Developing a Ludic Identity in Writing: Play as a Means of Reflection

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Writing is commonly taught through a process-based approach which opens up possibilities for productive, interdisciplinary work that takes a similar approach. Play and games are one such approach and can improve how we approach the teaching of writing. Through active reflection, the similarities between writing and playing games are shown through their awareness of and interaction with audience; their embodied forms of praxis; and their development of complex, situated ecologies. Fostering the lusory attitude found in play as a basis for problem-solving in writing is one way to help students reflect on their own identity, agency, and argument.

INTRODUCTION

Play and writing are both conceived of as processes and, because of this, each is centered on concerns of iteration, audience, and revision. Ever since Donald Murray's 1972 essay called for educators to "Teach Writing as a Process not a Product," the field of rhetoric and composition has moved away from models that focused solely on the end product of writing. In its place are pedagogies focused on pre-writing, drafting, and revising as equally important to the final product a writer produces. Murray's essay is so influential, it has become the *de facto* approach to teaching writing in higher education. While viewing writing as a process allows for student learning to become the central focus of the classroom as opposed to student assessment or grades, it also opens up new possibilities for finding productive crossover between writing and other disciplines that value and teach knowledge formulation through a process-based approach.

There is tremendous potential to this approach as shown in scholarship examining the overlap between design studies and writing (Leverenz, 2014) and machine learning and writing (Bamakan, Nurgaliev, and Qu, 2019). Leverenz (2014) argues that writing as a form of problem-solving may have fallen out of favor in rhetoric and composition, but design thinking can help address the flaws, in particular the relative simplicity of the problems posed, to such an approach. She writes, "Learning how to work on hard problems in a creative way is a skill that can transfer to future writing situations if students are made conscious of and given opportunities to reflect on what they're doing" (p. 6). Her ultimate solution to the "wicked" problem of teaching writing is to position production "as a recursive process of defining problems and proposing divergent solutions could lead to more engagement" (p. 7). For Leverenz and other scholars who seek to find interdisciplinary solutions to demystifying the process of writing, divergent thinking and abductive reasoning--where the subject addresses the problem through formulating solutions rather than through examining already existing approaches--are the keys. While

Leverenz offers a few practical solutions to get students into the proper state of mind for divergent solutions and abductive reasoning such as providing appropriate restraints via a Pecha Kucha type presentation or rapid prototyping via quickly produced drafts free of assessment, I would like to add another: playing games.

I will demonstrate the productive similarities between writing and playing across three dimensions. First, they are both processes that rely on iteration, revision, and audience-based reasoning. Second, in the same way that writing represents praxis (Yagelski, 2012), so too does play rely on transtemporal approaches that engage the subject in terms of past experiences, present action, and future outcomes. Third, both represent complex, situated ecologies where the writer/player must define contexts, goals, and constraints in order to succeed. Taken together, these three points demonstrate that playing games in a reflective manner can lead to a more thorough understanding of writing through an understanding of the processes and forces that bring writing into existence and open new possibilities for using play to transform the ways we interact with the world.

Games and the magic circles they inscribe allow for play to take form (Huizinga, 1978). Magic circles are the imaginary and literal boundaries of a game such as the "out of bounds" areas in a game of Tag, the painted chalk lines of a football field, or the restriction for most players to not use hands in a soccer game. Within the context of this magic circle, play allows subjects to adopt new identities which can then be used to formulate new ways of thinking about problem-solving. In her analysis of the digital game industry and their marketing towards women, Chess (2017) adapts the second-wave feminist slogan "the personal is political" for our current times. She argues that in what some scholars (Zimmerman, 2013) have deemed the "ludic century," the playful is also political. Chess writes, "the playful is political because the playful is about the bending of boundaries, the remapping of identity, and the rethinking of traditional roles" (p. 176). Play is reconfigured as a potentially subversive and resistant stance to dominant ideologies. Play, with its trivial autotelic stakes, resists capitalist notions of efficiency and structured leisure time, the rigidity of identity, and centralized forms of production.

The magic circle and the play it thereby affords is dependent on the formation of both an identity--the ludic identity--as well as a specific state of mind that is often deemed "the lusory attitude" (Suits, 1978). Suits defines the lusory attitude as "the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles" (p. 54). The lusory attitude then is what is needed to get students thinking divergently and using abductive reasoning. David Myers (2017) builds off of Suits's definition and argues that "the lusory attitude is a mode of cognition, a way of thinking about and interpreting games and gameplay: a way of being in the world" (p. 46). For Myers, lusory attitude is similar to the "suspension of disbelief" that readers partake in when reading fiction, but the lusory attitude is a more radical mindset because it requires greater empathy and "a more active assertion of belief in the game's particular meanings and values" (p. 60). This is similar to Gee's (2007) claim that video games embody good learning practices because the game always makes the player believe they are capable of accomplishing the goals set out before them. When a player steps into a magic circle and adopts a lusory attitude, they must do so with the genuine belief that they have the potential to win or succeed at the game.

