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Why Johnny Can't Fly: Treating Games as a Form of Youth Media Within a Youth Development Framework

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When the tables are turned, video games become a medium for children's personal and creative expression. . . . Making a game and its rules allowed the game designers to be in charge and to determine the player's place in the world.

—Yasmin B. Kafai¹

When kids program, just as when they write, they can learn to make their own claims about the world in the form of processes. Such a practice reframes videogame development as a rhetorical practice, not just a craft practice or a technical practice.

—Ian Bogost²

What's the Big Idea?

When Kristina was a high school senior, she spent a year participating in an afterschool program called *Playing 4 Keeps*, run by Global Kids, Inc. Trainers like me led the program, developing the youths' leadership skills around global issues.

Kristina learned how to play video games with a critical eye, and worked with her peers and the professional game development company, Gamelab, to make their own game. *Ayiti: The Cost of Life* challenges its players to educate an impoverished family of five in contemporary Haiti while keeping them healthy and out of debt. When the day came to release it online at theCostofLife.org, she presented the game to her school community at a special event attended by students, faculty, and even one curious security guard.

Afterward, I asked her how she felt sharing her game with others. She said, "I feel like you." "What does it feel like to be me?" I asked.

She said, "It feels like being a trainer."

Developing a game about a global issue made Kristina feel like a leader. This is not unusual for youth who go through a Global Kids' program. What is unusual, however, is the path she took, playing and making digital games.

Many cast a cynical eye toward the idea that games offer anything of value, especially within an educational context. But not too long ago, comic books were viewed in a similar light. In fact, before the arrival of **Art Spiegelman's Holocaust biography, *Maus*,** who would have expected a comic book to win a Pulitzer Prize? Yet the medium, once seen as the corrupter of children's minds, had offered up the highest example of what could be achieved in literature. Expectations were revised. Life went on.

For years, video games have been blamed for turning children into mesmerized robots, agents of sexism and racism, and violent gun-toting psychopaths, concerns not far afield from those once lobbed at comics. Perhaps by the time you read this, the game equivalent

of *Maus* will have arrived, winning its own Pulitzer.³ Or the Nobel. But today, in spite of the absence of such a superstar, video games are emerging as powerful tools for preparing today's youth to enter a globalized workforce. Expectations are being revised. Life goes on.

There are now many voices describing the power of these tools, from James Paul Gee and his former colleagues at the University of Wisconsin to Henry Jenkins at MIT's Comparative Media Studies Program to others included in this volume. These voices have played a key role informing how Global Kids has incorporated the informal learning associated with games into a formalized afterschool setting.

In *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century*, Jenkins⁴ recognizes that "some have expressed skepticism that schools should or could teach young people how to play." He views this skepticism as confusion between "play as a source of fun and play as a form of engagement," arguing that the type of engagement offered by digital play—along with other forms of digital media—inducts young people into powerful learning environments, rich with opportunities for building and sharing knowledge. And yet, this learning need not be removed from a formalized educational setting. In fact, he writes that one of his goals is to "challenge those who have responsibility for teaching our young people to think more systematically and creatively about the many different ways they might build [new media literacy] skills into their day-to-day activities in ways that are appropriate to the content they are teaching."⁵

This is a challenge that we at Global Kids took very seriously when we decided to incorporate digital games into our programs. These new game-oriented programs were based, in large part, on Global Kids' previous youth media programs, like one in which teenagers made a documentary about the conflict in Northern Ireland, and another in which they developed a monthly radio show on youth-related health topics.

Introducing game development into our pedagogy proved more difficult than we had anticipated. Paradigms fundamental to youth media were soon challenged by the new ideas we encountered in the emerging fields of games and learning. Jenkins describes this split when he critiques media literacy advocates who fail to understand the changes created by new media technologies, viewing media "primarily as threats rather than as resources." He continues, "More focus is placed on the dangers of manipulation rather than the possibilities of participation, on restricting access . . . rather than in expanding skills."⁶

As we worked through the conceptual shift offered by this way of thinking about games and learning, we came to a new understanding of youth media and how digital games could be used to develop the next generation of global citizens. This chapter aims to describe this process and offers examples from our two games-based programs: the Microsoft Corporation-funded *Playing 4 Keeps* and the MacArthur Foundation-funded *Camp Global Kids*.

