Yes, but.

Say someone were to suggest that Power Rangers, a popular children's TV show from the early 1990s, provided powerful motivation for kids to become physically active and that it spawned a learning community which took its cue both from the pedagogical address of the show itself and the various expertise of the fan cultures it had spawned. *Yes,* that is a compelling claim, you might say, *but*: What about its objectionable subtexts? Is violence a reasonable solution to conflict? Are the acts of violence shown on Power Rangers realistic? Where is the pain, both physical and emotional? And why did my little Johnny get kicked in the stomach after school last week?

In fact, Power Rangers did cause a lot of controversy, back in its day. Many schools across North America even banned the playing of "Power Rangers" (the mock battle game favoured largely by boys that involved martial arts inspired kicks) in the school yard. And whether Power Rangers left in its wake a legacy of physical activity and increased enrollments in karate programs across North America is a footnote in a now largely forgotten debate. A karate kick is no longer a media-induced "practice" and a Power Ranger doll is more likely to be dispensed at a yard sale than in the pre-Christmas rush at a department store. In the raging river that is kids' culture, change is the zero-sum game, but it is a superficial type of change, akin to the shuffling of the chairs on the deck of the Titanic. Programs and icons, cleverly situated in intertexts with commodities, come and go, often synchronic snapshots of media-panics and parental maelstroms, but the diachronic show goes on. It is only occasionally that a substantial change occurs in media products, usually associated with the introduction of a new technology, though sometimes with an innovation in genre (i.e. reality TV) or the implementation of a policy (i.e. restricting viewing age). Video games are clearly an example of the former.

Unlike the introduction of other major technological innovations in the delivery of media product such as silent movies, radio and television, video games predated their cultural impact by a couple of decades. Unbeknownst to us casual players of Pong back in the 1970s, this new technology would take time to bear its most tantalizing fruit. While the movies, radio and television had rapid and dramatic effects on cultural practices, video games entered the pond of everyday social and cultural interactions with hardly a ripple and stealthily sneaked up to their current position as number two income grosser in the pop culture industries (after pop music). Given that gaming is largely a subcultural practice, rather than an unavoidable wall-to-wall media technology such as radio or TV, the success of the video game

industry and the reach of its products can come as somewhat of a surprise. But like myself and many others, James Paul Gee didn't have to go far to discover this subcultural world. It slipped in through the front door of his house, one of many "toys" his six-year old brought into the household.

What distinguishes Gee from many baffled parents, myself included, is that he jumped in with both feet, immersing himself in the tremendously immersive world of video games. What he appears to have found is an analogous universe to his own university world, a discursive site and a learning community with its own objectives, practices and principles. And while he glosses over many of the vexing issues raised by others about video games, a point to which I will return later, he has written an astoundingly insightful manifesto on teaching and learning, astounding given its provenance from a largely misunderstood, oft vilified and ridiculed subculture. Reading this book has been for me a great inspiration, challenging many of my tenets of good pedagogy and literally overwhelming me with a litany of ideas and principles to guide my future forays into the classroom. And its appeal is not limited to other crusty academics; a gamer I know, a man in his late 20s who is both a beta tester (he tests games for companies before they are marketed) and a modder (like other gamers, he is actively encouraged to develop game components which are then integrated into the new game design), began reading this book voraciously when I showed it to him, inspired by Gee's substantial forays into the world of video games and by his clear articulation of the learning processes embedded in the games. In a very real sense, Gee was providing this gamer with the language and concepts to articulate what he already knows.

For us educators, Gee has distilled his lesson into 36 learning principles introduced at length through the book and listed at the end. For the sake of brevity, and in order that this review not be like a movie trailer that discloses all of the film's best moments, I will introduce only eight:

6. "Psychosocial Moratorium" Principle: Learners can take risks in a space where real-world consequences are lowered.

7. Committed Learning Principle: Learners participate in an extended engagement (lots of effort and practice) as extensions of their real-world identities in relation to a virtual identity to which they feel some commitment and a virtual world that they find compelling.

