



A Room to Play: The Infrastructure of Game Pedagogy

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that the work of teaching writing with video games starts before the syllabus, the assignment, and the lesson plan: First, there must be an *infrastructure for game pedagogy*. Drawing on our experiences at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, we explain that various material considerations – from consoles to classroom furniture, and from grant-funding to graduate students – were necessary to build our game-based classroom, the Greenlaw Gameroom, and the Critical Game Studies Program it facilitates. Our primary aim has been to foster what we call *collaborative close play*, which is a method of game analysis that resolves the oft-cited tension between playful immersion and critical distance by turning close play into a group activity whereby students cycle between the roles of player, advisor, researcher, and notetaker. A three-day module that pairs *Super Mario Bros.* with the Inupiaq platformer *Never Alone* demonstrates how such structured play, scaffolded by flexible furniture, digital data management, and trained instructors, enables students to analyze procedural rhetorics, cultural logics, and design ethics at scale. Virginia Woolf observed that certain material circumstances, like a room of one's own, are necessary to write; by the same token, this article deals with some of the material obstacles a writing program must face in the process of securing “money and a room” for teaching games.

Introduction

Walking through the door of the <https://dclab.unc.edu/gaming-program/greenlaw-game-room> Greenlaw Gameroom, one encounters a room built for play: A carefully crafted pedagogical space designed for a class of 25 students to game together. Along the walls are five gaming stations, each outfitted with large screens, gaming PCs, consoles, headsets, controllers, and adaptive equipment to meet a range of play needs. In the center, movable, collapsible desks and rolling chairs form a flexible zone that can be rearranged for tabletop games, writing activities, or full-class discussions (see [Image 1](#): Classroom). This is not a research lab or an entertainment lounge, though much fun is had here, but a classroom built to teach with and through games – and as students file in, the room begins to take shape around them. One group adjusts the desks to ensure everyone has a clear view of the screen, shifting chairs to accommodate a peer's access needs. At a nearby station, a student grips a controller while another laughs, points, and helps her navigate a puzzle. A third student is jotting notes onto a worksheet, while the fourth scrolls through last night's reading, excitedly linking a game mechanic

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Image 1. Panorama view of the interactive Greenlaw Gameroom.

to a passage from Ian Bogost's "The Rhetoric of Videogames" (2008). What appears at first glance to be a group of students simply playing together is in fact a structured exercise we call *collaborative close play*.

There's a growing body of research on pedagogies of play, with composition and rhetoric – and especially *Computers and Composition* – at the forefront. Scholars have examined the multimodal literacies video games develop (Alexander, 2009; Alexander, 2016; Gee, 2003; Vie, 2008), the ways that game-based composition skills transfer to other technical and professional writing contexts (DeWinter & Moeller, 2016; Eyman & Davis, 2016; Miller, 2013), and the importance of thinking critically about the persuasive power of these machines that combine embodied, immersive, and procedural rhetorics (Hagood, 2016; LaVaque-Manty, 2013; Sheridan & Buchanan, 2016; Shultz Colby & Colby, 2008). When it comes to the classroom, however, there's little literature on how to enact playful pedagogies, let alone scale them (Shultz Colby, 2017). Yes, many articles, books, and other resources provide course modules, class assignments, and lesson plans, but as a recent edited collection notes, educators also need to grapple with the practical and ethical challenges of implementing game-based learning across programs (Colby et al., 2021). These are challenges scholarship on "spatial pedagogies" (Haley-Brown et al., 2012) and the "materiality of learning environments" (Miller-Cochran & Gierdowski, 2013) has dealt with for some time: Which digital devices and storage solutions do we want? What should the classroom look like? How many employees do we need to maintain the space? And who is paying for all of this? Such banal questions get to the heart of what it means to teach with video games today, for they draw our attention to the *infrastructure of game pedagogy*.

In describing the construction of the Greenlaw Gameroom, a classroom administered by the <https://dlclab.unc.edu> Digital Literacy and Communications (DLC) lab, and the goals of the <https://dlclab.unc.edu/gaming-program/> Critical Game Studies (CGS) Program at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill (UNC-CH), we¹ seek to demonstrate that a number of infrastructural considerations – from consoles to classroom furniture, and from grant funding to graduate students – are necessary to build an effective, sustainable environment for teaching with games, considerations that, while far from theoretical, speak to recent research into games and materiality (Germaine & Wake, 2022; Jayemane, 2012; Shultz Colby & Holmes, 2022; Taylor, 2024b). The article begins by explaining the motivation behind our game-based classroom: To foster collaborative close play – a method of game analysis that resolves the oft-cited tension between playful immersion and critical distance by turning close play into a group activity whereby students cycle between the roles of player, advisor, notetaker, and researcher. After discussing how the design of the classroom facilitates this exercise, we recount a one-week module on procedural rhetoric, *Super Mario Bros.* (1985), and *Never Alone* (2014) that we teach as part of first-year composition courses. We end with a brief discussion of future directions for the CGS Program. Ultimately, we take our cue from Virginia Woolf: Just as writers need a room of their own to write, we argue that game-based pedagogy needs a room to play.

First hurdle: some material obstacles to game-based pedagogy

Why, despite numerous advances in game research, do instructors in Rhetoric and Composition and Technical Communication remain hesitant to adopt game-based teaching methods? In "Game-based Pedagogy in the Writing Classroom" (2017), Rebekah Shultz Colby suggests that this hesitancy results from the fact that

There are no direct teaching resources for teaching writing with games, most scholarship on using games to teach writing are based on autoethnographic classroom case studies, which do not provide a broad perspective on game-based practices within the field, and while there have been a few review articles published on game-based pedagogies that provide larger perspectives on game-based practices, they do not completely explore current emerging pedagogical trends. (p. 58)

Scholars have certainly begun to address some of these pedagogical gaps, including Shultz Colby herself,² but when we started to

¹ The authors of this article include: [explanation of the roles each of the authors had during the construction of the classroom]. As this article will make clear, [name of faculty director and first author] constructed the infrastructure of the [name of classroom] and the [name of program] such that graduate students would be co-developers gaining crucial administrative experience that they would not have otherwise received.

² See for example: Eyman and Davis (2016); Colby, Johnson, and Colby (2021); and McGunnigle (2023).

consider integrating games into the curriculum back in 2019, we encountered the same problem, especially when it came to surmounting the material obstacles of game-based pedagogy.

Even the seemingly straightforward task of selecting a video game proved challenging. Typically, an instructor must choose from one of three imperfect options: (1) free, browser-based games that students can run on their personal laptops, but which are often limited in number, quality, and security; (2) commercial games from platforms like Steam, which not only create compatibility headaches between Windows and Apple devices but also pose monetary obstacles, as students cannot use financial aid to purchase digital games in the same way they buy textbooks from the campus bookstore; or (3) console-based games, which require instructors to haul personal equipment to class, set up complex hardware, and manage a limited number of simultaneous players – introducing inconvenience and risk of damage, while severely restricting collaborative gameplay.

