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Throughout my life, I have stormed an uncountable number of digital castles—from my childhood spent tilting Mario toward a victory flag to my burgeoning academic career focusing on what it means to experience and learn through games. Those of us in the gaming community seem to instinctively know that playing a game is more than just having fun. There is something about the combination of enjoyment, challenge, and competition that drives gamers to persevere through obstacles that seem insurmountable. What has been difficult is explaining to others why games have a place in the teacher curricula toolbox. Since Gee (2003) began the conversation about the potential of situated learning in *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*, practical research into what this can look like in the classroom is very limited. In *Exploding the Castle: Rethinking How Video Games & Game Mechanics Can Shape the Future of Education*, Young and Slota bring a variety of voices together and present a clear
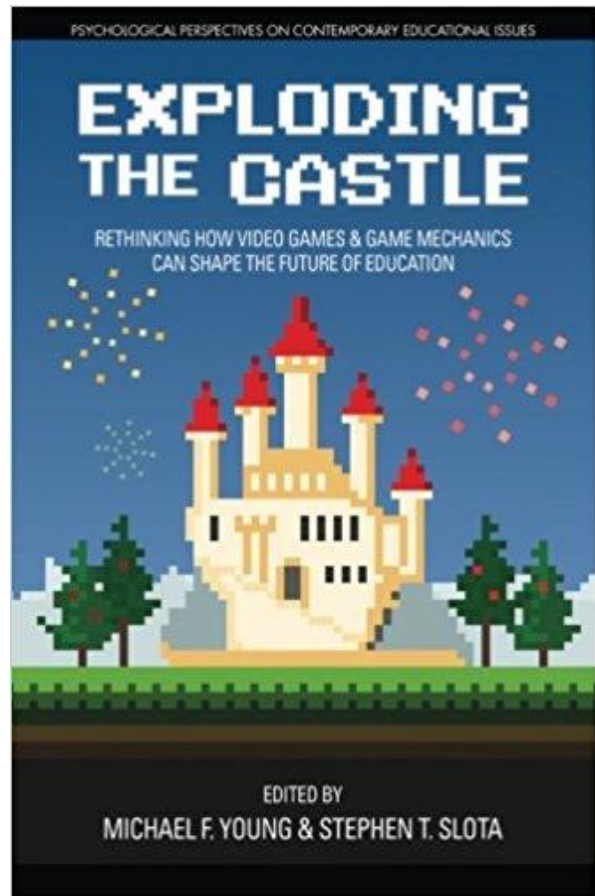
trajectory towards what learning through gaming has looked like, looks like at present, and can look like.

Michael F. Young, a professor, and Stephen T. Slota, an assistant professor, both educational psychology faculty at the University of Connecticut are well suited to using the current work in the field of educational gaming to create a thoughtful argument for the power of gaming and situated cognition. They have used the classic gaming story structure of kishōtenketsu to organize exemplary work currently being done in the field. Kishōtenketsu is a four-part structure of introduction, development, twist, and conclusion commonly found in games and feels incredibly appropriate as a structure for this discussion.

In the Ki (introduction) section Young and Slota, Travis, and Hergenrader work together to explain the place that gaming holds in the learning ecology. I was most impressed by the connections drawn between Homeric epics and modern gaming narratives given by Travis. Presenting Socrates and Plato as gamers that used the narratives in the Homeric epics to frame experiences they were not genuinely having, Travis builds an argument that the epics are lessons being handed down in fluid and interactive narratives. This argument was further intensified by Hergenrader's explanation of the creative creation that can occur during game-play—especially role-playing games where a group of players work together to create a story. Here the text starts to firmly engage in the practical needs of bringing games into the classroom. Hergenrader presents an example of what he terms "critical worldbuilding" (p. 54) while ensuring that the described elements are generalized enough to be adapted to many instructional goals. By grounding the value of interactive narratives in the classic tradition of Socrates and creative writing, the common concern that gaming is unproven as a learning ecology is convincingly challenged.

In the Shō (development) section, Bell and Gresalfi, Barnes and Gresalfi, Wardrip and Abramovich, Barah and Arici share four studies that explore some possibilities for bringing game design into the classroom. The progression through 'what it will take to meaningfully bring games into classrooms' moves from 'what teachers will need to consider as they integrate gaming mechanics into their instruction' to 'the ways in which student perspective will affect classroom gaming experiences.' This series of discussions is followed by two chapters that deal with a subject crucial for the classroom teacher – assessment. Across subjects, curricula, and pedagogies, educators have difficulty understanding the value of instructional methods that they cannot assess. First, Wardrip and Abramovich explain badges—a concept familiar with any gamer—as a means of both increasing motivation in students and providing teachers (and researchers) with data about student learning. Using badges, through a situated cognition perspective, we can "understand how individual motives for learning emerge across people, programs, and contexts" (p. 132). Barab amd Arici argue that the true potential of games comes from their ability to "create opportunities for players to unlock their potential" (p. 173). The authors collectively make it clear that the power of games, or any instructional strategy, lay in their ability to impact learner's lives.