Raising Akiva (An Interlude)

As I write this, my son, Akiva, is about to turn eight months old. When he was barely two weeks, my wife and I went to a brunch where a friend asked, "So, do you have it down yet?"

Words failed me. Had we mastered raising a child? In only two weeks?

My wife was quick with a response. She said that learning to be a mom was like playing a video game. "Each day is a new level, with its own challenges," she explained. "By the end of the day you have a handle on them. But the next day you are faced with a whole new level."

Everyone laughed. Then she added, "Unfortunately, you can't return to an earlier level and try again."



My Day Job

Global Kids is committed to transforming urban youth into successful students and global and community leaders through its classroom-based, afterschool, digital media programs. We educate young people about international affairs, develop academic and leadership skills, and promote active engagement in civic life. We work in dozens of schools and other sites reaching over 14,000 teens and adults annually, mostly in New York City.

We approach teens and learning with what is now known as a youth development model. In its most general usage, “youth development” refers to any work with young people designed to improve their lives, whether playing basketball at a Police Athletic League or arguing on behalf of Madagascar in a model U.N. session. However, in the nineties, a very specific youth development model was articulated and adapted primarily by afterschool organizations around the country, with very specific practices and outcomes. This flexible and evolving pedagogy can be hard to pin down, but for Global Kids, it means creating interactive activities that are experiential, building on students’ existing strengths, involving youth in the design of the programs, tapping into their interests and talents, and considering them not as “leaders of tomorrow” but as capable, passionate people who can better their world today.

Global Kids is unique in that we combine a youth development model with civic and global engagement within both classroom and afterschool contexts. I was hired in 2000 to develop the Online Leadership Program, with initial support from both the Academy for Educational Development and the Surdna Foundation. My mission was to use the Internet to extend elements of our youth leadership and global education programs, reaching a broad range of youth online and making the creation of these projects a leadership opportunity for Global Kids’ youth leaders.

It was hard not to notice the increasingly visible role video games were playing in the lives of our youth leaders. Through a Global Kids’ workshop they might become active in the struggle to eliminate the use of child soldiers, but return home to become active as virtual soldiers in a computer-based war game. Something seemed wrong with this picture.

At the same time, game elements had always been part of Global Kids’ workshops. That’s part of what makes them so engaging. Why couldn’t the same educational aspects of games that were regularly employed in our school-based programs be coded into an online game? It seemed like a natural fit.

In the spring of 2005, we received a grant from the Microsoft Corporation’s U.S. Partners in Learning program—which supports innovative technology and education programs—to develop an afterschool game development program. We named it *Playing 4 Keeps*. Just a few months later, the MacArthur Foundation granted Global Kids funds to gather the voices of youth around the topic of the role that digital media plays in their lives as part of their new Digital Media and Learning initiative. A core component of this work led us to develop a space in early 2006 within the virtual world *Teen Second Life* in a location we named *Global Kids Island* where, that summer, we held *Camp GK*.

How Not to Hail a Cab in Liberty City (Another Interlude)

A few years ago I walked into my local hotdog joint and watched a twelve-year-old play *Grand Theft Auto*. No one who followed the news could miss the controversy fueled by this game. Debates about its level of violence were frequently discussed and debated. I was intrigued finally to watch someone play it.

Imagine my surprise when I observed that the only thing the teen did in the game was to drive a taxi. It turned out there were multiple ways to play the game, and this young man's preference happened to be driving around the streets of Liberty City.

He had, however, developed an unusual method for being a cabbie. Rather than slowing down before picking up a fare, he would often run a person over, wait for him or her to get back up (as if nothing had happened) and climb into his cab, then drive away. I could just imagine how this might appear in a newspaper: "Teen Learns Violent Acts Have No Repercussions."

