Good Video Games + Good Learning: Collected Essays on Video Games, Learning, and Literacy

James Paul Gee

New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc., 2007. vi, 194 pp. $29.95 paper. ISBN: 9780820497037.

"Don't Bother Me Mom—I'm Learning!": How Computer and Video Games Are Preparing Your Kids for Twenty-first Century Success—and How You Can Help!

Marc Prensky

St Paul, MN: Paragon House, 2006. xxi, 254 pp. $15.99 paper. ISBN: 1557788588.

Imagination and Play in the Electronic Age

Dorothy G. and Jerome L. Singer

Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005. Illustrations. 201pp. $18.95 paper. ISBN: 0674017455.

As the complexity, production quality, and popularity of electronic games have evolved, public concern about their impact on those who play with them has become increasingly vociferous. Much of this attention has been directed towards children, as always when the subject concerns popular media forms. Many of the anxieties associated with the alleged effects of television have been transferred to computer and video games, not least because so many of them have violent themes. The widespread use of self-contained electronic games, which can be bought off the shelf from major retail outlets, and the growing popularity of online games, which engage multiple players in real time, has drawn not just the usual lobby groups but even national governments into the debate about whether these games are good or bad for our children. Much of the concern stems from the fact that, in playing these games, children enter a realm where they know more than their parents. As a result, parents often feel they lack the competence to effectively monitor their children's behaviour and therefore to know for sure whether they are at risk.

In the United Kingdom in April 2008, a well-known television psychologist and child expert, Dr. Tanya Byron, published a review of the evidence about the risks children face in a digital world. Her work—entitled *Safer Children in a Digital World: The Report of the*

Byron Review and published by the Department for Children, Schools and Families and by the Department of Culture, Media and Sport—was commissioned by Gordon Brown, the British prime minister. Byron and her team of experts concluded that a generational digital divide has developed as children have adopted a range of new communications technologies at a quicker pace than their parents. In consequence, there is a need for action by government, by regulators, and by the industry itself to implement better labeling of video games and to promote greater parental awareness of the meanings of these labels and the types of content they signify. Once again, much emphasis was placed on the potential risk and harm to youngsters who engage with electronic games either offline or online.

It is therefore both helpful and in some sense reassuring to see three books emerge amidst the ongoing debate and cast computer and video games in a somewhat different light. Two of these books—one by James Paul Gee and one by Marc Prensky—have been written very much with parents in mind, although both contain material that should be of relevance and interest to professionals involved in childcare, education, and therapy.

Although Gee is an academic and his book is informed by a lengthy bibliography, the volume comprises a series of essays that present a personal view of video games, a view derived to a significant degree from his own personal experience playing electronic games, as well as from his observations of his son also playing such games. The book is primarily a vehicle through which a clearly well-informed author can pass on his experience to other parents.

Gee's book places video games squarely within the context of children's learning experiences. For Gee, playing with electronic games should not be stereotyped as a source of harm. Instead, these games present challenges to players that require them to think, to strategize, to solve problems, and to acquire a range of cognitive skills that not only hone their game-playing skills but can also transfer usefully over to other settings in the offline world. While video gaming embraces a new form of "literacy," playing electronic games can also promote the more traditional kind of literacy. Even games with violent themes may invoke and cultivate a variety of cognitive competences. And they can teach other lessons. In some games, for example, success does not invariably follow from being the most violent player. Sometimes, self-control proves to be a better strategy and route to success.

Gee's book proves most useful in its discussion of a range of specific games and their ingredients. All too often in empirical studies of electronic games, only a narrow range of games is studied and scant information is provided about how they are actually played. Gee presents enough detail for the reader to glean useful insights into what specific games are all about. If the book falls short anywhere, it would be in the support evidence listed in the bibliography, which omits many useful and established studies of the educational benefits of electronic games. Although clearly the author did not intend to write a textbook, nevertheless quite a few of his personal observations might have been usefully reinforced by such references.

