“CONTINUE WEST AND ASCEND THE STAIRS”: GAME WALKTHROUGHS IN PROFESSIONAL AND TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION

Stephanie Vie, University of Central Florida

INTRODUCTORY ESSAY

Consalvo (2003) described video game walkthroughs as “detailed descriptions of where to go and what to do—in sequential order—to get through a game successfully” (p. 328). Given their emphasis on sequential, orderly steps through a portion of a game with a clearly defined beginning and end, walkthrough documents are particularly effective genres for courses that teach students effective rhetorical principles for writing instructions. Additionally, game walkthroughs bring together multiple elements of higher-order thinking in the classroom, “embedding usability education in the pleasurable kinesthetic learning process gaming provides” (Vie, 2008, p. 159). This assignment offers a video game walkthrough assignment designed for use in writing classrooms, especially professional and technical communication courses, and could be adapted for any course with a focus on composing instructional documents.

The goal of this assignment is to introduce students to writing clear and audience-driven instructions; as such, the assignment is well suited to courses with a rhetorical focus. Understanding the writing process and adapting one’s writing for a variety of audiences are both key outcomes for many writing classes across the country. These outcomes also appear in the nationally recognized Council of Writing Program Administrators’ Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition. In a course such as this, the rhetorical context surrounding professional and technical communication is the theoretical underpinning. As such, the class—through the various writing assignments offered—asks students to consider “their audience, their appeals, their exigency, and their claims and evidence” (Vie, 2008, p. 158). Additional theoretical principles addressed in such a course include human-computer interaction and participatory design, particularly during discussions of usability (detailed later in this assignment guide), as well as visual and textual design principles drawn from fields like graphic design (including Gestalt theory, contrast, repetition, alignment, and proximity).
I structured this walkthrough assignment to allow for student creativity. It can excite students about the fundamentals of professional and technical communication while also introducing students to the rhetorical notion of revision for a particular audience. Students also learn valuable group composing skills: Teams work together to make decisions about playing their game, writing up the results, participating in the usability test of another group’s game, and revising their final walkthrough for the instructor. Research has shown that students asked to write group documents enjoy the writing process more, feel they learned more about writing than in non-group situations, and develop a better sense of writing for an audience (Louth, McAllister, & McAllister, 1993, p. 221).

Overall, this assignment offers students an engaging activity that many find appealing given the interest in playing games that students often bring to class. Students are challenged to work in groups and produce a substantive and accurate walkthrough that can be used by members of its intended audience.

THE WALKTHROUGH ACTIVITY

The video game walkthrough assignment asks students to work in groups to compose a walkthrough of one section or level of a video game (such as New Super Mario Bros. [Nintendo Entertainment Analysis & Development, 2006], The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess [Nintendo Entertainment Analysis & Development, 2006], or Luigi’s Mansion: Dark Moon [Nintendo, 2013]). Depending on the classroom’s technological affordances, the type of video games can vary. Options include:

- console games (played on consoles like Microsoft’s XBox or Sony’s Playstation);
- handheld and mobile device games (played on devices like Nintendo’s DS, Sony’s PSP, or Apple’s iPad); and
- computer games (either installed on a personal computer or accessed online through a browser).

Instructors can decide whether all groups will play the same game or a different one. The advantage of having all students play the same game is that the instructor may be more easily able to help students if they get stuck (provided the instructor is also familiar with the game). However, the disadvantage occurs during the usability testing phase of the activity: If all student groups play the same game, then groups may potentially sail through the game without actually having to read—and thoroughly test—another group’s walkthrough. If the instructor prefers all student groups play the same game, he or she may wish to assign groups to different levels or sections to sidestep the testing issue. It is recommended that, if possible, instructors provide a variety of games for this activity. The variety of game titles, genres, and even access (console, mobile, multiplayer online, and so forth) makes for a much more interesting range of walkthroughs and a more successful usability testing phase.
Because the goal of the assignment is to have students write up detailed instructions for completing a section, level, or scenario in a game, the instructor must be careful to only include games that lend themselves to this kind of completion. That is, an open-world environment or sandbox game like *Minecraft* (4J Studios, 2009), *The Sims*, or *Second Life* (Linden Lab, 2003) may not work well unless the student authors can clearly delineate a replicable scenario or achievement for which they will write up instructions. Therefore, a massively multiplayer online role-playing game like *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004)—despite the variety of options in its gameplay and its lack of a final win state—would be suitable given its focus on repeatable quests, tasks, and missions. Similarly, games that provide a randomized experience every time do not work well; for example, a trivia game that shuffles among hundreds of possible questions during a level is difficult, if not impossible, to write a walkthrough for.

