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Gee, James Paul. (2010). *New Digital Media and Learning as an Emerging Area and “Worked Examples” as One Way Forward*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

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Gee's (2010) book *New Digital Media and Learning as an Emerging Area and “Worked Examples” as One Way Forward* is not for the fainthearted. Although Gee (2010) writes in clear and concise prose, I, a digital practitioner, found the book dense and difficult to comprehend. Fortunately, shortly after purchasing the analog book, I was able to download it for free on my Kindle. Once I was able to select my own font size and digest short pieces of Gee's work at different settings, I was able to make sense of the content. My experience with Gee's latest book is in sharp contrast to my experiences with Gee's (2007) revision of *What*



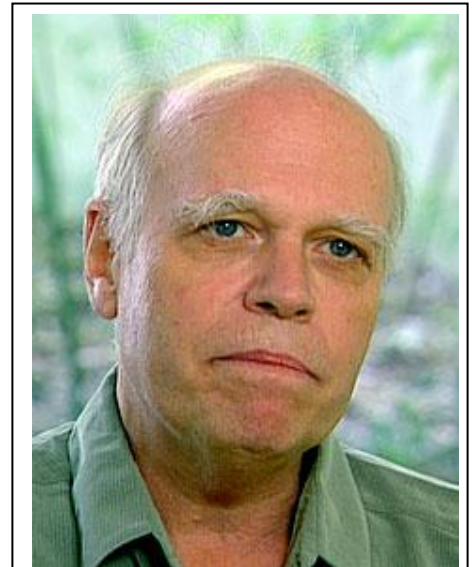
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*Video Games Have To Teach Us About Learning and Literacy.*

While the latter was engaging and easy to understand even for readers like myself who had never played a video game, this latest book is written for fellow researchers or, as he calls them, “contributors.” This book is part of a grant-funded series on digital media that is related to the John D. and Catherine T. Mac Arthur Foundation’s digital media and learning initiative.

In this book, Gee asks, “how can work in digital media achieve enough commonality for contributors to engage in fruitful collaboration and the accumulations of shared knowledge” (p. 5). After discussing the difference between a field and a discipline, he addresses where the study of digital media and learning (DMAL) fits on this continuum. Gee suggests that we adopt the term “thematic discipline” for the study of DMAL because it is “centered on a theme that cuts across many different disciplines and disciplinary specializations” (p. 4). He argues that “right now, at best, DMAL is a loose configuration of scholars from different disciplinary specializations in different disciplines or fields. It is not yet even a field” (p. 5). His reasoning is that DMAL intersects with so many “disparate academic disciplines,” including “media studies, media literacy, or communication, technology, education, the learning sciences, or other areas” (p. 10). Although I am not a researcher of DMAL—merely a digital media practitioner—I agree with Gee. At this point, our understanding of DMAL is interdisciplinary and approaches vary. Gee and I are not digital natives, like the children who are growing up with computers today. As I read his arguments, I actually wondered if digital immigrants can truly understand DMAL or if we are like anthropologists studying another culture. We may have learned to speak the language, but we will always impose our biases since we are not truly members of the group. Perhaps the study of DMAL will fluctuate until digital natives join the discussion.

Gee seems troubled by the chaos that has emerged since DMAL became an area of academic interest. As a result, he offers a recommendation for the future of DMAL. I found it disturbing that when seriously discussing possibilities, including recommendations, for academic research on



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DMAL, Gee cites Wikipedia when he defines what a discipline is. Although popular, I question the reliability of Wikipedia, which bills itself as “the free encyclopedia that anyone can edit,” whether one is a scholar or not.

Gee offers a “concrete proposal about one way researchers studying DMAL could move to a more cohesive, integrated, and collaborative enterprise” (p. 1). What he eventually proposes is the process of developing “worked examples” to pull the many fields of DMAL together as a thematic discipline. After this abstract discussion about what DMAL could and not could become academically, and an in-depth exposition of situated cognition and new literacy studies, Gee discusses the usefulness of worked examples in general. His own worked example is almost anticlimactic. Out of 14 chapters in this book, Gee devotes only one to his own “worked example” of the mixed media game *Yu-Gi-Oh!* He tags on a final chapter in which he provides an explanation of the “analysis and method” of his worked example. In chapters 1 and 2, Gee sets up his discussion of where DMAL is today. In chapters 3-6, he discusses how work in situated cognition and literacy studies impact DMAL. The emphasis on new literacy studies is confusing because Gee’s set-up led me to believe that he would say that literary studies is where DMAL fits as an academic area. In chapter 7, he discusses so-called “influence” (p. 37) on DMAL, which is really a discussion about DMAL and gaming. Chapters 8 through 12 set up the discussion of a “worked example” by providing examples from other academic areas of study unrelated to DMAL. In this section, it seems as if Gee is justifying his own approach rather than sharing his own work.

