the deep, where we flounder about with symptomatic cries that sound like propositions about life and death, good and evil, substance, beauty, and other non-existent topics. (88)

According to Langer, any theory that limits the human mind to discursivity fails to account for the vast majority of lived experience. To make sense of positivism’s nonsense⁶⁸ (literally that which cannot be “sensed” by scientific instruments) Langer argues semiotic theory needs a concept of all those kinds of symbols that articulate the ineffable.

What expresses the ineffable is presentational form, or the non-discursive. Langer’s major claim in theorizing the non-discursive is that it is just as capable of articulation—meaning it can express, communicate, emote, and advance complex thoughts—as words, but that such symbols “are altogether different from the laws that govern” the discursive (93). While discursive forms tend to operate in time and break complex ideas into more simple ones—imagine an art critic discussing

⁶⁸ In logical positivism, Langer claims, “Knowledge from sensory experience was deemed the only knowledge that carried any affidavit of truth” (15).

Picasso's *Guernica* by breaking into smaller pieces in her analysis—non-discursive forms tend to operate spatially and are experienced all at once. Langer writes, “An idea that contains too many minute yet closely related parts, too many relations within relations cannot be ‘projected’ into discursive form; it is too subtle for speech” (93). In other words, some ideas are not particularly well suited for discursive form, *but they can still be symbolized and expressed*. To understand the broad range of how and why humans express and communicate, Langer insists that theorists must understand how non-discursive forms operate and include them in theories of symbolization more broadly.

It is my contention that play is a form of non-discursive symbolization. However, I differ from Langer in the sense that I include play and the non-discursive under the heading of “language,” a move Langer does not fully make. She claims, “Language in the strict sense is essentially discursive” (96). To fully legitimize non-discursive forms, like play, as fruitful areas of teaching and scholarship in rhetoric and composition, I believe it is essential that new media and multimodal theory expand the field's conception of language. In *Non-Discursive Rhetoric* (2009), Joddy Murray insists, “As long as the term ‘language’ is only associated with discursive text, it cannot take advantage of all that image and emotions bring to rhetorical texts and their production, much less handle the challenges of hybrid texts that incorporate many modes at once” (2). As robust and essential to language and meaning as the discursive is, and as many ideas and concepts as it can handle well, the fact remains that some kinds of ideas are better—and perhaps only—symbolized through the non-discursive. By limiting language to the discursive,

rhetorical theory's inquiries into language and communication are subsequently limited and not particularly well suited to the range of symbolizing practices in electronic environments and new media compositions.

New Media's Possibility Spaces

Following the claim that the language of play is symbolized through non-discursive form, in this section I point to examples of the language of play by showing how it is symbolized within new media's possibility spaces. While new media studies has become an important subfield of teaching and research in rhetoric and composition during the past two decades, competing definitions of what should or does constitute "new media" remain. As I see it, competing definitions of new media do not necessarily require resolution, and it may not be necessary for the field to agree on a single definition. Instead, what is needed is an awareness of the functions various definitions serve, what kinds of composing practices they enable and constrain, and well-reasoned justifications for adopting particular definitions in specific institutional and classroom contexts.

Some definitions, for example, are inclusionary and work for well encouraging many different kinds of textual products. Anne Francis Wysocki, for instance, argues that new media texts should include all those "that have been made by composers who are aware of the range of materialities of texts and who then highlight the materiality" (15). This definition is inclusive because it does not require an institutional infrastructure built around particular technologies to support expensive hardware and software, since it defines new media in terms of

the habits and practices of composers. Similarly, Jody Shipka's approach to new media and multimodality, in *Toward a Composition Made Whole*, expresses concern about technology-heavy definitions of new media and moves toward a more inclusive definition:

I am concerned that emphasis placed on "new" (meaning digital) technologies has led to a tendency to equate terms like *multimodal*, *intertextual*, *multimedia*, or still more broadly speaking, *composition*, with the production and consumption of computer-based, digitized, screen-mediated texts. I am concerned as well that this conflation could limit (provided that it has not already limited) the kinds of texts students produce in our courses. (7-8)

Shipka argues that theories of new media and multimodality should leave room for "texts that explore how print, speech, still images, video, sounds, scents, live performance, textures (for example, glass, cloth, paper affixed to plastic), and other three-dimensional objects come together, intersect, or overlap in innovative and compelling ways" (8). Taken together, Wysocki and Shipka's conceptions of new media composition enable a wide range of textual products by heavily emphasizing "media composition" and deemphasizing "new."

As Bill Cope and Mary Kalantzis argue in *Multiliteracies: Literacy, Learning, and the Design of Social Futures*, all texts are multimodal to some degree, as even print-based, discursive writing appeals to multiple senses such as mental imagery. With this in mind, competing conceptions of new media can differ in terms of degrees of emphasis regarding multimodality. The New London Group, for instance,

offers the concept of design to emphasize the connectedness of a range of literacies, an emphasis that many have followed. Such an approach works well for emphasizing the multiple senses involved in all kinds of composing situations. Still other multimodal theorists emphasize texts that take risks, disrupt conventions, and create new knowledge by combining modes into non-linear, juxtaposed texts (Ball; Rice, *The Rhetoric of Cool*; Sirc, *Composition as a Happening*), an approach that effectively connects multimodality with the arts and the avant-garde, as well as with conceptions of play embodied in ludic rhetorics of progress that value experimentation and growth through playful composing processes.

As an emergent property of multimodality, the language of play is necessarily rooted in multimodality. But what conception of new media is best suited to develop the language of play? Here, I argue that conceptions of new media that emphasize “new” work best, as specific characteristics of computability create large possibility spaces for play’s symbolization. This is not to suggest that “new media studies” should define new media purely in terms of the computerization, but that it is an effective means of connecting new media and multimodality with play due to the possibility spaces opened by computerization more generally. In other words, the language of play is emphasized and enabled by the computability of new media because of the possibility spaces computerization creates for the operation of the ludic mode and its symbolic forms.

In *The Language of New Media*, Lev Manovich defines new media as the use of computers to “record, store, create, and distribute” media (20). This definition highlights how computability influences all stages of communication, including

production, consumption, distribution, acquisition, storage, and accessibility. I find this a particularly appealing emphasis for a consideration of play because—as I mention in chapter two—conversations of play are often limited to the process stage of composing. Manovich’s emphasis on computability creates the possibility for bringing play into stages like production and distribution. In particular, four consequences of new media’s computerization Manovich describes create possibility spaces for the language of play: 1) numerical representation, 2) modularity, 3) automation, and 4) variability.⁶⁹

Numerical Representation

First, the language of play is symbolized through the endless mixing of media objects enabled by new media’s computability. According to Lev Manovich, the new media revolution arises out of two parallel movements: the development of modern media and the development of computers. He writes, “Mass media and data processing are complementary technologies; they appear together and develop side by side, making modern mass society possible” (23). Just as modern media were being developed to store modes like image and sound, numerous mechanical tabulators and calculators were also being invented. The core of Manovich’s argument is that media become “new” when these parallel movements meet: all existing media can be translated into numerical data. This means they are stored, accessed, produced, and distributed through computers, a singular device where all

⁶⁹ Manovich’s fifth characteristic is “transcoding,” the idea that culture’s “structure now follows the established conventions of the computer’s organization of data” (45). As this is a larger cultural change, rather than a property of computable media, I did not see it as creating a specific possibility space for play’s symbolization.

modes and media converge. I contend that this mass convergence of media includes the modality of play and the media platforms of gaming. This meeting eventually changes not only how media are produced and accessed, but also radically alters the function of computers. From mathematical calculator, computers become media storage and projection devices. Defining new media in terms of computerization allows Manovich to usefully distinguish between “old” and “new” media, presenting the possibility to define specific characteristics of new media. These emergent characteristics of new media’s computerization, I argue, create large possibility spaces for the language of play. As a semiotic resource for meaning, play—like image, sound, and movement—can be recorded, stored, accessed, and distributed through computerized media in the form of multimodal textual products like videogames.

The first characteristic of new media objects is numerical representation. This means that a defining feature of media’s “newness” is that it is composed of digital code. The consequences of this are that new media can be described mathematically and then programmed (27). For example, an old media object—a photograph of my father, shot on a camera and developed from film—can be scanned and stored on a computer numerically, thus becoming “new media.” Being converted to numbers and stored on a computer creates the possibility that a user can manipulate the photograph as computerized data through image editing software. The user can crop, resize, or change colors of the image without damaging or destroying the original photograph. Notice that Manovich’s definition of new media does not mean that it is somehow more technology-heavy than old: all media

require technology for production, storage, and distribution. But whereas old media means that specific media tend to have their own technologies for those purposes, new media all operate through a single device: the computer.



Figure 4.1: An Example *Yearbook Yourself* Photo

The numerical representation of new media creates a large possibility space for the language of play by enabling endlessly repeatable symbolization. Since various media objects are all composed of numbers, they can endlessly play with each other: in other words, they can move about “relatively freely” within each other’s forms. This, I argue, is one way the language of play is symbolized, and an excellent example of such a symbol can be seen through image editing enabled by websites like *Yearbook Yourself*, a commonly used website that allows users to upload photographs of themselves or friends and then replace the face of stock yearbook photos as far back as 1950. The images users create are easily sharable and require no sophisticated knowledge to produce, and are often found on social media sites such as like *Facebook* and *Twitter*. *Yearbook Yourself* has its own *Facebook* page with over 135,000 “likes” at the time of this writing.

The images (such as the dapper young man shown in the figure) are very clearly meant for amusement, and many people use them as joke avatars on social media websites. The images are communicative through their emotional appeal, creating a shared jive between friends through commonplaces about typical fashion

and appearance. Further, they also make not-so-subtle digs at hair and dress styles from different eras. The language of play emerges in *Yearbook Yourself* from the mixing of contemporary faces with old hairstyles, poses, and clothing, symbolized by the endless repeatability of its playful images. Since the ludic mode is a resource for meaning, the symbol making that happens through *Yearbook Yourself* can express many different ideas and emotions: my own face beneath a flock of seagulls becomes a laugh between friends, a way to poke fun at myself, a way to reminisce about fashion sensibilities of yesterday.

The numerical representation of new media creates a large possibility space for the language of play because it allows various pieces of media to mix more or less endlessly. Remediating photographs of myself and of another person from an old yearbook through computerization, *Yearbook Yourself* images bring together and hybridize the “more rigid structure” of individual instances of the photographic medium. Subjected to the “rule structures” of computable media, which allow for information from the individual images to swap out and mix endlessly through numerical representation, the possibility of *Yearbook Yourself* images and their repeatability emerges. Play can, of course, be similarly symbolized through old media. I can cut out my own face from a photograph and place it on another to make a similar kind of statement, enabled by the technology of scissors. However, conversion of those photographs to new media through computerization means I can play with those images again and again without destroying the originals. Moreover, the computer-as-storage-medium provides me with a large disposal of new media objects for play, since *Yearbook Yourself*'s database is likely much larger

than the collection of old media photographs a typical person might have just lying around. In this way, new media creates a specific possibility space for the symbolization of play's endless repetition. Though the language of play is not limited to computability, the jokes, jives, and self-deprecation expressed through something like *Yearbook Yourself* can happen again and again.

Modularity

Second, the language of play is symbolized through customized media objects made possible by new media's computability. According to Manovich, old media and new media operate according to different cultural logics. He argues that modern media objects emerged during the Industrial Revolution and thereby reflect cultural practices and ideologies of the time. Operating according to the "logic of the factory," modern media tend toward standardization and mass production. For example, 1890s cinema projected images that were standardized according to size and contrast, and it was mass-produced by making many identical copies of the master. New media objects, he argues, follow "quite a different logic of post-industrial society—that of individual customization" (30-31). The customization logic embodied by computable new media objects, I argue, creates a large possibility space for the language of play by enabling composers to customize texts for various rhetorical purposes and situations. In other words, play is symbolized as the same texts are repeatedly customized by many different rhetors working toward many different rhetorical goals. When I customize a new media object for my own purposes, that object has been shaped and composed by my play.

This customization logic is manifest in the second feature of new media, which is its modular structure. New media's modularity means that individual media components can be swapped or deleted without the whole being affected. For example, a user composing a graphic in a design program creates multiple layers in order to assemble their final image. One layer might contain the color of the background, while another layer can have an image and another can have text. While the file is eventually flattened into a single piece of media with all those elements, individual pieces can be removed or changed without destroying the others. So, even if text is layered across the top of the image, the text can be removed without taking out the part of image or background it overlays. Manovich argues:

the modular structure of new media makes such deletion and substitution of parts particularly easy. For example, since an HTML document consists of a number of separate objects each represented by a line of HTML code, it is very easy to delete, substitute, or add new objects. Similarly, since in Photoshop the parts of a digital image are usually kept placed on separate layers, these parts can be deleted and substituted with a click of a button. (31)

While old media tend toward mass production and reproducibility, the modular structure of new media enables possibilities of customization and flexibility.

The customization logic of new media, enabled by modularity, creates a large possibility space for the language of play because it allows composers to adapt an object for many different rhetorical purposes and situations by swapping its media

parts, the “more or less rigid” rule structures of its magic circles. One good example of how the language of play articulates through such customization is the meme. The word “meme” comes from the Greek word meaning an “imitated thing,” and as a new media object it refers to the internet phenomenon where users take a common image and compose on top of it, making a joke that is imitated, customized, and shared by others across various social media platforms like *Twitter*, *Instagram*, and *Facebook*. Such memes become popular and take on their own personas, such as the well known “lame pun coon” featured in figures 3.2 and 3.3. Users invent new jokes by imitating the form and style of previous memes, and the modularity of new media enables such customization over and over again.