"Would you ever get in a taxi that ran you over?" I asked. Without breaking contact with the game the boy responded, "The A.I. is dumb," referring to the code controlling the behavior of his passengers.

This was my first of many "aha" moments as I delved into the world of games and learning. The teen was not learning to be violent. Rather, he was learning how to analyze the rules of a system and leverage its flaws.

As Ian Bogost has written elsewhere in this volume, when we play video games, "We explore the possibility space its rules afford by manipulating the symbolic systems the game provides."⁷ By exploring *Grand Theft Auto*, this boy had discovered possibilities its designers most likely had never intended, and he was manipulating the system to his own advantage. More to the point, he very well knew it.

The Problem of Pedagogy

In the field of youth development, "youth media" refers to programs that help teenagers develop media skills, which they, in turn, use to express their thoughts and feelings and educate others. They might produce a video, or a Web site, or a book of poetry.

This strikes me as a conceptual offshoot of the general field of media literacy, which teaches consumers how to think critically about the effects (mostly negative) that various forms of mass media have on our minds and values, such as the influence of advertising on children. I can easily recall my first lesson in media literacy, in the cartoonish voice of Carol Channing, from the feminist-inspired children's album *Free to Be, You and Me*:

The lady we see when we are watching TV
 The lady who smiles as she scours or scrubs or rubs or washes . . .
 That lady is smiling because she is an actress
 And she's earning money for learning those speeches
 That mention those wonderful soaps and detergents and cleaners and powders . . .
 So, the very next time you happen to be
 Just sitting there quietly watching TV . . .
 Remember, no one smiles doing housework but those ladies you see on TV
 Your mommy hates housework . . . And when you grow up, so will you.⁸

That was a powerful lesson for an eight-year-old: Beware! Media pay adults to lie to you, to misrepresent the world to get you to buy products. It's little wonder that, as an adult, I was able to learn so easily how to develop youth media programs without access to any of the media's underlying pedagogical theory. All I had to do was watch other youth media practitioners and then try it myself to see that youth media's core paradigm concerns itself with the framing and addressing of two issues, which I will call the problems of representation and manipulation.

Most media do not accurately represent, when they attempt to represent at all, youth voices. To address this, one framework for media literacy challenges us to ask of any media

message, "What lifestyles, values, and points of view are represented in—or omitted from—this message?"⁹ When it comes to the specific voices of Global Kids' youth leaders, who tend to be youth of color from low-income neighborhoods, not only are their voices absent, but their representation to the public, and the issues that most concern them, are vastly distorted. Youth media positions itself as a necessary corrective, putting the power of media into the hands of the disenfranchised.

At the same time, media are seen to have a power that shapes our attitudes and desires, often without our knowing it. Media critic Noam Chomsky goes so far as to frame mass media within what he calls a "propaganda model," wherein the role of media is to mobilize support for the dominant interest groups to maintain their power.¹⁰ They make children want fast food and adults believe in a connection between Iraq and the attacks of 9/11; they create a narrow range for holding public debates and deride all critical thought.

As such, youth media positions itself as an essential tool for a healthy democracy, developing citizens with the conceptual tools necessary to deconstruct the workings of media—whether television, movies, music, or advertising. As if against a virus, such programs inoculate youth against media's most virulent strains. Rather than become pawns of media, this training allows youth to maintain their independent perspectives and to be critical of the biases inherent in representation.

It was not much of a challenge to view Global Kids' new gaming programs from this perspective. Building games and critically playing games would empower the youth in our programs to use games as a means to express themselves and educate others while training them to be critical consumers of the games they already played. But we soon learned that a field of theory had developed specifically to address the vast learning potential these games—and other media within the popular culture landscape—afford.

We read Stephen Johnson's *Everything Bad Is Good For You*,¹¹ and learned that a new paradigm sees unparalleled learning opportunities in the increased complexity that exists in the forms of television and games, regardless of their specific subject matter. In a similar vein, Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, in their seminal game design textbook *Rules of Play*,¹² argue that games teach best when the core mechanic, the thing one learns to actually do to play the game, is itself the subject being taught, rather than a set of facts or figures. I saw the focus shifting from the content to the form, from the subject of a game to what it means to learn to play it.