Instructors should take time to familiarize themselves with the games students will play. That way, the instructor will know ahead of time what pitfalls, if any, the game might have that could impede student progress in the game. These could include:

- a limited number of lives per set block of time (for example, some mobile games limit players to a certain number of lives per play session and new lives only appear after a set amount of time, such as one life every twenty minutes);
- the requirement to purchase boosters or in-app purchases to proceed;
- the requirement to “ask a friend” for an item in order to move forward;
- the need to register an account and/or provide a credit card to access the game (for example, some multiplayer online games will block players from progressing further in the game unless they purchase game time cards or a subscription);
- the need for specialized equipment required to play the game; and
- a “party game” atmosphere where multiple players are required to take turns (such as trivia games).

Along with familiarizing themselves with the games students will be playing, faculty unfamiliar with the typical format, style, and tone of game walkthrough documents themselves will want to read through sample documents, both print-based and online if possible. While each walkthrough varies based on the composer’s decisions regarding the level of detail offered, the point of view provided to the reader, the design choices used, and so on (see Consalvo, 2003 and Vie, 2008 for further reading on the subject) all walkthroughs will have a similar foundation in that they attempt to move the reader from point A to point B in a game through detailed step-based instructions.

The assignment can be scaled as large or as small as an instructor prefers: I have taught this walkthrough assignment as a two-day, two-week, and two-month assignment, each for various reasons and with different results. A shorter amount of time requires that students begin working in their groups on the walkthrough almost immediately; they have little time to get to know each other, explore their game, or revise. However, the lengthier amount of time is not necessarily best: Two months means that some student groups will tire of working with each
other or on their chosen game by the time they finish. Two to four weeks is an ideal span as it gives students enough time to get to know the various members of their group, divide up the work effectively, explore the game, write up the walkthrough, participate in usability testing without feeling pressed for time, and revise their walkthrough based on user testing results.

During the initial class day, the instructor should allow students to choose groups or assign groups, distribute the walkthrough assignment (included here), and give students a chance to get to know each other if possible. If time permits, groups should delineate each student’s role within the group and choose or be assigned a game to play. The next several sessions should be devoted to gameplay, with students in groups participating in their assigned roles and providing the instructor regular feedback on the group’s progress. Instructors can assign check-in documents like progress reports or memos; they can also simply ask for an emailed or verbal update at the beginning or end of class. Once all groups have a complete initial draft, usability testing should occur. Groups trade their walkthroughs and use the walkthrough documentation to play the target game. Based on the results of the usability test, groups then get together once more and revise their draft for final submission to the instructor.

By the end of this assignment, students have worked in groups to compose a substantial document that incorporates both visual and textual materials. They have made strategic rhetorical choices in composing and have attempted to meet their target audience’s needs. Using the usability test results as a guide, students then strategize about revision to better meet their target audience’s desires in multiple areas: visual appeal, content, organization, clarity and conciseness, style and tone, and ease of use. Throughout the remainder of the technical and professional communication course, these elements will come into play as students work to make effective choices as apprentice technical communicators. This assignment, therefore, is a fun and creative way to set forth foundational principles (or reinforce them) in the technical and professional communication classroom.

