GRAND THEFT EDUCATION
Literacy in the Age of Video Games
A Forum with Jane Avrich, Steven Johnson, Raph Koster,
and Thomas de Zengotita

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GRAND THEFT EDUCATION

Literacy in the age of video games

"It should be noted that children at play are not playing about," wrote Montaigne; "their games should be seen as their most serious-minded activity." If true, this bodes well for the industriousness of our rising generation, for whom playing games—that is, video games, sales of which last year eclipsed Hollywood's box-office gross—borders on an occupation. Three fifths of American teenagers play video games each week, and a quarter play six hours or more.

Lesson plans are being adjusted accordingly. Last year hundreds of new educational video games were released, on subjects ranging from algebra to U.S. history. Players can coordinate hunger relief in a U.N. game called Food Force, or flee the perils of overeating in Escape from ObeezCity. The Army has developed some fifty different video games with which to instruct its soldiers.

In order to assess the video game's pedagogical potential, but also its implications for the English language, Harper's Magazine brought together four experts—two video-game enthusiasts and two teachers—and charged them with a task: to dream up video games that might teach, of all things, writing.
The following forum is based on a discussion that took place this summer at the New School, in New York City. Bill Wasik served as moderator.

JANE AVIRICH

is the author of The Winter Without Milk, a collection of short stories. She has taught English at Saint Ann's School, in Brooklyn, New York, for fifteen years.

STEVEN JOHNSON


RAFAH KOSTER

has been a video-game designer for many years, most recently at Sony Online Entertainment, where he was chief creative officer; games on which he has served as lead designer include Star Wars Galaxies and Ultima Online. He is the author of A Theory of Fun for Game Design.

THOMAS DE ZENGOTITA

is a contributing editor of Harper's Magazine and a teacher at the Dalton School, in New York City, and as well at NYU. His book, Mediated: How the Media Shapes the World and the Way You Live in It, received the 2006 Marshall McLuhan Award from the Media Ecology Association.

BILL WASIK

is a senior editor of Harper's Magazine.

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**LESSON 1: GRAMMAR, SPELLING, PUNCTUATION**

BILL WASIK: Let's begin with the simple elements of writing—grammar, punctuation, and spelling. It seems as though rote learning is where video games would naturally excel. What would be the best approach to teach the rote parts of writing?

RAFAH KOSTER: To start, we should take a step back and think about how the learning process works in games. Games, fundamentally, are models. They're little toy simulations of some aspect of reality.

STEVEN JOHNSON: Right. One of the main things that games do is teach us how to play them.

KOSTER: But often what we're learning from them bears no resemblance whatsoever to what we think we're learning. In Pac-Man, we think we're eating dots, but the game is actually about visiting every location on a grid. With first-person shooter games like Grand Theft Auto, we're learning to position a cursor on a screen accurately.

For our spelling game, we might consider modifying an instructional typing game I once played called Typing of the Dead. This was a spinoff from light-gun games, where you aim a gun at a screen and the computer detects where on the screen you're pointing. In the original game, you simply have to shoot the zombies before they eat you and all the other people around you. Well, the game makers developed an alternate version of this game that is frankly ludicrous, when you first think about it, but is actually brilliant. To each zombie they added a placard with a word printed on it. Instead of shooting the zombie, the player simply had to type the word.

THOMAS DE ZENGOTITA: That's a perfect idea.

JANE AVIRICH: I want to play that game.

KOSTER: And it works. You learn how to touch-type. Now, the zombies are not the important part. The zombies are what I call the dressing. They're irrelevant. They're also peripheral to the game, the goal of which is simply to rack up points.

WASIK: Would the game have the same pedagogical value if the dressing were more pedestrian? If instead of shooting zombies you shot words on a virtual chalkboard? Does it have to look like sweets instead of vegetables?

KOSTER: It's long been known that brussels sprouts are not as much fun as chocolate. As Mark Twain put it, "Work consists of whatever a body is obliged to do. Play consists of whatever a body is not obliged to do."

AVIRICH: Right. Tom Sawyer gets the other kids to paint Aunt Polly's fence by turning it into play.

KOSTER: It's very important to set up that context. In the video-game world, this is called the "magic circle" surrounding games. And it has to be a circle of no consequence: What you're doing here doesn't matter outside it, so it's okay to fail. You're forgiven. One of the problems with standard pedagogy is that it all matters too much. There's a pressure to succeed. And that turns off a lot of learners. Pressure situations are difficult for some people.