We then read James Paul Gee and a number of others from the University of Wisconsin–Madison's Games, Learning, and Society group, who are articulating how digital games offer insights into key questions of learning and literacy.¹³ As we learned about this, we did not have to throw out the old paradigm of youth media; however, we were challenged to reorient our framework toward the new problem that a games-based literacy often aims to address—the problem of pedagogy.

When I first began speaking with program officers at various foundations about games and learning, one of the first things I had to explain was that the world has moved far beyond Pong and Pac Man. Today's games have become increasingly complex, often supported by Web-based fora, complex guide books, and affinity groups.¹⁴ They frequently offer various ways to play, as I learned from my encounter with the *Grand Theft Auto* taxi driver, and they force players to explore complex ethical decisions.¹⁵ Games can teach players to develop critical thinking, comprehend sophisticated models of the world, understand complex systems theory, and more.

In fact, the learning found in today's video games, and associated affinity groups, offers a powerful model for resolving the conflict between, and limitations of, a permissive

anything-goes progressive pedagogy (on the one hand), and a more traditional one focused on an expert imparting knowledge (on the other hand).¹⁶ Gee refers to this as a “post-progressive pedagogy.” Forget “No Child Left Behind,” his work suggests. All children are getting left behind, trapped in a deficient educational model that leaves them ill-prepared for the globalized workplace of the twenty-first century.

Advocates of the educational use of games do not always dismiss media critics’ concerns about the power of mass media—they just find that these critics often miss the point. Jenkins criticizes those whom he calls “critical pessimists,” who “often exaggerate the power of big media in order to frighten readers into taking action.”¹⁷ This leaves a false impression that hinders those interested in leveraging the participatory power of new media. According to Jenkins, this exaggerated rhetoric “rests on melodramatic discourse about the victimization and vulnerability, seduction and manipulation”¹⁸ of media consumers. Gee is in agreement, writing, “people are not dupes . . . necessarily taking from a video game . . . any one predictable message predetermined by the design of the game . . .”¹⁹

Rather than focus on “what media is doing to us,” we should focus on “what we are doing with media,”²⁰ and learn how we can do so within, but not limited to or by, formalized learning spaces. This learning, according to Jenkins, is essential for today’s youth to develop the skills they need to participate fully in the world of tomorrow.²¹

However, when Global Kids decided to approach games as a form of youth media, there were few examples of programs designed around such a games-based post-progressive pedagogy; there were no Carol Channings we could hum along with as our guide. How could an educator harness informal learning practices developed around—and through—vehicles of digital play, in order to build a formalized setting that would institutionalize this process? We had little choice but to apply these new ideas ourselves, and figure out how those like Gee’s could be incorporated with those embedded in an already-familiar model of youth media literacy.

So This Guy Walks into a Situated Learning Matrix . . .

An important thing to keep in mind about Gee’s work is that he is not necessarily arguing that games should be used for education. Rather, he wants to draw our attention to the powerful forms of learning already available in many games, regardless of their subject matter.

Gee calls upon those outside the gaming world to consider the kinds of learning theory that games support and to apply it in explicitly educational contexts, with or without the use of games themselves. Inscribed in Gee’s thinking is a model he calls a **Situated Learning Matrix, which defines the conditions required for good learning to take place** (as currently modeled by good video games), described in his contribution to this volume, “Learning and Games.” Rather than teach content directly, such as by listing facts on a board, in Gee’s framework content is situated in a “goal-driven, identity-focused experience,”²² and the content is encountered, interrogated, and absorbed in that specific context.

This leads to the question: How does this approach align with the youth development and civic engagement pedagogy used by Global Kids?

Playing 4 Keeps and the Birth of Ayiti

DeWayne, a junior at Brooklyn’s South Shore High School, first learned of *Playing 4 Keeps* from an announcement over the loudspeaker explaining a new afterschool program about

games. DeWayne often describes himself as someone who had been hanging out with the wrong crowd and doing things he ought not be doing. But that year he was ready for a change.

