

The Game of Literacy: The Meaning of *Play* in Computer-Mediated Communication

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The author examines the qualities of “playfulness” and “gaming” which many writers in the field of computers and composition have noted as being seemingly inherent to uses of computer-mediated communication, especially synchronous discussion formats. Using excerpts from her own classes as examples, she examines these issues as they relate to the hybrid oral/literate nature of CMC. A wide range of theories and historical constructions of literacy and play are offered for instructors to conceptualize the construction of boundaries between productive and nonproductive language behaviors in this medium, especially when it is a new experience for students. The author argues that the “empowering” capabilities of this medium can be realized only when students are allowed to participate in creating the “rules of the game”; that it is important to interpret the meanings of silences as well as overt language behaviors in this medium; and that dismissing “playfulness” and “gaming” as being nonproductive may, by implication, lead students to think that there is nothing pleasurable about experimental discourse and practicing literacy skills.

computer-mediated communication	flaming/wilding	language games		
literacy/orality	pedagogy	play	silence	speech acts
	synchronous discussion formats			

The playfulness and gamelike qualities of discourse in computer conferencing formats are features that many in this field have noted. Andrew Feenburg (1989) observes that the “sociability of conferencing resembles that of sports or games” (p. 27) and that participants are like “players” in “ritual games” (p. 25). Richard Lanham (1990) claims that the “motive native to digital devices and electronic text [is] pure play” (p. xiv). Eric James Schroeder and John Boe (1990) write, “In the computer classroom, work often equals play” (p. 37) and Jay David Bolter (1991) says that “playfulness is a defining quality of this new medium” (p. 130). Gail Hawisher (1992) proposes that “we might say that participants are involved in a game of literacy” (p. 88) when they are involved in electronic conferencing.

That reading and writing in the medium of synchronous and asynchronous computer-mediated communication (CMC) turns acts of literacy into a “game of literacy” seems to be an accepted fact. But how should we as writing instructors react to this? What are the defining qualities of *gaming* and *play*? Is there a point at which the “fun” gets out of hand? For instance, should flaming behaviors be considered just part of “the game”?

From the first moment that synchronous conferencing (specifically INTERCHANGE) became part of my classroom, it was evident that something about the medium encouraged a sense of playfulness. I noticed, first of all, that my students practically begged to “get on INTERCHANGE today.” It was as if they were asking for permission to go

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outside to play. And yet, “getting on INTERCHANGE” meant that they were writing/ speaking and reading/listening—using literacy skills—with a high degree of interest and involvement.

Synchronous conferencing is a medium that seems to encourage a sense of informality, to encourage a natural tendency to “play around” with language, as the following examples¹ illustrate. (Please note that in all subsequent excerpts from INTERCHANGE transcripts, the “errors” are duplicated from the original messages).

Aaron (message 2):

gf fgd

redrum redrum redrum redrum (message 4).

Students find themselves not worrying about spelling or grammar or even whether they’re thinking in a straight, logical fashion:

Kori (message 3): I thnik that smoking should be restricted to reastricted areas. What is second hand smoke causes a health risk to certain people for example pregnant women. THE should be able to stand clear of anything to thier haelth.

Because of this tendency, synchronous conferencing is not unlike freewriting or journal writing that depends upon a heightened sense of audience. I have noticed, for example, a sort of early Tom Wolfe style:

Jenny (message 24): The only thing I have to say is that the last figure I heard was that 44 people died. FOURTY FOUR INNOCENT PEOPLE DIED!!!!And for what? Have things changed? The only thing that has changed is the amount of money we owe the goverment (only about half a billion). And didn’t Martin Luther King say something relating to peace is the only solution. . . .

In such online conversations, there is frequently an overuse of exclamation points!!! and CAPITALS and . . . breathless tangents . . . which seem to give the impression of *thoughts*, rather than fully constructed arguments. The use of ALL CAPITALS, by the way, in conferencing is generally thought of as SHOUTING!!!²

Roxabella (message 37): MANY OF YOU ARE SAYING HOW A BIG CHANGE HAS BEEN MOVING FROM YOUR HOME TOWN, AND I WILL LIKE TO KNOW IF THAT CHANGE HAS BEEN A POSITIVE ONE. DO YOU THINK ALL CHANGES ARE FOR THE BETTER, LIKE SOME PEOPLE SAY?