Depending on the instructor’s interest, this assignment can later support additional games-based learning in the classroom, such as having students analyze the usability of the video game consoles upon which they played their game. Similarly, if instructors wish to incorporate analog games (that is, non-digital games such as board or card games), students could play analog games and compose alternate instructions—for a new audience, with a different design, for an entirely new game that could be played with the board and pieces, and so forth. Alternately, students could be tasked with creating their own game from scratch and composing effective rhetorically based instructions for their intended audience. The possibilities for games-based learning in the writing classroom are extensive and this assignment offers only a glimpse of the many ways faculty can capitalize on the multiple pedagogical affordances that games can provide.
INSTRUCTIONS AND ASSESSMENT

INSTRUCTIONS

In a small group of three students, choose a game from the selection offered in class. Your group will be responsible for selecting a level, scenario, quest, or other achievable and replicable moment and writing a group walkthrough of that moment. Your walkthrough should incorporate images (such as screenshots from your game), color, and an overall design schema to appeal to your audience. Your audience is other game players of a moderate level of technical expertise (for example, they don’t need to be taught how to use a mouse or press a button) who also wish to play your game.

PLAYING THE ROLES:

Each member will, at various times, play various roles. These include the note taker, the game player, and the information seeker:

THE NOTE TAKER: This member watches and takes notes while the game player is playing. The note taker details exactly what the game player is doing. Is the game player jumping, hitting the “X” button over and over, or yelling at the game because he’s stuck? The note taker also notes the game player’s location: level one; the top of the stairs; or falling down the rabbit hole. Finally, the note taker describes what is happening in the game at that time. Maybe killer Goombas are attacking, stars are falling from the sky, or the game player is grabbing power-ups.

THE GAME PLAYER: This member plays the game through from a start point to an end point or for a certain period of time (measured in minutes). Be sure your group rotates through its game players. No one person should get stuck in any role for the duration of the assignment. This ensures that everyone in the group has an equal exposure to the game and how to play it, which will help you when your group begins to write up your walkthrough.

THE INFORMATION SEEKER: This member gives information to the note taker and the game player. If the game player gets stuck, the information seeker suggests alternatives, asks for help, or looks up information and remembers to cite it. If the note taker seems to be missing something, the information seeker points it out to her. The information seeker also helps keep everyone on task and working. Finally, the information seeker takes screen shots or photos at moments that seem crucial for the walkthrough.

WRITING THE WALKTHROUGH:

Once your group has played through its level, scenario, quest, or other achievable and replicable moment, your group will need to begin writing the walkthrough. You can choose to
write a paper-based document (in the style of a strategy guide or instructional manual) or you can choose to compose an online walkthrough website.

Refer to the note-taker’s notes as your group composes its walkthrough. Also refer to the screen shots or photos that the information seeker took. There is no minimum or maximum length for your walkthrough. Instead, you’ll need to consider what information your audience needs; remember, your audience is someone with a moderate level of expertise, so determine whether or not readers will need to be taught how to operate the controls, how to save the game, and so on. Write in a style and tone appropriate for your audience. Aim to clearly and promptly move your reader through the game to replicate the level, scenario, quest, or achievable moment your walkthrough outlines.

TESTING THE WALKTHROUGH:

Technical and professional communicators rely on usability testing to let them know whether an instructional document meets its audience’s needs. Usability refers to the extent to which any product supports its users in carrying out their tasks efficiently and effectively. Therefore, the usability test your group will perform is meant to assess how well another group’s game walkthrough allows you to progress to a certain point in their game efficiently and effectively.

To perform your usability test, give another group your game and walkthrough. Watch and listen as the group plays your game using your walkthrough. If the group gets stuck, give them some time to try to move past this moment and figure it out on their own. If they can’t move forward after a period of time, help the group and mark this place in the walkthrough for revision.

- After the group has played through your walkthrough entirely, ask them to reflect on your walkthrough:
- Was it easy to read? If visuals were included, did they make sense or help the other group through?
- If applicable, was it clear where the game branched off (had more than one option) and how to choose the right branch?
- How visually appealing was the walkthrough?

