Beyond the Dialectic of Work and Play: 
A Serio-Ludic Rhetoric for Composition Studies

Albert Rouzie

In a computers and writing listserv discussion a few years ago, the topic of play provoked an interesting eruption of discourse. One participant called play “one of the dragons of our culture.” Another participant began to rant, blaming a perceived privileging of play in education for many problems of learning, literacy, and discipline. The play element in education, he claimed, leads to the expectation that the hard work of literacy should be fun—a dangerous expectation because it dooms the system and students to failure by creating a demand for entertainment when education is, in fact, the result of years of blood, sweat, and tears.

This pitting of hard, meaningful work against the empty frivolity of play is endemic in our culture’s thinking about play, not only in the workplace, but also in literacy education. This way of thinking can be seen in the extent to which play has been purged from much language use, reflecting both the rationalist clarity demanded by objective science and the legacy of Taylorist efficiency in our educational systems. The model of the academic print text, as Richard Lanham points out, has repressed the playful tendencies of language in favor of a “just the facts, ma’am” monotony of presentation. While some elementary educators embrace the role of play in the learning activities of the young, college writing instruction continues to maintain a fairly rigorous separation between serious, persuasive, utilitarian writing and creative, expressive, playful writing.

Yet, play in language is the undeniable id, bubbling up no matter how stringent the control. When the medium expands beyond the austere conventions of the book, as it has with the computer, the suppressed play of language and its users moves to the foreground. For this reason, the computer writing classroom presents a compelling test case for exploring the value of what I will call the play element in writing instruction. In the late 1980s, Marcia Peoples Halio noted that students in her classes who
sat at Macintosh computers played with fonts instead of working on their writing. Play, she claimed, negatively affected the quality of her students' writing. Because of the distractions of the graphical capabilities of the Macintosh, she concluded, the IBM was more appropriate for computer writing pedagogy. Halio drew a line in the sand, so to speak, between writing and playing with the computer's liquid interface, between the business of literacy and the leisure of playful exploration, between text as the main course of literacy and graphics as unnecessary gravy. Halio viewed the intrinsic pleasures of playing with font size and style as a distraction from rather than an enhancement of student work. This tension reflects the culture's pervasive separation of work and pleasure as well as its anxieties about the effects of technology on learning, work, and human relationships.

Online play has become a litmus test for conservative versus progressive educational philosophies. Conservatives decry the use of play, claiming that it panders to demands for entertainment instead of supporting the hard work of learning. The conservative position appears to assume that play is undifferentiated, frivolous, and irrelevant to learning and literacy practices. Any use of play in serious education becomes a sop to the shortened attention spans of our media-soaked youth and a mistaken shift of focus from skills- and content-based education to student-centered approaches. On the other end of the spectrum, politically radical educators, such as James Berlin and Teresa Ebert, are also critical of play, claiming that it has no political impact because it is non-rhetorical. Progressives who land in between these poles view play as the natural mode of cognitive development through which intrinsically motivated activity can free us from the oppressive, authoritarian traditions epitomized by the conservative approach. Some progressives view play as a stage of cognitive development, while others see it as an elastic mode of cognitive perception or engagement that endures throughout life. Not surprisingly, the use of technology is at the crux of this debate. Media critic Neil Postman—the quintessential spokesman for the conservative view—first attacked educational television (such as Sesame Street) in Amusing Ourselves to Death before focusing his criticisms on computers in Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology. On the progressive side, Seymour Papert champions playful scenarios involving computer programming as the best hope for authentic, unalienated cognitive advancement.

The deeply entrenched divisions between work and play, seriousness and frivolity, and order and chaos inherited by educators ultimately
impoverish our culture’s approach to literacy. By now it is a truism that computer technology has added new dimensions and requirements to our concept of literacy. Deborah Brandt suggests that “literate ability has become more and more defined as the ability to position and reposition oneself amidst literacy’s recessive and emergent forms” (666). Despite the emergence of computer technology and its potential for enhancing the play element in literacy education, a normative ideology of work, reality, seriousness, practicality, and adult behavior continues to rule post-secondary institutions, blinding most educators to the significance of the play that is already occurring in their classrooms, preventing them from addressing it as a productive force for change and learning and from perceiving it as an interesting phenomenon in its own right. In this essay, I argue that the dichotomy between work and play in our culture continues to contribute to our alienation from creative connection to both work and play and that this dichotomy in English studies is further instutionalized in composition studies. Although play may appear to exist outside the realm of rhetoric, where it is limited to “creative” or “expressive” writing, I argue that certain forms of play are highly rhetorical and that an emergent form of literacy must include fluency with the play element in the writing of both traditional and electronic discourse. Furthermore, in discussing play in the context of critical postmodernism, I argue that play does not have to be apolitical, that its dialectical qualities can make it a powerful force for resistance and change.

Theorizing the Work/Play Dichotomy

*Play* is a complex, overdetermined term fraught with contradictions and ambiguities; it is used in a wide variety of ways, often for the purposes of invoking the binary oppositions I have noted. Speaking colloquially, we say that we were “just playing” but now are not “playing around.” In romance, if I say that I am “playing the field,” I indicate that I am not seeking a serious relationship. Yet, many uses of the word arguably suggest serious implications. “You played me for a fool” is a serious accusation of manipulation, of not “playing it straight.” Some uses of *play* place it squarely in a rhetorical situation. Rhetorically, the outcome of a situation often depends on “how you play it.” “Playing to their emotions” suggests that we think of play as intimately connected to the communicative/rhetorical act, metaphorically rendered in dramatic terms. The notion of “playing to an audience” or “playing up a point” is fundamental to the often “make believe” scene of rhetorical persuasion, the staging of which casts rhetors as players or actors who enact a dialectic between the
"authentic" self and the self as player of roles in an unfolding drama. Even though the complexity of the word play itself suggests considerable slippage across the binary oppositions between work/play and seriousness/frivolity, the prevailing dichotomy between seriousness and play has been our culture's most persistent approach to defining play.

The binary opposition of work/play privileges work, a situation that results from a combination of historical forces. The Protestant work ethic and socio-economic structures and pressures have understandably placed work above what is perceived to be its opposite, play. In mainstream academic treatment, play is ultimately trivialized, its importance limited. The derogation of play relegates play's most serious function to childhood social and cognitive development. This is, in part, the legacy of Jean Piaget, who found a close parallel between children's play and their developing structures of thought. Play, in Piaget's view, is the action of assimilating the world to the child's ego. In this schema, play causes its own obsolescence, since as children play and grow, they begin to accommodate their actions to the serious demands of adult life. With mature adult cognitive behavior, play falls off like a burned up rocket booster—it is no longer needed. Piaget's theory has its uses; unfortunately it has helped to maintain our culture's problematic separation of play and work.

Although largely responsible for countering the view that play is trivial and frivolous, Johan Huizinga's Homo Ludens has also been similarly effective in divorcing play from material reality. Brian Sutton-Smith notes that, in Huizinga's view, play is "outside of ordinary life, . . . immaterial, disinterested, nonutilitarian, voluntary, spatially and temporally separate, childlike, nonprofane, governed by rules, and utterly involving." This view, in effect, idealizes and sacralizes play as art for art's sake in the manner of aristocratic rhetoric of the later nineteenth century (Ambiguity 203). This legacy has powerfully influenced many humanistic play scholars. Huizinga's thinking is reflected in the following definition of play, which is espoused by recent play theorists:

Play is a voluntary and distinct activity carried out within arbitrary boundaries in space and time, separate from daily roles, concerns, and influences and having no seriousness, purpose, meaning, or goals for the actor beyond those emerging within the boundaries and context of the play act itself. (Stevens 240)

This restricted definition expresses the fissure in our culture between necessity and enjoyment. We construct reality on the basis of work
versus play, the elective versus the required, as if our attitudes and performance were prescribed by these categories: now we play; now we work.

Two alternative and interrelated perspectives on play make it more closely connected to work and suggest some avenues toward creating a different relationship between them. The first presents an image of what could be: work as an unalienated, engaged activity. The second suggests that play can be a significant rhetorical force, that play performs rhetorical work. In both perspectives, the play element plays a central role in the experience of work: the first is focused on the individual’s experience of absorbed engagement, and the second suggests that play is really interplay inasmuch as it is interactive and social.

The perspective on work as unalienated activity is characterized by what Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi calls the “flow experience”: the pleasurable feeling of total absorption in an intense and challenging activity. This experience is also marked by “intrinsic motivation,” where the drive to do something has less to do with extrinsic rewards than with the actor’s desire to do it for its own sake. The flow experience may occur in work or in play. What is significant is that it describes an experience that collapses their absolute separation. Csikszentmihalyi asserts that when areas for enjoyment are kept separate from the rest of life, we are “not likely to heal the basic split between ‘what needs to be done’ and ‘what is enjoyable to do’” (201). When the separation is absolute, Csikszentmihalyi warns, we are left with a degraded, “hedonistic escapist notion of what enjoyment is” (205).

The flip side of hedonistic, escapist leisure is the experience of work as drudgery. Hans Ostrom writes that most college writing is a “joyless affair. We might as well all dress as Puritans” (77). As if diagnosing a disease, Ostrom states that in “the culture of college writing, there’s a chasm between work and play,” pointing out that play is not “incidental but vital” (81). In “Fun?” Lex Runciman calls attention to the work/play dichotomy in composition studies. He asks why academics portray writing as relentlessly problematic, difficult, and serious, why fun and pleasure are absent in most discussions of writing as is the recognition that writing is often a satisfying and rewarding activity (157-59). Runciman observes (accurately I think) that one “trouble with pleasure (even that resulting from a demanding and rigorous mental activity) is that it’s squishy, it’s difficult to predict, and talking about it seems vaguely unprofessional. It seems frivolous” (159). Runciman calls for encouraging “student writers to discover and even savor the range of large and
small rewards which attend their own writing and thinking,” a process that should begin with “rediscovering for ourselves the internal, even intrinsic, rewards of the single, marvelously complicated process we call writing and thinking” (161-62). More playfully, Ostrom calls for a view of writing as “play-work” or “plerk,” and suggests an attitude of what he calls “off-beatedness”—or, “a deliberate, built-in, serious-and-playful irreverence toward received form” (81).

As Csikszentmihalyi and Runciman suggest, intrinsic motivation can lead to some healing of the necessity/pleasure split, while Marx sees this sense of alienation as a serious social problem, the legacy of the formation of labor by capital. The concept of alienated work is central to understanding why the dichotomy of work and play in our culture is debilitating in the context of college composition. The roots of this concept lie in Marx’s notion that capitalist production drains meaning from labor, preventing a sense of authentic connection between oneself and one’s work. In Marx’s analysis of capitalism, the worker is alienated both from what he or she produces and from the process of production, of labor. The product is “an alien object exercising power over [the worker],” while in the process of work, the worker is estranged from him or herself. Marx writes, “labour in which man alienates himself . . . is a labour of self-sacrifice, of mortification” (74). Alienated labor exists not to satisfy intrinsic needs but to satisfy needs outside the worker: “Its alien character emerges clearly in the fact that as soon as no physical or other compulsion exists, labour is shunned like the plague” (74). Alienated work not only creates a sense of absolute separation between home and work, it estranges the individual from his or her sense of connection with nature and the human species as a whole. As Marx says, “estranged labor . . . makes individual life in its abstract form the purpose of the life of the species, likewise in its abstract and estranged form” (75).

In more or less accepting this separation of work and play into discrete spheres, we also embrace the corollary to this version of labor, the commodified play of the leisure industry. In the twentieth century, this industry has become a dominant force shaping everyday life: we crowd theme parks and other havens of play in what little free time we have after the consuming demands of work. It is not, however, in this ghettoized, commodified experience of play that we find the meaning now lacking in our jobs. If, in our work, we are alienated because we are not engaged in creative activity, we are likewise alienated from forms of play offered by the leisure industry in which we are mere consumers of prefabricated presentations. If one connotation of play is the freedom to engage in
creative activity, the leisure industry offers not the freedom to be creative, but the freedom from the control of the work environment. Yet, commodified play is nothing if not a controlled activity designed to produce a predictable experience of “fun.” Work and play have been gutted of their creative value so that each is reified—we experience both as “other” rather than as part of our selves—while the separation of work and play into these spheres of activity helps to maintain this sense of alienation.

If we are to become more creatively engaged in work and play, then there must be some way to move beyond the dichotomy imposed by years of Taylorism. Play in the context of work can help to recapture aspects of creative activity that have been denied to labor. The quality of play we need is not the passive consumption offered by the theme park but the interactive play that has the potential of enriching work. Just as play can be serious, work can be playful, a quality I call “serio-ludic.” This kind of play promises some closing of the work/play gap. It is interactive and creative, performative and unalienated—and rhetorically significant. Serio-ludic play can achieve both serious and ludic purposes without the kind of polarization that leads to the exclusion of one purpose or the other. Serio-ludic play can lead to a richer conception of work that has clear relevance to the future of composition studies, because it opens up a space for the ludic impulses we all feel; it allows us the possibility of the creative engagement with writing that is all but lost in composition.

The second perspective on play asserts that some forms of play—particularly serio-ludic play—do rhetorical work. We may experience the flow of unalienated work as serio-ludic, but serio-ludic play extends beyond the individual’s felt sense to his or her interactions with others. This interaction displays a rhetorical dimension of obvious relevance to composition, for some theorizing of play strongly suggests its connection to rhetoric. In Understanding Media, Marshall McLuhan suggests that play is fundamentally social and rhetorical, providing reflexive perspective on the situation in which it emerges. Play, he writes, “must be give and take, or dialogue, as between two or more persons and groups.” Play, then, is interplay, an activity that McLuhan associates with performance and especially with the reaction of the audience—a reaction that is captured in the rhetorical concept of pathos. McLuhan writes, “the very medium of interplay is the feeling of the audience” (241).

Play’s rhetorical power lies in part in how it can reflect our most serious activities, but with a parodic twist, as in a funhouse mirror. McLuhan writes that the elements of play “must stand forth from the over-
all situation as models of it in order for the quality of play to persist” (240). These ideas are compatible with Gregory Bateson’s point that the distinguishing feature of play is the metacommunicative signal, “this is play” (41). Bateson points out that play parodies not reality itself but an idea or image of reality held by players, participants, and audiences. Reality, then, is put into play and reframed in the context of the rhetor/player and the audience. When we step out of ordinary roles and into what we think of as play roles, we activate the subjunctive “as if” that is associated with play. This quality accounts for play’s power to critically comment on received roles and reality; but it also accounts for how easily play is dismissed and constitutes a central paradox of play—namely, that play derives some of its power to alter the world from the perception that it is separate from it.

Some scholarship in rhetoric and composition explores the connection between play and rhetoric. Huizinga’s concept of *homo ludens* can serve, Kenneth Burke writes, “as an instrument to warn against an overly instrumentalist view of man’s ways with symbols” in which the concept of action is reduced to work (61). Burke’s dramatism construes language as a mode of symbolic action rather than as a means of conveying information (see Foss et al. 181). The dramatistic model suggests particular and shifting roles for writers and readers throughout the process. Building on Burke and Huizinga—particularly on the concept of *homo ludens*—Lanham places the ludic impulse in dialectical relation to the serious purposes of the Western intellectual tradition. He makes *homo rhetoricus* the playful counter to *homo seriatus*, thus making a strong link between play and rhetoric (*Motives*).

The fluidity of shifting roles in peer conferencing links the revision process in composition to elements common to play. Peter Elbow’s role-play technique of reading as a believer and a doubter has gained considerable acceptance in the field. Walker Gibson sees the writer as a “play-actor” assuming various roles and masks in “dramatic play through language” and thus functions as an antidote to the model of the writer as objective mapmaker (284-86). Both play and writing can, in this view, be seen as forms of “symbolic action” through which individuals encounter and negotiate socio-cultural structures of meaning. This sense of play as action connects it explicitly to the exigencies of rhetorical situations and bridges the gulf created by the distinction between serious and frivolous discourse.

The process approach supports the practice of playing around with ideas by viewing writing as provisional, deferring performance anxiety
by involving students with the associative, constructive, and discursive processes of writing in the hope that they feel a sense of intrinsic motivation. Drafting is a rehearsal in which the writer plays the role of rhetor in a fictional situation with an imagined audience. The associational quirkiness of some invention heuristics reintroduces play into the composing process (clustering, conceptual mapping, freewriting, and tagmemics are a few examples). Recursiveness suggests that the play of inventio can and should reenter the process at any stage. Role-play, dramatism, and the creative loopiness of the composing process are such accepted elements of the composition canon that we no longer acknowledge their essential playfulness. If that acknowledgment is necessary for bridging work and play in college composition, then these ideas and techniques alone cannot be sufficient to the task.

Enter the personal computer, first connected through local area networks and then through the Internet. More than any other development, the use of computers in composition has brought the play element in writing into the foreground. Until recently, the use of computer and network technology in composition courses has supported the production of serious, mostly monological print discourse; lately, the explosion of playful modes of online conversation and writing are forcing us to reconsider the place of play in our interactions and in writing in computer or traditional classrooms.

The two perspectives on play just discussed—play as unalienated activity and play as rhetorical—come together in serio-ludic play, which is the most educationally relevant quality of play because it can result in fruitful discourse that combines serious and playful purposes. This view contrasts with what is commonly referred to as “mere play” or pure play—play whose effects are irrelevant to the desired goals of a specific educational moment. Of course, there is no consensus on what constitutes pure play. Halio thought of playing with fonts as “mere play,” while many others strongly disagreed. Serio-ludic play calls attention to itself as play while achieving rhetorical purposes by conveying content of a serious nature through playfully stylistic means.

In electronic writing, serio-ludic play finds expression in the organization of the text through playful metaphors and narratives that provide readers with a dramatic experience of information, featuring interesting transitions, puzzles, conundrums, odd yet meaningful juxtapositions, collage effects, and fanciful graphics. In the online discourse of synchronous conferencing, the play element is, like Robert Brooke’s concept of underlife, more eruptive and spontaneous. In real-time online discourse,
serio-ludic play is expressed through metacommunicative jokes that mediate conflict and through group improvisation on emergent themes. Brooke points out that underlife—the supposedly off-task talking and activities performed by students during class—is not the mere play many have assumed, but is important in the development of student roles and identities distinct from those expected and rewarded in the institutional setting.

Underlife certainly can be playful, but since it accomplishes serious purposes, it is a good example of serio-ludic play. In the computer classroom, underlife blossoms and is transformed as it is transferred to the surface of online discourse, resulting in multiple levels of underlife in both verbal and written forms. Thus, the computer brings play into relief, forcing educators to reconsider their assumptions about what forms of play are legitimate. Yet, if Brooke’s account is accurate, most instructors assume a rigid stance on this issue: any play is seen as ludic and beside the point of instruction.

The Work/Play Dichotomy in English Studies

The rigid stance on play that persists in composition is in part the legacy of the historical separation of work and play in English departments. Serio-ludic play has the potential to help anneal this gap by opening up a space for reflective, social, rhetorical, and unalienated creativity. How the chasm between work and play developed in English studies continues to contribute to its power. According to Richard Ohmann, what we know as the modern English department was formed in the late nineteenth century at a time when corporate capitalism demonstrated to educators the need for a trained professional managerial class. Departments were organized for the purpose of teaching the reading of literature—a subject upon which professional expertise on a body of knowledge could be built—and its more “useful” partner, composition. Other possible contents of the field such as rhetoric and oratory, Ohmann notes, were deemed archaic (17). Teaching literature rapidly gained prestige because professors liked teaching it better and, more importantly, because “English literature carried with it the prestige of the leisured class for whom it had long been a ‘natural’ accomplishment. . . . It seemed fitting that the birthright of an old elite should be codified and promoted as cultural validation for the newly credentialed professional-managerial class” (18). This pairing of literature and composition was sold in the 1890s as a unified field of study; yet, as Ohmann observes, the reality was “less a unity than an unhappy yoking of alienated to unalienated labor.” The result was a “felt division”
Albert Rouzie

between work and leisure, especially since “the goal of literary instruction was to improve or perfect a self that could exist only in the realm of leisure” (20). Meanwhile, no rhetoric about higher cultural goals surrounded the discussion of composition. Ohmann notes that the discarding of rhetoric “left composition without foundation,” and made it an elementary and practical skill to be taught through ceaseless practice (21).

The privileging of literature was maintained, in part, by defining it against the everyday realities of rhetorical persuasion, evanescent popular genres, and journalistic writing. The bifurcation of English studies into one activity associated with leisure and one associate with work would be maintained so long as teaching composition remained subordinate to teaching literature. The fact that writing instruction continues to be more difficult than the teaching of literature indicates that work and play in English departments still split along these lines.

This asymmetry persists in the increasing workload for all academics. In “The Way We Work Now,” Mara Holt and Leon Anderson note that the typical academic works a fifty-plus hour week (132). Holt and Anderson call for an expansion of time away from work and for the “reflective leisure” that is “central to intellectual work because it provides the mental space for free play essential to the cultivation of critical creativity” (138). Recognizing the need for reflective leisure, they write, “undercuts the dichotomy of work and play” (139). These conditions apply to both tenure-track and adjunct faculty, but genuine leisure and other material conditions necessary for play have been withheld from historically disadvantaged groups, especially women and minorities. As Theresa Enos and others have documented, women form a large underclass in the field of composition, serving mostly as adjunct instructors, and they are even more susceptible to academic overwork since the privileging of literature in English departments guarantees an onerous load of composition courses. The gendered nature of composition studies represents a more generalized dynamic in American culture whereby women are relegated to subordinate roles in the workplace and assume heavier labor demands in the home, even when they are employed full-time, as Arlie Hochschild, among others, has demonstrated. Men, then, may have more leisure time than women whose access to play is more constrained. Certainly, play styles differ across genders and races; however, the fundamental dynamic of seriousness and play that defines serio-ludic play is expressed within and across these divisions, and its benefits are available to all. Furthermore, while the asymmetry of power relations may impede play and influence the nature of its expression, as Erving Goffman
has noted, the mutual enactment of play tends to mediate (at least to some
degree) power differences among play participants. Given this, the most
important factor impeding play is not the asymmetry of power relations
within play, but the material and structural discrimination that has
resulted in the formation of overworked underclasses for whom play is a
structurally less available activity.

The field of composition has played its own part in the persistent
association of teaching college writing courses with alienated grunt work.
“Current-traditional” rhetoric focuses on the mastery of certain well­
worn modes and forms. The objectivist assumptions on which this
rhetoric operates has contributed to limiting the leisure of reading and
interpretation to literature courses. With the advent of what Maxine
Hairston has called the paradigm shift to the process approach, a student
subject has emerged: seemingly for the first time students might focus on
the intricacies of their experiences of writing rather than solely on the
fetishized product. Although the 1960s’ view of the composition course
as “a happening” may have been a blip on the screen, it playfully
challenged the hegemony of received forms and roles for students and
instructors. As Berlin notes, the oppositional potential of expressivist
rhetoric appeared to dissipate when process and collaboration culminated
in the apotheosis of the writer as individual, romantic explorer of the self.
Even though expressivism succeeded in expanding the repertoire of
student writing and interactions beyond the conventions of academic
discourse, it ultimately played into a version of the self that has no social
sense of rhetoric.

In Berlin’s history of composition, social epistemic rhetoric views the
romantic self of expressivism as, at worst, an ideological fiction and, at
best, as just one part of a larger rhetorical economy. Social epistemic
rhetoric could possibly free composition of the split between objective
and subjective rhetorics by offering a more complex model of the social
construction of the self that is thoroughly grounded in poststructuralist
theory. However, rather than freeing composition to explore discourse
that might cross the work/play gap, the legacy of social epistemic rhetoric
has often been a narrow focus on political consciousness-raising, closing
off consideration of play as anything but a ludic escape from the hard work
of analyzing dominant ideologies. In rejecting expressivist rhetoric,
adherents of social-epistemic rhetoric appear to have thrown the baby of
play out with the bath water of the romantic subject.
Healing the Work/Play Split

Some rhetoricians whose work is based on postmodernist rhetorical theory see benefits in a ludic approach that critical postmodernists have not acknowledged. In making play a central element in writing instruction, William Covino and James Seitz, for example, suggest that play offers valuable resistance to the normative expectations of traditional writing instruction. From the perspective of postmodern literary theory, the radical relativism of the linguistic sign makes play language’s primary characteristic. Using language is playing, whether or not one wants to see it. Building on the slippery play of the signifier associated with deconstruction as a precondition of the rhetorical situation, Covino places the “rhetoric of free play [in opposition] to the valorization of truth,” of open, uncertain, discourse to closed, instrumental writing (312). Covino suggests that in composition’s usual emphasis on the completion of writing, “speculation and exploration remain subordinate to finishing” (316). His alternative is a writing “informed by associational thinking, a repertory of harlequin changes, by the resolution that resolution itself is anathema. This writer writes to see what happens” and maintains the attitude of “thoughtful uncertainty” that “informs full exploration and motivates wonder.” Now is the time, Covino adds, “for writing teachers to point out that the world is a drama of people and ideas and that writing is how we consistently locate and relocate ourselves in the play” (317). In short, Covino moves play from the periphery to the center of writing.

Although less apparently ludic in his approach to composition, Seitz calls for a similarly hypertextual approach to fragmentary texts but, like Covino, without any mention of hypertext or electronic discourse. He challenges compositionists to “broaden the range of texts we elicit from our students to include the fragmentary as a legitimate means to rhetorical and aesthetic effects” (819). Seitz proposes that the partial, fragmentary, and difficult be juxtaposed to conventional forms in order to “explore agonistic possibilities” (821). Current composition practices, according to Seitz, cover only “half the game” in which students construct harmonious wholes, leaving out “the attempt to arrange pieces of language so that the gaps between them leave more for readers themselves to construct” (820). The other half of the game alters the reader/writer contract to require active co-construction of meaning by the reader via exploration and play. Seitz notes that without an expansion of the boundaries of texts and the roles of readers and writers, “[r]ole without play . . . is merely a reinforcement of the status quo,” all accommodation and no assimilation (821). The value of fragmentary texts, in Seitz’s view, is that they
establish "an extremely subtle tension between the familiar and the strange," a tension that the student must learn to manage through astute anticipation of the audience.

Seitz's call for composition to consider more "mobile, heteroglot, polyphonic forms of writing" has been taken up by many practitioners in the sub-field of computers and writing (824). Joseph Janangelo, for example, has offered thoughtfully planned collage as a possible model for hypertext composition. Many of Jay Bolter's claims for hypertext focus on the qualities of composition favored by Covino and Seitz. According to Bolter, "[w]riting is the creative play of signs, and the computer offers us a new field for that play" (Writing 10). He adds that "[p]layfulness is a defining quality of this new medium" (130). These approaches to the rhetoric of computer-based composition acknowledge the important role of play in the construction of a critically nuanced aesthetic and rhetoric of electronic composition. What Bolter calls "the breakout of the visual," greatly accelerated by the computer, has placed the play element in composition in stark relief from print literacies traditionally taught in composition courses, bringing its controversies to the foreground ("Degrees"). The visual element of hypertext—that is, the composition of relationships between words and image through bricolage—has become indispensable to its play element. As a visually-oriented medium, hypertext increasingly relies on graphics to convey meaning.

The expansion of writing media to include the extensive palette of non-alphanumeric signs—graphics, audio, and video—creates a new rhetorical exigency for play. The document as site, as virtual space, demands that we conceive of presentation as performance, and it casts readers and writers in the role of actors in unfolding dramas, making manifest Burke's concept of language as symbolic action. Serio-ludic texts incorporate as one of their rhetorical features the metacommunicative signal that play is present, marking the discourse as performative by virtue of its display of the play signal. Playful computer media reintroduce and expand the need for an aesthetic of composition in dialectical interplay with the substance of the text. The quality of hypertextual play can be, in L.M. Dryden's words, "remarkably complex and witty—the result of an integration of work and play at high levels of cognition," made possible, in part, because the medium holds "the potential for a polyvalent and unpredictable play of ideas" (299).

Richard Lanham is perhaps the best-known rhetorician advocating a postmodernist approach to computers, rhetoric, and play. In The Electronic Word, he notes that writing with computers brings play into a
dialectical relationship with the serious, rational instrumentalism, and presumably with the stable transparent linearity of print media. Computer technology, according to Lanham, returns rhetoric to a fruitful oscillation between truth and style that has always been one of its disturbing and enabling tensions. Western thought has been constituted by "two clusters of motive" (game/play and "being serious") that the computer's liquid interface keeps in productive oscillation in a more or less sustained and self-conscious way (57). Lanham stresses the dialectical energy unleashed by the electronic word. Tracing the current rebellion against print back to the textual deformations of the Italian Futurists, Lanham notes that the Western intellectual tradition has always featured a collision between seriousness and play, content and style, fixity and fluidity. The didactic value of this interplay, Lanham argues, is revealed in the dialectical movement between our most persistent oppositions. The electronic word, he tells us, instantiates this dialectic in its surface by encouraging stylistic deformations of print conventions, and thus is the media par excellence for instituting profitable and pleasurable boundary crossings. Like Covino, Seitz, and Bolter, Lanham resists composition's presumption that essayistic literacy should be the goal of college writing courses, and he fully integrates computers and play in a postmodernist rhetoric for composition.

While the cognitive value of play is evident in the arguments of some postmodernist rhetoricians, the ludic characteristics of language (as they are manifest in composition) are viewed more skeptically by some critical postmodernists. Play, as they view it, is non-rhetorical and apolitical, lacking or blunting any critical edge. Yet, as I will argue in the next section, the critical and political implications of play are greater than what critical postmodernists have perceived.

How Critical Is Play?
My argument that play is critical depends in large measure on the connection I am making between play and rhetoric. I am claiming that much play is not isolated from and in opposition to work; rather, it exists within and transforms rhetorical situations and, at its best, combines ludic and serious purposes through sophisticated rhetorical strategies and effects. The theorists I draw on to make this case offer an array of ways of connecting play with rhetorical work. Burke views language use as the performance of symbolic action, and McLuhan ties play to the reaction of an audience. The composing process itself is rife with role-play. In terms of peer critique, think of Elbow's "metaphorical questions" (if this paper
were an article of clothing, what would it be?). Bateson's example of puppies at play (nipping, but not really) calls attention to the metacommunication that accompanies play (41). Brooke links the playful student underlife that teachers witness or ignore with students' refusal to submit to rigid institutional roles. Lanham attempts to foreground play as the repressed element in rhetoric that has recently been given new expression through computers, while Covino's metaphor of magic links play to a model of composing that is open-ended exploration. For both critical and aesthetic effects, Seitz and Janangelo validate experimentation with fragments. Play theorists explore the ways that play performs reflexive functions within cultures. My concept of serio-ludic play grounds play in a combination of serious and ludic purposes and effects in rhetorical writing and communication situations. Play of this kind connects writers and audiences in novel ways by healing the work/play dichotomy and the parallel dichotomy in English studies between rhetoric and poetic.

The concept of play as dialectical espoused by postmodernist rhetoricians such as Covino, Seitz, and Lanham has also been recognized by cultural anthropologists who emphasize the role of play in social transformation. A strong current in play studies views play as a critical tool or toy, a paradoxical element resistant to easy domination by hegemonic forces. Victor Turner—the eminent anthropologist of ritual, play, and "liminality"—personifies play as a mocker of accepted realities: "Play is a light-winged, light-fingered sceptic, putting into question the cherished assumptions of both hemispheres. There is no sanctity in play; it is irreverent, and protected in the world of power struggles by its apparent irrelevance and clown's garb" (223). This "apparent irrelevance" sets the stage for its irreverence to be heard rather than drowned out or assimilated into the power structure.8 The player as trickster suggests a strong performative function for play that serves as a mode of social critique. The anthropologist Dwight Conquergood eloquently summarizes this performative function of play in a paragraph well worth quoting at length. Play, he writes,

is linked to improvisation, innovation, experimentation, frame, reflection, agitation, irony, parody, jest, clowning, and carnival. As soon as a world has been made, lines drawn, categories defined, hierarchies erected, then the trickster, the archetypal performer, moves in to breach norms, violate taboos, turn everything upside down. By playing with social order, unsettling certainties, the trickster intensifies awareness of the
vulnerability of our institutions. The trickster’s playful impulse promotes a radical self-questioning critique that yields a deeper self-knowledge, the first step towards transformation. Appreciation of play has helped ethnographers of performance understand the unmasking and unmaking tendencies that keep cultures open and in a continuous state of productive tension. The metacommunicative signal “this is play” temporarily releases, but does not disconnect, us from workaday realities and responsibilities and opens up a privileged space for sheer deconstruction and reconstruction. (83)

Far from simply reveling in the ludic, these researchers see the ludic impulse as intimately connected to processes of individual, social, and cultural renewal.

The paradoxical and oppositional nature of play enables it to parody reality, and thus opens up a space for reflexivity. Sutton-Smith found through his research on children’s games that in play children “both mimic and defy reality. Being paradoxical means that play is always both of its own society and beyond it at the same time” (Toys 252). These “games of order and disorder” reveal the ways that play inverts, challenges, or reverses the social order (see Schwartzman 217). Variability, Sutton-Smith suggests, is the key to play, which is “characterized by quirkiness, redundancy, and flexibility” (Ambiguity 229). One of play’s important functions is that it acts as “an exemplar of cultural variability, an available alternative for behavior, just as are music, dance, song, and the other arts” (230). Play, then, can introduce novel forms, challenge the received order, and affect the larger society.

The role of play as a dialectical force in critical literacy can be clarified by considering its role in composition “A Class of Clowns,” Chris Holcomb claims that successful use of spontaneous humor in online synchronous discussion demonstrates “a competency in a new form of literate practice. . . . [S]tudents use joking to accomplish a variety of interactional tasks: to build rapport with other students, to save face, and to explore and negotiate (in a relatively safe way) thresholds between different ways of thinking and behaving (4). Conflicts are spurred and mediated by play in online dialogue, suggesting that the invocation of the ubiquitous play frame—“just kidding”—performs as a limited license to transgress that, according to anthropologist Roger Abrahams, “often leads to the extension of that license to depict and explore motives that we are not permitted to examine through enactment outside that specially distanced, stylized, and intensified environment of the play-stage.” The “play-stage” of the networked computer classroom provides a relatively
safe place for transgressive behaviors, where they are "exempted from full
judgment on moral grounds." Abrahams comments, "If play involves
committing such transgressions even while we are saying 'just kidding,
only kidding, only kidding,' . . . the study of the processes and the
expressive repertoire of playing then provides a primary means of
mapping the transgressions permitted and even encouraged by a group"
(30). Thus, if the play of computer-mediated communication in the
college classroom leads to a variety of transgressive behaviors in textual
form, then that disorder is, as John Shotter points out, "the provenance of
order . . . found in disorder, on the edge of chaos, in spontaneity and
playfulness" (165). Out of the relational tensions and releases that play
fosters, new and refreshing forms, even subject positions, can emerge.
The play element is critical to this process. The more and less spontaneous
negotiations and group improvisations that result from the use of play to
test discursive boundaries can yield significant movement in student
subject positions through the collective emergence of the individual and
group's political unconscious.

Brooke validates the serio-ludic play that he calls underlife (follow­
ing sociologist Erving Goffman), underscoring a connection between
playful resistance and individual and group identity, and supporting my
contention that serio-ludic play is highly rhetorical. Brooke defines
underlife as "the activities (or information games) individuals engage in
to show that their identities are different from or more complex than the
identities assigned them by organizational roles" (142). Brooke notes that
underlife in college composition is a "contained" form of underlife that,
as Goffman says, attempts to fit into "existing institutional structures
without introducing pressure for radical change" (Goffman, Asylums
199). This form of underlife is distinct from "disruptive underlife" that
militates for structural reform (Brooke 143). The student diversions
that Brooke discusses perform at least two functions: they develop
student identity through the expression of distance from expected roles,
and they actively connect "ideas in the classroom to [students'] own lives
outside the classroom" (145). These instances of underlife are rhetorical
in the sense of communicating a meaningful language game, and thus they
help to overcome alienation that springs from disconnection between
classroom content and life outside it. In Brooke's analysis, it is not
underlife itself that must be overcome but the alienated nature of academic
"gamesplaying" that results in cynical manipulation of classroom behav­
ior and writing for external rewards that prevents the commitment to
examining roles and identity necessary for growth as a writer. Even more
significant for my claim that play is critical is Brooke’s contention that writing instruction itself can be a form of disruptive underlife within English departments and universities when it “tries to undermine the nature of the institution and posit a different one in its place” (151). This can only happen, Brooke argues, if writing instructors’ approach to underlife provides opportunities for students to substitute their “naive, contained form” of underlife with a disruptive form in which they question, explore and write about their social world.

Underlife and, more broadly, serio-ludic play are not inherently disruptive of the social order; rather, they open up a space, an opportunity for critique, while they help to connect that process with what we think of as “real life” and help make the work of composition less onerous, alienated, and drudgelike. From this perspective, play does not stand in the way of critical agendas; rather, it is a necessary but not sufficient element of social change. Play can, of course, be a force for containment rather than subversion, since, as Sutton-Smith points out, “games of disorder” are balanced out with “games of order.” The outcome of play depends on what you do with it, on your goals and values, as well as on the cultural and material conditions within which it is enacted.

If, as Brooke claims, composition studies itself can be a disruptive form of underlife in the academy, Lanham’s vision of the future of the humanities certainly disrupts the status quo relationship between work and play. Lanham’s proposed focus on the “rhetoric of the digital arts” is a deliberately strategic attempt to form a philosophy on which a rhetoric-based community of readers and writers might use the unsettled textuality of the moment as a dialectical tool for prying open the curricular divisions of the disciplines by envisioning a means of instituting a rhetorical and dialectical mode of reading, writing, and teaching across the university. The nature of digital rhetoric, Lanham asserts, is such that collaboration across disciplines would be necessary to do justice to the expressive and rhetorical potential of our “bi-polar” media.

In Lanham’s view, play must be integral to the new curriculum because it is always already integral to all communication. Lanham asks, what “kind of stylistic training might equip students for this polyglot voyage” through the very different discourses of the disciplines? (142). “For a start,” he writes, “it should teach the sensitivity and adaptability needed to move from one discourse-community to another. It will have to be some sort of rehearsal education, one that imagines particular occasions and then tries to formulate a discourse appropriate to them” (142; emphasis added). The idea of rehearsal suggests maintaining some
distance from the conventional, epistemic perspective of a particular field so as to prevent "referential reality" from supplanting "rehearsal-reality" (150). Rhetoric—coupled with the vitality of the computer screen's "bipolar stability"—places utilitarian conventions of disciplinary thinking and writing in conversation with ludic disruptions of those modes through playful representations of the digitized word and image. In this view, there is no need to move educational philosophy toward one pole or the other because the power of each is checked by the denaturalizing effect of the other.

Throughout this essay, I have argued that the institutionalized opposition between work and play has had a debilitating effect on composition, maintaining the alienation in work and obscuring the rhetorical power of play. The serio-ludic qualities of much play suggest that dialectical energy is one of the most powerful benefits of putting play to work. I have noted that social epistemic rhetoric has precluded play as a tool of resistance and social transformation. This is apparent in Berlin's and Ebert's distinction between ludic and critical (or resistance) postmodernism. Berlin warns against enthusiasm for ludic postmodernism, noting that some have mistakenly found it "an exhilarating and liberating ingredient of our historical moment" (65). Ludic postmodernists, according to Berlin, revel in the free play of the Derridean signifier, seeing in free play "an opportunity to construct new subject formations" that are detrimental to a critical practice attuned to both the rhetorical constructions of reality and its material, especially economic, conditions (66). Likewise, in Ebert's view, ludic postmodernism undercuts a focus on the material circumstances needed for a politics of feminist liberation. In these versions, ludic postmodernism is without an activist politics and thus is incapable of meaningful critique.

If kept in opposition, however, the terms ludic and critical represent a dichotomy that impoverishes both. A viable critical postmodernism must incorporate the ludic in its toolbox of strategies in order to keep its political focus from shutting off creativity. Play—the realm of the ludic—needs critical postmodernism to reveal the relationship between play and power, to keep play from becoming a separate, escapist realm of irresponsibility. Practicing a dialectic between ludic and critical postmodernism can strengthen both.

Much of the discussion of ludic versus critical postmodernism centers on the question of the subject. The subject in ludic postmodernism is said to be fluid and to defy stable definition through its embrace of multiple, often contradictory positions. The subject of critical postmodernism flies
in the face of this fluidity, instead grounding the subject more in social and material conditions than in discourse and language. Across these discussions, a pattern emerges that recapitulates the binary oppositions I have discussed in this essay. As Joanne Addison and Susan Hilligoss suggest, theories of ludic postmodernists “become lost in a play of rhetoric that inhibits political agency and collective subjectivity” (Addison and Hilligoss 31). In ludic postmodernism, language is play. In critical postmodernism, language is understood as a site for social struggle that is grounded in the material realities of race, class, and gender. Critical postmodernism “insists that difference is social and historical, instead of simply discursive.” The problem with ludic postmodernism, Nedra Reynolds points out, is in the denial of agency that results from conceiving of the subject as fractured and dispersed. Extreme forms of ludic postmodernism in composition studies—such as Victor Vitanza’s “third sophistic rhetoric”—base their theories principally on Baudrillard’s concepts of seduction and hyper-reality, and promote ideas that challenge the existence of or at least any access to material realities, making activist intervention ineffective and, more seriously, making them complicitous with dominant hegemonic thought structures.

I find this form of ludic postmodernism problematic; however, third sophistic rhetoric comprises a small contingent of theorists who in no way exhaust or fully represent how play can inform composition. Furthermore, the distinction between ludic and critical postmodernism is complicitous with the separation of the playful and the serious in our culture and in higher education. Academic activism is once again presented as deadly serious, an approach that is no longer practiced by even the most committed young activists. And play is once again presented as the other of work—that is, as an escape from harsh realities.

Some of the tensions made visible by the play element in computer-mediated communication can be explored through discussing two articles about the online research project, woman@waytoofast. The project provided a listserv forum for a group of women composition scholars to discuss issues of common concern over a period of thirty days. In “Women on the Networks,” Gail Hawisher and Patricia Sullivan discuss this space as a version of Foucault’s notion of heterotopias—or “countersites where culture is represented, contested, and inverted.” Hawisher and Sullivan claim that such countersites “can transform writing classes, subverting dominant power structures and traditional classroom roles” (173, 174). At one point in the discussion, the participants began to discuss topics that collapsed the distinction between public
and private spaces and work and personal experience. This occurred when some women sent e-mail representations of themselves to the list. The authors explain:

For some, the faces, picts, or e-art, as the women called them, were fun and foregrounded woman@waytoofast as a safe place in which to play—an e-space where they might risk seeming foolish. Yet they immediately connected the personal and playful aspects of e-space with serious, professional and scholarly thought. E-art, used as a platform for self-representation and for self-critique, was also used to cantilever the discussion into the areas of how one represented oneself in e-space or in one’s department, as a job candidate or as an untenured faculty member. (190-91)

Hawisher and Sullivan note that e-spaces that fulfill various functions—including playgrounds and masked balls—“can also function as spaces for political action” (193). Their example of playful discourse that segues into serious discussion is an apt example of how play can productively open discussion of topics that may not have arisen without the spark of play. Yet, some members were unable or unwilling to participate in this aspect of the discussion. Hawisher and Sullivan note that “online and off, the strains of women’s academic lives take their toll. Thus the playful responses of some to those pressures . . . were seen by others as another responsibility” (191).

In an article that presents a dramatically different view of the discussion, Addison and Hilligoss present their refusal to participate in the playful posting of images and the subsequent discussion as a political response to what they saw as the subtle heterosexism of the group’s norms. Moved by a lack of response to some early postings on lesbian issues, they assumed that forthright postings on their appearance and the problems of self-presentation specific to lesbians would be poorly received—that is, they sensed an unspoken heterosexism in the group. This sense drove them to communicate with each other off of the list. They theorize their refusal in the context of the debate on ludic and critical postmodernism, categorizing the open-ended, non-gendered identity of queerness and assumptions about play in cyberspace (for example, gender-swapping in MOOs) as a form of ludic postmodernism that resists the social and material conditions that affect identity on and off-line. Addison and Hilligoss advocate the political necessity of claiming a lesbian identity that reflects the oppressive conditions in which they work.
Another way of reading both the silences of the majority of the women on the list and Addison and Hilligoss’ refusal to put their lesbian identities further into the discourse of the group is to see both silences as a failure of nerve. The “silent majority” could have been hesitant to speak from what they may have perceived as their heterosexual subject positions on issues of lesbian identity. Addison and Hilligoss’ choice to be silent in the face of this also suggests a loss of nerve. Their willing retreat into their own community amounts to a capitulation to the role of the silenced other: their silence fulfills that role and inadvertently reinforces the closed categories of the majority, allowing no one the chance to take responsibility, to refuse the straight-jackets of identity. An example of lost opportunity on both sides is the use of the term *coming out* by some members of the group, which was justifiably criticized by Addison and Hilligoss as an appropriation of an important term for publicly claiming homosexual identity. The playfulness of appropriating *coming out* to designate various forms of self-revelation clashed with Addison and Hilligoss’ desire to preserve its original meaning. If the group had been more responsive to the posts on lesbian issues, Addison and Hilligoss might have challenged this playful appropriation, and their challenge might have opened the way for further discussion rather than silence. This conflict demonstrates that play usually does involve taking risks (consciously or not) in asserting license to play with language that may step on toes and cause dissent. I can only wonder what might have happened if Addison and Hilligoss had felt they could intervene in that appropriation.

This lost opportunity is also an apt example of the need for both ludic and critical, resistant discourse. Rather than see these as separate, mutually contradictory and opposing strategies, I see them as interdependent and mutually defining social discourses. The worst outcome of such a debate would be the victory of one over the other. I make this claim not out of a commitment to liberal pluralism—in other words, a commitment to two perspectives that are of equal value—but from the standpoint that composition studies needs the dialogic and dialectical energy of the two in productive oscillation, that play sometimes embodies resistance, while at other times it calls for resistance to its expression.

It is important to note that some attempts have been made to open a space for play within the discourse about postmodernism in composition studies. Reynolds, for example, clearly supports critical postmodernism, calling for “interruption” as a tactic for resisting dominant discourses. Significantly, in applying this tactic to writing, she advocates the “culti-
vation of postmodernism-inspired discourses . . . besides the formal essay or written standard English” as a “greater means of resistance,” noting the potential for this in conversational discourse venues such as Interchange (71). Catherine Chaput, in arguing against the denial of an activist agenda by proponents of third Sophistic rhetoric, quotes recent arguments by Derrida that acts of responsibility still have a place in a post-metaphysical philosophy. Similarly, Addison and Hilligoss use some of the ludic postmodernist thinking of Sandy Stone to discuss online agency.

In my view, postmodern identity (or the erasure of such) is complicated substantially by the historical situation, and students’ multiple subject positions can interact with each other playfully to inform themselves and each other politically, particularly if the teacher foregrounds the historically situated nature of multiple subject positions. Eve Sedgwick provides a concrete example of the concept of situated multiple subject positions in her essay “White Glasses,” in which she describes herself as a woman, a gay man, a feminist, a healthy person, an ill person, and a fat person. She performs a playful dialogue among these identities while situating each of them in relation to the others and to the political situations that they represent. The seriousness with which she takes the history, the politics, and the emotion of each position is undeniable. But her representation of the dialogic relationships among these issues and subject positions is also inarguably playful. The interaction of the ludic with the serious makes her account compelling and, I would go so far as to say, makes it comprehensible and motivating within the framework of political activism.

Conclusion
The recognition of the need for further research and thinking about the play element in composition studies has been slowly emerging. Wendy Bishop’s Elements of Alternate Style offers options for instructors willing to release students from the traditional discursive constraints of the academic essay, to allow play to enrich composing process and product. This work suggests that adherents of playful creativity in composition have begun to theorize its place in composition and to explore the sometimes difficult means of integrating play in such a work-intensive context. Despite this encouraging sign, it is my contention that composition studies is still deeply ensconced in a disabbling, alienating bifurcation of work and play.

The computer classroom has unleashed an efflorescence of play that may force us either to find a legitimate place for play in composition or
to suppress or ignore its expression. It seems likely that writing instruction will become more and more computerized. What is not certain is the fate of play in this context, since computer media increasingly are tied into the burgeoning commercial culture of computerized products and the Web. The promise of hypertext to playfully expand composition could be threatened by the expansion of commodity logic to the Web. On the one hand, progress in the technological sophistication of computers and the Internet leads us closer to embracing the playful yet substantive potential of a medium that juxtaposes the visual and the verbal. On the other hand, the interactive quality of play is threatened by the use of this same technical sophistication by the purveyors of commodified leisure to create yet another deliverable, passive experience of “fun.” If the fate of the Web follows that of television, the promise of computers for exploration and productive play could be lost. We cannot afford to passively wait and see what happens. The play element could become co-opted as the latest commodity, unless compositionists pursue an interactive model of “plerk” with computers.

There are few easy answers to questions that writing instructors may have about how to foster productive play in their classrooms and in their students’ writing; however, some uneasy answers are possible. One step is to reverse the bias against the interanimation of work and play in our culture and to explore the implications for the academic lives of faculty and students. Along with Brooke, we might expect writing instruction to enable students to articulate their differences from prescribed roles as well as possible alternatives to those roles; likewise, composition professionals ought to engage more deeply the disruptive potential of their own underlife in order to open up a space for expression of and reflection on serio-ludic play. Students may need to feel some permission to experiment with the aesthetic and rhetorical possibilities of playful discourse, to experiment with a variety of roles and subject positions. This can be facilitated if major project assignments provide room for the creative license needed for the play element to emerge. Instructors may wish to provide models of their own serio-ludic dialogue and writing; even more crucially, students may need to see and discuss examples of student play in the context of composition courses. Because license to play is often keyed into hierarchical power structures, students may not feel entitled to incorporate play: they may feel that instructors are entitled to play, while students must maintain serious subject positions. Of course, the reverse is just as often true: our students invoke the license to play in resistance to the serious, instrumental conventions of classroom discourse, work,
and instructor subject positions. In this sense, it may be important for instructors to enable student resistance by choosing when to play the serious role. Instructors can experiment more with their own "instructor" subject positions, using their ability to model discourse, thought, and responsiveness to include some of the play elements that might enrich the class experience for all.

Finally, serio-ludic play has a critical potential beyond its pedagogical implications. If play is going to have any chance to thrive and make an impact on our work, we must move toward a more sophisticated understanding and practice of play within academic environments. The notion of serio-ludic play sensitizes us to the need for ludic activity and reflective leisure across the ranks of faculty in the academic workplace. Such sensitivity further challenges the inequity between literature and composition in English departments and the enduring gap between rhetoric and poetic that isolates the play of language in poetic and the practical work of language in rhetoric. I hope that serio-ludic play will exert significant dialectical and critical force and lead to some rapprochement between critical and ludic positions within this conversation in English studies and that this might result in further interest in the liberating potential of play in work.¹⁰

Ohio University
Athens, Ohio

Notes

1. Some articles dealing either directly or indirectly with the play element in discourse and composition (mostly but not exclusively computer-based) have been published. See Anderson; Bartholomae; Rickly and Crump; Daisley; Harris; Holcomb; Mathews-DeNatale; Millard; Ostrom; Sirc.

2. At the time, IBM users had extremely limited ability to change font and font sizes.

3. Burke's use of the word instrument against instrumentalism is a good example of a certain kind of ironic wordplay.

4. See Slatin et al.; Kaplan and Moulthrop; Anderson.

5. See Rouzie, "Composition."

6. By this time, Taylorism had removed the worker from the need to think or create, while the goods created by corporations were being sold through advertising in new national magazines. Ohmann asserts that the polarization of production and consumption was coterminus with the polarization of work and leisure (18).

7. The advent of graphics-rich composition environments, such as the Web, suggests a need for further research into visual literacy, especially in terms of its
implications for rhetoric and composition. The notion of visual literacy has met with some resistance in English studies, where written text is still privileged over the visual. The close relationship between visual perception and high-level cognition, however, has been thoroughly established by Arnheim and Lemke.

8. Margaret Syverson wrote in a personal note: “My sister lived in Japan for many years as the wife of a Japanese businessman. The custom there is for the businessmen to go out drinking together; under these auspices, underlings could say things to their bosses they would never dare to say in the office; no matter how outrageous or confrontational, this discourse was accepted as both ‘truthful’ and ‘nonharming’ because of course the messenger was ‘drunk.’ This was the only medium for underlings to deliver unpleasant news, complaints, etc. There were absolutely no consequences, and I mean no consequences for this behavior, because of course it was all in the context of ‘play.’ Bosses cherished this source of discourse unfettered by the ritual courtesies of the office. I think of it as a safety valve for people buttoned so tightly into carefully defined roles.” Used with permission.

9. My ostensibly tough stand on Addison and Hilligoss’s choice of silence causes me some anxiety. My anxiety stems from my self-consciousness as someone who would be positioned as a straight male. My engagement with this issue is, in a sense, a protest against the power of these categories. Mine is not, however, a rear-guard assault against the insidious concept of reverse discrimination but results from a wish for more dialogue, spurred by the nerviness of both ludic and resistant impulses.

10. I would like to thank Lynn Worsham and the anonymous reviewers of JAC for thoughtful responses to earlier drafts of this essay. Mara Holt and Leon Anderson also read drafts and offered invaluable advice on revision. Their unflagging support made all the difference.

Works Cited


