# Gaming Research: Learning or Wasting Time?

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In the world driven by technological and societal innovations, exponential advances in professional and personal spheres of human life leave the representatives of different generations ambivalent about the role of technology in the social, emotional, and academic development of adolescents. One of the most controversial and most debated issues still revolves around the video games and their perception as addictive, violent, or detrimental to the young minds and their future. However, these views about video games forget to capitalize on the level of engagement and critical learning opportunities that result in a tremendous time and resource investment in playing these games. Instead of criticizing the video games, education stakeholders need to evaluate the merit of learning principles used to promote collaboration, flexibility, creativity, and critical thinking skills so advocated by today’s workforce. My gaming research paper evaluates the experiences of my fellow coworker who I consider to be a technological wizard and often use his unconventional approaches to technology implementation at work and at home.

# Subject Demographics

Jason, my interview subject, works in the same school district as an information technology specialist. He is responsible for web design as well as other technical support required for online communication between all district stakeholders.

Jason is a white male in his late twenties who grew up in McDowell County and graduated from one of the local high schools. However, that’s where his connections to the upbringing in the southern West Virginia stop. Jason’s accent does not reflect his southern West Virginia upbringing, and so does not his name. After graduating high school, Jason changed his name to reflect his uniqueness and baffle his family members. The need for individuality in very homogeneous rural society of McDowell County was the main determinant in changes in Jason’s manner of expression and physical appearance.

Pursuing his interests in technology, Jason graduated from Cisco Systems Networking Academy but never pursued any other formal education venues. From time to time, the participant takes online classes on various systems development aspects from institutions like Harvard. His further education is not seen as a formal endeavor but a pursuit of his interests in the quest for the enhancement of his technology skills. His single choice of courses reflects the personalized view of learning so well supported by the video games where learning experiences become embodied rather than detached from meaning.

Jason’s exhausted look on his face, and a nervous smile make him a challenging interview subject. He speaks softly, always battling his shyness in face-to-face conversations. His vocabulary is precise and highly eloquent, leading the researcher to asking more sophisticated questions than previously anticipated. The interviewee has a passion for video gaming and started playing video games at the age of six, with twenty years of gaming experience definitely showing via Jason’s critical thinking and creativity skills not only in personal life but also in his career.

Interview Questions

While reading Gee’s work (2007), I struggled with the creation of my questions for the interview. The topics for discussion seemed either trivial or too complicated, and I desperately searched for a middle ground that would help the research subject conceptually reflect on his learning experiences. I created twelve questions and encouraged my interviewee to contribute any details that he wished to share as a follow up to my questions. Jason, my research participant, was familiarized with the purpose of my research and was very excited to share his “nerd” (sic) gaming experiences.

* What types of games to you play? How many hours a week do you devote to playing games?
* How old were you when you started playing games?
* What is the name of the game you play most often? What are the setting and the purpose of this game?
* How do you pick your character? Is it a set character or somebody you can create?
* How does this character reflect your real life values (your real life identity)? What skills/characteristics of the character serve as a part of your virtual identity, something that you do not possess in real life? How do the traits that you pick communicate your projected identity goals and aspirations for the game? What does your character look like as the game proceeds combining your values as well as the values you had to acquire based on the game challenges?
* How do you progress through the levels of the game? What happens if you die?
* Do you collaborate with others during the game? Do you use cheat codes? Do you contribute information to help others play the game more successfully (participate in chat rooms, blogs, etc.)
* What enemies do you encounter? How does beating them help you develop the skill level of the character as well as your skill in playing the game and using the tools available?
* What makes the game so engaging and worth your while? What skills have you learned by playing this game that helped you do something better in real life?
* How often do you have to use "just in time" decision-making? How does failing in this game help you learn? Does making decisions on the spot still contribute to the big mission of winning the game?
* What supports does a game provide for you to learn the ropes so to say?
* How does playing games affect your professional and career choices?

