This article calls attention to the need to explore with greater seriousness the rationales and frameworks for adopting gaming/writing in communication and composition pedagogy. Outsiders may imagine the world of gaming as distinguished by bloodthirsty heroes, oversexed heroines, and unbridled imperialism, and may imagine gamers as escapist, misogynistic, sociopathic, or worse. In fact, certain negative stereotypes about gaming—for instance, that it can lead to poor thinking, escapism, and exclusionary behavior—seem all too plausible to us. Yet our research suggests that gamers are encouraged to hone rhetorical skill through immersion in the genres associated with digital discourse and that gaming groups, to the extent they are characterized by a fluidity of power relations existing all too rarely in school, may provide a model for democratic classrooms.

Like many of our readers, but unlike the majority of our students, we are outsiders with respect to the worlds of digital gaming. Our marginal status in the gaming community inclines us to maintain a degree of skepticism toward the triumphal spirit all too often animating research into the educational uses of digital games. Indicative of the tone of such research are James Paul Gee and Michael H. Levine’s comments that digital media, and specifically video games, “can help all learners become tech savvy—that
is, unafraid of technical learning, adept at technology, and able to use it in productive and innovative ways" (2009: 48). In the view of Gee and Levine, current pedagogies ignore the "real world outside" and instead focus on "the contrived, dated world that exists within" school (48). Although we are not as certain that the deployment of digital games in school is necessary or would achieve the outcomes named by Gee and Levine, we do believe that the incorporation of gaming in writing curricula has the potential to facilitate democratic pedagogy.

In our exploration of the uses of digital games in wired or virtual writing classrooms, we propose a definition of "gaming" that is more restrictive than that of game. Definition of the latter we borrow from Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman (2003: 96): "A system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome." "Gaming" we define as a type of play along these lines, but crucially one that also involves a prominent communicative component within many-to-many digital environments. Here we envision examples like the massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) as representational of gaming—a virtual environment characterized by participants' engagement with one another in a fluid manner enabled by digital technology (Porter 2009: 217). "Democratic classrooms" we define as minimally hierarchical learning environments in which students are encouraged to articulate and to act according to their own goals and have the opportunity to refine their social habits and skills as they encounter an expanding network of others.

We begin this article by describing the writing habits of two gamers in order to illustrate how gaming communities are constructed discursively, that is, through the complex of play-oriented rhetorical activities we refer to as gaming/writing. The communicative genres accessed by gamers/writers are often highly dialogic and thus can hold special promise for teachers attempting to implement democratic pedagogy. Following an exploration of gaming/writing and a discussion of its relevance to writing curricula, we conclude with a brief analysis of the use of gaming/writing in a recent course in advanced writing.

Interviews with Two Expert Gamers
We began our research by conducting an exploratory study based on in-depth interviews with two gamers. Like the power gamers that Tina L. Taylor reported on in Play between Worlds: Exploring Online Game Culture (2006), our two participants, through a "reliance on social networks and their contribution to broader collective knowledge," were "decidedly networked play-
ers" (91). As advanced student-gamers, the two were initially solicited for interviewing as a result of their frequent eager references, during and outside of class time, to gaming.

We do not make claims of representativeness regarding data from these interviews. Yet certainly there is much to be gained from in-depth research of individual communicative habits and attitudes, as Gail Hawisher and Cynthia Selfe point out in *Gaming Lives in the Twenty-First Century: Literate Connections* (2007). Although their methodological approach "does not purport to identify generalizable results" insofar as it, like ours, involves interviews of a small selection of gamers, Hawisher and Selfe “[find] that the richness of information contained within the individual stories outweigh[s] the limitations” of a small sample (6). (They cite Brandt [2001] as a model for their own methodology.) Like Pamela Takayoshi (2007: 232), whose chapter in their book describes the gaming practices of four individuals, we undertook a close study of a small selection of gamers to enhance our “understanding of what we do not know and where we might head in our future attempts to understand the learning practices involved in gaming and their relationship with literacy, literate practices, and literacy learning” (229).

