

Chapter 7

Exploring Massively Multiplayer Online Gaming as an Emerging Trend in Distance Education

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ABSTRACT

Online gaming is becoming a commonplace activity for all age groups, but particularly student-age individuals engaging in distance learning. Within the gaming environments, players involve themselves in events and interactions, collaboration, extensive reading, evaluation, and communications. Incorporating these activities into instruction can create a richer learning environment that leverages student interest and motivation. An important pedagogical aspect to keep in mind in adopting this tool is assessment. Student assessment should be considered as to whether traditional methods of performance evaluation are sufficient for such innovative learning contexts, or whether non-traditional methods should be adopted to leverage the changing contexts of the environments. The purpose of this chapter is to explore what educational benefits online gaming can bring to distance learning contexts and how assessment can be adapted to incorporate this new venue of potential educational curricula.

INTRODUCTION

Online gamers are often seen as individuals glued to their computers or gaming console, attacking villains in the form of fantastical creatures for hours. From some perspectives, online gaming is considered counter-educational, vying for the time of the

student who ignores homework and studies in lieu of another few hours of activity in the digital world. However, gamers conduct more than individual assaults against digital monsters. Online activities within the gaming environs include social events and interactions, collaboration with other gamers to accomplish tasks and in-game goals, reading of task descriptions, evaluation of response implications, and constant messaging in-game to answer questions and

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coordinate activities. These activities may be viewed as gaming literacies and often expand to out-of-game activities as well, with website reading, blog posting, and deciphering of the innumerable context clues and instructions in the form of text, manuals, symbols, and coordination of clues to help the gamer perform better both individually and as a member of gaming communities that form to support play.

Some educators have begun to explore gaming, not as a contender for study time, but as a vehicle for learning. Although research in this field is not yet commonplace, some researchers have noted the digital world with which we interact on a daily basis in a variety of forms, from email to banking, may be changing the very nature of learning. Coiro (2003) has argued that new strategies must be adopted by teachers for students as new technologies become available. The importance of considering new technologies in learning is best conveyed by Luke and Elkins (1998), who posit that the continued problems in education, reading, at-risk populations, school-community links, school-to-work transitions, and integration of special needs students are all:

...very distinctively 'modern' problems [that] now sit side by side with the emergent challenges of New Times: how to train people to deal with emergent technologies and environments; how to prepare people for new forms of social participation, citizenship, consumption, and leisure; how to engage with a host of 'new voices,' intercultural texts, and multilingual practices in the curricula; and how to link our students' communities – real, virtual, and imagined – with those of their counterparts in other cultures and worlds (p. 6).

The issue of incorporating digital aspects of education, then, constitutes another facet of learning with which teachers must contend to help enable their students toward success in their academic and social lives, as well as participants in the growing global society. One such venue is online gaming.

But, where does educational theory draw the line between which aspects of digital environments are effective – let alone acceptable – for learning, and which could or should be dismissed out of hand? We must consider that aspects of online gaming are reflective of the learning we desire in our students. In *What Video Games Have to Teach Us about Learning and Literacy*, Gee (2007) lists in excess of thirty principles of learning that, he proposes, video games reflect and incorporate. Additional researchers note other aspects of learning integrated into video games, including but not limited to complex communications between participants, reading and comprehension of multiple inter-related texts, collaboration, evaluation skills, and problem solving (Annetta, Cheng, & Holmes, 2010; Dede, Clarke, Ketelhut, Nelson, Bowman, n.d.; Delwiche, 2006; Dickey, 2007; Hoffman & Nadelson, 2010; Martin & Ewing, 2008; Schrader & McCreery, 2008). Yet, education still takes pause when considering video gaming as a potential venue for instruction (Dede et al., n.d.; Delwiche). Perhaps hesitancy in part stems from questions and concerns as to methods of implementing gaming into curricula. How would lessons be structured and controlled? How important is a student gamer's perspective and stance within such activities?

While aspects of gaming and education are being explored, one additional curricular element must also be considered: that of assessment. Assessment activities within online gaming environments should be designed to address students' learning styles and accurately measure their learning. Our intent is not to argue whether online and video gaming is inherently good or bad, but rather to recognize that gaming is present and used in many distance learning contexts, reflects many beneficial elements of a robust curriculum and learning environment, and therefore could be further leveraged for educational purposes. For example, "Microsoft says Xbox 360 sales have surpassed 76 million units, Kinect sales top 24 million" (Epstein, 2013, n.p.). As more sophisticated and more creative games are rapidly developed

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