In many ways, this issue echoes the one identified by [Danielle DeVoss, Ellen Cushman and Jeffrey Grabill \(2005\)](#) in their influential article, “Infrastructure and Composing: The When of New-Media Writing.” Drawing on infrastructure theory developed by [Star and Ruhleder, 1996](#), DeVoss et al. demonstrate how “invisible structures make possible and limit, shape and constrain, influence and penetrate” all acts of composing and analyzing in writing classrooms, especially within contexts identified at the time as “new media” and “multimodal” (p. 16). Importantly, they emphasize that infrastructure is never just a matter of material or technological resources; it also encompasses standards, classifications, decision-making processes, and is “thoroughly penetrated by issues of culture and identity” (22). In other words, understanding infrastructural frameworks is vital when designing new media and multimodal pedagogies – categories into which games comfortably fit.

With these insights in mind, we began envisioning a new classroom specifically designed to facilitate play at scale. Our CGS Program is housed within English & Comparative Literature Department and administered by the DLC lab, so our primary touchstones were digital humanities labs and multimodal writing studios. We applied some of the lessons learned from these approaches to build what [Pawlicka-Deger \(2020\)](#) calls an “infrastructure of engagement” – a cohesive material and organizational support system capable of fostering new modes of knowledge – for learning about digital games. As [Stephanie Vie \(2008\)](#) argues, “it is essential that students have a dedicated space to focus on game-play” (p. 164), and thanks to successful grant funding and institutional support, we launched the Greenlaw Gameroom in 2020, naming it after the founder of UNC-CH’s modern English Department and the building that bears his name.

The Gameroom is the cornerstone of our CGS Program, which harnesses the department’s strengths in rhetoric, literature, and film to cultivate a critical understanding of games as cultural texts.³ Through instructor workshops, research projects, and pedagogical resources, the program encourages investigation into how games shape, and are shaped by, societal power structures and strives to create an environment where students can explore alternate play practices that embrace difference. Indeed, there’s much more to be said about how the Gameroom has facilitated learning across multiple disciplines, and how building an infrastructure for game pedagogy requires negotiating different disciplinary commitments, but this article’s aim is to explain the construction of a game-based classroom for the purpose of rhetoric and composition pedagogies. To that end, we pursued three main goals when designing the Gameroom: (1) foreground critical perspectives on games, (2) ensure the space remains flexible enough to accommodate diverse forms of gameplay while remaining accessible to all students, and (3) establish sustainable institutional practices to enable continuous growth and experimentation within the CGS Program.

For and against flow: collaborative close play

Recent scholarship in Rhetoric and Composition and Technical Communication has identified several emerging topoi in game-based writing pedagogies ([Eyman & Davis, 2016](#); [McGunnigle, 2023](#); [Shultz Colby, 2017](#)). While they differ in the details, these approaches generally: treat games as cultural artifacts demanding rhetorical analysis ([Shultz Colby, 2017](#)); teach multimodal and media literacies through game-play ([McGunnigle, 2023](#)); examine the “writing around games,” such as paratextual and community-produced documents ([Eyman & Davis, 2016](#)); analyze the compositional practices encoded in gameplay mechanics and technical documentation ([Vie, 2008](#)); or leverage game design exercises either for genre transfer or direct game development ([DeWinter & Moeller, 2016](#)). Each of these methods yields valuable pedagogical insights, yet all fundamentally rely on first teaching students that games merit sustained critical analysis.

In our experience, students encountering video game analysis for the first time tend to begin with a judgment of taste. Questions like “What do you think of this game?” are treated as equivalent to “Did you like it?”, “What would you rate it out of ten?”, or “Which parts could be improved?” Attempts to steer the conversation toward issues like gender representation are frequently met with skepticism: *Aren’t we reading too much into it?* ([Stang, 2022](#), p. 233). These responses reveal a broader cultural framing in which games are seen primarily as leisure, as activities that exist “outside the seriousness of the classroom” ([Shultz Colby and Colby, 2008](#), p. 302). On account of this framing, students can struggle to grasp the academic value of game analysis – let alone enact it.

And that’s before we even get to more basic problems. Many, especially marginalized communities, do not self-identify as gamers even when they play video games all the time ([Chess, 2017](#); [Gray, 2020](#); [Phillips, 2020](#); [Shaw, 2015](#)) and those who play “casual” games – like mobile titles or social sims – often don’t see their hobby as “real” gaming at all ([Consalvo & Paul, 2019](#)). This lack of consensus on what counts as a game creates friction in the classroom before analysis can begin. Further complicating matters is the experiential pull of gaming itself. Video games typically immerse their players through that satisfying harmony of player skill and

³ The Critical Game Studies Program joins the following programs housed within the English & Comparative Literature Department: Composition and Rhetoric, Creative Writing, Health Humanities, Film Studies, and Latina/o Studies.

game challenge Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi termed “flow” – an intense state of “concentration and pleasure-in-doing” that can make an individual so unaware of their surroundings that they can even neglect bodily needs (Sheridan & Buchanan, 2016, p. 290). This intense immersion appears to be the opposite of critical distance, and some have argued that flow precludes the reflective thinking analysis demands (Soderman, 2021; Tronstad, 2010). Theoretical debates aside, this fundamental challenge for game-based pedagogy presents itself in the most practical of ways: How is a student supposed to take notes when both hands are on a controller?

To address these problems, we turned to literature on what scholars have variously called “critical play” (Flanagan, 2009), “close play” (Chang, 2008), “critical gaming” (Crocco, 2011), and “game analysis” (Fernández-Vara, 2014). For Mary Flanagan (2009), “critical play” is “characterized by a careful examination of social, cultural, political, or even personal themes” (p. 6). One of her examples is Bertell Ollman’s riff on *Monopoly* (1935); instead of indulging the pleasures of financial accumulation, *Class Struggle* (1978) foregrounds the division of capitalists and workers, encouraging players to question social relations. This is exactly the kind of reflection we wanted students to engage in, but Flanagan’s version of “critical play” was clearly geared towards designers.⁴

Though closely related, there’s a difference between teaching students how to make games that induce critical thinking by virtue of their design and teaching students how to think critically about the rhetoric of games they didn’t make themselves.⁵ Chang, (2008) takes the latter approach, arguing for the importance of what he calls “close play,” which requires:

careful and critical attention to how the game is played (or not played), to what kind of game it is, to what the game looks like or sounds like, to what the game world is like, to what choices are offered (or not offered) to the player, to what the goals of the game are, to how the game interacts with and addresses the player, to *how the game fits into the real world*, and so on (emphasis own). (np)⁶

Similarly, Francesco Crocco (2011) emphasizes connecting games to the outside world, defining “critical gaming pedagogy” as an approach where “the valuable learning principles embodied by games (digital or otherwise) are used to promote critical thinking about hegemonic ideas and institutions rather than to propagate them” (p. 29). According to Rebekah Shultz Colby et al. (2021), this is where the ethical stakes of game analysis lie. By asking the player to inhabit an “ideologically laden ethos” through their audiovisuals, rules, narratives, mechanics, and interfaces, games train a literacy in that style of thinking and acting, placing players in a better position to question it (p. 5). Synthesizing these approaches, we aspired to have students question how the rhetorical and compositional elements of game design, play, and reception speak to wider social issues.