The meme is as commonplace as it is playful, but it is also capable of making complex rhetorical statements, and some scholars have begun to pay attention to

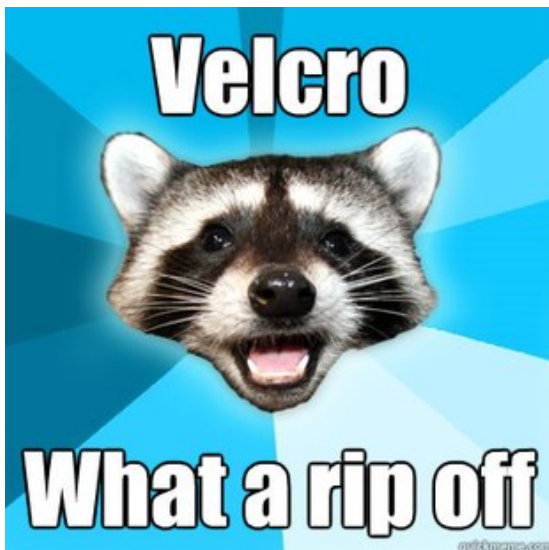


Figure 4.2: One example of the “lame pun coon.”



Figure 4.3: Users change the text over and again to make “bad puns” about a variety of topics.

the form, sometimes discussing them as

a kind of digital, open access topoi where rhetors invent by drawing on the

commonplaces memes embody. In a recent article in *College English*, “Occupying the

Digital Humanities,” Jeff Rice analyzes a well-known photograph from the “Occupy” movement where a police lieutenant pepper-sprays students at the University of California-Davis. While not specifically about memes, Rice claims that the photograph is a “digital moment” because of “how it is largely informed by a specific digital and media logic” (364). As evidence of its digital-ness, Rice points to the memes produced out of the original photograph, which include anything from texts making fun of the incident to “photoshopping” the officer into famous photographs or paintings, such as *Guernica*. The “digital and media logic” Rice references, I argue, is the post-industrial logic of customization, enabled by the modular structure of new media objects and symbolized through the language of play.

The modular structure of new media creates a large possibility space for the language of play because it allows a particular object to be customized by swapping its parts with other media objects. In doing so, composers are able to adapt the object for various rhetorical purposes and situations, as the meme is capable of generating anything from a joke to serious political commentary. The form of a meme is made as the magic circles of other modes and media trespass one another through their play. This allows many new and different texts to be invented and used for any number of purposes. Any individual composer’s play is symbolized through the customized form the text assumes. While composers have always had the ability to write a joke on top of an image, the computerization of media means that all of that text and image is stored, accessed, produced, and distributed through the same technology. Because of this, players are much more readily able to compose and share such texts as the meme. While the language of play can be

articulated through the mixing of image and text in old media, its symbolization is emphasized and enabled by the modular structure of computerized media because users can readily customize the same text for their own whims, intentions, or senses of humor. This means the Internet is filled with countless playful texts like the “lame pun coon” that make statements about a wide variety of topics, transforming moments of play into so many customized symbols.⁷⁰

Automation

Third, play is symbolized through feedback systems between human agents and non-human entities made possible by computerization. This possibility is enabled by the third characteristic of new media, which is automation. Since new media objects are both numerical and modular, “many operations involved in media creation, manipulation, and access” can be automated, meaning that at least some human intentionality can be removed from the creative process of new media objects (Manovich 32). In other words, features such as the interface, layout, and content of new media objects are partially generated through algorithms and networked computer code that respond to the user’s input and preferences. The most common experience of this aspect of new media comes from websites that generate information and layout for users as they reach the site. *Amazon* is one common example of this feature of new media, since the website creates pages, layouts, and content based on previous input gathered from the site’s user. For instance, if I buy a copy of James Paul Gee’s *What Video Games Have to Teach us*

⁷⁰ In Langer’s terms, the human mind “is actively translating experiences into symbols” (*Philosophy in a New Key* 41-42), what she calls “symbolic transformation.”

About Learning and Literacy, then Amazon's pages will be filled with suggestions for similar books, automatically generated by aggregating data both about my purchasing preferences and the preferences of others who have similar histories or share my geographical location.

The responsiveness of computerized media, enabled by automation, transforms user activities such as clicking through various websites, buying games online, or performing web searches into the symbolic form of a website claiming to be composed "of, by and for you, the user." Embodying the rhetoric of the self, the possibility is created for a new media object to respond to the user as though it reflects their own motivations for using the media in the first place. In my mind, this symbolic expression of play taps into and articulates rhetorics of the self that view play as engaging and pleasurable, but with potentially troubling consequences. When an automated new media object reacts to its user, it attempts to both simulate genuine human-to-human interaction while also creating the impression that everything is about what the user wants or needs. Furthermore, the feedback systems of videogames are often seen as both communicative and rhetorical because they express information to users and intend to elicit an emotional response. Jane McGonigal claims that a feedback system

tells players how close they are to achieving the goal. It can take the form of points, levels, a score, or a progress bar. Or, in its most basic form, the feedback system can be as simple as the players' knowledge of an objective outcome. "The game is over when . . ." Real-time feedback serves as a *promise* to the players that the goal is definitely

achievable, and it provides *motivation* to keep playing. (*Reality is Broken* 21)

For McGonigal, a game's feedback system is an incredibly powerful mechanism for creating pleasure. She claims, "Games make us happy because they are hard work that we choose for ourselves" (28), and videogames especially enable this pleasure response because the feedback systems are so tight (24). In other words, the game provides feedback that seems to happen in almost the same moment as the player's input, helping keep the player in a constant stage of engaging work that is suited perfectly to her skill level. Game theorist Jesper Juul, in *A Casual Revolution*, expresses similar sentiments, claiming that games which evoke positive emotions in players tend to have a high degree of "juiciness," or feedback systems that are colorfully and immediately responsive to the input of players (*Casual Revolution* 30). Claiming to be designed in response to the user and simulating human-to-human interaction in a way that is both more immediate and responsive than people tend to get in real life, feedback systems symbolize the individual's own motivations, pleasures, and experiences. In this way, the new media object appears to embody the choices and decisions made by individuals as they play.

However, the automation of new media also creates the possibility for deception because "play" is symbolized as meaningless points, badges, and choices in the form of non-reciprocal feedback systems. In this way, the language of play articulates rhetorics of the self, which cast play as pleasurable and rewarding, in order to manipulate users' experiences with "game-like" systems for some other purpose. Ian Bogost argues that well-designed games create true reciprocity,

meaning that the player's input and decisions actually matter (*Persuasive Games*). He further argues that "gamified" structures—those that borrow some of the surface-level features of games like points, interactivity, and badges—are exploitative because they create false-reciprocity where the player's input appears to matter but is actually in the service of a corporate or political agenda ("Exploitationware"). One example of this is the "Decision Points Game," an interactive video system at the recently opened George W. Bush Presidential Library where users play through "scenarios" Bush faced during his presidency, such as "The Threat of Saddam Hussein." Users navigate menus and solicit advice from high ranking political experts, and they ultimately decide which action they would have chosen, such as "Take No Action," "Seek U.N. Resolution," or "Lead International Coalition." As a feedback system, the "Decision Points Game" claims to respond to the users but, no matter what decisions are made, the game always ends with a video of George W. Bush explaining why invading Iraq (the option listed as "Lead International Coalition") was the correct decision.⁷¹ By claiming to genuinely respond to the user's input, a new media object symbolizes "play" through a non-reciprocal feedback system that attempts to manipulate users through pleasure and engagement. I say "play" because play, defined as "free movement in a more rigid structure" (Salen and Zimmerman 304) is severely restricted by such one-way feedback systems. In other words, they attempt to create a sense of free movement, but the user's movements always end up in the same place.

⁷¹ Rachel Maddow described this exhibit as, "A museum designed to make you think the Iraq War was a good idea." <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x4t2EQ3oo5U>>

Play is also symbolized in the form of user-aggregated data on social media websites, another possibility enabled by the automation of new media. In “User Data on the Social Web,” Jessica Reyman analyzes *Facebook’s* user data policy to insist that scholars must recognize the “full range of productive activities that occur in social media” (515), including data generated through user input into automated systems like *Facebook*. Reyman aptly points out rhetorical theory cannot consider such data a simple “by-product” of technology because human input and agency factors in the creation of that data. User data is composed through user input intersecting with the site’s automated code for mining and aggregating information. *Facebook’s* user policy, however, claims full ownership of data aggregated by the automation of its code. While user input—which includes playing games while on *Facebook*—factors into the data generated, social media users are given no credit or control of that information.⁷² The user’s play on *Facebook* is symbolized and embodied through aggregated data while simultaneously denied any agency in the production and use of that data. This means that rhetorical considerations of agency, power, intellectual property, and ethics come into consideration through the symbolization of play on social media websites.

The automation of computerized new media creates a large possibility space for the language of play because it allows an object to have, or at least appear to have, a feedback system that embodies and articulates rhetorics of the self. This means that the language of play appeals rhetorically with and through the

⁷² Perhaps more troubling is the recent discovery that social media sites now have the ability to aggregate the data that users choose *not* to post.
<http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/future_tense/2013/12/facebook_self_censorship_what_happens_to_the_posts_you_don_t_publish.html>

pleasurable experiences of play, but it also creates the possibility of its use to manipulate users. As I see it, this realization creates a powerful exigency for the cultural and rhetorical analysis of automated feedback systems that are a hallmark of videogames and common to many other types of new media objects as well. Just as students need rhetorical training to understand how persuasive appeals work in spoken and written forms like speeches and essays, literacy of how automated systems embody appeals to the pleasure and engagement of play could also be necessary, especially as such textual products proliferate. Collin Gifford Brooke has previously termed “post-humanism” as the capacity of digital technology to participate in rhetorical exchange through the simulation of rhetorical action (“Forgetting”), and I would suggest that such simulations are often symbolizations of play. However, I would also suggest that more inquiry is needed regarding what constitutes legitimate simulations of rhetorical action as opposed to the simulation of apparent rhetorical exchange through non-reciprocating systems. The language of play is, I believe, an important factor contributing to such inquiry.

Variability

Finally, the language of play is symbolized by the multiple pathways and experiences of the different versions of media objects enabled by computable media. As a consequence of how computerized media are stored and accessed through databases, Manovich argues, “A new media object is not something fixed once and for all, but something that can exist in different, potentially infinite versions” (36). Old media objects, according to Manovich, require human inventors who assemble a

particular object out of some specific type of material, and the sequencing for assembling that object is determined “once and for all” (36). Vehicles that are mass produced on an assembly line serve as a good example of old media objects because they both show how old media tend toward replication of standards and types but also do enable variations in design. In other words, the fact that an object can exist in different forms is not what makes that object “new.” Instead, the way new media are stored and accessed in computer databases makes variation a defining characteristic. Users access database content through a variety of platforms and hardware devices, meaning that potentially different versions of the media’s interface and overall composition are created each time a user accesses that media.

The variability of new media creates a large possibility space for the language of play by enabling users to assemble many different versions of the media object, potentially transforming it into a text that is suited to their particular needs or circumstances, but is at the very least shaped by the circumstances and devices used to access the text. In this way, the language of play expresses ludic rhetorics of the imaginary through the possibility spaces created by computable media’s variable composition. In chapter two, I claim that ludic rhetorics of the imaginary theorize play as multivocal, dialogic, and always flexible, taking play’s ambiguity as a central defining characteristic. New media’s computability means that any statement about an object’s singular form or meaning is ambiguous, as different users transform the media into multiple versions simply by accessing it. While old media are very capable of variation and flexibility, new media create the possibility for symbolic forms of the language of play to embody that ambiguity throughout. This means that

to analyze such a new media text is to analyze it *as it appeared in the moment of access*, and the ambiguity manifested through the limitless versions of a media object is an expression of play.⁷³

One symbolic form of play, made possible by the variability of new media, is avatar creation. While I pointed out in chapter two that avatars are often discussed as projections of the self, I have argued that they might be better defined as interfaces composed simultaneously as human and game. Here, I want to suggest that they also embody the multiple and varied pathways for play made possible by new media. James Paul Gee, of course, relates the multiple pathways in videogames to learning theory more broadly. He defines this “Multiple Routes Principle” as the idea that there “are multiple ways to make progress or move ahead. This allows learners to make choices, rely on their own strengths and styles of learning and problem solving, while also exploring alternative styles” (*What Video Games 223*). Gee is correct in relating games and learning in this way, but I contend that the possibility spaces opened by new media for the language of play are even more broad and transformative than Gee suggests. Games such as *Skyrim* enable players to build and customize avatars based on both their appearance and their in-game abilities, which introduces a high degree of variability to gamers’ play experiences. The large number of online resources devoted simply to building a player’s character is good evidence for the robustness of variability in console games.⁷⁴

⁷³ This is also symbolized in the form of academic citation systems as regards digital texts. Citation systems, such as MLA, no longer require URLs, but instead date of access, as the URL does not necessarily provide any information to what the text was in the moment of access.