Generally, it seems to be agreed, it’s not polite to shout in the classroom unless, perhaps, you are the moderator of a discussion (as this student was) trying to get everyone’s attention.

In synchronous conversations, some students dispense with capital letters almost altogether, which evokes the poetic style of e.e. cummings:

Matt (message 67): no, i agree he was not entitled to force himself upon her.

¹I am indebted to students at both Springfield College in Springfield, Massachusetts and the University of Massachusetts, Amherst—many of whom were ESL or “basic” writers, most of whom were first-year students—for allowing me to quote from INTERCHANGE transcripts generated in our classrooms.

²Some of the punctuation used here is a replication of punctuation as used on Megabyte University, a bulletin board service originated by Fred Kemp at Texas Technological University.

Students quickly discover “emoticons” to express comedy and tragedy and everything else between:

:)

:(

These truncated writing styles, “looking-to-typographics-for-visual-clues” styles, partially can be explained by the fact that writing styles in CMC (as many writers have noted) often reflect an effort to make up for lack of the body language (gestures, facial expressions, tones of voice) that gives clues about meaning in face-to-face encounters.

Beyond the physical writing style that creates a sense of play in CMC, I have noted that when the medium is new to participants, there is invariably some self-conscious goofing around. Nick Carbone, a colleague, has used the metaphor of speaking into a microphone for the first time to describe the experience of newcomers’ discourse on INTERCHANGE (e.g., Hello, hello. Is anyone out there?) and has shared with me a transcript that contained this comment almost verbatim.

The problem with the idea of online speech or writing as play is that we tend not to value play in academic settings. One point I would argue here is that play, within the framework of playing with language, is an essential part of all discourse communities, especially in formation stages, and as such should have its acknowledged classroom space. Indeed, some theorists argue that *all* uses of language constitute games. Such arguments may cause us, as instructors in writing classrooms equipped with computers and conferencing software, to redefine the boundaries of what constitutes acceptable academic discourse.

To revisit an old debate, Marcia Halio was critiqued for her report of initial findings in a comparison of Macintosh and IBM users (1990a). Her conclusion—broadly stated—was that IBMs were preferable to Macs for introducing students to academic discourse. Critics (Kaplan & Moulthrop, 1990; Slatin, Batson, Boston, & Cohen, 1990) focused primarily on her methodology, although as Halio (1990b) said in her rebuttal, her original essay “never claimed to be a tightly structured study” (p. 106). What no one, including me, seemed to notice at the time was that her rhetoric itself seemed to be an indictment of play.³

Mac writers were more “childish” and had a more “talky” way of writing, Halio (1990a) claimed. Mac users seemed to see their computers more as “toys.” “It reminds them of the games they play at home,” she wrote, “the mouse even seems like a sort of joystick to them, and they have nicknamed the printers in the lab,” unlike IBM users who “seemed to associate . . . with seriousness of purpose and adult-type activities” (p. 18). In concluding, Halio proposed: “Perhaps students who are strong writers to begin with can survive the ‘playful effect,’ but what about the weak ones?” (p. 45).

Perhaps playfulness has *never* been valued much in the academy. It is, it seems, antithetical to what Berlin (1987) called the “current-traditional” model which was formulated in 19th-century pedagogical practice and theory. Harvey Graff, in *The Literacy Myth* (1979), describes this model as being “structured by rules and discipline in

³It is important to note here that the point of this example is not to resurrect this old debate or to indict Halio. Rather, the aim is to demonstrate the subtlety of our prejudices against the idea of “play” in the academy. Halio, in fact, at the Spring 1993 Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) in San Diego, in a panel presentation made the remark: “I’m not against having fun in writing.”

the effort to replace ‘that unproductive activity called play’” (p. 229) in order to prepare a population for the type of work force needed in the late 19th-century industrial-based economy.