WASIK: So zombies it is. Presumably, as students go along in the game the words will get more difficult? The zombies wieldier?

JOHNSON: All good games start off relatively simple and they get more and more challenging. The learning is what keeps you roped in: Wow, it got a little bit harder, but I've gotten a little bit better.
KOSTER: Your long-term goal is to get a high score. You’ve got the medium goal of destroying whatever the enemy is. And you have an immediate goal: an obstacle to overcome. And right there is where the learning comes, in making that obstacle something that can teach you a skill.

JOHNSON: Any successful game works through a mix of exploration and reward. There are various different rewards promised at every level. And at the same time the player is exploring a space, trying to figure out how it works, or where that reward is going to come from. That mix is very primal, very attractive.

WASK: So for our writing game—at least in its simplest,rote-learning module—students will shoot the zombie with the mispelled word, or else he’s going to eat them. Does it matter if they use the gun or the keyboard—that is, if instead of gunning down the enemy they just had to type the correctly spelled word?

KOSTER: When it comes to fun, there is no one size that fits all. It’s very much dependent on what skills you bring to the table. My kids, for example, would have far more trouble than older kids would with the typing version of the game. If you can’t type, the typing version of the game is going to be excruciatingly difficult—it will be more about the typing than it is about the spelling. So you do have to make that decision very carefully.

JOHNSON: If games are too hard they’re boring, and if they’re too easy they’re boring, but if they’re right in the zone they’re addictive.

KOSTER: A large part of game design is figuring out the interface. Compare marbles with chess: both games are about territory, but the mechanical action of capturing the territory is radically different. And because of that, I will forever suck at marbles.

JOHNSON: Wait, there’s a game with marbles?

ZENGOTTITTA: [Laughs] Son, let me tell you about it.

KOSTER: You make a circle on the ground, and you try to knock opponents’ marbles out of it.

JOHNSON: Cool.

KOSTER: So the interfaces of the two games—having to flick the marble versus putting a piece down on the board—are very different. A three-year-old can be a chess prodigy if he understands chess perfectly, even if he has trouble moving the piece. We give him a pass on moving the piece. He’s still considered to be good at chess.

JOHNSON: That’s a hole in traditional game theory, by the way, which is accustomed to dealing with categories of games in which there’s no difficulty of execution: poker, chess, and so on. This category of game—in which the act of performing the moves requires a certain level of skill—hasn’t really been considered. When you move into the realm of video games, you have games that not only involve a lot of information, like poker and chess do, but also are challenging in the physical execution of the task.

KOSTER: But that isn’t new to video games. In fact, we have always had games whose outcomes are determined primarily by interface. They’re called physical sports. Think about it: What you’re mastering is the interface between you and this round object that obeys the laws of physics. When you learn to play soccer, by dribbling around the cones, you’re just learning an interface. It’s analogous to having to master the array of buttons in Defender.

ZENGOTTITTA: I do want to interject here, though. It’s really interesting to think of actual soccer as an interface between your body and the ball, etc. But should we be cautious about such metaphors? Don’t the privileges of reality need protecting? Doesn’t it matter that in the case of a soccer “interface,” the moves that you make are the moves that are happening on the field? Whereas when you press buttons on a controller, what’s happening on the screen isn’t even mimetically related to what you do with the buttons.

KOSTER: Sure. But I would point out that in video games, there’s a broad spectrum of interfaces that range from the completely nonmimetic to the perfectly mimetic. In our zombie game with the light gun, the player is not just doing mimicry. He or she is actually firing a gun.

WASK: Jane, you’re the English teacher in the room. How would our zombie game go over with students? It does sound a bit more fun than typical grammar instruction.
AVRICH: Actually, one of the main tools that I use as a teacher is play. First, I should explain that my school, Saint Ann's, is very unconventional: no grades, no ranking. Our grammar workbook, which was written by one of our own teachers, is full of wacky stories and poems. But when I teach it, I pretend that the students and I are in a strict Puritan classroom. I get rid of my jewelry—"frippery," as we call it. I put on a bib, a bonnet, and this hideous, tattered schoolmarm's jacket. My voice becomes a horrible, ear-splitting shriek. I turn to the blackboard, and when I turn back, I am no longer Ms. Avrich; I am "Mistress Jane," and all the children are now Puritan children. If they answer a question incorrectly, if they are not paying attention, if they do not speak courteously and audibly, they get a demerit. If they do all this correctly, they get a star. Three stars earn you a sticker, three demerits a dunce cap. At which point you must stand on your chair while everyone hisses at you.