Over the course of the school year, DeWayne, along with Kristina and other youth leaders, met for two hours once a week in a computer lab at their school. For many, it would be their only time during the week in front of a computer. My colleague—Afi French—and I facilitated the workshops, often with the assistance and contributions of a number of designers from Gamelab. Over the course of the year-long program, we went from playing and critiquing games to exploring global human rights issues, to collaborating closely with Gamelab on the creation of what became *Ayiti*, to—eventually—launching the game online.

“We understand that there are a lot of different things going on in the world,” DeWayne told me, “and poverty hit our mind quick fast.” Why poverty? “Poverty is not just about being homeless and hungry. We want to get that out there to other people and let them know that it’s in other places besides America.” But why a game? “You can actually see how they are living. You can live like the family, work like them.” So what does the game teach? “It lets you know that times are hard and people need help.”

Games are being used in this context as a form of persuasive media “to change opinion or action”; however, *Ayiti* persuades not by harnessing the more traditional practice of verbal or visual rhetoric, but by what Ian Bogost terms *procedural rhetoric*, “through the authorship of rules of behavior [and] the construction of dynamic models.”²³ As a popular online game magazine noted: “*Ayiti* . . . manages to deliver a strong political message without sacrificing strategy or entertainment, balancing real-life information with gaming convention.”²⁴ In other words, students like DeWayne found their voices as engaged global citizens by creating a game that represented poverty as a dynamic system.

With online partners like UNICEF and TakingITglobal, within seven months of its release over 600,000 teens played the game (figures 1 and 2).

Do Avatars Dream of Virtual Marshmallows?

Camp Global Kids took a very different approach from that of *Playing 4 Keeps*. While the latter used the learning potential of game development, the former focused on the learning potential within virtual worlds. *Camp Global Kids* took place on *Global Kids Island*, a virtual space within the teen grid of *Second Life*.

Teen Second Life (TSL) is the growing online space for 13–17-year-olds within *Second Life*, a virtual world wherein millions of people create avatars and develop unique living environments and strong social networks. (For more on *Second Life*, please read Cory Ondrejka’s contribution to this volume, “Education Unleashed: Participatory Culture, Education, and Innovation in *Second Life*.”) By most definitions, *TSL* is not a game. There are no levels to achieve, no short- or long-term win states, no scripted fantasy narratives to explore. However, while not strictly a digital game, there is little doubt that *TSL* is still a space of digital play, offering many of the affordances available through digital games.

Global Kids developed a host of interactive experiential workshops for the *TSL* environment based on those used in Global Kids’ offline programs. During these workshops—flying above the ground and dressed in inventive outfits—teen members discuss such topics as racism within virtual worlds, genocide in Darfur, global poverty, and the digital divide. We found that teens arrive on our island already possessing many leadership skills, often without an awareness of this fact. These skills are strengthened through the process of learning how



Figure 1
A screen shot of *Ayiti: The Cost of Life*.

to create their own avatars, objects, activities, and social narratives. Through our workshops, they learn to view themselves as individuals who can care about and help shape the world around them.

Camp Global Kids was the first virtual summer camp in *TSL*, taking place during the summer of 2006. This groundbreaking experiment gathered together a diverse group of sixteen teens logging in from three countries. Two of the teens were full-time interns, one in our office and one working remotely from his home in another state. Two others were assigned the role of “embedded reporters,” documenting their experiences on our blog (HolyMeatballs.org). Within *TSL*, some teens reflected their real races, genders, and species through the design of their avatars; others chose, instead, to represent themselves as a “knife wielding teddy bear” or played with altering their races or genders.

In *Camp Global Kids*, we adapted our real-world educational workshops for use in *TSL*, both in concept and in practice, raising students’ awareness of global issues like the impact of war or the genocide in Darfur, while helping them to realize what they can do to influence change in their world. While adapting these workshops was not a simple process, we eventually learned how to create experiential learning within the surreal physics, social networks, and unique youth culture of a virtual world.

