This paper reports on an eight participant person-based study designed to investigate the literacies and writing practices of adults who play the Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing game *City of Heroes*. The study consisted of an initial survey followed by an interview and an online gaming session wherein the researcher observed the gamers in their native environment. The paper elaborates considerably on the methods used to gather data. The results are presented in contrast to the gaming studies work done by James Gee (2004, 2006), the literacy work of Stuart Selber (2004) and Cynthia Selfe (2007), and the genre theories of Amy Devitt (2004) and Carolyn Miller (1984). The paper concludes by suggesting methods for implementing gaming in the composition classroom.
“BUT THAT’S NOT WRITING:”
THE LITERACIES, COMMUNICATION AND COMPOSING PRACTICES OF CITY OF HEROES GAMERS

A Thesis

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Chapter 1:

“You Can’t Really Separate ‘em:” Gaming and Writing in the 21st Century
“In order to gain acceptance, a new literacy technology must also develop a means of authenticating itself.”

-Denis Baron (in Hawisher & Selfe, 1999, p. 21)

“As the field of video game studies grows, it may well find its way to the center of media studies, as games eclipse other forms of digital technology and art.”

-Mark J.P. Wolf & Bernard Perron (2003, p. 20)

“The proliferation of networked computers, gaming consoles such as the Sony PlayStation, Microsoft Xbox and Nintendo Gamecube and handheld devices such as the Nintendo DS and Sony PSP, have made computer gaming part of mainstream culture. This has also resulted in a renewed interest in this topic among educational researchers.”

One of my earliest memories is of playing a game called *Combat* on the Atari 2600. It was basically a set of pixels that looked a little bit like tanks trying to shoot at each other around simple one-color ramparts. It was far from sophisticated, but at that point, so was I. It was 1981, and I was roughly four-years-old, reading *Spider-Man* comic books, watching *He-Man and the Masters of the Universe* on television, and preparing for kindergarten.

Twenty-six years later, I’m still a loyal gamer, playing *Madden 2007*, *Rainbow Six: Vegas* and *Crackdown* to relax after a week of teaching and learning. I still browse Gamefaqs.com weekly, consult IGN.com and Gamespot.com to figure out what new games I might want to pick up, and among the students and other academics on my AIM buddylist are people like Fenyx29 and SupaMarioBroz, gaming buddies who sometimes grumble that I spend too much time reading and not enough time playing. Occasionally I pop on my Xbox Live headset so I can chat with our tiny “clan” of three while catching up on emails. I sometimes talk to them about the work of James Gee (2003, 2005) or the T.L. Taylor (2006) book I just read. They laugh, pointing out that reading is one of my “nerdy” pastimes, asking in the next sentence if I read the three-page post by one of our other clan members about how someone found a new “glitch” and is “cheesing” online matches.

When I speak of gaming, I am referring to a specific sort of gaming practice. While games have been played for all of recorded history in one shape or form, I am referring here specifically to the current generation of video games. I am also moving a step deeper in referring to video games that can be played in the home, eliminating from consideration for the moment the bulky arcade machines of the 1980s and early 1990s that still exist in a limited number. Most of my discussion here will delve one level deeper still, looking specifically at games that can be played in online environments. The focal game for my research, the Massively-Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG) *City of Heroes*, is a Windows PC-based game which is played entirely online through a subscription service, though at times I will make reference to other online PC games as well as a few console games (e.g. Playstation, XBOX, etc.).

Gaming is situated in an interesting space; video games have existed for quite some time, but online gaming, and more specifically MMORPGs, are still relatively new; the first MMORPG, by current definition, was 1996’s *Meridian 59* (Anissimov, 2007, n.p.). I often mention that I am researching video games and the interaction between gamers, and people ask if I mean *Pac-Man*, or *Super Mario Brothers*, or *Mortal Kombat*, or *Tetris*. Gaming in general doesn’t mean to the
general public what gaming means to gamers. All current indications are that online, multi-
player gaming—if not outright Massively Multiplayer—is the new norm. One-player PC games
are all but extinct, and the mainstream video game consoles—Sony’s Playstation 2 and 3,
Microsoft’s Xbox and Xbox 360, and Nintendo’s Wii—are marketed, and their software is
developed, with an understanding that gaming is highly social and that social aspect demands the
ability to use the internet to connect players. It’s a brave new gaming world, where instead of
playing Pac-Man with the other person who is waiting for a take-out pizza, one can play City of
Heroes with the man waiting for his pizza to be delivered to at home 1000 miles away, and the
woman from Phoenix who just dropped her son off at soccer practice, and the dude in Indiana
with writer’s block who might never finish his thesis. The opportunities for collaborative game-
related writing are astounding, including:

- Blogging
- Role-playing (in various text forms from short-stories to internet message board
  posts)
- Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) documents
- Web authoring opportunities
- In-game story arc development
- Social networking texts (chats, WIKIs, etc.)

The current incarnation of gaming studies is still an abstract field, an interdisciplinary
academic toddler looking for a home that isn’t too distant from writing studies, cultural studies,
graphic design or computer science. When I refer here to gaming studies I am again referring
specifically to the study of video and computer games, though much of the research on gaming is
nearly a “game generation” behind—gaming generations being marked by the release of new
operating systems and consoles as opposed to decades. It is my fear that the field may struggle at
times due to the amount of time required to publish; as scholars we might never be able to study
and publish refereed scholarship, particularly print scholarship, about a game before that specific
game is rendered obsolete by the advances in technology. Recent work by scholars like
(2005), Cynthia Selfe (2007), and Pam Takayoshi (2007) among others have made significant
moves toward establishing a literacy/rhetoric/composition studies wing in the field. My research
sits in that same focused area, as here I investigate gaming literacies, rhetorical practices within
gaming genres, and the writing/composing involved in playing. While the works mentioned
above form a critical and theoretical backbone for the field, one voice is surprisingly silent in current research and scholarship: the voice of the gamers themselves.\(^1\) While I am now a scholar/teacher myself, I was a gamer long before making this career choice. I cannot remember a time when I didn’t play video games, just as I cannot see a time in the future when I will “outgrow” gaming.

In *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*, Gee (2003) argues that gaming opens the door to valuable learning practices and that many of the things that gamers do while “playing” can be adapted to other situations where they need to solve problems, develop literacies, etc. As I read Gee’s work, I found myself nodding in agreement while at times seeing deeper connections and areas that Gee, and others, had left to this point generally uncharted. This thesis represents my first exploration of one of those untapped areas of study: MMORPGs.

I set out to determine a few key things. First, I wanted to determine how gamers learn to play a game that involves the creation of a character, the understanding of a specific interface, and all of the complex social interactions that come with playing in a virtual world populated by thousands and thousands of other gamers—complex hybrids of two identities: a character, or toon, and a real person in front of a keyboard. The second thing I wanted to examine is how that virtual world is collaboratively created and maintained by the gamers themselves. The last thing I wanted to investigate is how MMORPG players extend their gaming experience into composition in extra-gaming spaces such as blogs, message boards, and other websites and digital texts.

While there are a host of MMORPGs—with new games appearing sometimes as often as weekly, I chose to focus on the game *City of Heroes* due to the structured opportunities the game offers for player-vs.-player (PvP) interaction\(^2\), its relative popularity (it has a large gaming base,  

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\(^1\) To be fair, many scholars writing about games are immersing themselves in the games as part of their research, and while that is a fantastic step to take, I do not feel that a scholar-turned-gamer/scholar has the same perspective that a gamer-turned-scholar/gamer has. I wish to stress here that I do not consider one position to be more critically valid or important than the other; I simply think that there is an obvious space in the current discussion for people from my generation, and younger generations, who grew up with frequent—and often affordable—access to video games.

\(^2\) Player-vs.-player, or PvP, is a gaming environment where one player can attack another player. Some MMORPGs, such as the extremely popular World of Warcraft, allow for PvP gaming in
but it isn’t so large that it experiences the server overloads that some of the extremely popular MMORPGs, like *World of Warcraft*, experience), and the tremendous amount of attention that the average gamer pays to character creation/maintenance. The primacy of the characters in *CoH* makes it an ideal environment for exploration of gamer composition.

Before entering the *City of Heroes*, however, it’s important to trace the intersections that exist between current gaming studies, learning and literacy, and online communication scholarship. Because gaming studies itself is less than a decade old, there are few projects that are truly similar to what I’m presenting here, but a number of studies inform my work and provide a framework for my study. These works provide the foundation on which I’m constructing this thesis. Thus in this chapter I will first offer a brief survey of the intersections between gaming studies and composition, rhetoric and literacy studies. Then, just as any good video game should, I’ll provide a brief explanation of my mission and my goals before immersing you in my research. This chapter ends by forecasting the following chapters.

### 1.1. Existing Scholarship: Gaming Studies—Rhetoric, Writing, and Literacy

Gaming studies incorporates perspectives from various disciplines in a dynamic, ever-evolving way (much like games themselves). Due to the diverse body of work, I’ll attempt here to only address texts that have a direct bearing on my research. While fascinating work is being done by those who create and design games, as well as a host of scientific and mathematical studies based on gaming environments providing fascinating reading, those pieces pay little attention to the opportunities gaming allows for complex actions between players, the development of characters and identities within the game environment—some of which bleed out into other arenas, or the literacies involved in “playing” a game.

One of the key issues in video game scholarship, appropriately enough, is gender bias. There’s an obvious male gender bias in gaming, at least part of which can be traced back to the all—or almost all- gaming areas. *City of Heroes/City of Villains* has “set” PvP areas with specific warnings so that players won’t walk into an area only to be slaughtered. PvP “violence” was something that each of my participants considered to be a major turnoff in other MMORPGs.
romantic hero quest.\textsuperscript{3} As Sharon Sherman (1997) explored in her article “Perils of the Princess,” many classic video games, such as Nintendo’s \textit{Super Mario Brothers} or \textit{Legend of Zelda}, follow the fairy tale format for a hero quest. Games that follow this pattern tend not only to fail to include female heroes but in fact relegate the female character—usually a princess—to the role of damsel in distress. This early casting of video games as dominantly male extended to media presentations of games as well, which Sherman noted by making reference to the “token” female character in the video game themed movie \textit{The Wizard}, a film in which a young male video gamer and his friends go on a trip across the country to win a gaming tourney (p. 243).

In contrast, Johndan Johnson-Eilola’s “Living on the Surface” (1998) was written because of conversations Johnson-Eilola had with his eight-year-old daughter Carolyn. In the chapter Johnson-Eilola utilized a transcript of a discussion he had with Carolyn about a game called \textit{Per.Oxyd}. It contains a telling exchange (one that has deep implications for other video game scholarship):

\begin{quote}
C: Yeah. But this is… this is just the first level. They’re all different.
J: Wow…So how do you figure out what the rules are?
C: Just play.
J: Just play? And then what happens?
C: You just… play. (p. 187)
\end{quote}

As Johnson-Eilola showed, this method of thinking can appear to be random or even worrisome to someone familiar with linear, traditional learning wherein a game (or any task) has set rules. But this method of learning—akin to foreign language immersion—values learning as a hands-on experience over previous memorization then application of a set of rules.

Johnson-Eilola also brought to the forefront the issue of perceived depth. As he wrote:

\begin{quote}
3 The fact that games are targeted specifically to males from age 5-35 makes a truly balanced study of gaming difficult; the gender bias in gaming—particularly in terms of the cultural impact of the objectification of women in game environments—is an issue that warrants serious consideration. I made every attempt to balance the genders of my participants, but I could only find one female gamer willing to participate. As such, this thesis obviously doesn’t provide the space needed to properly address gender issues without being reductive. It is my sincere hope that in the future I will have a chance to explore these issues and/or that other scholars will follow in the footsteps of T.L. Taylor and look at the differences in male gamers and female gamers, how games are constructed based on the assumed gender of the audience, and how some games, and some gamers, are violating the current “norms” to create spaces that are not presumed “masculine.” One might begin by looking at games like \textit{The Sims} and \textit{The Movies}, as they do not center on violence or competition and are generally open-ended.
\end{quote}
print and literacy are typically considered mature, historical technologies while television is marked as immature at the surface level. From another perspective, print is an instrument that a mature person learns to wield, while television [and video games] is a technology that taints and damages every thought or communication it touches. (1998, p.189)

Johnson-Eilola goes on to critique this position by pointing out the similarities between early games like Oregon Trail and typical computer software and WWW interfaces. In his conclusion he confronted another of the major issues of video games: violence. While watching his daughter play a video game in which she had to shoot aliens, he asked her to explain why she shot. Her explanation was that she knew “that they were going to kill her if she did not kill them first” (1998, p. 208). Johnson-Eilola then asked if perhaps the aliens were shooting in self defense, too, and he and his daughter discussed the implications of shooting first and of the fact that the game didn’t allow the player to communicate with the aliens. Though it is only a few paragraphs at the end of his chapter, Johnson-Eilola was one of the first scholars to articulate the counter-argument to the popular media notion that video game violence makes video game players violent. The topic of video game violence is a recurrent theme in any discussion of the medium.

While many scholars continued to explore stand-alone gaming systems, Richard Smith and Pamela Curtain (1998), in their chapter “Children, Computers and Life Online: Education in a Cyber-world,” began the exploration of online gaming. Their chapter built upon the idea of the “Cyberpunk,” one who is “cyber=fusion of flesh and machine tech; punk=rebellion against social norms” (p. 213). Smith and Curtain are the first scholars to directly tackle the concept of video games forming “symbolic communities” (p. 214), noting that video games and the communities that their players form spawn jargon, styles, and attitudes. Smith and Curtain also established that video games “over-represent” male characteristics (p. 215). They also shared the widespread fear that video games stunt social development and limit agency, but their study presented counter-arguments that claim that young video game players are both better at socializing and a have a better sense of personal agency. A key idea that carries over from Johnson-Eilola is this:

Violence in gaming is another issue that has been researched extensively by psychologists but hasn’t yet been addressed by rhetoricians. City of Heroes involves a sort of “comic book” violence, but because my participants didn’t see the violence as a central part of their gaming experience, this thesis doesn’t investigate the issue as deeply as it warrants being explored. It is my hope that in the future I will be able to research the cultural implications of a game like Civilization or Age of Empires where the goal is to construct armies and essentially commit acts of cyber-genocide. That is, however, an issue for another study at another time.
“Our study suggests that the dominant modes for learning how to play computer games and how to use computers are those under the direct control of the learner” (pp. 218-219). Smith and Curtain also introduced the concept of players attempting to alter—or hack—the game code, an issue that was previously absent from scholarship.5

In “Computer Games, Culture and Curriculum,” Catherine Beavis (1998) becomes the first scholar to refer to video games as a form of new media. Her chapter analyzed the game *Prince of Persia*. Beavis serves to create the call to action:

The ‘obstacles’ that persist between youth culture and the school, between traditional views of text and culture and those thrown up by the new technologies, are less easily resolved… [video games’] prominent place in young people’s lives can provide us with an impetus to reconceive the school curriculum in ways more closely connected with students’ experience…” (p. 236)

Beavis also once again articulated the tensions of gender in video games, as *Prince of Persia* is yet another game wherein a male hero must rescue a damsel in distress. She also began the work of connecting video games to the classroom and exploring the nature of video games as text.

Marc Prensky’s (2001) *Digital Game-Based Learning* argued that the pervasive nature of video games has changed the way that people think (and learn). That claim is interesting, and is important to the study of video games, but certain aspects of his position are problematic. One of his claims is that young people use a different part of their brain than older people do when addressing computers and video games. He also creates a binary in which young people are “native speakers” of digital languages while older people are outsiders (p. 45). Both of these claims are intriguing, but they don’t seem to match with research done by other scholars and Prensky doesn’t spend as much time supporting his claims as many scholars might expect.6

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5 “Hacking” or “modding” is another fascinating issue in gaming that this thesis simply cannot tackle without straying from my focus. One of my participants, however, is an avid “modder.” *City of Heroes* includes counter-measures to prevent players from tampering with the executable code, however, so any discussion of hacking will occur outside of my study itself. This is yet a fascinating thread that warrants further study.

6 I think Presnky’s theory of “native speaker” and “outsider” is interesting, but I don’t think it is accurate, particularly if he speaks as a member of the current academy. The problem doesn’t sit specifically with Prensky’s terms—“outsider” carries implications that are at times problematic, but “native speaker,” if not thought of as a biologically determined state, works well enough, but rather with the fact that Prensky feels these are *generational* divides instead of divides defined by experience. I’ve played games with people as old as 80 who haven’t played extensively, but I would hesitate to refer to them as “outsiders,” or to claim that I can assert superiority because
Prensky’s ideas about game based learning are in many ways similar to his colleague James Paul Gee, though the men have different foci: Prensky devotes half of his text to arguing that corporations should utilize video game models to train employees, exploring education which unlike academia has only one “goal” (to create efficient employees). Prensky’s method of utilizing video games to train employees is dominantly linear; other scholars argue for the non-linearity of video games as a genre. 

Mark J. P. Wolf (2001, 2003) compiled two gaming studies readers, *The Genre of the Video Game* and *The Video Game Theory Reader*. Due to the recent shift from standard one or two player, single machine gaming to multi-player online games much of the text in Wolf’s collections is dated, but Rebecca Tewes (2001) piece “Archetypes on Acid,” makes important moves toward defining video games as an emergent representation of popular culture. Tewes is a social scientist, however, so while her views on how gaming represents culture offers a valuable lens for use by a rhetorician, she focuses on different aspects of the gaming experience. Similar reflections on the implications of video games on culture and identity appear in Miroslaw Filack’s (in Wolf, 2003) “Hyperidentities,” Bob Rehak’s (in Wolf, 2003) “Learning at Being” and Martti Lahti’s (in Wolf, 2003) “As We Become Machines.” Most of Wolf’s work—and the other works in Wolf’s collections—is situated in a wing of gaming studies that is closer to film study and literary theory than writing, rhetoric and literacy.

*What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy* by James Paul Gee (2003) is currently the most widely-read text on video games and learning. Gee wrote the text from the perspective of an academic who became a gamer later in his life through his children (like Johndan Johnson-Eilola). Gee’s assertions that his way of learning through games is they have entered my world, a world they can never hope to know in the way that I do. I understand the spirit of Prensky’s argument—it seems he’s attempting to argue to traditionalist that they shouldn’t write off gaming because it seems like a “kiddie thing” by complicating the understanding of how gamers come to identify themselves as gamers—but I feel he made an ineffective rhetorical move by asserting “native/alien” as his metaphor and basing his division on biological age. It becomes intensely problematic to claim that one can simply observe a person as “too old” to be part of the “gaming native” generations and therefore declare that person forever an outsider. More importantly, there is no research to support the claim. While my experiences can only offer anecdotal evidence of gamers over the age of fifty, I did encounter a few during my research, and most of my participants were my age or older. It also seems only logical that as the generations who grew up with gaming advance in age any proposed “age based” criteria for understanding gaming would quickly become antiquated. 

7 In fact it is the absolute lack of linearity that makes the MMORPG so fascinating.
applicable to all learners contradicts Prensky’s belief that older generations are condemned to an “outsider” role. As a life-long gamer and one of the people who grew up with the technology, I think there needs to be a middle ground; there is no special language which my generation is automatically proficient in, but it is also unrealistic to think that Gee’s experience of video games as a middle-aged man is the same as the experience of a six-year-old. More importantly, it would be impossible for Gee, with his background in learning, psychology and linguistics, to approach a game in the same way a child playing a game for the first time would. His perspective is valuable, and extremely useful, but he is neither the outsider nor the “native speaker.” He, like Johnson-Eilola and Beavis, is what I would label a Scholar-Gamer (whereas I would label myself a Gamer-Scholar).

The strength of Gee’s text is the deep integration of learning principles. He elaborated greatly on the nature of video game-based learning as “hands on,” devoting entire sections of the book to exploring what it means to shape a character through in-game action, what it means to learn the game’s controls within the game itself instead of through a manual or external tutorial, and he established that online gamers form complex discourse communities. His reflections on his own experience as a gamer also bring issues of identity into the discussion, as he contemplates whether or not he plays the role-playing game Arcanum as James Paul Gee, Bead-

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8 To provide an example, during the 2006 Watson Conference at the University of Louisville, Gee delivered a presentation that included an explanation of a scenario in WoW wherein he and his wife felt conflicted about harming a small enemy because they felt it was the larger creature’s “baby.” This reflects critical thought, but this is the critical thought of someone who is not approaching the situation as a gamer first and a scholar second. I discussed this very topic with other gamers at the conference, and our belief is that the “native gamer” reaction is to attack and subdue the weaker enemy so that it will not do damage while attacking the larger enemy. I observed this strategy over and over again while studying CoH. A gamer doesn’t think of the opposition—the monsters—as a family. The larger ones are stronger and the smaller ones are weaker. This is not to say that Gee’s observation is invalid or that his feelings shouldn’t be taken into consideration; quite the opposite. His reading of the situation is quite interesting and could be used as a jumping in point for research into how game violence is perceived by the seasoned gamer and the viewer or critic. I would argue, however, that because Gee does not see the “big creature with small creature” situation as the native gamer would, he may never truly be a “native” in the traditional sense. It is not his age, however, that creates this division (as Prensky would argue) but his training as a social scientist and linguist. His pre-existing scholarly biases come with Gee into the gaming world. Having heard him say it, and looked at the screen shots, his reading of the scenario made sense, but when faced with the same type of scenario over and over—-even when playing with gamers who were parents—I never observed anyone else sharing that view.
Bead, or one of three hybrid forms of “James Paul Gee as Bead-Bead” (with emphasis on either his own name, his characters’ name, or the “as” between them to indicate different perspectives) (pp. 51-66).

Gee also addressed the topic of video game violence, though some might find his quick dismissal of the idea that video game violence can breed real violence as unsatisfying. Gee makes his position clear, and there is a great deal of research that explores the issue in-depth—Gee feels that violent video games are no worse than other depictions of violence, but when he chooses violent examples such as the game Ethnic Cleansing (a game created by a White Supremacist group wherein the player/character must kill minorities) it seems as if he might wish to address the disturbing nature of the game’s content. Gee also dodges the issues of gender representation in video games, referencing the game Tomb Raider but not commenting on the Barbie-doll like proportions of the game’s hero, Lara Croft. I believe Gee avoids these issues because they would undermine his unified presentation of modes of education and literacy, but given the wealth of valuable information he has contributed to the field, readers are left wondering how Gee might flesh out his position on these controversial issues.

In 2004, Catherine Beavis reflected on multiplayer online games in “‘Good Game’: Text and Community in Multiplayer Computer Games.” The title itself is a play on the idea of online gaming communities; the “proper” response after playing an online game against someone new—win or lose—is to type “GG” (good game). In the chapter Beavis reports the findings of a study she conducted with several 15-16 year old gamers. She noted that the gamers were far more excited about playing live opponents than the machine. She also noted that the students involved forged identities in the online environment. What is curious about her study is that there is a single female participant, and the female participant’s reactions to the environment are more about teamwork than about competition (pp. 197-198). Sadly the single example isn’t enough to

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9 Gee’s insights into gaming are at times fascinating, but his dismissal of violence, gender bias, and objectification of women disturbs me. I don’t think it would disturb me as much if he hadn’t chosen extremely violent and extremely sexually objectified games, but to bring up a game called “Ethnic Cleansing” and to make direct reference to a fetishised character like Lara Croft then ignore the issues seems problematic.
establish a trend, but the differences between male and female perceptions of online gaming spaces are certainly worth further research.\footnote{And to be fair to Beavis, when I get to my research, I’m going to end up doing the same thing with my one female gamer. It seems apparent to me that someone, somewhere, needs to conduct a gaming research study that is either perfectly gender balanced or is specifically directed to female participants so that issues of gender can be given the consideration they merit. Gaming has largely been seen as a boy’s club, and that doesn’t do the scholarship, or the gaming world, justice. There are many female gamers; they just aren’t front-and-center playing the most popular games.}

In *Game Work*, Ken McAllister (2004) refers to video games as “works of art” (p. vii). McAllister is one of the few scholars writing about games who was a “lifer” in the gaming community. His book explored many of the same issues that Gee and Prensky unearth, but McAllister makes the turn to talk about game designers and players who “mod”—make modifications to the game by manipulating the code itself—games. He also explores the nature of the environments that games spawn, looking at webpages, magazines, and other areas where gamers interact. Perhaps most interestingly, McAllister also includes a lengthy appendix that details how to stage a successful “gaming party” which straddles the worlds of academic reflection and event planning.

Clark Aldrich’s *Learning by Doing* (2005) and Stephen Johnson’s *Everything Bad is Good for You* (2005) both expand on existing literature. Aldrich built on Prensky, looking specifically at the usefulness of simulations in training. Aldrich integrated games like *American Soldier* (an army recruitment tool) and *Virtual University* (a *SimCity* clone where the player must manage a university), but most of his text is targeted to a corporate market. Johnson’s text included video games under an umbrella of popular culture, making a strong argument for the acceptance of popular culture as valuable for study and consideration.

In “Toward a Game Theory of Game,” Celia Pearce (2004) provided a sort of meta-commentary on studying gaming, exploring how gaming studies might justify itself simply by existing. Pearce proposed that games have one of six types of narrative pattern: experimental, performative, augmentary, descriptive, metasory, and story system (145). While her exploration is interesting, the presence of so many MMORPGs and “sandbox” games\footnote{“Sandbox” games are games like *Grand Theft Auto III*, the newest *Spiderman* and *Superman* games, or *Crackdown* where the gamer enters an interactive—sometimes multi-player but never beyond four-six players—world that has no set linear narrative. These games were considered “impossible” to execute as recently as 2001, and as such few of the computer science/game} makes me think that
her “story system” narrative (wherein the gamer uses the game like a tool kit to craft a narrative) needs significant expansion and delineation to fit the current gaming landscape.

