review

book

James Paul Gee, *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*
(Palgrave / Macmillan: New York, 2003), 225 pp.

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James Paul Gee is an education professor at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, who, apparently, has spent much of the past few years playing video games. For him, however, this was not an exercise in brain rot, as some would categorize it; instead, Gee was trying to determine how video games shape the ways in which young people learn. Watching his six-year-old son master the game Pikmin was an epiphany to Gee; he realized that today's students don't learn in the same ways as earlier generations. The Baby-Boomers were altered by television; Gen Xers by MTV and the beginnings of cable; and Gen Yers by the early surge of the computer. Gee believes that video games are largely responsible for the shift that is occurring in what is now termed 'Generation Z' and that we can only serve these students as learners if we understand how video game skills impact students' abilities to learn in a traditional classroom.

His thesis (and assumption) is that "if the principles of learning in good video games are good, then better theories of learning are embedded in the video games many children in elementary and particularly in high school play than in the schools they attend" (p. 7). The rest of the book is a series of object lessons that serve to illustrate his "36 principles of learning … that …are built into good video games" (p. 7). As any good education professor would, Gee covers a vast array of current learning topics: visual-spatial orientation skills, problem-based learning, critical thinking, continual practicing and refining of skills, gradual increase in the level of difficulty, intertexuality.

The book, however, has "another goal," as Gee puts it: to present and tie together three areas of current research in education -- "situated cognition," "New Literacy Studies," and "connectionalism" -- with the goal of proving that these three areas will allow theorists to "capture central truths about the human mind and human learning and that these truths are well represented in the ways in which good video games are learned and played" (p. 9).

Most of the book's content is good, and the 36 princi-

ples, while generally mirroring *Bloom's Taxonomy* and the recent work of education theorists in problem-based learning, are mostly sound. Gee does know his video games, and provides a rich array of examples to demonstrate both his own knowledge as a player and his understanding of how the games link to his theories. Although many of these games -- *Half Life*, *EverQuest*, *Arcanum*, *System Shock II*, *Max Payne*, *Medal of Honor: Allied Assault*, *Sonic Adventure Battle 2* -- are probably obsolete at this point to the "hip" gamers, they are familiar titles in a community that is regarded by many non-players as slightly less frightening than the reptile cage at the zoo. The reference to these games indicates to the aforementioned "hipsters" that Gee has indeed paid his dues and "earned" the right to speak on this subject.

Although the chapters do much to bolster Gee's assertions and do present an interesting case for

> **Gee makes interesting points in that educators should pay close attention to the way their students are learning through current technologies such as video games. However, he also chooses to place aside significant social content (sexism, violence) that are problematic to issues of learning through video games.**
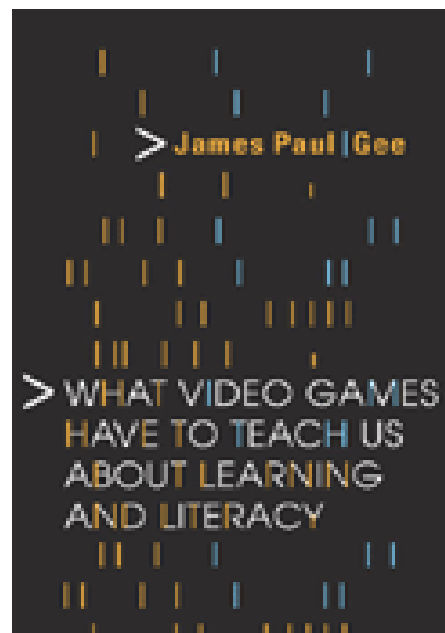
understanding the video game mind, notion 35 in chapter seven -- that "affinity groups" form independent of race, class and gender -- is somewhat problematic. The idea of a game "identity" that can rise above race, gender, or class and create, in Gee's own words, distinct social groups or a "social mind" (the chapter's title) transcending the aforementioned race / gender / class boundaries seems generalized and in direct conflict with what those of us living in race- and class-bifurcated communities can observe as social groups forming around these games. Perhaps this is an area where more research needs to be done in order to determine exactly what constitutes a social mind in this instance. Gee's model of pattern-recognition in social communities through the metaphor of birds seems limited and unsupported, particularly when he begins to speak of how the groups begin to "norm" in some way (p. 183).

There are some other problems with the book. First and foremost, there is a formatting issue over which Gee may have had no control: Palgrave's omission of in-text citations (allowed in both MLA and APA formatting) and placement of an "annotated bibliography" at the end of each chapter. This limits Gee's ability to specifically demarcate which information is his and which belongs to his sources (although he does attempt to orient his reader at the end of each chapter). In-text citation format was developed so that citations could appear next to borrowed material without greatly interrupting the flow of narrative, and they need to be used, especially in a theoretical book such as this.

Next is Gee's tendency to generalize about the impact that video games have on younger players (he describes himself as a "late middle-aged 'baby boomer'") from the perspective of A) a father watching his own child play video games and B) playing the games himself without much research to back him. (Although this could again be due to the in-text citation issues mentioned previously.) Although Gee's earlier two books, *Social Linguistics and Literacies* and *The Social Mind*, also deal with issues related to communication and learning ability, they address different aspects of the problem. However, Gee is upfront about the fact that the bulk of his research comes from having played the games himself and not from any studies that have been done (or are in process) on the impact of video game play on child development and the ability to learn. He also uses terms such as "semiotic" as a kind of "catch-all" term that ignores the complicated history of semiotic theory and the conflicting points of view still held by linguists and educators alike.

Gee makes a grand point of stating that his task in this book is not to talk about the issues of violence and gender representations in video games by proclaiming "I have nothing whatsoever to say about those issues in this book" (p. 10). It would seem to me that a truly balanced study of how video games affect learning and development in younger (more specifically, high-school-aged) children must consider the impact of violence on the evolving minds of its players; not to mention that young players everywhere are having their images of (especially female) gender molded by Lara Croft, Max Payne's latest femme fatale or the numerous hookers who populate *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*.

The most troubling section of Gee's book, however, is his conclusion. He engages with issues of how video games shape cultural perceptions by considering the impact of the white-supremacist game *Ethnic Cleansing* on children who play it. However, he avoids grappling with the obvious relationship between violence and racism by asserting that "things can still be true or false, solid or shabby" (p. 200) and, it seems, leaves it up to the player (an adolescent male) to determine exactly what constitutes the "true and solid."

His recommendation "to understand the play of identities and perspectives as they work for and against each other in the world, now and throughout history" (p. 200) strikes me as the very "postmodernist," "culturally relative" solution he so disdains by placing both of these terms in quotes.

Gee's narrative and his enthusiasm for the subject indicate that he wants educators to take video games seriously. He believes that the future of education is at stake if the field does not adapt to the learning styles of its students. As an educator, I agree 100 percent with his assessment of the situation and his position that we must begin to teach in the ways in which our students learn. If that means more hands-on, active learning, then so be it; standardized testing obviously is not working. However, educators cannot just rush in and appropriate an art and technology form that has been around now for over THIRTY years without dealing with the history of the medium, including the darker, more insidious teachings that video games give young children. In my opinion, that is a bit like letting the children play with a snake in the belief that the bite will not hurt them. That may be fine for some varieties of the species, but there are some very venomous animals out there that may spread their venom to unsuspecting, still-developing minds. Should we really let them into our classrooms before fully understanding what we have bought and paid for? In our race to help our students learn, let us not become technological determinists and have our creations turn on us, just as it happened to proponents of standardized testing in recent years.