Background
Video games represent a significant portion of the literate activity (reading, writing, and thinking) that students have engaged in prior to entering college (Gee, 2003; Gros, 2003). Yet, until recently first-year writing pedagogy has made few attempts to use video game literacies as bridges to academic literacies, as we have done with other genres of popular culture including film, music, and various Web media such as Blogs and Wikis. As with these other popular culture literacies, building such bridges has the potential both to motivate students and to lead them to engage with culture and technology in critical and analytical ways.

The assignment described here represents one instantiation of a first-year writing assignment centered on the analytical study of video games commensurate with the goals of Michigan State’s Tier I writing curriculum to challenge students “to seek new information and to reflect upon its relevance to their own observations and experiences” (http://www.msu.edu/~wrac/t1/t1_index.html). This assignment also validates students’ cultural expertise and represents an enactment of situated practice, overt instruction, and critical framing as the pathway to transformed practice (New London Group, 1996).

Contexts

Classroom Context
- Course: WRA 110, “Writing: Science and Technology”
- Theme: Usability issues in human technology interfaces
- 27 students – 24 freshmen, 3 sophomores

Theoretical Context
- Usability was operatively defined in the class as the extent to which a technology meets the needs of its users. Emphasis was placed on the “softer elements” of technology and technology as “acts of communication” between designers and users (Vicente, 2004; Norman, 2002).
- Students read James Paul Gee’s What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy as an analytical framework with which both to interpret video games as examples of especially effective learning technology and to reflect on themselves as learners.

Discussion
Student work was read according to a qualitative teacher research paradigm which emphasizes a rich and deeply-contextualized analysis of student data with the purpose of discovering useful information for teachers and students working in similar situations (Ray, 1993).

Preliminary analysis of student work suggests several directions for pedagogical approaches and future research:
- The analytic framework offered by Gee’s learning principles can help to situate the pedagogical possibilities of engaged gaming in composition courses as working within spheres of learner motivation, community, metalanguage, and transformed practice.
- Student narratives of on- and off-screen interactions with game technologes exhibit a mix of narrative perspectives, revealing an incipient awareness of the interplay of real, virtual, and projective identities as each was brought into play in the research and reflective tasks for the assignment (Gee, 2003). This points to the benefit of using video game assignments as a means of fully involving learners in research tasks in composition pedagogy (Gros, 2003).
- Student work also points to the usefulness of video game research as a means of fostering an embodied understanding and critical awareness of the ways in which they live, play, and work in material structures designed by others (Haas and Witte, 2001).

The Assignment
The back of the box
Good video and computer games represent some of the best-designed, most user-friendly technologies available. In this assignment you will analyze how the learning environment of a favorite video or computer game teaches its users to play while also challenging and motivating them.

Walkthrough
In this assignment you will evaluate the learning environment of a video or computer game of your choice in order to reach some conclusions about the overall quality of that environment. By “learning environment” I mean the methods by which the game teaches its new players (users) to play, including but not limited to wizards, tutorials, manuals, quick reference cards, in-game hints, special beginner levels, or any combination thereof.

I am asking you to do this in the context of a class focusing on usability because, as James Paul Gee notes, video games are complex pieces of technology that demand a diverse set of skills from their players, ranging from critical thinking and problem solving to careful reading and attention to detail — skills we try to teach in writing classes like WRA 110. Yet, unlike most classes you have probably encountered in school and also unlike most of the technologies we’ll talk about this semester, successful gamers do a very good job teaching learners how to make sense of this complexity while also motivating them to want to learn more and keep playing.

So, your job is to:
1. Report how the game you have chosen goes about teaching players to play
2. Assess the strengths and/or weaknesses of this learning environment
3. EITHER offer specific suggestions for ways in which the learning environment of the game could be improved to create a more satisfying playing experience OR, if the learning environment of the game you chose is nearly perfect, speculate on ways in which the learning environment of that game might be transferable to another technology

Mods (i.e. stuff you make)
Your deliverables for this assignment are:
- Report - 4 pages (+/- 1000 words).
- Reflective memo responding to the following prompts:
- What did this assignment teach you about yourself as a learner?
- In what ways are Gee’s principles useful for interpreting how video games affect you as a player (i.e. how they motivate you, how they frustrate you, how they intrigue you, how they manipulate your emotions, or how they shape your identity)?

Hints
Although I hope you have fun completing this assignment, doing it well will require careful planning and attention to detail. Even if you are already an expert at the game, you should play it again from the start, putting yourself in the role of a new player and paying close attention to how the game teaches you about itself.

To create a substantive analysis of a video game, you will need two things:
1) A game sufficiently complex to analyze (Pac-Man, for example, would probably be a bad choice); and
2) Some sort of specific criteria by which to analyze the game. Part of this criteria can come from your own past experience playing similar games, but to be credible, some of it will need to be based on criteria offered from our readings, class discussions, and your own research.

References