While always adopted in the act of playing, the lusory attitude need not be dependent on the playing of a game. If we can position the act of writing as taking place in its own magic circle, then we can encourage students to see the writing process as dependent on the active assertion that they can accomplish the tasks they have set for themselves. Brendan Keogh (2018) draws on the power of the lusory attitude and gameplay to force the player to "actively make belief" (p. 38) and, in doing so, bridge the gap between the virtual world and the actual world. Through his analysis of how casual mobile games are experienced, Keogh argues that we are always constructing belief--adopting a lusory attitude--when we enact with virtual or cyber worlds. What this demonstrates is that the utility of the lusory attitude is applicable beyond games. Students do not need to "play" a paper, but the adoption of a lusory attitude allows for reflection about identity, purpose, and expression to come to the forefront. In turn, this enables composers to draw on the power of divergent thinking and abductive reasoning to approach the production of their texts. What this looks like in the classroom is students identifying as many solutions as possible and staying much longer in an exploratory phase where they work backwards from solutions

to see how they address problems. Instead of having a singular solution in mind and working toward it, students stay in a state of productive uncertainty and genuinely build toward a fuller understanding of their and their topic's rhetorical situation. In this way, students formulate an argument about what they want to know or want to discover instead of arguing from what they already believe to be true. In the next section, I expand on this bridging of actual and virtual through the incorporation of time into the processes of writing and play.

PLAY AND WRITING AS PRAXIS

Play and writing are processes that reach across time and memory. Because of this, using play and writing as forms of reflection allow composers to gain a better understanding of who they were, who they are, and who they want to be. In responding to the question of why writing seems to have had so little a transformative effect on students even when writing is becoming increasingly common, Robert Yagelski (2012) argues that "we simply don't teach writing in ways that give students access to its transformative power; we don't allow them to experience writing as a way of making sense of themselves and the world around them" (p. 189). Yagelski's solution to the problem of students not viewing writing as transformative is to reposition writing not as a rote procedure but rather as a form of praxis. He draws on the work of critical pedagogist Paulo Freire to explain how "language and literacy are integral to--indeed, essential to--that process of action and reflection" (p. 190). For Freire (2000), we are always "in the process of becoming" fully human, which is a condition where the oppressed reject their oppression and oppressors without adopting the harmful hierarchies, hegemonies, and ideologies that lead to subjugation and oppression in the first place.

In many ways, the work of Freire and Yagelski is akin to the work done by the lusory attitude. In each, the focus is on the active construction of belief, meaning, and identity. In positioning writing as praxis, Yagelski (2012) extends the act of writing beyond the present moment. He argues, "Writing somehow brings together past, present, and future. Not the text we produce as a result of writing, but the act of writing in the moment. When we write, no matter what we are writing about, we call on the past and anticipate the future even as we inhabit the present; at the same time, we engage in an act that is both deeply intellectual and overtly physical" (p. 192). Play connects the world of the mind with that of the body in the same way writing does.

Play too is a form of praxis and a way of existing in the world (Fink, 2016). Scholars such as Rachel Shields (2015) have argued that an ontological understanding of play has the potential to underscore the transformative power of play. For Shields, the experience of play is often beyond language, but understanding play as a way of being can force us to adapt language practices in an attempt to bring forth the symbolization of these feelings. Play then literally becomes akin to the connective power of writing. As Yagelski (2012) states, "Writing is inherently an act of connection. What emerges as we write in the moment is a multifaceted sense of self that is connected, through language, to other selves and to the world we share" (p. 193). Of course, the process of bringing experience into language is itself an act of translation, one that does not always go as smoothly as planned. However, just because some experiences or emotions or incapable of being captured in written discourse, does not mean they are themselves ineffable. Shields (2015) ultimately argues that play as a force allows us to consider alternatives to dominant hegemonies and interpolated ideologies. Play, then, becomes a different way of expressing oneself and understanding the world around us.

It may be argued that play is a simple, trivial act that cannot claim the importance of the written word. However, play is not only a way of experiencing and existing in the world, but also an act of production. Joshua Daniel-Wariya (2016) argues that play is a frequent feature of new media related to computation's ability to make content that is endlessly repeatable, customizable, interactive, and radically variable. He argues that play as a form of production functions as a non-discursive language. Gee (2007) argues for play as a form of production because it forces players to engage with the "design grammar" of a particular semiotic domain. Through this engagement and production, players interact with various systems of belief and values. Huizinga, (1978), in examining the play-forms of art, connects play to production and

performance. For Huizinga, culture is derived from play, and art, as the paragon of culture, is dependent on its ability to be played or performed for an audience in order to have any affect. We enact our identities--performativity in post-modern thought--through performance which always has an element of play to it, even if deadly serious play. Viewing both writing and play as praxis, as events that span temporal scales and allow us to draw on past experiences, the present situation, and future possibilities, underscores the importance of memory and identity to both play and writing. Positioning them both as praxis means that they are actions or events instead of products, which allows for a rich sense of experience to form a basis for active and thorough reflection.

