

Reset: Changing the Way We Look at Video Games

Rusel DeMaria

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Video games as an educational tool: a surprising phenomenon to the general populace, but a hot topic of conferences and literature in the pedagogy of technology. In *Reset: Changing the Way We Look at Video Games*, DeMaria seeks to course-correct prevailing attitudes about video games by distilling the educational perspective, critiquing spurious research on the effects of media violence, and providing parents and newbies with tools to enter the dialogue. The author also hopes to “reset” the gaming industry’s focus on entertainment first, meaningfulness second.

The risks are ample. On the one hand, there’s the potential ire of readers who have been trenchant in their dismissal of video games; on the other, his own standing in the gaming world. Few gaming industry professionals risk the sentiments and declarations DeMaria makes in his book, such as, “[P]robably few people would say, ‘I was inspired by video games’ in the same way they might say, ‘I was inspired by Michael Jordan’...Too bad.”

Good thing DeMaria is up for the challenge. An insider of the gaming industry for twenty-six years and the author of such “how-to” game strategy guides as *Dark Age of Camelot: Trials of Atlantis* and *The Official Where in the U.S.A. Is Carmen Sandiego?: Clue Book*, DeMaria is careful to empathize with parental concerns, admitting a squeamishness about games like *Grand Theft Auto* that reward simulated acts of violence. But he also asks readers to consider that: 1) such games are not representative, 2) educational and gaming experts make a strong case for the function of “dark” games as harmless purgers of stress and anger, and 3) games are effective teaching tools that can and should be harnessed for higher purposes. “[V]ideo games are among the best learning environments ever invented. *Simply put, the Next Step is that games will become an intentional medium of positive change in individuals and society,*” DeMaria writes.

With the “Next Step,” DeMaria also offers the “Magic Edge” and “TSMI” (teach, simulate, model, and inspire)—basically, catch phrases for what makes games effective teaching tools and for what would make them even more useful. If the author stumbles in this clear-eyed book, it is in that propensity for catch phrases, something common to books that hope to distill complex ideas into condensed but memorable prose. He is on solid ground, however, when he brings his particular forte, analyzing video games, to bear. In breaking down the elements of a good video game, his creative mind churns out example after example of what games could and should do. “Suppose instead of attacking [a thief in a video game] you ask them what they need?” DeMaria proposes.

In doing so, he arms parents and interested parties with alternatives rather than alarmist all-or-nothing missives. In concert with tips he provides for keeping kids safe, learning advocacy, and understanding the array of games available (inclusive of a bibliography of entertaining yet educational games), the book provides a powerful companion to the thinking person’s exploration of the role of video games in our culture.

AIMEE HOUSER (June 7, 2007)

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