Even now, when we like to presume the current traditional model has become outmoded, we often associate the word *play* with the idea of immaturity and triviality. Keith Grint in Mason and Kaye’s *Mindweave* (1989) notes that the “criteria for assessing triviality itself is reflected in unquestioned assumptions about the technology [of conferencing]” (p. 192). In the same anthology, David Graddol (1989) notes that it is “unclear whether the tendency [to write/speak informally on CMC] is to be regarded as a weakness of CMC or a strength. Usually, “it” [play] he says, is regarded as a problem” (p. 236).

DEFINING PLAY

Johann Huizinga (1955), in his late 1930s study *Homo Ludens*, traced the global etymology of the idea *to play* and claimed that there is within all human beings across spans of time and space the innate urge to play. According to Huizinga,

play is a voluntary activity or occupation executed within certain fixed limits of time and place, according to rules freely accepted but absolutely binding, having its aim in itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy and the consciousness that it is “different” from “ordinary life.” (p. 28)

Huizinga’s contemporary, Ludwig Wittgenstein, arrived at a similar philosophy in his later works. John Canfield (1981) interprets Wittgenstein’s language-game theory as being “as central for him as the notion of a cell is in biology” (p. 4). Henry Finch (1977), using a definition of play almost identical to Huizinga’s, also claims that “language-games are the fundamental ‘units of sense’” (p. 69) in Wittgenstein’s philosophical framework.

More recently, psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott (1971) locates the fundamental space of growth and development in what he occasionally refers to as the “playground” place where individuals work out their relationships with the external environment, especially with significant others in that environment. This space of “play” is located in neither a subjective reality nor in the external objective world but exists in an interactive space between the two where objects (such as language) are used in the service of the inner self to play out these interactions. Winnicott claims that “there is a direct development from transitional phenomena [such as language] to playing, and from playing to shared playing, and from this to cultural experiences” (p. 41).

Wittgenstein, according to Dallas High (1967) has a similar paradigm: “Language (speaking) is to be seen neither first nor finally as God or logic but as a human reality wherein we dwell and extend ourselves” (p. 22). “It is play that is universal,” Winnicott writes, echoing both Huizinga and Wittgenstein (p. 41). “Playing facilitates growth and therefore health; playing leads to group relationships; playing can be a form of communication” (p. 41).

Playfulness seems to be an inevitable part of CMC discourse, and although playfulness might be natural and vital to human development, there is also an ingrained resistance to its display in an academic realm. The problem is brought to the fore because of tension between the oral and literate natures of CMC. Paul Taylor (1992) and Gregory Ulmer (1989) both argue convincingly that this genre cannot be classified as either exclusively oral or exclusively literate but is a hybrid of both. Ulmer, using a prototype called

“teletheory,” argues that telecommunication not only has produced a discourse hybrid called “oralysis” but also has spawned (or *should* spawn, in his estimation) a new genre of academic writing.

However, despite theory and evidence seeming to point toward a new hybrid discourse, in the academy we often think of language in terms of being either in the realm of orality or in the realm of literacy. And, as academics, we frequently think of orality as a discourse mode of a lesser nature than literacy, rather than as a mode of communication upon which literacy is based. However, literacy, as it is currently being redefined, is a process of practicing and refining both oral and literate skills within the context of specific discourse situations.⁴ In a recent MLA anthology, *The Right to Literacy*, Keith Walters (1990) examines some of the germinal texts in literacy studies that provide the foundation for the “Great Divide” or “Great Leap” way of thinking about orality and literacy. These theories lead us into a fallacious way of thinking, Walters argues, in which orality itself, as well as any written genres that seem to smack of orality, have been devalued. Janet Carey Eldred and Ron Fortune (1992) warn about the dangers of superimposing our metaphors for orality and literacy onto CMC discourse, arguing that it is all too easy to reinforce this “Great Divide” image in which “we envision a tremendous gulf between speech and writing” (p. 66). As Eldred and Fortune point out, if we tend to see synchronous discussions as simply a variation of oral class discussion, there will be a tendency in the academic community—where high value is placed on literate discourse—to dismiss INTERCHANGE and the like as mere speech.