JOHNSON: That's hilarious.

AVRICH: It gets worse. If you can't sit still, you get tied to your chair with your shoelaces. If you can't stop talking, your mouth gets taped shut. Or "corked," which means that the page in the workbook is stuffed into your mouth.

KOSTER: It's a classic game.

AVRICH: Sure. In certain ways, it's like a video game, in that it's based on repetition, and on pattern finding. Like in a video game, you learn the rules by playing, by seeing how the system evolves, instead of just being told at the beginning. It has the same elements of increasing difficulty and reward. But there's also a group dynamic involved, especially in the punishment aspect, in the spectacle of public humiliation. Yet the students love it. Every year, their attention spans get shorter, and every year they beg for it more.

LESSON 2: ARGUMENT

WASK: Let's move on to a significantly more conceptual aspect of writing for our game to teach. Most nonfiction writing assignments call upon students to make arguments—using if-then logic, the "rules" of the world, to assert the truth of a proposition. Video games, of course, are based on complicated sets of rules, and often they say something about the world—such as SimCity, in which players design an entire city and try to help it thrive over time.

KOSTER: It's worth noting that Will Wright, the designer of SimCity, has been critiqued over the rules in his game. For example, some people said he made too much of the importance of mass transit.

JOHNSON: Last fall one of the top-selling games in the country was Civilization IV, in which you re-create the entire course of human economic and technological history. That's what kids today do for fun. Really, the fact that titles with such a cognitive challenge to them are bestsellers is pretty remarkable. Games have gotten vastly more complex than they were twenty years ago. There has been this amazing rise in both the complexity of the games and the willingness of the audience to submit themselves to that kind of mental challenge.

WASK: So could an intensively rules-based game like Civilization IV help kids learn to make arguments about the course of civilization, in much the same way that a good book might? Even if the game had its biases—emphasizing, say, guns rather than germs or steel—it could still teach kids how, under that given model, civilizations tended to succeed or fail.

AVRICH: I think video games could teach logical, consequential thinking very effectively.

KOSTER: The best model here, actually, is the videogame hint guide. Take Grand Theft Auto, whose rules are fairly free-form, without any specific goal that you have to reach. Lots of players have written their own game guides, with advice and hints about how to tackle problems. Some of these run to more than a thousand pages of densely packed, single-spaced small type—longer than Tom Wolfe's last book.

JOHNSON: That's absolutely right. Game guides make explicit what is happening implicitly in the mind of somebody playing the game, which is the ongoing attempt to figure out the underlying rules of the system. Some of these rules are very explicit—
you must have X amount of energy to stay alive, you must have fifteen gold coins to buy a sword, you must have a power plant in your city to be able to build anything else. But most of the time what you're trying to figure out are more subtle rules—the physics of the world, the economics of the world, the underlying logic of the system, even weird glitches in the code. Game guides synthesize all that knowledge, translate it into prose, make it intelligible to other people.

WASKI: So to teach argument, rather than designing a new game, we could have students write guides about the games they already play. But how do we know that the lessons will stick? How can we be sure that they'll be able to abstract this knowledge out of the gaming world and into the real world?

JOHNSON: I'm convinced that there has to be some kind of transfer. If you spend time assessing these complex systems and writing about them, then you should be able to take that skill and apply it to a real-world ecosystem or a political system or a cultural system.

ZENGOTTA: Okay, but while I'm trying to budget for my curmudgeon factor—this is not the world I grew up in—I have to say that I'm skeptical. I see how students could learn to write analytically, deeply, about the systems of rules that are embedded in video games, rules that appear in the game to be the way the world actually works. But when the players go out into the real world, I think there's a real danger—and I see signs of this in my students, and young people in general— of failing to understand not just the complexity of the real world but also its mystery. I'm using “mystery” as opposed to “problem” on purpose: problems have solutions, mysteries don't. People are profoundly mysterious entities, I think, and understanding them in the real world involves understanding that you're never going to entirely understand them.

KOSTER: I call it gamist thinking, and I strongly agree with you.

