Reconstructing the Concept of Academic Motivation: A Gaming Symposium as an Academic Site for Critical Inquiry

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Abstract: In this article, we show how discussions of creating high-impact learning experiences led to the Undergraduate Videogame Symposium, a public venue where students from all disciplines presented their disciplinary learning to a non-disciplinary audience. After providing an introduction to the learning principles emphasized by the Interdisciplinary Writing Program (IWP), the sponsor of the symposium, we use research studies on critical literacy, game theory, and digital media literacy, and work on self-motivation to provide the foundations for our decision to choose gaming as the topic for the symposium. We then provide primary research data collected through interviews and participant observations to show that an undergraduate video game symposium draws on student personal and academic interests, and allows students to research a wide range of topics connected to such fields as education, anthropology, gender studies, rhetoric, psychology, science, art, music, engineering, political science, writing, business, and health sciences. Finally, we discuss our conclusions from hosting the interdisciplinary videogame symposium, and how events addressing interdisciplinary topics can be used as the stepping-stone for increasing interdisciplinary writing, research, design, and presentation spaces.

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Introducing the Game Plan

Betty Hayes Gee, in her keynote address at the inaugural Undergraduate Videogame Symposium sponsored by the Interdisciplinary Writing Program at Northern Arizona University, addressed "Video Games and Learning: Past, Present, and Future Directions" to show her audience the importance of making connections between academic learning principles and learning principles applied during gameplay. Gameplay, she pointed out, involves complex thinking, language, and problem-solving skills, and it encourages participants to engage critically in creative design, production, collaboration, and innovation. Throughout her talk, she affirmed James Paul Gee's argument that good games can lead to empowered learners, improve problem-solving skills, and increase understanding of complex systems through active engagement with words and concepts that are directly applied to specific action (see Gee, 2004a, 2004b).

Many faculty, staff, and administrators at our institution support integrative learning, transferrable skills, and interdisciplinary opportunities for disciplinary application, and placing "learner needs at the center of our academic and service planning, policies, and programs" while offering "a rigorous, high-quality education to all students" (NAU Mission Statement, 2015). The rhetoric faculty, in their discussions of degree program design, learning outcomes, and course design, have adopted the mission statement and have integrated the principles of learner-centered education with a focus on providing students with high-impact learning practices that encourage students to engage in activities that move beyond the individual classroom and encourage students to collaborate with their peers, apply their academic knowledge to community or workplace settings, and critically reflect on their learning. To achieve this goal, faculty at our institution, in conjunction with the Interdisciplinary Writing Program, have agreed to provide sites for students to apply their research, writing, design, and presentation skills outside of the classroom. Moving presentations from individual course-focused spaces to collaborative, public spaces showed us that student motivation increased, and that students put much time and effort into public presentations.

In this article, we show how initial faculty discussions of moving from class-focused and isolated student work to integrating public spaces for student presentations led to the undergraduate videogame symposium, a venue where students from all disciplines could present their disciplinary learning to a non-disciplinary audience. After providing an introduction to the learning principles emphasized by the Interdisciplinary Writing Program (IWP), the sponsor of the symposium, we use the principles outlined in research on high impact learning practices (Kuh, 2008) to show the importance of student involvement and engagement in learning. We show that high-impact learning practices are intricately connected to principles explored in critical literacy, game theory, and digital media literacy (Giroux, 1992, 2007; Freire, 1968, 1973; Kress, 1999, 2005; Lankshear & Knobel, 2007; McLaren and Kincheloe, 2007; Gee, 2007; McGonigal, 2011; Yee, 2014; Mayra, 2008; Zimmerman, 2009; Fenlasen, 2014; Rice, 2014). Furthermore, we show that high-impact learning practices can lead to increased self-motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan and Deci, 2000; Jennings, et al.; 2013; Nowacek, 2011). After contextualizing our decision to choose gaming as the topic for the symposium, we use primary research data collected through interviews and participant observations to show that public venues for student work, such as an undergraduate video game symposium, can increase student motivation by providing spaces where high-impact learning can take place. Such learning, we show, draws on student personal and academic interests, and allows students to research and present to a public audience a wide range of topics connected to such fields as education, anthropology, gender studies, rhetoric, psychology, science, art, music, engineering, political science, writing, business, and health sciences. Finally, we discuss our conclusions from hosting the interdisciplinary videogame symposium, and how events addressing disciplinary and

interdisciplinary topics can be used as the stepping stone for increasing writing, research, design, and presentation spaces that in return can influence classroom pedagogy.

The Interdisciplinary Writing Program: Playing on Student Initiative

The Interdisciplinary Writing Program (IWP) at our university was established in 2013 to assist in improving student writing and to also support faculty who teach the required disciplinary junior-level writing course in curriculum design and pedagogical delivery of writing in their disciplines. The initial challenge was to work with a university paradigm that agreed that student writing was "deficient" and was "lacking in all aspects" — which included surface-level research, weak articulation of the argument, and a severe lack of grammar and punctuation skills. Many faculty saw poor student writing as pervasive and had low expectations often affirmed by student papers that didn't meet the faculty's standards of "good writing" in their disciplines.