Recognizing, even for a moment, only the oral nature of this medium, it is not all that difficult to find justification for its inclusion in pedagogical practices. James Britton (1970), like Winnicott, has argued that language is used as a tool for cognitive and social development and that we act alternately in the roles of spectator and participant. We develop our language and thinking skills regardless of whether we are 3-year-old children or Nobel prize winners trying to make sense of our particular situations. In his encouragement of the uses of drama in the classroom, James Moffett (1983) also grounds his curricular recommendations in the use of orality and spontaneity.

However, informality and triviality and even orality are only a small part of the game of literacy, as well as a small part of what happens with CMC. Huizinga (1955) identified an enormous variety of play forms which revolve around language use. Wittgenstein also claimed that the number of categories of language-games is “countless.” According to Huizinga’s classification, most are *luden* (pleasure) based: poetry, myth, dialectic, questioning and answering, and riddles. Debate is another time-honored version of play, a rhetorical sport, and as this example from Mason and Kaye’s (1989) *Mindweave* demonstrates, there seems to be no line which separates the feeling of play from the serious act of using persuasive rhetoric:

Mike: . . . there you were debating a point with a student from Scotland when someone else from Wales chipped in with a valid point—it was like being in a huge debate . . . the feelings I

⁴David Blakesley, from Southern University of Illinois at Carbondale, in a paper presented at the 1993 CCCC in San Diego, reported on the status of his project to construct a “bibliography of bibliographies” on literacy. His task is monumental because, as he described it, the word *literacy* has become appended to an almost infinite variety of other words: cult literacy, historical literacy, judicial literacy, political literacy, mathematical literacy (numeracy), nutritional literacy, computer literacy, early literacy, adolescent literacy, adult literacy, functional literacy, critical literacy, ancient literacy, work literacy, home literacy, family literacy, urban literacy, gender literacy, and even literacy literacy.

had whilst using the system are just like those you get when playing an adventure game . . . what matters most is getting through the next challenge—putting over your point—getting agreement or disagreement but most of all interacting with your fellow students. (p. xi)

In my own classrooms, the game of literacy has frequently become a game of serious debate:

Matt (message 61): What no one seems to question is why did that girl go up to Tyson's room in the first place? What was she expecting, Tea and cookies with him?

Elaine (message 64): Excuse me, Matt? Yes, that was idiotic of her, but that doesn't entitle him or anyone to rape her!

Matt (message 82): I'm not in any way condoning what mike tyson did, I'm just saying that if the victim had used a little common sense, the entire ugly situation could have been avoided.

Michele (message 85): Matt, well if every date rape victim had just not invited him in or if they just didn't go out with him in the first place or maybe if THE GUY JUST DIDN'T RAPE HER IN THE FIRST PLACE IT WOULDN'T HAVE HAPPENED.

Is it the "winning" of a rhetorical point that produces a feeling of pleasure? Or is it—as the first example intimates—simply the feeling of connectedness, the "interacting with your fellow students"? Charles Schuster (1990) uses Bakhtinian theory to argue that "language, after all, is the ligature that binds person to person, individual to culture, human to the world of humanity . . . language is not just a social construct; on the contrary, language constructs us socially" (p. 227). Schuster's perspective is one shared by many writers in this field, and many have utopian visions about the egalitarian community that should result from collaborative discourse in CMC. Supposedly, if individuals use CMC as a tool for social interaction through language, a breakdown of boundaries between the individual-subjective self and the social-communal self will be the result. Everyone, it is presumed, will have the opportunity to be heard; everyone will have a voice.

We tend to forget, however, that boundaries are not always fortress walls erected by others to keep us out but are sometimes barriers that we ourselves erect in order to keep others at bay. "The real gulf," Eldred and Fortune (1992) say, "is not between orality and literacy but between different social/discursive communities" (p. 66). James Moffett (1990) writes that "literacy is dangerous and has always been so regarded. . . . It naturally breaks down barriers of time, space, and culture. It threatens one's original identity by broadening it through vicarious experiencing and the incorporation of somebody else's hearth and ethos" (p. 118).

