LIVING A HERO’S JOURNEY

There is a deconstruction occurring across all areas of education as we rethink practices that have been standard for over 100 years. For many, this is a welcome change, and an opportunity to recapture what has been lost in recent years due to a heavy emphasis on standardized testing and lock-step curriculum, as well as factory models of education that have been resistant to evolution. In rethinking our educational systems, we are beginning to question what it means to learn, not only cognitively, but also within the spirit of what it also means to be a human being living in a digital world.

There is an urge to reengage that human spirit, to support the personal achievement of the Jungian archetypal Hero, where the learner is sent out into the world as a weakling, and through their trials and tribulations, learns to conquer the beast and return as a stronger individual. This is learning at its best, when we have learned to achieve, have grown stronger and wiser because of our explorations and trials, and have left our mark on the world in a positive way. Immersive and game-based environments can be excellent vehicles for supporting this form of human discovery, and igniting awareness of our abilities to be successful as the hero.

THE PATH OF QUESTING

How might we model the hero’s journey in our educational system, and at the same time, not only engage users, but also create environments and opportunities where learners experience true joy, excitement, and develop a deep passion for learning? For those working in immersive and game-based environments, the concept of questing is not new. I’ve been inspired by the work of Barab and colleagues (2010) in Quest Atlantis with their work on transformational play, and how the player impacts storyline outcomes and the environment through their active decision making in gameplay. McConigal (2011) helps us understand that games can make us better, more creative, resilient, and even be designed where player interaction can change our physical world in positive ways. The Quest to Learn (http://q2l.
org) project uses rules of game systems where students are problem solvers, critical thinkers, active participants, and reflective practitioners who learn systems theory as a means of interpreting and acting upon the physical world. In the design of quest based learning systems, we currently encounter at least three areas of need: 1) the integration and blending of quests across a spectrum of virtuality, 2) the rewarding and tracking of achievements across this spectrum, and 3) the use of data and text mining for pattern discovery in learner progress and preferences, and to develop predictive learning models of what leads to successful learning outcomes.

BLENDING OF FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING ACROSS THE SPECTRUM

In Richter and Dawley (2010), we expose some of the issues and opportunities associated with the growing “spectrum of virtuality” that is exponentially evolving around us. With the emergence of new web 2.0 technologies, immersive environments, augmented realities, mobile devices, games and sims, and a plethora of virtual learning opportunities, policymakers at the federal and state levels are interested in how we might leverage these technologies to blend learning opportunities across both formal and informal, virtual and physical, environments. In essence, how do we capture what our students are living on a daily basis in their personal lives for educational purposes?

For those who desire to explore the power of quests and engage with a variety of learning options across the spectrum of virtuality, development has been slow-going. Aggregating educational content across the spectrum on a large scale, and collecting data around completion or non-completion of quests has been non-existent. Typically, questing is relegated to a specific platform designed to support specific content. It is typically owned by the designers of the systems, not the teachers and students who want to create, share, own, and build their own ecosystems of learning. Most game or simulation environments are closed systems in that they don’t provide the user a means to upload or aggregate content external to the game, or when they do (such as the virtual world, Second Life), they don’t provide a way to create quests and track achievements. Traditional learning management systems aren’t equipped to provide players quests, choices in gameplay, or non-linear approaches to learning based on competencies and personal interest, instead of age and a timeline.

CREATING A LIVING JOURNEY: 3D GAMELAB

Over the last year, we have been developing and piloting a quest-based learning platform, 3D GameLab, http://3dgamelab.org, with a variety of students from middle school to graduate school. Grounded in the notion that we can’t teach games, but rather, we have to “game” games (C. Haskell, personal communication, April 2010), 3D GameLab provides teachers and students the tools and training to turn their own classrooms into a living adventure by designing their own quests using an infinite variety of content and experiences from across the spectrum of virtuality, creating reward systems, and licensing their work with private copyright or Creative Commons. The Creative Commons license places the work into a “Quest Armory” where other teachers can view and “clone” quests for their students. Player scorecards track learning outcomes in relationship to competencies and standards. Through the planned integration of data and text mining, the system provides a means to begin to uncover patterns and predictive models of quest-based learning for various groups of users in different learning contexts.

In August 2011, we launched 3D GameLab in a closed beta summer camp with 175 teachers. Those teachers, in turn, could invite up to 60 of their students. The range of responses to-date is reflective of teachers’ comfort with the spectrum of virtuality, their ability to transverse
the spectrum, and their perceived need to successfully integrate a variety of technologies. As an aggregator of learning across the spectrum, the platform works. Quests integrate transmedia activities across games, sims such as World of Warcraft, Minecraft and Second Life, and a variety of technology tools and social networks, including a guild site. Its mobile access allows quests to be played at school, in the home, library, park, museums, or across the city on scavenger hunts. Its power to engage is there for those willing to engage with it. A challenge at this point is gaming literacy itself for the newly immersed, and what it means to comprehend, learn, and interact using game mechanisms. We are encouraging teachers to include their students as quest builders, as co-designers in the living journey, both in real life and in the game. We anticipate moving into open beta in 2012, and welcome you to join us by applying to the guild at http://3dgamelab.org.

As we continue to deconstruct, and then rebuild our educational systems, our teachers and students will be the ones to lead us in new directions if we are willing listen and design systems to learn from their co-constructed journey. Let the adventure begin!

Lisa Dawley
Guest Editor
IJGCMS

REFERENCES


Lisa Dawley, PhD, is Professor in the Department of Educational Technology at Boise State University. Dawley is an expert on the leadership, design, and pedagogy of online and virtual environments for teaching and learning. Dawley received a Top 20 Bestselling Books Award for her text, The Tools for Successful Online Teaching. She co-founded EDTECH Island, a virtual world resource supporting international teacher education. Dawley is co-founder and Program Chair of the Applied Research in Virtual Environments for Learning Special Interest Group (ARVEL SIG) affiliated with the American Educational Research Association (AERA). Dawley is a former member of the Board of Directors for the International Association for K-12 Online Learning (iNACOL), and co-author of the Going Virtual! research series studying professional development for K-12 online teachers. She received the Distinguished Research Award from the Association of Teacher Educators (ATE), and the Presidential Service Award from the Association of Educational Communications & Technology (AECT).