This questioning doesn’t happen automatically. One method of encouraging students to think critically about their play is to emphasize that video games teach us certain ideas and ideologies in the same way they teach us how to play the game – that is, tacitly – but even then, students often need guidance on what, exactly, they should attend to (Chang et al., 2021). As Clara Fernández-Vara (2015) puts it, getting students to play critically always “requires making a series of choices about how to play,” and a difficulty one must overcome is the fact that the “writer/player is also participating in the game” (pp. 26, 28). In other words, the rich literature on game analysis also runs up against the practical problem of gaining critical distance from an object designed to immerse us.

Of course, one can pause the game, watch a playthrough, or ruminate after the fact, but the primary way we have addressed – or, more accurately, harnessed – the tension between writer and player is through what we call *collaborative close play*. Students work in groups of four-to-five, each adopting a different role on a rotational basis – one plays, one advises, one researches, one takes notes. This rotation complements the pedagogical principles of composition, where both peer interaction (Bruffee, 1999) – whether that be brainstorming, peer review, or co-composing (Miller, 2013) – and role-based, experiential knowledge making are key (Reither & Vipond, 1989). As students form mini interpretive communities, they distribute cognitive load and expertise: Analysis transforms from a solitary skill into a collective enterprise that strikes a balance between immersion and distance, experience and reflection, play and critique. Simply put, community is our solution to the problem of flow (Soderman, 2021), and we may go so far as to say that flow is only opposed to critique when that opposition is staged at the scale of the individual. But to make community a central part of our pedagogy, we needed a particular infrastructure. That “series of choices about how to play” Fernández-Vara refers to began months before we stepped into the classroom.

Behind the screens: building the Greenlaw Gameroom

Rhetoric and Composition research into the infrastructures of writing in classrooms, labs, studios, and writing centers (Bemer et al., 2009; Grego & Thompson, 2007; Kim & Carpenter, 2017; Miller-Cochran & Gierdowski, 2013; Bridwell-Bowles & Powell, 2009) demonstrates that “the active, material, historical, and multisensory character of space and place affect not only our social interactions and ways of knowing, but also our ability to learn in environments designed for education” (Davis, 2015, p. np). Despite this research demonstrating the significance of space on learning, most classrooms on campus are inflexible, uncomfortable, and designed for the

⁴ This said, Flanagan (2009) suggests that one can also play critically when she discusses Victorian toys that children would “unplay,” staging forbidden scenes like murder; “reskin,” swapping-out feminine clothing; or “rewrite,” revising heteronormative scripts (p. 32-4).

⁵ This point underscores a distinction in the pedagogical needs of game studies programs that analyze games versus programs offering professional training in game development noted by Judith Pinter and Lisa Bievenue (2024). They cite a Higher Education Video Game Alliance 2015 study of 73 game-related programs, which all offered game design courses, but only 39% offered critical game studies classes. These statistics demonstrate the need to develop pedagogical infrastructure to support analyzing games as scale.

⁶ For a development of this definition, see Chang, E. & Welsh, T. J. (forthcoming 2025). *Video games, literature, and close playing: A practical guide*. Routledge.

focus to be exclusively on the instructor, thereby discouraging student collaboration (Walls et al., 2009). Likewise, computer labs, touted as modern spaces for multimodal learning, often have cutting-edge technical equipment but are ultimately designed to be used in tightly packed individualized work stations that inhibit collaboration (Bemer et al., 2009; Bruffee, 1999; Miller-Cochran & Gierdowski, 2013). Game labs and esports spaces, of which there are many, also tend to follow this computer lab approach, focusing on individual use of high-end equipment.⁷ To realize our vision of collaborative close play, we needed a new kind of classroom.

Auspiciously, a classroom was in need of refurbishment, and we applied for an instructional innovation grant made available through a partnership between our university and Lenovo, proposing to transform the derelict space into a game-based learning environment. The grant amount was modest, giving us enough for new furniture, paint, and some decorations, leaving a small sum for all our technological needs. Among other constraints we detail below, the tight budget meant we had to “hack” the space as Douglas Walls, Scott Schopieray, and Dànienne DeVoss put it. Since “space shapes practices” (p. 273), we needed to make the room “more pedagogically appropriate” (p. 275), so we designed the Gameroom with the following tenets in mind: Have the space be flexible, so we can adapt to different types of play and game; make it approachable, clearly communicating that this classroom is for critical play without indulging some of the “gamer” stereotypes that might drive students away; and make it be available, allowing all students in a 20–25 person class to play simultaneously.⁸

To achieve flexibility, we selected foldable and rollable two-person tables that could be modularly linked into small or large groups depending on needs as well as rolling chairs.⁹ This furniture allows for group discussion, partnered writing activities, tabletop play with different group sizes, and digital game group play (see Image 2: Group Play, Image 3: Tabletop, Image 4: Discussion). We created five stations with enough space for five students. Each station had controllers and headsets for five players, as well as a large LCD screen (see Image 5: Station). Initially, we only had PlayStation 4 (PS4) consoles because we could not afford PC gaming towers that typically cost anywhere from \$1500–\$3000 while consoles average \$250–\$350. However, subsequent grants allowed us to also purchase PC Towers (MSI Aegis RS). Having both PCs and consoles proved essential in offering instructors access to many different types of digital games from AAA to indie. There are shelves along one wall that contain a small tabletop game collection.¹⁰

To make the space approachable, we carefully considered what the Gameroom’s aesthetic would be. Indeed, Shultz Colby and Colby (2008) argue that when teaching with games, instructors must counteract the assumption that the classroom space is purely one of serious, passive, quiet listening, directed by the instructor. Our aim was to encourage a sense of play the very moment students walked through the door. We painted the walls a welcoming blue that contrasted with stark whiteness of the walls in the rest of the building and inviting wood floors, hung art around the room (some designed by students in the DLC lab) that referenced games (see Image 6: Room Décor [caption: students working on writing assignment in small groups with attention to décor on walls of Gameroom]), and added warm light fixtures to contrast with blazing white, fluorescent lamps ubiquitous in schools. Meanwhile, we tried to avoid making recourse to “gamer” tropes like neon lights so as to make the space welcoming for those who may not see themselves as part of that community.¹¹ With these aesthetic design choices, we strove to offer an alternative to what Wall et al. outline as the traditional design of fixed individual seats facing a podium. And in turn, we composed a space that prepares students to expect a different learning experience.

In many ways, the physical design of the space proved far easier than the digital game infrastructure, and finding new workarounds that make games freely available for students is an ongoing task. Much of the game industry does not envision their games as classroom material. For example, virtually all game platforms such as Steam, Epic, and GoG do not allow for classroom licensing. Therefore, each station requires its own account and login information associated with a unique email address for each gaming platform (e.g. Steam, GoG, Epic, PlayStation), totaling 40 separate account names and associated passwords, many of which require two-factor authentication. Game data storage is a constant issue too. Each PS4 has 500Gb of storage, and indie and AAA games typically take up anywhere from 5–100Gb. This challenge is exacerbated by multiple classes needing to play the same game over many days, meaning that we need to pause and save their specific gameplay. PS4s offered an easy solution as they allow for multiple profiles, so each group in each class could create a unique profile. But because PCs lack the option of making multiple profiles for gameplay sessions, we turned to external hard drives to house save files for the different class groups. Save file management, account information, and workflows required extensive documentation and precise communication between Gameroom members. In the end, our workarounds, though laborious, were necessary to make all the games accessible to our students and to ensure that the games would be accessible in the future.