⁷⁴ As an example, see IGNs online resources for *Skyrim*
<http://www.ign.com/wikis/the-elder-scrolls-5-skyrim/Character_Archetypes>

Avatar creation is an example of the variability of new media objects in three ways. First, gamers create different avatars, changing not only how the game looks but also how the game itself unfolds and responds to players. Second, the particular gaming platform and projection devices—televisions with different resolutions, computer monitors of various sizes—affect the experience different gamers have with the sounds, textures, colors, and graphics of games. Third, contemporary console games like *Skyrim* are treated the same way as computer software in that they are subject to periodic updates. In other words, when gamers connect their systems to the web, the game design company may have released updates the player can install that change in-game mechanics, fix bugs, or add new features. Moreover, gamers can both design and purchase modifications to change in-game graphics and sound. In these three ways—customizing avatars, using different gaming platforms and devices, and periodic updates—gamers create and express their preferred image of what constitutes “the game” through the symbolization of play through an avatar. To perform an analysis of a game like *Skyrim* is to perform an analysis of the game *as it was when I played*, which includes how I have built my character, what platform I am using, and what version or modification of the game I have installed. Ludic rhetorics of the imaginary are expressed through the variability of new media objects such as games because what constitutes the game space at any given time is always ambiguous and under transformation, symbolized by the various makings of avatars and the virtual worlds they inhabit.

As with many other cases regarding the language of play, the symbolizations of play that emerge from the variability of new media’s possibility spaces can also

manifest in old media. It is important to remember that old media objects tendencies toward fixity and mass reproduction are as much a result of the ideologies in which they are embedded as they are a result of some any central or determined trait. Moreover, there is nothing about a new media object that guarantees it is variable, as designers can shut down variation through propriety claims and intellectual property protections. As I have mentioned earlier in this chapter, print has opened countless and vast possibility spaces for composing in a variety of situations, most of which—if not all—involve multiple semiotic modes. Jay David Bolter claims, “A writing space is generated by the interaction of material properties and cultural choices and practices. Moreover, each space depends for its meaning on previous spaces or on contemporary spaces against which it competes” (*Writing Space* 12). Printed books, for instance, are incredibly robust as media, as they are both portable and easily sharable. If I purchase a book at a used bookstore, for instance, underlines of particular passages marked in black ink are the play of that media, the “free movement” within the book’s more rigid structure, making possible different versions of the text (Salen and Zimmerman 304). While Manovich’s theory of new media is sometimes criticized for over-emphasizing the “new,” I would argue that is more usefully and generously distinguishes between “old” and “new” media without denigrating or overvaluing either old or new media. Paired with the concept of possibility spaces, it becomes possible to discuss the different ways play is symbolized within the spaces made open by different media. While the computerization of new media makes it possible for variation to emerge

every time the media is accessed, the writing spaces of both old and new media abound with possibility.

Up to this point, I have made two large, over-arching claims about the language of play. First, I have claimed that play is symbolized non-discursively within magic circles, rule-bound cultural sites—simultaneously real and virtual—where a rhetor can act strategically and unleash her creativity. Second, I have claimed that the language of play—though not a specific property of computerization—is emphasized and enabled by specific characteristics of new media that allow for play to be symbolized in the form of new media objects such as digitally edited images, memes, feedback systems, and avatars.

Note that all the above examples involve some degree of hybridization. To my way of thinking, hybridity should be maintained as a central characteristic of the language of play in order to emphasize the always-present possibility for play to subvert expectations and cross boundaries. Remember that, in chapter three, I showed how Huizinga's inclusion of play within magic circles was on its own a boundary violation in that play was crossing profanely into sacred spaces where it did not belong. I contend that the symbolization of play is always a result of some boundary being violated. Whether that is through the digital code of one image entering the code of another, a gamer's modification that brings new music into the game space, or the sketching of a doodle on a printed book's page, all these examples mean that the general shape and structure of one media object—its magic circle—is invaded by another's play. Langer writes, "Magic, then, is not a method,

but a language” (*Philosophy* 49), and I contend that “play” is an appropriate term for that magic.

Emergence: The Trials and Errors of Many Minds

In chapter one, I argued that composing can be conceptualized as play when play is defined as “free movement within a more rigid structure” (Salen and Zimmerman 304) because of the ways texts are composed through exploration, experimentation, and user experience. In chapter two, I defined ludic rhetorics: underlying theories tacitly invoked through explicit use of the word “play” in composition scholarship and pedagogy. In chapter three, I turned to Johan Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens* to recover his theory of play-as-symbolic, using that to bridge ludic rhetorics to my own theory of play-as-language. In this chapter, I am theorizing the language of play as those non-discursive forms such as the feedback systems and avatars made possible by new media’s possibility spaces. In this section, I further build this theory of play’s language by invoking emergence—the theory of bottom-up complexity—because it suggests two additional concepts the language of play symbolizes: 1) trial and error and 2) distributed knowledge.

First, the language of play symbolizes trial and error processes that potentially make the use of particular new media both flexible and “pleasantly frustrating” (Gee, *What Video* 3). Sherry Turkle’s brief discussion of emergence theory in *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*, explains the trial and error processes that are a hallmark of decentralized artificial intelligence. Similar to Manovich’s history of computers moving from calculators to media storage devices,

Turkle argues that computers are evocative objects that not only externalize human thoughts and memory—using computer programs to journal or track our schedules—but that also imperfectly simulate the way people think, act, and connect. She writes:

Like dreams and beasts, the computer stands on the margins. It is a mind that is not yet a mind. It is inanimate yet interactive. It does not think, yet neither is it external to thought. It is an object, ultimately a mechanism, but it behaves, interacts, and seems in a certain sense to know. It confronts us with an uneasy sense of kinship. After all, we too behave, interact, and seem to know, and yet are ultimately made of matter and programmed DNA. We think we can think. But can *it* think? Could it have the capacity to feel? Could it ever be said to be alive? (23)

Turkle suggests that, even though people do not typically attribute human-like thought to machines, machines and their processes often seem to embody our emotional experiences with them. An example of this can be found in the processes of learning to use computer technology, especially through trial and error: experimenting, failing, and trying again. In game studies, people's motivation to keep trying at tasks that involve so much failure is often attributed a game's "regime of competence" (Gee, *What Video* 223), meaning the game's challenges are at the outer edge of a player's capabilities in order to create challenges that are both pleasant and frustrating. Emergence theory shows how the "error" half of this equation is itself a great resource for production and learning. While many note the

commonly invoked cultural myth of play as “pure waste” (Bogost; Caillois; Ferrara; Gee; Juul; McGonigal), what I want to emphasize is that even waste and error are themselves resources for rhetorical production. To call play an “error” or “waste” is not necessarily denigrating.

One example of the productive potential of play’s errors can be seen in the form of fan-made screen-capture videos. Screen-capture software is often used in games, similar to its usage in web design programs or video editing software, to record “walkthroughs” showing players how to solve particular puzzles, unlock achievements, or find hidden items in the game. While such videos are resources that gamers use to help overcome challenges, there are also popular videos that symbolize the experience of error, serving as humorous anecdotes that express and communicate the experience of failing over and over again. “Indie Games” have become increasingly popular in recent years, and one well-known example is Edmund McMillen and Tommy Refenes’s *Super Meat Boy*, voted as “Most Challenging Game of 2010” by IGN (Imagine Games Network). From the high error rate of games like this, fans produce videos of themselves failing over and over again at the game’s most difficult tasks, often including audio of profanity-laced tirades toward the game. One video by YouTube user “Rooster Teeth,” titled *Rage Quit: Super Meat Boy*,⁷⁵ is a four-minute video of the player “raging” at the game as he repeatedly fails (and never succeeds). It currently has over three million views and close to ten thousand comments. The experience of failing at such difficult tasks over and over again, including the experience of frustration (“pleasant” or not), is

⁷⁵ <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N874LFeLhYs>>

symbolized in the form of videos like *Rage Quit*, serving as sites of shared experiences, “venting,” and inside jokes between people who have the experience of *Super Meat Boy* in common. In this way, trial and error isn’t necessarily only about learning, but about the experience of error itself and the social connections enabled from sharing those experiences in the form of screen-capture videos.

Turkle’s conception of emergence theory shows how computers can be programmed to utilize trial and error as a resource. She describes a paradigm shift in computer programming called emergent IA, or the “way local interactions among decentralized components can lead to overall patterns” (138). In programming terms, this means that a computer’s decision-making process is distributed across many small programs that compile their information to make complex decisions. Through running such a machine through many simulations, it develops a massive inventory of trials and errors that can be used in decision-making. Because of this, such computers can adapt to new information. One example is a well-known chess match between Russian chess champion Gary Kasparov and IBM’s supercomputer, *Deep Blue*. Kasparov, widely regarded as the world’s greatest chess champion, became internationally famous through a series of matches played against supercomputers. Kasparov defeated many supercomputers that were programmed to process hundreds of millions of potential chess⁷⁶ moves per second and determine the statistically “best” course of action. Kasparov claims this is because

⁷⁶ As a game, chess is perhaps the perfect example of complexity emerging from simple rules. Despite the fact that chess only has a handful of very simple rules, its possibility space grows exponentially with every move made.

machines are “stupid,”⁷⁷ meaning that a person can predict which moves a computer is likely to see as the “best” and use that information against them. *Deep Blue* was the only supercomputer to defeat Kasparov,⁷⁸ largely because the computer’s strategies changed over the course of the six-game match. Through trial and error, the machine’s decisions are potentially less consistent. It can resourcefully use errors—making decisions tomorrow it would not have made yesterday—through its memory of past trials and simulations.

As I argued in chapter two, experimental theories of play claim that trial and error is one way that people learn through play. This is one reason that learning theorists often advocate for “sandbox learning,” or learning enabled in places where learners can try things out in situations where the consequences are lowered (Gee, *Good Video Games*). In this way, the aggregation of massive amounts of trials and errors by supercomputers is an articulation of ludic rhetorics of progress, but I contend that humans also symbolize play through textual products that aggregate the decisions of individuals into larger, more complex documents. Perhaps the best example of this is *Wikipedia*. While anyone can post information on pages, those pages tend to be self-correcting because of the large number of dedicated users who continuously check information, delete incorrect claims, and report users who intentionally try to disrupt the site. While *Wikipedia* has been shown to be incredibly accurate, Collin Gifford Brooke argues that the site is best seen as an active delivery platform where ongoing debates are held:

⁷⁷ Kasparov was so well known that he was featured in a *Pepsi* commercial that aired during the Superbowl, where he called machines “stupid” and was then attacked by a floor buffer and Pepsi dispenser.

⁷⁸ Kasparov has maintained that IBM manipulated the outcome of his match with *Deep Blue*, and there is some evidence of his claim. In any case, IBM never allowed him to play the machine again, which is the subject of a documentary about the match: *Game Over: Kasparov and the Machine*

If we expect Wikipedia to deliver (in the traditional sense) a definitive answer, then the site will often fail. But if we approach the site and particularly its contested pages as sites where the questions are not yet answered, where there are *no* definitive answers, then Wikipedia becomes a site where the debates over these issues is performed, in a much more “accurate” fashion than attempts at encyclopedia objectivity could be. (*Lingua Fracta* 191)

The experimentation and active learning of play are symbolized in the form of *Wikipedia* pages and their updates. Enabled by the possibility spaces of new media that allow many users to move freely within and contribute to the page—like the individual programs in a supercomputer—the site embodies the trials and errors of countless edits and updates. Moreover, such new media texts preserve memory of those trials and errors intertextually in the form of IP addresses⁷⁹ and usernames. What makes *Wikipedia* function well is not that the most qualified person possible ends up writing a particular page, but that so many people are enabled to move about its possibility space and contribute to the emergence of the ever-changing information being delivered. The knowledge embodied in any particular page is distributed and fallible;⁸⁰ errors become resources for changing and adapting a page as new information and materials become available.

⁷⁹ Users who do not log in to *Wikipedia* can still edit a page’s information. Instead of their username being shown, however, the site publishes the I.P. address from the edit’s origination, allowing users to block that address from making future edits to the site when a person consistently or intentionally contributes false information.

⁸⁰ One example of this is the relatively new phenomenon of celebrities having to verify that they are still alive after their deaths being reported falsely on *Wikipedia*, such as the hilarious case of Sinbad’s “death.” <http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/tech/news/2007-03-16-wiki-sinbad_n.htm>

Second, enabling such cooperation allows for new perspectives to coalesce from many different points of view. Multimodal texts embody the hybrid character of play's symbolization, as the language of play is not image and not text and not sound. It is, instead, the possibility that arises from language's distribution across multiple modes and media. Steven Johnson's *Emergence: The Connected Lives of Ants, Brains, Cities, and Software*, provides a good explanation of how distributed intelligence and mass cooperation allow for complexity to emerge in a biological sense. Johnson discusses microbiologists' attempts to understand the behavior of slime molds. Slime molds exist as individual cells but, when they need to move, they coalesce into a single organism in order to survive. Early theories assumed the existence of an autonomous "pacemaker" cell that directed the slime mold's organization. Unable to find any evidence of that theory, mathematicians wrote equations to theorize how slime molds might self-organize from the bottom-up. Eventually, researchers discovered that individual cells in slime molds leave trails—similar to pheromones left by ants⁸¹—to which other cells respond. Mitch Resnick, a software designer, famously designed a computer simulation showing how the slime mold behaves. Of this, Johnson writes:

Think of those slime mold cells as investigators in the field; think of those trails as a kind of institutional memory. With only a few minds exploring a given problem, the cells remain disconnected, meandering across the screen as isolated units, each pursuing its own desultory course. With pheromone trails that evaporate quickly, the cells leave

⁸¹ See *Ants: Nature's Secret Power*.

no trace of their progress—like an essay published in a journal that sits unread on a library shelf for years. But plug more minds into the system and give their work a longer more durable trail—by publishing their ideas in best-selling book, or founding research centers to explore those ideas—and before long the system arrives at a phase transition: isolated hunches and private obsessions coalesce into a new way of looking at the world, shared by thousands of individuals. (64)

The slime mold might be doomed if only one or a few cells controlled the entire system. If those cells make a mistake, the whole system crashes. But when decisions are distributed across millions of cells, error and accident become resources because they allow for the overall system to coalesce into something new, informed by the distributed memory and experiences of all.