To encourage students and faculty to change their perspectives on writing in their disciplines, the faculty team started to look closely at high-impact learning practices (Kuh, 2008), supported by the Association of American Colleges and Universities. Whether these practices occur in learning communities, writing-intensive courses, collaborative assignments and projects, undergraduate research, internships, or capstone courses, Kuh (2008) emphasizes the need for purposeful tasks, substantive interactions with faculty and other students, constructive feedback, spaces where learning can be tested, and reflection on the learning activities as well as on the results of the learning activities on the student's interactions with others and the larger world. At the same time, we considered the importance of student motivation—closely connected to high-impact practices—to perform well in their academic coursework and also when performing in public spaces. We leaned on psychologists Richard Ryan and Edward Deci, whose work on self-determination theory, motivation, and social development provided an excellent starting point for developing a game-plan that would show that motivation was a major component for encouraging students to write. Ryan and Deci (2000) explain that "motivation is highly valued because of its consequences: it produces" (p. 69). As they point out, "people are moved to act by very different types of factors… People can be motivated because they value an activity or because there is strong external coercion. They can be urged into action by an abiding interest or by a bribe. They can behave from a sense of personal commitment to excel or from fear of being surveilled" (p. 69). Thus, intrinsic motivation is the "inherent tendency to seek out novelty and challenges, to extend and exercise one's capacities, to explore and to learn" (p. 70) whereas extrinsic motivation "refers to the performance of an activity in order to attain some separable outcome" (p. 71). In other words, extrinsic motivation can include externally regulated behaviors such as compliance with an assignment to receive a passing grade, rewards or punishments when complying with a specific demand, or parental control that determines student action. It also can include performance "to avoid guilt or anxiety or to attain ego enhancements such as pride" (p. 72). Ideally, then, students needed to understand that they needed to internalize some of the extrinsically motivated behaviors. Writing in their disciplines, in other words, needed to become more than teacher-centered and class-specific work but instead needed to become part of a community where they could "feel competent, related, and autonomous" (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 74).

The Interdisciplinary Writing program saw the Undergraduate Videogame Symposium as an interdisciplinary event where students from different disciplines would present work that crossed disciplinary boundaries by researching and presenting beyond single disciplinary conventions. We integrated high-impact learning practices and theories on student self-motivation with the IWP mission to "providing a learner-centered program that focuses on student success, engagement, and achievement, advances the internationalization of the university, creates a culture of inclusion, and

exemplifies an innovative, effective, and accountable learning community" (IWP Mission Statement, 2015). Part of a long-term IWP internship project, a survey on student motivation showed that students did not put much effort into writing in their disciplines. Students reported that their disciplinary faculty care about the course content and are not interested in the writing since writing only averages 10-15% of the course grade. And since grades are highly important to students, and since "getting good grades is the drumbeat in students' definitions of success—the most consistently and frequently mentioned theme" (Jennings, et al., 2013), students are currently not motivated to write well for their disciplinary professors, especially if their writing does not become an important component that students can apply outside of their coursework. To change student perspectives, Jennings, et al., publishing in AACU's *Liberal Education,* point out that "we need to find ways of communicating to students that 'best' isn't always associated with high grades. If we ask students more about what they learn, how they learn, what challenges their ideas, and what grabs hold of them rather than the more routine question — 'How did you do?' — would that help them see success more broadly?" (Jennings, et al., 2013). Writing, then, needs to be closely connected to learning activities, especially purposeful learning activities that can be shared with others and that encourage public application and presentation of knowledge acquired in student coursework and through student interaction with their peers, faculty, or community members.

Motivation to Play: The Interdisciplinary Undergraduate Videogame Symposium

The establishment and design of the Interdisciplinary Undergraduate Videogame Symposium was one of several attempts to show high-impact learning practices that include purposeful learning outside the classroom and that also encourage self-determination in students. Similar to Ryan and Deci (2000), we wanted "to motivate others in a way that engenders commitment, effort, and high-quality performance" (p. 76). Doing so during the first year of the IWP's tenure was risky business. However, if we wanted to reach multiple disciplines at the student-level, we needed to listen to students to find out what motivated them and what encouraged commitment in and outside of classes, and we needed to find out what pedagogical approaches would lead to competence, relatedness, and autonomy, the major factors influencing "behavioral effectiveness, greater volitional persistence, enhanced subjective well-being, and better assimilation of the individual within his or her social group" (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 73).

In addition to Ryan and Deci's (2000) self-determination theory, the concept of a student-focused and student-run symposium was supported by social-cognitive theories on self-efficacy. According to Bandura (1997), self-efficacy includes perceptions of "beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments" (p. 3). It affects choices we make, how we act, how much effort we put into a task, whether we persevere, and how we think and feel about a specific task that we are trying to complete (Bandura, 1986, 1997). In Hom and Murphy's (1983) words, "When students are working on goals they themselves have set, they are more motivated and efficient, and they achieve more than they do when working on goals that have been set by the teacher" (p. 104).

High-impact learning practices are not only influenced by student motivation and self-efficacy. Guiding students to become reflective learners who can apply what they learned in different situations (Kuh, 2008) requires teachers to emphasize the teaching of writing within the context of students' overall literacy practices. This, to use Brian Street's (2003) ideological literacy model, included a focus on literacy as "social practice" instead of simply focusing on the "acquisition of literacy." Such an approach encouraged us to accept a "more culturally sensitive view of literacy

practices as they vary from one context to another" (p. 51) and to see symposium participants as being influenced by their membership in various communities, by their understanding of how they can participate in these communities, and by their willingness to engage with members of the community. As Gunther Kress (2005) has aptly pointed out, "learning can be seen as the individual's agentive selection from, engagement with and transformation of the world according to their principles" (p. 37).

