



Chapter VIII

Gamer Teachers

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Abstract

The divergence between the generation of people who grew up before versus after computer games became ubiquitous—a new kind of digital divide—is characterized by differences in thinking patterns, perceptions about the world, approaches to challenges, evaluation of risks, and expectations about leading and interacting with other people. Some argue that because of these sorts of differences, students of today have new expectations about learning, which suggests that we need new approaches to teaching and gamer teachers (the pun is intended). This chapter outlines a potential framework for research on teaching that understands and uses the power of computer games and simulations to improve student achievement. Along the way, we raise new research questions, which we hope that you and others will help answer.

Introduction

The terms “games generation” (Prensky, 2001a) and “gamer generation” (Beck & Wade, 2004) have recently captured the idea that a group of people born after 1970 are learning something—and learning it differently—by playing computer games. The term also implies that there are other generations—like the baby boomers born in the 1950s—who differ from the gamers and who are situated across a gap defined by digital game playing.

In our research and development of simSchool—a Web-based game designed to improve teaching skills—we began to wonder if today’s preservice students (tomorrow’s teachers) are more like boomers or gamers? Did they play games as kids? Do they still play? What do they think about the potential of teaching with games? Are they ready to teach with them?

In this chapter, we raise and give initial possible answers to questions like these, organized by four primary questions. What are the concerns of critics of educational games and simulations; are those concerns well founded, and is there a generational gap in attitudes about those concerns? How is the landscape of future teachers changing because of the impact of games and simulations on learners? To what extent do the people now becoming teachers share experiences, perceptions, and attitudes with the rest of their “gamer generation?” How can researchers approach the task of understanding teachers of the game generation?

The Concerns

Why not teach with games and simulations? Many of the concerns about playing games “instead of doing schoolwork” result from a mental model that having fun and learning are mutually exclusive. Why not say playing games “are a form of schoolwork?” There are several possible answers that have been called upon by critics of mass media in each era as first film, radio, television, computers, and now video and computer games have been introduced and their educational value assessed (Wartella & Jennings, 2000).

- The new technology takes time away from other things.
- It does not work any better than other teaching techniques.
- It has potentially harmful side effects, especially exposing young minds to commercialism, sex, and violence.

Games, in particular, are the number one use of home computers by kids over the age of eight (Becker, 2000). Are parents and teachers taking best advantage of them? Is it possible that, like technology in general, games can not only help children learn things *better*; they can help them learn *better things*? To believe in this possibility, people have to get over their reasonable fears of the influence of media.

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