

Chapter 4

Serious Games for Transformative Learning: A Communication Perspective on the Radical Binarisation of Everyday Life

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses the ways in which an understanding of key concepts from both communication studies and critical pedagogy can improve the use of serious games in learning environments. By exploring a history of educational theory that champions the ontological work of critical pedagogy, the authors note how critical self-reflection can be facilitated by serious games. This chapter then distinguishes between models of human communication as information transfer (on which some educational gaming situations are implicitly based) and models of human communication as social construction, or a process of co-constructing social realities and identities (on which new and future gaming situations might be based) as a way of demonstrating to both designers and educators the benefits of viewing games communicatively. Because video games are symptom and emblem of life in informatic control societies, their role in education is exceedingly important for cultivating students' critical reflection on the binarisation of everyday life (which is increasingly structured by algorithmic logics that polarize lived experience). Serious games often provide opportunities for gamers to become "experts" of scientific or informational knowledge and often more skilled technique—or skilled, technical know-how. However, they often fail to provide opportunities for critically reflective practice or the development of praxis. Incredibly rapid technological/scientific advancements in societies focused on production leave little room for mindful activity. Although we continue to "advance," we often fail to unite two fundamental aspects of critical learning: the moral and political (praxis) with the technical and productive (techne). Serious games can assist in doing this.

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INTRODUCTION

Experiential methods, including case studies, simulations, role-plays, and group work have become commonplace in most K-12 and undergraduate- and graduate-level classrooms. One of the newest and perhaps most potentially influential experiential tools is the video game. Gee (2008) notes that “during the past several years, many people have become interested in video games as a site to study human thinking, problem solving, and learning” (p. 253). Bousquet (2008) suggests that “the use of such simulations, models and games is [also] widespread in bureaucratic, professional, service, and manufacturing training environments” (p. 72). He further states:

The serious gaming trend has seen the emergence of games designed to promote environmental awareness, armed forces recruitment, white supremacy, religious tolerance, better eating habits, approaches to living with chronic diseases, and so on. Wherever there is real-world rhetorical and practical purpose, institutions and activist organizations have commissioned games to propagandize, train, inform, and recruit. (p. 72)

There is no question that the games commissioned and developed to educate aim to provide much more than the information and skills necessary to participate in required roles or perform specific functions. These games, like all aspects of experience, help instill the cultural norms or structural resources used to guide desired behavior. Such an increased use of video games specifically and technology in general, therefore, has spawned growing interest in the potential ability for using these experiential tools to impact higher-order learning and enhance critical pedagogy (Arnseth, 2006). This chapter is one more piece of the growing puzzle surrounding issues of experiential learning and critical pedagogy, especially as they relate to the use of video games and gaming. Indeed, the body of existing scholarly work

on experiential learning theory is vast, and this corpus has contributed fruitfully to theorizing the role of games in metacognitive education (see Kolb & Kolb, 2009, for an extensive review of past research and key concepts within the field of education). In this chapter, we specifically discuss ways in which video gaming might act as a pedagogical tool to help transcend critical reflection and facilitate more critical self-reflection, enhancing the ontological goals of contemporary education. We situate our exploration in the field of communication studies, and suggest that approaching games from within our field provides tools to mindfully construct and deconstruct the gaming experience.

Furthermore, we suggest that only through becoming mindful of the discursive *praxis* encasing the gaming experience—pulling game and gamer together in an uncertain, co-constituted experience of gaming—can critical self-reflection occur. We must caution against the use of serious games, or any experiential tool for that matter, that enhances or teaches connections between scientific/technical knowledge (*episteme*) and skillful technique (*techne*) without a solid grounding in practical wisdom (*phronesis*) and reflective action (*praxis*). In short, we suggest that a communication model housed in social constructionism and geared toward grounded practical theory (Craig & Tracy, 1995) provides the best opportunity for serious games to reach their ontological objectives. Craig and Tracy (1995) argue that such grounded practical theory can enhance our understanding of the relationships between practice and technique. They further note that a basic problem in the communication discipline (and of many who attempt to incorporate communication processes as links between self and society) is one of uniting these two aspects of communication—the moral and political (*praxis*) with the technical and productive (*techne*) (p. 252). In many respects, we suggest that research on and design of serious educational gaming has focused too heavily on learning of *techne* in the absence of *praxis*. It is our hope

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