To promote and encourage agency and autonomy, critical literacy advocates point to the importance of student participation in the learning process to emphasize active learning and active engagement (see, for example, Freire, 1968; 1973, Giroux, 1992, 2007; hooks, 1994; McLaren & Da Silva, 1993; McLaren & Kincheloe, 2007). Critical literacy practices, in combination with activities based on studies on self-determination and self-efficacy, can equip students with the necessary skills to determine how their roles in and outside the classroom influence their performance, how their understanding of productive engagement could encourage a move from external to internal motivation, and how the literacies that they bring to the classroom could influence their willingness to engage in critical discussions in and outside the classroom.

The Games Begin: Integrating Theory and Practice

We encouraged student participation for the planning stages to make sure that students would take ownership and would "affiliate with others … based on shared activities, interests, and goals" (Gee, 2004b, p. 73). A focus group of students from different disciplines informed us that videogames present a rich canvas for analysis, including discussions on how games are created, including planning, storyboarding and script writing, character development, programming and computer engineering, coding rules, and creating musical scores. Marketing, reviewing, and distributing games to a specific target audience creates additional venues for analysis, encouraging discussions on design and graphics, historical accuracy, storytelling, race and gender stereotypes, and gender balance in the videogame consumer base. Playing games requires players to explore game rules within design, and expectations for assessment to successfully complete portions or entire games. Play additionally offers topics for analysis about teaching, learning, assessment, and pedagogy from disciplinary and interdisciplinary perspectives.

Students' enthusiasm about a videogame symposium, combined with our research on high-impact practices, critical literacy, and agency and motivation, presented the perfect stage for organizing a planning committee of six faculty—some gamers, some non-gamers—to put together a call for proposals, schedule abstract writing workshops and presentation workshops. We also selected our newly hired lecturer in Rhetoric, Writing, and Digital Media Studies to be our opening speaker to highlight her professional expertise in game studies and game-like learning, and we invited Betty Hayes Gee, the founding member of the Games, Learning, and Society research collective and the University of Wisconsin-Madison and current fellow with the Teachers College Center for Games and Impact at Arizona State University, to be our keynote speaker.

Because we wanted to make sure that the symposium was seen as a legitimate outlet for student research, we knew that we had to provide a theoretical framework that would connect our studies on motivation and critical literacy to game studies theories. For our education colleagues, for example, it was interesting to see that Lev Vygotsky (1978) already discussed the importance of play in the development of social cognition in children. He was especially interested in the larger discussion of how games can encourage children to develop "abstract thought" by creating "imaginary situations" (p. 103). Play, according to Vygotsky (1978), "creates a zone of proximal

development of the child. In play, a child always behaves beyond [his/her] average age, above [her/his] daily behavior; in play it is as if [she/he] were a head taller" (p. 102).

Even though Vygotsky's focus was not on videogame theory and practice, his acknowledgment of the importance of play and his concept of "zones of proximal development" connects closely to the learning activities that videogames require of players, and the engagement, motivation, and agency afforded through game approaches to learning. As a topic within academia, the interdisciplinary approach to videogames and learning—where integration of knowledge across disciplines is encouraged—fosters creative approaches to analysis and discussion as scholars mix their perspectives to ask questions and invent research methodologies with perspectives and ideas from across the university (Mayra, 2008; Lankshear and Knobel, 2007; Farrell and Hardin, 2014). For this reason, the topic of videogames is particularly well suited to an interdisciplinary approach to a symposium designed for undergraduate student presentations, with the added benefit of being a familiar topic for many undergraduates.

As part of the interdisciplinary approach to game studies, much work has focused on how games assist players in learning, and the transfer and application of those game-like learning principles outside game environments. In *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning*, James Paul Gee (2003) describes active and critical learning as an activity that focuses on "how to understand and produce meanings in a particular semiotic domain" (p. 25). As he points out, a participant in a semiotic domain, a knowledge group, needs to actively and critically communicate specific messages, and "needs to learn how to think about the domain at a 'meta' level as a complex system of interrelated parts" (p. 25). In other words, players must determine how to play and interact with, and progress through a game, often through multiple attempts to allow a player to level up.

Gee (2004b) emphasizes that semiotic domains include content, design, rules, and objects as well as "ways of thinking, acting, interacting, and valuing that constitute identities of those people who are members of the affinity group" (p. 32). Semiotic domains can intersect, remain separate, and influence other domains. Furthermore, learning in one domain may be transferred to another domain, with expectations for recognizable products of communication. Gee emphasizes critical learning within a system as an important way for learners to adapt to new semiotic domains quickly and easily by comparing what they know to what they are expected to learn. Thus, instead of focusing on content knowledge and norms alone, participants in such a knowledge group also share values and knowledge about what it means to be a member of this group, defined by Gee as "affinity group."

