Trevor Luman is a graduate of Batavia High School, where he was involved in Youth & Government, Chemistry Club, and HSA. Trevor is currently majoring in biochemistry and pre-pharmacy, and he intends to be a pharmacist. Additionally, he is interested in basketball and video games, the latter being his inspiration for writing his essay “Video Games Used Learning! It’s Super Effective!” Video games are Trevor’s favorite storytelling medium, and he wrote his essay to prove that they are a legitimate art form.

Trevor wrote this synthesis in Ryan Eichberger's English 104 course.
Video Games Used Learning! It’s Super Effective!

APA Format

Trevor Luman

How could anyone learn anything of value from video games? What could we, as a society, gain from an activity that involves motionlessly gawking at a luminescent rectangle projecting a series of images, while manipulating a complex arrangement of buttons and joysticks? Now consider the default position of a person reading for pleasure. Someone is gazing down at an almost infinitesimal sequence imprinted on highly compressed sheets of pulp from various plants. As they attempt to absorb details that they will almost immediately forget, the reader will occasionally shift slightly in a resting position in an endless quest for comfort. If society is to assume that video games are a waste of one's time, any form of entertainment would be rendered moot since everything, sports, television, movies, theater, music, books, and comic books—just like video games in that they are entertainment. As with any medium, the mental stimulation depends upon the engagement of the observer.

James Paul Gee, author of the articles “Video Games, Violence, and Effects: Good and Bad” and “Literacy, Video Games, and Popular Culture,” claims that video games represent an effective learning model and are not as harmful as many media outlets would lead one to believe. He is clearly well-versed in the realm of video games, referencing numerous video-game-related situations and elements of certain video games throughout both of his works. Thomas Spence, columnist for the Wall Street Journal and author of the article “How to Raise Boys Who Read,” argues that electronic entertainment cannot facilitate literacy or civility at all, and the only way to promote these values in our young boys is through literature. Spence is clearly ignorant about the medium of video games and denounces it based on little or no first-hand experience. It is a shame that many of gaming's critics seem to have never played an excellent video game from start to finish; this would be analogous to condemning movies as a legitimate art form after seeing only one clip from one movie.

In Gee’s chapter from his book, he implies that the resistance that video games face is both overblown and cyclical. Whenever a new form of expression arises, there is a backlash from society that claims that it is
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Corrupting our youth and destroying our civilization as we know it (e.g., cinema, rock ‘n’ roll, rap/hip hop, comic books, and mystery novels). Yet, history shows us that these forms of media have not wreaked havoc upon us. Video games are the next stage in a seemingly never-ending cycle of society’s rejection of new art forms. Gee (2008) uses quotes from the early twentieth century to illustrate the public uproar against mystery novels like The Hardy Boys, and The Rover Boys and he concludes, “no one today, I hope and suspect, finds The Hardy Boys threatening, and there is no outcry against Nancy Drew” (p. 13). Society will always be phobic of new art forms, time will pass, and then society will see, in hindsight, that they were ridiculous to be outraged at such trivial matters. The general public also tends to believe that video games can drive people to imitate the violence they see in video games, yet they ignore the fact that, while video games have become steadily more popular, the violent crime rate has been on the decline since the early 1990s, according to the U.S. Department of Justice (2011) when early violent games like Doom, Mortal Kombat, and Street Fighter were all the rage.

Furthermore, video games are effective learning models, in many ways akin to the scientific method. As Gee puts it (2008), “good games are built on a cycle of ‘hypothesize, probe the world, get a reaction, reflect on the results, re-probe to get better results,’ a cycle typical of experimental science and of reflective practice” (p. 318). Video games effectively employ this disguised type of learning to teach children without the slightest suspicion that they are learning. Modern education has become stagnant, and it is built on a flawed model. According to Gee (2008):

The sorts of lucidly functional language practices and informal specialist-language lessons that exist around Yu-Gi-Oh or Pokémon could exist in school—even as early as the first grade—to teach school-valued content. However, it doesn’t; the creativity of the capitalist has far out-distanced that of the educators (p. 317).

Pop culture worlds allow us to become experts in their universes without us realizing it. It is their “cycle of consolidation and challenge [that] is the basis of the development of expertise in any domain” (Gee, 2008, p. 318). This approach needs to be applied to school so education becomes more effective and so we retain our knowledge better. When playing video games, we constantly use resource management. Players are faced with choices like using a healing potion now or saving it for a more necessary time, like when fighting a boss, or another example, purchasing an item now with the money currently in possession or saving more money for a better item in the future. Video games are able to show the value of experience-based learning over informational learning within themselves.
The manuals that are packaged with games are riddled with specialist and technical language that would make little sense to someone completely new to the game. However, upon playing through the game and learning from first-hand experience, the “hundreds of pieces of information in the booklet become clear and meaningful” (Gee, 2008, p. 321). As evidenced through video games, situation-based learning needs to be the norm for education, as opposed to the standard lecture-based learning we have now.

Some ignorant citizens are still blind to the cultural value and learning potential that comes from video games. Critics, such as Thomas Spence, the author of “How to Raise Boys that Read,” dismiss video gaming as a mindless activity and suggest that we should instead be pushing our learners back to a traditional way of obtaining literacy through books. He immediately discredits himself as an author by suggesting that society has regressed since the days when upper-level education was all-white and all-male. To Spence (2010), it “seems incredible now, in an era when headlines suggest that boys are largely unfit for the classroom.” Spence lets his ignorance shine through by suggesting that little or no reading is involved in playing video games. On the contrary, there are numerous games that require the player to read in order to fully appreciate the game, namely role-playing games (RPGs). Even simplistic RPGs, like the Pokémon series, require a substantial amount of reading in order to enjoy the game and learn the nuances of gameplay.

Direct evidence from games can help combat the blasphemy towards games about their lack of cultural, philosophical, and academic value. Deep philosophy is rooted in a lot of games’ narratives. Chrono Cross (1999) is a game involving two parallel universes in which the protagonist is alive in one and dead in the other, causing his existence to come into question on numerous occasions. The character Miguel offers a thought-provoking quote on the nature of life: “so being alive means you’re creeping closer to death with every second.” This shows the philosophical potential of video games as deep storytellers. Or, we can look at the more recent BioShock (2007), a game taking place in a purely objectivist dystopia called Rapture. The entire game is a deconstruction of objectivist ideals and critiques the idea of a totally laissez-faire economy, having all of Rapture collapsing underneath its own philosophy into a state of anarchy. This demonstrates that a video game not only entertains, but can have complex and penetrating themes similar to other media.

Just as numerous media have done before video games, they have been met with strong resistance in society due to its neophobia. Many critics debunk video games as an art form and legitimate form of expression without having ever played a game, which renders their criticism unfair.
Video games currently yield substantial depth in philosophy and learning capabilities, and there is still vast potential in the young medium.

References