For example, a workshop we often facilitate is called “Race to the Bottom.” Participants are divided into teams and represent different developing nations, like Haiti. They then are pitted against one another in an attempt to curry the interests of a multinational corporation (played by the facilitators) as they have to balance the economic benefits of a new factory against the impact of reduced human rights and environmental standards. The politics are



Figure 2
Students playing *Ayiti* at the launch party.

didactic, but it is a fun workshop that clearly makes its point and allows for a vigorous postgame discussion.

In the real world, we simply don't have the time or resources to reproduce much of the simulation, such as the setting, props, or costumes. We leave these to the imagination. Yet this is not required in a virtual world like *Second Life*. In the real world, when we run the Race to the Bottom workshop, we don't bring students to a working factory and dress them in the outfits of people from the competing countries; to suggest taking such an approach for a forty-minute workshop would be absurd. But to suggest *not* doing so in *TSL*, in which the campers can produce all of the required elements, would be equally absurd. As such, the workshop took place in a simulation of a working factory, with one wall dominated by an industrial fan; the facilitators were dressed in sharp business suits; bidding was performed by piling up colored boxes to represent concessions offered to the multinationals. All elements just described, and more, were digitally designed and created by the campers themselves, in advance of the actual workshop.

After a few weeks of similar workshops, we challenged the campers to pick one topic and develop a method for educating their community about it. They chose one of the hardest topics we had discussed: child sex trafficking. To educate their peers and inspire them to take action, they built an elaborate maze, metaphorically representing the passage of a youth from being trapped in the system to one freed by the efforts of international advocates. Maze



Figure 3
Campers tour their finished maze against child sex trafficking.

visitors collected virtual issue-related freebies (e.g., a ball and chain that stated, “I wear this to bring attention to child sex trafficking”), they answered multiple-choice questions based on the information they learned, and they were teleported to a monument in the sky, dedicated to those still trapped in the system, which offered a variety of actions teens could now take.

In the first eight weeks after launch, over 2,500 teens visited the maze, with 20 percent donating money. As one camper reported after the program had concluded, “Before camp I never thought about issues in the world. Well, I did but I never thought there was anything I could do to fix them. But I’ve found out that I can help to make a difference” (figure 3).

Modding

Modding refers to the ability of game players to build new extensions, even completely new versions, of existing games. This has become so normal that many game designers depend on their players to create the tools and content that will maintain interest in the game over time. Modding became an important tool for our teens in *Second Life*—not only in how they participated, but in how they learned.

Gee contends that this aspect of video games “allow[s] players not just to be passive consumers but also active producers who can customize their own learning experience.”²⁵ This lines up very nicely with viewing games as a form of youth media, while modding teaches youth—through building their own versions of existing media properties—to understand the framework within which games operate. At the same time, modding is a strong component of Jenkins’s argument for a “participatory culture” in which youth engage with popular culture not just by consuming it, but by transforming it in the process.²⁶

We knew this when we designed *Camp GK*. At least we thought we did. We knew the teens loved to build. It is the *lingua franca* of their virtual world, arguably nothing more

than one giant, collective mod. To meet this need, the camp was structured to end with a final, collective build (what eventually became their maze). We soon realized, however, that was hardly adequate. They wanted to build every day. All the time. Even when we were not meeting.

They built the clubhouse where each day began and the campfire where it ended. They populated the former with chairs, plants, and lights, and the latter with marshmallows on sticks. They initiated and held their own competition to build a *Camp GK* logo and virtual T-shirt, then posted the design on the Web site CafePress.com where physical objects (like notebooks and coffee mugs) could be purchased. They were not content attending the program we had developed for them; they wanted, as Gee contends, to customize their own learning experience.

Why were we caught by surprise? Because we had forgotten our Gee! "In school," Gee writes, "the teacher is the insider and the learners are outsiders who must take what they are given as mere consumers." However, "game designers and game players are both insiders and producers—if players so choose—and there need be no outside."²⁷ The residents in *Camp GK* did so choose, the outside was erased, and we were caught unprepared.