Likewise, some kinds of play in Huizinga's (1955) configuration can be seen as being more threatening, more agonistic, involving challenge, competition, and even confrontation, for example:

Jim (message 31): Adam, I don't agree with you!!!

Adam (message 32): Jim, WHY?

In Huizinga's and Wittgenstein's taxonomies, play encompasses everything from poetry (self-initiated pleasurable indulgence) to war (a physical confrontation, yet a "game" with rules and a clearly defined arena). Fortunately, on INTERCHANGE and other forms of CMC, we cannot physically confront each other. However, through language we might "play around" with the *idea* of physical confrontation:

(message 6): I also heard that a girl named [classmate] was badly beaten by a girl named [another classmate]

(message 20): Did you hear that [classmate] was shot in the head and died instantly? Services will be held Thursday if you care.

(message 23): [Classmate] will be shot today, after English class. No services will be held.

A surface-level reading of the aforementioned discourse fragment might lead one to conclude that, once again, students were just playing around or possibly acting out flaming behaviors. However, this exchange came out of what had been essentially a “rumor clearinghouse.” The class was preoccupied with rumors about a race riot that supposedly had erupted on the campus over the weekend and so discussed the event on INTERCHANGE. As class members gradually contributed their own pieces to the puzzle—including contributions from one student who worked part-time in the campus police office—it became clear that the rumors, which included reports of gunshots and stabbings, were greatly overblown versions of what really happened: a minor altercation between two people at a dance, both of whom happened to be Black. Once the puzzle was solved, students began playing around with the idea of rumor, as well as the idea of shooting and stabbing, and death, using words as their play-weapons. As a discourse community, they had used their own rhetorical tools—information, personal experience, gossip, persuasion, critique, and response—to arrive at a consensual understanding of a situation. They built a knowledge base—and then apparently wanted, or needed, to play with those ideas.

“PLAYING AROUND” WITH AUTHORITY AND EMPOWERMENT

God: In the beginning was the Word...

This is not an INTERCHANGE excerpt; I’m just quoting from yet another book. I’ve been thinking that in the beginning, when one first encounters the world of computer conferencing, it is a brave new unknown world where language is the only available tool for separating the murky waters from the seemingly stable land. Entering this world is also like speaking into a microphone for the first time; we don’t know if the microphone is working until we speak into it and someone responds to let us know our voices can be heard. Words are used to make order out of chaos, which is precisely the point of James Britton’s paradigm (1970): Individuals’ language acts in the participant role become templates formed in the spectator role. Language acts constitute ordering devices; language games are both enactment and invention of “rules of the game.”

In new discourse communities, such as classrooms at the beginning of each semester, the rules of the game are not all already clear, no matter how exhaustive the syllabus. This is to be expected. Wittgenstein, according to High (1967), argues that “vagueness of rules” and “impurities” “do not prevent a game from being a game” (p. 81). Finch (1977) claims that

the *spontaneous, originative, primal* character of language-games is one of the most illuminating insights in the *Philosophical Investigations*. It is revealing of Wittgenstein’s fundamental point of view that he sees as fundamental change, not the discovery of new facts or the development of new theories, but the appearance of new perspectives, new ways of thinking and speaking. (p. 76)

Ulmer's (1989) teletheory connects this aspect of play to academic epistemophilia (love of learning for learning's sake), as well as to joking (in the simplest form, a pun) which is, he says, an example of metalinguistic discourse, arguably an important step towards advancing one's literacy skills in an academic setting. The joke, according to Ulmer, is metalanguage that transcends two or more categories of thought or image (p. 53). Using Susan Stewart's theory of "nonsense as metacommunication," Ulmer says that the "passage from common sense to expert systems to explanatory systems is not continuous—is not 'rational' or logical—but nonsensical in the formal sense" (p. 54).