The two most recent publications about video games and learning, Prensky’s “Don’t Bother Me, Mom—I’m Learning” (2006) and Gee’s “Why Video Games are Good for Your Soul” (2005) make similar arguments. Both discuss the educational value that video games have for children and present an up-beat, pro-gaming position. Prensky moved away from the corporate training model and re-focused his ideas about education, presenting his ideas this time with a focus on helping parents choose proper games for their children. Gee continued the work he started with What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy, addressing newer games and delving for a first time into the power of pattern recognition while utilizing Tetris as an example. The two books taken as a reflection of the study of video games make one thing apparent: for a focused population—at the very least—video games are worthy of rigorous study.

MIT Press released two gaming studies books in 2006. The first, Jesper Juul’s Half-real explored video gaming from a more traditional—if such a thing can be said—gaming perspective. His research looked at specific elements of rule sets and defines how games depend on specific conditions to truly be games as opposed to simulations or instances that allow for gambling. Juul’s construct for defining a game will be explored more fully in Chapter Four of this thesis. The other recent MIT Press release, T.L. Taylor’s (2006) Play Between Worlds, moves toward the specific sort of work this thesis attempts to do. Taylor, a female gamer, explored the culture of Everquest while looking at gaming in general. Taylor’s research examined some of the same themes I will touch on; she looked at how social networks are formed, how gamers established online identities, and what the nature of the game is and how the nature of the game is transformed by the presence of the massive number of players who inhabit an MMORPG. Taylor’s research, however, doesn’t focus on the composing practices of gamers, choosing instead to look at game construction and how gamers interact within that frame. Reading the text was exciting, however, as it represents the voice of a female gamer entering the academic discussion and it forges important links among MMORPG gamers.

theory scholars have really examined them carefully. They were given the name “Sandbox” games due to the game presenting a virtual “sandbox” for the gamer to “play” in. I’m not sure I personally like the metaphor, but it has spread across gaming studies and the game industry itself.
While these texts constitute a fascinating view of what it means to be a gamer, how gamers form communities and forge bonds between each other, and what the implications of these massive social webs are, they touch only briefly on composing practices and collaborative composition. It is that gap which fascinates me. While playing an MMORPG, or talking to anyone who plays an MMORPG, one engages in a great deal of reading and writing—with specific rhetorical intents to accomplish both simple and complex tasks. We live in a world where people allegedly “hate” reading and writing. Yet this large group of people—many of whom are in the dead center of the college demographic—not only read and write with a careful eye for audience and intent, but also spend a significant amount of money to be given the opportunity to write. The participants in my study all paid anywhere from $25-50 for *City of Heroes*, another $20-40 for the “expansion” *City of Villains* and are willing to pay $15 a month for an account on the NCSoft servers. None of them complained, even for a moment, about the expense of gaming. In fact all but one seemed shocked that I’d even ask. This begs the question: what makes writing different in the *City of Heroes*?

**1.2. Overview of *City of Heroes*: Gameplay and Interface**

*So You’ve Decided to be a Hero: Character Creation*

The first thing a player must do after installing *CoH* and creating an account is generate at least one toon to use within the game. Gamers refer to their in-game characters as “toons,” short for “cartoon,” an homage to the game’s strong ties to comic books and cartoons. While the toon creation process is filled with complex rhetorical choices for the seasoned gamer—choices that I will explore in depth in Chapter Four—the initial creation process requires only a basic understanding of the interface and a unifying “theme” for the character. Gamers I interviewed and observed referred to the creation process as “so much fun it could be its own game,” “extremely forgiving,” and “the start of a long, long story.” To better illustrate what the creation process includes, I offer the example below. I decided to take advice from one of my participants

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12 To be completely fair, one COULD create a toon without a unifying theme, but I didn’t encounter anyone in my research who didn’t recall using at least one basic concept to hold even their first toon together. In chapter three I explore one of my own failed concepts, and in chapter four I explore an attempt to “make it right.”
who always role-plays teen heroes; she suggested that I create a toon that reflected some aspect of my high school personality mixed with bits and pieces of the heroes I enjoyed growing up.

I decided to focus on the computer geek aspect of my younger personality, a decision made in no small part because of the first two questions asked during creation. The first decision the gamer must make is what “archetype” to select (see figure 1.1). Since the prototypical super hero nerd, Spiderman, is a loner, it made sense to choose the Blaster archetype for my character so he could attack from a distance instead of committing to close quarters combat. The commitment to creating characters for the sake of their individuality (as opposed to creating characters specifically to fit a gaming situation) is discussed at length in Chapter Four.

![Fig. 1.1. The initial CoH hero creation screen (archetypes and origins)](image)

The gamer must next select an origin type for the toon. The obvious choice for my toon was “technology.” The next set of choices allows the toon’s creator to choose a specific type of power within the archetype (one might benefit from looking at these as nested circles, each one deeper inside the first). This is also where the toon gains his or her first actual ability. The initial choices are limited (in fact there are only two), but as the toon progresses more abilities are opened up. The creator then has the opportunity to choose a secondary power set. The secondary power sets are generally considered “weaker” powers (hence the label of “secondary”), but some
of the available options allow for interesting combinations. I equipped my toon with “energy blast” and “devices,” following my original “nerd with gadgets” concept.

Once the gamer has set the toon’s abilities, the visual design process begins. I will elaborate further on visual design choices in Chapter Four, but I want to offer a brief overview of the process here. The first option is to choose gender (there is a regular male, a regular female, and a “hulking” obviously distorted “huge” body—see figure 1.2) and body proportions.

![Fig. 1.2. CoH hero body type selection](image)

In attempting to basically replicate a younger version of myself, I found that some body forms are hard to simulate, but the software does offer a significant amount of size/shape manipulation. After establishing a shape, the gamer is given a what-you-see-is-what-you-get (WYSIWYG) design environment with a series of different faces, items of clothing, accents and accessories. Each item is skinned—meaning that a graphical element is placed over the 3-D model to create texture, apply a design, etc.—and can be shaded with any of a number of preset colors.

The final creation step is the toon’s “registration” card (see figure 1.3). One unique aspect of the CoH creation tool is that the toon’s name is assigned last; in many games the name comes first. There is also a space on the identification card for the gamer to post a biographical statement for the character—I will elaborate on different aspects of these documents in chapters three and four. This card also allows the gamer to see exactly what other gamers will see if they right click on the toon in-game; it can as such be used to offer key information, to record
membership in teams or groups, etc. As I was creating this toon the song “Electron Blue” by REM was stuck in my head, and it seemed like a decent hero name, so:

![CoH hero ID card](image)

Fig. 1.3. CoH hero ID card

Once the ID card is finished, the creation process is finished, and the player can click “Enter Paragon City” to enter the game itself.

*Entering the Interface: Take a Look Around*

The *City of Heroes* interface can appear a bit “daunting” to a new player, but most gamers are used to the number of graphic elements—usually heads up displays (HUDs) that provide information while presumably not blocking the gamer’s view of the action—that games place on screen. The game follows the player’s toon from behind the shoulder in a third-person view (see figure 1.4). The camera zooms in and out as the toon switches areas and can be manually zoomed with the scroll wheel on the mouse. There are HUD overlays in each corner of the screen as well as in the top center.
The most critical social element of the game appears in the lower left corner. This is the chat console (see figure 1.5). The chat console allows for communication with other players within the game. The standard chat functions like most internet chat applications; the user types his or her comments into the space at the bottom, hits enter, and the comments are sent to the specified recipients. This chat, however, is multi-tabbed and can at times become quite complex. The user has options including “broadcast”—which sends the message to everyone on the server, “local”—which simulates a virtual “earshot,” “team”—which only sends to other members of the current team), “supergroup”—which only sends to members of the toon’s supergroup, “tell”—which sends a message only to one specific person, and a customizable tab that allows for users to configure chats with friends, even if they are on different servers.
The game color codes communications based on message type—for example, in the image the “tell” I received is yellow. The upper part of the chat window, which logs the chat, also records emotes—when a player chooses to act out something, such as shrugging or pointing—and attacks.

Directly above the chat window is a target HUD. This changes to show the “health” and “energy” of anything the toon has targeted—an object, a fellow hero, an enemy, etc. To the right of the target HUD is a navigation HUD. It can be used to show a map, the current goal, or a list of the toon’s “contacts.” In the top right corner is the health/energy/experience meter. The top green bar indicates how many “hit points” the toon has before he or she loses consciousness and either needs to be revived by another player or must go to the hospital—the CoH version of “dying;” other players can see this bar when watching another toon in action. The blue bar below it indicates how much energy the toon has. If this bar is empty, the toon must rest before doing anything other than walking. The purple bar indicates how many experience points the toon currently has as he or she progresses to the next level. Small icons below the bars indicate what abilities or powers the toon is currently using.

The lower right HUD contains the toon’s powers and inspirations. Powers are clickable, or correspond to the number keys via the small numbers next to each on the display. The inspirations listed above the powers bar offer temporary boosts to various powers, health, energy, etc. They can only be used once and disappear once utilized.
Equipped with an understanding of the interface, the gamer must then seek out a contact to find a mission. In the beginning this is easy; the first contact is only a few steps from where the character enters Paragon City. Upon taking a mission the user is told what task to complete and asked if he or she understands. After accepting the mission, one utilizes the map to find the location then powers/actions to complete the task itself. In addition to the elements described in the various HUDs, almost everything in the game can be clicked on to interact or right clicked to obtain information (including other players). Each of the gamers I spoke with described the initial learning curve as “easy,” but indicated that learning to actually play the game “well” (as opposed to simply being able to say one was playing, perhaps a fine distinction but a critical distinction in the eyes of gamers) took anywhere from weeks to months.

As the gamer progresses through the game the tasks become both more difficult to complete and more complicated to interpret. Early missions include tasks like “take this package to Sam” or “defeat two gang members.” These tasks are fairly straightforward and require little more from the gamer than a basic understanding that pressing on one of the arrow keys moves the toon in that given direction, the buttons or numbers for each attack launch offensive strikes, and a mouse click prompts interaction between characters or toons and objects. Over time, missions evolve into multiple-battle, multiple-location, multiple-puzzle tasks that can at times take hours to complete.

A gamer can also avoid taking on missions and simply wander the streets fighting crime, taking in the sights, talking to other toons, or dancing the night away in Pocket D, the “no violence” dance club. The design of CoH allows a gamer to learn the game and develop his or her toon at whatever rate one wishes. The adventurous gamer who wishes to quickly rise in level to gain powers and abilities can roam the streets in dangerous neighborhoods, fighting mobs of various enemies well above the toon’s level; the chance of “dying” is much higher, but the benefits of winning are far greater than the benefits for those who play in lower level areas and fight one-on-one or one-on-two against weaker opponents. Some gamers take on missions based entirely on the social ramifications; for example one of my research participants took me along on what was basically a suicide mission. Another hero asked for his help, and he felt honor-bound to give it even though the opposing forces were significantly stronger than our toons. Others choose to place their toons in very specific roles of their own creation. One of my
participants considered himself a troll hunter, but he also called a specific area of Paragon City home, and he would not leave that area, even when a contact told him that he must.

The examples above should make it clear that straight out of the box CoH doesn’t have a specific, obvious path for the gamer to follow. Unlike classic games like Pac-Man, where the goal is to eat power pellets and kill ghosts—or to visit every point on a grid, or more plot driven games like the Final Fantasy series, where a character embarks on an epic quest, CoH is entirely open-ended. “Succeeding” as a hero doesn’t mean that one has accomplished any particular thing.

In Chapter Four I will reflect on how other gamers socially define the genre expectations of what makes a successful super hero. It is important to note, however, that the definitions of hero and villain, good toon and bad toon, well-played game and poorly played game come only from the community itself. Social interaction is the most critical element to playing the game. While some heroes choose to “campaign” solo—fighting some villains alone, taking on missions from contacts then forming teams, etc.—it is nearly impossible to play the game alone. Other toons—and the human beings sitting at their computers operating those other toons—seek out even the loners, offering help or simply chatting, usually in character. A person who wishes to play in solitude would find little use for CoH or any MMORPG.

1.3. The Mission, Should You Choose to Accept it…

I believe that MMORPGs and how they are “played,” in the gamer’s terms, have multiple implications for the composition classroom and our understanding of digital rhetorics. CoH gamers do a tremendous amount of sophisticated, rhetorically rich, composition as a function of the game, including composing biographical statements, extensive textual role-plays, character designs, supergroup websites, and Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) documents. Gamers, at least the ones I interviewed, create these texts—often sustained, well-focused rhetorical efforts that make audience-specific appeals—without perceiving their actions as “writing.” In fact the composing that gamers enact as they play is so important that one of gamer said “you can’t really separate [the writing from the game], because without that stuff, the game wouldn’t really work.” Gamers compose the “reality” of Paragon City, and they pay a monthly fee for the right to do it.
Chapter Two focuses on my research methodology. I have always believed that one learns the most about a group when one becomes a participant observer, so when I decided to research MMORPGs, I obviously chose to pick up the game and play. I quickly realized that the best way to conduct my research would be to conduct “game play interviews,” wherein I could play as a duo, or on a small team, with my participants. This allowed me to watch gamers play, to talk to them about the game and their practices, and it allowed me to observe their gaming styles and in-game interactions from the position of peer. In many cases they didn’t have to tell me things because they could simply show me. These in-game interviews also allowed for extended interview sessions which I do not believe would have occurred otherwise; in some cases I was able to spend an entire “day” (8 hours) with my participants. Having conducted this research, I feel the methods I utilized might be useful for others researching online communities.

In Chapter Three I borrow from and adapt the tripartite computer literacy that Stuart Selber (2004) developed in *Multiliteracies for a Digital Age*, creating a three-part online gaming literacy. I then explore how these literacies influence how gamers create characters and interact in the gaming world. Of particular importance to the development of this gaming literacy is the way that gamers weave an extra-gaming world through text and other digital media that, though amazingly rich, they write off as “just part of the game.” This chapter looks specifically at how two users came to find themselves highly literate *CoH* gamers, their reflections on the character creation process, my own successes and failures while creating a toon, and how my participants consider all the writing they do surrounding the game and their toons to be “playing the game.”

Chapter Four looks more specifically at how genre—and more specifically genre expectations—shape the *CoH* gaming world. My definition of genre here builds from the work of Amy Devitt (2004) and Carolyn Miller (1984, 1993), looking at genres as functional definitions of occasions which do specific work in the gaming world. I also define the overarching super hero genre that shapes all interactions in *CoH*. The primacy of gamer composition becomes clear when one realizes that without the rules, stories, characters, and lore developed by its gamers, Paragon City would be little more than a virtual playground with simplistic “bots” waiting to be slaughtered by players. Gamers actually develop a functional society with social rules, acceptable behavior, and generic expectations. For many, the game becomes a sort of mutual hero emulator, and as such there are defined expectations from each player. In this chapter I will reflect on how these social rules are created through the mutual creation of
“heroic” virtual identities, I will attempt to “correct” some of the errors made with one of my toons based on how my interviewees reacted to him, and I will reflect on how social rules and genre rules are enforced in such a seemingly abstract (virtual) reality.

I will conclude by drawing together the implications of MMORPG gaming literacy, gamers’ extra-gaming writing practices, the complex nature of role-plays and the collaborative compositional nature of the *City of Heroes* gaming world for the composition classroom. There’s something miraculous about a hobby that drives those who would groan at the thought of “writing” to devote hours and hours and pages and pages to “playing.” MMORPGs like *CoH* are also targeted to the college-age demographic, and the popularity of gaming shows no signs of waning. Just as composition instructors should strive to see the world in some of the same ways students see the world, it is important that compositionists show an interest in, and a willingness to engage with, gaming technologies. Many college students—now and in the foreseeable future—are likely to have made their first sustained contact with digital technologies through video games. Gaming is a critical part of their world, and their gaming practices will undoubtedly spill into the classroom to one degree or another. Considering ways to utilize gaming and game-based skills in other situations and contexts should lead to interesting new composition theories and a greater understanding of what gamers are talking about when they talk about gaming.
Chapter 2:  

A Virtual Method to Virtual Madness: Looking Critically—and Ethically—at the Research of Gaming Practices
“Methodology is always both political and ethical.”


“But even though the study of digital games is taking off, and we are seeing ideological and textual studies of individual games as well as genres of games, little has been done to actively develop a methodological system for the qualitative, critical analysis of the form.”

- Mia Consalvo and Nathan Dutton (2006, n.p.)
2.1. Turning the Critic’s Eye on the Hobby

When I chose to study the discourse communities created by gamers online, I did so knowing that long before I dreamed of writing this, I was “one of them.” I don’t have real memories that pre-date my first gaming experience, and as such I will always look at gaming from the inside, even if my goal is to leap to the outside so I can peer back in at “my people” with the eyes of a critic. I knew that while completing this project I would be researching as a gamer-turned-scholar virtually walking amongst his own kind, taking virtual notes as a participant observer. I also recognized that because of this my perspective would be different than many people who currently study gaming. I knew it would be critically important that I minimize any pro-gamer biases I might feel while at the same time utilizing my status as a gamer—and the understanding that comes from over two decades of playing video games—to the benefit of my research both in terms of how I interacted with my fellow gamers and how I presented my findings to others. I knew when I started this project that I wouldn’t really be able to switch hats on the fly between gamer and researcher; I had to reconcile the two so that I could play and study at the same time.

As I looked for a specific community to research, an old friend asked me to play an MMORPG called City of Heroes with him. While doing my own research into the game—as a gamer, deciding if I wanted to spend my money and time with the game, I noticed that CoH had an extensive and active online community, one with numerous players and plentiful in-game and game related writing. Because of this richness of participants and their game related writing, I decided to research CoH.

Researching gamers—or anyone who exists primarily, and for the purpose of the research entirely, online—is in many ways different from researching people one can interact with face to face.

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13 In fact it was the realization that James Gee (2004) was writing as a scholar-turned-gamer that first spurred my desire to write about gaming. Gee made tremendous contributions to the field, and he continues to study gaming, but his research as outsider-moving-inside raises questions for a person from the inside, particularly when he speaks to issues of gamer motive and gamer communities. I realized that there were gaps Gee did not notice because to this point he has not given up his outside subjectivity enough to know what the “inside” looks like without certain biases (like the “small creature is the child” scenario I mentioned earlier). The voice from inside is critical to understanding gaming, and I hope that gamer-scholars from my generation and the generations to come can bring that “insider” knowledge into the conversation.
face. There were several things I wanted to know about my participants, and while some of these things—particularly demographic information—could easily be solicited via a survey sent with the study’s consent form, other things would have to be ferreted out through careful observation. My research questions were:

1. How do players go about learning to play City of Heroes? What literacies are involved?
2. Given the extensive written material surrounding CoH, what motivated gamers to devote their time and energy to these extra-game writing projects.
3. How does a gamer move into an MMORPG world like the world of CoH—a world that is basically a shell with simple AI bots and other players—and contribute to developing a complex collaborative social network/virtual reality?
4. What are the explicit and implicit rules (social, rhetorical, generic) of the CoH community, and perhaps more importantly how is that information transmitted to gamers?

I was quick to realize that simply interviewing gamers outside their gaming experience wasn’t going to work. As I took my first cautious steps into Paragon City, I found the other gamers I encountered were highly social and quick to engage in conversation—both in and out of character, depending on their disposition. It made sense to me, then, that I could interview and observe by meeting my participants inside the game and playing with them. I had a few fleeting fears that this wouldn’t work—that the gamers wouldn’t take the interview portion seriously, that they’d play differently because I was watching, etc.—but after my first session, I found this method not only worked, but it worked well. My first interview/observation/campaign session lasted six hours, bouncing from gaming in character to discussing the game as researcher and participant to simply socializing as a pair of gamers.

2.2. The Calm Before the Research

To the best of my knowledge, my study is the first intensive person-based research of online gaming and gamers that has been done in Miami University’s English department. Knowing this, I was careful to explain the ethical implications of my proposed research to Miami’s Human Subjects IRB. I chose to solicit participants through a series of message boards (ign.com, gamefaqs.com and cityofheroes.com), ensuring that before posting about the study I
secured permission from the owners/moderators of each message board to use their space for my study.

I developed a consent form that addressed the elements of my study separately so that any participant could choose to allow me the level of access they were comfortable with. The three requests were that the participant grant me (1) permission for an interview and survey (grouped together so that worst case I’d have two pieces of data from each participant—the survey accompanied the schedule form for the interview), (2) permission to observe them while playing/to capture images of their characters and text as they role-played, and/or (3) permission to record/analyze their message board posts, blogs and other CoH based writing. All of my participants were willing to grant me full access for all three components of my research.

There was also some concern as to how I would insure that people were who they told me they were. In terms of age, I made the decision I believe all internet researchers must make; if the participant claims to be over the age of eighteen, one has to trust that; without that initial trust, how could one trust any of the other data? In all other demographic aspects—gender, geographic location, time gaming, etc.—I came to realize that what mattered was what the gamer himself or herself felt was “true.” If a gamer took the time to construct a “reality” that didn’t match to what one might observe if the two were in the same room, it seems ethically sound to address the constructed reality instead of attempting to somehow chip it away to insure it matches the “real” person enacting it.

I also chose to solicit participants while I was still learning the game myself. I balanced this carefully; while I have notes from my first CoH experiences, I didn’t want to walk into an interview interaction as a complete gaming liability. I did, however, begin my interviews after spending only sixteen hours in the game. That might seem like a tremendous amount of gaming time, but it was simply a three-day weekend’s worth of playing the way the average CoH gamer plays over a three-day weekend. I wanted to learn as I researched, but I didn’t want my learning to be a distraction for my participants.

I had a total of eight participants. Other than the initial solicitations, all communications for the project were handled via email, through AOL’s free instant messenger, or occurred in CoH itself through one of the several chat channels the game provides (see Figure 2.1).
Each participant agreed with my belief that the most engaging way to handle the game observations and interviews would be to weave them together, meeting within the game to both play and interview. All of the interviews occurred in July of 2006. All of the extra-game writing—blogs, message board posts, etc.—included in my research were gathered during July of 2006\textsuperscript{14}, though some were written in the months before.

2.3. Meet the Team

Though several of my participants were comfortable being referred to by their real names, I requested that all of them work with me to develop pseudonyms so that their identities were sufficiently protected. I have also given their toons pseudonyms, as I realized their in-game identities are every bit as important to protect and, in fact, would be much easier for a potential reader to locate. Please bear this in mind if at any point you find a toon’s name to be outlandish; I coded them so I would be able to easily recall the real toon name, but some of my pseudonyms don’t do the toons justice. And while one might question whether or not it is revealing too much to display screen captures of a participant’s toon, the visual options are finite (plentiful, but finite); a toon’s visual appearance, as such, isn’t necessarily unique, but names are.

In total I interviewed eight participants, but the bulk of Chapters Three, Four and Five focus on four participants: Jared, Rich, Sarah and Sean, because their responses represent the

\textsuperscript{14}In one case, I did have to go back for a screen capture due to an editing issue corrupting the original image, but that screen capture was from a static source that had not changed since July of 2006.
breadth of what I observed; the other four—Corey, David, Rob and Ryan (see Appendix A) appear periodically as reinforcement for key ideas or as participants in interesting interludes, but most of their gaming habits, interests and traits mirror members of the other foursome, leaving a tremendous amount of overlap and redundancy. I also feel it is important to mention here that while only one of my eight participants is female, that is not a commentary on the population of CoH. From all indications approximately a quarter of CoH gamers at the time of my research were female; for some reason all but one of the women involved in my study chose not to complete the interview portion. I chose my participants based on which people among those who responded to the initial solicitation were willing to spend an extended gaming session with me. There were two participants who dropped out during the process, but the eight described here represent those who were willing to give me full access to their gaming practices for an extended period of time.

Jared

Jared is a self-described “30-something” married man from “a small town in Michigan.” We had to schedule our gaming interactions carefully, as Jared had a series of standing dates to play other games with his wife. The two of them play MMORPGs (CoH, Dungeons and Dragons Online [DDO], World of Warcraft [WoW] and others) on a pair of high end gaming PC systems that Jared built himself. They have a gaming “room” with two comfortable desks, a pair of comfortable chairs, and their gaming “rigs.” They game facing opposite walls so that they cannot see each other or each other’s screens, though Jared mentioned that in addition to their in-game dialogue they often speak to each other while playing. For reasons Jared didn’t elaborate on his wife grew tired of CoH, though he considered it his favorite of the games they played.

Jared was the most highly computer literate—and perhaps the most gaming literate—of my participants. He “works with computers,” and while he is not an academic he mentioned that he occasionally teaches a computer science class at the local college. His engagement with gaming and coding is such that he won an award for creating his own “expansion” level for the Dungeons and Dragons online game Neverwinter Nights. At one point Jared phone interviewed for a job with NCSoft, as a member of the CoH development team, but he was unable to relocate to take the position.
Jared had extensive experience with video games, with the super hero genre, and with pen-and-paper role playing games like the original *Dungeons and Dragons*. He compared role-playing to acting, and spoke frequently of his attempts to recreate on the screen the sort of character infused role playing that he managed with his friends during their *D&D* days. Jared also exhibited a solid sense of character development—in the creative writing sense—and he made every attempt to infuse his toons with a rich sense of story that allowed for subversion and expansion of the standard *CoH* allowances.

Jared was also critical of interface and usability/gamer satisfaction. I believe this was due in large part to his own experience coding and creating game elements, though the two of us also spoke at length about the pen-and-paper RPG role of “dungeon master;” the dungeon master keeps the game moving while insuring that everyone understands what is happening and can keep up with both the current action and the larger story.

Jared pointed out more than once that in terms of taste he found the fantasy worlds of *WoW* and *DDO* much more to his liking, but the fact that *CoH* is so forgiving to new players and places such clear limits on PvP while stressing teamwork made the game his favorite. He also enjoyed role-playing his toons outside of the game environment. One of his toons, Kitten, had an active MySpace blog which I’ll discuss in Chapter Three, and many of his toons belonged to supergroups with web pages that included message boards for in-character discussion and role playing.

*Rich*

Rich is a 20-something single male from the Cincinnati, Ohio area. He was a self-professed “comic book nut” who had a very solid sense of what a hero was and how a hero should work. He was also extremely *CoH* literate, and he did not hesitate to offer me advice about the game. At the time of our interaction he was crafting a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) document detailing an aspect of the game called “binding” (which he also taught me on the fly).