11. Achievement Principle: For learners of all levels of skill there are intrinsic rewards from the beginning, customized to each learner's level, effort, and growing mastery and signaling the learner's ongoing achievements.

14. "Regime of Competence" Principle: The learner gets ample opportunity to operate within, but at the outer edge of, his or her resources, so at those points things are felt as challenging but not "undoable."

27. Explicit Information On-Demand and Just-in-Time Principle: The learner is given explicit information both on-demand and just-in-time, when the learner needs it or just at the point where the information can best be understood and used in practice.

28. Discovery Principle: Overt telling is kept to a well-thought-out minimum, allowing ample opportunity for the learner to experiment and make discoveries.

34. Dispersed Principle: Meaning/knowledge is dispersed in the sense that the learner shares it with others outside the domain/game. . .

36. Insider Principle: The learner is an "insider," teacher," and "producer" (not just a "consumer") able to customize the learning experience and domain/game from the beginning and throughout the experience.

As should be apparent from these few principles, the learning community Gee describes is marked by motivation, flexibility, teamwork and agency. It makes room for different learning styles (and speeds), it pushes learners without overwhelming them, and it weaves together action and reflection. In short, it is a dynamic and collaborative learning environment, much more like a well-functioning workplace than a dysfunctional classroom. But it is this careless aside that is one of the problems of the book. Gee has a number of bogeymen, "skills and drills" advocates in particular and teachers in general, who must always fall short of the cyber gurus for his arguments to stand tall. He may be right in many cases, but for every Miss Grundy, there's an innovative teacher out there somewhere, leading his or her students down an exalted path.

More troubling than the presumably unintended potshots at hard working teachers, however, is the glossing over of all of the major concerns parents and educators have raised about video games. On Canada's Media Awareness Network website, four are listed: the addictive quality of gaming; the primacy of violence in games; gender stereotyping; and racial stereotyping. In fairness, Gee does make token reference to the issues of violence and gender stereotyping and one rather substantial reference to racial stereotyping, and he very clearly distances himself from the more troubling content, speaking instead of the capacity of the medium as a learning site, rather than fetishizing its current manifestations. But it nonetheless feels like he is still a bit too in awe of the positive aspects of games and gaming to reflect critically on their shortcomings. And the question of addictiveness does emerge in an ironic but telling manner. A 15-year-old gamer playing *Everquest*, a madly popular on-line game, waits at home for someone from his affinity group – a bunch of gamers in far-flung spots of the atlas – to resurrect him. This is accomplished, he reports, by 11:45 p.m., at which point he launches into four hours of game playing. If there is a clash between

his nocturnal gaming and his daytime schooling, Gee does not mention it. Rather, he quotes the young chap saying, "I don't live and breathe school, but it's fine."

Gee himself dedicated what must have been hundreds of hours to the various games he explored. Here and there, oblique references are made to the many hours it takes to get from level to level of these games, but, for the most part, the time-consuming logistics of immersing oneself into the world of games is soft-pedaled. Ironically, one of Gee's Learning Principles, the Amplification of Input Principle, states that "for a little input, learners get a lot of output." This statement refers to material outcomes, somewhat akin to the ratio of labour to result in cooking a hot dog, but if an honest accounting were conducted of the time invested by the average gamer for the learning results achieved, game playing could go the way of the hula hoop, a passing craze, a benchmark in pop culture but hardly a beacon for pedagogy of the future. With Gee, however, I am doubtful that video games will just fade away. At least one major institution has already incorporated the video game into its teaching and learning strategies. The U.S. Marines use first-person shooter games for training troops in combat readiness. (And if this is not an ominous signal for us educators, what is?) And the potential for games to emerge in the educational "marketplace" is very strong. Increasingly, educators are identifying the positive elements of games for teaching and learning and then it will only be a matter of time before software companies will develop more products for the robust school market.

In the meantime, it is incumbent on us to recognize the potentials and pitfalls of this new technology. Gee has done a remarkable job gleaning useful insights from this new learning domain. Read this book not to understand the psychology and sociology of gaming, but to be inspired by the learning practices developed by a subcultural community.

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