Gee’s “worked example” focuses on the game *Yu-Gi-Oh!* He uses this example because he wanted it to impact “(a) media convergence; (b) the mixture of the digital and nondigital; and (c) global youth culture in a global world” (p. 58). This is significant because he argues that digital media can “teach us how to enhance learning in and out of school” (p. 14). Nonetheless, it falls short. Gee’s “worked example” is too little, too late. Rather than helping to illustrate this point, the “worked example” leaves too much for the reader to figure

out about DMAL and where DMAL researchers should be going. Additionally, the focus on video games, begs the question: Is digital learning primarily from video games?

My interest in this book stems from my role as chief communication officer for a school district. As new digital media emerge, there has been a lot of staff discussion in our school district about incorporating these tools in our outreach and engagement efforts. Having read Gee's (2007) book *What Video Games Have To Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*, my hope was that Gee's current discussion of DMAL would provide ideas about how to use digital media to help parents and community members learn about the work of our students and teachers. Although I found the first chapter difficult to follow, I was hopeful that this book would fit my needs when I read this statement in the second chapter: "an equally impressive phenomenon has been the ways in which digital tools have allowed 'everyday people' to produce and not just consume media" (p. 12). Despite the fact that Gee even mentions that these new products can compete with work done by professionals, this book is clearly intended for fellow researchers and not for users and creators of digital media.

It is somewhat ironic that I am reviewing this book since Gee's initial discussion is about what a "field" is, and why DMAL is not a field at this point. His two examples of "fields" are communication and education. My academic studies have been in communication, and I currently study public education as a doctoral student. Gee is clear that "a field is a much less integrated configuration of academic work than a discipline" (p. 1). Perhaps the fact that my experience is solely with "fields" explains why I found his discussion of disciplines to be confusing. He jumps from explaining what a discipline is to presenting, without further discussion, a continuum of academic studies that includes other categories, such as disciplinary specializations. Gee is clear that "knowing how to use a text in the right place and time is as important as knowing how to 'decode' it" (p. 18). In my doctoral student role, as someone determining the scope of my own future academic work, this book did offer food for thought. Gee's discussion of the

development of the academic study of DMAL resonated with assumptions that I hold about (a) the impact that digital media has on students; and (b) that learning does happen when using digital media, even games.

Gee, like Banks et al., (2007) encourages teachers to be cognizant of digital media that may impact the perspectives that students bring to the classroom. “There is a significant lag between education in public schools and the digital technology and culture in which students today are deeply involved” (Banks et al., 2007, p. 7). Gee emphasizes that we must be impressed “by the ways digital tools are used today to engage in powerful, deep, and complex thinking outside of schools” (p. 12). This statement by Banks et al., (2007) resonates with my experience as a practitioner: “Teachers [and practitioners] need significantly more professional development to close the divide between adults who are more like tourists [or immigrants] in digital worlds and youth under 30 who function as digital natives” (p. 17). I again wonder if those of us who are digital immigrants can completely grasp the nuances of digital media or if we can only see what our experiences have prepared us to see. Another of my assumptions that becomes evident while reading this book is that adults and children can learn from digital media. This volume itself is an example of learning from digital media. Gee, a well recognized scholar, introduces a new dialogue about digital media and learning. “I propose we treat each other as students working over problems . . . then we could imagine together new ways to think and work” (p. 51). This is one of the strengths of the book; Gee is genuinely creating an epistemology for DMAL. He encourages researchers to create knowledge about DMAL in a more collaborative and systematic manner. More importantly, he is highlighting the significance of DMAL. The emerging area of digital media and learning is not just the study of how digital tools may enhance learning. It is, rather, the “study of how digital tools and new forms of convergent media, production, and participation, as well as powerful forms of social organization and complexity in popular culture, can teach us how to enhance learning in and out of school and how to transform society and the global world as well” (p. 14)