MODELS, SYSTEMS, AND TEXTS

Play and writing both represent complex, situated ecologies where the writer or player must define contexts, goals, and constraints in order to succeed. Writing and play both represent embodied acts that force subjects to become cognizant of how their own experiences shape their current perspective. In his revitalization of the canons of rhetoric for our age of new media, Brooke (2009) argues for memory in the digital age to be a function of persistence. He defines persistence as, "the practice of retaining particular ideas, keywords, or concepts across multiple texts, be they websites, journal articles, or chapters of the same book" (p. 157). Each individual student comes to the classroom with their own repertoire of these ideas, keywords, and concepts.

What the idea of embodiment has brought to writing studies is that the writer never comes to the act of writing as *tabula rasa*, rather the writer brings their own attitudes, experiences, and beliefs to the act of writing. In discussing both the act of writing and the act of teaching writing, Melanie Kill (2006) argues that "the relational nature of identity, which places individuals in the situation of depending on others to serve both as reference points and sources of validation for their presentations of self" requires students to think in terms of relations or systems (p. 232). The ability for rhetorical memory to weave threads across these disparate factors gives credence to the fact the memory is more than just an analogy for digital storage. Each individual writer inhabits a unique body and life experience, meaning that each writer must individually identify what constraints, contexts, and goals exist in their literate acts. The task of teaching such an individualized subject would seem nearly impossible. Fortunately, we have a number of phrases and terminal screens we use to simplify this process. These include genre, the rhetorical situation, and heuristics and hermeneutics. In light of these terms, reading and writing can be thought of as the production and consumption of texts as a system of rule-bound structures, genres, and contexts that can be acknowledged, adhered to, or defied This is remarkably similar to how free play operates within the context of games, and I would like to draw out how games and play give players a greater understanding of systems and situated ecologies which can in turn be brought back to writing studies to aid writers.

In Eric Zimmerman's (2003) "Manifesto for the Ludic Century," he identifies systems thinking as a key literacy for the 21st century. As our society becomes increasingly digitized and networked, where even your kitchen sink is connected to the internet, the ability to think about complex interactions in terms of systems will be essential. Zimmerman argues, "The ways that we work and communicate, research and learn, socialize and romance, conduct our finances and communicate with our governments, are all intimately intertwined with complex systems of information...While every poem or every song is certainly a system, games are dynamic systems in a much more literal sense" (n.p.) Digital games rely on computation and rule sets to create the illusion of virtual space. Because digital games are entirely rule-bound--you can't use your hands in a soccer game like *Fifa 20*, you must adhere to the possibilities and rules the game affords--their rigidity effectively mirrors the processes in which a composer begins the act of writing. The writer must use intelligible language, follow a set syntax, obey or purposefully subvert genre conventions, and design the document in a way that allows for usability. There then exists productive crossover in how a writer can think strategically about how they want a reader to experience a text and how videogames promote thinking on a systemic level.

Games work best when they balance the line between predictability and randomness. In this way, they seek to constantly create the flow state between boredom--predictability--and anxiety--randomness.

DeVane, Durga, and Squire (2010) see games as the best way for students to engage in systems-oriented reasoning, essentially making meaning from the vast amount of information games display. Each game operates according to a system's set of rules or a model's simulation of the world brought into effect through rules. DeVane et al. (2010) argue that when approached with a critical mindset "players learn to infer the properties of its underlying relational model (or, put otherwise, its ideological world). As educators, we design experiences so that players learn to make inferences about those models and negotiate their meanings within real-world social and cultural systems" (p. 4). Games are always models and thus represent approximations of how an individual or team of designers believes the world works, should work, or could work. In much the same way, in the act of writing, we attempt to make sense of the chaos of the world in a way where our internal perceptions can become externalized. This is the work of memory and identity. In formulating a theory of identity to assist composition scholars in bridging theory and pedagogy, Sánchez (2017) argues that identity describes "the relationship between the inside and the outside of writing at the moment of a text's creation--that is, during an individual act of writing" (p. 9). Models, simulations, and texts all seek to operate as a way of connecting the writer's experience with the social world. Digital games have been demonstrated as a particularly powerful way of engaging learners and composers in critical reflection on how the connection between inside and outside operates.

CONCLUSION

When we write, we separate our thoughts from our thinking by turning thoughts into printed words or symbols. While this can be alienating, isolating, and frustrating, when done well in a supportive environment it also allows for people to share their experiences, freely express themselves, and forge a platform for reflection. Through the conscious recollection of and discussion of the differences between the thoughts the writer had and the writing they produced, writing becomes not simply a way of expressing one's thoughts, but an entirely new way of thinking. Writing and reflection can be seen as toys that the agile mind can adapt and transform to meet the needs of various situations. A creative, inventive process that is afforded by the act of writing.

There is a large, productive common ground shared by both play and writing. I have demonstrated three areas in which there is productive overlap between the two. These areas are their reliance on iteration, process, and audience; their positioning as praxis and transtemporal forms of thinking; and their representation of complex, situated ecologies.

Working in writing classrooms to help writers develop a lusory attitude about their process provides a low-stakes, high-gain situation. Using games and play as part of the curriculum for writing has the potential to reinvigorate contemporary thinking on memory, identity, and reflection. All of these allow for students to express themselves, reflect on their means and process of expression, and think through complex issues.

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