Rich suffered from an inner-ear condition called Ménière's disease. The primary symptoms of Ménière's include periodic vertigo, low frequency hearing loss, tinnitus (ringing in the ears), and ear pressure (Salt, 2005, n.p.). Rich pointed out that he could enjoy *CoH* because
one can play without needing to be able to hear everything clearly\(^\text{15}\) and more importantly because the slower pacing and third person variable distance camera was much less likely to induce vertigo than the popular First Person Shooter (FPS) interface.

Rich was one of two participants in my study who wasn’t particularly interested in role playing. He considered the RPG aspect of the game something he “had to do” in order to form teams and undertake missions. While gaming with him, it was at times hard to figure out if he was begrudgingly role-playing or if it was his nature to assume leadership of a group using his own voice; he was capable of fitting in with role-players even though he didn’t value such discourse himself. He was a student of the game, and he offered tips and tactics every opportunity he had.

The supergroup he belonged to was important to Rich. He’d formed lasting friendships with many of his fellow team members, and he spoke fondly of them. He made a clear distinction between the experience of joining a team to campaign and being devoted to a supergroup. Rich is also the only one of my participants who has maintained contact. Any time we are both online he sends a chat request to ask how I’m doing and how my research is progressing.

Sarah

The only female to participate in my research was Sarah, a 30-something single woman from “the Midwest.” She was quick to self-identify as a gamer, mentioning that she’d been playing games her entire life before launching into a list that included *Pac-Man, The Legend of Zelda, Super Mario Brothers, Final Fantasy,* and many others. She also, like Jared, was a longtime pen-and-paper role player who frequently played *D&D* and *Vampire: The Masquerade.*

I am hesitant to point out gender differences out of fear that it is unfair with a single female participant to attempt to establish what is gender based vs. individual preference based, but Sarah did exhibit what other scholars like Bevis (2005) and Taylor (2005) claim are “female” gaming traits: she was far more interested in networking and collaboration than with killing or

\(^{15}\) This is a point some gamers would argue, as there are ambient sounds that allow you to locate things in space, but several of the gamers I know played while also listening to music through the same headphones. When I was “power leveling” so that I’d have a character ready for one of my interview sessions, I’d often turn the game down and listen to the news, to music, or converse with someone VOIP, though I wouldn’t call that quality gaming time myself.
earning points, she was excited by the visual design aspects of character creation and used that, instead of story elements, as the springboard into her toons, she was likely on occasion to login to the game only to chat, and while she was also fond of long missions, she pointed out that one of the major draws of the game was that she could login for 20 minutes and “do something without it being a big deal.”

Sarah was also the most considerate of the participants in my study. On two separate occasions she paused to ask if her character’s evolution was impairing my character’s ability to develop (or if her unsteady sense of her character was disturbing my research), she politely offered tips on “fixing” my toon, and when I suffered a freak internet service outage in the middle of our session she was not only considerate enough to wait exactly where I vanished until I returned but also quickly packaged up the last hour or so of our chat log to email to me. She also seemed interested in getting to know me, asking questions while I asked her questions in a genuine attempt to socially network.

While Jared did some out-of-game role-playing, Sarah was a member—and officer—in a supergroup that had a significant web presence. The group—modeled after a Catholic high school for young super heroes in the model of the Xavier Academy in the X-Men comics and movies, had a membership in the hundreds. Sarah’s toon was one of the “class officers,” and as such her duties included message board role plays—which she initiated and at times facilitated, recruitment, new student training, and public relations. I’ll reflect much more on Sarah’s supergroup in Chapters Three and Four.

Sean

The eldest of my participants was Sean, a late-40s male from rural Missouri. Sean’s was my first actual interview, and as such my interactions with him were my first extended experiences role-playing in the CoH world. Sean was first and foremost interested in telling stories/developing stories, and he saw the game as a major platform for crafting characters that he could utilize for extended narratives.

Sean was also interested in maximizing the game’s mythology. He drew everything he could from the existing stories, which are quite abstract, crafting characters that utilized in-game events, place names, etc. as central points in their own narrative arcs. His primary toon, Starsky, was engaging and pleasant, quick to offer help and advice to everyone we encountered.
Perhaps the most interesting thing about Sean is that he “got” the game in a way that I’m not sure anyone else—including myself—did. He had a fine-tuned awareness of not just what the super hero genre called for but what this specific incarnation of it called for. He knew when something was too dark, too gritty, too cute, etc. At one point he stopped me just to point out the majesty of another toon flying by with his cape rippling in the wind.

Each of Sean’s characters had a complex biography and back story. Some of them were so complex, in fact, that other gamers seemed in awe of Sean’s creations. I will comment much more on Sean’s creations in Chapters Three and Four.

2.4. Whistle While You Work…err… Interview While You Game: Researching “In-Game”

I realize that to some readers it might seem strange that I chose to interview people within the game interface. In fact during my solicitation, one person asked if I was concerned that my participants would be so involved in playing the game that they would ignore my questions. Perhaps it was my own experience as a multi-tasking online gamer, or perhaps it was the impression left upon me by my undergraduate anthropology professor, but this method of interviewing made perfect sense to me. It did not make sense to me that a gamer would consent to an interview just to ignore the interviewer—particularly in such a social game—and my true goal was not just to talk to people about the game but also to SEE how they game. Participant observers have historically gone into the communities they wished to observe and participated in the observed activities, so campaigning alongside these gamers as I sought to understand their gaming practices seemed like a reasonable digital extension of that tradition. I also felt that my participants would feel more comfortable, and hence be more honest and forthright, if they realized I was one of them and our actions were taking place on their “turf.”

A gaming interview session functioned roughly the same way any gaming session does. I scheduled times to meet with my participants, and we chose a location in game to meet. At the appointed time we’d go to that location, meet up, and plan our exploits. The sessions went one of three ways: we’d either game first then stop to talk, talk first then game for a while, or actually interview amid the gaming experience.

For example, my first interview, with Sean, started with my toon, Nash, standing under a gigantic statue of Atlas in a player gathering area in CoH called “Atlas Park” (see Figure 2.2). I
told Sean what my toon’s name was and that I’d be waiting for him under the statue. After a few minutes of me watching a toon with super speed run in circles around the park to thrill newbies with his advanced skills, a toon walked up to me, waved, and:

Sean: Greetings there!
P: How’s it going? I’m under Atlas if you want to meet up here.
S: Just getting a drink...
P: No rush. I have all night. :)
S: You want to lead?
P: My goal is to watch you play and ask questions, so I’ll follow your lead. :) S: May get a call from the others in the Supergroup. The Boss lady is on right now... You fly by any chance?

![Fig. 2.2. Atlas Park](image)

I didn’t realize it—until he told me a few sentences later—but when we went into “team” mode Sean code-switched and began role-playing; I was talking to his toon, and his toon had quite a bit of fun commenting on the fact that another hero wanted to fly around and watch him “play.” We spent the next three hours or so simply playing as a duo, flying around smashing a robot gang and clearing a cave of trolls. From time to time we’d drop in personal comments ((Sean taught me that in *CoH* out-of-character (OOC) comments belong in double parentheses, like this)), but most of that time was spent role playing and gaming. We then returned to Atlas Park, flew to the top of the Atlas statue, sat down on the globe and spent a little over an hour just talking about the game and reflecting on our session.

My next interview session—with Sarah—started entirely in character, though we broke character mid-mission to talk for a bit then wove our OOC interview questions into our in-
character (IC) gaming. This mix of gaming and interviewing pleased me; my major concern going into my research was that I wanted this to be a gamer talking to other gamers. I was afraid that since my first impression was that of the scholar with his consent forms and demographic survey I might never cultivate my gaming ethos. Each of my participants was eager to engage with me as a gamer first, however, giving respect to my research but never behaving as if the only reason we were playing was so that I could watch them, then ask questions. The dynamic of the game itself, and the way I framed my interactions with my participants, maintained the sense that we were “playing” even when I shifted from playing to working.

The data collected varied from participant to participant, depending on what sort of extra game writing the participant participated in. My data included:

1. Chat transcripts generated from the various chat channels in CoH. These are saved as simple text files, but would have appeared in game color coded by channel or in separate boxes in the same chat HUD interface.

2. Instant messenger transcripts in HTML format, generated by AOL’s Instant Messenger program.


4. Saved web pages created entirely by gamers

5. FAQ documents created by gamers (in text format)

6. In-game screen captures of toons

7. Emails from my participants, including survey responses and short correspondence about the study itself.

I’ve made every attempt to avoid “accidentally” capturing other toons in images. In some cases, transcripts have empty spots with third-person description if a toon who was not a participant in my research said something of importance to either me or one of my participants.

2.5. Ethical Considerations

Researching in an emerging field—diving in to document an online discourse community—resulted in serious ethical considerations for me as a researcher. One of the first dilemmas I had to address is the fact that CoH has a “broadcast” function in chat. This allows
anyone on a server to input chat text so that it is sent to everyone on the server. There is also “local” chat text which appears any time a toon is close to the toon chatting. Combining the facts that one cannot escape broadcast text or local text, there were many comments in my transcripts that were not actually part of my interviews/gaming interactions. This was complicated a step further when I coded transcripts of occasions where one of my participants invited me into a larger team including people who were not part of my research, since the people not involved in my research were not always aware that I was logging what was being said. There was, as a result, a volume of text in my data that was only questionably “mine” to work with.

Some would claim that since local and broadcast text are contributed to a public sphere they are “fair game.” I don’t feel that is ethically sound, as I do not feel it is a realistic presumption to believe that gamers login to play CoH thinking “someone might be logging my public comments for research purposes, so I had better make sure not to say anything I wouldn’t want someone to publish later.” I have applied the same working ethical belief to comments made by non-participants in other parts of my study, such as responses on internet message boards or blogs. When faced with occasions where I believed that someone else’s comments must be somehow included for context, I have provided a completely de-identified anecdote from my own memory describing what happened, or I have presented a participant’s reflections on that incident. In fact, during the process of coding I removed all third-party comments from my working data (see Appendix B).

Similarly, I did not initially consider the implications of toon identities in my research. I checked with each of my participants to insure that their pseudonym was acceptable—in fact I asked them to choose their own, though some left that choice to me. I didn’t, however, think at the time to ask for pseudonyms for their toons. It became obvious, as I researched, that anyone who might read this later and wish to identify a participant could find a toon by logging into the game and searching for the names. Realizing this, I have given each toon a pseudonym, though I struggled with my decisions a bit because the name is such a central element of toon identity. It is, in the end, the only truly unique in-game element a toon owns, since visual appearances are based on a finite number of choices and could be easily replicated/ripped off. I decided to create pseudonyms for the toons that would trigger my memory instead of attempting to choose pseudonyms that could do the same work their actual names do. My participants put careful rhetorical consideration into their toon names, but I was unable to devise a clever way to mimic
that while applying the pseudonyms. Due to this, I feel it is important that my readers know that Sara’s toon is not actually called “Hugz,” that Jared’s toon isn’t called “Kitten,” etc.

While I decided that it was ethically sound to display screen captures of my participants, since I asked each of them for permission and because their appearance isn’t unique, there were also concerns with “collateral damage” while taking screenshots. In highly public places it was difficult to frame shots that didn’t include other toons, and from time to time a toon would walk into the frame just as I captured. I have cropped out these other toons where possible. When I couldn’t crop a toon out of the photo, I have utilized the Photoshop “smear” tool to transform these accidental targets into unidentified blobs of color. Any non-participant images that are not blurred out are NPCs unless I have specifically stated otherwise and explained why I’ve included the image.

A final ethical decision I made was in how I framed dialogue with my participants. I chose to depict all dialogue as my participants speaking with me regardless of whether or not we were, at the time, role-playing as characters. I struggled with this decision because a part of me feels that while it might be more complicated, it could better illustrate my point to refer to the dialogue as the toons speaking. It was my fear, however, that when I ended up having several different identities, and some of my participants took on different toons giving them additional identities, it might become needlessly difficult to read or that the ever changing names might make it difficult to track an individual participant. I have attempted in each context to specify with any piece of dialogue whether or not it happened IC, OOC or somewhere in the gray area between the two. I am not sure, ethically, if I feel it is better to represent the role-player as author or role-player as character, but it is my sincere hope that my choice to represent role-players as authors will make this document easier to read and understand without in any way minimizing the importance of IC nature of some dialogue.

2.6. Methods of Data Analysis

I have mixed several methodologies into my interpretation of data. The first thing I must profess is that it would be nearly impossible to address all of the data I have collected in-depth without overwhelming my readers—and myself—with an unruly mire of text and image. As such, I have coded my data looking for instances where important ideas and incidents arise from
the general discourse. Much of what I have collected consists of transcripts of “normal” gameplay situations; it is important as a researcher that I have witnessed the community in action and have a strong sense of what this communication looks like, but due to the intense volume of communication involved in normal role-playing there are pages and pages of data from my interviews that do not appear specifically in this report. I refer to that content in a general sense when addressing role-playing, or when talking about a specific participant’s game play habits, but to attempt to apply linguistic tools to it on a macro level would not, in my opinion, result in particularly interesting new insights.

What I have done instead could be referred to as thematic analysis, focusing in particular upon types of literacies, rhetorical moves, and generic conventions. What fascinated me about the discourse between my participants and other gamers in the game environment—and with me—was that there was not, as one might expect, an over-arching “gamespeak.” Each situation called for different communicative norms, and different elements of the gaming experience were addressed in stark contrast to others. The way one comments when looking for a team, for example, is markedly different from the way one speaks once on a team. Gamers also use specific forms of jargon when talking about specific topics—the language is different when discussing toon creation and when discussing general gaming practices, for example. I allowed these changes in language use and changes in rhetorical situation to guide my coding practices. This allowed me to cluster comments about a similar theme, or comments made on similar occasions, for both comparison and contrast throughout my data analysis process. I elaborate further on these communicative genre shifts in Chapter Four.

I have constructed mini-case studies based on scrutiny of each participant’s gaming style and responses to my questions. While my four focal participants represent only a small portion of the CoH community, their diverse interests and gaming foci, as well as their common interests and communal values, provide what seems—based on my time within the gaming world—to be an accurate snapshot of the CoH community during the summer of 2006. At the same time each of them brings something entirely unique to the game world. By comparing their case studies I do not presume that I can create an ethnography; one would need to spend far more time in the community and would need a much deeper focus to accomplish that. I do believe, however, that one can begin to understand the compositional activities and rhetorical situations involved in CoH by looking at these gamers and their experiences.
While Gee’s work on video games (2004) was of tremendous use to me as a researcher, his work on discourse analysis (2005) was also useful as I worked with my data. To this point in existing scholarship no one has focused on the complex rhetorical situations that exist in these games, nor has anyone looked carefully at the subtle nuances in the language used for different situations with different stakes moving toward different ends. For example one does not ask a stranger to join a team in the same way one would ask a friend, and one does not engage with a hardcore role-player the same way one would engage someone who is standing in a public area talking about the game OOC.

These differences in the ways that people address situations indicate the presence of genres in CoH. I have applied genre theory in my interpretation of my research data, specifically utilizing the work of Amy Devitt (2004) and Carolyn Miller (1984, 1993). My exploration of genre finds roots in the concept that genres develop as functional, usually recurring, rhetorical situations that do a specific type of work. Working from Devitt and Miller’s theories, I have coded my data looking for these specific instances that form functional rhetorical genres within the game. While completing this task, I utilized Huckin’s (1992) “context-sensitive text analysis” looking specifically at the “sociocultural context” of what gamers write and say to each other. I explain these findings in Chapter Four.

It is my hope that observing the game from the inside, building my case studies of these players both as in-game toons and as the composers of characters that expand at times well beyond the bounds of the game itself, I will be able to present the act of gaming in a different way than those who have recently written on the topic. Just as I am, myself, a hybrid of the academic writer and the gamer, I believe all of these gamers are hybrids of some sort of writer, some manner of critic, and gamer. What they do is fun, but just under the cartoon surface rests a complex socially constructed collaborative project begging for exploration. I hope that I have seen it clearly enough to share it.
Chapter 3:

“Writing itself is a game:” The Literacies of City of Heroes
“…print based protocols of reading have been modified and multiplied to help computer users attend to the prodigious volumes of information with which they are continuously deluged. In other words, readers of online texts have begun to develop alternative reading strategies.”

- *Stuart Selber* (2004, p. 62)

“..the enjoyment of a game depends on these easy-to-use rules presenting challenges that cannot be easily overcome. Playing a game is an activity of improving skills to overcome these challenges, and playing a game is therefore fundamentally a learning experience.”

- *Jesper Juul* (2006, p. 5)

“While the average player might not know about or take time to learn how one might ‘script’ an encounter, power gamers often spend time distilling down essential strategies…they do not just accept the interface but alter it to suit their own methods.”

- *TL Taylor* (2006, p. 79)
“Are you clicking?” Ryan asked me.

“Um… clicking?”

“The icons in your tray, are you clicking them?” He asked, a quick flurry of text amid a series of attacks on a clutch of trolls.

“Yeah,” I typed, then quickly clicked across a series of four attacks (click, click, click, click) as the digital brute dishing out virtual damage lurched left and right, knocking trolls to the ground.

“Just hit your number keys,” Ryan said, still systematically dismantling the troll gang.

I made another pair of clumsy swings, staring intently at my screen and trying to figure out what he’d just told me. Then I saw them. Next to each icon on the tray there were tiny little numbers. Instead of clicking on an icon to launch a mace attack, for example, I could hit the corresponding number on my keyboard. Then another. I pulled off what I would call an impressive combination attack as I moved to meet Ryan in the middle of the battlefield.

“Didn’t know about the numbers did you?” he asked, typing quickly amid attacks.

“Noob.”

It was my second week as a player/researcher in City of Heroes (CoH). As a life-long gamer, I was able to leap in and hold my own, but as the exchange above illustrates, I didn’t really know what I was doing. CoH’s manual is sparse, and in classic gamer style I chose not to read it anyway. The tutorial stage at the beginning of the game showed me how to speak to other players, find teams, and take on tasks from the various Non-Player Character (NPC) “contacts,” but at no point did it mention that the attack icon control panel was pre-mapped to my number pad. In roughly thirty seconds, Ryan—the first interviewee in my research project—had transformed my gaming practices.

3.2. Gaming Literacies: It’s Just Playing, but It’s Not Just Playing

James Paul Gee (2003) would refer to the piece of information that Ryan gave me as shared game knowledge that was dispersed by Ryan, an experienced gamer, to a “noob” who was, at the time, knocking on the door to his affinity group but didn’t yet know the codeword.
My exchange with Ryan reminded me of the previously mentioned conversations composition Johnson-Eilola (1998) had with his eight-year-old daughter Carolyn, as this highlights the method of thinking encouraged by video games—“just play”—can appear to be random or even worrisome to someone familiar with linear, traditional learning. This method of learning—akin to foreign language immersion—values learning as a hands-on experience over memorization and application of a set of rules. Gamers know the importance of immersion on an almost instinctive level, and a wanna-be gamer who insists on learning about the game before learning within the game will find gaming incredibly inorganic and infuriating. And while I was actually learning from Ryan, he himself discovered this method of attacking by accidentally hitting a number key and realizing that the attacks were mapped to the number keys, and in that moment he realized the key strokes resulted in faster responses than his mouse clicks.

But something else about the experience stood out to me. Ryan was helping me to expand my gaming literacy. It is important to create a working definition for the word literacy in this instance because of the potential pitfalls. If one places it in a binary, the opposite is “illiteracy,” a term that carries a great deal of emotional baggage for many, particularly those caught in the various “wars on illiteracy.” Stuart Selber (2004) claims that literacy is “not a monolithic or static phenomenon with predictable consequences,” hinting that scholars must avoid the desire to convert literacy into something concrete (p. 4). For my purposes, I am referring to literacy not simply as the ability to “read” a game but rather as the entire skill set of reading, composing, and interacting with the game. As Gee (2003) wrote, “when you read [think], you are always reading [thinking about] something in some way. You are never just reading ‘in general’ but not reading anything in particular” (p. 1). And as Elizabeth Tebeaux (1996) asserted, “Literacy is no longer just the ability to read and write, but the ability to grasp intellectually and then link concepts, to turn data into information and information into knowledge that can be communicated in a variety of textual forms” (p. 40). In that spirit I approach gaming literacy as the learning and practicing of everything a gamer must do in order to “play” the game in question.

In Multiliteracies for a Digital Age, Selber (2004) posited that there are three computer literacies: functional, critical and rhetorical. Paralleling Selber’s triad, I believe there are three types of online gaming literacy that I identify and describe below (see figures 3.1 and 3.2).
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<th>Category</th>
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<td>Functional literacy</td>
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<td>Computers as cultural artifacts</td>
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<td>Rhetorical literacy</td>
<td>Computers as hypertextual media</td>
<td>Students as producers of technology</td>
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with the game and use the input device(s) to accomplish basic in-game tasks. Ryan was helping me to attain mechanical literacy by assisting me in refining my method of input. I already knew one way to launch an in-game attack, but my “point and click” method wasn’t an efficient, or the most common, way of engaging in combat and thus it appeared “clumsy” to other players. The knowledge that the keypad was pre-mapped to the attack icons made a dramatic change in the speed with which I could attack while in battle, making me a more proficient player.

I refer to the second form of gaming literacy as character literacy. Character literacy is learning/knowing one’s in-game strengths and weaknesses, understanding one’s in-game character (or toon), and attaining some level of mastery over that character so that one can successfully “play” as the in-game character. This literacy, at least initially, is developed while one gains mechanical literacy, but it is recursive. With each new character the gamer must return to a previous stage of character development and once again recall and re-engage in character literacy.

The final form of gaming literacy I am proposing is social/interaction literacy. Richard Smith and Pamela Curtain (1998) suggest that video gamers form “symbolic communities” (p. 214), noting that video games and the communities that their players form spawn jargon, styles, and attitudes. Because MMORPGs are practically impossible to play alone, the final stage of understanding comes through knowing both how to interact and what the social norms are for the gaming world or “symbolic community.” In *City of Heroes*, all of the heroes live in Paragon City, a virtual cityscape that grows with each of the game’s regular updates or “expansions.” Within Paragon City, heroes have different home neighborhoods, though, and spend significant amounts of time campaigning in specific areas. Beyond the level of city and neighborhood, there are also 11 servers, each with a distinct social reality, and a whole host of super-groups (or “clans” in MMORPG-speak) and teams on each server. As a player, one must learn to navigate these various social networks, knowing at first the bedrock principles of life in Paragon City, then learning about the culture of the specific server one is playing on, then the neighborhood, the social role of the type of character one is playing, and finally the personality make-up and discourse patterns of the super-group or team with which the player is campaigning.

In reality, almost every game involves these three literacies to one degree or another. To successfully play soccer, for example, one must know that one cannot grab the soccer ball and run with it or that one will not score points if one shoots the ball into the incorrect goal. That is
mechanical literacy. In soccer, character literacy would involve learning to play a specific position and learning that one has strengths and weaknesses within the game. For example, if one were to play goalie, one gains the right to physically “handle” the ball frequently, but unlike all the other players on the field the goalie must stay positioned in front of the goal inside a box, essentially tethered to the goal itself. Instead of scoring, the goalie’s job is to stop other players from scoring. In choosing, or being assigned, the position of goalie the player takes on special duties which are critical to the success of the other players on his or her team. The realization of how those duties and rights involve other players is the soccer version of social/interaction literacy. A player must understand where he or she is being sent as the goalie, and what the goalie does, but he/she must also know how to communicate and work with the other players in order to actually be “playing” soccer.

Mechanical literacy is important to gaming as a practice, but it is essentially the “key” to the game itself. Without basic mechanical literacy a gamer cannot play the game, and without the ability to play the game, a gamer cannot develop character or social/interaction literacy. I acknowledge the importance of mechanical literacy as the impetus that makes gaming possible, but for my purposes I wish to concentrate on the character and social/interactive literacy practices of CoH players. In my example above, Ryan was “teaching” me a bit of mechanical literacy, but he was teaching it through the use of social/interaction literacy. Because a game like City of Heroes involves so much of what Gee (2003) calls “probing” the environment, players are frequently learning new bits of mechanical literacy as they play. For example, during one of my interview sessions my computer crashed. When I rebooted and logged back into the server, I found that I’d lost several lines of interview text. My interviewee had been playing CoH for years, but she didn’t know the command to copy the chat log and paste it into an outside application. She learned that from me, and in the process she helped me recover that missing portion of our interview.

3.3. Character Literacy: “I Hope You Don’t Get Attached to that First Toon…”

Character literacy in the case of a game like City of Heroes permeates every aspect of “playing.” One must develop a character—or toon, as gamers call them— the first time he or she logs into City of Heroes. As one of my interviewees said “I hope you didn’t get attached to that
first toon… once you learn to play, you have to go back and create one that fits you.” The process of creating a toon is involved and engaging. One of my participants claimed that the character design process of City of Heroes could be a game all by itself. Sarah, a passionate 30-something female gamer, has many toons, including Hugs, a member of a supergroup called The St. Joseph’s School, a virtual game-world school modeled after a private Catholic high school with a passing resemblance to the Xavier Institute of the famed X-Men comics, cartoons, toys and movies. Hugs is involved in the St. Joseph’s “student council”—doing work outside the game interface—and she has a secondary outfit that conforms to the school’s highly specific dress code—a virtual school uniform. Sarah describes her experience learning the St. Joseph’s School character development expectations:

Sarah: I made pretty costumes, decided what looked fun to play and went for it. Well, I never considered character design at all until i got into this supergroup and i HAD to.

Phill: Did it feel at all like a writing assignment? Like hero homework?