In academic settings, Gee's concepts are evident when students select a major, in effect choosing a semiotic domain and become members of an affinity group. This major, and the accompanying courses, help students to learn content, ways of knowing, ways of acting and interacting, ways of valuing, and ways of identifying themselves as members of a specific semiotic domain. To gain entrance into a new domain, Gee (2008) tells us in "Learning in Semiotic Domains," that "learners must be willing and motivated to engage in extended practice in the domain in such a way that they take on and grow into a new socially-situated identity, an identity that they can see as a fruitful extension of their core sense of self" (pp. 146-147).

In games, Gee (2004b) finds that play motivates players to learn, to succeed, to work toward mastery within a semiotic domain to be successful at the game. Participants in the videogame symposium, we realized, needed to be "willing and motivated" to move from their specific disciplinary domains into a new interdisciplinary domain. It was no longer enough to speak the language of the major, but they needed to learn to speak the language of multiple groups, including the lay person who is interested in the topic but who is not a member of the affinity group. This is often a language that is not addressed by faculty in disciplinary fields, and it is a language that is especially important when we

interact and communicate with individuals and groups outside of our discipline-specific worlds and outside of school. Students' ability to transfer disciplinary skills to non-disciplinary domains encourages students to become "agents of integration," a term used by Rebecca Nowacek (2011) to explore "the experience of students forging connections between various contexts" (p. 35).

Similar to Gee, Zimmerman (2009) finds that students need exposure to new literacies brought about by new ways of thinking, new technologies, and new emerging skills. Zimmerman describes "gaming literacy" as a way to approach the teaching of these new, emergent literacies through an understanding of games as system, play and design (p. 23). He describes games as systems that require thinking about processes, structures and their interrelated parts (p. 25). This approach to gaming literacy emphasizes problem-solving skills, encouraging students to apply new skills that broadly follow the IWP's tenets of research, writing, design, and presentation skills.

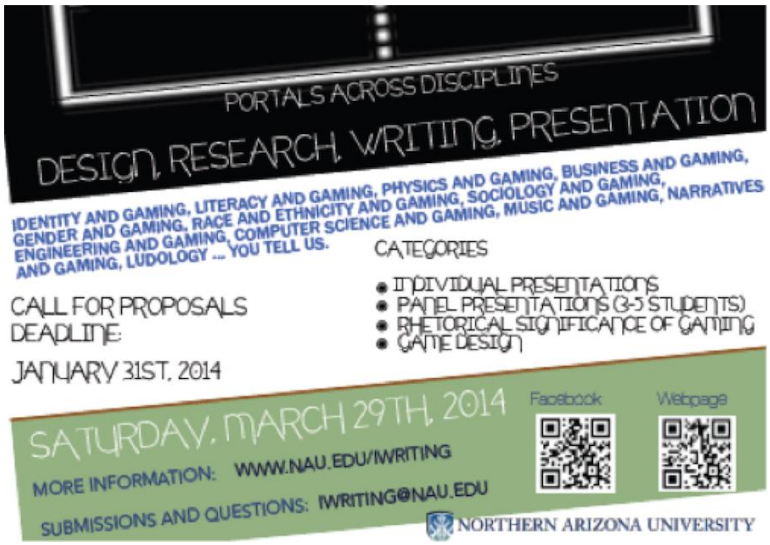
To encourage symposium presenters to engage in new literacy practices—or participate in new domains and affinity groups and become "agents of integration"—the Interdisciplinary Writing Program worked closely with faculty from across the disciplines to learn how they understand their roles in preparing students for future coursework and for workplace communication. Much of the feedback confirmed the importance of multimodal and non-disciplinary writing and communication practices, especially when applying to jobs and when trying to gain higher-level positions, shift to another department, or communicate specific findings to a lay audience. With this in mind, and understanding that teaching students transferable skills can be difficult, the symposium organizers emphasized the importance of addressing a broad and diverse audience during proposal writing workshops and also during practice presentations.

We expected resistance from students, but were positively surprised that students wanted to learn to speak to non-majors about their passion. We were even more surprised when we learned that it was a male computer science student who wanted to discuss gender disparity in games, and a business major who was interested in the impact of musical scores on player mood. In effect, we had started to create a new affinity group of first-years, sophomores, juniors, and seniors from 13 different majors. Students who participated in this new affinity group—the Interdisciplinary Videogame Symposium—engaged in new learning by presenting to over 100 audience members who ranged from experts to novices, from believers in videogame pedagogy to doubters, and from young players and non-players to experts in many disciplines, and to people with a wide range of cultural, social, and political backgrounds. These students were willing to practice and to revise their work so that they could present in a public venue and discuss their research at a professional symposium, a testing ground for being able to show academic skills of writing, research, design, and presentation beyond classroom expectations.