Our first interviewee, David (a pseudonym), was a nineteen-year-old music performance major at a land-grant university in the southern United States who had been playing video games since he was nine years old and whose game of choice was *Wolfenstein: Enemy Territory* (ET), a first-person shooter. Our second participant, Karen (also a pseudonym), was a thirty-two-year-old enrolled at a state university in the midwestern United States. Karen told us that she had played “video games since [she] was a child and learning to program” and that she and her husband regularly participated in the MMORPG *World of Warcraft*, in which players encounter quests, monsters, sorcery, and other trials.

In February 2006, we collected the first round of interview data from these individuals. We recontacted them in the months following our original interviews if we had questions, prompting the gamers to provide detailed information about topics that especially interested us. After gathering, transcribing, reviewing, and analyzing their remarks, and confirming their accuracy with the participants, we provided them with a late draft of this essay and considered their suggestions in the final revision.

**Gaming/Writing**

Textual production has long been key to the consolidation and maintenance of societies across vast areas and diverse populations (Anderson...
Figure 1. Genres referred to by gamers/writers interviewed for this article. More dialogic genres can embody the advantages and challenges of democratic classrooms.

1991). Michelle Sidler and Natasha Jones (2009: 30) explain, for example, how scientific institutions rely on digital texts, that is, “on a matrix of online discourses — databases, static pages, blogs, and search tools, to name a few,” to achieve among far-flung members a sense of community. Crucial to our discussion of gaming/writing is how gamers create their own communities through avidly employing and creating a range of rhetorical genres both within and outside of play.

As teachers, we are especially interested in the implications for democratic pedagogy that are suggested by the dialogic genres of gaming/writing. We consider it important, even in traditional classrooms, that our students practice not only sole authorship (e.g., through a final research paper) but coauthorship (e.g., through group projects or through creating content to be cited by peers in final exams or final papers). Our interviewees’ descriptions of the genres associated with gaming suggest how, far beyond instrumentally assisting gamers in cultivating play skills, these genres reflect a continuum of behaviors, some of which encourage decenteredness (or polycentricity) of communication and fluidity of persona. Following are brief analyses of the genres that our gamers associated with gaming and not infrequently used on a daily basis in collaboration with other group members. Figure 1 characterizes these genres as more monologic or more dialogic; not surprisingly, our participants were much more engaged with the latter type.

Broadly speaking, the monologic genres such as predigital media (books and ancillary print material packaged with gaming software), although clearly a part of the gaming universe, were comparatively rarely depended upon by the gamers/writers we interviewed. David stated that he had never used a book to learn how to play a computer game, although sometimes he consulted ancillary print materials listing or presenting in a
visualized format information essential for understanding especially complicated games. Electronic tutorials associated with games, that is, electronic texts taking users step by step through the process of play, were also rarely accessed by our participants. For instance, David “never used” a tutorial associated with the first game he had ever played; instead he “sort of hit the play button and things appeared on the screen, and [he] started improvising.” This remained his primary method for learning new games. At times, he would use in-game teaching strategies such as hot keys or hot buttons, which, in his view, made games essentially “self explanatory.”

In contrast, our interview participants frequently visited Internet sites associated with the greater gaming world. Karen cited www.worldofwarcraft.com as “a repository for helpful add-ons to make game play easier” and for “all things found in the game, from quest hints to item descriptions.” She stated that “almost all players of the game reference this site or one other much like it, so references to them are ubiquitous in the game.” As a guild leader, she found the add-ons at such sites to be helpful in sending mass in-game e-mails, organizing her guild roster, and performing other administrative tasks. The sites also provided add-ons to help her character optimize functioning in groups and to help customize her interface. David’s interest in other ET websites focused on tournament play. He occasionally visited e-zines with important information about upcoming games and often visited two tournament web pages, www.teamwarfare.com and www.caleague.com, in the hope that one day he might win one of the usually modest prizes offered by the sponsors.

The range of community-authored online discourses was crucial to both participants, who consulted clan discourse in order to illuminate solutions that conventional gaming texts, such as manuals, did not provide in a form they found usable. From time to time, David accessed electronic bulletin boards, which he described as comparable to a school bulletin board on which group members or a moderator posts messages and which help individuals improve game play, among other things. David told us that he had posted threads on these sites when looking for clans to join or when recruiting new players to join his clan.