In arguing the origin of pleasure in the use of literacy skills, Ulmer (1989) references Lacan's pun, "bliss-sense" (*jouissance, jouis-sens*) to name the "drives of desire that inform the subject of knowledge, the subject who wants to know" (p. 57). Bliss-sense, Ulmer says, produces a surprise in the writer which "first of all is the academic equivalent of the uncanny, marking the place of the inmixing of self and other in the unconscious" (p. 96).

The desire to play seems built in; the desire to play the game of literacy can build on that a priori condition, which can produce pleasure. These conditions could produce motivation, which could produce confidence. However, there is another part of the game, and that is to determine who is "it," who has "the ball," and whose turn it is. In the classroom, traditionally it is the teacher who is "it." However, another often-made claim about CMC is that students will somehow become empowered; they will get to be "it," yet there seem to be no clear descriptions of how, where, or when that transition of power from instructor to student will take place. Technology-as-neutral arguments cannot stand up against the work of scholars who trace the history of previous writing technologies (the alphabet, manuscript, manual printing press, mass production). Although we might demonstrate that computer technology creates a certain fluidity in composition and a certain playfulness in discourse, we cannot claim that it inherently empowers students. However, certain language acts in CMC might be seen as empowering.

It is not so unusual, I have found, for students to assume a "God-persona" when they have been allowed to assume pseudonyms:

God (message 134): I don't know if I'm too crazy about this "portfolio system" on the one hand I wanted to know what my grade was. But then it [*sic*] was relieved to not have to worry about it.

When one assumes a pseudonym, especially if it is the title of the "ultimate authority," it becomes easier, after all, to challenge other authority figures such as teachers. To "play God" is literally to act a part in a play, to assume a role and perform that role through language. Wittgenstein, according to Finch (1977), posits playacting as the "full expression of these other games and also the first game which has the element of *play* in it" (p. 85). However, Wittgenstein, like Kenneth Burke (1950) after him, distinguishes between roles on the basis of motive. "Pretense for entertainment or edification would have to be distinguished from pretense for deceit, which is another language-game" is Wittgenstein's viewpoint, according to Finch (p. 85).

Play acting can be a benign masquerade in which one tries on personas and experiments with voice, vocabulary, tone, and style. Or it can be a role played out for all of its potential shock value, as in the next example. This excerpt came from a last-day-of-school session in which students were instructed to sign on with pseudonyms, give some feedback about the class, and then "have fun":

God (message 125): Fuck all Y'all

“God,” of course, is not only a being who separates water from land to bring order into the world; there is also the “God” of hellfire and damnation and righteousness. What I have had to ask myself is this: Is this quote offensive because of its “blasphemous” usurpation of the persona of the “ultimate authority”? Because of the use of the “f-word”? Because it is a seeming attempt to challenge the instructor’s authority? Or, is it offensive at all? Have we not seen such language and posturing in novels? Do we not hear it with grinding regularity in movies and in student centers? Is this still just a game? What has this got to do with literacy? Where do we draw lines?

WHAT IS *NOT* A GAME?

Someone, it is presumed, has to draw the line; and yet someone, it is presumed, has to keep the conversation going. Are we, the instructors, the only ones in this discourse medium with the authority to draw lines? How do we stipulate the rules of the game? Isn’t that part of what the game of literacy is all about—allowing students to empower themselves through their use of language?

Sometimes, in our zeal to protect our students from sexist, racist, ethnophobic, homophobic, and even religiously offensive remarks—in our conscientious efforts to protect the political correctness of our classroom space—do we not also wind up usurping our students’ right to partake in the process of establishing the rules of the game?

As the following excerpts illustrate (from a discussion on “How Do We Know What We Know?”), many students are perfectly capable of defending what might be interpreted as a minority viewpoint. Although most students in this discussion claimed that family, parents, friends, or experience were their primary sources of knowledge, one student—Thien—added God to this list. His statement was challenged by another student:

Melissa (message 13): How do you know God actually exists?

Thien (message 31): I belief that God exist through my own faith. If there is no God then how did this Universe come about. You probably said that the universe come from the Big Bang but how did the Big Bang come about? There have to have somebody to do all that.