High-Impact Practices: Expanding Learning and Gaming Expectations

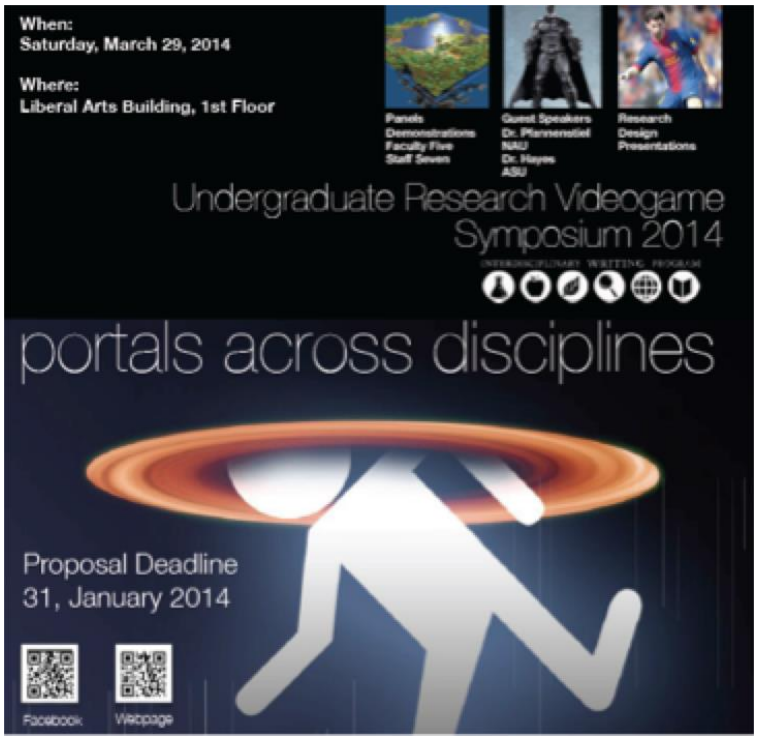
Preparing for **Learning**: When we sent out the call for proposals, we first consulted with our undergraduate videogame experts to make sure that our call included appropriate images, titles, and topic suggestions to promote the symposium as both a student-driven and an academic venue (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: First Call for Proposals, Videogame Symposium



When we put out our second call for proposals (Figure 2), we wanted to strengthen the implications of the connections between videogames and disciplinary writing. The committee, in addition to choosing "Portals Across Disciplines" as the symposium title, included an image of *Portal*, a 2007 first-person puzzle-platform videogame.

Figure 2: Reminder for Proposal Deadline, Videogame Symposium



To provide students with a concept of possible directions for their proposals, we encouraged them to organize their proposals around topics of identity and gaming, literacy and gaming, physics and gaming, business and gaming, computer science and gaming, or music and gaming. Students could

also find information on the IWP webpage (Figures 3 and 4) and Facebook page, and the Videogame Symposium Facebook page.

Figure 3: Resources for Students on IWP Website

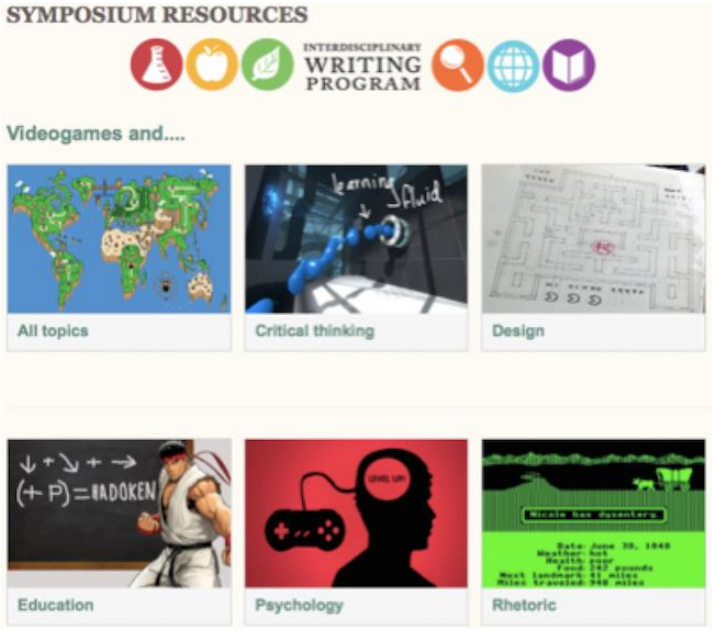
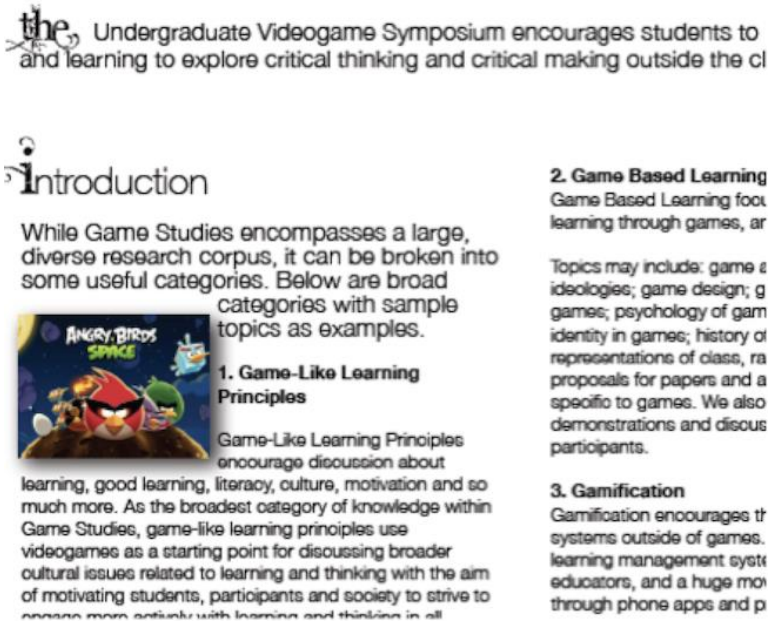