A heightened level of awareness will advantage gamers/writers who participate in guild forums or clan websites, both of which normally encourage a more interactive approach to gaming/writing than corporate websites do. For instance, Karen characterized guild forums as “an avenue to air grievances, hold discussions, clarify issues, and have . . . the occasional heartfelt apology.” The forums Karen participated in were “open to the entire guild
to see" and thus could be a challenging rhetorical environment for members. In fact, decentered, fluid, often anonymous online group interactions can reflect highly contextualized technology-mediated communications that are difficult or impossible to parse in terms of conventional rhetorical analysis. (For more information on this topic, see the summer 2007 issue of Kairos, which addresses the construction of an eclectic, digitally influenced rhetoric.) These comparatively dialogic forms of gaming/writing reflect in many ways the decentered power dynamics of gaming communities.

Complex, fluid relations occur when members have only a loose notion of who in their group is doing what, and when, where, or how — that is, when such knowledge is not controlled by an individual or a small group. Taylor (2006: 50) describes how gaming community members gesture identities and objectives in wildly different ways to audiences that are immensely varied and in many respects unknowable:

Gamers often create several different characters that they then deploy contingent on whatever specific conditions — social and event-based — they encounter during any given play session. This context-dependent play strategy highlights the ways players approach [gaming] not with one preset orientation but often shape their play styles and activities against a variety of factors.

The contemporary writer's desires to be networked within groups whose members are aware of each others' ever-changing thoughts, actions, and whereabouts — even though such knowledge is likely to complicate group relationships — are evident in the popularity of gadgets that simultaneously and broadly cast instant messages (Merholz 2007).

Although successful gamers such as Karen and David are likely to have developed a rich awareness of the presence, characteristics, and needs of countless potential and diverse audiences and of the ways in which they themselves are likely to be perceived online, their experiences with a genre such as the guild forum were very different. Karen felt positively about the genre, perhaps because she was a guild leader and in a position not only to shape discussions substantively but also to mentor new players:

I recently came across tips and guidelines for a new player I am bringing up in the game of a different class than the one I am used to playing. [The guild forum's] well-thought-out tips and articulate explanations have proven very beneficial in quickly learning how to play this class of character and how it interacts with other classes. Information sites can also help overcome stumbling blocks that may otherwise take days of trial and error.
But David was less sanguine. "I don’t waste my time with [ET forums]," he told us. "There was a time when I’d write in forums and respond to other people’s points, but the childish ‘I’m right and you’re wrong’ prevailed, and I gave up." David did consider these sites useful, however, to the extent that they provided hints to advanced players for perfecting skills.

Both Karen and David noted the problem of credibility of posts to guild forum and clan sites. David claimed that on such sites “a lot of [what is posted] is baloney,” and Karen stated that “there is a plethora of erroneous information and general wastes of server space” there. Thus, she noted her responsibility as guild leader to “step in, clarify, discuss” questionable information contributed by others.

The comparatively high degree of dialogue and participation afforded by blogs made David especially ambivalent toward this genre of gaming/writing. To begin, he noted their advantages:

There’s a lot of helpful comments online that would help starters of the games . . . tips and tricks to get familiar with the controls. You can make your own config, which is a file you can write up by yourself that can modify your controls so that it better fits you. Also, there are tweaks and tricks you can do to make your monitor brighter and more contrasting, and change resolution, field of view to better suit your preference. That’s the type of stuff that would be on [a] blog.

He told us, however, that in the blogs “a lot of people were just joking around and taking the games not seriously,” and that he disliked all of the blogs because of the arguing and childishness that characterized their discourse. What is more, the poorer players often inserted irrelevant diatribes into threads.

A shareware David did regularly use was mIRC chatrooms. mIRC (Internet Relay Chat) allows users to send and receive files, handle events, access the World Wide Web, and use streaming audio in online group conversations. David described these chatrooms as “the backbone” of the group since it is through them that players set up scrim, or schedule games, contact members of their own clans, and get to know other gamers. His comments suggest that the communicative situations associated with this genre can be highly fragmented: “The conversations online can really be a collage of people you don’t know,” he told us. “Since there’s a lot of random people entering the server, a lot of people just input their ideas, a kind of mesh of ideas.” The genre of gaming/writing described by David as “the backbone” of his community is in some ways the most dialogic genre, that is, the genre.
most like an unconstrained public discussion on issues of importance to the community, a discussion open to the greatest number of members and ultimately directed by no one. As teachers of writing who espouse democratic pedagogy, we aspire to achieve a similarly high level of participation, through both written and spoken dialogue, in our classrooms.

