

Chapter 27

A Future Focus of Gaming: Soft Skills

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ABSTRACT

The authors discuss the instruction of soft skills by games and simulations as a future direction for the use of educational gaming in P-12 education. Technical or hard skills are taught in the educational curriculum; however, soft skills training, such as communication, collaboration, decision-making, problem-solving, negotiation, and leadership, are lacking. Soft skills training through games and simulations have been successful in areas such as the military, medicine, business, and disaster response, as well as those individuals with learning disabilities; therefore, the authors investigate the potential for soft skills training using games and simulations. In addition to instruction of soft skills, this article also addresses the inherent nature of games and simulations as teaching and assessment tools.

INTRODUCTION

Advancements in technology have increased opportunities for teaching through games and simulations. For instance, games and simulations have been successfully integrated as employee training of technical and soft skills in business, government training of military and service personnel, medical procedure simulations, and behavioral training for individuals with learning disabilities (Brown, Standen, Proctor, & Sterland, 2001; Carroll & Messenger, 2008; Chen & Levinson, 2006; Forssen & Haho, 2001; Gaba, 2004; Parsons &

Mitchell, 2002). This successful integration of games and simulations has allowed people to learn potentially difficult and very technical information. Unfortunately, these hard skills are not the only types of training that are required throughout life. Despite the effort of students and personnel to study and acquire hard skills, they often do not possess the soft skills to effectively communicate their life skills and abilities and workforce potential. Furthermore, the influence of social media and mobile devices has exacerbated the loss of human interaction, which has particularly impacted the students of P-12 schools (Keller, 2013).

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Unfortunately, even though the focus of many P-12 schools is often to provide some hard skills to help students reach their potential, many times the soft skills needed are either not practiced or addressed. Moreover, because basic soft skills are often more generic, the P-12 environment is a perfect place to begin these types of lessons. Consequently, with a demand for soft skills and an increase in the preference for independent learning, differentiated learning, and student-centered learning environments, educational institutions, particularly P-12 schools, can provide a solution through the development and implementation of a virtual soft skills training component adopted into the curriculum with games and simulations. Additionally, because today's student is networked in technology that can bridge the gap to a more engaging and immersive learning experience, why not promote the type of learning that students embrace? Although games are often blamed for a lack of soft skills in children, games, if designed appropriately, can facilitate learning, strengthen skills in collaboration, decision-making, and problem-solving, while also building confidence (Aldrich, 2005; Gee, 2003; Ke & Grabowski, 2007; Papastergiou, 2009; Robertson, 2012; Royle & Colfer, 2010; Shaffer, 2006; Shaffer, Squire, Halverson, & Gee, 2005; Squire, 2006; Vos & Brennan, 2010). For all of these reasons a future trend of the use of games and simulations in P-12 schools could easily involve the learning of soft skills.

Approximately 92% of American teens report going online daily to use social media, surf the Internet, play video games, and message others (Lenhart, 2015). Therefore, it is no wonder they prefer open learning environments where they have choices, driving their own education, through the use of technology. Games and simulations may be able to provide an effective and engaging method to teach soft skills to in-

dividuals who may belong to the most socially interactive generation so far, but who may also have the least amount of face-to-face interaction as well. Additionally, P-12 students of today may not understand the importance of soft skills as compared to technically specific hard skills, perhaps resulting in a lack of motivation to learn any soft skills. With this lack of understanding and motivation, the use of games and simulations, a teaching tool associated with high levels of motivation and engagement, may be the best way of reaching these independent learners that prefer using technology to more traditional methods of teaching.

This chapter discusses the instruction of soft skills by games and simulations as a future direction for the use of games and simulations in P-12 education. Additionally, current soft skills training strategies are reviewed to highlight the lack of compatibility with preferred learning strategies of (i.e., student-centered, differentiated, independent) current P-12 students.

This chapter will also address the use of games and simulations to teach soft skills. For example, the pedagogy and fail-safe nature of current games and simulations are used to describe some of the advantages of using this method of instruction. Additionally, incorporation strategies and specific games and simulations are referenced. Suggestions for future game and simulation designs, which incorporate the use of soft skills, are also included.

Overall, the authors predict that soft skills will be an educational gaming trend in the near future. The general application of soft skills needed throughout life makes it a perfect lesson for students at the P-12 level. Additionally, instruction with games and simulations is very compatible with P-12 student learning preferences (i.e., student-centered, differentiated, independent). All of the elements covered in this chapter support the authors' prediction.

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