⁷ Before designing the Greenlaw Gameroom, we completed a thorough search of other game studies programs and their related spaces. A majority of the spaces included labs or studios tailored for game design needs, others included e-sports arenas for spectating or training; a few spaces were more geared to coursework, but were either mobile in which gaming laptops were transported to different spaces based on need or designed similar to computer lab spaces with individual work stations. While the spaces offer important support for design, training, spectating, and individual game play, we wanted a permanent space that facilitated collaborative play. See: Games Research Map by Sebastian Moring; Game Labs in the DACH Region by Max Kanderske and Annika Schwiderski (2025); and *Impact of the Video Game Industry* (n.d.), which includes data on higher education, by Entertainment Software Association.

⁸ The capacity for a room up to 25 students fit our needs well as our first-year composition courses are capped at 19 students and most upper-level seminars contain 20–25 students.

⁹ We originally wanted folding chairs for more possibilities, but they were cost prohibitive.

¹⁰ We are well aware that as our tabletop game collection grows space and cost will certainly be an issue. Tabletop games, not to mention multiple copies of the same game take space, which is limited in our classroom. Additionally, we have been able to take advantage of alerts for sales and free promotions for digital games, but there are few sales for tabletop games.

¹¹ As Nicholas Taylor (2024b) argues in *The Grounds of Gaming*, the dominance of the “gamer” figure is not merely a cultural trope but the effect of specific aesthetic and infrastructural arrangements.



Image 2. Students playing a digital game together as a group.



Image 3. Students playing a tabletop game together as a group.

Sustainable practices: maintaining the Critical Game Studies Program

In addition to standards and protocols necessary for maintaining the space of Gameroom, we also created extensive programming and resources for instructors through workshops, demonstrations, guest speakers, sample syllabi, teaching modules, and one-on-one consultations. Much of the financial support for this programmatic work came from a National Endowment for Humanities (NEH) Humanities Initiatives Grant, which we received in 2022. As this particular NEH grant gave funds to create a new program or initiative in the humanities, we proposed to create a Critical Game Studies Program that the already established Gameroom would support. The



Image 4. Students discussing key concepts.



Image 5. Equipment set-up for PC digital games with keyboard, moutse, and linked headphones.

funds and notoriety from the grant fueled programming that built a robust community of instructors committed to critical play pedagogies. This foundational work sparked 10 new classes that will eventually lead to an interdisciplinary Critical Games Studies minor. Together with these new classes, many other instructors have incorporated games and play pedagogies into their existing courses. To date, 95 classes and 2300 students have used the Gameroom.

The Gameroom's success required (and continues to require) significant labor: Creating, coordinating, and organizing the standards necessary to run the technology in the Gameroom, determining best pedagogical practices to use the equipment, and building a community of instructors who felt prepared to teach in the room. Much of this labor has come from the DLC lab, which Rivard founded in 2018. The lab's mission is to spur innovation in digital media and methods by employing graduate students to gain hands-on experience by creating digital material to support departmental teaching and research needs. As faculty director, Rivard successfully demonstrated to departmental and university stakeholders that supporting the Gameroom was a natural extension of the lab's digital pedagogy work.



Image 6.

Positioning graduate students as central to the infrastructure of the Gameroom allows them to gain essential management, program development, and pedagogical skills that can be applied to their own teaching and research, as well as future roles inside and outside of academia. These administrative skills are often difficult to acquire in graduate classes or in lab spaces that tend to focus on research methods (Pawlicka-Deger & Thomson, 2023) or pedagogical training (Flores et al., 2023). To fill this absence, graduate students were positioned as co-developers of the Gameroom infrastructure. They helped establish protocols, create troubleshooting documents, test equipment, form roles and responsibilities within the team, and create documentation to preserve institutional memory as different students cycle in and out of the game team. Many of the modules now used in the classroom were drafted, tested, and revised by graduate students themselves, and ideally, they leave UNC-CH prepared to administer programs of their own. It is important to note, however, that this type of labor and skill-building infrastructure was made possible by the already established DLC lab and institutional support, especially from the department chair at the time. Such support is, as DeVoss et al. (2005) explain, part of the often invisible institutional infrastructure that impacts the viability of media projects.

Never alone: collaborative close play in the classroom

To see how the Gameroom supports collaborative close play, we present an example module on procedural rhetoric used by many first-year writing instructors in a newly created course, “Gaming Across the Disciplines.” As its title suggests, the course is modeled on our Writing Program’s genre-based first-year writing-across-the-disciplines curriculum which aims to develop transferable writing competencies by having students compose in three main disciplinary divisions: Humanities, Social Sciences, and Natural Sciences. To help students recognize the conventions of a given genre of writing, they are asked to inhabit a specific rhetorical situation within each discipline. As Danielewicz et al. (2021) explain in a discussion of the research that grounds the program, the genre-based approach allows students to “inhabit [the genre] through role-playing” and thereby recognize and emulate the discursive practices of a given rhetorical situation (Danielewicz et al., Implications).

In this example within the humanities unit, students are positioned as interns in the DLC lab who have been asked to submit an academic blog on the procedural rhetoric of games to *In Media Res*, a Media Commons site that “focuses on up-to-the minute discussion of brief excerpts from media texts in weekly thematic clusters.” The learning objectives for the assignment are: identify the genre of an academic blog, including how to enter into a conversation with other academics through quotations and citations; leverage the multimodal capabilities of online publication; and make an argument about procedural rhetoric and sovereign space with direct evidence from a game. Through the assignment, students also perform collaborative close play in the space of the Gameroom.

To provide a model before students transition to independent work on a game of choice, we begin by working through an example together as a class over the course of one week, spread across three 50-minute sessions (see Appendix B: Teaching Module). The module evolves in three parts: (1) introduce close play analysis by playing *Super Mario Bros.* individually; (2) foreground the importance of community in collaborative close play with *Never Alone* alongside attention to indigenous game design and procedural rhetoric; (3) transfer game analysis skills to the writing genre of an academic blog by outlining a potential article on *Never Alone* and procedural rhetoric as a group.

This module brings together what might at first appear as two unlikely games: *Super Mario Bros.* and *Never Alone* or *(Kisima Ingitchuna)* (Nintendo, 1985). While most know Nintendo's iconic platformer game, few have heard of *Never Alone*, which emerged as a collaboration between E-Line Media, Upper One Games, and the Cook Inlet Tribal Council of the Iñupiaq community of Alaska. Juxtaposing these titles allows students to approach procedural rhetoric through the lens of Indigenous game design, thereby confronting ways in which colonial rhetoric often becomes normalized by mainstream gaming. This practice of foregrounding issues of representation and power while teaching core concepts in game analysis is central to our CGS Program.