Figure 4: Introduction to Gaming and Education on IWP Website



Our focus on multimodal communication strategies—taking advantage of a wide range of rhetorical tools—to advertise the symposium was intended as a precursor to what we wanted the symposium to accomplish. We wanted to show that we expected the program participants to apply their own multimodal skills as gamers and as participants in diverse discourse communities, following Cheryl Ball's (2014) suggestions "that texts should be designed, not 'just' written, within situated social and

cultural contexts" (p. 91). We wanted to make sure that students understood that they could not exclusively focus on written language and read a paper to their audience because we believed strongly in Gunther Kress's (1999) argument in "English at the Crossroads" that, "the single, exclusive and intensive focus on written language has dampened the full development of all kinds of human potential, through all the sensorial possibilities of human bodies, in all kinds of respects, cognitively and affectively" (p. 85). In other words, our initial flyer and subsequent posters and Facebook updates advertising the symposium where directly correlated to how we wanted students to write, research, design, and present their work. We wanted to increase their motivation to participate in knowledge-making, and by modeling ways to approach videogames in educational settings, we wanted to provide students with concepts and ideas that they could research in more detail and apply to their presentations.

To provide opportunities for becoming self-determined and autonomous learners, we encouraged students during our proposal writing workshops to research their topics in-depth before they submitted their proposals to the committee. They learned from the proposal flyer that we wanted to "encourage discussion on all aspects of video games including theory, educational implications, engineering, design, narrative construction and the social consequences of gaming practices." We also made students aware that the IWP commitment, and with it the commitment of the Undergraduate Videogame Symposium, encompassed an interdisciplinary scope; research, writing, and presentation skills; student engagement; and active learning principles (Appendix A). In addition to outlining the framework for the symposium, students were given specific selection criteria that included connectivity, research, scope, and quality and depth (Appendix B).

Based on the criteria disseminated to students, the symposium can be seen as a system designed with rules, similar to rules that illuminate the framework of the game to the player (student) within which players are expected to play, using multiple attempts to explore exactly how to play. The interdisciplinary scope and the focus on research, writing, design and presentation created broad boundaries for participants of the symposium, setting outer limits to the game space. To explore this game space, students worked with our research librarians and with faculty members, and they practiced multiple times before presenting during the symposium. Furthermore, students approached their presentations recursively and returned to do more research, revised their presentations, and practiced again to ensure that they understood the framework and would be prepared to perform well in an interdisciplinary public space. As Zimmerman (2009) points out in his discussion of gaming literacy, the approach to learning as an open space with broad boundaries provides room for interpretation, allowing students to engage and learn in ways comfortable to them, while also expecting these same students to capably communicate in the valued interdisciplinary language and knowledge patterns. In game systems, the combination of openness with expected communication patterns serves to motivate players to learn and operate within a new interdisciplinary semiotic domain that draws from the domains of their majors but adds new information, new ways of approaching specific tasks, and new ways of disseminating information to a larger audience.

The broad boundaries we established provided students with information on the new system, and it also left the system open enough to interpretation and to "gaming the system" -- following, breaking or bending the rules as they engage with skills and practices often associated with the acquisition of critical literacy within semiotic domains (Zimmerman, 2009, p. 25). These broad framework rules -- and students' ability to maintain their position within the system, or to break or bend the rules of the system to encompass their approach, presentation and discussion of the topic -- reinforce our approach to critical literacy in promoting and encouraging agency and autonomy.

We pointed out to students when we returned feedback on their accepted proposals that the new semiotic domain they joined requires a strong research component, especially since they addressed controversial topics and topics that are outside accepted disciplinary norms. The IWP provided students with initial resources related to game studies, game design, gaming and education, the psychology of gaming, the rhetoric of videogames, gender and gaming, politics and gaming, and math and gaming. This focus on research and professionalism was also emphasized in the practice sessions for the symposium that many of the presenters attended. We maintained the broad framework during these practice sessions and in our written feedback, and we also supported student engagement with their chosen topic and approach, even if it went beyond the established boundaries. During these volunteer sessions, students received feedback from faculty and from students, showing them additional resources that would strengthen their arguments, and also discussing audience awareness and presentation styles. These interactions with faculty and with students who did not know them from classroom interactions provided the environment needed to impress upon the student-presenters that no one would have read the same articles as they had. They could not rely on the professor in the front, or on their classmates to understand their argument. Continuous feedback and the creation of a public venue, according to Kuh's (2008) description of high-impact learning practices, were key for students to self-motivate and to work on a presentation that went beyond performance for a course grade and included active and collaborative learning, student-faculty interaction, and a supportive campus environment (Kuh & O'Donnell, 2013).

High-Impact Learning: In addition to preparing for the symposium, students also participated during a community discussion, organized by the Interdisciplinary Writing Program in collaboration with Philosophy in the Public Interest. The discussion focused specifically on "Do you play? Video Games and Learning," drawing an audience of gamers and non-gamers who wanted to learn more about how we can talk about the social impact of videogaming, the moral and ethical choices made by gamers, the changing demographics of gamers, and the appeal of specific games for specific audiences. In broadly defining the question to be addressed, participants discussed the many stereotypes that gamers face in academic settings where gaming is seen as outside the sphere of academic learning. Even though none of the participants was anti-social or unable to function outside of their virtual worlds, these stereotypes preoccupied many of them. Fortunately, a recent study by Taylor et al. (2014) shows that these preconceived notions need to undergo extensive revisions. As they state, the "dichotomy between online and offline practices and settings" (p. 764) is much too limiting and does not show that gamers are highly social people with gaming supplementing social interactions instead of eliminating them. The authors point out that "the notion that online games somehow supplant 'real world' sociality is inaccurate and limiting" (p. 771).

