The fact that universities around the world are dealing with a new generation of digital youth is not news, as evidenced by Ito et al. (2008) and Byron (2008). These reports show that youth are increasingly coming to higher education with enhanced knowledge of digital literacy, and are comfortable with diverse ways of engaging with virtual realities. In particular, higher education is welcoming new students with extensive experience of digital gaming. As young digital gamers flow into universities, how can higher education harness this experience?

Learning with Digital Games: A Practical Guide to Engaging Students in Higher Education provides a comprehensive toolkit for educators to contemplate, plan, implement and evaluate the use of digital gaming for educational purposes. The book is divided into three main parts: Theory, Practice and Technology. Part 1, Chapter 1, Introduction, lays the groundwork for promoting the use of video games in higher education and provides an overall map of the book. The companion website provides easy access to web-based resources. Chapter 2, Recognizing the Characteristics of Digital Games, sets the parameters of discussion by defining digital games and provides alternative definitions from wider fields. Chapter 3, Understanding the Pedagogy of Digital Games, discusses the pedagogic potential of digital games; Whitton provides a comprehensive overview of various learning theories, in particular, examining learning from a constructivist perspective. In Chapter 4, Identifying Types of Digital Games for Learning, a taxonomy of game types is pre-
sented, which will serve as a useful introduction for practitioners who are not familiar with the world of digital games. The author also suggests game types available and their applications in higher education settings.

Part 2 of the book deals with the practice of using games for learning. Chapter 5, Integrating Digital Games into the Curriculum, addresses practical issues related to integrating games into curricula. A discussion of institutional constraints can serve as the first step in contemplating the various hurdles a practitioner has to deal with and consider. Though the constraints might have strong implications for educators, the six models of integration encourage different scales of implementation, from a single session to a mixed reality game. Chapter 6, Designing a Digital Game for Learning, opens with pedagogic design considerations, a practical discussion of which leads on to more discussion in Part 3. Chapter 7, Assessing the Impact of Digital Games on Learning, briefly discusses various ways to assess learning through digital gaming. The use of engagement as an alternative assessment criterion puts affective factors in focus, which suits the overall call for a constructivist approach throughout the book. The chapter ends with a note of caution on the ethical issues involved in researching learning in the digital gaming context.

For educators interested in adopting digital gaming for learning, Part 3 of the book will be the most useful section. Chapter 8, Using Existing Digital Games for Learning, discuss differences between entertainment and learning games. The advantages and disadvantages of using commercial games and virtual worlds are explained clearly. The games and virtual worlds suggested have all been tested out by experienced educators in various educational contexts (further presented as case studies in a later section). Chapter 9, Developing New Digital Games for Learning, is perhaps one chapter which can be both practical and intimidating for novice (but curious) educators in using digital games for learning. The chapter discusses in great detail the various technical demands in designing a digital game from scratch, including game content, environment, skills, and functional specifications. The call for a balanced game pulls the whole design process together, and additional suggestions for the technical aspects of game design end the chapter. In Chapter 10, Evaluating Digital Games for Learning, the author suggests techniques for evaluating a game during the developmental process. The six guidelines for usability also provide useful references. In Chapter 11, Case Studies, six case studies provide evidence of the use of digital gaming in an array of contexts. Whitton usefully showcases a mix of self-designed and commercial games for learning. These illustrate interesting approaches to adopting digital gaming across the curriculum, but the concentration of examples in the British higher education sector raises the question of whether digital gaming projects in English will be feasible in universities where English is not necessarily the first language of the students? In the final chapter, Conclusions, Whitton suggests five areas for further research: large-scale development and implementation, qualitative and quantitative evaluation, three-dimensional environments, interaction devices and asynchronous collaboration. The five suggested areas highlight current gaps in research on digital gaming for learning, to which language and digital games could also be added.

The strengths of this book lie in its relatively simple structure and its ability to guide readers from the beginning to the end of the process of integrating digital gaming in teaching. Every stage is well-explained and reasoned. There are also additional resources for readers to explore further, both for reading and practical implementation, at the end of each chapter and from the companion website. The activity sections in each chapter encourage a more active and personal meditation on using digital games at every stage. Another strength is the independence of each individual chapter. Designed as a toolkit, every chapter can be read independently and serves as a good introduction to educators who are particularly interested in certain topics. That said, the technical advice provided is sound, but could be somewhat intimidating for
many novices in this area. As Whitton rightly observes, unless substantial resources (both financial and human) are available, tailor-made digital games will not be an option for educators with average (or even advanced) technical computer skills. It is very likely that educators may need to turn to commercial off-the-shelf (COTS) games, with or without further modification, for educational purposes. However, this aspect of digital gaming application receives less attention in the book. One question which also deserves greater attention is the linguistic aspect of digital gaming. As all the games mentioned in the book are English-based, this might prove to be a hurdle for institutions where students do not have English as their first language. Though the linguistic component should not be the sole medium in determining players’/learners’ accessibility to the game, it inevitably has a strong motivational impact for non-English native learners. Another point to note is the lack of resources for educators’ support. Throughout the book, Whitton makes a strong argument that learners should be collaborative and supported in undergoing the process of using digital games for learning. The same can be said for educators planning to use digital games. The knowledge that there are online communities of educators around the world using, considering, and debating the pedagogic principles of digital gaming will certainly boost the confidence of all educators, regardless of their experience with gaming implementation. All in all, this book achieves its aims of providing an introductory tour to integrate digital gaming for learning into higher education, and is likely to leave readers curious to further explore possibilities for their own teaching and learning.

REFERENCES


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