Sarah laughs suddenly.16

S: Oh, you have no idea! I was standing in Atlas [Park—a character meeting place], minding my own business when Miranda (sg leader) charged up, gave me the once over and said "Nice boots! Now write me a bio!"…Grin. Miranda doesn't much care for public opinion I guess. She can be kind of autocratic. She is very passionate about RPing and characters and writing stories. She really wants to build a world for people here.17

In this explanation of how Sarah’s toon Hugs18 came to be part of the St. Joseph’s School, she explains both the writing she had to do and the importance of her character’s appearance. She gave specific consideration to utilizing a power called “ice armor” not because it was particularly

16 Any time an action appears within one of the quotes from my interviews, they indicate in game “emotes” by the interviewee’s player character (or my own character, if it’s Phill committing the action). While the characters literally act out these emotes on-screen, a textual note of what the player has done on-screen appears in the chat. So while Sarah’s character engaged in a belly laugh on screen at this point in the interview, the textual label for her laugh appears in the transcript as well.

17 Much of the text that is quoted in this chapter comes from the game interface, but because there was an agreement between each of the gamers and myself to break character, the text is not code-switched as normal out-of-character (OOC) discussion would be.

18 Sarah’s character’s name is not actually “Hugs,” but as I mentioned in Chapter 2, due to the highly personal nature of online identities, I’ve given my interviewee’s toons pseudonyms, too. I point this out again here because I realize that a reader thinking about character literacy might question the name and wonder if the gamer was actually taking her practice seriously. I do not want the reader to mistakenly think that IS the toon’s actual name.
useful but because it “looks like Hugs is covered in big, shimmering diamonds” and adds a layer of individuality to a character that is wearing a “school uniform.”

The toon creation process, then, becomes a moment where as a player one must balance three motivations. One must first know what one can do/wishes to do as a player, one must know the story one wants to tell with the character, and one must know how well he or she will be able to play the character from a mechanical literacy perspective, as each type of character calls for a different style of play with different powers and different modes of input. A character created without careful attention—and even those with considerable thought—will be taken to task by other players and could ultimately fail. As I will discuss in Chapter 4, there are also issues of genre expectation. My research and experience show that most gamers learn this inside the game as part of their social/interaction literacy.

After my experience with Ryan, where without realizing it I dove head-first into hardcore role-playing with a character I set up as a former bouncer who was created to smash things, well outside of any culture I understood, I decided to create a new character for my interview with Sarah. I wanted to play on some existing mythology, so I created a teenage hero called Anguta, an Alaskan nerd-turned-hero who claimed to be the shepherd of the dead. I wrote a bio for him. I consider this writing, though gamers would refer to it as part of playing the game, subsumed under their “gaming” activities and separated from the generic definition of “writing” as they understand it; this is one of the things I find most fascinating from my research. When it came time to design him, I wanted to incorporate both elements that would make him seem “contemporary” but at the same time bring to mind something “ghostly.” He ended up in baggy cargo pants with a sleek leather padded top and a stylized skull mask (see figure 3.3).
I carefully considered how the character should “act tough” while simultaneously because of his rural upbringing have no idea how to handle being in “the big city,” and how slowly his status as a naïve teenager would bleed through his carefully crafted appearance.\(^\text{19}\) His “powers” are based on distance attacks, but I equipped him with an ice sword so that he could “act” the role of a “warrior” and engage in close quarters combat. I did some brief research on “goth” culture to get a sense of what this sort of character would be interested in, and I set his powers to be a mix of energy blasts and weapons made from ice to reflect both the supernatural and his ties to his cold native Alaskan climate.

Anguta is not nearly as complicated as many of my research participant’s toons,\(^\text{20}\) but it still took nearly an hour just to create him and move him into the game world. Others have professed to spending as many as three hours perfecting a toon’s visual design before moving on.

\(^{19}\) Readers familiar with *Spider-Man* will realize that this was a case of hero emulation on my part. I grew up with Spiderman, but I didn’t realize as I was crafting my character that I had lifted that aspect of Peter Parker’s personality for my own use.

\(^{20}\) And to be fair, my own toons became much more complex as my research progressed.
to establishing powers for the character or a biography. Active players also talk about modifying their toon’s look to match up to how the character is evolving through gameplay. The game has built-in stages where players can add a second, third and fourth costume\(^\text{21}\) and many players utilize these benchmarks as points where they change their toon’s look to better match the character’s persona. One of my participants role-plays a character who wears a suit of mechanical armor like Marvel’s famous \textit{Iron Man}. He would often refer to opportunities to “tweak his armor” when adding new powers or changing appearance, using changes in his costume and the abilities that he could anchor to the costume as an extension of his character’s story.

Once my toon Anguta was prepared, I met up with Sarah’s toon, Pixie, and our initial interview started on an interesting note:

Sarah: Zo. Tell me about yourself Anguta.
Phill: I’m just a guy who plans to do big things. I come from a much smaller area than this…
[at this point I had to pause to kill a robot]
P: Used to be able to get by on the menacing look and the ice sword.
S: I think we all plan for big things! I think I just plan to live through this warehouse…Paragon, she is a much bigger place…
[more robot killing]
S: You make my heart hurt! Ouch, Ang! Whyfore did you charge them? They were BIGGER than us!\(^\text{22}\)

Whereas when I met up with Ryan we had a few moments of casual chat before he asked if I was comfortable role-playing, Sarah approached me from the onset \textit{in character}. While there was no direct implication that were I not to role-play I would be branded “outsider,” our interview didn’t start with Sarah talking to me; it started with \textit{Sarah’s character talking to Anguta}, with the two

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\(^{21}\) The most important costume to most toons is the second, as it comes at the end of a “trial” that results in the player having access to capes. The cape is a point of pride for players; it proves that one has the staying power to get to level 20 and complete the difficult trial. During my research I managed to take two toons on the cape trial, and each was showered in congratulations from other players upon arrival in the public square with his cape flapping in the wind.

\(^{22}\) For the sake of keeping things from becoming cumbersome for readers, I have specified here the names of the participants—and myself as Phill—instead of listing each dialogue as existing between toons. I realize this might seem counter-intuitive to my point, but I employed a different toon for almost all of my interviews (Anguta is the only one who campaigned with more than one of my participants). I also spoke to some of my participants out-of-character via AIM. I didn’t want the use of their character names—then their real names—to create confusion as to what person/toon is involved in which exchange.
of us as interviewer and interviewee virtually invisible. As is also evident in the above excerpt, Sarah was trying to project a French accent. She maintained that—and maintained her character meticulously—until we both code switched when I said “((Okay to break character?))”\(^{23}\) Sarah actually responded:

Sarah: (( I think so. for one thing, my grasp of her[Sarah’s character] is not well centered yet. I don't know who she is!...she is still in malleable frosh stage, and I'd hate to mess you up further as I waffle amongst responses ))

Sarah’s response here is telling. As a gamer, she treated me as a fellow gamer instead of as an academic who was “watching” her play. She was concerned that her unsteady understanding of her own new toon would “mess [me] up,” as a role-player since I, too, was establishing a character. I learned through playing Anguta—and talking to Sarah about him—that he simply looked too “evil” for many players to accept him as a hero. While mainstream popular culture may have embraced the anti-hero, the *City of Heroes* discourse community—or at least the portion of it I was able to visit—has different standards for what is or is not “heroic,” an issue that I address in Chapter Four. Anguta was essentially a failure, in spite of all my efforts and other player’s attempts to help me make him work.

Sarah’s stance on character creation reflects the sort of character literacy that helps one to avoid the mistakes I made with Anguta:

Sarah: Hmm. Well, there is the proper way and then there is my way. To be honest, I start with the costume. Then I figure out a name that seems to fit. Then I start thinking about a back story that works with both. I start with the look, most certainly. [I draw inspiration] from books of course, and from talking to others in the SG that are inspirations in themselves. Some of the stories people come up with are just fantastic. It makes you reach for something a little deeper than you might normally go for.

Sarah’s character creation practices are consistent—or at least compatible—with most of the other participants in my study. While the priority between appearance and story shifts from gamer to gamer—and for some from toon concept to toon concept, the same basic considerations arise. Players draw from the popular culture around them, particularly movies and comic books, from classic literature, and from their fellow teammates/super-group members when developing

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\(^{23}\) Any time a player wants to break character his or her dialogue must appear within two sets of parenthesis ((like this))—I refer to these comments as “meta-dialogue”
new characters. Ryan, for example, had a toon that had to be from a certain “archetype”—a “blaster” who uses a bow and arrow—because his supergroup was a guild of archers. In the case of Sarah’s characters, the unifying element for each was that they were all designed to be students at the St. Joseph’s School (her supergroup).

Of the particular character she chose for our gaming session, Sarah said:

Sarah: So far, I know that [this character] comes from a French Canadian background and travels with a circus with her family. Due to her power manifestation and the unfortunate destruction of the big top one night, she’s been enrolled in St. Joes [the super hero high school supergroup] for her family’s sanity. She was a high wire artist, or starting to be one. Mostly one of those girls that spins on the rope and things like that. She was studying to be trapeze though before her fire skills decided to manifest.

Sarah’s French Canadian former circus-performing toon was visually interesting. She looked like a mime, but instead of hair she had violet leaves, sort of like a fern, on the top of her head. The character’s powers and accent bear a passing resemblance to the X-Man Gambit, but the premise also draws heavily from Robin, the famous Batman sidekick. Sarah also mentioned during the interview that of late she’d been fascinated with Cirque Du Soleil. All of these elements mix in the French accent, the mutant energy blast power, the role of young hero, and the circus performer back story. The finishing touches that Sarah adds make the toon unique, and as she professed, the fashioning of that aspect of the character—the glue that holds the visuals and the biographical bits together—was incomplete at the time of our interactions.

3.4. Social/Interaction Literacy: Building Paragon City, Brick by Role-play Brick

Sarah’s character literacy bleeds heavily into her social/interaction literacy. As I described above, she takes great pains to maintain her character, even lamenting that she feared she was damaging the character—and my gaming experience—by reacting at times without thinking like the character. But she also posts to the message board at SuperHighSchool.com—a free-registration public online message board on the web—in character, expanding her character’s story outside of the game itself, or as she and other players would say “taking the game somewhere else.” In those posts she fleshes out her character’s back story in ways that one simply couldn’t within the game: through writing essays, diary entries, re-telling the story of a
battle from her point of view, etc. These role-play posts could be read and responded to by someone who doesn’t own or play CoH—anyone with internet access who found the site and chose to join—but message board communities like these are usually comprised entirely of CoH gamers who have chosen to expand their stories in ways that the game itself doesn’t accommodate (see Figure 3.4).

Fig. 3.4. A screen capture of one of Sarah’s posts on the St. Joseph’s School’s message board

Like Sarah, the majority of Heroes in the CoH community are “role-players,” who role-play to varying degrees, ranging from the casual player who often slips from behaving in character to simply talking to another player or making jokes as a form of meta-discourse at will, to the hardcore role-player who will actually make in-character comments to those who break role-play conventions essentially “policing” through treating the “real” comments, made out-of-character, as the “imaginary” or “ridiculous” within the role-play construct. For those who are hardcore role-players, it is important that other players in their groups and on their teams stay in character. More importantly, it matters that other players know their characters and behave as their characters would in the online community.

During my early sessions in the game I found that when I was in a large group with an interviewee and someone asked me a question, any answer from Phill was singled out. Each of the characters I created during the process of my research have at least one unique quirk, and other players could sense when I slid out of character by abandoning those elements. People wanted to hear from my character, and they were perceptive enough to know which of us was
speaking in a given situation. For example, Anguta rarely knows what he’s doing—he frequently asks questions and acts tentative; he is, after all, in over his head. In one case, Anguta was in a small group that rushed into a task and got lost on the mission map. I took the lead because I (Phill) knew the area. Anguta had already professed to being unfamiliar with the area and the mission, so when I took the lead one of the other players pointed out to me, via private message, that I (Anguta) shouldn’t know what to do next. It turns out he or she, too, knew the mission and the map from playing with another character. Using that knowledge, however, violates character literacy. Anguta (the toon) didn’t know the map, so while I (Phill, the player) knew it, that knowledge was socially “off limits.”

The importance of the role-play tradition was a key factor in my discussions with Jared, another avid role-player. Jared maintains a MySpace blog for his character Kitten (see figure 3.5). Though Jared is a 30-something married professional, Kitten was a sixteen-year-old hero, and she takes things like her MySpace page seriously. Jared’s ability to maintain a character that is so different from his own persona illustrates the level of critical thought and rhetorical consideration *City of Heroes* players devote to their toons.

![Figure 3.5. A screen capture of Jared’s Kitten MySpace Blog](image)

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24 Interestingly enough, Kitten turned 17 during my research, as readers can see from her MySpace blog.
The first time I chatted with Jared, he was posting in character on a supergroup message board. While scheduling an interview session, he mentioned that he and his wife had a “standing” gaming date every Monday night wherein they sit at their respective computers and role-play, speaking to each other in the room out of character but never breaking character on screen. In addition to being an avid gamer, Jared also teaches computer programming and has created his own levels and other content for games such as *Neverwinter Nights* and *Maximum Force*. He approaches his toons as characters he will write for both in the game and on supergroup message boards, as he shared during an interview:

…I think about what kind of character might be interesting to do [write]. My highest [level] character came from the idea of "what if my hero was indeed a fallen arc[hi]angel and didn't know it?” So from there I built her up as a storm defender, an angel of vengeance "trapped" in the body of a pious woman...made for fun playing as the "demon" (as she thought it) started to exert itself over her more and more...I was lucky enough to be in a good Role Play SG at the time so I was able to develop her slowly with other people.

It was apparent during our online chats that Jared had a deep love for his characters. During exchanges like the one that resulted in the long quote above, he responded quickly and was more than willing to volunteer details. The character he described above, which I wasn’t able to observe because he’d since lost that account, shows the level of complexity he puts into each of his designs. It is also telling that Jared approaches his character from the point of view of what sort of character would be fun to, as he said, “write role plays for and stuff.”

Jared is also careful to maintain his character—not just in the game and while role-playing on other boards, but also when confronted by players who refuse to role-play:

in a group that's mixed of RPer's and "gamers" I just RP, and if I have to put nearly every comment in ((()')s I do… I don't often enter the city unless I know what kind of person my character is… [role-playing] getting harder to do in some games. [In] DDO [Dungeons and Dragons Online] it's nearly impossible, but I'm an actor at heart.

The quote above not only shares Jared’s thoughts but shows what conversations within the community start to look like when one is an “insider.” I didn’t realize just now bizarre one of these conversations looked until I showed the quote to someone else and had to translate, as I developed deep CoH literacy while researching. I knew what it meant for his text to appear in the meta-comment double parentheses, and it wasn’t at all odd for him to refer to playing the
game as “entering the city,” because role-players wouldn’t say “logged into the game;” that isn’t what their toons are doing. What Jared is saying is that if he ends up on a team that is a mix of players who role-play and those who break character, he maintains his role-playing persona, and doesn’t break character, using the accepted CoH social code of meta-commenting by surrounding a statement in double parentheses to indicate that he is speaking out-of-character. He also contrasts that experience to another popular MMORPG, Dungeons & Dragons Online (DDO). Several of my interviewees mentioned DDO and World of Warcraft (WoW), lamenting in each case that they found it difficult to locate other role-players or spaces to role-play within each game. It was the difference in the attitudes of the gaming population that drew my interviewees away from more commercially popular games and to City of Heroes, where role-playing is more common and a higher premium is placed on role-play than on killing.

While I would separate the “Kitten” MySpace blog from the City of Heroes game, classifying it as a separate genre entirely, Jared would not. His view is indicative of the community in general:

Phil: Would you consider that-- the blog-- a part of the game experience?
Jared: yeah... usually once I get active in a supergroup they have an in character board I post on as my character, and it's a way to flesh the game out a little, give you way to play on your lunch hour, or when you don't have time for a mission.
P: So would you consider that playing or writing?
J: I consider it part of the overall role playing game... writing itself is a game.

Jared’s opinion of game related writing strikes me in many ways as the critical disconnect between gamers and those who consider gaming to be “a waste of time.” Gamers who consider role-playing and writing in other spaces to be a part of their gaming experience, who create characters and vivid back stories or who create instructional or social websites, are doing a great deal of what some would consider “writing work” as part of the practice of gaming. But these gamers do not even consider what they are doing to be writing. They consider the text they generate to be entirely a part of the gaming practice, and they are so involved in the social/interaction elements of the documents they are creating that they logically include it in the experience of playing.

Jared’s reflections on the way he plays illustrates the importance of social/interaction literacy. Jared’s characters, like Kitten, are forged through a process that shows his understanding of character literacy, but he then practices social/interaction literacy with an
unwavering devotion to the social nature of the game. He takes this so far as to follow the meta-commentary conventions even when most of the rest of his team abandon the convention. He also described creating characters that depended upon the actions of others, such as the archangel character. This character eventually became a “guardian angel” which Jared role-played as a sort of “neighborhood defender.” She took new toons under her wing and served as a leader of sorts for a ragtag supergroup.

Social/interaction literacy dominates a game like City of Heroes because the game is by its very nature social; the two Ms do, after all, stand for Massively Multiplayer. Unlike most other games, MMORPGs do not have a “single player” mode, and if someone attempted to play as a “soloist” he or she would be stigmatized. One night, in response to a challenge from one of my participants, and for the sake of my research, I attempted to play “solo” for four hours. Within fifteen minutes I was flooded with invites to join teams. By the half-hour point I managed to get myself in a mess and received unsolicited help from a much more powerful toon. Later on that same toon gave me some in-game money and power-ups (this happened without me speaking to him in any way). He finally asked why I wasn’t responding, first explaining to me how to use the chat interface then finally asking, pointedly, why I wasn’t responding. This repeated (without the gifts) in every neighborhood I visited. People helped me with missions without me asking. People involved me in the various events they were participating in without me asking. It was actually impossible to play “alone,” and people eventually showed frustration that I wouldn’t behave as I should in the game world.

25 Jared and I spent a portion of our first interaction in a group of eight “leveling” on a sewer map that exists only for characters to rapidly kill enemies so as to raise their levels. Of the eight members of the team, only he and I remained in character, but he still separated his in-character and out-of-character comments. I did, as well, out of respect for Jared’s devotion to the social norms even when we were in a group that obviously didn’t share his feelings.

26 I did explain to this gamer that I was trying to play “solo.” I didn’t want to ruin his day with my experiment.

27 To be fair, I did once login at 6 a.m. and manage to run an entire mission without seeing anyone, but the second I wrote “I managed to spend a half hour in the game without anyone contacting me,” in my notes, I was recruited for a mission. I thought, for a moment, I had found a “downtime” in a game that is played by people around the world, but it turns out the server I was playing on crashed and somehow seven or so of us weren’t dropped. There were only a handful of players online, and they still found me and welcomed me into their group.
3.5. A Little Less Batman and a Little More Justice League

Why do gamers devote so much time to creating this collaborative world? As a researcher, I found myself in a unique position; I had no choice on occasion but to play solo so that I would have a toon that was close enough in level to the participant I wished to campaign with—I was basically building teammates for my participants so that they wouldn’t have to play with a low level character for a prolonged period. I didn’t want their participation in my research to lead to them spending fruitless game time with me, so I had to insure that I could do my share of the heavy lifting while we campaigned. Playing alone is nearly impossible, but when one can pull it off, Paragon City is boring for a lone hero. One can only foil so many purse snatchers and bank robbers before the monotony drives him to actively seek assistance. I quickly learned to broadcast “Level X blaster seeking team to level up!” as a desperate plea to find people to go on missions with while accruing points. As much fun as Batman might have made it look in the comics, there’s a reason he had Robin, and Jarvais, and Commissioner Gordon, and Batgirl on television and on the silver screen. Fighting crime alone is a drag.

Catherine Beavis (2004) noted this difference in gaming options:

For all the richness of technology, and the multiply branching options built into stand-alone games, the computer nonetheless is perceived as a limited partner or opponent, by comparison with what a human partner can bring to bear. That sense of possibility and expansiveness is further underlined by the belief that human opponents [or teammates] could come from almost anywhere. (191)

Beavis also wrote that “cyberspace provides the forum and opportunity for communal engagement with other players around the common ground of a known text, the chosen game” (192). While all of my participants specifically pointed out the importance of the social elements of the game, Sarah made the most compelling case:

I love this game a lot. It suits me very well, [but] I'd have to say I wouldn’t [play it if it was a single player game.] The missions are repetitive to the extreme and there is no uber-detailed-system to hold my attention. The interaction is what makes this game so much fun! [It] gets boring in ways [without others involved]. I've been playing for about a year and a half and after some time, you really really REALLY get to know the maps. But its hellish fun charging around in them, with a team at your back. I mean, I DO play for the levels, don't get me wrong. You
need that measure stick of the progress. But on [another toon], I collect badges. That’s another goal. I mostly remember having a great time, hitting things. Often and with great joy. I had the fortune to meet somebody in my early toon teens. A peacebringer who’s first toon had been MY powersets when he started. We hit it off and he kind of helped me some at the beginning. Mostly with build advice and being somebody to talk to.

3.6. Game Over: Where Do Gaming Literacies Lead?

While I was mapping the development and implementation of gaming literacy, several things about the gaming landscape—at least for this cross-section of gamers—became clear. It is apparent that gamers who play *City of Heroes* construct identities for their toons and either

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28 Badges are small icons added to a toon’s ID card/bio screen when the toon accomplishes certain things. Some are easy to obtain (such as the “First successful mission” badge) while others (such as the “defeat 2000 trolls” badge) take a tremendous effort. High level toons—and longtime players—tend to move into collecting badges to mark their progress as it is much more difficult to obtain all the badges than it is to level up to the maximum (currently level 50, though there is a rumor that the next expansion will move that number to 60).

29 Peacebringer is one of the two archetypes that one must achieve level 50 to unlock, so while this might seem like a weird point for Sarah to make, it was her contextual way of letting me know that the friend/in-game mentor she’s referring to played the character that resembled hers all the way to the “maximum” level, making him an expert. Having a Peacebringer means tremendous in-game ethos.

30 Sarah’s comments also intersect with another of Beavis’ findings; Beavis (2003) noted that her one female participant viewed gaming differently: “For Anna, the appeal of the online community was not so much its novelty as its apparent manageability, and the opportunity to be part of a team” (p. 197). This was certainly true of Sarah, but my findings, perhaps due to the nature of MMORPGs, indicate that all *CoH* players of both genders share that interest and a deep sense of social/interaction literacy. There do exist gamers referred to as “min/maxers” or “power levelers” who play specifically to see if they can design the “most efficient” of each sort of character, but even those gamers engage in social interaction and form teams so that they can test their creations or share what they’ve discovered with other players. As such, it would be worthwhile in the future for someone to research a group of female gamers to see what other differences manifest along gender lines in the MMORPG world. Sarah was quicker to consider my feelings and to offer me help, but otherwise her desire for interaction and teamwork was not notably different from Jared, Ryan or Steven, and based on her explanation of her role within her super-group, I believe it is just as likely that she was more helpful because she was used to helping “noobs” as it was that she was helpful because of a gender difference, though sadly I don’t have data to confirm or deny that. They all craved companionship while patrolling Paragon City, and they all exhibited an understanding of how to socially network within the game’s construction.
construct a gamer identity or “port” one that has already been constructed elsewhere into the gaming environment and surrounding extra-game activities. It is also apparent that gamers then use these identities to take part in a massive collaborative world governed by few external rules and the ever-evolving internal rules—or genres—ratified by small, medium, and large scale groups. It’s obvious that these gamers derive enjoyment from their efforts. It’s also obvious that these gamers move from a sort of shifting novice or “noob” state into sophisticated CoH practitioners over the course of their time in Paragon City.

Navigating this virtual world with this virtual “toon” identity requires complex rhetorical skills and the ability to read situations, contexts, occasions—what I will define in Chapter Four as game specific genres—as well as the ability to use a critical eye to observe and interpret other toons and the identities of gamers playing them. Gamers employ these skill sets on the fly with little difficulty beyond the initial learning curve, and over time they come to simply know what will work and what will not work by experiencing game genres and conventions. They also become careful critics of visual rhetoric and character consistency in terms of both written voice and behavior or motives. They then enact all of this knowledge and all of these skills to the ends of crafting a story—or a series of stories—about what it means to be a hero, recursively reflecting on their own circumstances, experiences, hopes, desires, and biases.

The work being done in these environments is far from the “child’s play” that gaming is often considered. If one forgets for a moment that these interactions are taking place within a visual world where toons indeed resemble cartoon characters, the CoH society functions in ways that are similar to a real society, to a workplace, to an athletic team or class, to a department or to an entourage of friends. As such, it seems only logical that studying these environments and coming to an understanding of why undertaking such complex tasks is so much fun that people are willing to pay a substantial amount of money and devote countless hours of their free time to game can lead to myriad potential applications in the classroom, workplace, and community.

There’s a powerful draw involved in offering a person the chance to sit at a keyboard and become a hero. There’s also quite obviously a satisfying payoff for those who are able to do so with skill. With further research, those same desires and pleasures to undergo complex rhetorical analysis and writing tasks might be isolated and ported into other settings, leading to innovative ways to expand and teach various complex literacies. I comment more on this concept—the idea of “play” and its power to transform writing—in Chapter Five.
There are also implications for how we understand the reading and writing work that gamers do. At Miami University, we ask our students to begin the second semester of first year composition by creating an “inventory” of their reading and writing habits. The first time I assigned this activity, two students told me, “Phill… um… we don’t… um… read.” I asked “so what do you do in your free time?” These two young gentlemen—who lived across the hall from each other in what students call “the hippy dorm”—were “obsessed” with *Halo 2*, a first person shooter and war game. They had a clan, and their clan had a webpage with forums where they shared strategies, planned battles, etc. One of them also spent hours playing a game called *Elder Scrolls: The Morrowind*, a Role-playing Game (RPG) that requires the same sort of character creation and “in character” play present in *City of Heroes*. The other played *Madden* football regularly and maintained “virtual” franchise web pages that tracked the progress of his team throughout the season(s) he played. Both talked of hours of playing, hours of reading message boards, hours of posting messages and participating in game chats, and all the other reading and writing activities that went into finding solutions to their gaming problems. In five minutes of banter these two young men who claimed to “not read and write” described their roles as highly literate participants in a set of gamer discourse communities.