Before the first class session, students are asked to read "The Rhetoric of Video Games" by Ian Bogost (2008). In class, they begin by playing *Mario* on a browser-based emulator using their own devices. We then hold a brief discussion about their observations, but without prompts or structure, the conversation tends to stall. Students alternate between enthusiastic but vague comments and long pauses, unsure of what constitutes a meaningful insight. Rather than attempting to avoid this response, we treat it as a teachable moment, a demonstration of the importance of a more structured approach. We introduce the Collaborative Close Play Worksheet (see Appendix A: Collaborative Close Play Worksheet) and ask them to play the game again.

Drawn from Edmond Chang and Timothy Welsh's close play framework (2025) and Fernández-Vara's "interpretative analyses" (p. 210), the worksheet invites students to articulate and organize their observations from the game into four main categories. These include:

- (1) **Narrative** – the "game's plot, themes, characters, dialogues." This is generally the most intuitive category for students, though they tend to default to broad summaries of "what the game is about" instead of citing specific examples.
- (2) **Mise en scène** – an expanded version of the term from film studies, encompassing "visuals, representations, sounds, items, and settings." Students usually gravitate towards this category as they can readily describe what they see and hear.
- (3) **Mechanics** – "controls, actions, interface, rules, exploits." This tends to be more challenging, since it requires attention to the procedural systems that shape play, many of which remain invisible.
- (4) **Impact of/on culture and society** – "contexts, race, gender, sexuality, class, disability, connections to player communities, non-gaming communities, news, laws and policies." This final category helps students consider the game's broader cultural circulation and how it mediates their own experience as players (Chang et al., 2021, p. 121).

Thus, the worksheet provides students with a structure that filters their notes into the terms of critical analysis, encouraging them to both look for certain features and use the appropriate vocabulary to describe them.

Still using their own machines, students play *Mario* for several minutes while completing the worksheet. We then arrange the tables into a large circle to facilitate collaborative discussion, with particular attention to mechanics and the concept of procedural rhetoric from Bogost. *Mario* proves especially effective for this module: its gameplay is simple, yet – often to the students' surprise – reveals layers of complexity under close analysis. Its historical and cultural context further enriches the discussion: The game's release in 1985 revitalized the collapsed U.S. video game market, giving Nintendo and the Japanese video game industry a controlling and foundational hand in the development of U.S. video game culture. These facts equip instructors to challenge students' assumptions and broaden the interpretive frame they bring to the classroom.

The second discussion is notably more lively and analytically focused on account of the structures put in place: The Collaborative Close Play Worksheet and the instructor's guidance model the kind of connections we want students to draw between their in-game experiences and broader cultural issues. By the end of this class, students are much more able to approach games as objects worthy of analysis as they use the collaborative close play framework to communicate their thoughts and observations. Between this session and the next, students read "Digital dispossessions: the importance of regional specificity and sovereign spaces to video game representations of native American cultural heritage" by Ashlee Bird (2021) and define the "procedural rhetoric" and "sovereign space" in their own words via the class discussion forum.

During the next session, the space of the Gameroom is leveraged to introduce students to the importance of community in close play. The tables are arranged such that students can both play and take notes in groups, immediately conveying that gameplay and analysis will be collaborative. Class begins with an overview of *Never Alone*, situating this Iñupiaq game with English subtitles as a unique and powerful collaboration between community members and game designers. This time, students do not play independently. Instead, they are arranged into groups of five, each gathered around a narrow table in front of a large screen. On every table are two PS4 controllers and five headsets, all connected to the console. *Never Alone* is a two-player collaborative game, where one person plays as a young girl named Nuna and another as her companion, an arctic fox. So, two people play while the rest of the group rotate through supporting roles: the advisor, who offers navigation tips and encouragement; the researcher, who draws on class readings and prior notes; and the notetaker, who completes the Collaborative Close Play Worksheet.

Over the course of the session, the instructor periodically calls out for students to rotate roles, ensuring that by the end of the class, each student has spent approximately 20 % of the time playing and the remaining 80 % contributing observations in a supporting role.

Despite this structure, or perhaps because of it, they often clamor for “just ten more minutes” of class. As they communicate and collaborate, each group forms a dynamic learning unit that excitedly plays and simultaneously maintains a critical distance from which to analyze that play. This form of shared play also addresses longstanding questions of access in game pedagogy. As Jennifer DeWinter and her co-authors (2010) explain, students come to class with varying levels of gaming familiarity and comfort, shaped by prior exposure, identity, and cultural context.¹² Our community approach allows everyone to rotate through roles in quick fashion, exercising areas of personal strength while exploring new areas for growth.¹³

The Collaborative Close Play Worksheet is crucial in sustaining this learning community. It focuses each group’s attention on their shared writing goals while also giving shape to the practice of group-based analysis. This tactile presence – on the table, between controllers – links the embodied act of gameplay with the intellectual work of observation and reflection, fostering both individual continuity and group cohesion. That said, using the worksheet is not intuitive for all students; it is a learned practice that needs to be reinforced by the instructor.

By encouraging students to be boisterous, and listening to their spontaneous reactions, we gain opportunities to channel the curiosity and observational skill students already bring to the game. Comments like “What was that?”, “I’m nervous about crossing the river,” “Why did her hair change color?” or “Why is there a gravestone in this spot?” become openings for analysis. As interlocutors between the students and the text, we affirm or challenge these observations then remind them to record them on the worksheet. Students are often surprised – and proud – to learn that what felt like offhand remarks are, in fact, the beginnings of a critical practice. With consistency, this practice becomes a habit or, perhaps more precisely, what Steve Holmes calls a procedural habit: “a player’s embodied rhetorical agency [that] emerges through a series of complex feedback loops among mind, body, technology, and environment” (Holmes, 2017, p. 10). Every time they discover something in discussion, they write it down, generate data to draw upon in their writing, and gradually learn that play and critique are not so opposed after all.

As class wraps up, we shift into a large circle format for a whole-class discussion. This final conversation helps students direct their observations towards material they can use in their blog posts. Returning to questions posed at the beginning of the play session – where could they go and what could they interact with – we prompt students to think more critically about boundaries and space, and how these elements reveal systems of power and procedure. In teaching *Never Alone*, we’ve found success in foregrounding its dialogue with Mario, especially in moments that subvert familiar platformer conventions – such as an early scene where the player is asked to move left, rather than right. Moments like these allow students to see how *Never Alone* not only resists genre expectations but performs a critique of them.

Mario teaches players to enact a hostile, extractive relationship with the world – destroying bricks, defeating enemies, and accumulating points in order to conquer castles and rescue a princess. *Never Alone*, by contrast, draws on Indigenous storytelling practices to reveal what that earlier model obscures. Its “cultural insights” – short documentaries narrated by Iñupiaq community members and unlocked during gameplay – frame the story with regional and cosmological specificity. Rather than rewarding domination, the game encourages relationality: the two players must work together to outwit (but not harm) other characters, listen to the spirits, and attend closely to the natural environment in order to progress.

