CHAPTER 11

Techne as Play: Three Interstices

James Schirmer

Pedagogy that encourages more play in college-level writing courses is often coupled with an acknowledgment of technology as an increasing influence in students' lives (Sirc, 2001; Moberly, 2008; Robison, 2008; Shultz Colby & Colby, 2008). Writing scholars' revisiting and/or revitalization of classical Greek words like *kairos* and *techne* is motivated by similar purposes, that is, teaching writing while acknowledging related technical and technological influences (Moeller & McAllister, 2002; Penrod, 2005; Losh, 2009). In light of research in play and the revival of classical rhetorical language for the purposes of composition-rhetoric pedagogy, I desire to bring these two research areas together by arguing for an understanding of techne as play.

The nebulous nature of both techne and play invite tangible examples. Video games are an evolving, popular medium that refashions earlier media and promotes a greater degree of interactivity (Bolter & Grusin, 2000) while also being representative of learning (Gee, 2003). As such, video games comprise important instances of how techne, play, and techne as play might be understood. What follows, then, is an exploratory analysis of three interstices of gaming that signal opportunities for play and together provide a potential model for writing instruction.

Before such analysis, it is important (if not necessary) to acknowledge that the pervasiveness and scope of both techne and play remain contentious. This acknowledgment is not to imply a lack of similarities between the two; in fact, the opposite is closer to the truth. As signifiers, play "stands

for a category of very diverse happenings" (Sutton-Smith, 2001, p. 3) and techne acts as the name for the activities and skills of the craftsman as well as for the arts of the mind (Heidegger, 1977). In other words, both are sort of catchall descriptors for various and sundry things.

Many have been encouraged rather than dissuaded from exploring alternate understandings of each term. For instance, Sutton-Smith (2001) observes how rhetorics of play are influenced by historical sources, particular functions, specialized advocates, and the contexts of specific academic disciplines. Much the same occurs with techne, given views of it as a mode of revealing (Ong, 1982), as the suggestion of learning within a tradition (Hodgkin, 1990), as possessing aesthetic and technical characteristics (Rutsky, 1999), as a kind of control over chance (Gordon, 2002), as a situational bridge over the gap between theory and practice (Dubinsky, 2002), and as techniques for situating bodies in contexts (Hawk, 2004). Neutral interpretations are as improbable for play as they might be for techne, given how ambiguity creeps into "the relationship between how they are perceived and how they are experienced" (Sutton-Smith, 2001, p. 216). Roger Caillois's (1961) observation of play is illustrative here as he describes it as "an occasion of pure waste: waste of time, energy, ingenuity, skill, and often of money" (pp. 5–6) while also emphasizing it as essential to social development. While absent are arguments about techne as wasteful, Winner (1983) and Rosen (1993) both assert its inseparability from society, too.

As this edited collection attests, video games enable scholars to explore composition-rhetoric in epistemological and pedagogical ways. I think this reveals the imperative that we go beyond the acknowledgment and awareness advocated by Selfe (1999) and implement approaches that encourage and complement new ways of making meaning. In seeing techne as play, video games work as a collective example, inviting a rethinking of composition pedagogy and suggesting a writing-instruction mode that emphasizes engaged learning.

Caravan's Platonic Play

Divergent ideas about techne and play can cause confusion, but such divergence can also allow for greater understanding as well as, dare I say, play. In this first interstice, I aim to explain how a game within a game reveals a notion of techne as play that is Platonic, that is, flexible, diverse, and linear.

Card games are known to possess such characteristics and *Caravan* is one such game, created by Obsidian Entertainment for *Fallout: New Vegas*, a role-playing game set in a postapocalyptic environment in and around

Las Vegas, Nevada. Given the setting, it should be of little surprise that the player can visit casinos and play blackjack, roulette, and slot machines. While drawing on elements of blackjack and poker, *Caravan* is uniquely playable with nonplayer-characters (NPCs) found across the Mojave Desert. *Caravan* also belies *Fallout: New Vegas*'s ESRB mature rating as the card game is a nonviolent means of acquiring in-game currency or "caps."

