

Play as Praxis: How Using Video Games in an Online Writing Classroom Encourages Student Engagement

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This paper examines the possibilities of using video games in the online writing classroom as a tool for teaching writing skills. By analyzing current scholarship on both play and writing pedagogy, and by examining video games such as *Among Us* and *Star Wars: The Old Republic*, this chapter discusses how the use of video games encourages students to connect their play to rhetorical writing decisions through the rewards and consequences of gameplay, social engagement, and storytelling. Likewise, this chapter explores possible activities instructors could do to incorporate *Among Us* and *Star Wars: The Old Republic* into their classrooms.

The inclusion of video games in the college writing classroom is nothing new, but the need to keep students engaged is a continuous conversation amongst scholars. The Conference on College Composition & Communication (CCCC) (2015) states that one of the main guiding principles to teaching writing is that it “supports learning, engagement, and critical thinking in courses across the curriculum”. When COVID-19 appeared and sent most college institutions online, instructors had to learn to adapt to new technologies and teaching strategies to keep their students engaged. The use of video games in the online writing classroom increased, but video games as a mode of instruction are just as complex as writing pedagogy as a whole. It takes a lot of work to incorporate video games into the classroom successfully. So instructors must think about which games are going to be most beneficial to achieve their course goals. As a writing instructor, I found the use of *Among Us*—a game that exploded in popularity during COVID-19—and *Star Wars: The Old Republic (SWTOR)* to be particularly inspiring options to engage my writing students.

More than ever, our students are interacting with video games outside of our classes. *Forbes* reported that 93% of people under 18 admitted to gaming regularly (Skwarczek, 2021). They also reported an 83% increase in game-streaming viewership (Skwarczek, 2021). Another study done in March

2020 showed that people playing video games in the United States increased their playtime by 45% during quarantine (Clement, 2021). In the effort of engaging our students, it makes sense to pull from their interests, especially when the modality of those interests matches with the new modality of their classrooms. The *Forbes* survey showed that “almost half of the teachers in the U.K. and the U.S. have turned to gaming to try to engage their students during periods of virtual learning, with 91% claiming it’s helped” (Skwarczek, 2021). As Lisa Murphy made clear in her book on how children learn, though, “*interests* are where planning and curriculum begin” and just because students are interested in video games, doesn’t mean that is where we can stop as instructors (Murphy, 2016, p. 50–51). It’s likely we could tell our students to write about or incorporate their interest in video games into our classes and they would, but it would not necessarily create the same transferability of skills that having students playing the same game together would. *Among Us* and *SWTOR* give students the opportunity to engage in a fun game together and discuss their experiences in the scholarly setting of the online college writing classroom.

Increasing Engagement through Video Games

In the online college writing classroom, video games can pull on student interest to engage students in scholastic content where readings and discussion boards cannot. In “Digital game-based learning: Towards an experiential gaming model”, Kristian Kiili (2005) noted that “[t]he promise of educational games is to engage and motivate players through direct experiences with the game world” (p.14) The act of playing a game voluntarily reflects engagement as the very gameplay motivates students to complete goals and tasks that have been assigned to them, even if they are scholastically motivated. Video games engage students by inviting students to use more of their bodily senses than simply reading and writing would ask of them. In “Game-based pedagogy in the writing classroom,” Rebekah Shultz Colby (2017), writing instructor and scholar, pointed out that Games, especially commercial games like *Among Us* or *SWTOR*, “provide richly multimodal spaces that incorporate visual, aural, written, spatial, and kinesthetic modes that students can then analyze and explore” (p. 56). While playing video games, online college students interact with several genres of text and rhetoric. Some games have text that share quests or storylines. Others ask students to interact with writing through communication with PCs (player characters) or NPCs (non-player characters) that instructors can ask students to analyze and connect to other ideas and content from the courses they are taking. Even more subtly, video games interject rhetoric through the visuals or the coding that make up the gameplay.