JOHNSON: Of course, I agree, too. You do have to grow up from the game.

ZENGOTTA: Good, good.

KOSTER: To bring solely a gamist perspective to the world is a really big mistake. But of course this perspective predates video games. It harkens back to behaviorist psychology, and a variety of unsavory political movements as well.

ZENGOTTA: It's systems-based thinking, model-based thinking. I can't claim that Donald Rumsfeld or Robert McNamara were products of a video-game education. But they show all the symptoms of it.

WASKI: Within reason, though, it seems as if you all agree that analyzing these complex games, and writing about their worlds, might serve as good preparation for the task of argument.

KOSTER: The people who write strategy guides are the kind of people who grow up to write non-fiction books. Seriously, it's a personality trait. I've seen many, many examples of it—players who started out being interested in, say, guild dynamics in adventure games, and now they have their Ph.D.'s and are doing ethnographic studies of guilds.

LESSON 3: PLOT

WASKI: Let me now broaden the question somewhat. Are there any other structural aspects of writing that we can model on the rules of games? Narrative, for example, was taught for centuries on the Aristotelian scheme of rising action, climax, denouement. What about a game called SimStory, in which what the player creates and grooms is not a society but a well-balanced narrative?

JOHNSON: There are two ways you could do it, one of which I think would potentially work, the other of which would not. The first would be to use the game as a way to broaden the realm of experiences the students have, to trigger their creativity. If they want to write a story about what it was like to live in a medieval village, then through video games they now can go experience that in a way they couldn't before. But in the other approach—where the actual text of the story is being built and evaluated inside the game—you would need a game engine that itself had some form of consciousness. You can't evaluate complex forms of writing without consciousness. And with our current technology, you know, my grammar checker in Microsoft Word can't even tell if my subjects and verbs agree.

KOSTER: It's true, though, that like any art form, writing is very, very heavily formal. Incidentally, I don't know if you all know this, but I don't come from the computer world at all. I actually have a master of fine arts in poetry. I'm probably the only person in the room to have written a garland of sonnets—a form that was out of date 300 years ago. Any of you who have taught or taken creative-writing classes know that you learn and absorb a giant pile of formal rules, often contradictory, and then learn when to use and when not to use them. The classic arc, the monomythic structure. Creative-writing exercises are designed to put you through the paces. Write an interior monologue. Write something in the second person, even though you probably will never do so again.

AVRICH: I've definitely seen that by restricting the autonomy of students in writing narrative, by narrowing their choices, it can be exciting for them—it gives them more of a sense of consequence and responsibility. One model might be a game like Indigo Prophecy, which is basically
an update on choose-your-own-adventure. Or even The Sims, or any other game in which you create your own character. One eight-year-old girl I know told me that she uses her Sims characters in her own short stories.

KOSTER: There are certain kinds of underlying formal structures in game narratives, but the problem is that games never let you play with them. The games aren’t trying to teach you to assemble stories; they’re trying to give you the story experience. Which is why their stories are like really, really bad movie scripts. That’s usually what game writing is. You have the perfect best friend, played by Catherine Keener or whoever.

JOHNSON: Parker Posey.

KOSTER: Right. The games are good at that.

ZENGOTTITA: I worry that games have the same effect on the imagination that movies have. If you read a book and then see a movie based on it, there’s always dissonance. The characters in the movie are never the people who occupied your mind when you were reading the book, that you yourself constructed out of the stuff of your own life experience. On the other hand, if you go to a movie and then you read the book, it feels seamless.

JOHNSON: Yes, that’s true.

ZENGOTTITA: You submit completely to the movie. You see Keira Knightley as Elizabeth Bennett. You just let that happen.

KOSTER: There’s a reason why so many games draw their inspiration from genre fiction—sci-fi, fantasy. It’s precisely because the genres are so rigid and formulaic. In Japan there’s now a whole subgenre of romance games—although almost all of them take the man’s point of view. We haven’t yet had many romance games for women, but I think that the video game as a form will be well suited for it.

AVRICH: One gamer did create her own Sex and the City-style video game called Sex and the Single Adventuress.

KOSTER: There’s actually a Desperate Housewives one that is coming out very soon.

JOHNSON: The Sims is the closest thing we have so far. You can spend days trying to get two neighbors to fall in love and have a baby.