Multimodal texts symbolize the emergence of new perspectives from the meetings of knowledge embodied by different modes and media. As image moves about in the magic circle of sound—like the movement of play within a sacred dance—the possibility is created for new perspectives to emerge from their hybridity. In multimodal texts, different modes and media compete, collaborate, and cooperate. Just as emergence theory demonstrates that the slime mold is able to adapt through its distributed intelligence, I contend that multimodal texts symbolize experimental theories of play that emphasize adaptability. When symbolic behavior is distributed across many different modes and media, this creates the possibility to make “a new way of looking at the world” (Johnson 64).

Examples of this can be found in any number of multimodal texts, including those in print. For instance, consider Derek Mueller's recent essay on methodology, "Grasping Rhetoric and Composition by Its Long Tail: What Graphs Can Tell Us about the Field's Changing Shape." Through a combination of discursive writing, graphs adjusted to different scales, and bibliometric data gathered from *College Composition and Communication* archives, Mueller provides a new way of looking at how the field's shape has changed over time. In all three of the forms mentioned above, Mueller provides accounts of the most frequently cited figures over the past twenty-five years in the field's flagship journal. Mueller finds that the number of articles with infrequently cited figures (scholars cited only once or twice) has dramatically increased and, by altering the scale of his bibliometric data, he shows that composition has developed a "long tail," symbolized by the flattening of line graphs. He speculates that this long tail may present an emerging problem in composition scholarship, as researchers' shared body of knowledge could shrink to a point where they have trouble communicating. Mueller's point is to show how such a multimodal methodology can help scholars discover "non-obvious phenomena" (216). This, I contend, illustrates the symbolic form of play coalescing from the distribution of knowledge across different modes and media: it is the ludic mode, Huizinga's play-concept, the symbolization of movement within and through the magic circles of graphs, numbers, and alphabetic writing. It is the "warp and woof of a fabric" (*Homo Ludens* 10) from play's "free movement within a more rigid structure" (Salen and Zimmerman 304). Play is always in motion, and the disturbances it creates are evidence of its presences and absences.

Through print, Mueller's piece includes discursive writing, but also remediates computation (the calculations of numerical data) as well as graphs. New media, defined in terms of computation, creates large possibility spaces for such composing practices. French film critic and composer Michel Chion's excellent book, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, provides another example of play's multimodal symbolization. Chion argues that films are not experienced as either audio or video, but as "audio-view," a term to describe the movie's synesthetic whole. Chion uses the term "synchresis" to describe "the forging of an immediate and necessary relationship between something one sees and something one hears" (5).

Synchresis is a good concept for explaining how play is symbolized in the form of new media compositions like the "video mashup." A video mashup is a collection of audio and video, often from many different sources, that coalesces into a new audio-visual whole.⁸² One common technique for composing such mashups is to take video from one movie and recut it with sound effects and theatrical trailer techniques from another film or genre. The effect is to create an entirely new composition, often comical, that changes the viewer's perception of the content, style, and genre of the original film. One of the best examples of this technique is the *Mrs. Doubtfire Psycho Edition* trailer.⁸³ The movie takes the original footage and dialogue from the *Mrs. Doubtfire* theatrical trailer and pairs it with the style of cuts, sound effects, and music from Hitchcock's classic film, *Psycho*. Instead of a romantic comedy starring Robin Williams, *Mrs. Doubtfire Psycho* is about a divorced husband

⁸² Copyright Law recognizes remixes that create a new whole as original works. See Steve Westbrook's *Composition and Copyright*.

⁸³ <<http://www.ebaumsworld.com/video/watch/82589950>>

turned psychotic killer. The trailer is funny if the viewer knows something of the original movie. However, there is absolutely nothing unusual about the trailer in its own right. The images on screen and the sounds and cuts fit together seamlessly. Chion would say that the relationship between those parts seems immediate and necessary because of synchresis. The audio and video play so well together, emerging in the form of a new trailer, that it is hard to believe they were not made for one another. A person playing with clips from *Mrs. Doubtfire* and audio from *Psycho* is symbolized in the form of *Mrs. Doubtfire Psycho*, a composition that is simultaneously both and neither film, composed from the free movement of one within the form of another.

To view multimodal texts—whether composed in old or new media—as symbolizing play is to conceptualize their possibility spaces as teeming with the movements of human experience and experimentation. Such possibility spaces are always capable of creating new insights. Like all language, the language of play is always comprised of both the old and the new. Like the cells of a slime mold forming into a new being through emergence, the language of play is a hybrid, a coalescing of distributed meanings gathered from different media, modes, and symbols. Because play is symbolized within the possibility spaces of new media and multimodal texts, it embodies the collaboration and cooperation of distributed knowledge through its own insightful and hybrid forms.

Conclusion: Sharing Secrets

Finally, I want to end this chapter by suggesting some additional ways the magic circle concept, seen as a both real and virtual space, is useful for discussing multimodal texts in general, but especially in contexts of digital environments. While some scholars have claimed, as do Sheridan, Ridolfo, and Michel in *The Available Means of Persuasion* (2012) that “in multimodal compositions, the whole exceeds the sum of its parts, resulting in both challenges and new possibilities” (xvii), I believe magic circles provide a means of discussing multimodality that brings appropriate attention to two more characteristics of language and play: secrecy and intrinsic pleasure.

As mentioned in chapter two, Brian Sutton-Smith claims that those who play and those who are afforded the leisure time to artfully play with language tend to be naively associated with originality and autonomy because they have, “the time to waste” (134). While Sutton-Smith highlights commonly held beliefs about play and art as leisurely and even trivial, Johan Huizinga highlights two other key insights about play:

The exceptional and special position of play is most tellingly illustrated by the fact that it loves to surround itself with secrecy. Even in early childhood the charm of play is enhanced by making a “secret” out of it. This is for *us*, not for the “others”. What the “others” do “outside” is no concern of ours at the moment. Inside the circle of the game the laws and customs of ordinary life no longer count. We are different and do things differently. (*Homo Ludens* 12)

For Huizinga, play is often marked by secrecy and fetish. Huizinga, as I noted in the previous chapter, has been critiqued by some on grounds that he views play as non-serious and divorced from reality (Colby and Colby; Ferrara; Rouzie; Taylor), but I believe Huizinga's theory is much more complex. Passages such as the one quoted above, I contend, are better understood as Huizinga's reflections on the pleasurable experience of play, how players can take such pleasure in what they are doing so as to enjoy it on its own terms, almost *as though* they are in a different world. This creates what Epsen Aarseth⁸⁴ and Jeff Rush call "aporia," a kind of meta-knowledge about play derived from reflection after deep immersion in the game. In other words, after getting deeply involved in a game like *Legend of Zelda*, the player can fetishize the game, taking intense pleasure from the object itself: the way dungeons are laid out, the structure of its puzzles, or its use of sound effects. Fetishized objects are often attributed magical power (Mitchell, *Iconology*), so Huizinga's circling of play by magic is a means of emphasizing the deep enthusiasm and pleasure of various play forms. I do not believe Huizinga naively contends that play and games are completely separated from reality; instead, magic circles and fetish provide means of discussing the intense pleasures players often report, the feeling of getting so absorbed by play that one feels *as though* she or he has left reality. Player's presence in either the real or virtual world from moment to moment is ambiguous, both and none. Players, like the games they play, are "half-real" in the moment of interfacing.

⁸⁴ See *Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*.

Play theorist Jeff Rush points out that Roland Barthes claimed similar relations between readers and texts as Huizinga's play theory claims between people and play. To make the connection, Rush quotes Barthes's claim that "the reader has a fetishist relation with the text being read; he takes pleasure in the words, in certain words, in certain arrangements of words; in the texts, certain areas, certain isolates are formed" (qtd. in Rush 247). The point is that, as with play and games, people can get absorbed in various sites of language—writing and books or moving images and the theatre—and admitting or highlighting this part of users' experiences does not equal a matter-of-fact assertion that games, books, or movies are divorced from reality. However, enthusiasts of those media care and are involved so deeply as to become aware of the "secrets" they hold, such as gaming enthusiasts who know the background stories of every character in every *Final Fantasy* game or Tolkien enthusiasts who know the mythology of every character in *Lord of the Rings*.

If magic circles highlight the fetishism and secrecy that surround any particular media, then play is subversive because it potentially shares those secrets as it moves between modes and media. In this way, the play of image and word can create third meanings that are simultaneously both and neither. Gregory Ulmer's recent book, *Avatar Emergency*, suggests that the prevalence of interfaces in digital environments requires attention to such "third" concepts in the typical rhetor/audience relation, such as avatar. Ulmer suggests that, through avatar, "we put our self into the prosthesis of the Internet" (ix). As a prosthetic, the avatar is both a part of us and not, just as magic circles mark spaces that are both real and

virtual. Another metaphor Ulmer offers is that of binocular vision, a “simultaneous rendering of two views of the same scene slightly displaced from one another. The thought of avatar must sustain this parallax dimension, supporting the emergence of a third quality out of a logic of two” (xii). The avatar, like a landscape viewed through binoculars, is neither the view of the right nor the left eye, but the offset image of two. If we view any particular media or mode as governed by its own rules and logic, as having its own secrets and fetishists, it is possible to think of them as surrounded by a magic circle. The language of play expresses the offsets those magics create: conjuring the symbols of pleasure, hybridity, trial and error, and distributed knowledge in the forms of feedback systems, avatars, screen-capture videos, and wikis.

Chapter 5: Ludic Outcomes

“We differ about what our courses are supposed to achieve, about how effective writing is best produced, about what an effective classroom looks like, and about what it means to make knowledge.” (292)

Richard Fulkerson

“Composition at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century”

“In addition to the kinds of questions associated with outcomes, what’s also interesting about them is the freedom they allow for curricular specifics—for different teaching styles, diverse pedagogies, multiple kinds of assignments, direct and indirect response strategies, and so on.

What’s important, from an outcomes perspective, is the students’ final performance, and there is an implicit recognition within outcomes assessment that there are many legitimate ways to get to Rome.” (22-23)

Kathleen Blake Yancey

“Standards, Outcomes, and All that Jazz”

Introduction: The WPA Outcomes Statement

The WPA Outcomes Statement (WPA OS) for First-Year Composition is utilized by writing programs in a variety of ways: course definition, graduate student training, direct implementation in course design, and assessment (Ericcson). It emerged in response to a question on the WPA listserv in 1996 about the purpose of first-year composition. From that online conversation, Ed White asked the following question:

Is it an impossible dream to imagine this group coming out with at least a draft set of objectives that might really work and be usable, for instance, distinguishing comp 1 from comp 2 or from “advanced” comp? We may not have professional consensus on this, though, or

even consensus that we *should* have consensus. How could we go about trying? (Behm et al ix).

The outcomes statement, first approved by the Council of Writing Program Administrators in April 2000, embodies the bottom-up process of its creation. Susanmarie Harrington notes that the initial group of scholars who drafted the WPA OS resisted calling themselves a “committee” or “task force” specifically because the group was informal and unofficial. Instead, they referred to themselves as the “Outcomes Collective” because “*collective* characterized the playful chaos that swirled around core questions, a chaos that eventually formed into the Outcomes Statement” (xvi). In that sense, the WPA OS is itself a symbolization of play, a street-level text that emerged from the distributed knowledge of composition teaching and scholarship moving through the listserv. All those teaching practices of trying things out, making errors, experimenting with new assignments and course designs, and trying old approaches again are symbolized by the “playful chaos” of the WPA OS’s composing.

The outcomes articulate such values as audience sensitivity, the synthesis of ideas, and an awareness of one’s own composing processes. Out of this small and relatively general set of outcomes emerges the astounding degree of complexity and variation witnessed in the wide-ranging approaches to the teaching of first-year writing in American universities. The WPA OS is “simple yet complex” (Harrington xvi), and a common refrain about the statement is that it remains a “living” document (Behm et al xvi), one that is always shifting, moving, and adapting in response to local contexts and circumstances.

The “aliveness” of the WPA OS is dramatized by the history of revisions surrounding writing and technology. The 1999 version contains only one explicit reference to technology, located in the “Process” section: “Use a variety of technologies to address a range of audiences.” This feature of the WPA OS has been roundly critiqued as maintaining an instrumentalist conception of technology (Banks; Calloway). The 1999 version constructs technology only as a tool for “writing,” still defined primarily as traditional, print-based composition. Technology is important here only insofar as it helps produce and deliver discursive writing. By 2008, as the field began showing increased attention to new media compositions and multiple literacies, a “technology plank” was added, reflected by the heading, “Composing in Electronic Environments” and its action steps.

Still, the 2008 amendment seems to do little more than expand upon the single point made in the original version. Its focus remains on students using electronic environments to do the traditional work of discursive writing, like drafting and revising, peer review, and researching. What remains absent is an awareness of how technologies shape the act of writing, or even the definition of what constitutes writing. Reflecting this concern, at the 2013 Annual Convention of the *Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC)*, themed as “The Public Work of Composition,” one of the featured sessions was titled, “Revising the WPA Outcomes Statement for a Multimodal, Digitally Composed World.” Recalling the WPA OS’s genesis, this panel emerged from a debate on the listserv in which teacher-scholars asked if, and in what ways, the statement should be revised with

respect to how digital and emerging composing technologies shape current practices in first-year composition.

