

Chapter 4.15

Productive Gaming and the Case for Historiographic Game–Play

Shree Durga

University of Wisconsin – Madison, USA

Kurt Squire

University of Wisconsin – Madison, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the potential of video games as a learning tool given their productive capacity for content creation and dissemination. Based on the findings from a longitudinal, two-year design-based research study investigating the potential of learning communities constructed around using *Civilization III* (a turn-based historical simulation-strategy game), the chapter argues that historical model construction is a compelling way to mediate one's understandings about history. Participants in this game-based learning program developed new identities as producers as well as consumers of historical simulations. Two distinct trajectories of expertise were found to be emerging: one that

developed around expert, systemic gaming (orienting toward the experience as a game system), and another that we call historical gaming, orienting to the game experience as a form of “replaying history.” Both forms have value, emphasizing different aspects of the game system. We believe that a community tying these two forms of gaming together (and other ones, as they emerge) is key for building robust learning environments.

INTRODUCTION

Recent years have witnessed unforeseen leaps in technology, which many have argued are ushering in a new media paradigm (Galarneau, 2005). Video games are an excellent site to examine in order to understand this new medium, because games

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are natively digital. Video games are emblematic of the current popular culture we live in that has a distinctive zeitgeist. Examining games, we see three overriding themes that demarcate the modern media landscape:

1. **Video games are built around logic of simulation:** One that is about possible worlds, rather than inspiring oratory, coherent linear arguments, or purely visual imagery. Games are worlds we explore, and learn within, through interaction and performance.
2. **Video games are participatory:** Players have the opportunity to shape the medium itself through: (a) production within game worlds (many of which are filmed and published on the Internet), (b) production with game tools (such as modding), and (c) gaining membership in affinity groups, such as gaming clans, guilds, clubs, and so on, to support one's gaming.
3. **Video games provide an aesthetic experience:** Video games offer us opportunities to do new things and take on identities that are unavailable in the real world. As Galarneau (2005) writes, their potential impact in education may be best thought of as producing *transformative* experience.

A mature theory of game-based learning, we argue, will take into account the underlying principles by which they work as learning environments “naturalistically,” or “in the wild,” to borrow Hutchins’ (1995) term. Modern video games, with their myriad of toolkits for modding and interface editing, have increasingly evolved from being compelling mediums that merely engage users passively, into spaces (and communities) that empower users to willfully create and disseminate content (Jenkins & Squire 2003; Steinkuehler & Johnson, this volume). As such, video games are not only a pervasive popular culture media, but also form some of the central discourses around 21st century pedagogical practices and what it

means to teach or learn in a globalized future. The growing body of literature around video games and learning suggests that games are powerful models for teaching and can potentially affect how people can and ought to learn in the ever-changing landscape of knowledge (Shaffer & Gee, 2006). A key challenge that remains for educators is how to produce pedagogical models that leverage the strengths of the medium, yet meet educationally valued goals. Restated, we know that players learn through participation in MMOs such as World of Warcraft (Steinkuehler, 2005, Nardi, Ly, & Harris, forthcoming; Galarneau & Zibit 2006), and that educational interventions that use game technologies (such as networked 3D worlds) can be effective. But how might we harness the simulation, participatory, and aesthetic dimensions of games for intentional learning?

This chapter will examine the potential of video games as a learning tool given their productive capacity for content creation and dissemination. Using the *Civilization III* game engine (a turn-based historical simulation-strategy game), we explore whether a group of disadvantaged kids playing a series of historically themed scenarios can become the kind of “producers” of media and knowledge described by Squire and Giovanetto (in press). We seek to build on the participatory nature of gaming communities (most often virtual) which function for many players as “third spaces”—spaces that emerge out of coherent and shared history of information and tend to perpetuate game practices beyond virtual game worlds and foster social interactions beyond homes and workplaces (Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006). As of this writing, our community is primarily face to face, although we are exploring ways to extend the community into virtual spaces as well.

SIMULATION IN WORLD HISTORY

When it comes to history teaching in schools, there has remained a persistent tradition to present

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