Caravan's linearity stands in stark contrast to the open-world nature of *Fallout: New Vegas* proper. Freedom in *Caravan* is limited by the rules of the game as well as by the cards of the player and the NPC. Punishment (loss of caps) and reward (gain of caps) are consistent and steadfast. As the results of particular card moves are calculated by a hidden system (not by the player), wins and losses can sometimes appear abrupt. The moment a winning or losing move is made, the game ends. The player's in-game perspective undergoes an automatic shift from the card table to a tabulation of earnings and overall wins and losses along with options to play again or quit. There is no summary of the previous game and no explanation of why the player won or lost. For the first-time player, *Caravan* can be a frustrating experience.

Some hold Obsidian Entertainment responsible for such an experience as the developer's choices in presenting how to play *Caravan* encourage or inhibit the player. Evidence of this perspective exists on YouTube as some "how to play *Caravan*" videos are not exactly helpful, instead showing players' inability to play *Caravan* and/or their venting frustrations by killing NPCs who introduce the card game.

Despite difficulties associated with the player's introduction to and subsequent playing of *Caravan*, it was once much easier to win. When *Fallout: New Vegas* was first released, NPCs would commonly run out of cards, leading to the player's win by default. NPCs would also never play face cards, leading to the player's disruption-less build and ultimate win. The player would also be able to endlessly discard before having to play a card. These are, of course, more "bug exploits" than actual strategies, game aspects overlooked by the developers and capitalized upon by attentive players. One 2011 *Fallout: New Vegas* patch eliminated these exploits. NPCs now play face cards on the player's stack, thereby making for a more dynamic and interesting game, increasing the difficulty of the player's waiting out an NPC's deck, and making endless discards less advantageous.

Revealed herein is a curious parallel to the critique of writing we find in Plato's *Phaedrus*. Socrates's condemnation of writing as out of context, without any voice, and as evidence of a heuristic that weakens memory (Plato, 2001b, pp. 165–166) is a clear and present paradox. In fact, it may be the earliest instance of the word being "technologized" (Ong, 1982, p. 79), as

it is through writing that Plato is able to critique it. The YouTube tutorials mentioned above reveal that it is through play that the player is able to critique the game of *Caravan*. Writing is itself a techne that "requires mastery of a determinate subject matter" (Roochnik, 1996, p. 34) and, in the case of *Caravan*, play requires much the same.

Caravan incorporates mundane, repetitive activities in service of an ultimate goal. The player, having the requisite skill, plays *Caravan* to reach an end state, that is, victory and reward in the form of caps. The player's actions may lack complexity, but learning is still required to play. There is a necessary playing-to-learn element to *Caravan* in that the only real way to improve is by playing again and again, but always with Platonic adherence to established parameters. Again, games of *Caravan* sometimes have abrupt conclusions and there is no in-game explanation for why an NPC opponent wins. This lack of notification not only makes the initial learning process more difficult, but it also forces the player to be more attentive.

Techne as play in this sense is linear, propagating rather than reciprocating, with earlier play serving as the foundation for later play. The player engages in *Caravan* with the intent to acquire more caps for better items, including more *Caravan* playing cards. *Caravan* is a game within a game, play within play, facilitating and serving as the foundation for later games and play. That *Caravan* is wholly unnecessary to winning *Fallout: New Vegas* and that there are much quicker ways to acquire caps does not necessarily negate its worth as an interstitial moment in which parameters, once learned, work in the service of the player.

LittleBigPlanet's Aristotelian Acquisition

In moving forward, across and down the page, we can come to see how this chapter itself is an exercise of techne as play, linear as well as diverse in its progression. While the diversity of meanings applied to both techne and play can be confusing, comprehension can also come. In this second interstice, I aim to explain how an occasion of "pure waste" (Caillois, 1961, p. 5) reveals a notion of techne as play that is Aristotelian, that is, acquirable and applicable.