The gamer participants in the roundtable discussion, highly articulate in their analysis of games and gaming, undermined gamer stereotypes as soon as the discussion started. One of the participants, a senior in Computer Science at NAU and the president of the local ACM chapter, provided an excellent starting point for rethinking who plays videogames. She made it clear that she started playing because of her mother's passion for videogames, a mother who sometimes stayed home from work to recover from an all-nighter playing SIMS games. Another student, a major in Applied Computer Science and English minor, included his passion for making moral choices in his discussion of what we learn from video games. And, the discussion on what we see as play provided an excellent starting point for making connections between academic learning and Gee's (2003) concept of affinity spaces, which Gee and Hayes (2011) in *Language and Learning in the Digital Age* expand to "passionate affinity spaces," spaces that provide ideal environments for learning and exist outside of clearly defined disciplinary spaces. This merge of academic spaces with passionate affinity spaces became especially pronounced during the discussion, when participants could show their expertise, and their

passion, to an audience that was curious about gamers and gaming, and who were ready to learn more about who plays games, what we can learn from games, and how games can help us learn. In setting the rules to the discussion very broadly, the participants easily dictated the direction of conversation, using their own game play as a way to engage with "how playing, understanding and designing games all embody crucial ways of looking at and being in the world" (Zimmerman p. 30). Participants' interests directed and motivated conversation that continued into the parking lot.

When the symposium day arrived, students had practiced their presentations several times, and they had honed their research skills to support their arguments. Panel topics included experimentation, design, and gameplay; gender and gaming and perceptions of gamers; popular culture, gaming and global communities, including multiple disciplinary perspectives on such topics as videogame music; video games as a cognitive model of reality; game difficulty and player perceptions; a student video game project under construction; and institutional behavior in gaming. All topics followed the established rules of the system in ways students found comfortable and demonstrated motivation for research, writing and presentation. As one of the symposium participants, Paisley Green, pointed out, "it's really cool to see how much effort that has gone into the student presentations and how much it connects to education" (qtd in Fenlason, 2014). Students, using Gee and Hayes' (2011) definition, participated in "passionate affinity-based learning" (p. 69), which, according to Gee and Hayes, "occurs when people organize themselves in the real world and/or via the Internet (or virtual world) to learn something connected to a shared endeavor, interest, or passion" (p. 69). The creation of this new affinity space—the Interdisciplinary Undergraduate Videogame Symposium—created by and for students, showed that students were highly motivated, not by grades and external pressure, but by their strong association with the group, and by their interest in videogames. As Deci and Ryan (1985) point out, "interest plays an important directive role in intrinsically motivated behavior in that people naturally approach activities that interest them" (p. 34). Being able to discuss videogames was of great interest to students, and their participation went beyond expected performance in their courses.

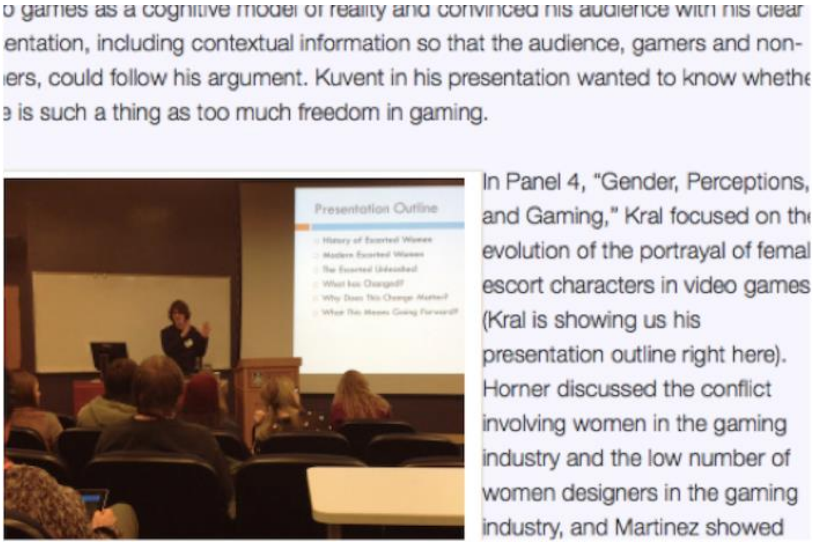
Because student presenters wanted to be part of the symposium, without pressures of graded performance, they were willing to research and design presentations that applied interdisciplinary and multi-modal principles. They unknowingly became advocates of interdisciplinary learning by researching and addressing topics outside their disciplinary expertise. Additionally, when presenters learned that their audience would include community members, faculty members, administrators, and students, they were willing to explain discipline-specific terms, and they included examples that were selected because of their appeal to gamers, non-gamers, and audience members from a variety of disciplines and from the community. In presenting in a new affinity space, student presenters were motivated to explore new ways of communicating within the rules of the system.