Make notes about what to revise based on the other group’s playthrough of your game. Then switch: Your group should now play the other group’s game using their walkthrough.

REVISING THE WALKTHROUGH:

Based on the results of your usability test, revise your walkthrough document accordingly. Aim for greater clarity, conciseness, and audience recognition throughout. That is, if portions of
your walkthrough were unclear or if game players got stuck, revise to better assist players in understanding.

ASSESSMENT

The video game walkthrough is graded for both content and form.

CONTENT:

- The walkthrough focused on a clearly defined level, scenario, quest, or other achievable and replicable moment.
- The walkthrough met the needs of an audience member with a moderate amount of technical ability.
- The walkthrough clearly, concisely, and accurately described how to achieve the replicable moment defined by the group.
- The walkthrough was composed by the group and not drawn from outside sources such as already existing online walkthroughs or strategy guides.

FORM:

- The walkthrough was either paper-based or web-based and used color, images, and text to engage its audience with an overall appealing and appropriate design.
- The walkthrough used elements from technical communication (such as chunking, highlighting, call-out boxes, glossaries, and so forth.) to offer clarity and conciseness.
- The walkthrough was proofread for spelling and grammar and reflected professional standards of polishing.
- The walkthrough incorporated screen shots and other images drawn from the group’s own game play; any additional images are cited appropriately.

A: The walkthrough is clear, concise, and meets the audience’s needs by allowing them to play successfully through the replicable moment. It engages the audience through the rhetorically appropriate use of color, images, and textual material. It reflects group game play and group composing strategies and showcases the original work of the group. It is professionally polished with no spelling or grammar errors and no inaccuracies.

B: The walkthrough is generally clear and concise and mostly meets the audience’s needs by allowing them to play successfully through the replicable moment with some moments of “getting stuck” caused by the writing of the walkthrough itself. It uses color, images, and textual material with some areas where the group could have better considered the rhetorical effectiveness of these elements. While it reflects group game play and composing strategies, there may be areas where the group coherence of the document could be stronger (for example, there are moderate shifts in voice, tone, or style in the walkthrough) or where group
participation could have been more equitable. It is professionally polished with only a few spelling or grammar errors or inaccuracies.

C: The walkthrough does an average job of meeting the audience’s needs. The walkthrough may have caused game players to “get stuck” or become frustrated repeatedly because of the lack of clarity, conciseness, or accuracy in the writing. It uses color, images, and textual material with many areas where the group could have better considered the rhetorical effectiveness of these elements and the overall design schema. While it reflects group game play and composing strategies, there are multiple areas where the group coherence of the document could be stronger (for example, there are significant shifts in voice, tone, or style in the walkthrough that signal individual composing strategies rather than group coherence) or where group participation could have been more equitable (for example, group members did not shift through roles equitably or did not work together effectively). It shows some attention to polishing with multiple spelling or grammar errors or inaccuracies that may impede a reader’s understanding.

D: The walkthrough has significant problems with its content and form. The walkthrough may be incomplete or have writing issues that impede a game player from achieving the defined goal. There is a lack of clarity, conciseness, or accuracy in the writing and/or the document fails to use color and images to meet the audience’s needs. The walkthrough shows little attention to group composing and/or the group members worked individually, only getting together at the end to submit a document on behalf of the group and not composing and communicating collaboratively throughout. The content of the walkthrough may be drawn from outside sources (such as online walkthroughs or strategy guides) with no citation of these materials. It lacks attention to polishing with multiple spelling or grammar errors or inaccuracies that may impede a reader’s understanding.

F: The walkthrough does not focus on a replicable, achievable moment in a game. It may be copied from outside sources (such as online walkthroughs or strategy guides) and passed off as the group’s own. The group members did not work together as a group and turned in individual documents. Or, the walkthrough is significantly incomplete, lacks a design schema of any kind, and/or contains multiple spelling and grammar errors or inaccuracies that strongly impede a reader’s understanding.

REFERENCES