LittleBigPlanet (*LBP*) and its sequel, *LittleBigPlanet2* (*LBP2*), developed by Media Molecule and published by Sony Computer Entertainment Europe, are puzzle platformer video games very much dependent on acquisitions and applications. Levels contain myriad items with a variety of uses, including costume pieces for the player's avatar as well as stickers and miscellaneous parts for use in creating one's own levels. The capacity for user-created levels is perhaps most intriguing about *LBP* as players become

level designers in creating, sharing, and reviewing each other's work. *LBP2* increased the potential of user-created levels by including fighting, racing, and other competition-based elements through the game's engine.

While the single, cooperative, and multiplayer modes show what is possible within a semi-2D platforming space on a next-generation console, *LBP* and *LBP2* remain perhaps best known for their user-generated content. Such content knowledge aligns well with Aristotle's operative definition of techne as "identical with a state of capacity to make, involving a true course of reasoning" (Aristotle, 1984, p. 1799). Linearity is implied here as well as the notion of potential, of something to be taught. The level editor presents all players with such a state, inviting them to a similar course of reasoning by way of creation. As Garrett (1987) explains, techne is "an actualization of our inborn capacity for knowing" (pp. 289–290). We might see, then, user-created levels as examples of acquired and applied learning. But where is the play in all this? I hope to illustrate by way of the following anecdote.

Upon learning that levels like "Cat Burglar" and "Tumblerizer" had been created by fellow *LBP* players, my ten-year-old niece drafted her own designs. That these sketches were amalgamations of previously played levels was no surprise. Her designs were not only the results of play, of course, but also fulfilled what is definitive of techne for Aristotle, "the artist's prior conception of the thing to be made" (Glazebrook, 2000, p. 105). I was curious about these prior conceptions, particularly about how certain features were among the most difficult for her to play. She often nominated me to carry us through the most troublesome sections of a given *LBP* level. For example, I was the one to make it across the wooden planks in "The Islands—Endurance Dojo" and to lead and sustain our escape from Skulldozer in "Skulldozer." When I inquired as to why she had these challenging elements in her designs, she said she wanted to "make the hardest level ever." She also wanted to get started right away.

We elected to open up a familiar template, deciding on "The Islands—Endurance Dojo," a level from which she drew inspiration. Without any worries about architecture, a desire to play soon took over. Instead of level designers, we became "garbage gods," more interested in filling the design space. Three layers of large white balloons soon marked the very top of the level template. Scores of beach balls piled upon a massive zombie. Oblong shapes of metal and plastic toppled what was once sturdy in-game infrastructure. Our player avatars soon hovered over an *LBP* landfill.

Never was there more an appropriate time to consider play as "an occasion of pure waste: waste of time, energy, ingenuity, skill" (Caillois, 1961, pp. 5–6), but impeding our pollution-based play were the tutorials. Any time we attempted to add something different to our collective mess, our

player perspective shifted to an instruction-based space. Most of the tutorials were informative and helpful, but the requirement to complete particular tasks before returning to the creation space often proved a problem. The audio tutorial was of particular difficulty, frustrating us enough that we abandoned level creation altogether. I later suffered through each of the tutorials alone and was better able to serve my secretarial function in transcribing my niece's vision.

These tutorials were pedagogical disruptions, though, much in the same way "how to play *Caravan*" tutorials on YouTube reveal what *Fallout: New Vegas* lacks. While disruptive and frustrating to our play, the *LBP* tutorials marked the linear nature of the level editor, bringing us back to the "true course of reasoning," that is, principled production of a playable level. Tutorials also kept even our rather chaotic endeavor to fill the design space with stuff linear, marking our progression with notifications of other things to do. I thus see this anecdote as another instance of playing-to-learn, of figuring out what is allowed and possible in a given space, of pushing the limits of the means made available.