One important issue raised by the possible revising of outcomes is assessment. In *A Rhetoric for Writing Teachers*, Erika Lindemann suggests that writing instruction can be built around three basic questions: “What do I want my students to learn?” “How am I going to get them there?” and “How will I know when they have gotten there?” (267). If outcomes articulate what a teacher wants students to learn, and the day-to-day activities of classrooms represent how teachers help students meet outcomes, then assessment is at least one part of “knowing” what students learn and how well outcomes are met. My own work is situated within the growing body of scholarship that urges composition instructors to train students in both the analysis and production of new media and multimodal texts (Anderson; Ball; Fortune; Rouzie; Murray; Palmeri; Tobin). How to articulate outcomes for this work, as well as strategies for assessing if and how well students and teachers meet such outcomes, is an important and ongoing conversation within fields such as computers and writing, new media studies, and digital humanities.

As part of that conversation, in this chapter I consider how play—emerging symbolically in those possibility spaces enabled by computability—might interject in this ongoing debate about the outcomes of first-year composition. Specifically, I consider ways ludic rhetorics and the language of play might be articulated as outcomes for first-year writing, and I offer some strategies for meeting and assessing what I call “ludic outcomes,” outcomes for first-year writing that both embody and can be met by composing with play’s symbolic forms.

Research Questions

- How might ludic rhetorics and the language of play be articulated as outcomes?
- How might play be symbolized through classroom activities, writing and research processes, and student writing products in first-year composition?
- What teaching and assessment practices enable teachers to evaluate how well ludic outcomes are being met?

Method and Methodology

To bring ludic rhetorics and the language of play to issues of outcomes and assessment, I distinguish two terms that—like *play* and *games*—are often used interchangeably: *mode* and *media*. While a mode is a “socially shaped and culturally given semiotic resource for making meaning” (Kress, *Multimodality* 79), media is “the material articulation of the semiotic event” (Kress and Van Leeuwen 21). Equating modes with semiotic meaning and media with technologies of production and distribution, in this chapter I take play as a resource for meaning and videogames as material articulations of play. Furthermore, Gunther Kress argues that some materials are particularly “apt” for the articulation of specific modes (*Multimodality* 82-83). I take videogames as the most apt media for play because of their propensity for creating its various symbolic forms: feedback systems, avatars,

variable choice systems, etc. I argue that videogames make possible the analysis, composition, and evaluation of the language of play in first-year writing.

To make my case, I first review current literature on new media and assessment, pointing out some of the complications raised by the evaluation of outcomes through new media more generally. From there, I suggest ways that ludic rhetorics and the language of play can be expressed as outcomes for first-year writing, offering best practices for meeting ludic outcomes by considering the literature on multimodal assessment and my own teaching experiences with game-based composition courses.

New Media and Multimodal Assessment: Some Approaches

In previous chapters, I have argued that play is symbolized in the possibility spaces made open by computable media. As the language of play is expressed through hybrid forms such as avatars, feedback systems, and discursive texts that utilize modes such as image and number to advance arguments, I contend that existing scholarship on new media and multimodality assessment can provide insight on assessing ludic outcomes. In this section, I review some selected literature on new media and multimodal assessment. This brief survey is not intended to be comprehensive, but instead is a selection that identifies a few broad approaches and specific strategies for assessing new media and multimodal compositions that I contend can help in the meeting of ludic outcomes.

The WPA OS is not composed as an argument about what is assessable through student writing (Harrington xvi), but as a broad statement of values

regarding first-year writing. As contemporary composition theory and pedagogy emphasize that the local and material conditions of particular universities are central to all aspects of teaching writing, the outcomes are not imposed and, when used, the WPA specifically recommends that writing programs should adapt them for their own purposes. However, many programs do use some version of the outcomes to reflect the field's core values and, while many methods exist to demonstrate if and how well those outcomes are met, the assessment of student writing is a central means of evaluating teaching and programmatic effectiveness, as well as student learning.

As assigning new media and multimodal composing in first-year writing becomes more common, such texts play an important role in meeting outcomes and reflecting the field's core values. Despite the proliferation of such teaching, however, Jody Shipka notes the "dearth of scholarship devoted to assessment of multimodal and new media texts" ("Negotiating" W346). Similarly, Kathleen Blake Yancey claims that, though scholarship reflects a comfort with composing practices where different literacies overlap, "we seem decidedly discomfited with it comes time to assess such process and products" ("Looking for Sources"). Despite the small corpus on new media assessment practices, four broad approaches offer some lessons for meeting ludic outcomes: 1) the adaptation on print-based assessment rubrics for new media assignments, 2) the use of critical reflection to accompany non-traditional student compositions, 3) the borrowing of concepts from other disciplines, and 4) the reinvigoration of traditional rhetorical concepts through

electronic composing. Here, I outline these four approaches before discussing them in the specific context of ludic outcomes in the next section.

First, some approaches consider ways to adopt rubrics designed for the evaluation of print-based products for new media compositions. For example, in a 2009 *Computers and Composition Online* article, “The New Work of Assessment: Evaluating Multimodal Compositions,” Elizabeth Murray, Hailey Sheets, and Nicole Williams point out that labor conditions are an important consideration for assessment practices. Specifically, they note that graduate students and adjuncts sometimes work in contexts where they must use programmatic rubrics that may be designed primarily for alphabetic and print-based texts.⁸⁵ Some institutional contexts make the use of print-based rubrics for new media assessment and evaluation a necessity.

Murray, Sheets, and Williams use Ball State University’s Writing Program Rubric to illustrate how projects such as digital videos, collages, and flash animations can be assessed using the same criteria intended for application to print. Ball State’s rubric has instructors evaluate compositions based on traditional concepts like “thesis and organization” and “syntax and diction.” The authors argue that instructors can translate what a concept like organization means in discursive and alphabetic texts to non-discursive and non-alphabetic contexts. For example:

Ball State Rubric: Has a clear sense of logical order appropriate to the content and the thesis.

⁸⁵ As part of this work, the authors report on a survey they conducted through the WPA listserv, which shows that most instructors report developing new evaluative rubrics for new media and multimodal compositions.

Multimodal Project: In a multimodal project, a clear sense of logical order is demonstrated through the variety of modes interacted and flowing with one another to support the argument or thesis. Depending on the modes being used (i.e. website), one may not visibly see a traditional introduction, body, and conclusion; instead, organization will be made evident through the audience's ability to understand and follow the flow of the text and images in the composition. (Murray, Sheets, and Williams)

Such an approach may not be ideal since, as Gunter Kress points out, “translations’ across modes *within* a culture are both possible and hugely difficult” (*Multimodality* 10). However, specific programmatic and university contexts may make such “difficult translations” unavoidable for any instructors who wish to incorporate new media into their course designs and teaching, a consideration to keep in mind for the context of my own discussion of ludic outcomes. In other words, outcomes and assessment practices for first-year writing in general should maintain the field’s emphasis on adaptability to local contexts, which includes this consideration of ludic outcomes.

Another approach involves the use of critical reflections to accompany new media and multimodal texts. Jody Shipka’s “task-based framework” for multimodal composing provides an illustrative example. Shipka has students choose their own modes, media, and materials as part of a given writing assignment. In Shipka’s approach, students are provided with a rhetorical task, such as composing a literacy narrative, and they compose a response to that task using materials of their own choosing. This means the same assignment may yield many different kinds of final products, including discursive essays, videos, or even products assembled from “found” materials like cereal boxes or magazine clippings (“A Multimodal Task-

Based Framework”). Shipka also insists that students should devise multiple ways to approach any given rhetorical task, often using very different kinds of materials in each iteration of their drafting process (“Sound Engineering”).

To assess such varied and non-traditional compositions, Shipka argues that students should take responsibility for “describing and evaluating the purposes and potentials of their work” (“Negotiating Rhetorical” W347). Claiming that composition should privilege “innovative, purposeful choosing and treat all modes, materials, methodologies, and technologies” as equally significant for meaning making to help students become rhetorically sensitive to compositions of all kinds (W350), Shipka recommends that students write a “statement of goals and choices,” or a “SOGC,” to explain and take responsibility for the rhetorical choices and strategies they utilize. Through the SOGC, students demonstrate their rhetorical sensitivity by discursively explaining how their composition effectively responds to a rhetorical situation. Moving forward into my consideration of ludic outcomes, two aspects of Shipka’s task-based method will be important: making possible a wide variety of textual products and the distribution of evaluate weight across different modes, media, materials, and people. These considerations factor into the hybrid and distributed characteristics of play.

Third, some approaches to new media and multimodal assessment emphasize the need to develop new evaluative criteria. In her important essay, “The Shape of Electronic Writing,” Pamela Takayoshi argues that, if

computers can challenge and thus change not only pedagogies but also writing and reading processes, then it follows that these changes

necessitate a transition from assessment practices based on theories about print literacy to assessment practices based on computer-assisted composition theory. (246)

Takayoshi points out that if technology and materiality shape and change writing, then it follows that they also shape and change the evaluation and assessment of the many different shapes writing assumes.⁸⁶

One possible way to change assessment is to develop evaluation practices based on concepts from other fields of study. Meredith Zoeteway and Julie Stagers, for instance, argue, “Writing with new media is fundamentally different from writing in/with other technologies,” and this fundamental difference is what makes writing assessment difficult and necessitates new assessment paradigms (126). Specifically, they point out that writing assessment has been slow to adapt to the “pictorial turn”⁸⁷ brought about through new media composing. In other words, rhetoric and composition’s bias favoring the printed and spoken word has created a dearth of resources for evaluating visual and non-alphabetic texts. Zoeteway and Stagers point to the adoption of models from visual design⁸⁸ by composition textbooks as a method for developing more image-sensitive assessment criteria and pedagogy. However, they also suggest that textbooks have a tendency to divorce

⁸⁶ Takayoshi identifies three ways that computers reframe assessment: they 1) force us to confront writing processes as discursive rather than discrete stages, 2) call special attention to visual rhetoric by making the relationship between form and content more fluid, since computers enable easier control over the visual layout of page designs, and 3) they throw into question our basic assumptions about the roles of readers and writers through hypertext.

⁸⁷ The pictorial turn is described by W.J.T. Mitchell as “the way modern thought has re-oriented itself around visual paradigms and seems to threaten and overwhelm the possibility of any discursive mastery” (*Picture Theory* 9).

⁸⁸ Robin Williams’s “C.R.A.P.” design heuristic—contrast, repetition, alignment, and proximity—is probably the most used, from his *The Non-Designer’s Design Book*.

such models from the theories through which they are informed. In terms of ludic outcomes, the transformation of writing by new media and the borrowing of models from other fields of study enter into considerations of experimentation, secrecy, and reciprocity.

Finally, in what is becoming a familiar refrain in new media studies, some claim electronic composing recalls, reinvigorates, and potentially transforms traditional rhetorical concepts, such as the rhetorical canons of invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery (Brooke, *Linga Fracta*; Lanham, *Electronic Word*; Welch, *Electric Rhetoric*). In terms of assessment, this suggests that general rhetorical concepts have the flexibility and adaptability needed to assess a wide range of rhetorical texts and performances. Madeleine Sorapure's webtext, "Between Modes: Assessing Students' New Media Compositions," illustrates how general rhetorical concepts can help assess student projects that bring together and compose with many modes. More specifically, Sorapure discusses metaphor and metonymy as broad rhetorical concepts for understanding and assessing how meaning is made through the combinations of various semiotic modes.

For example, she argues that metaphor, conceived as a "relation based on substitution," makes it possible to conceive of different modes as having a metaphorical relation to the texts' various points. Each mode, as a "substitution," provides various shades of meaning to those points, and teachers can assess how well the multiple modes consider rhetorical issues such as purpose, audience, and situation. Sorapure admits that such a broad rhetorical approach does not offer specific instruction on the nuts and bolts of assessment:

assessment is very much about context and needs to take into account the particular circumstances of the course, the students, and the teacher, as well as the possibilities afforded by the assignment, the modes, and the media. Even if it were possible, then, it would be unwise to apply a set of assessment criteria to all types of assignments in all places. (30)

Since specific contextual factors are always critical to the effectiveness and success of any composition, rhetorical concepts' flexibility to such factors is always critical. For my discussion of ludic outcomes, the reinvigoration of traditional rhetorical concepts factors in considerations of pleasure and possibility spaces.

Taken together, the four approaches I have outlined here—1) the adaptation on print-based assessment rubrics for new media assignments, 2) the use of critical reflection to accompany non-traditional student compositions, 3) the borrowing of concepts from other disciplines, and 4) the reinvigoration of traditional rhetorical concepts through electronic composing—combined with my own experiences teaching and designing first-year writing courses that use videogames, provide a foundation for creating and meeting ludic outcomes. In the next section, I briefly provide contextual information about my own experiences with videogames and first-year composition. From there, I discuss a variety of ludic outcomes and some best practices for the assessment thereof through classroom activities, writing and research processes, and student projects.