Summary of Findings

Jason was very excited to share his gaming experiences during the interview. He stated that he engaged in playing video games on average fifteen hours a week, building his skill level as Mordecai the Hunter in the game *Borderlands*. The game is a role-playing shooter-game taking place on a planet Pandora where a player can choose a character to engage on a series of quests to find a treasure buried in the Vault. Besides Mordecai, there are options to become Roland the Soldier, Lilith the Siren, and Brick as a player himself. In the beginning of the game, the player has to watch a tutorial from a character named Guardian Angel. She informs the character about the mysterious Vault and the artifacts needed to open it. Considering that the Vault can be open only once every 200 years and its next opening time is fast approaching, the tutor urges the player to find three artifacts to complete the Vault Key. Throughout the quests assigned to him by the non-player characters in addition to the initial introduction, the player gets closer to the treasure, collects the artifacts, and earns points for completing the quests.

After establishing a character, the player chooses his weapons. The weapon of Jason’s choice is a sniper rifle, as the interviewee does not like to die often. Moreover, Mordecai can easily kill enemies from afar using this weapon. Mordecai also has a pet Bloodwing who the player can give more points earned after each level to be able to do more damage to or attack more enemies. The player also uses his earned points to make his rifles more powerful or gain health. Defeating more powerful enemies means earning more experience; and a variety of foes is considerable, with other humans, huge worms, or wolf-like characters acting as obstacles to the player’s search for treasure in the Vault.

The price of failure in this game is not high. As Jason states, “And if you die, you just respawn and lose a bit of money. So you can be nice and relaxed when you play.” (\*Jason, 2012) Additionally, if the character in the game dies, other players can revive him. Jason spends his Fridays playing this game alongside his brothers who act as his backup when needed. His brothers live in California and Arizona, so playing the game is not only a gaming experience. It is also an opportunity to hang out with the siblings who are otherwise physically far away from West Virginia.

Jason has played this video game for two years now and is anticipating the release of *Borderlands 2* that has better graphics, a wider range of weapons, and a more elaborate variety of foes. This young man is not going to give up gaming any time soon, as it helps him not only develop his critical thinking and virtual stealth skills but also enjoy his family time with the siblings playing the same game.

Comparison to Reading

As the interview proceeded, it became evident that the research subject spent multiple hours a week engaged in continuous learning experiences to retrieve the treasure at the end of his quest in the game *Borderlands.* The player clearly identified the setting and the quests to accomplish to win the game and successfully navigated Pandora’s complex world full of treasure hunters. As Gee states, the player needs to be able to function within the internal and external grammars of the game and skillfully navigate the content as well as social practices and views established by the affinity groups. The experiences of choosing one’s character and identifying skills as well as weapons to help the player win the game reflect Gee’s insight that “learning in all semiotic domains requires taking on a new identify and forming bridges form one’s old identifies to the new one.” (Gee, p. 45) The player creates a character that reflects his or her real world identify while blending in the desired virtual identify elements. As the game proceeds, the player acquires other skills and develops sophistication in the initial skills thus creating a projected identity through the game. As the player progresses through the multiple levels of the game, the game exposes him or her to the subset principle where learning takes place in a simplified domain of the game. Within this progression, incremental principle plays a tremendous role, as the players are exposed to the more complex cases later in the game, building their basic skills and honing them to become more sophisticated as they move on.

Jason’s statement that dying in the game is not a big deal reflects the learning process that helps the player learn from his mistakes rather than giving up after receiving an unsatisfactory rating (death, in this case). This “psychosocial moratorium” learning principle encourages players to take risks in the environment where real world consequences are lowered. (Gee, p. 222) It is concerning that the individuals who do not hesitate to learn from their mistakes, even the fatal ones when it comes to games, do not dare to make mistakes in the learning environment at school and consider themselves failures when it comes to one unsuccessful experience in the classroom.

Games have a lot to teach us about learning and teaching, as engaging students in relevant, meaningful, project-based learning opportunities has become a necessity in helping students become productive citizens of the global world.