The multifaceted use of rhetoric in video games makes their connection to writing studies worth studying. In the introduction of *Rhetoric/Composition/Play through Video Games*, Richard Colby, Matthew S.S. Johnson, and Rebekah Shultz Colby (2013) claimed that “video games become exemplar multimodal texts, aligning word, image, and sound with the rules and operations constrained by computer technologies but composed by teams of writers, designers, and artists to persuade and entertain” (p. 4). The very existence of a game depends at least partially on a writer, and as such they make excellent tools to study in a writing course. Likewise, games offer many educational benefits to students that relate to what is often studied within the writing classroom. In the composition classroom, video games are effective teaching tools that teach students how to adapt their learning to different situations, give them a space to explore and express themselves, and, perhaps most importantly, stay engaged and motivated to learn. It is the role of the instructor to help students engage and reflect on the skills playing video games offers them. In this essay I will look at two games that instructors can present to students to support engagement in their online college writing courses: *Among Us* and *Star Wars: The Old Republic (SWTOR)*.

Among Us

One video game that can be used to help increase student engagement in the college writing classroom is *Among Us*, as it gives students immediate feedback on their use of various written rhetorical techniques while being free-to-play and easy to incorporate into college writing course goals. Innersloth (2020), a small gaming company based in Washington, released *Among Us* in 2018 for both the computer and as a mobile game. The game, a whodunit based in outer space, asks players to deduce through conversation who is the “imposter” (murderer) and asks the “crewmates” (other players) to vote on who they think is guilty. Players work in rooms of four to fifteen players. 2020 saw the game explode in popularity during the COVID-19 pandemic, with streamers playing the game from home and bringing in millions of users by the end of the year. With that popularity came explorations on how it could be used in the college writing classroom to increase engagement.

In one of the more obvious ways, *Among Us* creates engagement in an online classroom by having students interact in smaller groups with other players in a single span of time. The main way students do this is through the chat options in the game itself. However, with the right additions, students can also use voice chat to talk with each other as well, which can add another layer to the rhetorical experience students have. Students do not have the choice to step away from the game for a long period of time and think about

how they respond to a prompt. Students must act within a short time frame to persuade their peers of their innocence. Since the games are usually completed in relatively short rounds, it also means that they are not a large time commitment for students and instructors can pair a round or two of the game with lectures or other lessons in the same slot of time a normal asynchronous course would take online.

While playing *Among Us*, players also actively engage with rhetorical concepts surrounding propaganda, trust, and elements of persuasion (Matthews, 2020), which make it useful to connect to concepts in the college writing classroom. Players must work through (dis)information from their crewmates in order to survive each round. Instructors who use *Among Us* in the classroom are able to connect the rhetoric they use within the game's conversation with other written communication, such as political discourse, as Alina Kim (2020) noted in her article "Red is lowkey sus: A political reflection on 'Among Us'". Discerning what is legitimate fact from fiction within the game can translate to critical thinking, literacy, and an understanding of the ethical implications of rhetoric. By comparing lessons that use *Among Us* to teach rhetoric and lessons that use a more traditional lecture/discussion format, we can get an idea of how this video game can be used within the classroom.

***Among Us* in the Classroom**

For example, in a more traditional lesson on rhetorical appeals, I tell students that in an academic essay, ethos might look like having reliable sources cited throughout their papers; logos would be giving a reader specific facts and statistics on the topic; and pathos would be the inclusion of personal stories that ask the reader to empathize with the writer. I then pull up an ASPCA commercial about sad animals to give a specific example they could visualize. The techniques are not unsuccessful. My students are usually able to identify the different appeals in a piece of writing through these methods. However, if I have students play *Among Us*, or even watch a streamed game, following that discussion of the appeals, not only do I give students the chance to identify the use of the rhetorical appeals, but my students are actively engaging in the writing techniques in the moment, even if they don't yet realize it.

Through gameplay, and discussion about the game, students are made aware of who has played before and who has not. This experience creates the idea of ethos as students who haven't played before now view experienced players with either more or less trust. Some students might trust the experienced ones more when they call out suspicious behavior because they might have memorized all the tasks that the crew are supposed to complete, where those tasks are meant to be completed, and how long it takes to complete the

tasks. All players have a progress bar for tasks so they know when a task has or has not been completed; even if they don't know exactly which one was done. At the same time, experienced players might become less trusted because of this same knowledge. If they have that knowledge, their lies become harder to prove. If they are the imposter on the crew, they would be harder to catch than someone inexperienced.

