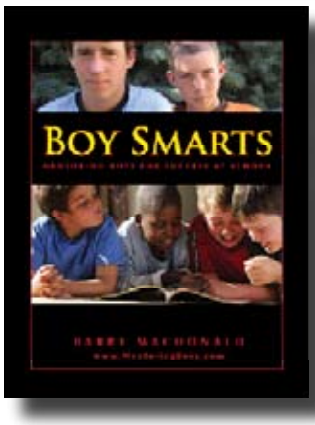
Barry MacDonald's Boy Smarts Newsletter
June 2013 - MentoringBoys.com

Misreading Video Games



Dear Barry,

Recently, I attended a parent-teacher-student conference with my eleven year old son and his teacher said that if he spent as much time reading books as he did playing video games, he could become an ***A*** student. My son shrugged his shoulders dismissively, claiming that he learned more from video games than from reading books. As we listened in amazement, he described how gaming was more real and more motivating than reading books.

Despite wanting to shrivel up and apologize for his brazen comments, he also got me thinking: What if the lines between academic schooling and video gaming were blurred? What if, instead of seeing school the way we've known it, we saw it for what my son might dream it could be—a challenging and engaging video game? Would he read more? Would his motivation and grades improve?

As for his teacher's suggestion that he read more books, I have to admit that getting my son to read at home is hard. He'll sit with a book if I make him, but he just zones out. Should I force him to read to get better grades?

Tara, Mississauga

Dear Tara,

In recent years technology has changed the ways we think, interact, and learn. Our children communicate, build relationships, network with each other, and perceive themselves and the world in dramatically different ways than we did. Not surprisingly, digital devices such as laptops, smartphones, and tablets are also challenging the way many teachers are delivering instruction in their classrooms. As teachers shift from being knowledge experts to being learning guides, many have come to rely on digital tools such as videos, multimedia lessons, and video games to engage and motivate students.

In my experience in schools, I have seen how keenly aware Grade 6 boys are about which learning activities engage them in ways that are authentic and meaningful to them. Usually these involve new media and games.

VIDEO GAMES CHALLENGE LEARNERS TO USE NEW KNOWLEDGE WITH PRESENT-TIME EXPERIENCES THAT RESULT IN IMMEDIATE FEEDBACK

James Paul Gee, a professor of literacy studies at Arizona State University, asserts that digital curricula empowers students, putting them in charge of their learning, and helping them develop critical thinking skills by connecting what they're doing in school to real-world applications. Gee and others who study games-and-learning argue that as gamers decode a game's "internal design grammar," they are also strategizing and assessing and problem-solving. While books provide learners with knowledge and another's experience with applying that knowledge, effectively designed video games challenge learners to use new knowledge with present-time experiences that result in immediate feedback.

Of course, we must think critically about games as well, many of which are inappropriate for children. Concerns about sexualized, violent, and homophobic content in M-rated games such as ***Call of Duty Blacks Ops*** are warranted, and we do need to be vigilant (visit ***CommonSenseMedia.org*** for more details). However, we cannot monitor everything that young people do, especially since so many teens are using cell phones to play online games when we are well out of sight. Ultimately, as young people mature, the best way to empower them is not to ignore the media deluge of information and entertainment they are immersed in, but to help them learn how to scan, sift, sort, evaluate—and ask questions.

Constance Steinkuehler, an educational researcher who advises on American national policy decisions relating to the impact of video games, challenges the common misperception that boys' engagement in video games is a zero-sum game and that if boys were to play video games less, they would be reading print text more. She argues that for many youth, the practice of playing video games is not displacing the practice of reading; instead, for many youth, it is an integral part of what it means to participate in a cultural community. She also claims that playing video games actually leads to more reading, as more than one third of gamers—36%—regularly read game-related texts such as game reviews, strategy

websites, fan fiction, and forum discussions as part of their gameplay. Furthermore, she notes that the rate of reading engagement rises dramatically for players of multiplayer online games. Steinkuehler argues, "Reading is an important (albeit often hidden) component of participation in video game culture. Thus, video games and print text are not in competition with one another but instead represent two vital, complementary components within the media ecology of today's youth."

Tara, your son's remarks about his interest in video games and reading should register. It would likely backfire if you insist that he read conventional books at home, but if you show respect for his interests, and continue to model your own engagement with print text, you can be sure that he will be more likely to read if he is allowed to read what he wants to read. It might not be you or a teacher who hooks him on reading, but his own natural curiosity, perhaps springing from something he encounters in online games, or in the world of digital literacies.

A final caveat: Being open to the benefits of video game play does not mean that we should shrug our shoulders and turn kids loose in the digital world, concluding that this is an alien world to us that we cannot understand. Of course, we should monitor their participation and balance their gameplay with other vital responsibilities, including school assignments, physical activities, and chores.

And in the long run, the ability to listen to our children and help them process life's complex and dizzying problems is more powerful than anything they will learn from print or digital literacies. ▪ ▪ ▪

Barry MacDonald

MentoringBoys.com

For readers wanting to explore video gaming in the classroom further—and perhaps even try a few educational games—visit these two sites for additional insight and inspiration:

Edutopia.org

Search one of the following titles to read an article or watch a video clip...

—James Paul Gee on Learning with Video Games
—A Neurologist Makes the Case for the Video Game Model as a Learning Tool
—Game-Based Learning Units for the Everyday Teacher
—Get Your Game On: How to Build Curriculum Units Using the Video Game Model
—How to Plan Instruction Using the Video Game Model

GamesLearningSociety.org

Click on the ***Projects*** button to play an educational game...

Anatomy Browser—This game offers a human anatomy catalog where you can peel away layers of the body and identify muscles, organs, and systems of the body in full 3D. With the ability to adjust the transparency of each layer, you'll be able to easily identify the relationship of organs to each other as well as their names.

Fair Play—Assume the role of Jamal, a young African American graduate student, on his journey to become a renowned professor. To succeed in the game, players must maintain a diverse academic social network while running a research lab.

Virulent—Learn how to control virus particles that are trying to infect, replicate inside of, and escape from a host cell. Fight off host and cellular immune responses with armies of viral proteins while stealing precious energy and production facilities to ensure your survival.

Parents and teachers who still find themselves questioning the potential benefits of playing video games might read the ***Boys on Target*** chapter, ***Hooked on Video Games***, and review ten positive outcomes that are associated with gaming.

A note to teachers: Kudos to those who incorporate digital literacies into their teaching, capitalizing on student knowledge, interest, and familiarity with new media to encourage ways of thinking that are less linear, but which still require comprehension, selection, organization, critical reflection, evaluation—and creation. We certainly don't want to get rid of books, but we must bridge the divide between the digital literacies that are part of students' everyday lives and school. As academic theorist and writer Henry Jenkins suggests, we need to bring "a flashlight into a cave....We're afraid of the dark, but if we understand what's going on, we'll be able to make rational decisions about it."

Please email me about your son's experiences with video gaming—the good and the bad— for an upcoming newsletter.

Email your stories, comments, and questions to **info@mentoringboys.com**

Thank you!

Follow us on Twitter!

LIKE us on Facebook!