Prensky is an education expert who has worked as a teacher and consultant and has specialized in the development and implementation of electronic learning systems. His book is therefore developed from personal observations, case studies, and professional experience in the electronic game world. It has a "how to" or self-help flavor clearly targeted at parents needing advice about the risks and benefits of these games for their children. In a key formulation, the author calls today's kids "digital natives," youngsters who have taken comfortably to new technologies. In that regard, they are different from their parents, who are far less likely to have so thoroughly adjusted to the digital new world.

The book strongly emphasizes the different types of games in the marketplace. In so doing, it redresses the imbalance too often found in the rhetoric of critics of electronic games who focus solely on games with violent themes. These are not the only games in the marketplace, nor are they the only games popular among young players. One value of the book is its clear outline of the types of games now emerging, the nature of their contents and playing characteristics, and the types of skills they both engage and cultivate among players. The author also provides a number of tips to parents on how to find out from their kids about the games they play and the kinds of enjoyment they garner from these games.

The book's limitations lie with its discussions of player types, game playing motivations, the way games involve kids, and their ultimate impact upon players, a discussion that seems largely based on the author's own observations. Only occasionally are fleeting references made to other sources. This lack of support does suggest that some of the author's ideas should be challenged. The "digital natives" concept may merely reflect the differential technology adoption patterns of younger and older generations, and there is evidence that the gap is closing fast in

respect to some communication technology applications. Older evidence shows that in respect to television viewing, parents aren't always in touch with their children's tastes and habits—even when they think they are. The generational divide Prensky observes in relation to computer and video games already existed in some respects in an older medium. In addition, the statistical evidence on electronic game playing generally shows that many adults play these games as well.

The third book is written by Dorothy G. and Jerome L. Singer, two of the best known authorities on the role played by media in child development over the last forty years. While the Singers write in an engaging style, they also provide a wealth of scientific evidence—both from their own research and from that of other leading contributors in the field—about the impact of computer and video games on children and teenagers. Unlike the other two books, however, this volume is targeted at a more specialized and professional market, though the intelligent lay person with a personal interest in the subject would find it readable. Much of the Singers' book is devoted to setting the scene by examining what we know about play and its importance to children's development, what we know about imagination and creativity development among the young, and what evidence exists on the impact of television viewing among children on the development of their imaginations.

The book then turns to the subject of violent themes in electronic entertainment, covering both television and video games. The review of evidence about televised violence is deliberately selective and focuses primarily on evidence concerning links between exposure to violence on television and children's play and imagination development. Experiments with children playing video games with violent themes, primarily conducted in the United States, have largely confirmed that the games were derived from research into televised violence. Both boys and girls have been found to display enhanced aggressive thoughts and behaviours contingent on playing violently themed video games.

Play of all kinds, though, can benefit children as they develop. Playing with electronic games is no different. Electronic games that promote cognitive development and the adoption of pro-social behavioral choices by children have been created. Computer and video games have also been devised to support educational programs in schools. The Singers present scientific evidence from a range of relevant studies demonstrating that computer games not only enable children to acquire computer skills, but also to practice and develop other linguistic and

numerical competencies essential to academic achievement in general.

Taken together these books provide a collection of helpful insights into the potential benefits of computer- and video-game playing by children, while at the same time recognizing that parents do have real concerns about these activities on behalf of their children. To some degree, there is empirical evidence—most notably cited by the Singers in their book—that some electronic games with violent themes can cultivate antisocial mindsets among youngsters who play these games a lot. At the same time, such empirical evidence should not be accepted uncritically and, perhaps in the case of *Imagination and Play in the Electronic Age,* the experimental research on video-game violence was taken too liberally at face value.

There are genuine public anxieties about electronic games that once could have been dismissed on the grounds that most of these products combined crude production quality with simplistic or non-existent narratives. Thus, though they may have been interactively engaging, they could not involve players emotionally the way high-end movies or TV dramas did. This situation has now changed. Computer power has grown and triggered much more coherent narratives that, accompanied by an enhanced visual clarity, engage players interactively and emotionally. Yet there are also many electronic game forms that cultivate cognitive competencies, impulse control, and the adoption of positive social scripts. As such, electronic games can be conceived as an extension of play that is known to be so important to the development of rounded personalities.

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