The use of the progress bars and task lists during the alibi session of proving your innocence or someone else's guilt could be seen as a form of logos. These aspects of gameplay act as observable facts that all students can check for truthfulness. Likewise, students can watch certain spaces on the game map and can occasionally catch imposter players attacking others, or using the vents on the ship, which only imposters can do. These facts help persuade students to vote one way or the other. However, students can lie about seeing things on the cameras as those are not able to be replayed for others, so there is an element of risk for students who use that as their logos.

The pathos aspect of *Among Us* is probably the most enjoyable and the most frustrating part of students. The "meetings" that are called when players want to report suspicious behavior are timed, though that time can be varied by the person who set up the game for the group. Unless you have other technology set up, this is the only time players can communicate with each other, so there might be a lot that people are trying to communicate in a short period of time. When accusations are thrown, and students are forced to defend themselves, emotions can run high. When one player says another one has done something suspicious, other players must now interact with their own emotions to gauge authenticity. They have to think about where they last saw each of their players. Can they refute any of the claims? Do they have any biases towards the other players? Do they know who the imposter is but they want them to win? The more competitive the players, the more heated the rhetoric can get. It is not unheard of for innocent players to accidentally make themselves look guilty because the other players thought they were protesting too much, without anything to back up their claims. Once gameplay has finished I can bring the class back together to discuss their findings or to further connect it to the other topics that might be discussed in class (such as the rhetorical appeals). Through these methods, *Among Us* makes a valuable tool for quick and immediate engagement from their students.

Star Wars: The Old Republic

Another game that can be a useful tool for college instructors to use to increase student engagement in their writing courses is *Star Wars: The Old Republic* (SWTOR). Unlike *Among Us*, SWTOR is what is called a massive

multiplayer online roleplaying game (MMORPG) which means that students playing *SWTOR* could engage with hundreds of people in a day, depending on how they play (swtor.com). Unlike other more well-known MMORPGs, though, students can play most of the game for free. Players can complete the entirety of their player class storylines and some of the expansions without having to spend money on it. Students are also not as limited as other free-to-play games in how they can communicate with other players. It is also less demanding of computer's graphics in comparison to other games of the same type.

There are several different ways that students can engage in the game. The game includes a storyline for each class type students can play. These storylines follow the class of their characters, but students can make moral choices that will change the end result of their storyline. Through this storyline, students do not need to interact with other players and will instead work with non-player characters (NPCs). Another option players have is to work through extra gameplay that isn't related to the main story they are following. In these portions of the game, they will have specific objectives they are trying to achieve, such as gathering a certain amount of supplies, or by removing an enemy presence from an area. In these areas of the game, players might encounter other players and can choose to group up with them to accomplish tasks or not. Students can also take a more independent approach to playing the game. Many players create characters with their own backstories and personalities that might not reflect the restrictions of their class or race choices. Players can then interact with other players to build their stories and personalities, create and solve fictionalized conflict, or build relationships with others. However, because this asks players to interact directly with others, it can be the riskiest to use in a classroom setting, unless heavily monitored and controlled.

However, the different options allow students to reflect on rhetorical choices in many different ways. Students can reflect on how their communication choices change the route of the story when they choose light or dark side options. They can analyze how interacting with others helps them achieve their in-game goals or hinders them as other players want to beat them to objectives. Students can also observe how others react to them depending on how they present and write their own character creations. Students can also reflect how different genres within the game itself change how they communicate. For example, if they're using a chat just between guild members, a private message, in-character and out of character chats, trade channels, and more. There are a lot of opportunities for instructors to use *SWTOR* to help students adapt to writing situations, be engaged and explore themselves and other communities.

SWTOR in the Classroom

The following example shows how I, as an instructor of an online Business Writing course could use *SWTOR* to help students understand communication in a professional setting, audience analysis, and different genres. In *SWTOR* I would create a class guild where students create characters to roleplay as members of the Republic Strategic Information Service (SIS), an espionage group working with the Galactic Republic. In this course, the first thing students work on is job application materials. I would have students do research on the SIS, their character and class choices, and create resumes and cover letters that would get them their “job” at the SIS. They would then do an in-character interview with me in the game to show what they should be trying to accomplish as members of this group, what forms of communication they would be expected to use (in-character), and specific jargon that might appear.

