

High Marks for Games in the Classroom

But what are the students learning?

The Game Believes in You: How Digital Play Can Make Our Kids Smarter

By Greg Toppo

Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, \$26; 252 pages.

As reviewed by Mark Bauerlein

The primary purpose of *The Game Believes in You* is forward-looking and optimistic. It imparts a winning excitement precisely because it covers a rousing advent, one that is “rewriting centuries-old rules of learning, motivation, and success.” A handful of visionaries and frustrated teachers have conceived and applied digital games to turn bored and struggling youth into avid learners.

Greg Toppo, a reporter at *USA Today*, profiles a social studies teacher in Minnesota who can’t get his “zombified ninth graders” to care about geopolitics until he invents *Fantasy Geopolitics*, a version of fantasy football that substitutes countries for gridiron stars. *Mission US* teaches U.S. history by enabling students to assume the identity of a boy in Boston circa 1776, a female slave in 1848 Kentucky, etc. Historical settings are scrupulously reproduced, and players act within them instead of just reading about them. A group of boys in a building near the East River evaluate biology-oriented games while experts monitor their responses. We hear, too, about virtual-reality versions of *Ulysses* and *Walden*.

Kids love the games, and education improves. The emphasis here falls on description—what the game is like, how a misfit thinker dreamed it up, how students react. Toppo’s confidence



overflows, as he recounts how games are so much better than the old textbook, chalk-and-blackboard methods.

Indeed, the more people praise digital play, the more they scorn traditional schooling. One theorist declares, “You have the prison which is school.” Another says, “It would be criminal if we didn’t start where they are and take advantage of the things they want to do” (that makes for a lot of criminals in the teacher ranks). Another educator cites the decline of leisure reading among teenagers—“readicide”—and then remarks, “Was it the teaching? Yes.” Another explains her decision to shift from traditional topics to games: “I did it because I was really tired of studying people being forced to study stuff.” A school designer tells Toppo, “Creating sh***y schools is in our blood.” And here’s Toppo himself in the last page of the book: “The system seems to mess up everything it touches, even the great ideas.”

Games are the best remedy, if only we can link the tools and habits to knowledge and skills. The portraits

are lively and inspiring, Toppo’s interviews and observations detailed and animated, but there is a problem. We never quite complete the bridge to the other side. Yes, students love games, and the games sound interesting, but the long-term effect is unproven. A few times, after recounting the experience of a school incorporating games into the curriculum, Toppo notes that scores went up. His opening vignette profiles an elementary school in Washington, D.C., that relied on the *Jiji* game to teach math. We have six large paragraphs on *Jiji*’s operations, school demographics, and a thrilling visit by the *Jiji* creator. But there is only one sentence on test results from spring 2014, with a footnote on the source.

We don’t learn of any other factors at the school that may have contributed to the gains, nor do we know how those students will fare next year and the next.

And the problem is more than insufficient evidence. Toppo advocates games as the best tools for learning, but he says practically nothing about what students are supposed to learn. Chapter seven bears the subtitle, “How a Subversive Suburban Teacher Is Using *World of Warcraft* to Teach Humanities.” It follows a free-spirited 60-year-old (“Her hair, by then bleach-blonde, had wisps of pink and blue”) who despises traditional schooling and greets her 6th graders with “Good morning heroes!” A sign taped to her desk reads, “REMEMBER! If a future you tries to warn you about this class, DON’T LISTEN.” As Toppo sits in the back, she announces, “The door is closed and what are we doing? We are doing something *very revolutionary*.” Then the games begin.

In *Walden, A Game*, students view 1845 Concord and interact with Thoreau's cabin, which sounds like a compelling virtual experience, connecting students with the historical realities. But what do students know once the game ends?