Epistemic Learning

Gee's Situated Learning Matrix, discussed elsewhere in this volume, includes the notion of epistemic learning, which has been clearly articulated in the book *How Computer Games Help Children Learn*, written by his colleague, David Williamson Shaffer.²⁸ Epistemic learning looks to the ways that certain games afford their players the opportunity to step virtually into the shoes of a specific profession and, through game play, become familiar with its domains of knowledge, skill base, values, identities, and ways of thinking about the world.²⁹ As with Gee, Shaffer is interested in not only how games can offer this form of learning, but how educators can adapt it outside of games as well.

Global Kids developed *Playing 4 Keeps* before learning about the concept of epistemic learning. However, when we were first introduced to the concept and looked at our program from this perspective, we asked ourselves how well we were preparing the youth leaders to view the world as professional game designers. We realized we were coming up short. Sure, we were teaching them important skills, but only in a general sense. We were failing to provide them with the specific context, the context of the professional game developer, to tie it all together. And, as Gee writes, "learning out of context leaves learners with knowledge they cannot apply."³⁰

We were no longer simply interested in teaching our youth skills in the classroom and providing them with opportunities to express themselves. We wanted to develop opportunities for them to be immersed in the world of this specific profession. We visited a game design office to see where game designers work. We went to a gaming conference to hear what game designers sound like. We brought in game developer magazines to read what game designers think about. We visited a "History of Games" exhibit in a museum to see what they selected and why. We created opportunities for the most articulate students to speak about the program at conferences—such as the annual Game Developers Conference—at a meeting on educational technology held at Microsoft, and even on a panel about games and learning alongside Gee and Jenkins.

It did not matter whether any of what the students saw made sense to them in any immediately practical manner. Often the discourse was, by its very nature, over their heads,

as it was intended for other game designers and not outsiders listening in. But that was precisely the point: to expose them repeatedly to the epistemic frame of this field. So when we returned from a rather academic debate about the nature of game design, they did not report learning about, say, the gendered nature of play, but rather, as one youth leader noted (quite disappointedly), that “Game designers look like normal people.”



As it would turn out, they were learning more than what it means to be game designers. By visiting our offices each week, traveling with us, learning from us, watching how Afi and I spoke to one another, observing how we dressed, and so forth, they also had an epistemic learning experience regarding what it means to be a Global Kids’ trainer, as Kristina had so kindly brought to our attention.

So while a youth media model offers one framework for viewing the *Playing 4 Keeps* program, we can also see how exclusively doing so would ignore the epistemic potential of the program, just to pick one of many components within Gee’s Matrix. We need not focus on one framework over the other; both have valuable things to offer. And both fit well within a youth development model, building youth voices by focusing on their current interests, abilities, and strengths.

21st Century Learning Skills

When I think about my baby son, or about any of my students, I can relate to the problems of pedagogy encountered by those grappling with games-based learning. Youth development programs share a similar concern, as we too attempt to develop critical thinking skills that are not necessarily designed for passing standardized tests. And we are not alone. A broader educational framework has been articulated, called 21st Century Learning Skills, detailing many of the educational objectives undertaken by most youth media, youth development, and games-based learning programs.³¹ Developed, supported, and put into practice through funding offered by a broad range of high-profile foundations and corporations (including many who have funded our digital media work at Global Kids), companies like Time Warner, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, the Microsoft Corporation, and the MacArthur Foundation recognize that we need to embrace new models for thinking about education.

21st Century Learning Skills puts into high relief the failed pedagogy built into the current “No Child Left Behind” model. As Gee writes, “Education has for well over a hundred years cycled between arguments for ‘progressive’ approaches to education and arguments for ‘traditional’ approaches to education . . . Good video games solve this dilemma.”³² And they solve it in a way that situates a games-based literacy as a strong addition to any program focused on developing 21st Century Learning Skills while challenging our current system to move toward this alternative educational vision.

