


To play or not to play – video games for learning

Education

National

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A pertinent question I constantly ask myself as a teacher is: did I really teach if my students do not understand what I have delivered?

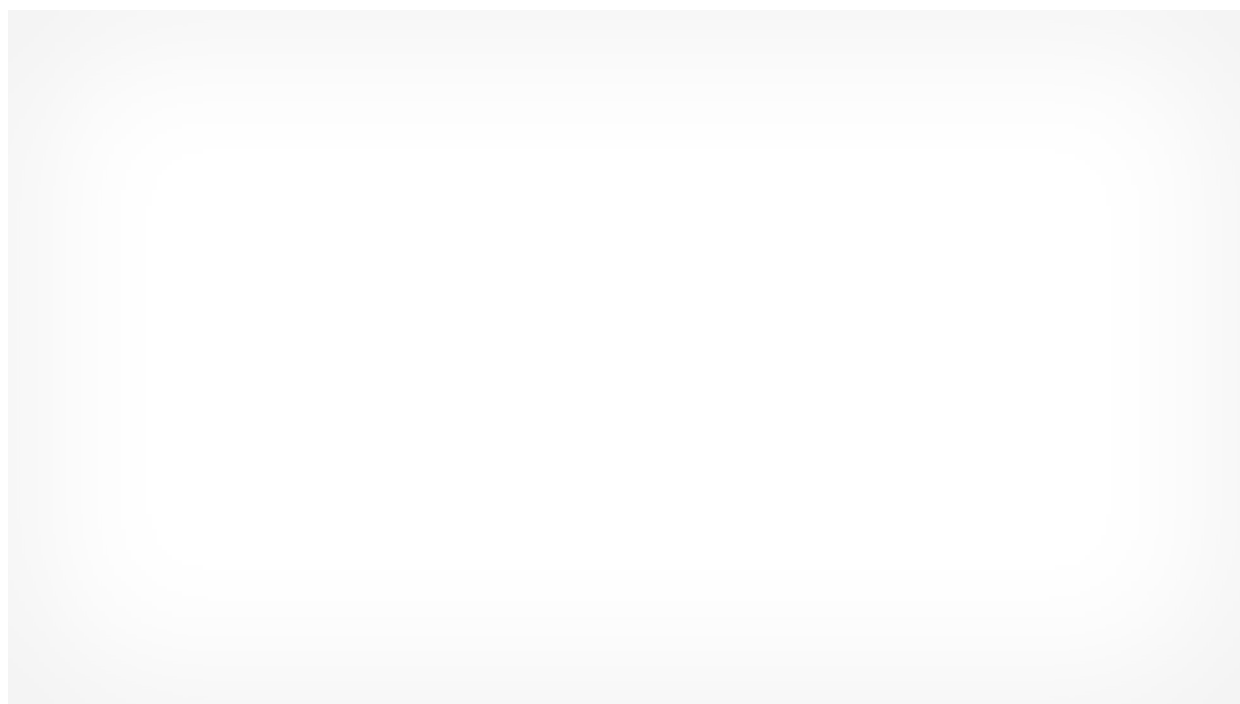
Essentially an important prerogative in teaching is not that facts are transmitted and received, but that these facts can be weaved into meaningful forms of knowledge to be easily understood and employed in students' reasoning. Subsequently in their endeavour to make teaching more meaningful and authentic, teachers go through great lengths to ensure that this is achieved.

It is common knowledge that play is a pleasurable way to learn, and while it has been widely used in educational contexts, playing video games for learning still raises eyebrows.

At this point it should be mentioned that far from being exhaustive, this write-up does not intend to justify the use of any particular video game or genre of games in formal learning situations. Rather, it aims to validate the place and educational potential of video games in terms of their inherent qualities and as another approach in the repertoire of teaching and learning solutions.

By definition, play is something a person chooses for enjoyment. Besides providing pleasure, what makes play useful for education is that it intensifies task involvement.

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A game can be recognised as a framework for organised play that promotes enjoyment through activities and goals that expose the player/s to stimuli that include constraints, payoffs, consequences and ultimately a sense of competition that asks for strategies directed towards success.