Students, when designing their presentations, learned to incorporate text, visual, audio, and clips from the games they discussed. Additionally, students continued multimodal composing by participating in a blogging community and by commenting on the Facebook page created for the symposium. As a group of bloggers told their audience at the beginning of the symposium, it's "an awesome event where interdisciplinary rules and video games are a legitimate discussion point in the hallowed halls of academia." Later on, during lunchtime reflections, one of the bloggers pointed to the "high quality of presentations," outlining specific arguments addressed by the presenters. In addition, she writes that "the hallway was filled with continuing discussions about everything we had learned in the sessions we attended" (Incremona, 2014). Addressing Faculty Five and Community Conundrum, two events where gaming and non-gaming members of the faculty and members of the community collaborated on *Surgeon Simulator*, Incremona stated that

> Team play is in high demand, and blood is flowing freely. Who will be able to save the patient? Will women be better at surgery than men? Does gender matter at all when wielding a hammer to smash in a patient's sternum and ribcage? What team skills and strategies are necessary to make sure that we do our best to use the hammer with skill and finesse? Or should we have used the electric saw instead? Or maybe it should have been the drill that was conveniently placed on the surgeon's tray?" (Incremona, 2014)

What Incremona's post shows is her ability to make connections to topics addressed by student presenters during the symposium, including gender and gaming, team play, and the acquisition of problem solving skills through participation in videogames. These critical literacy skills, skills that go beyond the classroom and beyond her discipline, required Incremona to write in a new medium, for a new audience, and on a topic that did not relate to her academic discipline.

Figure 5: Blog Comments on UVS



Successful Learning Practices: Concluding our Games

Jane McGonigal (2010, 2011), game designer and researcher, has told us that gaming can make a better world. In her TED talk, she tells us that she and her employees do not want to predict the future; instead, they want to "make the future." As she sees it,

> we've got all these amazing gamers, we've got these games that are kind of pilots of what we might do, but none of them have saved the real world yet. Well I hope that you will agree with me that gamers are a human resource that we can use to do real-world work, that games are a powerful platform for change. We have all these amazing superpowers: blissful productivity, the ability to weave a tight social fabric, this feeling of urgent optimism and the desire for epic meaning. (2010, video file)

Zimmerman has a similar message, stating that "the good news is that games, so often maligned, have much to offer our complex world. And not just so-called 'serious games'" (p. 30). The Interdisciplinary Undergraduate Videogame Symposium showed us that we can create change by engaging students in autonomous learning, by motivating them to participate in new affinity groups, and by allowing for learning spaces that encourage students to research, write, design, and share their passions in a

public space, and to reflect, with members of the community, on the presentations and interdisciplinary approaches that they experienced.

Similar to the encouragement of points, badges, and leader boards (PBL) used in gaming, we have continued high-impact practices by continuously providing students with interdisciplinary and public domains that create new systems and new affinity groups. We have already held a highly successful second videogame symposium and are currently working on integrating the symposium into the 2016 university-wide research symposium. High-impact learning practices, we learned, can expand conversations about student learning, student motivation, and student engagement by providing spaces that encourage students and faculty to participate in conversations that are relevant in many disciplines and are not confined to a specific disciplinary domain. Our experiences have shown us that it is the interdisciplinarity of the topic, and the opportunity to apply their research, writing, design, and presentation skills in a public venue that encourages student participation and engagement. Student presenters can interact with a public audience who is interested and excited to be part of a professional, well-practiced, and enthusiastic community. Learning, then, is high impact and is expanded to include disciplinary knowledge gained in specific courses and interdisciplinary research, design, and presentation skills necessary to address a new affinity group—an interdisciplinary audience.

Appendix A

The four tenets of the Undergraduate Videogame Symposium:

- *Interdisciplinary scope*: the UVS will draw interest and create conversations among academic majors. It will provide students an opportunity to network with each other across disciplines about a common theme, videogames.
- *Research, writing, design, and presentation*: the IWP core values are key in the symposium. Participants are expected to research their desired topic, write a proposal incorporating their research, design a presentation that fits within the allocated time limit, and present their findings in a professional manner. This practice allows students to practice research, writing and presentation skills that will help with future job interviews in all fields.
- *Student engagement*: the UVS will draw student interest by providing a research forum to discuss a media format that many students are passionate about. It will encourage conversations about complex aspects of learning and playing in good games.
- *Learning*: participants and attendees are expected to teach and learn about the topics presented at the symposium. We will expand critical analysis and thought on videogames and their connection to all disciplines.

Appendix B

Selection Criteria for the Undergraduate Research Symposium:

- *Connectivity*: the proposal draws an in-depth and analytical connection between videogames and academic topics. We seek original proposals that use prior research to draw innovative and thought-provoking conclusions.

- *Research*: the proposal includes a working bibliography that supports the discussion outlined in the abstract. We suggest examining the Symposium Resources at www.nau.edu/iwriting (under Rhetoric Symposium > Symposium Resources).
- *Scope*: the abstract and discussion remain focused on one or two topics as determined by the proposal's author(s).
- *Quality and depth*: the abstract displays in-depth knowledge backed by relevant research. The abstract and any supporting materials are presented in a professional manner (proper formatting, clear and concise writing, fulfills submission criteria).

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