As scholars of composition, we have much to learn from the way gamers interact and what they *claim* is gaming. From the careful rhetorical positioning of their characters to the ways they interact with other players within the game space—and in other spaces where the game extends beyond its perceived borders—they are utilizing the skill sets that some claim video games, television and popular culture hinder. As Cindy Selfe, Anne Mareck and Josh Gardner (2007) recently asserted, “Young people … and the adults in their worlds do not necessarily share a common understanding of and appreciation for gaming as literacy.” Later in the same piece Selfe, Mareck and Gardner argued:

> Perhaps in our well-intended concern for our youth, we have been inclined to overlook or dismiss the positive, exciting, socially transformative developments in computer gaming—or the skillful, tactical agency that young people, themselves, can enact. (n.p.)

While many of the gamers I met while researching/playing *City of Heroes* were 20 or 30-somethings, all of them “grew up” as gamers. For most of them games are equated with television, comic books, and movies with an added interactive element. Traditionalists with a
deep reverence for the canon might dispute the belief that games are “literature,” but understanding how gamers view games opens an interesting new avenue for academia. Many of them don’t use the language that scholars use, but gamers consider games to be multi-modal texts and cultural artifacts. Further understanding of the games leads to further understanding of the gamers themselves. And further understanding of gaming cultures will reveal ways that Sarah and Jared can apply their extra-gaming practices to other textual or multi-modal composing.

Sarah is part of a virtual student council, coordinating school events and helping with “new student orientation” in a world that exists only because she and the other “students” at St. Joseph’s School have written it. Kitten has both “virtual” and “real” friends who visit her MySpace page because Jared has composed a life for Kitten that extends beyond the game itself into extra game genres. Gamers consider writing several pages of coherent, themed text to be “playing.” The hours they spend on role-playing message boards, commenting with other users on GameFaqs, IGN or other similar gaming sites, blogging, or creating web pages is writing, in every way a compositionist would define writing, even if the gamers consider it not to be. As Jared said in one of our online chats, “writing itself is a game.” These gamers have found ways to make writing fun. They aren’t spending these hours working on writing—they’re playing.

But obtaining gaming literacies isn’t all a gamer must accomplish to successfully play CoH. Just as the most traditional form of literacy opens the door to reading but doesn’t imbue the new reader with the ability to understand all written text, gaming literacies open the door to playing the game, but having these gaming literacies doesn’t imbue the new CoH gamer with the ability to play well. To successfully play City of Heroes, a gamer must understand a set of game related genres. The next chapter explores these genres and their implications on the gaming experience and the writing gamers do.

31 One of Kitten’s MySpace friends is “Feedback,” the man who won So You Want to Be a Superhero on the Sci-Fi Network. Feedback comments on Kitten’s posts as if she is a “real” person and vice versa.
Chapter 4:

Genres in a Complicated Virtual World
“As soon as a genre announces itself, one must respect a norm, one must not cross a line of demarcation, one must not risk impurity, anomaly, or monstrosity. And so it goes in all cases…”

-Jacques Derrida (1980, p. 53)

“Genre pervades human lives. As people go about their business, interacting with others and trying to get along in the world, they use genres to ease their way, to meet expectations, to save time… Genres have the power to help or hurt human interaction, to ease communication or deceive… genre has significance in people’s lives.”

-Amy Devitt (2004, p. 1)

“I was trying to emphasize that a rhetorically useful notion of genre should be grounded in the conventions of discourse that a society establishes as ways of ‘acting together’ (in Kenneth Burke’s phrase), that we should look to ethno-categories of discourse rather than to the theoretically neat classifications that seemed to control most discussions of genre at the time.”

-Carolyn Miller, reflecting on her own piece “Genre as Social Action” (1994, p. 67)
Below is a screenshot (see figure 4.1) from the IGN.com video game database entry on *City of Heroes*:

![IGN.com datacard for City of Heroes](image)

### Fig. 4.1: IGN.com datacard for *City of Heroes*

This data card offers a wealth of information, but of primary interest for my purposes is that IGN defines the game as belonging to a “genre” they call “Persistent Online RPG” (PORPG). Others would declare *CoH* an MMORPG and the MMORPG a genre\(^\text{32}\), a slight shift from “Persistent Online RPG,” though the two categories differ only in where importance is placed: on the world of the game itself (persistent online) or on the players (massively multiplayer). These generic labels are purely taxonomic; they allow those who might buy the game to place it contextually among other games they have played before and create a designated shelf space for the physical product on retail shelves. In some ways these definitions are useful, but *CoH* can also be placed squarely in a number of other genres which range from far less specific to highly specific: PC software, video game, subscription internet service, network video game, super hero game, social network, etc. Each of these generic labels fits in some contexts, but none of these labels can fully describe the *CoH* gaming experience and more importantly none of these labels capture the complex socially interactive genres that shape, and are shaped and enacted, by players in Paragon City.

\(^{32}\) The entry in the Wikipedia, the internet’s open-source dictionary, defines MMORPG as: “Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG) is a *genre* of online computer role-playing games (RPGs) in which a large number of players interact with one another in a virtual world.” (my emphasis)
I certainly wouldn’t argue with the usefulness of classifying \textit{CoH} generically as a video game, a PC game, an MMORPG or a PORPG. These labels grant those familiar with those genres a basic understanding of the game itself. In that sense, those genres serve a function. At the same time, I would argue that they are highly reductive and that beyond the moment of recognition—or the moment of purchase—they are of little practical use to a gamer or someone trying to understand the game. As Amy Devitt (2004) wrote, genres have “significance in people’s lives” (p. 1). The labels PORPG or MMORPG lack the ability to do anything but classify and sort. There’s little to learn about the game from these labels.

4.1. That’s Generic: Gaming as Genre(s) as Social Action

Genres—or more specifically genre expectations—are critical to \textit{CoH}. But first I want to address the problematic nature of “genre.” Genre is a term with varied meaning both in scholarship and in everyday life; it can mean anything from the most general label (for example, this text is currently part of an MS Word document and will later be part of a thesis) to a highly specific, rhetorically situated label for an occasion (such as a \textit{City of Heroes} combat mission based healer role-play). The difference here is between what I am referring to as taxonomic genres—“video game,” “MMORPG,” etc.—and rhetorical genres. As Carolyn Miller (1984) proposed in “Genre as Social Action,” one should categorize a text not by what it \textit{appears} to be (“a novel,” “a horror story,” “a mass market paperback about a guy with pins coming out of his head who guards the gates of hell”) but by what actions that texts “does” (in my previous example “a warning not to take a happy life for granted” or “a caution against opening the gates of hell which alludes to Pandora’s Box”). Miller doesn’t specifically address gaming in the piece, but her ideas apply to \textit{City of Heroes} the same way they would to any other text. As Miller (1984) wrote:

In constructing discourse, we deal with purposes at several levels, not just one. We learn to adopt social motives as ways of satisfying private intentions through rhetorical action. This is how recurring situations seem to ‘invite’ discourse of a particular type. (p. 37)

The goal of \textit{CoH} gamers, while largely unspoken, is to create a collaborative story in which the morality of the super hero genre is preserved while individual toons create narrative lines—which the gamers would call story arcs, borrowing from the comic book super hero genre—
within the ongoing textual tapestry. Herein lies the unique element that constructs the MMORPG, in this case *CoH*: without the players and their rhetorically rich toons—their interactions, their collaborative role-play texts, their extra-game writing, etc.—it is questionable whether or not the environment, by itself, is even a game. Jesper Juul (2006) wrote that in order for something to be a “game,” in the classic sense\(^33\), a construct must fulfill six criteria: (1) it must have “rules,” (2) it must have a “variable outcome,” (3) there must be a “valorization of outcome” (or there must be something to “win”), (4) the “player” must exert “effort” to play, (5) the player must have an “attachment” to the “outcome” of the game, and (6) the game must have negotiable “consequences” (p. 54). With the entrance of the first toon the environment becomes a game by most standard gamer definitions because a single gamer can undertake missions, but it is, by Juul’s classic gaming genre definition above, still not a game, as there is really no definition to the gaming experience. A solo toon doesn’t have something specific to win and is bound only by the environment’s rules\(^34\). However when several toons enter Paragon City, the “game” becomes the interplay between those toons, and the gamers start to create a web of rhetorical motives and intentions. It is through the efforts of the gamers themselves that Paragon City becomes a location for gaming, much in the same way that a pool table becomes a location for gaming, or a *Monopoly* board becomes a location for gaming, or a basketball court becomes a location for gaming. A basketball court is not a game. A *Monopoly* board is not a game. A pool table is not a game. Paragon City, without its virtual residents, is not a game, even if its taxonomic genre label is “video game.”

The “game” *City of Heroes* is constructed by a set of five rhetorical genres that converge to form a complex web. It is important to note that these five genres are not equal in their scope and impact on the game, though each relates to the others in a symbiotic fashion. Two of these genres bleed into and out of the game, existing in both places in multiple forms. The first is what should be considered the “master” genre for *CoH*: the super hero genre. The super hero genre is borrowed from, and feeds back into, the rich, now dominantly American, tradition of super

\(^33\) A primary thrust of Juul’s argument later in this same piece is that some newer games violate these rules, but the criteria—which form a “game” genre—pre-date video games. In fact his definition is constructed from a survey of other studies on gaming.

\(^34\) If one were to use a less robust set of criteria as to what defines a game, or if one were to read Juul’s criteria in a highly simplified way, one might make the case for *City of Heroes* working as a single player game, but it is my belief that such an argument would be unable to endure rigorous scrutiny.
heroism that officially began in the 1930s with Superman but in practice pre-dates Western society by sampling from and remixing the varied mythologies that mark recorded history. *CoH* taps this genre, and everything that happens in *CoH* happens within this genre, but not all elements of this genre apply to the game, as I will discuss later in this chapter. The second genre is the highly fluid hybrid genre of extra-game writing which consists of gamer created compositions written in multiple mediums that are themselves set in different sub-genres—blogs, web pages, FAQ documents, message board posts, short stories, fanfic, graphic novels, etc.—that expand on the gaming world but are not governed by the virtual physical space of Paragon City; these genres appeared in Chapter Three during the discussion of Sarah’s supergroup website/message board and Jared’s Kitten’s MySpace blog. Due to their diverse nature, these extra-game texts may or may not directly re-enter the game world and can at times be difficult to isolate for observation—for example one might role-play on a blog then carry that same story arc back into the game, but a person developing an out-of-character FAQ is unlikely to bring the FAQ itself back into the game.\(^35\) The other three game genres—which I refer to as in-game rhetorical genres—form a network of the three dominant rhetorical motives and intentions that define the game experience itself: the social or chat genre, the networking/task preparation genre, and the combat/mission execution genre. I address this network of genres more specifically later in this chapter.

Due to the fact that everything else is nested within it and dependant upon it, it seems only appropriate to start with the most visually obvious and mainstream of these genres: the super hero genre, with its flamboyant spandex outfits and feats of strength. The super hero genre can be most easily explored by returning to my hapless toon Anguta, who failed quite fabulously at being a real boy in Chapter Three.

### 4.2. With Great Power Comes Great Responsibility: The Super Hero Genre in *CoH*

One of the stumbling points for a new *City of Heroes* player who is familiar with the super hero genre is this: a hero in *CoH* isn’t exactly the same as a hero in the most general

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\(^35\) One could argue at the same time that the FAQ does re-enter the game as knowledge for another player, but I would argue that is more an issue of gaming literacy—as discussed in Chapter 3—than a re-application of genre.
generic sense. While the modern super hero genre is rooted in Superman and traces a line from the patriotic imagery of Captain America during World War II through the socially charged Vietnam era politics of Green Arrow and Green Lantern into the 1990s anti-hero movement of Wolverine, The Punisher and Spawn all the way to current comic and movie titles like the re-imagined Clark Kent of *Smallville*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, or *Heroes* — the *City of Heroes* definition of hero is actually much more narrow than that of contemporary popular culture. A narrowed focus makes sense; the super hero genre has become so wide-spread that it is now so elastic that beyond a few fundamental elements — powers and costumes — it could include virtually anything. *CoH* players — at least the *CoH* players I have encountered and played with — distill from the larger genre a sort of super heroic blue-print that serves the needs of the gaming environment and the wishes of the gamers themselves.

Having grown up an avid comic book reader, the *CoH* super hero genre focus felt comfortable to me as a “newbie.” I learned to read with a stack of *Spider-Man* comics. I knew even the most obscure of the mutants in the *X-Men* mythology. I’d heard the words of Uncle Ben Parker on film and read them in print: “with great power comes great responsibility.” Anguta, the first toon I created while paying specific attention to the game’s theme, was the product of my attempt to harness and enact the super hero genre as I knew it. I developed a story arc where he acted tough but really wasn’t, projected a fearsome visage when he was in fact terrified. I was confident that Anguta would be well received. The fact that he didn’t “work” is indicative of the social actions of other *CoH* gamers.

Anguta was a renegade, bucking the pervasive nature of super-groups in *CoH* as he showed no outward desire to “team up” with anyone else, though his actions should have revealed that he very much wished for the security that comes from forging friendships. Anguta was also, in at least a visual sense, unapproachable, though I didn’t design him with that specific intention. He was too dark, too somber, and his Batman-like desire to use fear to intimidate villains simply didn’t “fit the description” of a *CoH* super hero. Gamers seek out fellow gamers with similar interests so they can craft collaborative stories. People wanted to explain to me that Anguta was “broken,” so that I could join in their collective fun. They wanted me to be able to take part in their collaborative story, and they wanted to help me figure out how I could do that. It was never that Anguta was so broken that I couldn’t play him; I did manage to campaign with
him, as he was, more than once, and no one was ever so distraught that they felt a need to be forceful or belligerent. But he was so far outside the existing collaborative discourse that without retooling he couldn’t add to existing stories without causing those stories to “decay.”

In other words, the rhetorical work being done by my character didn’t match to or mesh with the rhetorical work being done by Sarah’s, Jared’s, or Steven’s characters, and spending extensive time role-playing with my toon would hinder their progress toward their “ethical ends.” The phrase “ethical ends” originates with Edward Tomarken’s (2002) text *Genre and Ethics*, and it runs highly parallel to Miller’s theory of genre as social action. Tomarken claimed that the protagonist(s) of any story strive to reach a specific “ethical end:” this is the protagonist’s goal or the work—within the story—that the protagonist hopes to do. While the term originates in a discussion of literature written by a career literary critic, it works well to describe the individual story arcs enacted by toons in CoH because heroes are by the nature of their genre “ethical” virtual entities. It was Anguta’s seemingly ambiguous standing as a dark, “evil looking” hero that created his narrative line crisis. Other toons, in order to achieve their ethical ends, had to either attempt to help Anguta (at best), ignore Anguta, or must assume Anguta was a villain and address him as a “threat” to Paragon City (at worst). The CoH super hero genre’s socially enacted rules marked Anguta as incongruent. He suffered from design flaws from his origin up. This is why I chose the term “decay” in the paragraph above; other toons could interact with Anguta to a certain degree, but sustained involvement with his story arc as I originally devised it would “corrupt” the other hero by drawing him or her into a darker, more ominous, place.

Gamers were kind to Anguta—including the gamers I encountered while playing him who are not participants in my study. Even while noting that he violated the genre expectations of being a “super hero.” Sarah, who to her credit attempted to role-play over an hour with the

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36 I’m borrowing this term from Edward Tomarken, a literature professor at Miami University. While I have referenced his text, my understanding of “ethical ends” draws much more from my discussions with Tomarken than from his writing; the phrase appears in his book with a brief explanation, but my elaboration here draws from hours of conversation in relation to another project. Those unfamiliar with his work will want to view him using Carolyn Miller as a lens (the two have presented on panels before, and there are many parallels and overlaps in their theories in spite of the fact that they come from different fields). Tomarken looks at the *ethical work* that genres do while Miller looks at the *social work* that genres do. I would argue, however, that social work is ethical, and ethical work is social, as ethics depend upon social definition and social action would be nearly impossible without an ethical aim on the part of the agent/author.
character, pointed out to me politely that he didn’t seem to fit with what I was role-playing. “He’s a little dark…sorta creepy” she noted. Others commented that he “looked like a villain” and that his “vibe just wasn’t landing.” As a longtime comic book reader and gamer, I was surprised to find that my toon was viewed as a failed attempt at creating a “legitimate hero.” He had a rich mythological base. He was, to at least some degree, visually striking. His super powers—hurling bolts of ice/wielding an ice sword—made sense given his biography. I knew the super hero genre inside out, and Anguta was drawn from years and years of comic books, cartoons and movies. He should have worked. He was, in fact, as much of a creative composition as I was willing to openly forfeit to a company while playing their game, as upon creation he became the property of NCSoft, an issue I will return to later in this chapter. He represented time and effort in an area where I am well trained, and while I wasn’t distraught, I was frustrated by the fact that my focused attempt at crafting a toon properly resulted in what would generally be considered a failure. It didn’t make sense. But as other gamers offered advice, and I asked questions about genre expectations, I learned the lay of the virtual land, and it became clear that there was an underlying set of rules I missed on my first glance. Anguta violated several of the rules that form the backbone of the CoH super hero genre.

Eventually I realized what the other gamers meant with their criticism and what actions they were taking while interacting with me. As an individual, I am buried waist deep in postmodernism. My intentions were for the character to seem menacing in an ironic way; his dark nature was meant to be yet another mask for what was in reality a nervous, in-over-his-head young hero masking his fear in something fearsome, a super hero genre convention from comic books and movies that does not work in CoH. Anguta was a hero created by me, an adult who as a child loved Spider-Man but grew into an adolescent with anti-heroes like The Punisher, Ghost rider and Spawn. Anguta was meant to be a hero cut from that post-mod “build a creepier Batman” cloth, a good guy with a scary look. He wasn’t being read that way, however, because he broke a series of unspoken CoH super hero genre rules. I have chosen to list these as a series of “don’t” instead of a series of “dos” because these rules construct the CoH super hero genre in the spirit of Derrida’s (1980) “Law of Genre;” they indicate lines that one cannot cross. These CoH super hero genre expectations include:

1. Heroes don’t wear all dark colors
(2) Heroes don’t represent vengeance
(3) Heroes don’t have gigantic skull masks or prominently display skulls
(4) Heroes don’t use being “silent” as an element of their persona
(5) Heroes don’t hide their faces, unless those faces are part of a “secret identity” that is part of their story arc
(6) Heroes don’t behave in anti-heroic ways
(7) Heroes don’t scare civilians—at least not on purpose
(8) Heroes don’t take joy from killing, even when “killing” evil robots
(9) Heroes don’t ignore anyone’s call for help, regardless of what else might be happening

Anguta broke a number of these rules, particularly rules 1, 3, 4, and 5. Once I realized why Anguta was essentially “broken,” I had a chance to make use of one of the game’s interesting features; through visiting an in-game “tailor” I was able to spend a nominal amount of game-earned “credits” to give Anguta what I think of as “Extreme Makeover: City of Heroes Edition,” removing his mask and changing his clothing and coloration (see Figure 4.1). I could have also changed his power-set through completing an in-game quest to earn the right to “respec”—standing for “re-specify”—but each person I spoke to agreed that my initial read on Anguta’s powers was correct. It is important, however, to note that beyond changing the toon’s archetype (Anguta will always be a “blaster”), the game allows for everything else to be revised as the character evolves.

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37 This criteria removes both Batman and Ghost Rider, two of the most viable big name heroes of recent history, from consideration, but the reality of City of Heroes is that heroism is much more Superman than Wolverine; heroism among active role-players is actually almost a “throwback” to the golden age of comic books, a hero that exists long before the concept of the anti-hero
38 I have a feeling this was more about other gamers thinking that I was attempting to avoid conversation, actually, as opposed to anyone actively disapproving the concept. During his silent moments, Anguta frequently emoted, often emoting in a sort of “faux dialogue” way, doing things like “Anguta shrugs, indicating that he’s willing to go on either mission but has no actual preference.”
Re-envisioning a character that is meant to be an avatar for an Alaskan indigenous god of the dead without using skulls or predominantly dark colors presented me with a new challenge, though it only took me a matter of seconds to realize that dark red was a bad rhetorical decision. Left to my own devices, I could have pulled one of the crates of comic books out of my closet, opened the lid, and leaped in looking for ideas to synthesize and re-appropriate; comic books are, after all, the mother and father of the super hero genre, and I suffer for no lack of source material. But it was my own comic book and movie-inspired sense of heroism that led to the first broken Anguta. I needed to draw upon the knowledge of those who are already familiar with the narrowed CoH super hero genre. It seemed wise to revise with a little help from my gaming friends.

Toon Like Me

When I asked Sarah how she started creating the toon she was playing the night she met Anguta, she said “I made pretty costumes… then I start thinking about a back story…”

39 I have greatly condensed this conversation here because it appears in extended form in Chapter Three.
Figure 4.2) which was the beginning of her explanation of how the toon was originally meant to be a performer in an upscale circus, drawing inspiration from Cirque Du Soleil\(^{40}\). This was obvious from the toon’s colorful, thematic attire.

![Figure 4.2: Sarah’s toon](image)

One particularly interesting aspect of Sarah’s description is the way it mirrors this quote from Steve Ditko, the man who created the famous Marvel character Spider-Man:

One of the first things I did was to work up a costume. A vital, visual part of the character. I had to know how he looked … before I did any breakdowns. For example: A clinging power so he wouldn't have hard shoes or boots, a hidden wrist-shooter versus a web gun and holster, etc. … I wasn’t sure Stan [Lee, Spiderman’s co-creator] would like the idea of covering the character's face but I did it because it hid an obviously boyish face. It would also add mystery to the character… (Thomas, 2000, p. 56)

In both cases a tremendous premium was placed on getting the visual appearance of the character “right,” and as history would indicate, many elements of Ditko’s design influenced Spider-Man’s development, just as the visual elements of Sarah’s toon designs influenced the toon’s stories, most specifically the acrobat/circus performer aspect of Sarah’s toon’s story arc.

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\(^{40}\) Sarah’s “acrobat turned tragic” toon also draws from the background of Robin, Batman’s sidekick, though Robin’s parents died as part of the accident that set him on the path to heroism, but Sarah’s toon’s parents—at least in the story as she’s told it so far—live.
There were some dark elements to Sarah’s toon’s background—for example the toon discovered her powers during an “accident”\textsuperscript{41} that is never specifically addressed but is alluded to as having caused significant damage and perhaps taken lives—but the toon is upbeat, cheerful and visually vibrant. The toon also seems to have learned valuable lessons from the “accident” the night she discovered her powers, turning the potential “dark” elements into a positive experience. Everything but the powers—and the raw template for creating the appearance—here came from Sarah, though it shares elements with other existing heroes. And it works. Her toon fits well within the genre. Other players see the toon, engage the toon, and learn and understand the story. In fact Sarah leaned on the other members of her super-group to help the character evolve through mutual role-playing.

Steven’s primary toon, who drew his name and inspiration from the in-game mythology (taking on the same name as one of the ancient figures mentioned during one of the early missions), was a model of image evolution (see Figure 4.3). As he explained:

\textit{CoH} was trendsetting [with its feature rich creation tool]. My first character concept was a sheltered young man, of a well off family, who had had his powers develop erratically. He had lost his arms, and had prosthetic replacements, but his powers actually came from a spirit twin. He started off with a very basic costume with the caveat that he was easily impressionable, and would adopt any look that some other super suggested. I had a really hideous orange one once…

[I asked here if it was as hideous as Anguta’s mid-modification look]

... its hideousness was more consistent.:-)

My present costume is derived from the last one of the previous incarnations, with some nods to the new super team. The stars were a perfect fit though. The last one was in red and yellow though. He was told supers needed to be bright!

Again with Steven’s character there’s a level of darkness and tragedy—the lost arms, and the “spirit twin” which is a complex story touch that Steven wove into his created narrative to allow for his character to use a special shape-shifting ability gained at level 50. Steven played the “other” shape as a sort of “parasitic” twin\textsuperscript{42}—but he managed to maintain a heroic appearance

\textsuperscript{41}This is something that seems to be consistent across the super hero spectrum; almost all of the toons I’ve looked at here have some sort of tragic background, as do most pop culture super heroes.

\textsuperscript{42}Steven’s toon’s parasitic twin story arc bares many similarities to the Spider-Man/alien symbiote/Venom storyline, and it shows how a portion of the larger super hero genre being pulled in and re-mixed by a user. Venom—as a character—wouldn’t work in \textit{CoH}, but what
and attitude. He also says, point blank, what many hinted at while talking to me, that “a super[hero] needed to be bright!” It’s also interesting that Steven was so used to speaking AS his character that he slips between “he” and “I” in this portion of our dialogue, referring to his created “mask” both as an other and as himself. He told me later that he considers the naïve heroic side of this toon to be like his childhood self, just as Sarah and Jared described their toons in Chapter 3.

Using these reflections as a lens and as markers for the super hero genre, I was able to reshape Anguta so that he visually fulfilled the CoH hero genre expectations. I was also able to tweak his background in small ways so that he could function well with other characters while remaining true to my original character concept. On the surface, this might look like “smoke and mirrors,” as the major changes to Anguta were visual/cosmetic. But it is also representative of something far more important to the Paragon City community and to those who have a fondness for comic books and cartoons: the visual is the entry point to CoH, and just as in life, the first impression left by a toon’s visual appearance is the foundation for all future understanding of the toon’s stories, role-play dialogues, and motives (see figure 4.4 for Anguta mug shots).

Steven created is just distant enough from the anti-heroic Venom that it fits CoH genre expectations.
There were aspects of my original Anguta design that violated the “laws” of the CoH genre which I outlined above. Particularly troubling were his design’s disregard for rules (3) and (5). His skull facemask made him “alien,” or worse yet familiar as a symbol for death instead of as an icon that stands in for a vibrant living person; by turning the skull element into face paint—revealing his eyes, nose and mouth and including facial hair and a pair of ski goggles—I gave the character a look that other gamers could identify with. After the makeover, he visually fit. By tweaking his biography so that he was by nature a bit more outgoing, and then role-playing him as vocal while standoffish and at times outright afraid, I finished the transformation from broken toon to toon that worked.