Ludic Outcomes and Assessment: Best Practices

Institutional and Individual Contexts

The outcomes, assignments, and assessment practices discussed in this section emerge from my own development and teaching of English 20833: “Gaming and the Arguments of Play” while at Texas Christian University. This course serves to fulfill the “WCO 2” segment of a two-course first-year writing requirement. The first course, “Writing as Inquiry,” focuses on invention, drafting, and revising writing in a variety of genres, such as personal narrative, profile, and research essays. The second, “Writing as Argument,” emphasizes the analysis and production of arguments in a variety of contexts, genres, and mediums. “Writing as Inquiry” is most often taught from a common syllabus, and new graduate students teach the course for two semesters before teaching “Writing as Argument.” While support and materials are made available for this course, there is no common syllabus, and instructors tend to develop their own syllabi. After a semester of teaching “Writing as Argument,” instructors may develop a “themed” version of the course based in their research and teaching interests. This course is proposed and then “vetted” by a committee that includes the Director of Composition, the Assistant Director of Composition, and representatives for both faculty and graduate students. The committee provides feedback and suggestions on how well the course meets the writing program’s core outcomes before it is taught.⁸⁹

I designed and taught this course as a graduate student through the processes and procedures described above. The materials and practices discussed

⁸⁹ At the time when the course under consideration was developed, TCU’s WCO courses had four primary outcomes. Students will demonstrate: 1) facility with the language and analysis of argument, 2) the ability to write an argument for a specific rhetorical situation, 3) competency in using primary and secondary sources in argument construction, and 4) the ability to use computers effectively as a communication mechanism.

here emerge from three sections of the course, taught between Fall 2011 and Spring 2014. In the course, students analyze and produce scholarly arguments about games, arguments within gaming culture that surround games, and arguments made through the gaming medium. Many of the products students produce and analyze in this course involve the various symbolic forms of play I have discussed in previous chapters.

The subsequent sections list “ludic outcomes,” those rhetorical goals for first-year writing that I claim embody and lend themselves to demonstration through play’s symbolic forms. In each section, I: 1) list one or two ludic outcomes; 2) outline assignments, activities, or practices that enable the achievement of those outcomes; 3) provide some suggested “best practices” for assessing if and how student activities, processes, and products demonstrate those outcomes; and 4) argue for how meeting ludic outcomes can help achieve more general WPA outcomes for first-year composition and/or emphasize ways play might suggest how the WPA OS could be revised in light of digital, emergent composing technologies.

Ludic Outcomes of Experimentation and Error

In previous chapters, I have discussed what I termed “experimental theories” of play, as well as the various forms of play that symbolize trial and error. While experimental theories emphasize the various processes and pathways that can lead to “learning through play,” some kinds of textual products serve as symbolizations of the various trials and errors of play. Such textual products can take the form of assessment criteria that customize to the experience and level of learners. In this

section, I define two potential outcomes for first-year writing that can be achieved through experimental theories of play and the symbolizations of learning through trial and error.

The ludic outcomes for this section include that students will learn to effectively:

- Rhetorically analyze both monomodal and multimodal texts and assess the effectiveness of arguments through the application of basic rhetorical concepts
- Engage in a variety of new analytical strategies across the course of the semester

First, one means of helping students achieve the ludic outcomes listed above is by embodying them in classroom activities and processes of learning. James Paul Gee refers to this concept as the “Multiple Routes Principle,” or the idea that, “there are multiple ways to make progress or move ahead. This allows learners to make choices, rely on their own strengths and styles of learning and problem solving, while also exploring alternative styles” (223). In terms of Erika Lindemann’s questions for structuring a classroom that I mentioned earlier, Gee’s observation about games and learning might mean that day-to-day classroom activities are designed so that question number two—“How am I going to get students to the learning outcome?”—is embodied by the multiple routes available to students to meet outcomes. This suggests that instructors might think of the classroom as a

“possibility space” structured so that students can discover multiple and creative ways of demonstrating their learning of classroom objectives.

For example, one typical goal in a videogame-based composition course is for students to come to an understanding of the theory of procedural rhetoric, what Ian Bogost describes as, “the art of persuasion through rule-based representations and interactions rather than the spoken word, writing, images, or moving pictures” (ix).⁹⁰ Bogost’s theory provides a means for students to analyze games as persuasive media and, to embody the multiple routes learning principle found in games, instructors might create different routes for students to demonstrate their understanding of the concept for a single course. For example, the classroom might be built around three “learning modules” that students enter—either individually or as groups—for fifteen or twenty-minute sessions to engage in different sorts of activities. In one module, students might read highlighted sections of the material and then have to paraphrase the main content. In another module, students might play one of the games on Bogost’s website and create bulleted lists of what the game is arguing and how. In a third module, students might watch collections of online videos where game designers such as Bogost, John Ferrara, and Jane McGonigal talk about games as persuasive media, recording their observations into audio files. Each module represents a different route students can take to meet the day’s learning objectives and, in this way, classroom activities themselves symbolize play, or the “free movement” within the possibility spaces created by classroom rules and constraints, such as time, policy, and procedure.

⁹⁰ The first-year writing programs at the University of Texas and Oakland University, for instance, offer courses that use procedural rhetoric.

One means of assessing the effectiveness of these processes of learning is to reserve time at the end of class for students to report their activities from the various modules they visited. Aside from providing the opportunity for instructors to hear students reflect meta-cognitively on their own processes of learning, it also means that students can get some sense of the different kinds of routes embodied by each module. In this way, even if a particular student or group of students does not get time in each module, they become aware of more routes to learn the concept than the one they tried. For example, students who entered the “summarize the reading” module might have had difficulty understanding procedural rhetoric conceptually and—after hearing reports about the experiences of people who played some persuasive games—might see another means of getting a grasp on the concept using their own time. In this way, instructors also enable multiple routes for themselves since they can “know” students met the outcomes from hearing verbal reports, from collecting any written material produced through the modules themselves, and from having students reflect on exploring alternative routes outside of class.

Second, experimentation with new and different rhetorical strategies can be embodied through specific assessment criteria. One effective method for doing this is through periodic response essays throughout the course of the semester. In my “Gaming and the Arguments of Play” course, for example, students are responsible for four short rhetorical analysis papers where they analyze a text’s effectiveness through the application of basic rhetorical concepts. Instructors can symbolize trial and error and experimentation through weights and distributions of points in the

evaluation of such papers by creating assessment “nodes” that only activate after students have mastered a particular concept. Gee refers to this idea as the “achievement principle,” which states that, “for learners of all levels of skill there are intrinsic rewards from the beginning, customized to each learner’s level, effort, and growing mastery and signaling the learner’s ongoing achievements” (*What Video Games* 223). For example, once a student achieves an “A” by analyzing the way an author establishes credibility to further her argument in a discursive text, a new and different assessment node activates for that student, such as, “The student deliberately experiments with new and different approaches to the analysis of argument.” Because students who are still attempting to learn how to analyze *ethos* in a discursive text do not have to face this new obstacle, the writing situation customizes to the experiences and skills of different writers.

Figures 4.1 and 4.2 illustrate the concept of assessment nodes in a relatively simple case. Figure x illustrates what could be used as the standard rubric for a basic rhetorical analysis assignment, and it is complete with descriptions of the outcomes and distributions of weights and points. Each row represents a different assessment node, and the sixth node assigns some general weight to experimenting with different approaches across multiple essays. After achieving an “A” on a rhetorical analysis essay, a student can choose to meet with her instructor to set specific goals for the experimental node. Figure y shows an example of how the rubric can be customized for such students. There, a student has decided that she wants to try incorporating images into her analysis paper. The generalized experimental node is swapped with a node specific to that student’s goals for the

assignment. Moreover, to reflect how much emphasis the student and teacher wish to put on that goal, some weight is taken from other nodes and added to the image node.

Response Essay Demonstrates:*A clear and nuanced articulation of the author's argument (20%)*

1 (0-9 points) The author's argument is either misunderstood or unstated in the essay.	2 (10-15 points) Author's argument is stated or quoted, but not explained or elaborated on fully.	3 (16-20 points) Essay shows a clear and nuanced understanding of the author's argument.
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Good use of textual examples to support your analysis (20%)

1 (0-9 points) Uses few, if any, textual examples; examples used may lack a clear purpose	2 (10-15 points) Uses good examples, may need some more elaboration. May be formatting errors.	3 (16-20 points) Excellent, purposeful examples that drive the analysis forward. Formatting is perfect.
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A deep analysis of rhetorical strategies used in the construction of arguments (25%)

1 (0-11 points) Essay is mostly summary with little analysis.	2 (12-20 points) Analyzes rhetorical strategies; may show some confusion about terms. Very little summary, and shows some understanding of how rhetoric makes arguments effective or not.	3 (21-25 points) Clear analysis of rhetorical strategies and how they make the argument effective/ineffective. Shows a deep understanding of rhetorical concepts.
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Tight, clear prose with few wasted words (10%)

1 (1-4 points) Sentences are overly wordy; more editing could allow the author to do more analysis.	2 (5-7 points) Writing is very good, may need to tighten some sentences through close editing	3 (8-10 points) Prose is clear and has few, if any, wasted words. Clear transitions between sentences and paragraphs.
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Thoughtful connections of reading to other material (15%)

1 (1-6 points) Does not connect the reading to anything else.	2 (7-11 points) Makes connections to other material, but points may need more elaboration.	3 (12-15 points) Clear and thoughtful connections of reading to other material. Essay shows that the writer understands concepts and connections between readings. (Not applicable to first essay)
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Varied approaches to analysis across multiple analyses (10%)

1 (1-4 points) The essay does not experiment or uses the same strategies at all times.	2 (5-7 points) Author tries new things in each analysis; could experiment with different rhetorical ideas.	3 (8-10 points) Author consistently shows a willingness to try new things and experiment. Varies their approach greatly with respect to new material (not applicable for first essay).
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Figure 5.1 A standard rubric with an experimental node included.

Response Essay Demonstrates:*A clear and nuanced articulation of the author's argument (20%)*

1 (0-9 points) The author's argument is either misunderstood or unstated in the essay.	2 (10-15 points) Author's argument is stated or quoted, but not explained or elaborated on fully.	3 (16-20 points) Essay shows a clear and nuanced understanding of the author's argument.
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Good use of textual examples to support your analysis (20%)

1 (0-9 points) Uses few, if any, textual examples; examples used may lack a clear purpose	2 (10-15 points) Uses good examples, may need some more elaboration. May be formatting errors.	3 (16-20 points) Excellent, purposeful examples that drive the analysis forward. Formatting is perfect.
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A deep analysis of rhetorical strategies used in the construction of arguments (15%)

1 (0-11 points) Essay is mostly summary with little analysis.	2 (12-20 points) Analyzes rhetorical strategies; may show some confusion about terms. Very little summary, and shows some understanding of how rhetoric makes arguments effective or not.	3 (21-25 points) Clear analysis of rhetorical strategies and how they make the argument effective/ineffective. Shows a deep understanding of rhetorical concepts.
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Tight, clear prose with few wasted words (10%)

1 (1-4 points) Sentences are overly wordy; more editing could allow the author to do more analysis.	2 (5-7 points) Writing is very good, may need to tighten some sentences through close editing	3 (8-10 points) Prose is clear and has few, if any, wasted words. Clear transitions between sentences and paragraphs.
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Thoughtful connections of reading to other material (15%)

1 (1-6 points) Does not connect the reading to anything else.	2 (7-11 points) Makes connections to other material, but points may need more elaboration.	3 (12-15 points) Clear and thoughtful connections of reading to other material. Essay shows that the writer understands concepts and connections between readings. (Not applicable to first essay)
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Clear use of embedded images to complicate and extend the analysis (20%)

1 (1-4 points) The essay does not make use of images.	2 (5-7 points) They author makes consistent use of images in the analysis; those images may be mostly illustrative or their connection to the analysis may be unclear	3 (8-10 points) Author makes excellent use of well-chosen images to complicate the analysis; the connection to the analysis is clear and purposeful
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Figure 5.2 A rubric with the experimental node customized to a particular student's goals.

For such a strategy to be effective, the evaluative downside of not experimenting should be roughly equal to the potential upside of using a single, proven strategy time and again. Another way of putting this might be that the weight assigned to the experimental node embodies how much the instructor values experimentation and trial and error for that particular assignment. The node being worth fifteen percent of the student's grade on that assignment, for instance, would enable students to stick with the method they have already "mastered" moving forward—the analysis of ethos in discursive texts—but they would not be able to make an "A" on any assignment that used such a strategy. In this way, the assessment node symbolizes the risk/reward of playful experimentation: by experimenting, the student maintains the possibility of achieving an "A" on the assignment. Sticking with what they know proves less effective for them as the course progresses. Remember that, in the previous section on assessment, I mentioned that Jody Shipka's "task-based framework" argues that experimentation and play should be valued and encouraged in the composition classroom, and the use of assessment nodes that activate as learners progress is one way of embodying that value and articulating it to students. In this way, the course's outcomes are "ludic" both in the sense that they encourage and are demonstrated through play.

Together, the processes discussed in this section—embodying the experimental and trial and error characteristics of play in classroom activities and assessment criteria—are effective means of achieving outcomes listed in the WPA OS. This includes outcomes classified as the "processes" of students developing "flexible strategies for generating, revising, editing, and proof-reading" their work

and the “rhetorical knowledge” of being able to “respond appropriately to different kinds of rhetorical situations.” Rhetorical response papers in general are a very common method for achieving the rhetorical knowledge plank of the WPA OS and, by providing multiple routes in classroom activities for students to achieve outcomes and by creating assessment nodes that activate and customize learning across the course of the semester, students are actively encouraged to develop a wide range of flexible rhetorical and compositional strategies to maintain success in the course. Remember, what makes an outcome “ludic” in the sense I am describing is not that it is somehow radical or wildly different from the general values and outcomes for first-year writing, but that it embodies and responds to the various symbolic forms and rhetorical expressions of play.