Perhaps playing through a level and playing with the level editor are not that different. Both have linear qualities, alternately constricting and opening player movement through the defined space of the game. The levels made by Media Molecule and the levels made by players are examples of what is possible, of techne as play realized in diverse, linear, acquirable, and applicable fashion.

This second interstice of playing-to-learn, my niece's occasion of "pure waste," inspired her toward later level designs and redesigns, which supports the idea of techne as play as a continual practice, something to be reinforced as well as learned for "one's skills is at one's disposal, is one's own to give or withhold" (Dunne, 1993, p. 266). Techne as play is more than simple competence because there are processes of acquisition and application at work.

Halo: Reach's Isocratic Ideas

In approaching the third instance of techne as play, we proceed with linearity and diversity as well as an acknowledgment of how processes of acquisition and application work. In this third interstice, I aim to explain how the expanse of a multiplayer-based gaming experience reveals a notion of techne as play that is Isocratic, that is, about desire fulfillment and the unification of form and content.

Halo: Reach, a first-person shooter developed by Bungie and published by Microsoft Game Studios, focuses predominantly on player development and fulfillment via combat. A single-player/cooperative campaign follows a

group of elite supersoldiers called Spartans in their fight against an alien collective called the Covenant, while the multiplayer campaigns of *Halo: Reach* include deathmatch, capture the flag, and territory defense. Contextual awareness, desire, and the development of abilities are integral aspects here, necessary for enjoyment and success, lending to the idea of techne as play through embodied experiences.

As the two previous interstices of gaming focused more upon linearity and applicability, *Halo: Reach*'s multiplayer campaigns invite play that is more active and critical, allowing for and encouraging the development of a range of skills dependent on what kind of end state the player wants to achieve. Any given multiplayer session of *Halo: Reach* requires the player to identify and take advantage of connections between particular skills and abilities, to be fluid and responsive to changes in the gaming environment, changes that are brought about more by fellow players than the game itself.

Each player's actions in a *Halo: Reach* multiplayer session are similar to how Isocrates taught and used what was available toward the development of "a strong sense of comparison to set out situations as examples for those around to learn" (Papillion, 1995, p. 158). What's interesting about this, though, is how all players of *Halo: Reach* are instructive as examples. Regardless of ability to rack up the most deaths or kills, capture or lose the most flags, or defend or lose the most territory, each player involved in a multiplayer session works as an example of what to do and/or what not to do. Like Isocrates's understanding of techne (via rhetoric) as fluid and responsive to changes in human existence, design and implementation joins form with content in *Halo: Reach*. Rules remain, but the freedom to move and negotiate the space is limited less by the game than its players.

Furthermore, in "Against the Sophists," Isocrates (2001a) defines techne as ability "found in those who are well endowed by nature and have been schooled by practical experience" (p. 74). With such a definition, one might view Isocrates as accounting for two kinds of techne, a natural ability, or "knack," and an experiential ability, or "craft." We can apply the natural and experiential to a player's skill use and exploitation of in-game ability in *Halo: Reach*. Just as subject matter, according to Isocrates, is not fixed and stable due to a good rhetor's impact on unpredictable events, much the same can be observed of the player's particular handling of *Halo: Reach*. Writing from experience, it is quite easy to be "schooled" in deathmatch or any other multiplayer variation.

Halo: Reach's multiplayer games can be overwhelming due to their demand for constant awareness. As understood in terms of Isocrates's techne, awareness is necessary, as techne neither happens by chance nor is

its use accidental. *Halo: Reach*'s multiplayer requires conscious, immediate decisions. *Halo: Reach*, like any good video game, presents an opportunity for the player to take clear ownership of a virtual identity, one defined by the player's own values, desires, choices, goals, and actions (Gee, 2003). Depending on choice, the player develops and hones some abilities and skills more than others, building concentrations. According to Gee (2005b), "the virtual character becomes an authentic professional built from the ground up by the player" (p. 92), and we can observe this in *Halo: Reach* as particular feats performed in multiplayer sessions unlock aesthetic items. How the player's Spartan looks is indicative of experience and knowledge in and of the game itself.