That I had to make these changes to maximize my toon’s potential is an indicator of the collaborative nature of the CoH community. Gamers are forgiving; they don’t literally alienate or chastise toons that don’t fulfill genre expectations, but if a player spends any significant time in the gaming world, he or she will come to understand that certain generic expectations must be met in order to become a member of the community. The toons I studied, and the gamers who created them, weren’t just “playing” City of Heroes. They were enacting, and composing, a multi-media collaborative text situated within a specific genre of storytelling. The composition of that text is what gamers are doing when they’re “playing”—both within the gaming interface and in those extra-game spaces discussed in Chapter Three.
I view genre here as a social construct based on actions and motives. These genres inherently police in passive ways as they are rule sets and criteria, but there is one area where gamers do enact active super hero genre policing is the CoH community stance—both gamers and creators/server administrators—on character copyright. Through the game’s license, toons become the intellectual property of NCSoft, the company responsible for the game and the servers, so that they might appear in the City of Heroes comic book. I alluded to this earlier when speaking of Anguta. He’s my creation, but he doesn’t legally belong to me. Upon creating him and placing him in Paragon City, I have forfeited the rights to the character to NCSoft. To this point there have been no cases where NCSoft has attempted to stop a gamer from role-playing or writing about a toon outside of the game, but as someone who writes, and works alongside creative writers who actively seek publication, I was extremely standoffish about just “giving” my creation to a gaming company.

What has transpired in the CoH community are violations of existing copyrights by gamers. There is a strict “no rip-off” policy written into the CoH Terms of Service (TOS). I first encountered it on the evening I was gaming and saw this toon named “Frank Castle” (see figure 4.5).
really shouldn’t just duplicate a real character. It’s against the rules,” to profanity and threats such as “you effin’ suck!” That night I was playing with Steven, who told me:

In the beginning there were a lot [of rip-off toons]. You still see the odd ball one here and there, but not too much anymore. Don't make one. You could have your account suspended. Probably won't happen the first time, but don't take the chance. And the toon will quickly be named Generic Hero 45654987 or something. Look alikes [aren’t as bad, but] look alike and named alike is big bad no no. Just name alikes are a no no, too.

Ryan also told me a story about the beta test:

There were a bunch of rip-off X-Men and Avengers. NCSoft was quick to stop it, and they made it clear to all of us that we’d be kicked out of the beta if we created copycat characters. Later we found out that the people making X-Men and stuff were Marvel employees who had permission to use the character likenesses, but that still didn’t change the company’s stance.43

It is interesting that gamers share the company’s fear of copyright infringement but are so willing to offer their own creations free of charge to NCSoft. As I mentioned above about Anguta, I actually felt uncomfortable when creating my first toon, but none of the gamers I interviewed found the forfeiture of their creations to be a big deal. While it isn’t implicit, what this tendency by gamers indicates is that the capitalist concept of corporate ownership—an issue that should be important to NCSoft—has been transmitted to and absorbed into the gamer community. The disregard that gamers have while forfeiting their toons runs counter to every similar creative activity I am familiar with, but at the same time no one I encountered, participant or non-participant gamer, was concerned at all by the fact that they were essentially doing freelance design work for any outside City of Heroes projects—the most mainstream being the comic book series—NCSoft might choose to publish later. The needs and wishes of the service provider became the desires of the users without any overt coercion. Likewise none of my participants were familiar with the Creative Commons license—which I suggested in a few cases as a possible

43 Out of curiosity, I one night created a character called “The Lansing Spartan,” a power and appearance mimic of Marvel’s famous “Wolverine.” I couldn’t get the uniform exact, but even with my mascot pun name and green and white motif, it only took me five minutes in-game to receive several comments about how “cheap” my character was and how I needed to “get a clue.” The Lansing Spartan, curiously, is just far enough from being considered a “rip-off” in the eyes of NCSoft that he is still active on my account a year later.
alternative to direct forfeiture of character permissions. I believe this could be a rich line of investigation for later research, but my study indicates that there is currently no widespread concern and/or a lack of education about potential alternatives to the existing system.\footnote{I consider this a CRITICALLY important issue, but none of my research participants did, so I feel like this is as much as I can personally push it without getting into “rant” mode. I want to try to design a way to study this in the future (perhaps by targeting the solicitation to ask for people who create characters for a living, such as creative writers or comic creators?)}

4.3 Extra-Gaming Genres

I have designated a large segment of texts created here as a genre labeled “extra gaming genres.” These are difficult to isolate, as they could take many forms from blogs to message board posts to FAQ document to illustrations. They are both digital and could be non-digital. The hyper-fluid nature of this genre/these genres—a text in this genre could be virtually anything that carries the toon and/or the gamer outside of the game itself while expanding on something that originated within the game—makes them impossible to pen down with any specificity.

In Chapter Three I spoke of three specific examples of extra-gaming genre texts. The first was the message board/website that Sarah helped to maintain for her supergroup. It exists as a hand coded website that links to a free, customizable online message board. Most of Sarah’s contributions are textual, though the texts themselves exist in different genres—some are role-plays, some are administrative messages for the message board, some are in-character administrative messages for other “students” in the school, and others are playful IC/OOC discussions that blur at the edges. The second was Jared’s Kitten MySpace page. It existed entirely within the MySpace architecture, and it was treated like a “real” MySpace site enacted by the toon, Kitten. The last of the extra-game writing mentioned in Chapter Three was Sean’s FAQ, a carefully written gamer-technical document that detailed the many uses of a sort of in-game coding called “binding” that allows a gamer to designate that a single keystroke sub for several in-game commands.

Though I do not have participant data to represent these, I also encountered during my own gaming players who wrote short stories, created their own fanzine style comic books, and even one man who created an action figure—along with custom packaging including a bio card and an explanation of how to emulate the toon’s powers. These extra-gaming genres, as such,
cannot be easily categorized without casting a wide net. What I feel is important is this: there is an “extra-gaming space” which most gamers still consider part of the game but which exists outside of the game’s virtual physical constraints. These texts bleed into and out of the gaming environment, and I believe with further research the sort of extra-gaming writing and composing gamers do on a daily basis could drastically change the general sense of how “literate” gamers are.

4.3 City of Rhetorical Genres

To this point in the chapter I have explained a dominating, overarching super hero genre which can be applied in the same way as many other genre labels (both literary and rhetorical) and I have briefly touched on the extra-gaming genres that gamers compose in on a regular basis. It is important, moving forward, to return to the definition of genre as I am applying it. The super hero genre exists in “layers.” It works as a taxonomic label. It also works as a category for both the game and the sorts of stories being told. But the critical part of what the super hero genre does, at least in terms of this study, is that it structures the gaming world. It provides the framework for the social actions that gamers undertake.

The gamer entering CoH must consider genre, audience, and occasion within the collaborative umbrella created by that specific super hero genre. Gamers in CoH then face tasks that fall into one of three types of in-game rhetorical genres which exist in a triangular relationship: socialization, networking/task preparation, and missions/combat (see Figure 4.6). These genres follow from my appropriated Devitt and Miller construction of genres that mark relevant rhetorical occasions and do specific social work. There are certain expectations, and certain goals for the user to accomplish, that follow from each genre or occasion for communication/writing. The gamer who doesn’t know and follow these expectations will earn the label of “noob,” and will be met with failure until someone is kind enough to stop and offer advice.

Socialization is the most fluid of the CoH rhetorical genres, though it also forms the stable central hub of the game world. Socializing in the game follows basic netiquette as most understand it. It is a major error, for example, to repeat the same question or statement over and
over. It is also considered “wrong” to insult another player, to interject oneself into conversations or situations one has not been invited into, or to mimic another gamer/toon.

The varied servers, and within those servers the varied super-groups and teams, have slightly different standards for communication, but these are generally relaxed. One major issue that generated discussion among gamers was misuse of the different chat channels. One can broadcast, for example, with a matter that is of “global” chat importance (a “broadcasted” message will be heard by anyone on the same map as the player broadcasting), but conversation that is obviously intended for people in a local area is generally expected to happen through the “local” channel. People who speak to their teams about team-specific issues, or who have one-on-one conversations, in the “local” chat channel are often urged to move to either the team chat channel or the private “tell” function. Some servers also welcome both out-of-character and in-character comments on the local channel, while on the more “hardcore” role-play game servers there is an expectation that all local conversation will occur in the toon’s voice and not the player’s.

Figure 4.6. *City of Heroes* In-Game Rhetorical Genres: Map

Socialization—the base of the triangle—is also the most “recursive” of the *CoH*
rhetorical genres, supporting the other two arms. Upon first logging in, gamers will need to somehow engage in social actions. These might be as simple as hitting a user-specified chat channel to locate friends and teammates, going into a populated area to seek out random toons to team up for an adventure, asking questions about the game—which is, without question, the best way to learn things about the interface, the missions, the culture, etc.—or one might choose to go to Pocket D, the in-game dance club, or one of the city parks to simply “hang out.” The same social activities continue once another rhetorical situation has begun.

Actions taken in the socialization genre are likely to look a great deal like online chat or text messaging in some cases and may look like the beginnings of a comic book or super hero movie dialogue in others. For example, it is not at all uncommon to see someone pop into an area and say “sup? NE1 4 team?” It’s just as likely, however, to see someone say “Greetings, hero! Save any citizens tonight?” In both cases, however, the intent of the text is obvious enough; people are attempting to begin conversations. In the case of those who already know those they are attempting to locate, it’s not at all uncommon to see people throwing around nicknames. Ryan, who often lost track of me when we campaigned, would sometimes broadcast “anyone seen the Bouncer?” if he were attempting to locate Nash, though only a few other gamers realized that the Nash character was supposed to be a nightclub bouncer. Due to the fact that most of my interviews started though a highly inorganic method—emails, followed by in-game private messages and meetings in specific places—I don’t have a great deal of data to exhibit the sort of dialogue that results in the social genre.

The next rhetorical genre—rising from the left side of the base of the triangle—is networking and/or task preparation. Depending on the task and whether or not the gamer needs assistance primarily from NPCs or other gamers, this process can be highly social or could be user intensive. These activities begin once a toon chooses to begin a mission of any sort, and they could include gathering a team, insuring that all the team members have the supplies they need, checking to insure that every member of a team is of the right basic level, obtaining training for any team members who need to level up, assisting all the team members in locating and arriving at the task location, and talking to any necessary contacts in the gaming world.

For some missions, task preparation is as simple as entering a one question dialogue with an NPC contact then traveling to a location to complete a task (clearing enemies from an area, transporting something from one place to another, etc.). More complex tasks, such as “Taskforce
Missions” require that several toons actually sit and strategize, forming a team of exactly eight members with the required abilities, obtaining all the correct supplies, and insuring that everyone involved is of the right power level to complete the task. Because Taskforce missions take hours to complete, gamers take them seriously and tend to remain highly task oriented and disciplined during the creation of such a team.

Most of my experience in this genre came while playing on my own, as my participants, due to concerns about who we might find and what we might get ourselves involved with, attempted to keep our teams loose and our missions simple. As such, I do not have enough data to truly represent the richness of communication within this genre. The one time I participated in a task force mission, it took nearly an hour just to assemble the right collection of people and all the required supplies. The leader of that team—who was not a participant in my study—sent me on several errands to different shops in-game to buy various things we would need (healing enhancements, “revive” enhancements which bring a defeated player back to consciousness, etc.). This leader was also careful to balance the archetypes on the team so that there were enough healers, enough melee combatants, enough distance attackers, etc. The entire campaign, from the moment I joined the team until the end of the final leg of the taskforce mission, took roughly eight hours.

The final type of CoH rhetorical genre, the leg of the triangle leading downward from the top to the base, is the communication that surrounds the mission itself—or combat in general. Depending on the server, the team, and the level of content this could blend in many ways with basic socialization. In one case, for example, I interviewed a participant and discussed comic books with him while the two of us, as a duo, cleared a cave of several hundred enemies, and in another case that same week one of my participants took me on a mission with a team of six that was so highly task driven and organized that even brief off-topic chatter was considered unacceptable. Most teams, however, maintain a specific method of operation wherein a member takes the “scouting” position, a character serves as the “bait” so to speak—a role my toons seemed to excel at, a toon serves as medic and heals the others while they fight45, and the other

45 It should be pointed out that more than anyone else in the game, “healers” know their generic function. While on a team as a “tank”—the guy designated to take damage while others attack—my healer “messed up” and allowed me to die. He took this personally, and spent the better part of the next half hour apologizing to me and fuming over neglecting his duties. I was told later
members of the team assault opponents. Gamers with toons designed for specific tasks, such as healers, find themselves in demand, and they realize they have a specific role to play in any encounter. If the mission presents a mental challenge but no threat of physical danger, team members congregate to find a solution.

On one particular mission with a team including one of my participants, a “mistake” was made. Though I have a transcript of what was said, and I watched the in-game action, I still cannot figure out what, exactly, went wrong, nor could Jared, the participant. Our team had surrounded a cluster of zombies in a small room in the sewer. The team leader devised a careful plan of attack. Since both Jared and I were blasters, we were to “start” the fight by firing at the “boss” in the group of zombies—the team leader knew specifically who this was and utilizing an in-game function basically “painted the target” for us. When he told us to fire, the entire horde advanced on us before either one of us could get a shot off. The next few minutes were filled with several people rattling off real-time, inspired-by-military-television instructions like “flank right. Someone hit the zombie two clicks behind the leader!” or “someone pull this beast off me with a headshot!” The dialogue was highly specific, and any pause in acting on a comment—or question as to what a comment meant—was met with disdain and led to problems with the mission.

This sat in strong contrast to the two-man team mission I undertook with Steven. We spent most of the mission socializing, as we set our strategy early. As Steven said, “you pull, I’ll attack from behind while they cross.” “Pulling,” in this context is when a blaster shoots the member of the opposing group that is closest to his team, “pulling” him away from the collective. Once he is in the space between his team and the blaster’s, another teammate can attack from behind while the blaster attacks from in front. If executed properly, it results in slow, but methodical, dismantling of a large group of enemies with little to no damage sustained. Other than mixing in an occasional “rest,” “pull again,” or “we need to re-think this room,” our combat dialogue was loose and edged more into developing the toon’s role-play story arcs. It had a very “hero and sidekick” feel, as Steven’s toon led me around and showed me things. Most of my combat/missions with participants went this way, though that data is not truly representative of that this is common practice for a healer, and that as the team’s tank I should have been insulted if he didn’t apologize to me.
how combat usually works based on my other gaming experiences. Due to this, I have little data that represents an “authentic” combat situation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Socialization</th>
<th>Networking/Task Preparation</th>
<th>Missions &amp; Combat</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Making friends</td>
<td>• Forming teams</td>
<td>• Establishing team roles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Learning game basics</td>
<td>• Formulating strategies</td>
<td>• Code switching to proper team method of communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Chatting for entertainment</td>
<td>• Obtaining supplies</td>
<td>• Following established strategy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Locating friends who are online</td>
<td>• Establishing team specific rules</td>
<td>• Being a good teammate (whatever that might mean in the collaboratively created team environment)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Random role-playing</td>
<td>• Locating objective and assisting in transporting others to objective</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Visiting necessary contacts</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4.7. *City of Heroes* In-Game Rhetorical Genres

It is important, while navigating these different in-game genres, to communicate in the proper fashion. Knowing when to code switch can be challenging. While it is acceptable to sit in Pocket D, or under the gigantic statue of Atlas in Atlas Park, and discuss just about anything, one must communicate efficiently when moving into task preparation mode. For example, the second thing Rich said to me—after “hi”—was “OMW is shorter in chat” in response to me saying “on my way.” His response was somewhat uncommon in that he actively corrected me, something he would do several times during our gaming session, but there is an expectation among *CoH* gamers, and I believe gamers in general, if not text based chatters/text messengers on the whole, for fellow gamers to know the short form of basic statements and to use them when attempting to communicate quickly. “Congratulations” is “gratz,” “thank you” is “ty,” “your welcome” is something one simply “nod”s to, etc.

There are also select times when gamers actively police and correct each other based on these genres. During one of my gaming sessions with Jared, we joined a random team going on a
mission into the sewers under the city. These missions are generally considered “levelers,” or missions that people undertake simply to gain experience and level up. As such, it’s common for a team to role-play/socialize while in the sewers, mixing the socialization and mission genres. For some reason, one of the members of the team, in the middle of the mission, continually entered the same profane message—which we later discovered was an AC-DC lyric—at a rate of two to three times per second. This lasted for roughly a minute before other members of the team began to protest. After another awkward minute or two the team “leader” kicked this member out, at which time the gamer’s friend—breaking his toon’s role-play persona—entered into an argument with the team leader. Jared told me afterward that such an event was “uncommon, but when you play at certain times of day (we were playing at roughly 2 a.m. EST), you sort of expect that on a sewer mission.” He told me that he “just plays through that in character.”

4.4. A Working Genre Hero is Something to Be: Maneuvering Rhetorically in CoH

As I’ve said, one can classify City of Heroes as “a video game” or “a super hero story,” and walk away. This works taxonomically to place the CoH in a box. For retail purposes it places the game on a shelf, and it allows some critics to situate it in relation to comic books, other games, and movies. But harnessed as a rhetorical tool and not a taxonomic structure, genre in CoH does the sort of “work” that Miller (1984) imagined. One can read situations and contexts based on a socially constructed generic frame, knowing for example that when someone says “Blaster LFT!” that person’s toon is a blaster—specializing in distance attacks—looking for a team to join or that ((Phill’s designating text with double parentheses tells you he is writing out of character and outside the expected genre right about now)).

It is through a rhetorical lens—an elastic rhetorical lens that allows for blurring and subversion—that genre labels become useful. As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, the super hero genre is of critical—in fact bedrock, fundamental—importance to City of Heroes. These are gamers who read comic books, watch movies and television, and view these texts with the same critical eye that English studies turns on the canon. The super hero genre is their terrain and they expect anyone joining their world to make every effort to learn, understand and be able to apply it. But the game doesn’t depend upon the loose, ever-changing anti-hero-as-hero super hero genre that permeates current popular culture. The super hero genre that structures and supports
CoH harkens back to the mainstream super hero genre of the mid-1970s—epitomized by Marvel’s Spider-Man—which itself was a throwback in many ways to the ethically upright 1950s post-war Superman stories where the small town super hero does good. And as my early adventures perfectly illustrated, dropping into the game with a high level of current super hero genre knowledge was worthless without making calibrations to account for how CoH’s heroes were different from those on local newsstands, in theaters or on television screens.

It could be easy for a casual viewer—or even a casual gamer—watching someone playing City of Heroes to do what Miller (1984) and Devitt (2003) warn against; one could be so positive that one sees a bunch of spandex clad super heroes running around killing things that one wouldn’t look deep enough to see what the gamers actually did during a gaming session. The casual viewer might not see that Sarah has rhetorically positioned herself as the “upperclassman” and is leading a group of St. Joseph’s “freshmen” into battle against crazed robots. One might not notice that she changes her communication style when speaking to the other students and when recruiting the odd looking hero with the skull mask. One might not notice how she switches from socializing to planning to “getting down to business.” These changes from genre to genre and from rhetorical situation to rhetorical situation happen organically in the game, and without a critical eye, one could easily miss the complex social actions Sarah executes with her dialogue. CoH is not “just” a super hero story, and it’s not “just” a game. In some cases one might even make the claim that while “super hero game” easily fits CoH, it’s not even close to the best practical description of what is happening. The composition that gamers enact while playing—crafting characters visually and biographically, role-playing, and crafting extra-gaming texts—needs the benefit of being evaluated not by dismissing it to a box (“that’s a role-play!” “that’s just some super hero character”) but by being observed with a critical eye for what work the composition does.

The most interesting example of this in my research is to continue looking at Sarah’s toon Hugz. Hugz is an elder-stateswoman in CoH; at the time of my research she was approaching level 45 and has no-doubt by now reached the current cap at level 50. But if one were to attempt to confine Hugz to a genre, she’d resist. It’s easy to create a nested taxonomy for the sake of labeling her: Hugz is a toon> is a tank—that’s her archetype> in the MMORPG City of Heroes>played by a 30-something woman named Sarah>who is part of a supergroup based loosely on the X-men. This would allow one to place Sarah in a box with similar players. But that
tells the reader precious little about the “work” that Hugz does. Sarah—in-character, as a toon—was one of the members of her supergroup/mock super hero high school’s student council. Her duty, in that capacity, was to handle new student orientation. Such a position left Sarah constantly bouncing between the three in-game genres: she needed to constantly maintain social conversations (entrenched in the socialization genre) while aiding supergroup members in networking tasks (aiding others in forming teams and prepping for missions) and completing her own tasks. She could code-switch on cue with no difficulty multi-tasking, as is evident from this portion of our campaign/interview wherein Sarah had to aid me in regaining a few minutes of notes I lost to an internet service provider (ISP) crash:

Phill: Still here? My ISP tanked on me for a second.
Sarah: Hello! I was just dealing with some supergroup stuff while I waited. *grin*
P: Do you still have our chat up?
S: I do!
P: could you log it and email it to me? My ISP crashing killed my notes, too. *sigh* I was just in the process of saving, too.
S: hmm .. maybe? I don't think I've toggled capture on this toon. I can't cut and paste.
P: all you have to do is type /copychat and the name of the tab. It'll copy it to your clipboard.
S: nice! See, learn something new every day! Now that's a nifty feature. Okay. I will save now and email afterwards.
P: I learned that one out of necessity. :) Thanks. Where were we?

At that point we went right back into role-playing the mission with questions interspersed, but in that moment I pulled Sarah from her networking/task preparation assisting supergroup members into socialization (and actually problem solving for me) before we went back into the mission and combat genre to continue our mission.

Sarah was also one to fluidly move into socialization while on a mission; this was somewhat uncommon as she was the only participant in my study who would do this without specifically entering into the ((accepted codeswitch)); instead she’d fuse her social response into her toon’s real-time commentary on the mission. At one point I mentioned to her that the night before I’d experienced an airhead moment:

Phill: Last night a random team invited me, and they were all laughing because I got lost.
Sarah: Grin. I've made a career out of getting lost. I'm terrible at going the right way.
P: I didn't know it until I pulled up the map*, but last night I was running in a circle.
S: And there you are, in the middle of nowhere.
P: I bet it was hilarious for the people who noticed before me.
Sarah’s toon snickers
S: Oh, I'm sure! Always one on a team
S: It’s really sad when it’s me…but there is nothing wrong with being a little behind! Slow tankers need love too!

The only place in this exchange where either of us broke character was my mention of the map*—which some gamers would consider “in-character” though it refers to a HUD that the toon shouldn’t be able to see—but this chat wasn’t at all mission based. Sarah had no problem weaving this into the missions and combat genre, however. There was no pause to ask me what I was doing, no protest, in fact there was no hesitation at all. It flowed organically from one genre to the other.

Sarah’s willingness to move between/blur in-game genres brings the discussion back to Miller (1984) and Devitt (2004). Sarah knew the genres inside-out, and because of her mastery she could blur them without it harming her game experience. But more importantly, Sarah was able to give the game a sort of master “genre” in terms of the work she wanted it to go. She told me, plainly: “oh, I play [because of] the people I play with.” For her, the game is a social experience, so while she could leave the socialization genre to do other things within the game—and outside the game, with her supergroup—she still referred to herself at all times as “not usually the most serious person you've ever not met” playing both with the idea of “seriousness” in terms of genre and the concept of being a person “you’ve ever not met” because meeting her toon was not meeting Sarah in the flesh. She maintained a persona across genres that bled from the super hero she created to her in-game and extra-game writing; it was always clear that some form of “Sarah” was present. She never vanished into a toon, though she could enact her toons’ personalities with no difficulty. Her goal in CoH was to socialize and enjoy the company of others, so that, in a sense, became the master genre for her experience. The game was a way to connect with people. And judging by the hours and money Sarah spent, and her joyful demeanor even when campaigning with a researcher she’d met only an hour or so earlier, she was able to do exactly what she hoped to do with the game. She successfully navigated a web of genres, coming out of the experience with exactly what she wanted.

Other gamers in my study had other genre expectations for their game experiences. Sean, for example, wanted to act, so he viewed the game as a gigantic role-playing engine, and even when other resisted, he role-played. Steven wanted to tell stories, so his toons leaped into the super hero genre, saturated themselves, and shot through the other genres creating fodder for Steven to script his tale. Rich was interested in the most basic genre I’ve observed here: the
game’s actual rule set. He spent his time finding ways to better execute tasks within the rules, like the basketball player who shoots 100 free throws before dinner each night or the chess player who raises the difficulty of the simulator as far as he can and loses over and over to watch his opponent. Each of these gamers understood that the game had genres, and that the genres had expectations, but in the end they also created their own master-plan, defining their own social actions—or genres—for the game.

If Amy Devitt (2004) is correct in claiming that “genres have significance in our lives” (p.1), the fact that gamers attain such mastery over genres while playing has to be a positive indicator for their abilities to understand other genres, compose in other modes and in other contexts, and to turn a critical rhetorical eye to the world around them. Just as my participants grasped and manipulated the super hero genre, knowing the occasions for socialization, for networking and task preparation, knowing the genre for mission communication and execution, and knew what aspects of each genre to carry with them as they moved their toons out of the game, one could posit that those same gamers could master the genres of personal letter writing, professional letter writing, essay writing, researched report writing, etc. Given the right motivation, those same gamers might include APA citations in their role-play posts. There is a complexity of communication and expertise in composition present in what gamers are doing. They aren’t “just” playing anymore than I am “just” writing. They have motivations and desired ends, they understand contexts and realize that certain things work for certain audiences. The level of sophistication displayed by CoH gamers indicates that these same people, placed in different contexts, could compose complicated texts moving from genre to genre with ease.