**Gaming/Writing and Implications for Pedagogy**

The ubiquity of contemporary technology-mediated communication, from efficiency-focused software such as Power Point, which is designed to facilitate top-down communication, to social media such as Facebook, through which communication is radically decentered, suggests that new-media authors appreciate a broad spectrum of digital genres. In our view, this flexibility calls for increased attention to the complexity of epistemologies underlying digital discourse. This idea is supported by Steven Johnson (2005: 27–35), who states that the information conveyed by a popular technology continuously increases in complexity as audiences learn to adapt new iterations of the technology. But with gaming, not only is there an ever-more intricate and demanding “sequence of tasks you know you have to complete to proceed” (207), but such adaptation is likely to involve a thorough immersion in digital discourse.

The rhetorical sophistication of excellent gamers/writers lies in a sensitivity to audience that far outstrips traditional conceptualizations of primary, secondary, or tertiary audiences and imbues the canons of arrangement and delivery, especially, with a new instability. We suggest that teachers of writing seize the increasing presence, rhetorical range, and influence of the digital as a kairotic opening, not to harness and norm the diverse rhetorics of digital communication into hierarchically based formulae for the digital age, but to nudge our praxis in the direction of classroom decenteredness and student authority. Through incorporating gaming/writing in curricula, and especially by focusing on its dialogic potentials, teachers can help students recognize the sophistication of this seemingly mundane, often familiar activity. Crucially, gaming/writing assignments must be offered in a critical context, for “like all learning, without active, critical reflection and a metacognitive awareness of what is being learned, these lessons and their potential for influencing participation in other semiotic domains risk being lost” (Takayoshi 2007: 239).

Gaming’s potential to decenter power relations and thus its relevance to transformative education have been a focus of scholars such as Tracy Fullerton (2006), Ian Bogost (2007), and Jane McGonigal (2008: 205, 222).
McGonigal describes in an analysis of the game *I Love Bees* how "meaningful ambiguity" in game design encourages players to apply their respective expertise during interactions and especially during problem solving. Especially with the more dialogic genres of gaming/writing, community members are encouraged to explore more fluid participatory styles and roles. The section that follows explores how introducing gaming into the curriculum can assist teachers in facilitating a democratic classroom atmosphere promoting decentered power relations and valuing student knowledge.

**Education in Transformation**

"The traditional classroom" might be thought of as an environment in which power relations are unambiguous insofar as the teacher occupies the focal attention of each student, who communicates, in the main, with her alone. Thus, in addition to discomfort with the technology associated with new media, discomfort with many-to-many, hyperpublic, decentered, and structurally porous learning and communicating environments no doubt discourages some teachers from joining students in the digital realm.

Top-down approaches can be difficult to dismantle in digitally mediated classrooms as well. For instance, textbooks that address new media may devote considerable attention to e-mail and web browsers—which although important are by no means the tools most capable of promoting dialogue—and may indicate an unbudging respect for the notion of fixed, sole authorship by offering stern warnings that what is written on e-mail is public and not private, and thus dangerous because out of the author’s control. Such warnings set a tone of decided skepticism about the ethics of interactive digital media. Assignments may also normalize hierarchical power relations. For instance, groupware tools such as Microsoft Project may be advocated, or students may be assigned to impose a centralized structure on group projects by identifying a group leader, who is then expected to delegate tasks to specific members. These assignment features often respond to student preferences and pressures—which writing teacher has not heard students bemoaning a lack of leadership in their groups or asking for more detailed and unambiguous assignments?