In fact, Jenkins contends that since “schools as institutions have been slow to react” to these new opportunities, “the greatest opportunities for change is currently found in afterschool programs and informal learning communities.”³³ Global Kids is cognizant of and inspired by the unique role it can play in this process, and it looks forward to collaborating with others to help bring about this change.

At a personal level, this gives me hope, both for Global Kids’ youth leaders and the future education of youth like my son. Speaking of my son, you might recall I earlier mentioned that my wife found it convenient to use games as a model to describe the education she was receiving as a new mother. What interested me most at the time was that while my wife loves our son, she hates video games. She has not touched one in years. So even someone with

no direct experience of contemporary video games, even one who hates to play them, could value and find useful the post-progressive learning theories embedded within them. Perhaps this is yet another example of expectations being revised. Perhaps it means a new praxis has been established, transmitting elements of the games and learning meme and signaling the arrival of a new paradigm that can deeply affect the future of education.

Perhaps somewhere, out there, Carol Channing is singing a new song.

Notes

1. Yasmin B. Kafai, Gender Differences in Children's Constructions of Video Games, in *Interacting with Video*, eds. Patricia R. Greenfield and Rodney R. Cocking (Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1996)
2. Ian Bogost, The Rhetoric of Video Games, in *The Ecology of Games: Connecting Youth, Games, and Learning*, ed. Katie Salen (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2007), 117–39.
3. A month after I wrote this paragraph, I read the following in Arie Kaplan's excellent *Masters of the Comic Book Universe Revealed* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2006): "In the 1960s, in the pages of a particularly lighthearted issue of *Fantastic Four*, writer Stan Lee jokingly announced that he and cartoonist Jack Kirby should be considered by the Pulitzer Prize Committee for their work on the *FF*. At the time, it was a joke: a *comic book* winning the Pulitzer? How ridiculous! With *Maus*, it's no joke."
4. Henry Jenkins, *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century* (Chicago: The MacArthur Foundation, 2006), 24.
5. *Ibid.*, 21.
6. Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 259.
7. Bogost, The Rhetoric of Video Games, 121.
8. Carol Channing, "Housework, Written by Sheldon Harnick." *Free to Be, You and Me* (New York: Bell Records, 1972).
9. Tessa Jolls, Jeff Share, and Elizabeth Thoman, *Five Key Questions That Can Change the World* (San Francisco: Center for Media Literacy, 2005), 3.
10. Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent* (New York: Pantheon, 1988).
11. Steven Johnson, *Everything Bad Is Good for You* (London: Riverhead Trade, 2005).
12. Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, *Rules of Play* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2003).
13. Examples of this work can be found at Academic ADL Co-Lab, the University of Wisconsin–Madison, at <http://www.academiccolab.org/initiatives/gapps.html>. Accessed June 19, 2007.
14. James Paul Gee, Learning and Games, in *The Ecology of Games: Connecting Youth, Games, and Learning*, ed. Katie Salen (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2007), 21–40.
15. In his earlier book, *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Games and Learning* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), Gee refers to the form as the "Multiple Route Principle," and the latter as the "Cultural Models About the World Principle."
16. Gee, Learning and Games.
17. Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 259.
18. *Ibid.*

19. James Paul Gee, *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Games and Learning* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 200.
20. Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 259.
21. Jenkins, *Confronting the Challenges*, 3.
22. Gee, *Learning and Games*, 26.
23. Bogost, *The Rhetoric of Video Games*, 125.
24. Jay Is Games, *Best of Casual Games 2006*. http://www.jayisgames.com/bestof/2006/best_of_simulation_results.php. Accessed June 19, 2007.
25. Gee, *What Video Games Have to Teach Us*, 194.
26. Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 162.
27. Gee, *What Video Games Have to Teach Us*, 194.
28. David Williamson Shaffer, *How Computer Games Help Children Learn* (New York: Palgrave, 2006).
29. Ibid.
30. Gee, *What Video Games Have to Teach Us*, 194.
31. An excellent resource is the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, <http://www.21stcenturyskills.org>. Accessed June 19, 2007.
32. Gee, *Learning and Games*.
33. Jenkins, *Confronting the Challenges*, 4.