If that’s the case, there is a great deal that educators can learn from gamers; their “play” includes the execution of things instructors spend years attempting to teach in a classroom environment. It would be easy to follow the same line of thinking that so many have and place gamers, and their games, in a generic box. They are “gamers” playing a “game.” They are indeed playing with a high tech toy, but that high tech toy is enabling them to do fascinating things that are no more “child’s play” than any other composition, and it’s the same toy I’m “playing” with as I write. Everything about what they are doing is generic, but that’s hardly “generic.” Gamers often use a term called “porting” when discussing things. The term originally meant taking a game from one platform (such as the PC) and moving it to another (like the Playstation). It is highly similar to Manovich’s (2002) concept of transcoding. But gamers now use the term
loosely to refer to moving anything game related anywhere else, “porting” their toon to a blog, or “porting” a character from another game into CoH—attempting, for example, to recreate a WoW character as a toon or devising one of those “rip-off” toons who looks and acts like Spider-man. I would propose that we can urge gamers to “port” their understanding of genre, of audience, and of how to execute specific writing for specific occasions from the game into other aspects of their lives, and in doing so I believe we could cause a powerful transformation in writing practices. In the closing chapter I will reflect more fully on what these genres, video game literacies, and this complex gaming world really means in terms of scholarship and pedagogy.
Chapter 5:

A Great Virtual Place to Visit, Even if You Don’t Want to Virtually Live There: The Implications of City of Heroes for Writing and Rhetoric in Academic Spaces
“When we write with cutting-edge tools, it is easy to forget that … writing itself is always first and foremost a technology, a way of engineering materials in order to accomplish an end.”

- *Denis Baron* (in Hawisher & Selfe, 1997, p. 16)

“After all, players co-author games by playing them, since if the player doesn’t interact with the games and make choices about what will happen, nothing will happen.”

- *James Gee* (2005, p. 1)

“When English studies teachers get together to talk about technology, we generally end up talking about change.”

- *Cynthia Selfe* (in Hawisher & Selfe, 1997, p. 292)
Certain things are apparent when a gamer takes the first virtual steps into Paragon City. *City of Heroes*—as is no doubt true of many of other MMORPGS (Taylor, 2006; Oliver, 2002; Delwiche, 2003)—is not a simple “game” by most common definitions. *CoH* is an intricate web of genres, communicative acts, and multi-modal texts where multiple literacies are learned, developed, and enacted. While reflecting on my research and the campaigning I undertook with my participants, the following five points were illuminated:

(1) While it is quite obvious to a seasoned gamer how complex the *CoH* gaming environment is, it’s equally important to future considerations of gaming that insiders make this transparent complexity obvious to casual observers. Due to the high public profiles of games like the *Grand Theft Auto* series, gaming in general is often relegated to an inferior position, and far too much of current scholarship points to gaming as a place where hegemony reigns without realizing that collaborative games allow for disruptions— and in some cases complete revisions— of the hegemonic order. It is unfair for those who haven’t explored gaming—or those who have taken only a cursory glance at gaming—to place all games into a generic box and walk away.

(2) Gamers work hard. I realize this statement is a theoretical jump for many, as gaming is often depicted as a passive, lazy practice, but my research indicates that at the very least the group of gamers I’ve worked with put more effort into their gaming—without calling it work, or even thinking of it as anything BUT playing—than most of the college students I’ve ever taught in a writing classroom put into their writing. After an eight hour gaming session, it even starts to feel in some ways like one is leaving work after an eight hour shift. It can be exhausting.

(3) What seem to be “game specific” skills aren’t *entirely* game specific. Learning to work within rule systems, learning to interact with others, learning to apply genres and utilize genre expectations, and learning to manage composition and communication in multiple modes are all skills one must develop to play *CoH*. These are also the skills needed to be a graduate student, to work in an accounting office, or to work in an emergency room...
(4) …but doing it in a game environment is *fun*. It’s so much fun that people will pay $50 for a game, $15 a month, $20-50 for expansion packs and upgrades, and in some cases will build specific computer systems, costing thousands of dollars, for the right to learn and apply these skills. In some ways, it’s magic.

(5) The future evolution of writing—both as a process and as an academic practice—will no doubt be intimately tied to the quickly evolving digital landscape. It’s unlikely that the entire world will become a video game, but modern society moves closer each day to Baudrillard’s (2001) “simulacra,” and as “truth” is diluted and transformed by the digital landscape, writers and teacher-scholars in the field of writing studies and rhetoric must explore that digital landscape. If one were to draw a comparison to the most commonly recognized form of “writing,” cyberspace has become the paper. And the pencil. But end users are the pencil, too. And the paper. And the desk is anywhere one can connect to the internet with any input device. Where then does one go to write, and what is writing when one gets there?

5.1. Gaming isn’t (Just) Child’s Play

The major hurdle for gaming studies, like the project I present here, is establishing that—for lack of a better metaphor—gaming deserves a seat at the table. At times I feel I’ve over-stressed this point, but I believe it is absolutely critical that educators understand what we’re really talking about when we talk about gaming. There will always be games that allow for a strictly cultural critique, such as the *Grand Theft Auto* games, *Saint’s Row* or *Crackdown*. Interesting things DO happen in these gaming environments, but one can easily wave a finger at the highly violent, sexist, at times overly repetitive game play and say “look how hideous this is! All it does is conform to a phallogocentric hegemony glorifying sex and violence” in the same way some dismiss movies and television. At the same time, however, the majority of current video games are like *City of Heroes*: complex gaming communities that buck up against the hegemonic order in interesting and unexpected ways.

It would be a terrible mistake to think that people who play *CoH* for eight hours at a time aren’t thinking or are simply reveling in glorified violence. Speaking as a life-long gamer and a
scholar-researcher, I can profess that after eight hours of playing *CoH* with a participant I was mentally—and astonishingly enough to some degree physically—exhausted. There’s this deceptive sense that once one learns the input, and one is capable of dancing one’s fingers over the number pad in a well timed 1-2-4-6-7-3-9-8, the game will suddenly become a breezy series of assaults followed by a chat, followed by another assault, etc. I feel I can safely say that without offending my fellow gamers because that was MY initial read. I thought “oh, alright, I learn to fight, then we talk while we kill bad guys. Okay. Seems fun enough.”

Only that’s not it at all. Those mechanical literacy elements of the game are the first thing a player has to learn, but as soon as the player knows how to handle a toon in a fight, one has to learn to read others in the fight, to deliver key information to teammates, to cover team members, etc.—one has to become character literate. A player has to learn to speak as the toon and as oneself, when to mix the two, when the situation calls for one to only speak as the toon, when the player needs to ((excuse oneself from speaking as the toon for a second)), what roles the player is comfortable with in game—for example, even with my extensive experience I don’t feel comfortable leading a team. If one is on a team and friend logs in who isn’t on that team, sometimes one has to juggle combat with team discussion, a private chat with a friend who isn’t at all involved in the mission, and private discussions with individual people involved in combat, mastering social/interaction literacy. Sometimes the mission simply requires deep thought to solve a puzzle, and one has to try to think through a complicated task while managing all of the conversations swirling around, while maintaining the toon ((and not making my mistake of solving the puzzle as Phill)) and being alert enough to not be pummeled to death by a random zombie while staring at the puzzle. It’s reading and writing and juggling, oh my!

There is nothing simple about playing a game like *CoH*. The genres actually weave in a way that is so complicated that I once said to someone “it’s easy to explain! *City of Heroes* is a super hero game where…” and about ten minutes later, I said “maybe it’s not so easy to explain after all.” The complexity involved in the game is one of its major draws. Gamers don’t want to have an easy time. In fact that’s one of my life-long gripes as a gamer. I shouldn’t buy a game on Friday and finish it on Sunday. Of course there’s no “end” to *CoH*, so in addition to the multiple layers of complexity, MMORPGs remove the “singular end goal,” making the game even more challenging. So while it’s easiest to say “it’s a game,” what *CoH* really consists of is a collaborative text that is supported by a web of interactive genres and socially constructed rules
that are also governed by the limitations of a software interface and the virtual bounds of a
cybercity, a cybercity that contains millions of toons who serve as the virtual faces of other
people’s stories, each one as unique and complex as the person “playing” behind the keyboard.
It’s a bit daunting to collect oneself and say “yes, I’m ready to leap into this collaborative text
and see what I can do,” but people make the leap every day.

The Toughest Job You’ll Ever Spend Hundreds of Dollars to Love

While I was campaigning with Jared, we came across a long line of toons in the middle of
Atlas Park. I made a crack about line-dancing, and he said “no, that’s a costume contest.” From
time to time, just because they want to give back to other gamers, high level toons will broadcast
that they’re hosting a costume contest and will ask lower level toons to congregate in a certain
place. The “host” then judges the costumes and awards some sort of prize to the top three toons.
The prizes are usually in-game credits—AKA money—or power upgrades. The winner of that
contest was probably the most visually impressive toon I saw in all of my time playing. He commented that it took him five hours just to get his appearance finished. I asked Jared “wow, five hours? That’s intense, isn’t it?” to which he replied, “yeah. I try to keep mine at around three.”

Five hours is more than a week of in-class time for a graduate seminar. It’s more than
most undergraduates put in-class on their “long” day of the week. It’s more time than is legally
allowed before a break on the job; it’s over half a full time shift. That’s how much time this one
player spent not developing his toon but developing the visual aspects of his toon. We didn’t ask
him how long the entire toon, with powers and bio, took him to develop, but Jared told me that
he’d put well over seven hours into a single creation before. And this happens before the actual
“game” starts. This is the “getting dressed for work” part of the process.

46 I leaped into one of these contests with my re-vamped Nash character. He won third prize,
which was 50000 in-game credits. When the host noticed I was of the same archetype he was, he
also gave me several high level upgrades that he had no further use for. To put that in context, I
was the least of the winners, and I was given what would have taken me about 10 hours of play
to earn.

47 While I don’t have consent to directly quote this gamer, we did know that he was male. He
shared his name openly with us and chatted for a bit, but it seemed wildly inappropriate for me to
ask if I could email him a project consent form, so I have attempted to relate all information
about him through Jared’s eyes or my own.
And it doesn’t end with that first attempt. Character appearance, powers, and biographical statements are ever-changing texts that gamers revise as they play, so the chunk of time I am talking about here is just the basic, bedrock start to the process of playing. It could be that none of it is final, and at the end of that effort the only person who could see the product of this gamer’s labor was the gamer himself. He then entered the game and had to play the customary hour-or-so to get from the tutorial zone to Atlas City. Jared and I estimated together that this guy and his absolutely astonishingly cool toon probably spent about 11-12 hours working alone just to get to the point where he could try to join a team. He happened upon that costume contest and likely won a fair amount of in-game credits for his effort, but that wasn’t something he expected or that any gamer ever expects. The only reward he expected was that at the end of that long period of development he’d have an enjoyable toon to play.

I try, as I conduct my research, not to stay forever entrenched in my role as instructor, but I quite literally dream of the day when a first year student walks up to me and says, “Phill, I spent 12 hours this weekend researching and prepping to write my paper. Can we talk a little while before I start actually composing?” In fact I dream of the day that one of my students accounts for twelve hours of total work on a project. But this gamer spent that time with pride, and from all indications he enjoyed it. Jared, and all my other participants, talked about spending similar amounts of time developing toons. This is a part of the process that many would claim isn’t even really playing the game yet, and it’s already more of a commitment than some give to major projects in other walks of life.

Gaming is work. It’s intense, at times frustrating, work. As I’ve exhibited with my sideshow freak turned lovable loser turned functional member of cyber-society Anguta, sometimes a person puts in a great deal of work only to be met with apparent failure. And yet gamers plug on. As I’ve been accounting for time, I’ve tried to establish exactly how many hours I spent on Anguta. I logged his “in game” time through my interviews; he played roughly 40 hours in a two week period ((or, in other words, he was my part-time job)). But it took me at least an hour to find the right mythological figure to base him on and to pull together his bio. It took another two hours to build him in the character creator, and since that went poorly, it took

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48 None were quite as extreme—I felt right or wrong getting the double digit guy into this reflection was important. I know it’s all psychological, but 11 sounds like so much more than nine.
me about an hour or so to give him his make-over, not including the time I spent talking to people about what I should do to him. Nash, who I played the most out of all of my toons, has logged over 100 hours.

I don’t generate nearly the level of extra-game text that others do ((unless one counts this thesis; if this is a game text, I’m pulling ahead of the competition)). Other than the month of July in 2006—while I conducted my interviews—I haven’t had nearly the time to game that I would devote to it if I weren’t researching gaming and writing about gaming. Still, with just Nash and Anguta I put about 150 hours into the game in a month. That’s almost a week (six and one quarter days). Some of that time, particularly with Nash, was spent leveling while also talking to friends, reading or watching television, but still, I spent almost a real-time week out of a month just playing the game. And for the most part, it was fun. I was constantly composing, either through in-game role-play chat or refining my character biography, and I spent a tremendous amount of time early on reading FAQ documents and asking questions both of other gamers and on message boards.

The interesting thing I discovered is that while gamers are doing all of this “work” while gaming—writing, creating web pages, building characters, organizing events in-game, etc.—it’s so far from feeling like work to them that they don’t even keep track of how much time they’re spending. I asked Sarah, for example, how much time she spent working with the St. Joseph’s school website, and all she could offer was “I don’t know. A couple of hours a day, I guess. I’m not really sure.” Others, like Jared and Sean, referred to projects they worked on in terms of “nights” spent on them as opposed to specifying how long a “night” might be. Each of them campaigned with me for six or more hours and planned to do more gaming, so a “night” could be over six hours, and Sean’s FAQ took “several nights.” Jared devotes “nights” to role playing certain characters. Of course there is a question of quality output from work, but even as a life-long gamer I don’t feel comfortable making judgment calls as to who has done good gaming work and who could improve his or her gaming practices, particularly since the product of my life as a gamer and comic book nerd was initially a failure. What mattered to me, and what I think is important to carry forward, is that all of this work is happening within this complex rhetorical web of genres is the practice of the three video game literacies I outlined in Chapter Three, and the people doing the work—the reading and writing—are enjoying it so much that they don’t consider it work, they don’t log it as work, and the time seems to melt away as they
complete these gaming tasks. It comes down to the compositionist debate of product vs.
practice, and the “practice” side of the equation for these gamers is in every possible way what
instructors hope their students will engage in.

Living up to Expectations

Returning for a moment to my natural instinct to carry my “teaching” hat with me
everywhere I go, my first night of gaming with Ryan was astonishing. I know that as a gamer
I’ve always mixed in my composing practices. I’m the guy who turns off John Madden and Al
Michaels so I can do my own play-by-play over Madden just because I get sick of the AI
commentators making the same calls over and over. But when Ryan showed me his toon, and
started talking to me about why he’d chosen specific colors and motifs, then he showed me his
player’s biographical statement and explained to me that he was going to move to speaking to me
in-character, I couldn’t help but think “wait a minute. I’ve seen all of this somewhere before.”

As a composition instructor, I’ve been faced many times with teaching students rhetorical
analysis—tossing them triangles and terms from Aristotle—and I’ve asked my share of students
to write autobiographical or autoethnographic texts. That’s work. I know students look at it as
academic work that is foreign to them. But with Ryan, it was sort of like I was talking “shop” as
a total outsider. He knew what the audience was for his toon, and he designed the toon thinking
about that audience’s potential reactions. His character’s biographical statement was—for the
character, which he enacted—autobiographical, and his sense of how to behave in character was
enacting autoethnographic composition, knowing how to communicate out in the gaming world
as a part of the team community, as a gamer, etc.

The point I am driving toward is that what I’ve fleshed out in Chapter Three and Chapter
Four is presented in a game specific fashion, but in reality the building of multiple literacies and
the ability to move fluidly between genres are essential skills that people use in all walks of life.
On some level I no more “play” CoH than I “play” graduate school, though I realize saying such
a thing—that one is “playing” college—is highly loaded and would infuriate many of the people
I hold in high esteem. It could be that as scholars we need to use the word “play” in contexts
where it becomes loaded and uncomfortable, though, for “play” is a key term, if not a way of
life, for college age and younger generations. Gaming is play. Remixing is play. For some
blogging, video editing, photo editing, audio editing and other computer related tasks are play.
Why stress the word play? In the paragraph above I suggested that I “play” graduate school the same way I might “play” a game. For a moment, I want to set aside the fact that this statement could make some academics’ blood boil. It’s not entirely true, even by my definition. I don’t play CoH like my participants do. If I did, I would make time for it in my life that would call for me to sacrifice other things ((including my studies and my own recreational gaming)). I haven’t played—other than for little moments here and there to test theories, to capture images, or just because it was late and I was bored but couldn’t sleep—since my interviews ended in August of 2006.

I do, however, “play” graduate school the way my participants play CoH. I devote hours to preparing for grad school events—conference presentations, workshops I offer, classes, massive documents ((like the one I’m writing right now))—and I do so without stopping to complain that it is so much work ((though to be fair I do on occasion whine about graduate school)). I gleefully address challenges and move from genre to genre and from occasion to occasion as I strive to move forward in this open-ended world of scholarship. I’m chasing my degree, just like they’re chasing badges. I just don’t get to kill nearly as many psychotic robots as I go.

That is why I chose to use the word “play.” There’s something I’m going to refer to as “magical” about gaming. This work that gamers do is fun for them. They’re playing, and they’re carrying that child-like sense of playing—playing is fun!—with them. I like to think that most days I carry that with me through my studies. This is play—very serious, rigorous play that involves reading other people’s work and understanding how my work is situated in a larger field of scholarship. Even on days when the writing is difficult, it’s enjoyable to sit down and attempt to compose.

In some senses, my research failed to meet one of my goals. The second I realized all of these gamers were doing all of this writing—doing all this work—and they still considered it fun, I made it my goal to find out WHY it was fun with the theory that I could then capture that “fun” principle and move it into my classroom. I wanted to catch lightning in a bottle. I’ve had some success making class “more like playing,” particularly through giving my students assignments that started with the idea of tinkering with new software before quickly turning the corner into
careful rhetorical considerations, but I didn’t exactly catch the lightning, perhaps because it is something magical that eludes me; I will elaborate a bit more on why I feel this concept is so elusive later in this chapter. I believe I need a larger sample, and a longer duration of engagement with that sample, to determine why game work doesn’t feel like work. I also think it is possible that this is a question I cannot answer because by revealing that game related writing looks like work I am creating a disconnect with the participants or worse I am souring their gaming experience by showing them how I, as a scholar, see it. Still, I think this pursuit of this particular question is critically important to future implications for gaming and digital media/new media studies. If people are playing, and they’re highly productive while having a good time, that’s amazing. If the academy can move to a point where teaching key skills can be fun for students, someone might just find this mythic world where everything technology brings to the classroom is good and students are alert and smiling during every class meeting. If learning to read critically and write with careful consideration of audience and occasion can be enjoyable, people will do it. If people start doing it, it just might catch on. At that point, playing would be rewarding for everyone.

5.2. The (nothing is ever) Final Frontier

In the opening of *Datacloud*, Johndan Johnson-Eilola (2006) wrote:

> We talk in fevered voices of the computer revolution, but the shape and trajectory of that revolution are only now becoming clear at the fringes. Although computers now touch our lives in substantial and ubiquitous ways, their impact has remained relatively benign. The ways in which we work and love now include digital components – and computers are now everywhere and constitute relatively large portions of our everyday work and the global economy – but our process and structures for working and living have not radically changed. (p. 1)

Johnson-Eilola’s point is well-taken, and the mythic “computer revolution” that he refers to is nearly as pervasive as the myth that every member of the current 20-something generation is somehow inherently capable of utilizing technology that confounds their parents, or as Prensky (2006) suggests, those young people speak a different language that is inaccessible to their
elders. For all of the high minded talk, and all of the utopian dreams, computers are indeed just starting to transform composing practices.

But I would offer Johnson-Eilola a counter-point expanding on his own reflections on gaming: while he is correct in asserting that computers have generically had a “benign impact” on most aspects of life, there are a select number of places where computers have been integral to the evolution of discourse communities and literacy practices from their origin onward. One of those obvious spaces is video gaming, an entire hobby/practice that would be rendered impossible without access to a computer, or at least a scaled back computer housed in a “gaming console” or an arcade cabinet containing a modified computer. Gamers, by their nature, have always sought out technology. Early on they looked for the arcade, pizza parlor or corner store with the newest machines, then they quested after the best personal computers and the newest consoles or handhelds. Gamers chase the bleeding edge of technology.

The position of gaming, and gamers, at the forefront of the technological revolution is what makes studying their habits, practices and communities so integral to understanding where writing is going. But in addition to the position of gamers, there’s the positioning of the gaming industry itself: games generate a fantastic amount of revenue, accounting for over $7.1 billion in revenue in 200549. Game developers have to come up with innovative ways to use technologies, and they have to create products that are inviting and forgiving to new users. A game has to be fun, but it also has to be easy enough to learn without being so easy that there is no challenge. As a result, gaming pushes at all the right tensions in the technological revolution. Gamers also develop what may well become the next academic technological myth: the “I can’t break it” mentality. Because video games reward those who dive in and start playing, it seems—at least based on casual observation and my own experiences as a gamer-turned-techie—that gamers are far more willing to sit down in front of a piece of software and play. I attempt to impression this upon the students in my classroom. The computer will not explode if someone doesn’t edit a photo properly in Photoshop. Saving a Flash file in the wrong format won’t destroy the internet. Gamers already know that, and some of them seem to know it in a way that is almost instinctive. They aren’t afraid of new software, just like they aren’t afraid of new games. That spirit will be important to the spread of digital based writing.

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49 This information is taken from www.wikipedia.org. It appears under “Video Game Industry,” but the actual URL has changed twice during my research.
A quick look at my research on *CoH* reveals some interesting aspects of the future of writing. The first thing that struck me is that writing in these new digital spaces doesn’t carry the “finished product that shan’t be disturbed” stigma that college age writers—and older adults—often attach to printed drafts of their texts. Gamers view the texts they create in *CoH* as temporal contributions to a larger narrative. Some pieces of what they create—names, certain aspects of their toons, and mutual historical accounts of events—become permanent fixtures in the game’s narrative line, but my own experiences showed how quickly a toon can be undone and re-woven. Most toons live a virtual life that is filled with tinkering and experimentation, participating in a series of stories that are ever-changing and highly fluid. The role plays written on web pages and blogs are also subject to whimsical re-writing and expansion by comments, and over time fragments of the story are removed, lost, and abandoned. These texts are created as part of the gaming experience, and while they are attributed the same sort of attention, and the same rhetorical considerations, as the texts that are produced in academic classrooms, they aren’t viewed as being nearly as weighty and “important.” It doesn’t matter if they are revised because these texts are created to be elastic.

Online gamers also view their texts as occurring in a decidedly public space as a part of an ongoing discourse. As Beavis (2005) noted, gamers often tailor their “gamer image” to project a certain ethos to other gamers, and as such they are quick to encourage—and outright entice—others to become involved in their writings. Those who compose FAQ documents crave feedback. Message boards abound with gamer conversations. Blogs cross-pollinate with one gamer commenting—in character or out-of-character—on another’s blog, new audiences being exposed to both gamers in the process. And the “master” narrative for all of these activities—the games themselves—would be impossible without the other players. Contemporary gaming isn’t a solo practice in any sense of the word; those who play games like *City of Heroes* are crafting public texts with public voices in the hopes that others will become involved.

*CoH* gamers are also willing to take the sorts of risks with their writing that are rarely seen when one takes a pen to paper. Frequently during my *CoH* gaming sessions I’d hear people say “I’m giving this a shot,” or “I doubt this will work but I had to try,” and likewise some of the most interesting toon story arcs—the avenging angel/schizophrenic teen, the living embodiment of Paragon City, or the villain turned hero—were the result of gamers applying creativity and innovation to what they considered to be a comfortable genre. Gamers seem to be far less afraid
of failure than many writers; while many people were quick to offer advice about my failed attempt at crafting a working Anguta, no one insulted me, spoke down to me, or acted as if I’d somehow blown my chance. It was understood that I tried something, it didn’t work, and I needed to either revise or cut my losses.

Gamers also compose in multiple modes across multiple platforms: the game itself (which is visual, textual and auditory), textual blogs, occasional video elements, PHP and HTML coded web pages, etc. Gamers will utilize whatever they can find to help write their collaborative texts, often taking advantage of different technologies just to see what might happen if the game is taken to that arena. None of my participants utilized role play wikis, but during the time I was researching there was a movement toward creating such sites, providing the allowance for others to come into a textual role play and insert themselves as they saw fit.

All of these elements come together to form what I refer to as the (nothing is ever) Final Frontier. Gamers are composing in an arena where the “process over product” mentality has moved toward the next logical evolution for composing practices. The current mentality of those who write alphabetic texts ((people like myself, who are attempting to arrive at a “finished” product which can be archived)) seems to still be rooted in the “must have a quality product” paradigm regardless of the stress one might place on the processes that generated it. CoH gamers don’t think about a text as being “done;” some stories end, or are abandoned, or like Kitten’s blog—which hasn’t been updated since September of 2006—just one day “stop,” but there’s never a sense that a text should become this pristine, finished product without flaw so that it can be set aside for later consumption. The idea that anything in the CoH universe would come to a perfect, final end point works contrary to everything the gamers are building and moving toward.

5.3. Takin’ It to the Classroom: City of Heroes as an Educational Tool

At this point it is unclear exactly what impact bringing video games into the composition classroom might have\(^{50}\), but each of the following seems to be a logical progression from my research with a consideration of what students are already doing as gamers and what gamers are already doing as they play:

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\(^{50}\) This is where I’m hoping to take my research in the next few years. I want to see what happens when games are placed in the classroom.
(1) Video games are a front door to computer literacy and offer an opportunity to bring computers comfortably into the writing classroom. Students who are intimidated by the prospects of using a computer—or who have limited experience outside of a “comfort” zone on the computer—could benefit greatly from the “jump in and play around” methodology that defines a game like City of Heroes. While asking a student to create a movie in Macromedia’s Flash might be intimidating on the first day of class, it seems reasonable to assume that students—due to previous experiences—would be willing to jump into a video game. One could then design a course where students begin the semester by playing City of Heroes, discussing what it would mean to design a hero then jump in and create the toon and navigate Paragon City. The mentality, and the skills developed through “prodding” the game environment and using the toon creation tool and gaming interface can then be transferred to software like Flash or Adobe Photoshop. Once the students have latched onto that bedrock concept of “you can’t really break it, so play around,” learning new software is less intimidating, intuitive, organic, and more enjoyable.