We, however, hold our primary charge as teachers to be that of helping create a culture characterized by fluid movement and thoughtful and open communication across social boundaries, both inside and outside the classroom, and assert that "no society [likewise classroom] which maintains order through constant supervision and/or coercion can be rightly called democratic" (Covaleskie 1994). In a truly democratic era, in which the members...
Figure 2. A continuum for understanding ideology’s relation to political life and communicative preferences. As a culture embraces or rejects hierarchical norms, communicative style will both reflect and reify this orientation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Democratic ideology</th>
<th>Hierarchic ideology</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Decentralization</td>
<td>Centralization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grassroots empowerment</td>
<td>Top-down power</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Porous societies</td>
<td>Bounded societies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affiliational orientation</td>
<td>Familial orientation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public orientation</td>
<td>Private orientation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Many-to-many orientation</td>
<td>One-to-many orientation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

of different classes and social groups interacted freely, and civic discourse was practiced universally as a hallmark of citizenship, the many-to-many potentials of digital communication would be received not as pernicious but as empowering (see fig. 2).

To repeat, we consider democratic classrooms to be minimally hierarchical learning environments in which students are encouraged to articulate and to act according to their own goals and have the opportunity to refine their social habits and skills as they encounter an expanding network of others. According to John Dewey (1916: 86, 91), this process, loosely synonymous with the act of maturing, is unique to each individual in light of her “specific and variable qualities.”

Dewey explains that his philosophy of education contrasts with Plato’s and Hegel’s, both of which posit the goals of the state as the ends of education and grant individuals a limited range of capacities, for example, soldier or nursemaid. The type of maturity that Dewey would have education facilitate is not possible when students play a negligible role in determining the ends that education and that they themselves will serve, and thus was unavailable in the main within societies such as ancient Athens or the German states. And it remains unavailable wherever individual liberty is a casualty or economic inequalities undermine democracy’s potential to “eliminate distance between people and classes previously hemmed off from one another” (1916: 86). “Obviously,” Dewey writes, “a society to which stratification into separate classes would be fatal [that is, a democratic one], must see to it that intellectual opportunities are accessible to all on equable and easy terms” (87–88). This is so because “a society marked off into classes need be specially attentive only to the education of its ruling elements” (88). Gaming assignments that promote the exchange of ideas among all class members, among and within groups of students, and between students and gaming
communities outside the classroom, can, we believe, be a step toward more
democratic education. The coexistence of decentralized social organization
and dynamic discursive activity in the gaming community is not coincidental,
as the history of rhetoric would suggest.

Richards attempted to decenter student learning in an advanced writ-
ing class by encouraging students to develop gaming skill and rhetorical com-
petence simultaneously. Students were required to join one of four gaming
communities that they were not already part of and to play for one hour per
week for four weeks. These communities were all based on quests and were
free to play. Students blogged communally about their experiences, exploring
their backgrounds in gaming, their choices of avatar, their navigation of
virtual worlds, and, finally, their predictions regarding the future of social
media in light of their new understandings of gaming culture. Although the
majority of the class had not gamed before, most students ultimately did partic-
ipate in clan forums and blogs, surf game websites, use in-game tutorials,
and chat synchronously with other gamers from within and outside the class.

Because this classroom contained many adult learners who were not
skilled gamers, some students strongly resisted the gaming unit at first—not
only was it frustrating for them to learn to sign up and to play, but despite
discussions of relevant readings by scholars and other class members' expe-
riences, it was initially difficult for them to grasp the connection between
gaming and authorship in the digital age. Students may also resist engaging
in such assignments because (a) gaming/writing is not yet perceived as a
“normal” focus in communication and composition classes, (b) it entails a
breakdown of traditional power relations between students and teachers, and
(c) it requires an immersion in communal discourses. The teacher who advo-
cates decentered learning and wishes to promote it in the context of gaming/
writing runs the risk, then, of arriving at the paradoxical and theoretically
embarrassing position of requiring students to try to learn things they do not,
at least at first, have any interest in learning.

Attempting to locate and then to walk what we know from personal
experience to be a fine line between achieving decenteredness and risking
frustration and chaos, we offer nine ways in which gaming/writing assign-
ments might be shaped to promote skills in novice gamers and to honor the
rhetorical skills and expertise that many of our writing students already
bring from their gaming experiences. Our suggestions, although designed
to facilitate less hierarchical learning environments, may still fail to achieve
the effect desired, as Lynda Walsh (2010) suggests in a revelatory study of her
own attempts to leverage wiki technology in her writing classroom in order

*Lamberti and Richards* • *Gaming/Writing and Rhetorical Awareness*  491
to promote a more democratic learning experience. Walsh concludes that “instructors who wish their students to experience liberation or resistance via a wiki writing project . . . should be mindful of the powerful challenges the post-secondary classroom and students’ acculturation therein pose to a liberating wiki pedagogy” (207). As with the midwifery sites discussed by Philippa Spoel (2008: 332), digitally mediated projects, no matter how well intentioned, that are designed to decenter classrooms can evidence a “centripetal force” that reinforces “a traditional, print-based model of online communication rather than the ‘mobile, interactive, and immersive’ approaches that are becoming increasingly prevalent” on the World Wide Web (citing Warnick 2005). Resistance to democratic pedagogy will not necessarily be the teacher’s alone or in the main, for during the first weeks of the advanced writing class described in the prior paragraphs, students would likely have established the unshakable centrality of the “traditional, print-based model of online communication” had they not been answered definitively by established gamers and other classmates cognizant of the relevance of gaming to writing in the digital age.

The suggestions below, which reflect our respect for Dewey’s insights into the complex relation between education and democracy, represent our best-for-now guidelines for cultivating decentered classrooms that incorporate gaming/writing and dialogic rhetoric:

1. The teacher takes part in the assignment along with his students.
2. Class members are asked to choose a gaming community most relevant to their own goals. Toward this end, the teacher provides a generous list of no-cost games offering various degrees of challenge, such as Allods (easy), Runes of Magic (more challenging), and Dungeons and Dragons or Lord of the Rings (difficult). Class members are given the opportunity to look elsewhere if these are not to their liking.
3. Class members join the digital gaming group of their choice and begin writing within that group.
4. Class members choose from a range of possibilities the type of writing that they would like to do in or about their gaming group. They provide a rationale for their choices.
5. Class members are asked to critique the culture of the group that they have chosen in light of its representations of/engagement with various populations, environments, and/or systems, some of which students are part of—for example, a specific gender, race, ethnicity—and some of which they are not, such as nations, species, worldviews, lifeways, future citizens.
6. Class members analyze the quality of dialogue promoted by the game.
7. Class members critique the community’s rhetorical strategies in light of the freedom or constraint present in the gaming environment.

8. Class members regularly report on their findings to the entire class, for example, through informal presentations or blogs, field questions, and request feedback.

9. Class members critique the assignment itself, offering suggestions for improving it or discarding it in future. Because so many in positions of responsibility are likely to be both immersed in and comfortable with hierarchical social interactions, we believe it is essential for students to have the opportunity to reflect on the nature of the student/teacher relationship and on the quality of “freedom” that they experience and “agency” that they enact (if at all) through writing assignments aimed at promoting democratic education.

We are not entirely persuaded that these nine suggestions do not merely mystify the teacher’s central position in class. Regardless of the amount of input and agency students appear to have, the teacher remains, with her nimbus of special authority. We are conflicted because we feel that complete removal of the teacher’s authority risks a negative anomic, a collection of student peers who are inappropriately (or perhaps unfairly) expected to engineer their own educational experiences when the means of doing so may not be clear to them. Yet we are reassured by our own experiences and by Pat Tyrer’s (1997) observations regarding her foray into decentered digital learning: Tyrer has used a multiuser domain object-oriented (MOO) “cybercity” in a writing class in order to encourage students “to feel as if they are in control of their own learning experience.” “This removal of outside control,” she suggests, “does not eliminate the teacher, nor the teacher’s knowledge and abilities from the classroom.” We recall that even an accomplished rhetor like Karen, insofar as her communicative strategies reflected traditional rhetorical strategies such as ethos building, could have benefited from being helped to understand the importance of constructing a dialogic digital rhetoric, for “the days of crafting and delivering a top-down message are dwindling” (Holtz 2006: 25).

Obviously, guidelines for cultivating classrooms that incorporate gaming/writing represent a very modest step toward creating a decentered classroom. But freely exploring each course’s reason for being—framing objectives, assignments, and assessments collaboratively, and critiquing the curriculum from a broad range of perspectives—should help teacher and students construct their respective roles and responsibilities, contribute their diverse types of expertise, and, ideally, come closer to jointly creating a place where all benefit from the activity of education.
Works Cited