One strength of Gee's new book is his focus on moving those of us interested in digital media and learning from being basic users to those who create the ideal format for studying this emerging field, discipline, or thematic discipline. I do wonder what this work will look like when digital natives enhance this discussion by joining the digital immigrants and more casually engaged digital tourists. Though the book itself is not for practitioners, we may be able to benefit by borrowing the author's model of the "worked example." Rather than working in our own districts in isolation, some of us who work in school communication could adopt the model presented in his "worked example" to invite dialogue about our work. For example, we could create our own "worked example" with a tool such as a school Facebook page. Like Gee, we could offer a "claim" (p. 56) about the page and its significance, provide "evidence" (pp. 56-57) for this claim, and discuss why it is "interesting," (pp. 57-58) and relevant to our practice. By doing this, we could then engage in a dialogue about how this "worked example" intersects with other related disciplines or tools that we use to engage stakeholders. Despite the challenging content, there are additional strengths in this book. To start, I don't know what kind of deal Gee and his publisher created with Amazon, but I appreciated the opportunity to download the book on my Kindle for free. This is not a common occurrence with academic books, and I find it much easier to read on my Kindle because I control the layout.

The greatest strength of this book is how well the author supports the majority of his arguments. For example, when he is explaining why DMAL is significant, he addresses "the ways in which digital tools have transformed the human mind and human society and will do so in the future" (p. 6). When Gee compares the study of DMAL to early studies of literacy, he clearly identifies and explains why key themes were not adopted.

Gee must be commended for taking leadership with this new area of study. He invites other scholars to critique his work and build on it to further develop the study of DMAL. He

urges other scholars to continue to link digital media with learning. Whether one agrees with his analysis or not, Gee's "worked example," while relatively minor, provides a tangible starting point by providing a model upon which others may build.

In addition to the challenging, dense content, which limits access to his ideas, there are other shortcomings in this book. Gee's tangible examples of how other areas of study emerged, how they failed or how they developed academically, such as new literacy studies, are interesting, but confusing. He doesn't tell us why DMAL won't fall prey to these same pitfalls. He simply says that those who study DMAL should avoid these pitfalls. For example, he argues that new literacy studies should have "yielded more compromise and collaboration" and "argues such an approach when we are talking about digital media as technologies," but he doesn't explain what difference this will make for DMAL (p. 21)

Another weakness is one that Gee acknowledges but doesn't seem to be able to avoid. He tells us that he came to the study of digital media from gaming. Although he is cognizant of others who are studying digital media from a variety of perspectives, he fails to make connections beyond the world of games. Most of the examples and even his "worked example" are from the world of gaming.

Gee also assumes a level of knowledge about U.S. popular culture that may pose a challenge for some readers without the same degree of cultural literacy. This is essential, as his examples, including the "worked example" that he offers as a model, are based on assumed knowledge of popular culture, including games such as *Yu-Gi-Oh!*, *World of Warcraft*, and even the television show *Wizard*. Readers unfamiliar with these popular culture references will be confused or even lost. Readers must also have some cultural literacy in the world of academic studies. Those unfamiliar with work in situated cognition, literacy studies, and new literacy studies will find themselves challenged because Gee presents his work in a type of shorthand. Readers must fill in the

blanks when he discusses popular culture and academic research.

In the 2007 book *What Video Games Have To Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*, Gee argued that to learn at “any deep level requires learners to play ‘the game’ or, at least, to appreciate the sort of ‘game’ it is” (p. 8). Although this new book did not provide the tangible information I was hoping for, I appreciate that Gee’s “game” of academic research does open the door to a new discussion about digital media and learning.

There are many who might benefit from this book, provided that readers are culturally literate in academic studies and popular culture, specifically digital gaming, and have time to absorb the dense content. This book is clearly for researchers from any field or discipline who wish to enhance the growing body of work on digital media and learning. As Gee puts it, “one can develop an appreciation for some texts without participating in the practices of the group whose texts they are, but a knowledge of how the ‘texts’ fit into those practices is still necessary” (p. 20).

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## About the Reviewer

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