(2) Gamers can use their pre-existing extra-gaming reading and writing practices to better understand the internet as a collection of discourse communities. Even students who aren’t gamers are highly likely to have encountered online chat interfaces like those used in games, and they may have extensive experience blogging, writing on message boards, or creating their own web based projects. All of these practices are modeled by gamers, making a gaming community an ideal model of online recreational writing. If writing instructors can stress that these casual gaming acts are composition, it will make students aware of skills they already have and practices they already engage in and open the door to “new” composition practices by re-classifying something students do for fun as something they will use academically and professionally.

(3) Avid gamers can be pulled into careful consideration of complex topics by being introduced to them through games. A game like City of Heroes can be used as a sort of social, collaborative “life” simulator. While it takes effort on the part of a player, one could “turn to the dark side” as one of my participants referred to the process and become a villain, leaping from City of Heroes to City of Villains. Players can form social cliques and can make conscious choices to enforce a specific moral code. There is, however, a
layer of separation within the game similar to what many scholars have noticed in online discussion forums or chat rooms due to the seeming anonymity of the gaming space. If one cannot see the person on the other side of the exchange, there exists a freedom to take risks one might not take in a face-to-face encounter. Used for academic purposes, one could construct discussions on race, the concepts of law, morality, or practically any social issue by inciting an incident in the gaming world, asking students to react/interact, then discussing the events either within the game or outside “in real life.” With a game like City of Heroes, there is also the added element of the superhero genre and its tendency to grapple with issues of morality due to the inherent nature of what heroes “do.”

(4) Students can experience multi-modality through gaming and understanding gaming practices. Games themselves are like videos, with soundtracks and in some cases voice acting or actual vocal interaction. Almost every game still utilizes text as well. More importantly the blogs, message boards and supergroup pages that players create include sound, images, text and animation. Students are already working in the age of digital multi-modality; they just don’t call it what instructors call it. If students were given access to some of these existing fansites as models, one could ask them to compose multi-modal texts about their gaming experiences or other hobbies. If students were to use other gamers as resources, they would discover that these practices which they might view as homework are actually a part of regular game play.

(5) Students can be inspired to experiment with their writing through writing documents to accompany their gaming. The biographical statements and role-plays from City of Heroes are often long, complex documents. Players create them without a groan, without a sigh, and they relish the chance to receive feedback from others so that they can revise. That same passion can be harnessed in the classroom by bringing in the things that students love. Students could rhetorically analyze games, create characters, or even design their own games as assignments in the composition classroom. These documents also exist largely outside the bounds of defined academic genres while sharing many of the characteristics expected from academic texts; because there is no standard way to compose a character biography or to role-play, students have the freedom to experiment without believing there is an “expected” outcome; in other words students are free to
write without the concern that the teacher “wants” something specific, a consideration that sometimes handcuffs writing students.

(6) Students can learn to compose biographical, and ethnographical texts, comfortably through their video game characters. Current first-year “autobiographical” or “autoethnographic” writing often faces two major pitfalls: students are hesitant to see, and specifically to label, themselves as “different,” and students are often uncomfortable sharing secrets they consider intimate—or they simply have no experience turning the lens on themselves as they write. Going through the process of creating and playing a toon in City of Heroes—or a character in any of a number of other MMORPGs, then writing a rich, engaging biography for the character, would allow students to learn how to work with biographical and ethnographical genres without the “risks” they feel when trying to reflect on their own identities. Students are also less likely to make assumptions about what the audience does or does not know when writing about a character, as the students are in the process of learning everything about their characters for the first time themselves—instead of attempting to summarize the lives they have lived—and are less likely to assume that certain things will be implicitly understood by the reader.

See Appendix C for a potential classroom application of City of Heroes.

5.4. The Next Level: Considerations for Future MMORPG (and General Gaming) Research

Throughout this text I have resisted the urge to repeatedly say “more research is needed,” as my personal belief is that all too often in the field we utilize that cliché as a way to keep from making what could appear to be radical suggestions based on limited research, as if that one phrase is a shield that protects us from saying something that will later appear foolish. I realize my study is small in scope, and because of that there are many ideas I’ve come upon that I simply didn’t have the time, or the data, to cultivate. The following are major considerations for the future research of MMORPG—and I believe all online games, even those which are smaller in scope:

(1) I believe my methodology, applied to a much larger sample over a longer period of time, could produce interesting and useful data that right now we couldn’t anticipate. I had
basically three to five interactions with each of my participants over a month, but the level of comfort they achieved in talking about their gaming practices with me, and the amount of access they gave me to their projects, toons and virtual lives, led to things I never anticipated. I hoped going into my research that I would find people who were part of the wide-spread extra-gaming writing that occurs around *City of Heroes*, but I had no idea I’d encounter someone who maintained a MySpace page IC with actual, “real life” friends, someone who was integral in running a large super-group, or someone who was in the process of writing a FAQ document while we were playing. And even with those participants, some of the most fascinating things I saw while researching were things I couldn’t secure permission to discuss. More time in the field—even if the field is, as it was for me, a desk in the corner of a bedroom—could uncover fascinating writing practices we haven’t yet considered. I have every hope that over the next several years I’ll be able to apply what I’ve learned and shared here to a larger sample over a span of a year—or years. There’s more out there, and as writing scholars and researchers we should be discovering and working with it.

(2) Just as with the Bevis (2005) study I referenced earlier, my research has a single female participant. There was a time when gaming was considered a “boy’s club,” but recent statistics, and the exponential growth of environments like Linden Lab’s *Second Life* that deal less in violence and competition and more in socialization and consumerism, indicate that many more women are gaming. It would be valuable for gaming studies if someone were to undertake a gender balanced study AND a female heavy—or exclusively female—study. There appear, from casual observations and single participants like Sarah in my study, to be some interesting differences in male and female gamers, but until someone does the actual research to find out, we are as a field dealing in one of those “more research is needed” areas.

(3) I have, much like Gee (2004), only briefly commented on violence in this study. The primary reason for that was the nature of my participants. Only one of them spoke overtly about what the heroes in *CoH* do as “killing,” and his stance was a very matter-of-fact, “that’s what gamers do. We kill bad guys.” With the massive rise in the number of massively multi-player FPS games like *Rainbow Six: Vegas*, *Halo 3* and the *BattleField* series, as well as the new, much more realistic *Grand Theft Auto IV*, there will be ample
opportunity for researchers to engage with gamers who play with the primary goal of “killing.” Unlike with games like *Doom, Quake*, the early *GTA* games, or their predecessors like *Super Mario Brothers* or *The Legend of Zelda*, the violence in this newest generation of games is so realistic that many gamers I have encountered casually—lifers like myself—claim that “the line is starting to blur.” At the same time, I’ve had a chance to play *Rainbow Six* with a group of friends who treat it entirely as a tactical simulation. They tease each other when one of them is shot and killed in the game, but it is clear that they see a marked difference in a virtual “death” and the concept of “killing” someone.

(4) Just as Rich Rice (2007) said of the future of computers and writing, sound is now the future of online gaming. PC services like TeamSpeak make Voice-Over-Internet-Protocol (VOIP) possible for gamers regardless of the game they are engaging in, but more revolutionary is what the newest generation of gaming consoles offer. Microsoft’s XBOX 360 and Sony’s Playstation 3 both come equipped with headsets attached to the controllers. It has become a standard feature for online games to allow for VOIP. While playing *Rainbow Six*—as I mentioned in the point just above this—I was connected to a team of 14 other players. Each of us could speak to everyone else on the team. This allows for a move away from alphabetic text, but it also adds exciting new levels to what can be done in terms of team collaboration and role-play. The same rhetorical situations will exist, but new practices will emerge and new methods of executing old commands will develop.

(5) As I have mentioned here, the “magic” of gaming is the “play” factor—or the idea that games are *fun* writing. With my small sample, I wasn’t able to distill out what makes gaming fun. I am afraid, as a researcher, that it might be one of those things that cannot be found by researching, as it may well follow the same pattern that a teen’s favorite music follows when mom and dad start to like it, or the same thing that happens to the weird sound the car makes when one takes it to the mechanic. It is possible that by turning a critical eye on the concept of “fun” we short-circuit it. After all how much fun CAN critical inquiry be for someone who doesn’t *want* to engage in critical inquiry? I think that whoever can isolate what makes gaming fun and then “port” it to other forms of learning and writing will find the academic equal of the pot of gold at the end of the
rainbow, however, and I believe that the continued pursuit of a complete understanding of what it means to “play” is of tremendous importance to the field of writing and rhetoric.

Whether some realize it or not, gaming is the new television. Corporate America has already realized this, as companies like NCSoft capture economic control over the toons created in their environment, Linden Labs developed an online economy that can cash-in and cash-out their game money for real currency, and Electronic Arts and others have begun the slow crawl to full-on product placement—and perhaps actual commercials—in games from their EA Sports brands (*Madden* football, NCAA football and basketball, *NBA Live*, NASCAR, etc.). Since gaming doesn’t appear to be going anywhere, and each generation since my peers—the thirty-somethings—seems to be more and more involved with gaming, it only makes sense that we should be studying and playing in their virtual worlds. Just as we ask them to come into our classrooms, they should feel allowed to expect us to join them online now and again to hunt for orcs or toss around the virtual pigskin. Gaming is always evolving, and if gaming is going to intermingle with academia, scholars will have to stay on top of what is happening in the gaming world (or within gaming worlds).

5.5. So If Nothing is Ever Final…

One of the interesting symptoms of a game like *City of Heroes* is that the virtual world “grows” over time. In April of 2007 the game celebrated its third birthday. At that point in time there were 24 million toons inhabiting Paragon City and its expansion areas, over 600,000 supergroups, over 66,000 supergroup bases with specific user content, and 102,000 characters had reached level 50, prompting NCSoft to consider the addition of higher levels as the game expands (IGN Staff, 2007, n.p.). In a virtual world that adds residents every day, where all of the residents grow and evolve at a rapid pace while playing, the idea that anything is final or permanent is as laughable as the idea that one could easily expand all the copies of an existing hardbound book because the author had a new revelation to share. *CoH* happens in a state of constant fluidity.

Time, sadly, has passed Anguta and Nash by. When I last logged in and played as each of them—in December of 2006 for the “holiday missions”—all of the people they’d met during
their encounters in July of 2006 had either left the duo in the dust while rapidly advancing in level and skill or had left the gaming world. Only time itself will tell whether or not the bouncer-turned-hero or the awkward Alaskan teen become a part of new stories, but the fact that their once cohorts have moved on is another indicator of how quickly the CoH world evolves. Six months in Paragon City allowed for massive turnover. The population on the Virtue server where Nash and Anguta live—the crowd around the Atlas statue, the people rocking in Pocket D—was almost entirely new. Paragon City changes rapidly, mirroring the stories that the players tell and the texts they create in and around the game.

So what does one make of a world where nothing is final and things are constantly in flux? It is my belief that such a sense of the temporality and immateriality of created texts is where writing is going. These gamers are in an environment where they must develop a set of literacies and then navigate a web of genres. The chances they take, the stories they tell, and the time they devote to these practices are an indicator of what writing at least some portion of the college age demographic will do if they consider it fun. Their texts aren’t about being “right” or creating something “perfect.” Their texts are about knowing the function of what they wish to create, creating it, and allowing it to do the work it is meant to do.

The missing piece of the equation, right now, is the “fun” factor. Gamers play for pleasure; they have different senses of what makes the game enjoyable, but the common bond is that the game itself is fun. Reading and writing—particularly in an academic sense—are considered “work” and are viewed as tasks that must be done. If a way can be found to infuse all reading and writing with the fun that currently permeates gaming, I believe it is likely that those who must read and who must write would find themselves reinvigorated and that students in particular would find themselves empowered in the writing classroom. The concept of play has the power to transform everyday writing from a task into a pleasure.

As educators, we must acknowledge that a large number of our students are gaming—playing on their computers—and they consider these activities a hobby, if not a devotion. We should be playing with them. They should be playing with us. We should all be using video games as the complex social and intellectual environment that the gamers of City of Heroes do.

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51 The toons, I mean. The gamers themselves were all still active as of May of 2007.
We should experiment. We should try new things in our composition classrooms, knowing that if they don’t go exactly as we hoped they would we can still continue the game. Things can change. In fact, things will change. Nothing is final anymore. I guess what I’m trying to say is that it wouldn’t hurt us to stop occasionally to destroy a few robots with our students if it opens the door to new understanding. *Pac-Man* might not sound like something all of us should be concerned with studying, but a virtual city full of heroes that exist entirely because they are multi-modal compositions authored by the same sort of people that attend college classes should—I would hope—sound like exactly the sort of place every scholar should visit, even if one should choose not to take up residence there.
Appendix A: Non-focal Participants

Below are the biographies for the four non-focal participants in my study.

Corey

A late 20s computer programmer who had been considering playing *CoH* but always resisted, Corey saw my solicitation and decided to give the game a try. Corey and I discussed the character creation process and the early stages of the game—learning the basic mechanics and incorporating oneself into the community—while he played the demo version over a long weekend.

Corey wasn’t particularly talkative—he was by far the least “vocal” of my participants—and while playing with him for several hours presented the opportunity to watch another “newbie” in action, it seemed as if Corey wasn’t enamored with the game. We planned a follow-up session, but Corey delayed and his demo time ran out. He wasn’t interested in paying the play the game, so we finished our follow-up via email.

David

I was introduced to David—a 20something student from Las Vegas—by his supergroup partner Ryan, another of my participants. David had, by the time of our interactions, grown somewhat bored with *CoH* itself (the actual game—he was anxious for an upgrade, which came about a month after my interview sessions) and had moved more specifically into developing websites and writing stories/crafting role-plays related to his toons. Our in-game interview time was limited to roughly an hour playing alongside Ryan, but we exchanged emails for several weeks while I read his websites.

The most intriguing thing David attempted was taking a character from the *CoH* expansion pack *City of Villains*, building this criminal character to the point that he was actually “well known”—by game standards—then crafting a story where the villain “reformed” into a hero. To pull this off, he had to then create the same character in *CoH* and build him into a functioning hero. Though NCSoft had discussed adding the ability to “switch sides” into the software, there was at the time no way to actually move back-and-forth, so in order to enact this transformation David had to rely on extensive role playing outside of the game while he juggled...
the two separate toons that constituted the one character, attempting to play as a hero in a game full of villains then as a reluctant hero in a game full of heroes.

David considered himself more a “writer” than a “gamer” in relation to CoH, though he also described himself as a “fanatical gamer.” He also considered his websites both “playing” and “an excuse to learn PHP.” Of all of my participants, David was the one with the most visible virtual face in the community; I have no doubt that if his toon didn’t appear here with a pseudonym readers familiar with CoH could recognize the name, and due to this I haven’t included any screen captures of his toon in costume.

Rob

While many think of MMORPG play as something that people do from the comfort of their own homes, Rob, an at-the-time unemployed 20-something from Denver, Colorado, played CoH from a cybercafé. This is something I wouldn’t have noted had it not been for the fact that Rob was also a smoker, and the cybercafé where he gamed had just changed their smoking regulations. During our interactions we’d have to pause once an hour so that Rob could go outside to smoke.

Rob role-played, and role-played well, but he told me he felt that “role playing isn’t really conductive [sic] to good play in this game.” Rob was more interested in developing the most effective toons he could for any given set of tasks—for example, he’d work on creating “the best energy blaster for attempting one-shot boss kills.” His style of play is what is referred to in the gaming community as “min/maxing;” a min/max player attempts to come up with the maximum gain for the minimum work (the most powerful attack for the least level of experience, for example).

During our session Rob offered me a host of valuable bits of advice to make my toons more effective both in solo and group combat. While being a highly efficient killing machine wasn’t particularly important to my other participants, Rob’s lessons on maximizing potential were extremely useful as a I power leveled so that I could conduct interview sessions with gamers with higher level toons.

Rob also represented the sort of gamer who plays CoH to socialize without a deep reverence for the role-playing base of the game itself. He was more than willing to answer all of my questions, and he seemed to enjoy playing the game, but the meat of our discussion focused
either on what was happening in the cybercafé, about computers in general, about the injustices
of smoking bans, and other seemingly disconnected topics. Rob was pleasant, but among the
people involved in my research he is the anomaly. Our session felt much more like an instant
messenger chat while we just happened to be hunting trolls as opposed to a gaming session
where we were also chatting.

Ryan

Ryan, a 30-something graphic designer from Northern Texas, is the only participant in
my research who I knew before the solicitations. Ryan and I used to role-play on the same MUD
many, many years ago. I originally considered not including anything that happened with Ryan
in my research because he was the person who asked me to play the game and campaigned with
me the very first night I played, but I felt like those transcripts of me asking stupid questions and
him offering advice might be useful, so I asked him to consent to be involved in the study.

Ryan was from the same school of role-players as Jared and Sarah. He played pen-and-
paper RPGs as a teen, and he carried into CoH that deep sense of character development. He
knew things about his toons that would seem trivial to other players, such as what the toon’s
favorite ice cream flavor was or what sort of stuffed toy the toon had on his bed as a child. Ryan
was also eager to move his role-playing out of the game and then back in, allowing him to make
use of these interesting little facts that probably would never come up during the course of
playing the game.

Ryan was also what one might refer to as a CoH social butterfly. He had been playing the
game since the initial public beta test, so he had a vast network of existing friends and supergroup
memberships. He told me once that it was impossible to login and play the game without
teaming up and/or talking to other people. Any time the two of us played, others flocked to Ryan.
Due to the fact that I did have a pre-existing relationship with Ryan that I didn’t with all of my
other participants, I have tried to only use interactions with him to provide insights that weren’t
present anywhere else, most specifically in relation to his reflections on my learning curve as a
CoH player.
Appendix B: Raw Interview Data Sample

Notes:

The [Team] notation indicates that the statements could only be heard by people who had joined our team at that time. In the transcript below it was just Jared and I on the “team.” Nash Tidal is my toon, and Vincent is his. This is but a sampling from a 72-page interview transcript which cataloged three hours or so of gaming, including two hours completely in character. By this point in the interview he and I have, at least to a point, broken character (though we still engage in the meta-commentary known in the game by surrounding some parts of the discussion in double parentheses ()).

... [Team]Nash Tidal: If you were going to compare this game to another medium (movies, TV, comic books, novels, or something else), what do you feel is the closest comparison?
[Team]Vincent: That's a good one....
[Team]Nash Tidal: ((Thanks. :)))
[Team]Vincent: I think I would have to go with movie, or TV series as most dominant. It shares elements with all of those though.
[Team]Nash Tidal: Do you feel like the game controls the story, like players control the story, or like both elements share in that task?
[Team]Vincent: If you are creative, you control the story. You are playing within the framework provided, but you can make what you will of it. That said, I have two alts who I designed to fit the actual physical way the game works. One is a manifestation of Paragon City, who really does get inspirations from the citizens and enhancements from his deeds. He is a gestalt of the overmind of the city, and is made of it (concrete, metal, steel, etc)
[Team]Nash Tidal: Tell me more about that character.
[Team]Vincent: I have binds that allow him to thank other heros for their good deeds towards the City
[Team]Nash Tidal: That's a great creative concept for a character.
Nash Tidal: Your mentioning of binds transitions into another question ((though you can keep going if you have more to add)). The game seems relatively easy to pick up, but how long did it take you to really feel like you were starting to master the interface?

Vincent: Oh, I was still doing inefficient things for quite a while. I slotted brawl and rest! I would have to say six months or more.....

Nash Tidal: ((so I shouldn't feel bad that I still suck two weeks in?)) :)

Nash Tidal: At any point did the game seem more "taxing" than fun?

Vincent: ((nope, plus mace is a late bloomer))

Nash Tidal: I only have one question left...

Nash Tidal: The big finish, if you will. :)

Nash Tidal: They are pretty good at keeping new carrots coming in. The main thing I have noticed is that I am not as keen on soloing as I once was. But things like hitting 50 (finally) and having new kheldians to play with, things like that keep the juices flowing.

Nash Tidal: If you walked into a college classroom, and your writing instructor put you in front of a computer running a MMORPG like CoH, what impression would you walk away with?

Vincent: ((nope, plus mace is a late bloomer))

Nash Tidal: Oh, I lied. I have one other little question after this.

Nash Tidal: My view on these things is that they are a consensual story, with the skeleton created by the game authors, and the main characters played by the players. Loosely played or tightly focused, depending on group. I would think I had gotten good teacher

Nash Tidal: My last question is fairly simple, but I realized I forgot to ask.

Nash Tidal: You have to pay every month to play. Have you ever balked at that?

Vincent: I have in the past. I watched other Mmorg being played by friends, but was not tempted. CoH is actually my first of its type. I consider the money very well spent.

Nash Tidal: I'm trying to decide if I'm going to have time to play after my 2 months... it seems enjoyable. :)

Nash Tidal: I'm trying to decide if I'm going to have time to play after my 2 months... it seems enjoyable. :)

Nash Tidal: Well, that's all, in terms of the interview.

Nash Tidal: Thanks for your time. I'll have some follow-up questions sometime in the next few weeks. We can handle those in whatever format you prefer.

Vincent: No problem at all.
[Team] Nash Tidal: If you want to play some more tonight, I'm up for it, but if you want to take care of other things, I'll let you go. I've taken 3 hours of your time already.

[Team] Vincent: I do have some dishes that are calling for washing and I have to hammer at the computer for a bit. Should probably do some while I can. But I will be back on later. I always am....

Vincent: : -]

[Team] Nash Tidal: Sounds good. If you see me online and want to run a few missions, hit me up.

[Team] Nash Tidal: I should probably check on my dishes, come to think of it.

[Team] Vincent: Was good fun! Hope it helps some...

[Team] Nash Tidal: Have a good night, and thanks again!
Appendix C: Potential Four Week *City of Heroes* Lesson-Plan

Based on the six gaming educational criteria set forth in Chapter Five, I believe the following four week sequence of assignments would function well in the first-year writing classroom. While I anchor my own proposed assignment with a comic book/graphic novel text entitled *Freshmen* (Sterbakov, Green and Kirk, 2006), an instructor could use any super hero related text—be it comic book, novel, short story, poem, myth, television or feature film—as a brief introduction to the genre itself. I chose *Freshmen* because it details a set of heroes who also happen to be first-year students at a stereotypical fictional state college; it seemed like a good “starting point.” The sequence would look like this, designed for a class that meets twice a week in a computer-equipped classroom:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week 1: Introduction to the Super Hero Genre</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Meeting 1:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Read: <em>Freshmen</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-class open discussion of graphic novel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meeting 2:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-class discussion: What does it mean to be a hero?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homework for next meeting: write a one page (or longer) single spaced reflection on your own definition of what it means to be a “super hero.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week 2: Constructing a Super Hero/Toon</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Meeting 1:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class activity: Construct a collaborative definition of “super hero” from homework</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-I would recommend doing this through a WIKI or online message board so that it can be a tactile experience for the students as opposed to an “instructor at the board” moment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class activity: Tinker with <em>City of Heroes</em>; open the software, get your feet wet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meeting 2:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assignment prompt:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For this project, you will begin by creating a character in the NCSoft video game <em>City of Heroes</em>. You should put careful consideration into each step of your character’s creation. He or she can be anything the game itself allows for, but remember that the character should have a coherent “concept” which guides creation. You will also write an “origin”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Story for your character (no less than one page, single spaced). Think about what we read and discussed in *Freshmen*.

Once you have created your character, you should take him or her into the game and play for at least one hour. If possible, play with other members of the class. You may play longer if you wish. You may also create a second character, if you find after playing that you are not at all happy with your first creation. As you are playing, remember that many of the people in the game world will expect you to behave as your character would.

Week 3: Playing and Reflecting

Meeting 1:
Activity:

For this activity, you will be put into groups of four.

Once you form your group, choose a team name and team leader. Report these to me via email or instant message. As a group, log into *City of Heroes*. Your chosen leader should invite the other three of you to join as a team.

Collaborating, choose a task. Most missions within the game take approximately 30-60 minutes to complete, but if you are concerned that you will run out of time, consult one of the online game FAQs—or ask me—how long your chosen mission should take.

Working as a group, see how efficiently you can complete your task while maintaining your characters. It might be difficult to take notes while playing, but keep key ideas in mind so that you can write about them as soon as you’ve finished playing.

Meeting 2: Meet “in-game” at a set location

In-class discussion: What works, what doesn’t? How have we enacted heroism?

Week 4: Major writing assignment

The goal of this essay will be to explore what you’ve learned through creating and playing your own super hero in *City of Heroes*. As you write, think about the following:

- What theme or themes unify your character?
• Do you feel that the character’s appearance matches to the origin that you created?
• Did you receive feedback from other players? Did their opinions validate your opinions of your creation or cause you to question certain decisions?
• How did “role-playing” the character feel?
• What things did you enjoy (or dislike) about the game?
• In what ways is your character like you? In what ways is he/she different from you?
• How much consideration did you give to how your character would appear/interact with other players?
• How often did you stop to consider the audience for a given activity or action? What does this tell you about the greater nature of the game itself?

Your response should exhibit critical engagement with the game and a serious consideration of your character and the character creation process. It should be no less than four pages (double spaced) or the equivalent if you choose to write in some other media.

I was able, to a limited capacity, to start this sequence with a class. Due to unforeseen technological issues in relation to the game software, we were unable to get everyone up-and-running in the game world, but the students informally reported learning a great deal from creating and designing their super heroes. I am confident that when I have a chance to undertake the entire sequence with a full class it will open the door to many interesting conversations and reconsiderations of both the technologies in play and the concepts that such collaborative environments promote. I visualize this as the opening sequence of a full semester of first-year writing in a digital environment; it would provide support for creative writing, for entrance into autobiography and autoethnography, it would expose students to new online communities and new software, and with any luck it would capture the “fun” of gaming and deliver it in an academic setting, disrupting the concept that writing is “work” in the process. It could also serve as the anchor for a gaming-specific course.
The text in the assignment above is:
References:


