Review: What Video Games Have to Teach Us about Learning and Literacy by James Paul Gee. Co-authored with Cynthia L. Selfe and Scott Lloyd DeWitt

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Reviews

What Video Games Have to Teach Us about Learning and Literacy

James Paul Gee
ISBN 1403961697.

I don’t game. I played arcade games in the early 1980s—mostly Centipede and Frogger. I often scored bonus games and was able to enter my three initials on the winners’ board because I had quick fine-motor skills and an ability to recognize, discern, and respond to patterns, all of which I now attribute to studying classical piano and jazz saxophone (keyboarding and mousing were not realities of the day). For me, these games meant little more than “shoot fast-dropping fleas” and “jump across street, hop on log, mate with female frog.”

These are not the games, nor was I the type of gamer, that James Gee writes about in his latest book, What Video Games Have to Teach Us about Learning and Literacy. Instead, Gee is interested in games like Pikmin, Deus Ex, Arcanum: Of Steamworks and Magick Obscura, and Tomb Raider: The Last Revelation, games that are not only amazingly difficult and challenging for their players but that also represent a commerce whose revenue equals that of the film industry (6). So why would a scholar known for his work in language learning and cognition defend and tout gaming, a clear target of those who claim to understand today’s “literacy crisis”? And why should parents, politicians, and especially today’s language teachers listen carefully to his arguments?
Gee’s claims, on the surface, might be difficult for some teachers to swallow: These video games engage players in reflective practice, complex problem solving, and active, critical learning. They require players to probe and question while considering multiple routes toward progress and success. They force players to recognize relationships and to process and construct multimodal texts. Gee supports his claims throughout his book by applying learning principles from cognitive science (thirty-six of them, to be exact) that he argues are situated in the digital domains of video games:

15. Probing Principle: Learning is a cycle of probing the world (doing something); reflecting in and on this action and, on the basis, forming a hypothesis; reprobing the world to test this hypothesis; and then accepting or rethinking the hypothesis.

20. Multimodal Principle: Meanings and knowledge are built up through various modalities (images, texts, symbols, interactions, abstract design, sound, etc.), not just words.

29. Transfer Principle: Learners are given ample opportunity to practice, and support for, transferring what they have learned earlier to later problems, including problems that require adapting and transforming that earlier learning.

Although the field of composition studies has not embraced cognitive theories of learning much of late, these are not new ideas for those of us who teach writing. (Even those who steadfastly dismiss cognitive notions of writing often unknowingly cite variations on these principles when talking about their work with students. Gee’s book reminds us that the field of human cognition is alive and well.)

Gee’s work gives us yet another reason to pay attention to the different literacies our students—in this case, those who are proficient gamers—bring to our classes. I continually try to make sense of the rapid changes I see in my composition students’ approaches to learning. Gee’s book offers me a smart and perceptive take on student learning in the context of writing instruction, yet it does so from outside the field. For example, Gee’s claims play out in obvious ways in my digital media production classes. I have not yet asked my students about their gaming literacies, but many have shared how various experiences and literacies feed into and enrich their blending of text, image, sound, and interactivity. As my students are learning the complexities of digital media production, most often for the first time, not one ever says, “This is just like school work I do in other classes.” Similarly, I find that the metaphors
for learning and text production I try to use from traditional composition studies fall flat. If I value the work of digital media production yet if my teaching is not connecting with students' literacies in any helpful way, then it seems only logical to allow them to bring their literacies to the table. (The most interesting of these literacies came from a student who connected digital media production through his work as a professional deejay at a local nightclub.)

Gee's book is not necessarily a feel-good book for our schools. Gee does not hesitate to challenge the ways our schools operate and the learning situations we create for our students. His criticism is both indirect (“Children cannot learn in a deep way if they have no opportunities to practice what they are learning” [68]) and direct (“If human learning works best in a certain way . . . then it is not going to work well in another way just because educators, policymakers, and politicians want it to” [68]). Yet, I believe that Gee's book, even at its most critical moments, provides us with an optimistic direction.

Scott Lloyd DeWitt
Ohio State University

For me, James Gee's book offers not only an astute and cogent analysis of the digital environments that serve as new semiotic landscapes for the multimodal literacies of gamers but also a productive springboard for classroom inquiry projects focused on contemporary literacy practices and values. Graduate classes I have taught recently at both Michigan Tech and the University of Louisville, for instance, have worked with Gee's book in conducting their own multimodal studies of computer gamers and their literacy practices and values in digital environments. These students interview gamers about their literacy activities in connection with gaming and create video and audio and print essays about these practices and the values associated with them. The goal of these projects is to test Gee's claims about gaming environments and literacy against the lived experiences and literacy practices of individual gamers from a range of generations, backgrounds, and genders.

For many of these students, Gee's book succeeds in opening up the concept of literacy practices and values in ways that conventional literacy studies has failed to do. For others, Gee's book connects literacy studies with a self-sponsored activity that they value and practice but have failed to appreciate as a form of reading, composing, interpreting, or communicating. Within gaming environments, as Gee notes—and within the chatrooms and the online exchanges, the Web sites, the documentation manuals, the underground cheats
(explanations of how to succeed in the game and beat the built-in obstacles or puzzles), and the LANs (local-area networks on which games are played in collaborative teams) associated with computer games—young people learn the semiotic and the cognitive skills they will need in the changing "contemporary high-tech global world" (4) as well as the values and understandings that make such skills and understandings important. Among the thirty-six specific learning principles that Gee claims gamers acquire in such environments are many that contemporary literacy teachers and scholars will find familiar and soundly based on contemporary literacy theory:

learning is most effective when it is active and critical (Principle 1);

semiotic domains and their related sign systems are core to learning experiences (Principle 3);

learning involves mastering semiotic domains, being able to participate in affinity groups that use those domains, thinking critically about the relationships among domains (Principles 4 and 5);

semiotic domains are culturally and socially defined and valued (Principle 32). "Each of these domains," Gee notes, "has its own rules and requirements. Each is a culturally and historically separate way of reading and writing, and, in that sense, a different literacy" (14);

the meanings of (words, actions, objects, artifacts, symbols, texts, etc.) are situated in embodied experience (Principle 17);

texts are not simply understood in purely verbal terms, but, also, in "terms of embodied experiences" (Principle 18);

learners understand texts in families (genres) of "related texts" and understand "any one such text in relation to others in the family, but only after having achieved embodied understandings of some texts" (209) (Principle 19); and

"meaning and knowledge are built up through various modalities (images, texts, interactions, abstract designs, sound, etc.), not just words" (Principle 20).

Not all of Gee's book, however, will sit so comfortably with the values of composition scholars in the humanities. In the introduction of the volume, for instance, Gee notes,

Two issues have taken up the vast majority of writing about video games: violence (e.g., shooting and killing in games, depictions of crime) and gender (e.g.,
whether and how much girls play, whether and how video games depict women poorly). I have nothing whatsoever to say about these issues in this book. (10)

If Gee's promise to ignore gender issues, sadly, proves true, his claim about violence is partly belied in the conclusion of the book, where he once again takes up contemporary concerns—voiced primarily, but not exclusively, by experimental psychologists (cf., Fleming and Rickwood 2001; Anderson 2002; Bushman and Anderson 2001; Anderson and Bushman 2001) who contend that a causal link exists between the playing of violent video games and aggressive behavior in children. In contrast, Gee sets games in a social, cultural, and ideological context, suggesting a more complicated and nuanced relationship between the projective identities that gamers assume in digital landscapes and the values that game designers and sponsors build into these landscapes. In this work, Gee echoes Terry Eagleton's (1991) understanding ideology and its role in social settings. As Gee notes,

... people are not dupes. They do not necessarily take from a video game, any more than they do from a book or movie, any one predictable message predetermined by the design of the game, movie, or text. It is quite possible that some people could play Ethnic Cleansing and form a projective identity that both lets them understand ... hate organizations ... and want to redouble their efforts to work for a world of peace, diversity, and tolerance. (200)

He continues,

This certainly doesn't mean you should play Ethnic Cleansing. It does not mean that you shouldn't despise neo-Nazi viewpoints ... It does mean that if you have no idea why people who would create or be drawn to such a game are so angry and filled with hate, then you are very unlikely to do anything more than recruit members for organizations like the National Alliance ... However, to understand their rage means to understand the workings of history, economics, and culture ... Sadly, this is not the sort of education usually offered in U.S. schools, least of all those driven back to passive learning and skill-and-drill by the current standardized-test regime. (200)

And he adds,

We cannot work for a world of peace, diversity, and tolerance while disdaining to understand those who resist, hate, and feel disenfranchised in such a world ... .

I am not here advocating any sort of "postmodernist" view that "anything goes" and all perspectives are simply sociocultural "constructions" and "culturally relative" (a very poor characterization of good work in postmodernism) ....

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What I do advocate is understanding the "play" of identities and perspectives as they work for and against each other in the world, now and throughout history. This is even a form of self-defense. (200)

For teachers of literacy, as these last quotations suggest, this book can be revealing, disconcerting, and maddening—in equal parts. Gee has not written a book in which any teachers (other than himself) get to speak about their own efforts or have a chance to defend their practices, many of which are sound and engaging—even for students habituated to gaming environments. Nor is this a book that features women's voices or the voices of people from underrepresented groups. Those voices, however, should be inspired by Gee's effort to address computer games as literacy and learning environments from their own perspectives, adding to our understanding of these important spaces.

Personally, I am going to assign this book to every graduate course I teach that touches on the topic of literacy—and I do not do this because of my interest in technology. Indeed, I think that the less people know about technology and gaming, the more important this book is! I find in Gee's work a marvelous excuse to take off my own disciplinary blinders, to open up my own understanding of literacy practices and values beyond the realm of the alphabetic, and to get a glimpse of the literacy practices and values that will inform our world in the new few decades.

Cynthia L. Selfe
Michigan Technological University

James Gee's thinking about this book began with observations of his four-year-old son playing interactive video games and a realization that he needed to play the game himself so he could "coach" his son while he played. Like many researchers who happen to also be parents, Gee finds that there is much to learn about literacy from observing the practices of young people outside school. Indeed, one of the central conclusions he comes to in this book is that the literacy practices of young people outside school offer to teach educators and literacy researchers a great deal about literacy itself—if we are willing to pay attention.

At about the time I first read Gee's book, my four-year-old son, Henry, began playing interactive video games. When Henry first started playing computer games, he had to develop his own learning strategies, in part because his parents could provide little help. He'd ask us to help him "get to the next level"
and go away discouraged because we didn’t know how. Several nights after
Henry was asleep, his father and I spent hours at the computer, trying to get at
least one step ahead of him so we could “help” him the next day. This learning
process—experiencing the technologies ourselves first hand—allowed us to
measure Gee’s claims about video games against our own and our son’s experi-
ences. A linguist by training, Gee clearly emerges in this book as a thoughtful,
reflective, and generous parent as well—a father who begins with his son’s prac-
tices, reflects on those practices, and then returns to them to measure his re-
fections. Gee describes four steps involved in playing good video games well
as the probe, hypothesize, re-probe, and rethink cycle: “In a good video game
you have to try lots of different things and then you have to think about the
results you get, try to make sense of what they mean for you and your progress
through the virtual world of the game…. Some consider this four-step process
to be the basis of expert reflective practice in any complex semiotic domain”
(91). Indeed, this four-step cycle is at the heart of Gee’s investigation and pro-
vides a model for others wanting to understand new media in people’s lives
now. The mismatch between literacy practices inside and outside school is
apparent especially in the case of video games, but it’s a dynamic that obtains
in many others areas (how often do composition instructors, for example, draw
on visual, musical, or audio elements to composing?). At one of Henry’s par-
et-teacher conferences, I mentioned that Henry’s grandmother had given him
a Nintendo Game Cube for Christmas. His two teachers, in unison, drew in
their breath, shook their heads slightly, and said “Oh, he’s a little young for
that.” These teachers—caring, dedicated, and thoughtful caregivers—based
their negative assessment on a dominant cultural narrative of video games as
contributors to violence, aggression, and mind-numbing apathy. My own ex-
perience playing Henry’s games, though, measured against my experience with
schools as a teacher, researcher, and parent suggests to me that Gee is right
when he argues that good video games “operate with—that is, they build into
their designs and encourage—good principles of learning, principles that are
better than those in many of our skill-and-drill, back-to-basics, test-them-un-
til-they-drop schools” (205).

When parents and educators work to understand the meanings of tech-
nologies such as gaming in children’s lives, we might find that the dominant
cultural narratives, “the ways in which content in video games either reinforces
or challenges players’ taken-for-granted perspectives on the world” (140), are
incomplete and, in many cases, just plain wrong. Gee’s book helped Henry’s
parents to “see” his experiences with gaming technologies in a way we might
not have on our own; his teachers (and other educators), too, might see his experiences—and the experiences of Henry’s peers—in a more complex way after encountering James Gee.

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Works Cited


Revisiting Racialized Voice: African American Ethos in Language and Literatures

David G. Holmes

David G. Holmes’s first book takes us in new directions as composition and rhetoric scholars and makes us not only accountable to the exploration of hard questions but also cognizant of both the implications and our roles in the answers to those questions. His project, to problematize voice—specifically black voice—is a project long awaited and much needed. Revisiting Racialized Voice crisscrosses the field of English studies and provides a clear example of not only how but also why the fields of literature and composition/rhetoric studies should be in conversation with one another. Like Keith Gilyard’s Liberation Memories: The Rhetorics and Poetics of John Oliver Killens, this book brings African American rhetorical studies and African American literary studies into conversation with one another in fruitful ways.