Chapter XXXII
Surviving the Game

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ABSTRACT

A large body of research exists on the topics of computer-based educational gaming on the one hand and the role of playing traditional games in face-to-face learning environments on the other. Relatively few studies, however, have looked at the potential of technology to support traditional face-to-face games in an online educational environment. While some traditional games such as Tic-Tac-Toe, Hangman, Monopoly, *and* Chess *have been ported over to an electronic medium, relatively little thought has been given to porting games where human-to-human interaction is a central component. This chapter reports on the use of a game in an online learning module that was presented to adult learners. It sets out to explore the complexities involved in teaching and learning in an adult online learning community that is based on a modified version of the television reality show, "Survivor."*

INTRODUCTION

There is a widespread tendency in modernist culture to define play and fun as the opposite of work. In the conventional teaching environment that we have inherited over many centuries, the use of play, pleasure, and enjoyment as possible vehicles of education is frowned upon by many academics and practitioners even today. In the minds of many educators of the 'old school', suffering, silence, solemnity, and (above all) deep seriousness are regarded as the outward signs of 'real' education. Any hint of pleasure or light-heartedness that might leaven the drudgery of education is regarded by such people as being somehow unsuited to the learning environment.

Using the modified version of a game to teach adult learners is therefore to go out on a limb, especially since there seems to be consensus in the literature that adult learners do not particularly enjoy playing games (Nasseh, 1999). Even today there are still those who support Beach's (1945) premise that 'play' is predominantly a character-

istic of young, developing human beings rather than that of adults. Adult learners prefer not to be taught in a manner that may surprise them, or in a learning environment that might entail threats or uncomfortable challenges of some kind. Many of the techniques used in the teaching of children are ineffectual for teaching adults because adults are developmentally different and they bring into the classroom a wealth of life experience that the young do not possess.

In addition, to present a course to adult learners that is based on a popular reality show on television, and that is presented exclusively over the Internet, is a pioneering venture for all concerned. Although online learning has been and is being extensively explored and researched, it is still such a new field of study that even though many studies address topics that are related to Web-based learning, experts are not in agreement about its true value. Teaching and learning over the Internet is characterized by its own unique set of challenges, and these include user computer literacy, resources, stable connections, bandwidth, and many others.

This chapter combines the abovementioned areas of study in that it reports on the use of a game in an online learning module that was presented to adult learners. It sets out to explore the complexities involved in teaching and learning in an adult online learning community that is based on the television reality show, "Survivor©." The *CyberSurvivor* module (with its focus on the value of e-learning in education) is central in this case study, which investigates the potential of the Internet to host a reality game such as "Survivor" in an educational context.

BACKGROUND

Over the past two decades or so, electronic games have become an integral part of the suburban scene in many affluent societies, especially among younger people. While the obsession of the young

with these games initially alarmed both parents and educators alike, some far-sighted educational researchers soon began to wonder whether this intense motivation to play could be tapped and harnessed for educational purposes (Malone, 1981). Therefore, "not long after the birth of computer games, the first hopes for the potential of learning through games were expressed" (Smith, 2003). Experts hoped that the enthusiasm so obviously generated by playing games could be harnessed in the cause of sound learning. The *CyberSurvivor* module was consequently designed with this expectation in mind.

If one considers that Nintendo's *Super Mario Bros. 3* has earned US$500 million worldwide, it becomes clear that the game industry is growing fast and may well generate more income than other kinds of media in the future (Smith, 2003). One research project on the media as used by six- to nine-year-old Europeans revealed that "79% of boys and 48% of girls play computer games" (Smith, 2003). In the CBS television program "60 Minutes," the presenter opened the documentary on pro-gamer Jonathan 'Fatal1ty' Wendel with the following statement:

*Worldwide sales of video game consoles and software are expected to reach US$35 billion this year. That is more than twice the revenue of the NFL [*football*], the NBA [*basketball*] and Major League Baseball combined.*

It is therefore understandable that a lot of attention has been given to the relationship between information technology, playing, and learning over the last couple of years. Slogans such as "play-and-learn" and "learn-while-you-play" are typically found in advertisements that promote the use of software packages whose purpose it is to integrate a game with learning. However, the design and production of such games are not always based on research that has evaluated such games' potential for learning. As Malone (1981) rightly states, the characteristics that make games *fun* do

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