Implications for Teaching and Learning

Video games incorporate various learning principles that would contribute to engaged, critical learning of the content in the classrooms across the world. The games help their players “understand and produce meanings in a particular semiotic domain” as well as “think about the domains at a “meta” level as a complex system of interrelated parts.” (Gee, p. 25) As Gee (p.37) states, the children who learn to learn actively and critically learn to experience the world around them in a new way; develop collaboration skills with new affinity groups; identify and develop resources to accommodate future learning and problem solving; as well as view the content they engage in as a way to manipulate these sources as well as human interactions within it.

If we look at the current instructional practices in today’s schools, it is evident that the standards-based instruction with a heavy emphasis on summative assessment rules the majority of classroom environments. Baby boomer teachers, administrators, and policy makers view learning as a linear process thus failing to understand that students learn differently. Many students power down when they get to school, as rote memorization and scarce assessment practices with minimal feedback lack meaning and relevance to their lives after school. As they leave the brick and mortar school buildings, students engage in critical, active learning in the virtual worlds of games where they are forced to make novel decisions to adapt to the increasing level of challenge and collaborate with other players to build their knowledge and skill levels. Additionally, these young individuals who feel a sense of despair when seeing an “F” grade on their tests, fail multiple times when playing the games without a fear of dire consequences. Failing is a part of one’s learning. However, in education, the notion of failing carries a meaning of irreversibility and serves as reinforcement of a students’ view of themselves as a failure.

In this light, educators need to provide multiple opportunities for students to practice skills continuously, providing frequent feedback and adapting instruction to meet the diverse needs of learners, and scaffolding student learning to remediate or to enrich. The instruction should be structured to let the students learn from not succeeding at learning the concepts initially and persevere in mastering the concepts that are made progressively complex. Just like the game developers provide opportunities for the learning that adapts and changes when facing novel situations, the teachers have to help students engage in learning activities that require students “to bring back to conscious awareness skills that have become unconscious and taken for granted and to think anew about these skills and how they relate to specific sorts of problems.” (Gee, p. 67)

Personal Meaning

As I was blogging about my pre-reading views on video games and learning while reflecting on the last chapter in Tapscott’s work, I have realized how much more understanding I have developed in regards to video games as valued learning tools due to my work with Globaloria in my teaching career as well as through various assignments in the Technology and Curriculum course. My views on video gaming and its academic benefits reflected my fear of the unknown realm of the games as well as my narrow-minded approach to conventional image of learning. As a beginning Globaloria teacher in the summer of 2006, I was definitely not suited to embark on this role. I never played a video game in my life, considered the whole concept of spending hours in front of a computer screen ridiculous, and refused to see the value of using video games in school curriculum. Before the initial training, I remember playing a few games created by students in other WV pilot schools after bemoaning the fact that my principal signed me up to lead the program at our middle school. They seemed too simplistic and did not showcase the merit of education as I saw it in my classes. However, years later, the experience of working with students on creating simple video games using Adobe Flash and personally experiencing the joy of learning and discovery in my classroom made me realize how much my students and I have learned about the content and the mechanics of creating video games that are engaging, educational, and collaborative. These experiences set a great stage for reading Gee’s work on video games and what they can teach us about learning.

As I have stated earlier in my blog, I have realized that the standard image of learning established by prior generations does not match the reality of learning projected by the young generation of students whose interaction with social media and a variety of technology tools is an unknown domain, scary for many baby boomers or generation X members. As an old saying goes, in order to understand another person, one needs to walk a mile in the other’s shoes.  For the baby boomers and Generation X representatives this walk needs to take place in order for them to meet the needs of the younger generations. This walk cannot be contained to reading the books on the subject only. One needs to become immersed in the world of gaming through personal experiences or deep, meaningful discussions about gaming with the younger generation who avidly spend hours interacting with video games and acquire tremendous adaptation skills to the design grammar and semiotic domains created by the game developers.

References

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