Finally, the approaches discussed here also call attention to some ways the WPA OS might be revised in light of digital and emerging composing technologies such as videogames. Gee’s “achievement principle” is the clearest example of how digital and emerging technologies make clear the importance of educational systems genuinely responding to the input of learners. As I have mentioned in previous chapters, many game designers note that one thing that makes games so pleasurable are the tight feedback systems they have, feedback systems that both alert players to their progress and customize to their level. Anyone who has taught first-year composition knows that the writing classroom tends to be filled with student writers from a range of backgrounds and experiences. Creating ludic outcomes that embody experimentation and trial and error through classroom practices, emphasized by the creation of multiple routes and customizable assessment nodes,

is one method for putting the diversity of student writers at the center of writing instruction. In other words, one way the WPA OS might be revised in light of digital and emerging composing technologies is to encourage student experimentation and teacher customization of learning, thereby embodying the trials and errors and tight feedback systems created by emerging media such as videogames.

Ludic Outcomes of Pleasure and Reciprocity

In previous chapters, I have discussed what I termed “subjective theories” of play, as well as the symbolizations of play made possible through computable media’s automation, such as feedback systems. While subjective theories emphasize the pleasures and intrinsic motivations that are enabled by immediate and tight feedback from games, new media’s automation helps emphasize ways that game-like structures provide external motivations to potentially deceptive ends. In this section, I define two potential outcomes for first-year writing that can be achieved through subjective theories of play and its symbolizations of pleasure and motivation.

The ludic outcomes for this section include that students will learn to effectively:

- Generate, assemble, and design materials created through play in order to create an argument.
- Analyze and explain the rhetorical strategies embodied by videogames that make claims, justify beliefs, and act persuasively.

First, one way to help students achieve the ludic outcomes listed above is by using the actual materials generated from play's feedback systems in student compositions. Such materials might include graphics, sounds, and movements created in the game from a player's input. As the outcomes listed suggest, these materials can factor into both new media compositions and more traditional print-based assignments like research essays. On one hand, students might use the actual still and moving images, sounds, and procedures that emerge from their input in the creation of new media and multimodal compositions (such as a strategy guide) that use those various modes. In this way, their play of games is a composing activity, literally generating the material that will be used in the composition of their argument. On the other hand, students can also play games as part of their research process for print-based and discursive texts. While this still means that play is productive—it helps them generate their analytical claims—the materials produced by play do not necessarily become a part of the final product, as students are instead analyzing discursively how games make rhetorical claims through the modes mentioned earlier.

For example, students can use screen-capture software⁹¹ to create strategy guides for games. Such an assignment requires that students know something about the videogame medium in general, which could of course include Bogost's theory of

⁹¹ The use of such screen-capture software is not new to conversations in computers and writing. Mary Lourdes Silva, for instance, discusses the use of screen-capture software as a method for providing audio-visual feedback to students on their writing projects. Comparing the screen-capture method of responding to student writing with more traditional approaches, Silva argues that the mode and medium of feedback has significant influence in the ways students perceive and participate in that feedback process (14). Such scholarship emerges from long-standing conversations about using various technologies to respond to student writing. However, research has yet to fully consider the possibilities of having students compose original arguments through screen-capture software.

procedural rhetoric. However, students also need to know something about the various rule structures of games and the possibility spaces they create. To compose strategy-guides-as-arguments using the materials generated from game's feedback systems, students need to spend time playing a game with emergent components that enable them to choose from and argue for one of the many different pathways possible to achieve a particular outcome within a game. By "emergent components," I am referring to Jesper Juul's description of emergence as the "primordial game structure where a game is specified as a small number of rules that combine and yield a large game tree, that is a large number of game variations that the players deal with by designing strategies" (*Half-Real* 73). In other words, the rule structures of emergent games make possible the multiple pathways and possibilities necessary for students to conceive their strategy guides as arguments. Students can spend time playing such a game and recording their play through screen-capture software, which creates the possibility for them to design their favorite strategies into an argument about the game and its play. In doing so, students have to learn the specialized vocabulary of the communities that play the particular game they choose, framing their own strategy design within the context of what other experts about that game argue.

One assessment strategy for evaluating such a composition, which was suggested by my earlier discussion of multimodal assessment, is to borrow evaluative concepts from game design and apply them to texts produced through the play of games. One good example of this might be John Ferrara's "five planes of player experience" model from *Playful Design*. Ferrara argues that players

experience games across five planes: 1) motivation, 2) meaningful choices, 3) balance, 4) usability, and 5) aesthetics (27-32). Well-designed games, he suggests, are attentive to player's experiences on each of these planes in both a short-term and long-term sense. For example, games provide an aesthetic experience for the player in terms of their sensory experience of graphics, sounds, and movements, all short-term experiences (happening in the real time of gameplay). A well-designed game, however, is also careful to provide a long-term experience of the game, meaning that the player contemplates the game's design, look, narrative, and feel long after the moment of play. Instructors could apply Ferrara's scale to the evaluation of screencast projects that use those games, asking students to balance short-term experience—meaning that the strategy guide shows the nuts and bolts of how to play the game as they watch—with the long term goal of reflection and consideration—meaning the aesthetic appeals and nuance of the strategy are designed to keep the viewer in contemplation of the strategy long after the initial use.

However, instructors might also invite students to participate in the creation of evaluative criteria for assignments such as gaming screencasts. This means that instructors do not have to position themselves as the final voice of authority on what counts as “good” or “effective” composing in new and emerging media, nor do they necessarily have to claim to know the best models from other disciplines. Working with students as they watch samples of screencast videos online, instructors can come up with lists of valued features for screencast videos that students will choose to highlight in their final products. In this way, students help

create the “rule structures” and “possibility spaces” of their own composing experience by creating the constraints they work within and the obstacles they must overcome to succeed on the assignment. This is one gaming practice that is often cited as a method for making games pleasurable. Jane McGonigal, for instance, refers to such rules as “unnecessary obstacles,” referring to the idea that games are sometimes more pleasurable than real life *because* they are less efficient and more difficult:

Let’s take golf to start. As a golfer, you have a clear goal: to get a ball into a series of very small holes, with fewer tries than anyone else. If you weren’t playing a game, you’d achieve this goal the most efficient way possible: you’d walk right up to each hole and drop the ball in with your hand. What makes golf a game is that you willingly agree to stand really far away from each hole and swing the ball with a club. Golf is engaging exactly because you, with all the other players, have agreed to make the work more challenging than it has any reasonable right to be. (*Reality is Broken* 22-23)

By inviting students to participate in assessment criteria, the outcomes of the assignment become ludic in two ways: 1) they embody the “unnecessary obstacles” that make games difficult and pleasurable, and 2) they become reciprocal feedback systems that respond to and are shaped the input of student. This is not to say that the assignments are completely student-centered—outcomes, and even the requirement to take such a course, are still dictated by factors beyond a student’s

control—but assessment practices can genuinely invite and respond to student input.

These comments on pleasure and motivation, as well as “ludic outcomes” more generally, do raise a point of warning for game-based courses and outcomes. Specifically, I am referring to the popularity of “gamification.” As I mentioned in chapter four, gamification is one way the language of play can be deceptive or even exploitative, drawing on the feedback and pleasures of games to create non-reciprocal systems that are actually intended to further the agenda of a corporate or political entity, such as the “Decision Points Game” at the George W. Bush Presidential Library. In “Exploitationware,” Ian Bogost argues that gamification is a “dysfunctional perversion of relationships” fostered by the two-way interactions of games, where the “gamified” structure presents the appearance of play that is really a masked version of authority and manipulation (“Exploitationware” 146). I believe that rhetoric and composition classrooms should resist labeling their classes as “gamified” and not pursue the gamification⁹² of classes in general for two reasons. First, instructors would do well to not use gamification as a key term or concept, as it might be seen as a marker in game design circles of knowing little about games or play. Second, if the field’s only interest in games is going to be extrinsic rewards like badges and points, then I do not believe writing instruction is taking anything worthwhile from games.

⁹² In the recent edited collection, *Rhetoric/Play/Composition*, Ian Bogost calls on rhetoric and composition scholars to use the term “exploitationware” in place in gamification: “For those who lament the rise of gamification, the most important thing you can do is to stop saying gamification entirely. Reinvest that energy partly into arguments against the scourge of exploitationware, but mostly into your own approaches to the use of games in different contexts” (147).

The term “gamification” has a short, yet pervasive, history. In its most common usage, as I mention in chapter four, it refers to the use of games and game-like structures in non-game spaces. Most typically, this takes the form of borrowing the positive and negative reinforcements embedded in games through things like points, badges, and trophies to reward “players” for making good decisions and punish them for making bad ones. Some have argued, including the presenters of CCC 2013 session, “Gamification 101: Play to Learn” (Mitchum, Rodrigo, Sierra, and Hagood⁹³), that game structures such as points, rules, and mechanics can externalize the internal motivations and engagement of play, fostering more active, engaged learning. This argument relies heavily on the ludic rhetorics of the self that theorize play as pleasurable and self-motivating. The points, trophies, and rewards of a gamified structure are externalizations of internal motivations and are intended as motivational goals and incentives. This represents one way that some gaming studies researchers have recently embraced gamification.

John Ferrara, UX designer and author of *Playful Design: Creating Game Experiences in Everyday Interfaces*, writes, “Around 2009, something really bad happened: Gamification” (“Games for Persuasion” 291). He also makes a very compelling case for why gamification misses the most interesting parts of games. I quote from a recent article at length because Ferrara touches on what I think are the most salient points about why rhetoric and composition should reject the term:

It is important to realize that this term has no formal definition. It has been applied broadly as to include everything from Farmville to

⁹³ Grace Hagood presented a counterpoint to the gamification panel and discussed many of the objections to the term I have mentioned here.

LinkedIn's profile completeness bar. Gamification is not a useful term because it cannot make meaningful distinctions between meaningfully dissimilar things. Depending upon who is saying it, "gamification" may refer to something that I very much support or something that I very much reject. Its most common use, however, it usually serves to institutionalize a big lie: that games can be strip-mined for their "useful" elements, disregarding the rest of what makes a game a game. Those useful elements are typically some form of intrinsic reward—points, leaderboards, badges, and such. The lie goes on to say that these elements can be tacked onto things that are not games by any stretch of the imagination, and as a result, you should expect people to react to the extracted elements the same way they react to games. This is great news, because you do not have to worry about doing any actual game design. I argue that this approach of taking game-like extrinsic rewards onto non-game experiences exposes a disdain for games, because it refuses to entertain the idea that "Games are themselves valuable experiences." Gamification implies an impoverished, cynical, and exploitative view of games as inherently frivolous and mostly useless. Gamification fails to recognize that games are much more than rewards. ("Games for Persuasion" 291)

In short, “gamification”⁹⁴ is too broad of a term to be useful and, in its most specific usage, refers only to the least interesting and most reductive sense of games: motivation-through-reward. In my mind, the appeal of gamification for writing studies is clear and understandable: the issue of how to get students engaged in their writing has always been an important question for the field, so it makes sense that instructors would want to draw on the powerful engagement games create. However, if getting students engaged is as simple as creating points and badges, then why on earth have we been having so much trouble with engagement all these years? It is my contention that points and badges have little to do with what makes games interesting and engaging anyway. As I mentioned in the above conversation about assessment, the pleasure games create has much more to do with choosing to take on obstacles that are both challenging and unnecessary. In this way, games provide means for acting creatively and strategically. Moreover, what well-designed feedback systems rely on most is reciprocity, meaning that instructors should consider not only how game-like elements motivate players but how they might also invite input and provide genuine feedback to students. Saying that a classroom is “like a game” because it uses points, badges, and achievement trophies is akin to saying a game is “like a classroom” because it uses chalkboards, podiums, and uncomfortable chairs.

Together, the processes discussed in this section—using game’s feedback systems to create the material of arguments, borrowing concepts from game design

⁹⁴ For an explanation of the many uses to which gamification is currently being put, see Gabe Zichermann’s TED Talk, where he defines gamification as the use of “game thinking and game mechanics to engage audiences and solve problems.”

for assessment, and inviting students to create the “unnecessary obstacles” between them and their learning objectives—are effective means of achieving outcomes listed in the WPA OS. This includes outcomes such as in the “Critical Thinking, Reading, and Writing” plank that asks students to understand a “writing assignment as a series of tasks, including finding, evaluating, analyzing, and synthesizing appropriate primary and secondary sources.” Furthermore, by locating this work in an electronic environment, such an assignment also meets many of the action steps in the “Composing in Electronic Environments Plank.” Through screen-capture assignments, students can engage play as a series of tasks that produce the primary and secondary materials needed to write. Furthermore, by participation in assessment criteria, students engage the “Processes” plank’s goal for them to “understand the collaborative and social aspects of writing processes.”

Finally, the approaches discussed here also call attention to some ways the WPA OS might be revised in light of digital and emerging composing technologies such as videogames. Specifically, the “Composing in Electronic Environments” plank says students should, “understand and exploit the differences in rhetorical strategies and in the affordances available for both print and electronic composing processes and texts.” This outcome is not itself a problem, but might use gaming concepts and practices to provide additional support and nuance. This outcome assumes that the “rhetorical strategies and affordances available” are a product of the technologies students write in and through. This is, of course, partially true, as the technology of a video camera affords strategies different from the technology of a pen. However, it might be wise for the WPA OS to have an additional statement

emphasizing the actions and decisions of composers as *creating* available rhetorical strategies and affordances, or what I would call the “possibility spaces” of the composing medium. Game designers have often noted that, though they design games that intend to be played a certain way, gamers inevitably create new things to do in the game that the designers never imagined.⁹⁵ A ludic outcome in the WPA OS might highlight the potential for writers to do things with a composing medium that it does not typically afford, but that “unleashed creativity” makes possible through writing spaces.