Based on these key observations, students are asked to consider how the two games, as an indigenous game studies scholar Jodi Byrd explains, “serve to locate both the teller and the listener within particular geopolitical, cultural, communal, and cosmic relationalities” (Byrd, 2017). In other words, how might gameplay in *Never Alone* encourage players to “enact and embody” (Chang et al., 2021, p. 119) a different worldview than the one modeled by *Mario* – one not grounded in colonial conquest, environmental violence, or masculine rescue narratives, but in cooperation, relationality, and respect for life? These questions evoke key tenets of many Native American worldviews and, by extension, Indigenous approaches to game design (Byrd, 2017). In establishing this contrast, students begin to recognize the unexamined habits they bring to games, and the ways in which titles like *Mario* rehearse and reinscribe dominant cultural logics (Bird, 2021).

Before coming to the third and final class of the module, students are asked to read and reverse outline Edmond Chang’s “Queer Dystopias, Queer Mechanics, and *Queers in Love at the End of the World*” (Chang, 2020). Class begins with students working through their outlines to identify the rhetorical moves in Chang’s piece: first, he introduces the game under analysis (*Queers in Love at the End of the World*, Anthropy, (2016)) and presents his main argument about queergaming through game mechanics; then, he enters into a

¹² We note the importance of acknowledging and accommodating disability and sensitivities in producing this group setting. Alongside the standard game system equipment, we purchased a toolkit of adaptive equipment that can be flexibly configured to provide a comfortable play experience for any student that wishes to play. For some students however, active gameplay is simply not possible regardless of hardware accommodations. The collaborative close play practice nevertheless affords those students close contact with games through active interaction and conversation with their fellow students. One such student approached an instructor at the end of the semester and thanked the instructor for providing the opportunity to engage with games to a degree that had been unavailable to and missed by them for many years.

¹³ That said, an important part of our pedagogy is emphasizing that playing a video game isn’t the only valid mode of consuming a video game. For many students, especially women who grew up with brothers, watching was the primary way they encountered games in their youth. Therefore, while we strive to foster a space where students who don’t usually play video games feel comfortable to, acknowledging the value of spectatorship can mean accommodating a student’s preference to watch. The collaborative close play format was in part inspired by the group *Let’s Play* format popularized by series such as *Game Informer’s Replay* interviews, *Geek Remix* playthroughs, and *Inside Gaming’s* comedy gameplays. In these, as in the series that came before and after, the gameplay serves as a useful basis out of which the conversation, comedy, and analysis of the commenters emerges. That conversation is the focus and content of the gameplay session rather than the game itself, which often fades into the background or is cut away from entirely in favor of the discussion. In other words, *all* of the value comes from the active spectatorship of the video creators. These videos are not popular because the audience cares about the game, but because the audience is entertained by conversation inspired by it.

conversation with other scholars to define queergaming and builds toward his central claim: the ten-second timer can be queered to open up a dystopian space of hope.

To facilitate small group discussion and collaborative writing, the classroom is rearranged into five groups, with students facing one another. Working in their community play groups from the previous session, students spend the next part of class outlining a potential blog post on *Never Alone*, procedural rhetoric, and sovereign space – drawing on their worksheets and assigned readings. The focus is on translating their collaborative close play into the academic blog genre. While proceduralism can be assessed in various ways (including code analysis), our emphasis remains on gameplay: the way a “player interact[s] with the procedurality” (Colby, 2014, p. 46). In the final stage of the assignment, students select their own games to analyze and compose individual blog posts. Overall, the module highlights both the pedagogical affordances of collaborative close play and the infrastructural design needed to enact it.

Future directions

With the Greenlaw Gameroom and its core pedagogical model now in active use, our next phase will involve assessing the efficacy of the collaborative close play framework. We have begun collecting data on student experiences and have also initiated a collaboration with scholars in the Department of Culture, Media, and Creative Industries and the Department of Digital Humanities at College London (KCL), who are developing a similar infrastructure and approach at their institution. These two settings will allow us to compare how different contexts shape the practice of collaborative close play. In addition to assessing the impact of spatial and technological infrastructure, we are also examining how writing assignments mediate the experience of play and how game literacies transfer across domains. We anticipate that this partnership will generate co-authored publications and offer a broader perspective on how our pedagogy might adapt to different institutional constraints.

While this essay has focused on the use of games for Rhetoric and Composition, we have designed both the collaborative close play framework and the classroom infrastructure to be flexible and interoperable. Already, the Gameroom has supported offerings like Introduction to Critical Game Studies, Video Games and Narrative Cinema, and Tabletop Games: Narrative, History, and Design, that are dedicated to games, as well as courses that involve games in their curriculum, including Graphic and Visual Narrative, The Invention of the Modern Artist, and Ancient Magic & Religion. We have also collaborated on game-based events with programs in Medieval and Renaissance studies, Asian American studies, Indigenous studies, Creative Writing, Film studies, and more. Our goal is to continue developing shared protocols that allow instructors across disciplines to adapt the framework to their own critical practices, while maintaining an emphasis on play as a method of inquiry.

These overlaps are essential to our long-term curricular ambitions. We are in the process of proposing an interdisciplinary undergraduate minor in critical game studies, with the hope that it will eventually grow into a major. As others have observed, this presents a version of what might be called *the double bind of interdisciplinarity*: while game studies thrives on methodological pluralism, the lack of a disciplinary “home” notoriously makes hiring – and long-term program building – difficult. We are not alone in facing this challenge. As recent scholarship has noted, the structural precarity of interdisciplinary game studies programs is widely recognized, if unevenly theorized (Malazita et al., 2024; Deterding, 2017; Pitar & Bievenue, 2024; Taylor, 2024a). At our institution, the proposed minor is the result of collaborative efforts across multiple departments to share courses, advising, and teaching resources. Still, its foundation is rooted most firmly in the humanities and humanistic social sciences, and, for better or worse, the English & Comparative Literature Department serves as its home.

This structural gap is felt most acutely at the graduate level. Despite being a primary engine of the program, graduate students in game studies (of which there are currently nine in the English & Comparative Literature Department alone) have limited access to coursework, advising beyond that provided by Rivard, and formal degree pathways. In many ways, the program has served as a kind of stopgap infrastructure: a space where students can teach, conduct research, and develop pedagogical practices in a field where institutional enthusiasm has yet to be reflected in its tenure-line faculty cohort. That two of our recent team members, Stark and Kinzinger, have gone on to secure tenure-track positions in game studies is a testament to the formative role this program has played in their professional development. Our hope is that they, too, will build infrastructures and pedagogies of their own – shaped by local conditions, but informed by shared commitments.

Conclusion: infrastructure poetics

Virginia Woolf famously argued that fiction is not conceived immaculately: a writer must have “money and a room of one’s own” to produce creative work (Woolf, 1929, p. 4). This article has similarly argued that teaching writing with video games requires its own “money and a room,” an infrastructure built of tangible resources – cables, consoles, classroom furniture, and other technologies – as well as intangible but equally essential supports: grant funding, trained personnel, and institutional commitment. Just as Woolf emphasized that material and social conditions shape creative output, we contend that teaching with games demands various infrastructural considerations, especially if one wants to engage in collaborative close play.

