

Chapter 1.34

Pedagogy in Commercial Video Games

Katrin Becker

University of Calgary, Canada

ABSTRACT

Books, film, television, and indeed every other medium that came before them have been used and sometimes studied as media for the delivery of instruction. Outstanding examples of each medium have been applied to educative purposes with enduring results. Digital games are now also receiving attention in this context. A first step to gaining an understanding for just how a particular medium can be used in education is to study the outstanding examples, regardless of their original purpose. This chapter examines numerous well-known and commercially successful games through the lens of several known and accepted learning theories and styles, using the premise that “good” games already embody sound pedagogy in their designs even if the incorporation of those theories was not deliberate.

INTRODUCTION

In spite of their having been around for more than a generation now, video games have still not gained wide acceptance as legitimate media. Perhaps it is worthwhile to raise this argument here, though it would be for neither the first nor the last time, to be sure. Games are a medium of communication and expression and possess some parallels with other forms of media, like film. As Henry Jenkins likes to point out (as in Palmer, 2004), the early days of film were little more than chases and pies in the face, yet just a few years later we see the likes of Chaplin’s *The Tramp* (1915) and Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* (1915). Thirty years after the beginning of film we already had recognized works of artistic merit, popular appeal, and lasting significance, such as *Tarzan of the Apes* (1918), *Nanook of the North*¹ (1922), *The Jazz Singer* (1927), and *Steamboat Willie* (1928). We also have “stars,” such as Charlie Chaplin, Rudolph Valentino, Mary Pickford, and

Douglas Fairbanks. Radio and television may have started with somewhat more sombre offerings insofar as their early shows were somewhat less extreme, but they too had both classics and stars within a few years of their introduction, as well as a broad range of offerings in several genres, both fictional and not.

Is it so radical to suggest that early gems of the game industry might already be out there, and we just are not recognizing them? The average age of video game players in 2005 was 30² (ESA, 2005), so we can't honestly claim that video games are in the same category as children's toys. Actually, those who are gamers already recognize game "classics," such as *Pong* (1972), *Donkey Kong* (1983), *Tetris* (1988), *Monkey Island* (1990), and others. There are also "stars": some, such as Mario, Lara Croft, and Link from *Zelda* belong to a category that would include Mickey, while others such as Will Wright and Peter Molyneux are more tangible. Although each medium has its own unique qualities, each also shares qualities with the others, making it possible to compare as well as contrast. When we examine media such as radio, film, television, and even popular music, we see some similarities in the ways they have been accepted into society and the objections and resistances that were raised along the way (Williams, 2005). Given that, it must be argued that the medium of the video game deserves a place among these others as a medium of human expression and communication.

Each of the other media mentioned have, in their turn, been applied to educative goals. Each also has, to a greater or lesser extent, been studied as a medium for the delivery of instruction, and although we are far from finished with this study, each has left us with a better understanding of how we might approach a new medium if our primary goal is to educate. Even though many offerings in film, on radio, and in television are designed primarily to entertain, there are also many that are intended to deliver a message—to *teach us something*—and that intent lies at the very heart

of instructional design. When looking at how the different forms of modern media have been used this way and which particular instances have been chosen, one notion stands out—the majority of the most remarkable and effective "lessons" taught to us have been created by extraordinarily talented writers, directors, and producers together with their teams. They have, by and large, *not* been created by professional educators or instructional designers. Now, before we go too much further down this particular path, permit me to make a point. Far from trying to sell educators and instructional designers short, we should recognize the opportunities afforded us in studying these outstanding examples of "educational" objects, and try to learn why they have the impact they do. Why do many of Spielberg's movies move us so? Why did the radio show *Amos 'n Andy*'s enjoy such lasting popularity? Why have so many people learned more about American politics and government from the television show *The West Wing* [1999] than they ever did in school? While we are on the subject of the appropriation of media objects for the purposes of education, it might be enlightening to note that the same can be said of literature. It is unlikely that Charles Dickens, Harper Lee, or Miguel De Cervantes had the classroom in mind when they wrote *A Christmas Carol*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, or *Don Quixote*. They had a lesson or two in mind when they produced these works to be sure, but none were teachers or instructional designers. There is much we can learn from them, not only from the lessons they were teaching, but also from how those messages were crafted.

When we turn our attention to computer and video games, the puzzle climbs to a whole new plane. Not only can we ask what makes this medium's finest examples so compelling, but, what could possibly motivate an individual to log thousands of hours in a game that, when reflected upon, does not appear to offer more than time spent? After watching players for a time, it becomes blatantly obvious that it is not done

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