In the Ten (twist) section, O'Bryne amd Radovic, Schute, Rahimi, and Sun, and Dalsen, Anderson, Squire, and Steinkuehler turn to what it will mean to have an end goal—to build a castle if you will—for games research. I am a little confused about the part meant to be played by O'Bryne and Radovic's chapter on digital natives, or people raised in the computer age who have had a familiarity with technology from an early age. They create a possible map for the future of games research through illustrative case studies and consider what it will mean for digital natives to

be literate. In a small bit of organizational miscommunication, their chapter is listed as part of the Shō section but is described as being a part of the Ten section in the introduction. Shute, Rahimi, and Sun then return to the concept of assessment and the potential of games to imbed assessment throughout play. Here again, the organization, which had seemed strong up until this point, breaks down. Though the content of each chapter is well-reasoned, the pace and ordering of the information seems a little opaque. This examination of the way that assessment can be woven throughout the situated experiences games provide seems like it should have been connected to digital badges and their power to assess while motivating. Their focus on the future of assessment would have then led nicely into the work of O'Bryne and Radovic. The Ten section concludes with a cautionary piece by Dalsen, Anderson, Squire, and Steinkuehler that asks the reader to consider what it could mean have the ability to collect student data on an unprecedented scale. This eye towards the future of gaming research, while a bit muddled in its execution, is a critical component of building the "castle" that Young and Slota describe and advocate.

The Ketsu (conclusion) section is an attempt to bring the castle into better focus with recommendations for teachers, designers and researchers. Holmes, Tran, and Gee discuss the ways that games can provide flexible learning pathways for students. Slota and Young, on the other hand, consider all the ways in which digital games-based learning can fail and then present arguments for what can be done to overcome those failures. This focus on repeated failure within gaming education research might appear daunting for the average educational researcher, but as a gamer I know that it is only through failure that we can learn how to reach the next level. I do wish that this parallel was more clearly drawn for those readers who might not be as familiar with the view of failure as a stepping stone towards greater achievement.
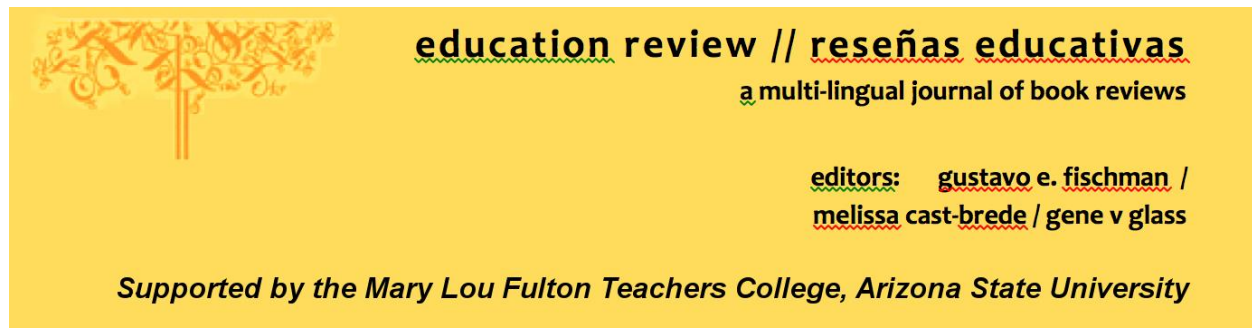
In summary, Editors Young and Slota present an impressive collection of works that delve into the role that gaming can play in learning. Their argument centers on the idea that understanding games through the lens of situated cognition leads to a more complete end-goal for games-based education and research. For those familiar with gaming, situated cognition, and the needs of teachers, the text is a compelling combination of history, current findings, and future possibilities. Unfortunately, for those not well-versed in these topics, the book will probably a difficult read. Despite a focus on the practical needs of games-based learning, this is not a particularly user-friendly text. The technical language and challenging topics could be difficult for the average classroom teacher to wade through in order to understand the powerful message the authors are trying to impart. That said, for researchers or teachers interested in gaming and learning, *Exploding the Castle* remains a well-constructed text with a powerful vision of how gaming, education and research can come together to create more meaningful experiences for students and teachers.

References

Gee, J. P. (2003). *What video games have to teach us about learning and literacy*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

About the Reviewer

Laurie Darian Thrailkill is a graduate student at the University of Wyoming currently pursuing a doctorate in Curriculum & Instruction, with a focus in Literacy. Darian's research focus is on how unconventional texts can be used for learning.

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