

Lots of people these days -- some old, some young; some in suits, some not -- are advocating that we use video games for learning, education, health, social change, and other "non-entertainment" purposes.

However, lots of people who understand games, don't understand books and lots of people who understand books, don't understand games. There are 10 key truths we know about books. They happen to be equally true of other "meaning making technologies" like television and video games. Thus, in these 10 ways, books and video games are the same. They are both tools suited for certain jobs and best used in certain ways. So here are the 10 truths (for citations to the literature, see my book *Situated Language and Learning*, Routledge, 2004):

1. Books are a powerful technology. They can lead to aggression and violence (witness the Bible, the Koran, and the Turner Diaries in the wrong hands). Nazi Germany was a highly literate society. Games, so far, do not have this much power, but some day they may.
2. Books can lead to peace, tolerance, and charity if (and only if) they are read in a society and in families devoted to peace, tolerance, and charity.
3. For good learning, books require talk and social interaction with others around interpretation and implications.
4. Books can make you stupid by not questioning what they say.
5. Books can make you smart by supplying vicarious experience, new ideas, and something to debate and think about.
6. Books are often best used as tools for problem solving, not just in and for themselves.
7. To get the most out of them, books require the reader to read like a "writer" (a type of designer).
8. Just giving people books does not make them smarter; it all depends on what they do with them and who they do it with. For young people, it depends, too, on how much and how well they get mentored. Mentoring is, in fact, crucial.
9. Connecting books to the real world and to other media is good for learning, not doing so is bad for learning.
10. Books tend to make the "rich" richer and the poor "poorer" (those who read more in the right way get to be better and better readers and get more and more out of reading; those who don't, get to be poorer and poorer readers and get less and less out of reading. The former get more successful, the latter, less). This is called "the Matthew Principle."

However, games do have some special properties that set them aside from books (and books have special properties that set them aside from games). Some of these are:

1. Games are based not on content, but on problems to solve. The content of a game (what it is "about") exists to serve problem solving.
2. Games can lead to more than thinking like a designer; they can lead to designing, since players can "mod" many games, i.e., use software that comes with the game to modify it or redesign it.
3. Gamers co-author the games they play by the choices they make and how they choose to solve problems, since what they do can affect the course and sometimes the outcome of the game.
4. Games are most often played socially and involve collaboration and competition.