In my experience, many students seem to enjoy assuming authoritative roles and speaking in authoritative voices. Wittgenstein, according to High (1967), says that we tend to “overlook the fact that games are played by people who create, establish, accept, and even change the rules” (p. 81). If the rules are not self-evident, it seems inevitable that someone—not necessarily the instructor—will take an authoritative role in trying to establish them. However, for many students the authoritative role is one they have had little experience in playing out.

Student (message 115): I think that [name] and [name] are the two biggest jokes ever and they are making a mockery out this assignment. Why do you guys write this stuff don't you think Prof. Daisley sees it. Well anyhow, I'm sure neither of you care and I don't either so why don't you *fags* get back to your stripteas and *chick picking up*. [italics added]

This student seems to be making an admirable attempt to establish a certain level of decorum in the class. Unfortunately, some of his own remarks might be considered flaming. As Hawisher’s article (1992) points out, in some discourse communities, this would not be tolerated; in others, it becomes part of the game itself. Instructors in this

medium, it seems, must eventually ask themselves: How are we defining boundaries of language use to identify flaming and other offensive behaviors?

Wilding is another term that has been used in CMC literature as a synonym for flaming. Ethnographer Peter McLaren (1986) refers to a type of student behavior that is spontaneous as well as uniformly resistant to the perceived dominant order. He calls it *wild communitas*, and the term takes on a sinister undertone when connected to its first introduction to the general populace in 1989. The mass media reported *wilding* as the term used by a remorseless gang of thugs to describe what they were doing the night they roved Central Park, attacking, robbing, raping, and attempting to murder. "We were just wilding," they were reported to have said in way of explanation.⁵ Laurie George (1990) refers to the incident, saying that what may seem at first to be just fooling around in the medium of CMC can easily degenerate into wilding around. Interactive behaviors become nothing more than "interinsultive" behaviors (49).

War and wilding, however, would be forms of play in Huizinga's and Wittgenstein's broadly-encompassing taxonomies, an unsettling thought. On this end of the spectrum is play of the most sinister kind—a chaotic, impulse-driven self-rule, one that mows down others in its path. Is motive a clear enough guideline to help us determine which discourse behaviors to banish from the classroom? Winnicott's (1971) taxonomy also seems broadly encompassing. In his paradigm, "playing is essentially satisfying. This is true even when it leads to a high degree of anxiety" (p. 52). Yet, Winnicott provides a qualifier, a boundary: "Playing is inherently exciting and precarious"—even threatening—he writes, but "playing implies trust," and trust implies believing that you are playing in a safe place. There is a degree of anxiety that can be "unbearable," Winnicott explains, and this level of anxiety destroys playing (pp. 51–52).

Who makes the playground of language, the game of literacy safe? Or, is "safety" always the ideal to shoot for when it comes to language use? Teachers can sometimes act as over-protective monitors on the playground, though students have many ways of working out these issues for themselves—by protecting each other, as well as by challenging each other.

Kenneth Burke (1950) also uses a broadly encompassing theory that brings ideas such as insult, injury, murder, and suicide under one taxonomic umbrella called *rhetoric*. Like Winnicott, Burke sees the arena of rhetoric in a topographic manner, using in his later works the drama-based pentad which includes, as an analysis model, the scene of rhetorical act. Topographic metaphors are also at work in Wittgenstein's philosophy. According to High (1967):

It is [within a] more or less distinguishable "topography" . . . that words and sentences, when used, are aided in obtaining their particular meaning. One can speak of this area—the language-game topography—as including grammar, rules, logic, tones of expressions, purposes, tradition, and above all the speakers and hearers and their skills and confidences. (p. 78)

Within these topographical metaphors, play seems to run rampant and unrestricted. Yet, certain metaphors for boundaries and, therefore, images of how to create them are also included in these theories. Wittgenstein challenges us "to discard the idea that

⁵Various media reported on this incident and the use of the word *wilding*. For a discussion of the word's appearance in the popular media and in our culture, see Charles Derber's "In These Times: A Nation Gone Wild" in the March/April 1993 issue of *Utne Reader* (pp. 67–70).

language-games have strict boundaries,” according to High (1967, p. 90), but at the same time says that “we can draw boundaries . . . for a special purpose . . . of the contexts of speech topographies” (p. 88). Winnicott (1971) draws a theoretical circle to define the boundaries of the playground—including the self and other and excluding an “unbearable” level of anxiety. Kenneth Burke (1950) on the other hand, draws a line across the scene of the language act. When the talking stops, Burke says, that’s when the war begins. Silence and silencing, at least on INTERCHANGE and other forms of CMC, seem to have the potential for causing psychic pain or metaphorical death.