The look of the player's Spartan can also be seen as evidence of the development and application of social wisdom, a techne enhanced by and grounded in persistent, personal, and practical experience, one dominated by "fitness for the occasion" (Isocrates, 2001a, p. 73). How the player's Spartan looks is also indicative of the fulfillment of desire, which is very much a part of Isocratic techne, informing the continued development of ability and enabling greater pleasure in the overall experience. This is a fundamental part of techne as play in *Halo: Reach*, concerning the drive to better endear the player to the particular context of the game space, to the kairotic moment. Persistent fulfillment of this desire comes in a variety of moments. The better endeared the player is to a particular moment, the greater the satisfaction in its execution.

This third and last interstice exists as support for the idea of techne as play as desire fulfilled and form and content unified. The desire to learn within the space of a *Halo: Reach* multiplayer session informs subsequent play, which, in turn, reveals a coming together of contextual awareness executed through that play. Techne as play is thus similar here to previous interstices in that there is a continual practice at work in a rule-bound area whose linearity remains determined as much by the players as the game.

Conclusion

There is certain richness in historical inquiry that makes for worthy additions to discussions of composition-rhetoric and video games. This chapter has endeavored to provide a degree of that richness. In arguing techne as play, I have identified it as Platonic, Aristotelian, *and* Isocratic. Techne as play is Platonic in that it is flexible and diverse while also linear. Techne as play is Aristotelian in that it is acquirable and applicable in a given space. Techne as play is Isocratic in that it is about desire fulfillment and the union of form and content.

Again, it is the direct application of acquired knowledge within video games that reveals techne as play, as the fluid, embodied experience that is learning itself. Each new hand in *Caravan*, each tutorial in *LBP*, each multiplayer session in *Halo: Reac*h influences one's play, one's fluid, contextual form of action. Taken further, techne as play is a series of layered, ubiquitous moments; each new encounter gives further shape to present/future performance.

The first-year composition course can become a kind of a real-world simulation designed with this in mind. In viewing writing as a linear process, vital is the possibility of change. While unmarked to the reader's eye, students need greater awareness of this potential, understanding composition as based in play, not just argument. In "Collaborative Pedagogy," Moore Howard (2001) explains writer/text collaboration as when "a writer overtly collaborates with a written text" (p. 66). She uses the term "(re)formative collaboration" (p. 67) to further describe such pedagogy as the facilitation of exercises in which students have more freedom to play with language without regard for singular ownership. This relates most clearly to Gee's (2003) design and semiotic domain principles of learning, which involve coming to appreciate the design of and participate in a particular discourse community. (Re)formative collaboration also relates well to an understanding of techne as "the knowledge of those social practices that characterize the acts of insiders . . . [and] enables cultural critique and becomes the means by which new social possibilities are invented" (Atwill & Lauer, 1995, pp. 37–38). A first-year composition course should allow and encourage the development of such knowledge and critique so that students have the ability to engage in a dialogue with a particular text, not only making note of discursive features but also creating something new out of it, perhaps even exerting later influence over insider social practice.

In an appendix, I offer an assignment that encourages such engagement by way of what Geoffrey Sirc (2001) describes as "assemblage, with a structure based on association and implication; piling on stuff to create a spellbinding, mesmerizing surface" (p. 284). This assignment also acknowledges Carl Whithaus's (2005) observations of how ways of knowing and writing are a "piling up" of verbal and textual rhetorical practices. In addition, this assignment allows students to "imagine for themselves the privilege of being 'insiders'—that is, the privilege of both being inside an established and powerful discourse and of being granted a special right to speak" (Bartholomae, 2002, p. 81). Philip Eubanks and John D. Schaeffer (2008) call academic writing a kind of bullshit, though not necessarily with a negative connotation, explaining that it may be both unavoidable and beneficial. This is because good writing is "inseparable from the context in which it

arises—and thus from the manipulations of self that contexts foist upon us all" (p. 385). In other words, there is bound to be some bullshit along the path to good, quality composition.

