

Serendipity and learning

James Paul Gee

What video games have to teach us about learning and literacy

Chapter 5 Telling and doing: Why doesn't Lara Croft obey Professor Von Croy?

Of all the readings in this class, Gee's has done the best job of addressing learning in a games environment. He clearly applies pedagogical framework to learning in a video game and even throws in some rhetorical analysis of voice. This is very useful to me: I am an accidental curriculum developer and a rare game player, but I am very interested in making learning more engaging. However, although I have much value for his approach and topic, his criticism of education rings hollow and he cops out on the toughest question of all: how to transfer learning from one situation to another.

All these authors we have read this semester have a problem with education, it seems. Gee, in particular, takes his digs at the educational establishment. With a mystifying lack of irony, Gee, the researcher who evaluates video games, admits that children in rich environments can "hit on interesting patterns and generalizations" but dismisses these as "garden paths" (134). About training basic skills in a reduced subdomain: "This is an important learning principle and, again, one regularly ignored in school" (p. 121). This open alignment against schools is unfortunate because it suggests that Gee is an academic more interested in getting his work noticed than an educator wanting to mine the very real learning that occurs in video games for techniques that can transfer to formal educational settings.

And in about the subdomains, at least, Gee is wrong. Not about subdomains — training is effective there. But I disagree that schools do not use subdomains. I reflect on laboratory classes I took as a student and have watched my children take: lab classes start with basic techniques (measuring, calculations, simple dissections) required for more advanced labs. Social studies projects begin with learning about research tools. English classes (including my own) start with short assignments and build up to research papers. And of course, school is not an end in itself. Schools are inherent subdomains of the world, and everything taught there, by definition, is taught in a subdomain.

Transfer. I was most intrigued by Gee's discussion of transfer. This gets to the heart of education because it addresses the ultimate educational goal not of knowledge (although facts are important) but of applying knowledge – of thinking. To transfer knowledge requires that the learner understand it and its applications. This reminds me of the conclusion of the movie *War Games*. Children inadvertently set off global thermonuclear warfare then program the computer controlling the impending devastation to play tic-tac-toe. By learning that tic-tac-toe is a dead end in which nobody wins, the computer the computer is able to transfer that knowledge to the impending thermo-nuclear warfare learn and decided that, too, is a game that cannot be won. Cancel the ICBMs.

This transfer – the heart of learning and the gold standard of education, is a weak point of Gee's. He demonstrates his own transfer of knowledge between video games, and his

explanation involves chance and serendipity. Not critical thinking. As educators, how can we plan for serendipity?

This is a real problem. We can take a formulaic approach to training and create very effective training modules. But the transfer that he describes is not formulaic. It relies on chance. The gold standard seems to be out of our reach as educators, if Gee is our authority.