Ludic Outcomes of Hybridity and Distributed Knowledge

In previous chapters, I have discussed what I termed “ambiguous theories” of play that emphasize the transformation of language through its hybrid and dialogic forms. Further, as I claimed in chapter four, theories of emergence show the mixing of knowledges distributed through different forms creates the possibility of new insight. Research and assessment practices in first-year writing can embody these forms of play through the use of electronic tools to collaborate on research and the distribution of evaluative weights across many modes and media. In this section, I define two potential outcomes for first-year writing that embody and respond to play’s hybridity:

The ludic outcomes for this section include that students will learn to effectively:

⁹⁵ In *Developing Online Games*, Jessica Mulligan and Bridgette Patrovsky write, “It isn’t your game. It’s the player’s game. Developers spend years focused on making a game. If they’re not careful, this will breed certain assumptions, such as the world they created will remain their world and the payers will play the game the way the creators want it played. This will not happen. Players have their own motivations and objectives” (217).

- Recognize and explain the rhetorical strategies used in their own arguments across a variety of modes and media
- Collaborate with classmates doing research to create fresh insights in their own work and others'

First, one way to help students achieve the ludic outcomes listed above is by having them compose arguments that distribute claims across a variety of modes and media, accompanied by a discursive text that reflects awareness of their rhetorical decisions. For example, students can create arguments through the use of infographics, which are graphical representations of information, knowledge, or arguments that can utilize a wide variety of discursive and non-discursive forms, such as text, image, color, and graphs and charts. Many online resources for infographics exist, such as sample texts, programs designed to help students build infographics from templates, and copyright free websites for graphics, images, moving pictures, and sounds. Through their own research and thinking, students make claims and advance arguments in the form of an infographic in place of a more traditional research essay, using the rhetorical affordances of non-discursive modes to make their claims. Like Derek Mueller's piece—discussed in chapter four—on Composition's "long tail," the various modes in an infographic might also provide different ways of "seeing" the student's argument.

In terms of assessment, a written reflection can—and likely should—also be a staple of such an assignment, as reflection provides a space for students to both demonstrate awareness of their choices and to potentially explain non-discursive moves their instructors might not initially recognize. This is one obvious way that

print-based rubrics can be used in the evaluation of new media and multimodal work, as the discursive forms they are designed for can still factor into assessment practices. However, although written reflections can be an effective assessment method for new media and multimodal work, instructors should be careful not to use them to circumvent the meaning making potential of non-discursive symbols such as image, sound, movement, and play. In other words, putting too much evaluative weight and emphasis on the reflection may signal to students that print is the “real” writing, while something like an infographic only has value to the degree that it is explained discursively. While a broad rhetorical approach to new media compositions, such as the one discussed in the previous section on assessment, does not provide specific guidance on assessing new media compositions, what it does emphasize is how the evaluative weight for such work should be distributed across all the modes and media being marshaled to make an argument. Whether instructors create their own criteria for assessing non-discursive modes, borrow them from other disciplines, “translate” print-based rubrics, or enable students to develop the assessment criteria, it is my position that instructors cannot claim to be fully supporting new media writing as long as their evaluative weights fall completely—or even mostly—on discursive or print-based forms.

Second, electronic composing environments provide opportunities for students to strategically collaborate on research in order to create fresh insights for each other’s work. Wikis, which I discussed in chapter four as embodying forms of play such as trial and error and distributed knowledge, provide an illustration of this point. For example, instructors can create a wiki page specifically for particular

first-year writing courses, having students practice such skills as composing bibliographic citations for resources and writing annotations for key articles, books, and chapters. As students post their annotations and citations on the course wiki, they can “tag” their individual posts using a variety of keywords developed in class. For “Gaming and the Arguments of Play,” for instance, students might use rhetorical concepts such as “identification” or “design,” as well as gaming concepts like “emergence” and “magic circle.” Such a practice provides both a mechanism for and embodies the resource of collaboration on a large scale. As Kenneth Bruffee writes, “To think well as individuals, we must learn to think well collectively—that is, we must learn to converse well” (“Collaborative Learning” 640), and the tagging features on wikis provide a mechanism that enables students to learn how to converse well about their research. Since each student contributes only a handful of citations and sources to the wiki, the researched knowledge of the class is distributed throughout the wiki and then coalesces into a variety of shapes through the use of tags. Such an approach speaks directly to values of bottom-up generation the WPA OS embodies. In the introduction to *The WPA Outcomes Statement: A Decade Later*, the authors claim the WPA OS fosters:

the value of a bottom-up, generative approach that centers on collaboration requiring the involvement of (and investment by) a large group of stakeholders, ranging from program directors to university librarians, from full-time lecturers and part-time adjunct faculty to graduate teaching assistants. (xiii)

The WPA OS itself stands as evidence for the richness of collaboration as a resource, as the involvement of a “large group of stakeholders” in the researching and writing of a text can add considerable complexity, flexibility, and rhetorical sensitivity to the final document. Students using the possibility spaces of electronic environments such as wikis to generate, organize, and collaborate on research is an effective means of fostering both purposeful and playful collaboration. In other words, the students collaborate for specific purposes—meeting outcomes and enriching their research—through a symbolic form of play.

Such a composing practice further creates at least a limited possibility to emphasize the benefits of the “voluntary participation” that helps make games pleasurable. McGonigal lists voluntary participation as one of the four defining features of games, claiming “the freedom to enter or leave a game at will ensures that intentionally stressful and challenging work is experienced as *safe* and *pleasurable* activity” (21). While I have previously mentioned in chapter two my skepticism that the “safety” of learning to play a game can be transferred to writing, collaboration and assessment provide that claim a slightly different shade. Electronic environments like wikis provide a site where students can voluntarily participate to varying degrees. Students are required to conduct their own research, contributing citations, annotations, and tags to the collective resource. In this way, students have contributed to the collaborate source in one way, but then can enter and leave that source to inform their own writing to whatever degree they choose. In this way, their participation in the wiki is “relatively safe” since they are not subject to having their grade penalized if the collaborative process does not work

well for them. Rather than assessing students on if they collaborate as required by the assignment, students can decide if and how collaboration might enrich their work with mitigated consequences however they choose.

Together, the processes discussed in this section—involving the distribution of language and knowledge through play’s hybrid forms—are effective means of achieving outcomes listed in the WPA OS such as in the “Critical Thinking, Reading, and Writing” plank that says students should “integrate their own ideas with those of others,” and in the “Processes” plank that says students should be asked “to apply the technologies commonly used to research and communicate within their fields.” Through the use of tagging their own work and calling up the work classmates have done, the possibility is created for students to make connections between their work and other students as they are thinking about how to incorporate research into their own writing. Furthermore, thinking about how arguments, composed through hybrid forms such as infographics and wikis, work through a variety of modes and media might provide one means for preparing students to learn the variety of ways research is used and communicated in their own areas of study.

Finally, the approaches discussed here also call attention to some ways the WPA OS might be revised in light of digital and emerging composing technologies such as videogames. While the WPA-OS does mention collaboration, the current version only mentions collaboration twice. Both references appear in the “Processes” plank: Students should “understand the collaborative and social aspects of writing processes” and “review work-in-progress in collaborative peer groups for purposes other than editing.” While this is a worthy goal of a writing classroom, the

verb “understand” says nothing about the actual activities and practices of collaborative authorship, and the adjective form only claims to define one “aspect” of writing. One benefit of using compositional mediums such as wikis is that they create the possibility for the different kinds of skills, practices, and technical “know-hows” students from a diverse range of backgrounds bring to any particular classroom to be utilized as a resource. The WPA OS might embody the possibilities of such emergent technologies by rendering “collaborate” in the verb form: “instructors should enable students to potentially collaborate in ways that possibly complicate, extend, and enrich their own writing and the writing of their classmates,” for example.

Conclusion: Why Videogames Become Us

In this dissertation, I have made four main points about play. They are as follows.

First, play is an important part of how people invent, create, and experience textual products. This is reflected not only by the wide variety of multimodal and new media texts people compose, but also by the various theories of play that currently exist in the field of rhetoric and composition.

Second, play—like words and images—is a resource used by people to symbolize and express ideas, to communicate with one another, and to persuade others of the veracity of their beliefs. Such symbolic play is primarily non-discursive, and it is apparent in a variety of hybrid and distributed forms.

Third, while not specific to digital contexts, play is emphasized and enabled by the composing possibilities of computerized media. Digital new media allow

play's symbolic forms to be endlessly repeated, customized, and distributed throughout a wide variety of electronic environments.

Finally, in this chapter I have argued that play might intervene in the ongoing debate about the outcomes for first-year composition, specifically as the WPA considers revising its Outcomes Statement in light of digital and emerging composing technologies. I argued that “ludic outcomes,” those outcomes for first-year writing that both embody and can be achieved through play's various symbolic forms, might offer some considerations for that ongoing discussion through a consideration of composition classes that utilize videogames—the most apt medium for symbolizing play—and their processes as part of writing pedagogy.

To make this case, I provided some best practices for assessing if and how well students and teachers meet ludic outcomes through classroom activities, as well as writing processes and products. These best practices include several trends in new media and multimodal assessment more broadly: 1) the adaptation on print-based assessment rubrics for new media assignments, 2) the use of critical reflection to accompany non-traditional student compositions, 3) the borrowing of concepts from other disciplines, and 4) the reinvigoration of traditional rhetorical concepts through electronic composing. To this list, I also added some best practices from my own experiences with teaching game-base composition courses, such as: 1) providing variable “learning modules” as class activities to demonstrate learning outcomes through multiple routes, 2) creating “assessment nodes” that customize the assessment of student writing to individual students, 3) inviting students to help create the “possibility spaces” of their own composing situations, 4) distributing

evaluative weights across many different modes and media to highlight the emergent meanings from their play, and 5) creating some “as-voluntary-as-possible” opportunities for students to purposefully collaborate with one another to provide insights into each others’ writing. These assessment practices for meeting ludic outcomes, I contend, show how such outcomes can both demonstrate student learning of the core values in the WPA OS and help instructors and researchers imagine ways to revise the outcomes in light of digital and emerging composing technologies.

In the concluding essay of *The WPA Outcomes Statement: A Decade Later*, titled “Assessing the Impact of the Outcomes Statement,” Emily Isaacs and Melinda Knight note that the WPA OS “has not been broadly adopted” by many universities and that “it appears that little of our discipline’s values are shared” (300-301). Moreover, they find that the most recently added section, “Composing in Electronic Environments,” “has had virtually no impact at all” (301). While the influence of the Outcomes Statement—much less its specific sections—is difficult to know unless specifically mentioned by first-year writing programs, the idea that the last attempt to update the WPA OS has had so little impact may suggest that revision did not go nearly far enough in articulating the field’s values concerning twenty-first century composing technologies.

While ludic outcomes are not specific to videogames, in this chapter I have considered videogame-based pedagogy because videogames are the most apt medium for expressing play’s various symbolic forms. Moreover, I believe the study of and teaching with games may prove useful for helping the field articulate some of

its core values about composing in general as the WPA continues its working on keeping the field's Outcomes Statement alive. At the end of *Persuasive Games*, Ian Bogost muses:

Despite the computers that host them, despite the futuristic and mechanical fictional worlds they often render, videogames are not expressions of the machine. They are expressions of being human. And the logics that drive our games make claims about who we are, how our world functions, and what we want it to become. (340)

The possibilities any composing medium creates for people to express their own humanity is a statement of if, and to what degree, it merits consideration for those who care about rhetoric and writing. To use videogames in the teaching of first-year writing—especially as a means to demonstrate learning of the field's core values—is to express the belief that composing is nearly always challenging and sometimes intensely pleasurable. It is sometimes safe, but always potentially dangerous because its pervasiveness gives it power to shape the ways we think, act, and believe. Composing of and through play, symbolized through the various forms I have described in this project, both expresses the self and connects individuals with the world around them, and I suggest that the field take a good hard look at gaming for revisions to the WPA OS, which is less a statement of how the field functions than a statement of what it might become.

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Experience

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ABSTRACT

LUDIC RHETORICS AND THE LANGUAGE OF PLAY

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My dissertation proposes a rhetorical theory of how human play is symbolized in the possibility spaces created by computable media. I examine existing concepts of play in both rhetorical and composition theory and put them in conversation with play theory such as Brian Sutton-Smith's *The Ambiguity of Play* and Jan Huizinga's classic, *Homo Ludens*. I propose that rhetorical theory treat play as a resource used by humans symbolically to express ideas, shape beliefs, and persuade audiences in computerized media such as videogames, virtual environments, and wikis.

In my first chapter, I argue that using Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman's definition of play as "free movement within a more rigid structure" (*Rules of Play* 304) allows rhetoric and composition scholars to visualize play as composing through exploration, experimentation, and user experience. I also provide an overview of the project.

In my second chapter, I analyze the articles in a 2008 special issue of *Computers and Composition* about videogames. Drawing from Brian Sutton-Smith's work in *The*

Ambiguity of Play, I argue that explicit uses of the word *play* in the emerging area of gaming studies embody three theories of play in rhetoric and composition: theories of 1) experimentation, 2) subjectivity, and 3) ambiguity.

In my third chapter, I revisit Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*. Drawing from the work of archival scholar William Otterspeer, I argue that Huizinga's work has been largely misunderstood in rhetoric and composition. Further, I claim that by understanding Huizinga's methodology and theory of language, scholars can arrive at a new reading of *Homo Ludens*, one that illustrates Huizinga's theory of symbolic play.

In my fourth chapter, I propose a theory of the language of play, which is a theory of how human play takes on symbolic forms that express rhetorical meaning in the possibility spaces created by computable media.

In my final chapter, I bring the language of play to bear on the WPA OS and argue that play's symbolic forms can help the field both articulate and realize the core values articulated in the Outcomes Statement.