Preface

David B. Downing

Halo 2 hit the market just before this issue went to press. For all of you, like myself, not in the loop of joysticks and game stations, I should explain that this is not a minor event. As a marketing blurb on Amazon.com reads: "*Halo 2* is one of those rare video games that garnishes attention from regular folk who wouldn't know which direction to point a game controller. With more than 1.5 million pre-orders and a massive release party in Times Square, the game enjoys the sort of buzz, and sales, generally reserved for boy wizards." According to *Time Magazine* (November 29, 2004), "*Halo 2* sold more than 2 million copies on its very first day—at $45 a pop." This is big business, indeed: in the US alone, video games constitute a 7 billion dollar-a-year industry.

This volume of *Works and Days* thus focuses on one of the most powerful forms of cultural discourse now crossing the globe. The political, economic, cultural, and educational significance of this enterprise deserves the kind of careful analysis that you will find in the essays in this volume. The co-editors, Ken McAllister and Ryan Moeller, represent the new breed of academic rhetoricians trained in electracy, mega-literacy (see Jennifer deWinter's essay), and multi-media, as well as in composition, rhetoric, and cultural theory. It's a powerful combination they and their collaborators bring to this study. As members of the Learning Games Initiative, an international research collective headquartered at the University of Arizona, McAllister and Moeller have taken leadership roles in the development and adaptation of these powerful cultural forms for educational purposes. They have done this both through their critique and understanding of current game-playing technologies, as well as through their own efforts to develop innovative uses of electronic interaction for specific educational purposes.

There are, of course, numerous ways to narrate the rise of the computer gaming industry in world culture, but most of the contributors to this volume acknowledge a materialist perspective because the modes of production never slide out of their purview. Recurring questions include: how have the regimes of flexible accumulation in global capitalism worked themselves out in the

gaming industry, for players and producers, both? How has the remarkable potential of game interactivity and creativity been thwarted and/or sustained under current economic and political conditions? What can we as educators do about the risks and the potentials of computer games? These are vital questions to ask. Put another way, how could we have moved from Chris Crawford's hopeful 1982 vision that "computer games constitute an as-yet untapped art form" ("Future of Computer Games" 93) to his equally infamous 1996 proclamation "that computer games are dead" (275). Crawford answers his own question with the general assessment that there has been a "decisive shift from a creator-driven field to a market-driven field" (277). Regardless of whether one believes gaming could ever have been free of market forces, Crawford's worry is that the creative force of interactivity has been on the decline rather than on the rise, despite the remarkable increase in technological sophistication.

Since interactivity is a kind of benchmark term in current learning theory, Crawford's worry is cause for deep concern. The educational potential of computer gaming rests in large part on electronically sustaining high levels of engagement and interactivity. But when driven by neo-liberal market forces seeking profit in every niche and corner, it is no wonder that vested economic and political interests often thwart the learning dimensions of game playing. Ramping up unreflective intensity, often by increasingly violent graphics, displaces reflective learning: capital expansion and graphic intensity frequently go hand in hand. The results are predictable in light of the past twenty years of public defunding of education at all levels. As Nicholas White explains, when "schooling gets reduced to mere indoctrination," computer gaming contributes as well to producing a "dysfunctional democracy" (235).

When damaging cultural stereotypes come prepackaged in the game software, a player's interactivity and powers of resistance have been sharply curtailed at the get-go (see especially the essays by Clary, Taylor, and White). Even as consumers marvel over the remarkable graphics and revel in their powers of creation and manipulation of virtual characters and events, the producers as programmers still rule the screen. Deceptive levels of "freedom" come packaged in programmer-determined sets of options. As Kevin Moberly argues persuasively, "players ultimately have no power over the world of the game: no rights to do anything, not even to speak out about perceived injustices" (226). If there are cultural stereotypes, gratuitous forms of violence, or racist/sexist dimensions built into the game, players cannot just alter those dimensions if they wish to play by the rules.

And those rules tend, more often than not, to be the rules of the marketplace. As Laurie Taylor explains, the consequence of current game development practices is that their products tend to "naturalize players to capitalistic labor processes, including the acceptance of exchange value as real value, commodity fetishism, and the alienation of labor" (143). The comodification does not just end with the role-playing. Fast capitalism propels the rampant

drive for more megahertz, more RAM, more resolution, and the rapid turn-around and replacement of out-dated systems means not just more sales, but more waste products. It is not easy to dispose of old computers whose devaluation is perhaps more rapid than any other kind of product. Indeed, Amy Clary documents the consequences of this accelerated production march with stunning clarity: "Most of the U.S.'s exported electronic waste ends up in China, where, according to the *Financial Times*, 80 percent of the children in the town of Guiyu suffer '…respiratory diseases and skin diseases due to pollution from electronic trash'" (108).

Despite these very real worries, it is important that we become informed about the many alternatives to the more exploitive practices. Several of the contributors move us down these roads. As Laurie Taylor explains: "Non-traditional games like *Lulu* and emergent games like *GTA3* allow designers and players to work outside of the metaphor of capitalism for design and for play" (150). Fejardo also offers possibilities for games that resist the exploitive, violent, and competitive forms of capitalistic modes of expression: "*Juan & the Beanstalk* is a product of SWEAT, a loose collective that creates socially conscious video games" (155). We should not lose sight of these alternative ventures when collaboration, solidarity, and collective action become engaging features of game performance.

In short, this volume deserves to be read not just by gaming aficionados. Even for those of us who came of age before the advent of the Gamecube, Play Station, Xbox, and the parade of handheld game systems now on the market, the essays in this volume may be a wake-up call to pay attention to the electronic discourses that now constitute so much of our students' (and our colleagues') cultural literacy. One doesn't have to be a specialist to get the point: McAllister and Moeller have made sure that all these contributions are accessible to the non-specialized audience. Many people should hear what they are saying.

Ryan Moeller **Judd Ruggill**

Ken McAllister **Bryan Pearce**