Video games, like games in general, can be inherently educational. Unfortunately, their use has not yet taken off in the classroom. There may be various reasons for resistance, including the limitations of a rigid syllabus, lack of familiarisation with ICT in formal learning contexts, and the tendency that those who as yet do not play video games tend to group and liken this activity to watching TV.

Alas, their contextualisation in classrooms that by design are still so much teacher-centric, with rows of desks facing forward like it was 100 years ago, does not really help at all.

When I was younger I did not have video games but I had chess. Chess has its rules, and the almost infinite permutations of moves require strategy and decision-making. But while chessboards and chess pieces come in different shapes and colours the game still does not appeal to everyone.

Like chess, video games have evolved not to be linear, but unlike chess they come in various themes, directed to different age groups, and are also visually pleasing. Over time, developments in 3D graphics has enhanced their complexity and sophistication, making them more appealing but also demanding.

“ *Classrooms that by design are still so teacher-centric, with rows of desks facing forward like it was 100 years ago, do not really help* ”

Inherently they are designed to challenge players to solve complex problems as part of a developing narrative, which even in this case has evolved from linear plots and storylines to free roam formats where narratives (storylines), schemes and outcomes are very much prone to user decisions and execution.

Video games have attracted criticism with regard to their violence, gender stereotyped communications and addiction. In the meantime, more violence has been committed in the name of religious or political dogma than through all video games combined. Furthermore, out of the top five most sold video games, four are non-violent of the likes of the Super Mario series and Minecraft.

Admittedly there are a lot of mindless games; then again, this is not enough to undermine the intrinsic potential of strategic game design to instil challenge, perseverance and extended commitment.

There are also games that are situated in particular game worlds. These tend to place the player central to the narrative and set problem-solving situations. Thus, like in real-life situations, they are liable to user interpretations and decisions, permit branching, can invoke collaboration and potentially enhance user participation.

The list of games that comes to mind is extensive but a classic example is the game Spore (Electronic Arts, 2008). Spore is based on evolution and survival.

In Spore's storyline, as the player undertakes the journey from the most basic life form to mastering the universe, important decisions will allow the game character to evolve into a herbivore or carnivore, and eventually, if desired, into an omnivore. Subsequently as quests become harder and weapons, machinery and economic conquests become more expensive, it is up to the user as the decision maker to see which are the better options to take.

But beyond these more obvious and valid qualities of the game and others like it, there are other benefits. The very intrinsic nature underlying the design in modern video games is set to open new dimensions of unprecedented interaction and literacies. These games are built to take user thinking and participation to new levels, evoking unique novel literacy practices such as 'modding' and 'machinima' that are set to enhance strategic and critical thinking.

Modding, as in the case of the Elder Scrolls (Bethesda Softworks, 1994-2011) and Skyrim (Bethesda Game Studio, 2011), allows for content creation (particularly on the PC) with the possible construction of new experiences. In the case of machinima, users can combine the machine to film. Subsequently as users are allowed to delve deeper 'beneath the bonnet' and avail themselves of video games' real-time 3D engines and cinematic products, they learn to merge characters into novel and original scenarios.

On a different note it is widely believed that reading can enhance knowledge, so in the process, schools provide books. Unfortunately, as Gee (2007) states, each and every subject book presents a specific world such as that of the physicist, economist, linguistic or mathematician. But for the student who has not visited these worlds and not experimented in them, these books become understandably complex, pedantic and boring. I wonder why it should be so.

Video games also come with their own manuals that require one to read a lot. But while school books turn out to be boring and require a lot of effort, goodwill and perseverance to read, the same cannot be said about game manuals. When children play a game, the manual becomes meaningful, situated and also authentic, especially if the manual is used to bridge into new user-designed spaces.

Thus, I would say it makes sense to look at the way children and young people relate with the world around them. Consequently, as we experience their games, we learn to employ our maturity, insights, lifelong experiences, and hopefully, creativity, to make that quantum leap to help us choose the best scenarios where playing video games, and replicating their

intrinsic nature in formal educational settings (without throwing away the books), can enhance learning in a meaningful manner.

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