She is a moral example to Toppo, who tracks her to an open-house event, where she makes the case for games to parents. But only in the last words of the chapter do we reach the final proof, and it comes through her voice: "My kids did really, really well on the tests. And I know why." OK, but we still don't know what the students learned, and the only information about the exams is that they were "a battery of skills tests" in New York. Little humanities content shows up. What books did her students read? We have a quick reference to *The Hobbit*, but that's all. Toppo mentions "ancient civilizations," and a theme of "quests and journeys" seems to run through the semester, but no historical, geographical, or religious elements of it are provided. The teacher, game theorists, and Toppo speak about the games, not the humanities.

The absence of knowledge aims leaves an inexplicable hole at the center of *The Game Believes in You*. Toppo addresses the ingenuity of designers, youth enthusiasm, virtues of games, and dullness of standard practice, but not the things kids should learn. Ironically, Toppo's subjects disdain the testing mentality, but curt notes on score improvements are the only back-end evidence he provides.

This is not to refute the potential of games, but only to pose the ultimate question. One chapter details *Walden, A Game*, in which students view 1845 Concord, enter Thoreau's cabin and family home, chop wood, and secure food while "actual sounds of Walden" are heard. Clicking on objects brings up information about them plus Thoreau's own words. It sounds like a compelling virtual experience, connecting students with the historical realities of the time and place. But what do students know once the game ends? Toppo briefly worries that the game might reduce the meaning of *Walden* to a few truisms, but a researcher assures him that if students "invest a little bit more in thinking about why Thoreau did what he did, why the game

is the way that it is, if they allow the experience to affect them, they'll take away a lot more."

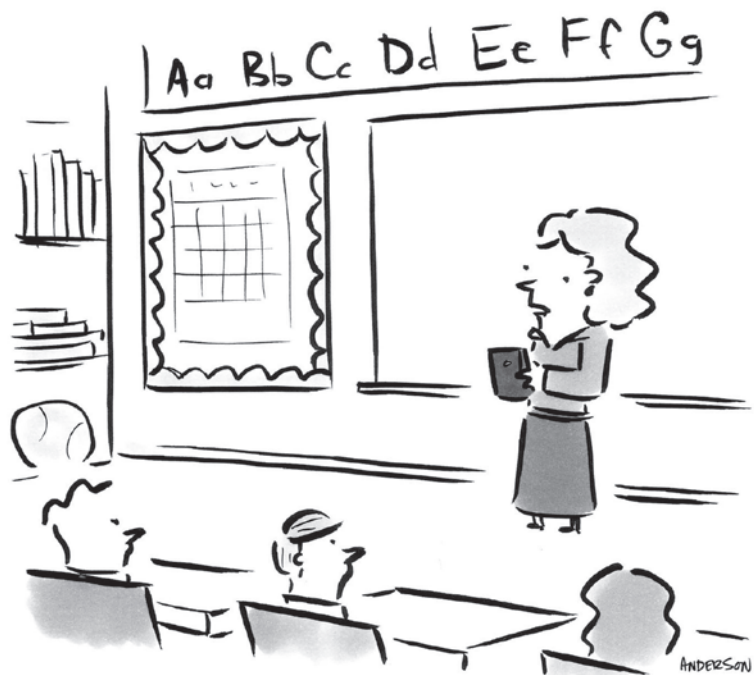
That's the final word in the chapter, and a telling one. Note that it equalizes

what Thoreau did and what the game does. To prove the benefits of games, however, let's hear a player of *Walden, A Game* respond to the question, What does Thoreau mean by 'Let us spend one day as deliberately as nature'? or explain Thoreau's attitude toward charity or tell us what happens when Thoreau asks a tailor to make him a new coat.

Those responses have nothing to do with games. Games can draw students into dry-seeming materials of history, literature, etc., but the project is successful only when students end the game and expound the materials themselves. They have to translate a virtual "experience" into nonvirtual knowledge. So, yes, let's see more experiments in dynamic game-assisted instruction, but let's also have comparisons, through knowledge-based examinations administered before and after the term, of students who were educated through games and those who weren't.

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I appreciate the text, Kate, but next time you can just raise your hand.