AVRICH: But it’s in the realm of character that the games—like genre fiction—get stuck. Both forms are entirely plot-driven.

KOSTER: All nuance is lost in games. They are intrinsically and irredeemably formal in nature.

JOHNSON: But one of the problems we have in understanding games is that we see them as being driven by their narratives. In fact, I think the narratives tend to be a vestigial part of games that has been carried over from earlier forms. When people play games, they aren’t playing them for the story. They aren’t playing them for a narrative arc of any kind. In fact, if you’re looking for an analogy, I would say that game design is closer to architecture than it is to novel writing. The designers do create resistances to certain types of behavior and encourage other types of behavior within the space, but first and foremost, they’re creating a space that can be explored and occupied in multiple ways.

LESSON 4: CHARACTERIZATION

JOHNSON: Honestly, I doubt that video games are capable of dealing with psychological depth at all. I mean, the closest thing to the interior life of characters we have is in The Sims, at the bottom of the interface, where a small chart displays your comfort level. It lists comfort, hygiene, how sleepy you are, and how full your bladder is.

AVRICH: It’s funny, when I was talking to my eight-year-old friend about The Sims, at one point she said, casually—referring to herself, not her character—that her bladder bar was red and she had to go make it green.

JOHNSON: So that’s the interior life of your character. And people were drawn to The Sims because the characters had that much of an interior life. But I just don’t think it’s possible to re-create that part of human experience in the game form. The games are about external systems and rules, and interiority is something they just don’t do very well.

AVRICH: One of my former students told me recently that she loves books as a child were the Laura Ingalls Wilder books. And the reason she gave was that the lives of Wilder’s characters were completely different from her own, and yet she felt like she could be there and be them. This is the same thing when we’re in the mind of Jane Eyre, or Isabel Archer, or whoever. To replicate that in a video game would be very difficult.

WASK: Is that an inherent limitation of video games as opposed to books?

ZENGOTTITA: I do think there is something special about the screen. In video games you get to be the star on the screen and to be the spectator at the same time. There’s a huge narcissistic charge to that.

AVRICH: Right. A video game makes the player the superstar, the central figure. It’s very me-centered. The player isn’t curious about the outside world and how to fit into it; it’s the world that has to fit into his game. The world is just a backdrop. Or a mirror.

ZENGOTTITA: This isn’t just video games, by the way. They’re part of a much broader phenomenon that one might call the “virtual revolution,” in which spectators are able to use all these new resources—video games, but also
video-hosting sites like YouTube, social-networking sites like MySpace—to overthrow the whole idea of celebrity. You get all of the gratifications of spectatorialship, but at the same time you’re also the star. And the closing of that loop, the gratification of both watching and being at the center of attention, the pleasure of that just goes on and on and on.

WASIK: Jane, earlier you compared Mistress Jane to a video game, but it does seem like there is one very crucial difference. As Mistress Jane, you are an actual person in the room, and the students know that they’re pleasing or displeasing you. Video games are just about the player.

KOSTER: I do want to correct a misapprehension about video games, though. We tend to think of the gamer as one nerdy male teenager sitting alone in front of a screen. But that is unusual in gaming. There’s a reason why all of the game of friends and comment on one another, or compete group versus group.

AVRICH: But that’s not the same thing as authority. Kids may not need hand-smacking, but they do need to have a sense that there’s a mentor figure who is guiding them and setting limits.

KOSTER: Well, all games act as an authority in some sense. Grand Theft Auto, even.

AVRICH: Oh boy, does it ever. The authority to waste you. The time I played, I crashed my car seventeen times and died.

KOSTER: Right. You did something wrong, and so the game cracked the whip.

WASIK: But you’re suggesting that increasingly it’s the social network itself, through reputation systems or what have you, that is acting as the authority?

JOHNSON: This is especially true in the online network games, too, which are really the most influential games in the world right now. Raph, actually, helped to create some of the biggest ones. With Ultima Online and other online games, we’ve had the rise of guild structures, these distributed systems for collaborating. A player who wants to slay a particular dragon will need to get twelve people together, and put one in charge of this, another in charge of that.

KOSTER: That’s right.

JOHNSON: You know, one possibility for a game to teach writing would simply be to have an open document in a Wikipedia-like format that the class works on together. It could be a short story, or it could be just a traditional paper of some kind. The game of it would simply be that people are free to make suggestions for things that could be changed or additions, and those changes could somehow be evaluated by the rest of the class. Whoever ended up making the most valuable contributions to this document would win somehow. Instead of a grade, you would get this kind of social esteem.