Collaborative close play is a pedagogical method that harnesses the productive tension between immersive engagement and critical distance by distributing the analytical workload across student groups, who rotate between distinct roles as players, researchers, advisors, and notetakers. By structuring gameplay as a collective rather than solitary endeavor, students learn to toggle between embodied experience and analytical observation, thereby deepening their critical insights. However, achieving this productive interplay requires more than pedagogical intent – it necessitates a deliberately constructed infrastructure capable of supporting

dynamic role-shifting, interactive group work, and sustained reflection. In other words, the capacity for collaborative close play to foster meaningful learning outcomes is fundamentally contingent upon the careful orchestration of physical, financial, and organizational supports that render such collaborative interactions not only possible but effective.

The stakes of attending to infrastructure are particularly acute for Rhetoric and Composition and Technical Communication, disciplines that have long foregrounded the relationship between modes of writing, technological mediation, and material resources. By acknowledging the infrastructural underpinnings of pedagogy, we extend a crucial conversation within these fields, emphasizing that how we teach is inseparable from the conditions under which teaching occurs. From this perspective, “set-up” and “teaching” are not so easily separated, for infrastructure shapes and constrains what kinds of rhetorical and compositional practices can be explored, validated, or even imagined within educational settings.

Indeed, universities themselves function as infrastructures, defined by [Geoffrey Bowker and Susan Star \(2000\)](#) as embedded, taken-for-granted systems that organize knowledge and shape scholarly practice. As institutions, universities establish what is worth knowing and how knowledge should be pursued, profoundly influencing intellectual possibilities and pedagogical norms. [Anne Waldman’s \(2009\)](#) concept of “infrastructure poetics” provides an evocative framework for engaging such institutional conditions not just critically, but creatively. Originally articulated in relation to poetry, Waldman proposed that the small, almost invisible labor of hosting readings, organizing panels, and, generally, building an infrastructure for poetry is needed for it to flourish. Applied to our context, this concept underscores the careful, intentional work required to create and sustain educational spaces like the [name of classroom], spaces designed to open new pedagogical possibilities within higher education.

Nick Taylor’s recent book, *The Grounds of Gaming*, exemplifies an infrastructural turn in game studies, whereby scholars are increasingly attuned to the material, institutional and spatial conditions that shape where and how gaming takes place. To change game culture, argues Taylor, we must commit to “reconstructing the spaces in which we play, from the ground up” (2024b, p. 211). This perspective is especially vital for the ongoing struggle over how video games should appear as objects of knowledge within the university. As [Francesco Crocco \(2011\)](#) notes, the incorporation of games into curricula is too often framed solely in terms of their ability to impart technical skills that prepare students for the workforce. This, of course, remains an important facet of any university education, but following [Colby et al. \(2021\)](#) work on the ethical and political stakes of game-based pedagogy, we maintain that teaching with games can be about more than getting students ready for the world of informatic labor. Our aim is to make students capable of interrogating, and perhaps reshaping, that world – a task that fittingly demands we interrogate and reshape our academic one.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Courtney Rivard: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **DA Hall:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Stephanie Kinzinger:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Doug Stark:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare the following financial interests/personal relationships which may be considered as potential competing interests:

Courtney Rivard reports financial support was provided by National Endowment for the Humanities. Courtney Rivard reports financial support was provided by Lenovo Group Ltd. If there are other authors, they declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Appendix A. Collaborative close play worksheet

[Note: This is the long version of the collaborative close play worksheet given to students. Depending upon the needs of the

particular play session, some parts may be shortened or cut. Additionally, these observational categories are borrowed from Edmond Y. Chang, “Playing Difference” (2021) and fleshed out with framing concepts from Clara Fernández-Vara, *Introduction to Game Analysis* (2014).]

Narrative

1. Plot:

What are the important events that comprise the story? What events do you participate in and what events occur outside of your control? Where does the story begin and end? Think about narrative branches created by player choice in relation to one another.

2. Character:

Who are the main characters in the story? What is the player’s relationship to these characters? What kinds of personalities and motivations do the characters possess? Note important dialogue and player-made choices that contribute to this characterization.

3. Setting:

What information does the game provide about its world? How does it provide access to that information? Consider whether the source of this knowledge is diegetic or non-diegetic, and how it should therefore be evaluated.

Mise en Scène

4. Visuals:

How does the game use lighting and color? What kind of perspective does the game employ to display the world? How does the game represent different kinds of entities in the world?

5. Sound:

What kinds of sound effects does the game attach to action in the world? What kind of music does the game have and how does it change as the player moves through the game? How does the game use speech and other diegetic noise?

6. Objects:

What discrete things exist in the space of the game world? How does the game visually differentiate objects in terms of their purpose or function? What relationships exist between the objects and the player, as well as with one another?

Mechanics

7. Actions:

What are the actions available to the player for interacting with the world? How are these actions mapped to the game’s controls? Do these actions change over time and if so, how?

8. Systems:

What is the physical infrastructure that gives shape to the world and your character’s movement through it? What systems exist that the player can interact directly with? What systems exist that the player cannot affect?

9. Interface:

How does the game provide access to its systems and actions? To what degree is this access diegetic or non-diegetic? How much control does the player have over the game and its interface?

Impact of/on Culture and Society

10. Representation:

How does the game engage with questions of race, gender, sexuality, disability, class, etc.? What control does the player have over how they are represented in the game? How much does this affect the experience of the game?

11. Context:

Where was the game produced and by whom? What were the historical circumstances around the production of the game? What other games have been made by these developers?

12. Experience:

What was your holistic experience of the game, both individually and as a group? Do you feel you were the intended audience of the game or that the game wasn’t “for” you? What do you feel like you brought to the game that influenced your experience?

Appendix B. Teaching Module: Procedural Rhetoric and Indigeneity in Games

Overview

This module unfolds over three class periods and engages concepts of *collaborative close play*, *procedural rhetoric*, and *sovereign space* in the context of indigenous games. Working in the Greenlaw Gameroom, students compare gameplay in *Super Mario Bros.* (Nintendo, 1985) and *Never Alone/Kisima Ingitchuna* (Upper One Games, 2014) to develop an understanding of sovereign space and self-expression, colonial logics and procedural rhetoric, and the importance of games as sites of both control and resistance. The module moves from individual, unstructured play to collaborative close play. Using the worksheet and working in rotating roles within their groups, each student contributes to a deeper, shared analysis, thereby experiencing the analytical benefits of collaborative close

play. This module is designed to be flexible, so instructors should feel free to remix to meet their own pedagogical goals.

Learning Outcomes

- Practice collaborative close playing in video game texts
- Identify the procedural rhetoric of video games
- Describe the concept of sovereign spaces in video games

Games

Super Mario Bros. Nintendo (1985)

Never Alone/Kisima Ingitchuna. Upper One Games (2014)

Background Resources for Instructor

- Byrd, J. (2017, March 2). *Playing Stories: Never Alone, Indigeneity, and the Structures of Settler Colonialism*. Critical Race Lecture Series, Cornell University English Department, Ithaca, NY.
- Chang (2010) Close Playing, A Meditation on Teaching (with) Video Games. *ED(MOND)CHANG(ED)AGOGY*. <http://www.edmondchang.com/2010/11/11/close-playing-a-meditation/>
- Never Alone [Full Youtube Playthrough](#)

Student Readings

- Bird, A. (2021). Digital dispossessions: the importance of regional specificity and sovereign spaces to video game representations of native American cultural heritage. *Studia Neophilologica*, 93(2), 242–257. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00393274.2021.1916995>
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Session 1

Objectives

This session draws on “The Rhetoric of Video Games” by Ian Bogost and “Close Playing” by Edmond Chang to give students a framework for playing and analyzing games. The two major terms to introduce for students are *procedural rhetoric* and *close play*. Procedural rhetoric gives students a better understanding of the ways in which games teach players how to think, perceive, and act within game spaces, as well as the way in which games are informed by a history of structural logics; this opens up the possibility to subvert and challenge settler logic via alternate structures. Close play provides students a way to critically approach a video game and a framework with which to analyze the game.

