Book Review: Using Games to Enhance Learning and Teaching

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Using Games to Enhance Learning and Teaching: A Beginner’s Guide is exactly what the title maintains: a beginner’s guide. The editors and primary authors, Nicola Whitton and Alex Moseley, have provided an extensive overview of using games as a pedagogical resource. While this title highlights the benefits of effective games usage, it nonetheless also identifies the potential problems when employing games in a pedagogical context.

Content

The book is divided into three major sections together with an introduction and a conclusion. Part one introduces the field of educational games and provides a background to the effective role of games in learning. Whitton has suggested four main theories that provide a rationale for the use of games in education. A strong supporter of the constructivist perspective, she also considers experiential learning, collaborative learning and inquiry-based learning pertinent to this field. She also advocates benefits of using games in pedagogy. They include playfulness, practice, engagement, scaffolding, feedback, and digital literacy.

Part two discusses how different game elements can be adapted for educational needs. Elements like challenge, game narrative, scaffolding, and game aesthetics are discussed by different authors who make practical suggestions for their effective use in an educational context. In Chapter 4, communal gaming and ‘the wisdom of
the crowd’ are examined through analysis of case studies. Skills like collective intelligence, critical thinking, leadership skills, peer mentoring, persistence and development of scientific habits of mind are outlined as the major benefits of communal games for educational purpose. Hoyle and Moseley explain the gist of their thesis on collaborative work in the gaming community in these words:

... we take aspects of group learning activities emerging in these games – activities that involve voluntarily writing, reading, and thinking critically – and channel them into productive, student-led learning, where students go beyond their immediate group to crowdsource additional ideas to incorporate into their joint knowledge* (p.36).

Additionally a 10-point guideline has been provided to ‘harness the power of game communities’ within an educational context (pp.41 - 43). Chapter 6 proved to be a very interesting discussion on the subject of competition, examining the pros and cons of competition in the existing educational landscape. The chapter goes on to examine how to harness it and turn it into a positive experience for students. Similarly the succeeding Chapter 7 provides a worthwhile analysis of the use and importance of multiple media.

Parts III and IV could have been treated as one part since they both explore the creation and development of games for learning. Detailed lists of things to do to make games more useful and effective are provided together with different case studies which serve as examples. The book has a special focus on Alternate Reality Games and how they can be used as a pedagogical resource.

Both Whitton and Moseley have worked earlier on Alternate Reality Games and published in academic journals and conference proceedings. Therefore, it is no surprise that this game genre has been suggested as an effective educational tool. An important game genre is that of the virtual environment for learning which is also briefly discussed.

In Part V, the conclusion, the authors concede that:

... games can be an effective tool to support and enhance learning and teaching in a variety of educational sectors and contexts. However, their use is not without its drawbacks, and there are a number of major challenges that we see in the field that need to be overcome before the use of games for learning can reach its potential (p.197).

These challenges include the current standing of game-based learning and its gradual acceptance, a behaviourist model of learning and at the same time a lack of research-based evidence to provide evidence of its virtue and benefits. Whilst currently this is certainly the case, new research results are being published which argue for the effectiveness of games in pedagogy. However, they are still yet to be widely adopted and still some way to becoming incorporated in the mainstream teaching and learning.

Expert Opinion

In the introduction the authors preface their arguments with the information that they have interviewed experts in the field in preparation for this book. Quotations from these different experts are included throughout the book, identified clearly as their quotations. The authors have done an excellent job of relating these experts’ quotations to the discussion without breaking the flow, at the same time as working in support, of the various arguments. The only thing missing is the affiliations of these experts; whilst readers can go to the start of the book and find out this information, it does involve them in more work.

Practical Guidelines

Perhaps the strongest part of this book is its practical suggestion for incorporation of game elements within an educational environment. Whether it is for compiling a game narrative or developing a virtual reality, different suggestions and possible options are offered throughout the book. The authors’ personal experience of the use of games in an educational context as well as coverage of the relevant literature combine to provide a strong basis for this book to function as a guide. Not only beginners but experienced practitioners experimenting with games as a pedagogical resource can find this very useful. Topics like assessment development and alignment of the objectives of a game with that of curriculum design are examined in detail. Case studies provide a few strategies for the use of challenges/tasks/activities to map out specific learning outcomes.

Even so, not all of the attributes described can or should be used to make the ‘perfect’ educational game. The deployment of each game will depend on the nature of the educational setting and its target audience. Some
participants would prefer a highly competitive, point-based game, while others would prefer learning individually at
their own pace, while indeed others again would favour elements of both. Despite this, there will be learners who
still might not benefit from this approach. Whereas games may represent a good educational resource, the authors
specifically state that they cannot replace the existing teaching modules that work well.

Conclusion

This work is a well written and easily readable guide for academics and young researchers interested in using
games for an educational purpose. It provides a useful overview of the key beneficial attributes of games and also
discusses ways and techniques that would enhance the pedagogical effectiveness of their use. Moreover it
provides some very interesting discussion on the use of the Alternate Reality Game in a pedagogical context. It is
perhaps the one game genre which stand outs the most here. In publishing this work the authors have very astutely
filled a gap in the existing field of books on this topic, and have done so in a very detailed and comprehensive
manner.

A thoroughly practical discussion set in a theoretical framework, this book hones the experiences gained from
earlier research to compile the characteristics of games that can be incorporated in an educational environment. It
is quite an interesting compilation and a highly recommended piece of work.

Author Details

Wajeehah Aayeshah
PhD candidate/ Tutor
Swinburne University of Technology
Melbourne
Australia

Email: wajeehah@gmail.com

Wajeehah Aayeshah is a researcher in Media and Communication. She is currently examining the use of games in
journalism education as a part of her PhD. Her research interests include: Media and Journalism Education,
Alternate Reality Games, Education Technology and Social Development.

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