KOSTER: That’s a good point. One category of games that did actually teach higher orders of writing was the text-based online network game. You would go out and slay dragons, make your character more powerful, and so on, but your entire interface to the game was typing text. At the time, this was because it was the only technology available. But what it meant was that the game privileged and rewarded people who could communicate effec-
tively in text. The best players knew when to be incredibly efficient and use shorthand, and when to cut loose with lengthy role-playing text that really conveyed the intensity of, say, the virtual wedding they were performing. I know a lot of people who got to be much better writers, who went on to write published fiction, because of the training they had there.

AVRICH: But any game that would teach students real literary writing, with real characters, would have to include some real literary reading. There's no other way to learn style, tone, the uses of irony. Because on so many levels it's the language that propels the story, that creates the narrative. When I teach The Great Gatsby, I have my students keep "character lists," gathering details and quotes, and as they take down more and more quotes they get addicted to it. The jazzy cadences get into their heads, and in class they actually start to speak like Fitzgerald. Their stories become gorgeous and lilting and synesthetic—full of green tastes and glittering music.

WASK: So it's not enough to inhabit the characters; on some level they have to inhabit their language.

AVRICH: The inhabiting of the language. Exactly.

LESSON 5: GREATNESS

AVRICH: My friend Griffin suggested an idea for a game to teach writing. I thought it was very clever, considering that he's ten. He said, "What about a detective game, with questions and real clues?" Such a game would involve finding patterns and discovering evidence. It could be a great way to learn narrative.

WASK: Could you modify a game like that to include real reading?

AVRICH: Yes, my idea would basically be a hybrid. In order to move to the next phase of the game, you would have to read literary texts and answer questions about them. The questions would grow more difficult, detailed, and arcane, and the answers would create a pattern, a text within a text. The text, a unique story determined by the player, would ultimately lead you to the goal of your quest: the secret scrolls of Atlantis, for example, or the buried wing of the library of Alexandria.

But within this frame mystery would be the mysteries of the English language, everything from basic rules of grammar to the obscure etymology of words—this word is Greek, this is from the old French, this is Arabic, and so on. Our language is full of historical and cultural riddles. Drama too: the conquests that transformed it could provide great visuals. A magician-mentor figure could guide you back in time to show you through the different eras: the Druids and the Romans, the Angles and the Saxons, William the Conqueror and William Shakespeare.

KOSTER: That's a great idea. Have you heard of alternate-reality gaming?

AVRICH: I don't think so, no.

KOSTER: It's a relatively new genre of game, in which the play links up with the real world in some way. The first well-known one was actually made as a promotional campaign for AI, the Spielberg/Kubrick movie. In the credits at the bottom of the movie poster, a woman was credited as the film's "Sentient Machine Therapist." People who saw it knew that it had to be fake, but when they searched for the woman's name online, they found academic papers by her, websites that cited her. The more they dug, the more they found, and they had to keep up this exercise in close reading. Eventually they found their way to phone numbers, meeting places. In the end, many hundreds of players wound up playing this game to figure out the hidden history. The game you're describing sounds a lot like that. It's an exercise in a form of literacy.

AVRICH: That's the idea—to create a really great mystery story within the game, but where the reading supplements would be bits of actual literature.

KOSTER: I hate to make the analogy, but I also think the appeal would be very similar to that of The Da Vinci Code. Which is a very game-like book, right?

AVRICH: Yes, that's true. The protagonists solve a series of riddles in order to move from level to level.

JOHNSON: One of the signs of how important gaming is now, I think, is that video games have started to influence our ideas of narrative, as opposed to the other way around. The best example of this is the television show Lost, this huge hit that is in some ways trying to build a television show structured like a video game. The show has all these little clues that you can only see if you freeze-frame on your TiVo.

KOSTER: Lost has run its own alternate-reality game, in fact. During its first season, in 2004, the show ran television commercials for a fictitious airline—what was it, Oceanic?

JOHNSON: Oceanic Airlines, yes.

KOSTER: And viewers could visit this airline's website and find hidden details about the show.

JOHNSON: As with video games, there are hint guides to Lost that have been created by fans online, all these fans with way too much time on their hands.