Pre-session activity

Before Session 1, students read “The Rhetoric of Video Games” by Ian Bogost.

In-session activity

Room Set Up: Tables should be organized in 4–5 groups of 5 people, so students are introduced to the peers who will eventually form their play group, though they will be working individually for this session.

Part 1: Individual Play of *Super Mario Bros.*

Working individually on their own laptops or phones, students are given a link to a free emulator to briefly play through the opening level of *Super Mario Bros.* After this individual play, the instructor holds a whole class discussion on their observations and insights. Instructors should expect very generalized discussion among students based on excitement, memories of *Mario*, and general tastes.

Part 2: Individual Play with Worksheet

The instructor introduces the Collaborative Close Play Worksheet, working through the details of each observational category (narrative, mise en scène, mechanics, and impact of/on culture and society). Students individually play again and complete the worksheet. Note: students may express frustration at the difficulty of playing and writing; this frustration should be noted and connected to the benefits of collaborative play in the next class session. After this second play session, the instructor holds a whole class discussion attending to the outlined observational categories in the worksheet and giving a definition of procedural rhetoric from Bogost. It’s helpful to prompt students to consider certain aspects of the game’s procedurality: Which behaviors and perceptions does the game teach the player to adopt? How does it do this? Instructors should also draw attention to how the worksheet helped move the discussion in a more analytical direction and opened up elements not previously considered.

Post-session activity

Between Session 1 and Session 2, students read “Digital dispossessions: the importance of regional specificity and sovereign spaces to video game representations of native American cultural heritage” by Ashlee Bird (2021) and define procedural rhetoric and sovereign space in their own words in the class online discussion forum.

Session 2

Objectives:

The second session extends the lessons of the first by foregrounding the importance of community in overcoming some of the tensions involved in playing games for critique. The major terms for students are *collaborative close play*: a group observation and discussion practice that organizes and prompts students to critically engage with games as a group, and *sovereign space*: real and represented spaces structured by indigenous practices of reclamation and decolonization. Students will collaboratively close play *Never Alone* with the assistance of the worksheet for the majority of class and then use their observational notes to compare the gameplay in *Never Alone* to *Super Mario Bros*. Such comparison allows students to identify and attend to *Never Alone*'s indigenous game design in contrast to the colonial systems of *Super Mario Bros*.

In-session activity

Room Set Up: The room should be organized for digital game play such that the tables are converted into long, thin rectangles and placed in front of each of the 5 gaming stations. Each station should have 5 connected headphones and two controllers. The tables will help facilitate notetaking and role rotation. For the group discussion after game play, instructors should ask students to roll their chairs away from the desks in front of the gaming sessions to the inside of the room such that they make one large circle to facilitate group discussion.

Part 1: Collaborative close play of never alone

In groups of five, students play *Never Alone*. Instructors should note the different roles that students will inhabit: *players* (the two people driving the gameplay by holding the controllers), *advisor* (the person helping the player navigate the game space), *researcher* (the person who connects elements of the worksheet to key concepts and readings, sometimes requiring them to refer to articles and notes), *notetaker* (the person actively completing worksheet by including observations that the researcher and advisor explain). As play progresses, instructors keep careful note of time, signaling when students should switch roles (every 7–10 min depending on total class time). As students play, instructors can encourage them to explore, rather than rushing. Also, because *Never Alone* is a two-player game, students can consider this collaborative element.

Part 2: Group Discussion

At the end of the session, the students share and discuss their observations together as a whole class. Instructors prompt students to reflect on their experience of collaborative close play: What were they able to observe while another student was playing? How did they think about their role while they were playing the game? Instructors can emphasize the contrast between the play of *Super Mario Bros*. and that of *Never Alone*. This contrast should be a space to connect the concept of sovereign space and the settler logic that informs *Super Mario Bros*' design to procedural rhetoric. Students will likely recognize the importance of regional specificity, community engagement, and Indigenous developers in lead roles, but may need some prompting to recognize how those material practices result in mechanics and narratives that enact alternative decolonizing logics of space, land, and time. Pointing this out as an alternative or subversive procedural rhetoric can help students connect the concept of procedural rhetoric to the long history of settler logic in game design and consumption. Instructors may find Jodi Byrd's lecture helpful in further contextualizing this history, especially in *Super Mario Bros*. ("It is... a game about competitive colonial conquest and the pursuit of power, wealth, and territoriality.") Instructors should emphasize the importance of reflecting on these issues since *Mario* occupies a central place within the canon of video games as a touchstone for designers and players alike.

Post-session activity

Between Session 2 and Session 3, students read Edmond Chang's short post on the game *Queers in Love at the End of the World* (Anthropy, 2016). They will then reverse outline the blog, particularly attending to how the argument unfolds, such as the use of theoretical concepts, citations of scholarly discourse, and evidence from the game. They then bring these outlines to the following session.

Session 3

Objectives

This last session focuses on transferring students' collaborative close play analysis into an academic blog genre. Students work to identify the genre conventions of an academic blog including how to engage with a discourse community through citation and provide observational evidence to support a central argument.

In-session activity

Room Set Up: Tables should be organized in 4–5 groups of 5 people such that they can easily talk with each other as they discuss their outlines.

Part 1: Review of reverse outlines

The session begins with students working in their play groups to share their reverse outlines, discussing the important rhetorical moves made within and clarifying the structure of the genre. Students should note the flow of the argument: it begins with an overview of the game under analysis (*Queers in Love at the End of the World*), moves to a presentation of the argument about queergaming through game mechanics, and uses citations from other scholars to define queergaming and observations about mechanics to support the argument about how the mechanic of 10-second timer can be queered to open up a dystopian space of hope. They should also recognize that the tone of writing style is more informal than scholarly journal articles, the length is much shorter, and the author uses hyperlinks to connect to sources.

Part 2: Academic blog post workshop

With their genre analysis of the academic blog in place, students move to trying to mimic the rhetorical structure by creating an outline for a post on *Never Alone*. Instructors ask students to bring the central concepts of procedural rhetoric and sovereign space together with 1–2 pieces of observational evidence from their worksheet. Instructors should encourage students not to spend too much effort on wordsmithing or even writing in complete sentences, but instead to focus on the major rhetorical moves.

Post-session activity

Students review each of the other groups' outlines for homework. They should be prepared to come to the following class and discuss what they learned from reviewing other outlines, allowing the instructor to bridge the concepts and activities of this module with the next part of the assignment into which this module fits.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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