Foreword

GAMES: LITTLE ‘g’ AND BIG ‘G’

We don’t want games going to school in the way textbooks went to school. Textbooks are a very poor educational tool. They standardize education rather than customize it. They are a one-size-fits-all-all-purpose-tool that is too blunt for any of the jobs they need to do. They stress summary rather than inquiry and exploration. They stay always at the surface rather than go on deep dives. And they are too often private reading experiences rather than fuel for collaborative interactions and collective intelligence. Let’s not let games become yet another stand-alone-all-purpose tool.

Games are good for lots of things. For example, they are good for motivation, preparation for future learning, developing persistence past failure, and for coming to see failure as a form of (and necessity for) learning. They are good for giving people experiences they cannot necessarily have in the real world and for tying these experience to words, discussion, texts, and dialogue often outside the game. And they can be good for getting students to think about and think like designers and for getting them to see problem solving as social and collaborative interaction among people and smart tools. But they are not good at everything. We need to combine them with texts, social media, and many other sorts of tools and activities.

In the world of entertainment games—games like Civilization, League of Legends, the Sims, Zelda, World of Warcraft, or Minecraft—games as software are only part of the action. They are (often social and collaborative) problem solving spaces that fuel all sorts of interactions outside and around the game. Players gather on all sorts of sites to review, discuss, debate, and mod the game. They discuss strategies, answer questions, write fan fiction, and make videos. They relate the game to other games, texts, media, activities, and experiences in the world. They create all sorts of teaching and learning practices customized to the needs of different sorts of players, things like tutorials, strategy guides, in-game coaching, annotated video, and models of how to build, spec, design, and play at different levels in different ways. They theory craft in an attempt to understand the deep properties of the game’s design and to use this understanding for deeper forms of play and collaboration. They help turn interests into passions—passions that might be orthogonal to the game or devoted to related skill areas beyond the game—passions that can fuel thousands of hours of practice as the necessary route to real mastery.

The combination of a game as software and all this hive of interest, passion, teaching and learning around the game I call the “Big G Game” (for me the “little g game” is the game as software). We need to bring Big G Games to school. When we do this, the game is one tool networked with many others and with all sorts of teaching and learning practices, all in the service of discovery, problem solving, and collective intelligence (collective intelligence = networking people, tools, and practices so that the system is smarter than anything in it and can solve “hard problems”).
We have major problems in our world today. We face great danger from a variety of interacting complex systems that human greed and stupidity have set on a course to disaster. We face global warming; massive and growing inequality; large-scale environmental degradation; massive immigration flows; speculative capitalism conducted by computers; global wars and violence; and a deterioration of work and wages thanks to the Internet, automation, global competition, and rampant forms of social Darwinism in the United States and spreading across the world. It is time to end business as usual and start working on the really hard problems that face us all. Let’s use Games (note the capital) to finally change the paradigm. This book is a great place to start, but it is up to readers to jump into the new paradigm pool and swim for their lives.

James Paul Gee
Arizona State University, USA

James Paul Gee is Mary Lou Fulton Presidential Professor of Literacy Studies and Regents’ Professor at Arizona State University.