SILENCE AND PLAY

In the following example, Jen’s remark was made in jest. Yet, imagine if Jen had a power base in the classroom that allowed her to dictate the language acts of fellow students:

Kris (message 45): Someone write to me!

Jen (message 48): NO one write to Kris.

In this instance, students continued to acknowledge Kris’s online existence; perhaps, in another situation, his further comments would not have been recognized. I am reminded of Sinead O’Connor’s 1993 career fiasco on the television show *Saturday Night Live*, and how hard it was to “read” the silence that followed her act of ripping up a photograph of the Pope. I had the television on, but I didn’t have my contact lenses in so I couldn’t see what happened; I only *heard* what happened: Sinead sang a lovely a cappella song about world peace, and when she was done the audience was completely silent. Not being able to see what happened, I interpreted what I heard—the audience’s silence—as awe. But it wasn’t awe; the audience had *shunned* O’Connor, to use an old-fashioned expression. The next time Sinead appeared in public, she was booed off the stage.

Silence in the realm of CMC is almost impossible to read. Silence can seem to be threatening; it can be like wilding, like trying to kill off a member of the tribe. It can be like a refusal to allow someone into the game; or, it can be like booing someone off the stage. On the other hand, silence might be interpreted as signaling involvement in a significant part of literacy skills—reading/listening. Then again, silence might also signal the fact that someone simply doesn’t *know how* to play the game or doesn’t *want* to play.

In an on-site networking situation, it is certainly easier to read silence than it is in asynchronous or distance situations. It is easier to get to a problem’s root—if there is a problem—by talking directly to the persons involved. As with overt language behaviors in CMC, sometimes students themselves can identify and handle the problem of silence:

Melissa (message 42): OKAY . . . where the BLEEP is everyone? NATI? LORI? JAMES? WATARU? NATIVIDAD? Did you guys drop off the earth or do you just not want to play with us anymore! sniffle-

I think it is as important to try to read the silences in this medium as it is to try to read the texts, and our readings of both should not be overly simplistic. Shirley Brice Heath (1990) argues that

America’s children are silent and lonely across socioeconomic classes and in cultural and linguistic memberships . . . [with] fewer opportunities to follow a single topic or line of thought through a sustained conversation with adults. (p. 291)

She continues, “Even teachers who express the goal of wanting to improve their students’ oral language skills find it extremely difficult to give up their central position as talkers in the classroom” (p. 293). The instructor taking the “central position” online, always being the “rule maker” in the game of language exchange, seems to be one scenario, then, that would perpetuate silences whatever the source.

Heath (1990) also draws our attention to the fact that our traditional ideas about how literacy is formed are out-of-kilter with the reality of loss of orality in the late 20th century and notes that we may have to learn how to imitate the interactive capacities of computers to move closer to what she calls “The Fourth Vision”—“one of learners talking and considering together” (p. 302).

Learners talking and considering together is exactly what happens—or can happen—with CMC when the virtual topography is being discovered and mapped out. It is a new world, a new experience for most students to be talking and listening, reading and writing, and considering together. Boundaries of discourse at this point have not been erected, and students find such language exchanges to be fun, or consider them a type of game. For some, these exchanges are a new experience within which one can associate the use of literacy skills with feelings of pleasure. It is exactly this feature—the fun, the gaming—I am arguing, that we should not be too quick to dismiss as being *just* play, or *just* a game. To do so is to imply that there can be nothing inherently productive about experimental discourse and nothing pleasurable about practicing the skills of literacy.

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