AVRICH: I have to admit, I love Lost. I've actually had conversations about Lost with my students that have turned into discussions of reading skills.

JOHNSON: So as games become more and more dominant, you are starting to see these more traditional forms of storytelling borrow elements from them.
WASIK: It seems, then, that insofar as video games might soon rise to a kind of art, they will do so by changing the nature of art itself. What about in the realm of ideas? Will games have a similar impact?

ZENOTTICA: I have been wondering about just this question. If a game like SimCity might be said to have sociological depth—for example, contemplating the role of mass transit—could we, in thirty years, imagine a game whose impact on political thought would be analogous to John Locke’s in the seventeenth century, or Marx’s in the nineteenth?

JOHNSON: I actually think that’s plausible. In fact, in some sense you can see it starting to develop already. The best example I can think of is in Second Life, which is another of these online network environments. Even though it lacks an explicit game structure, there are all sorts of small games within it. You have a character who represents you, an avatar who is persistent over time, who has possessions. A lot of Second Life revolves around real estate.

Anyway, recently a character with the Pynchonesque screen name of Lazarus Divine started buying infinitely thin strips of land next to other people’s valuable houses. Because the land was infinitely thin, it was incredibly cheap to buy. On these infinitesimal strips, he erected the equivalent of thousands of story tower, incredibly garish, ugly things that were blocking people’s view. Then he would go to these people and say, “Would you like to buy my house that I’ve just built, blocking your view? I’ll sell it you for $1,000 instead of the $10 I paid for it.” Now, all of this is very funny, but it created a huge brouhaha inside Second Life, because there was no institutional system to stop him from doing that. So what they’ve had to do is get together as a community and figure out—

ZENOTTICA: A social contract.

JOHNSON: Right. What the laws of this virtual world should be. Out in the real world, we live at a time when utopian minds no longer have the same influence they had over us in the nineteenth century. And so we don’t think about radically different forms of social organization. But in these online communities, that’s exactly what they’re doing. There the rules are totally up for grabs, and they are trying to figure out what the best social system should be.


JOHNSON: Yes, I read it.

KOSTER: So it’s absolutely true. There is a lot of debate, in the games, about the very fundamentals of democracy, especially among players who have been thrust into leadership roles. Or among those who have tried to be police, and then have quit because they concluded that policing was too hard, was in fact an unsustainable role in society. We’ve had people come to the position that in large societies, democracy doesn’t work. As a designer, also, you find yourself having to make these philosophical choices. When I designed Star Wars Galaxies, I said, you know what, I won’t allow players to make exclusive cities, because people tend to form into guilds in which they associate only with their friends. I wanted people to live like they do in New York City, where you did with the fact that somebody you don’t like just moved in next door to you. To me that’s an important part of the human experience.

AVRICH: It’s like what one learns from being in the physical classroom, from having classmates.

KOSTER: So I designed into the game the ability to move next to somebody, which is the same thing that Second Life is wrestling with. There is no right answer to that problem, because there isn’t one right answer to it in the real world.

WASIK: It seems, then, as if video games might serve ideas better than they will serve art.

AVRICH: My concern, really, is for language. Which I fear is becoming more uniform, more practical, less grammatical, less edited, and more bland.

KOSTER: What we mean by literacy is changing. If you look at books like The Da Vinci Code, a lot of what it does is appropriation—of a painting, or a historical text—and annotation, with this whole cottage industry of providing the footnotes: the TV specials, the books. To me, there’s a question hanging over our conversation, which is: What kind of writing do we hope to teach? We might like to teach kids to write like Proust, but no one writes like Proust anymore. Appropriation and annotation are becoming our new forms of literacy. Think of blogs, for example: most blog posts are reblogs, they’re parasitic on things other people have written. It’s a democratized writing, a democratized literacy.

ZENOTTICA: This plays into the virtual revolution I was describing earlier. Everyone in the overdeveloped world will have the tools they need to create this amazing stuff, whether it be blogs or films or games. None of it will rise to the peaks that we associate with names like Joyce or Proust, but a great deal of it will be fantastic. And there will be so much of it that it will inevitably divide into niches, into small groups devoted to the art that they are making. In a way it’s the fulfillment of an ancient dream. Everyone can have a creative life and a meaningful dialogue with the culture. Everyone will be an artist, but the price is that no one will be a great artist. There will no longer be a place for such a being.