However, the act of composition need not be bullshit if an assignment plays upon student knowledge. A major difference between playing a video game and "inventing the university" concerns how the former is, in some ways, more tangible, with parameters and principles introduced and reinforced from the very beginning, while the latter tends toward abstraction. Placement tests and other assessment procedures acknowledge skills for proper placing rather than seeing preknowledge as something to be leveraged. Identity and context are wrapped together in terms of superficial motivation rather than managed over time for the actual content of the learning experience. As such, concepts like audience awareness remain intangible for those who persist in seeing themselves as students in a composition class rather than actual, active composers. Among the most important, potential benefits of studying video games "may not be as much in generating theoretical understanding of human experience in technology or guidelines for instructional design, but rather, in inspiring us to create new designs" (Squire, 2003, p. 57). And I share the interests of Gee (2003) in not necessarily bringing video games into the classroom, but certainly drawing inspiration from the design and learning principles of good video games to create new assignments.

While without explicit ties to *Caravan*, *LBP*, *Halo: Reach*, or video games in general, this assignment acknowledges techne as play by encouraging students to experiment and mess around with what they know and what they want to know, helping them to see the diversity and linearity of discipline-specific writing, to acquire and apply that knowledge in fulfillment of their own desires through a unified presentation of ideas. By engaging students in sustained discussions of discursive practice and "piling on" sundry compositions, this is but one example of an assignment that affords students "a place to begin" (Bartholomae, 2002, p. 93) with a greater chance for more development and ownership of identities unique to particular contexts and to do so in ways similar to what players encounter in video games.

Appendix: Pop Up Scholarship

The inspiration for this assignment comes from VH1's *Pop Up Video* (Thompson & Low, 1996), a show that presented music videos of different genres and offered little pop up windows with all kinds of information, ranging from the band/artist and lyrical interpretation to sociopolitical

commentary and little-known facts. VH1's *Pop Up Video* is a kind of writer/text collaboration as it not only involves more than one kind of text but also more than one kind of author; furthermore, the show itself is rather lighthearted and all about linguistic play.

By engaging in "Pop Up Scholarship," students will

- have the opportunity to work in greater detail with a major piece of writing in their field of study;
- showcase awareness of discursive practices within that field of study; and
- reflect on these discursive practices (and perhaps even draw some comparisons).

The Assignment

Section 1. To develop a better working knowledge of discursive practices in academic writing, choose a recent article from a journal or magazine related to your intended major/profession. Either after printing out a copy of the article, converting it from ".pdf" to ".doc," or simply copying it into Microsoft Word, go through the entire document as you would in peer review. In other words, make observations on format/style, pose discipline-specific questions, delete unnecessary sentences, and insert new sentences. Be sure to justify all changes. Track/insert at least three to five changes/comments per page and insert a brief end comment after the conclusion paragraph. Keep the idea of *Pop Up Video* in mind, though. Don't hesitate to get playful and/or experimental with the text.

Section 2. Use Section 1 as the basis for a piece of writing about the particular discursive practices within your major field of study. How you construct this piece is up to you. I encourage you to provide a simple walkthrough of your comments and observations and suggested changes to the document, a conventional collection of bulleted points, or a scan/upload of the actual document accompanied by your own further commentary. In the blog entry, make sure to have some conclusions about the nature of writing within your area of interest, if you see any problems, or if you think all writing in your area of interest should be like this and why.

Section 3. Having not only written your comments and observations but also read the comments and observations of your peers, compose an additional piece of writing in which you reflect further on not only how to write within your own major field of study but also how to write within the majors/professions of others. Ask yourself about similarities and

differences and what this might reveal about the very nature of academic discourse. Think as well about whether or not you look forward to writing in such a style/format and how this will change the way you write in the future (if at all).