I would then start students off with two tasks. The first task, to continue up to the semester’s end, is to complete their class story. While completing the class story, students would create character analyses for recurring characters in the story as they would potential audiences. What sort of responses did the NPCs like? What did they not like? How did that change how the student interacted with them in future scenes? I would have students turn these in as short memo reports to me after each of the major storyline chapters and have them reflect on what changes they might make in the future and the rhetorical theory behind those decisions.

The second task I would ask students to complete is a report on a topic of their choice connected to some other aspect of the game, such as the other storylines, lore, history, or other characters of importance. Some NPCs make speeches that students could break down to look at the rhetorical appeals used based on what they knew of the intended audiences. During this process students would have to write a proposal on the topic they are researching and why it would be important for the SIS to investigate it. For a less in-character option, I might invite students to conduct out-of-game research on how it was marketed, updated, built, and more for their reports. Likewise, I might have students connect in-game themes with current or historical events that use similar methods of rhetoric in their actions.

The available options for student engagement with the game and the course content means that *SWTOR* is more friendly than *Among Us* is to both synchronous and asynchronous classes. Students can play alone or with others which means that the instructor does not have to be present to make the connections to content as soon as they occur. Students are given more time to reflect and think about their choices and the impact they had on their gameplay. This also means instructors can offer more flexibility on what students

explore within the game as well since not everyone will be working on exactly the same thing at the same time.

Conclusion

Games like *SWTOR* might ask students to interact with other players in order to achieve their goals. With video games, “[p]layers do not have identical playing experiences, but each player’s experience is totally unique. The subjective experiences of players as they play games are the heart of explanations of engagement in games” (Kiili et al, 2012, p. 79). This can be difficult for instructors to control learning, but it can help students find a way to engage in materials in a way that works best for them. For some games, like *Among Us*, students must collaborate to find the imposter, or in the case of some levels, keep their fellow imposter hidden from the other crew members. Likewise, if the student is playing *SWTOR* in a roleplay setting, students must engage with others on an entirely different level that requires students to create and understand game lore, identities, and relationships.

The social aspect of games can also help students feel motivated to learn and contribute. “All users of a virtual space share one key unifying characteristic; they are users of their shared virtual space. As such, there is always a certain level of underlying virtual consubstantiality at play in all virtual environments” (Baron, 2012, p.55). Being part of a virtual community is not enough, though, as any student using Canvas or Blackboard for an online class can tell you. Games, through interactions more complex than a discussion board or a FlipGrid, give students more space in which to interact with each other. Many games create opportunities for collaboration, such as solving puzzles together, or roleplaying. Those interactions allow students to create stronger relationships with each other and with the course content and that motivation can transfer into the regular course activities.

While there are many ways to engage students through video games, there are many challenges as well. Instructors have to be deliberate in their choices and how they scaffold and present games to their students in order to avoid those challenges. They must consider accessibility for the student, whether that is cost, time, or ability. They must consider how progress will be assessed and how they will know when students are meeting learning goals. Instructors must also consider the risks to the student as they interact with an environment that might not be as controllable as a single classroom space. We must incorporate games with purpose and understanding. Video games offer instructors a framework to keep that awareness but by prioritizing the student and their feelings towards the classroom space, instructors are predisposed to looking for some of the challenges of games.

In the writing classroom, video games like *Among Us* and *SWTOR* create a space for students that is low-risk, process-oriented, creative, and engaging so that they can explore writing and rhetoric in a way that relates to them. The social aspects help students stay motivated and engaged in the course content. Also, since there is an emphasis on helping students learn intrinsically, there is the hope that students will want to engage in the games and find pleasure from learning about writing. However, until the pairing of games and writing pedagogy are put into practice, more research will still need to be done. The type of game, the classroom setup, the instructor, and the students all have a part to play on whether a game will be a worthwhile teacher tool.

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