Chapter 12
A Research Lens for Studying Power in Learning Games: Critical Ciné-Ethnography

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ABSTRACT

Digital games have been used to support learning since the 1980s. However, the last decade has seen games, simulations and virtual world use take firm hold of the academic imagination. There also has been a rapid expansion of sponsored, formal research, informal inquiry, and a growing body of theory supporting the use of learning games. As a result, several challenges to their use have been identified such as flaws in the games themselves, inadequate methods of assessment due to complex, confounding variables, and the perceptions of students and teachers. This piece describes a research method called Critical CinéEthnography meant to address this lack. It stems from a discursive, systems-oriented view of learning that explores of the arguments and truth claims made by learners and teachers. The method employs video capture of out-of-game discussion, artifacts, and body language that should allow researchers to build a complex picture of participant experiences that can be easily shared with academics and practitioners alike.

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INTRODUCTION

Digital learning games are increasingly common in educational settings. These range from the use of off-the-shelf simulation games like the *Civilization* series employed by Squire (2004) to games created in Adobe Flash such as *Whyville* (Kafai, Quintero, & Feldon, 2010) and multi-user virtual environments such as *EcoMUVE* (Metcalf, S., Kamarainen, A., Tutweiler, M. S., Grotzer, T., & Dede, C. (2011) and *Quest Atlantis* (Barab et al., 2007). Each of these has shown a propensity to motivate or support learning as has our own work with the undergraduate course alternate reality games *The Door* (Warren, Dondlinger, McLeod, & Bigenho, 2011) and *Broken Window* (Warren & Najmi, 2013) alternate reality games, supporting the idea that games as part of strong pedagogical practice.

However, as with many new technologies introduced to education over the last two decades, there is often a push to view each as a panacea to improve learning achievement, engagement, and motivation. This push has sometimes resulted in false promises about the efficacy of technologies from hypermedia to PowerPoint as well as concerns that the tools distract from the work of teaching and learning (Reese, 2011). It is important to ask a number of additional questions regarding the ethics of using learning games (Warren & Lin, 2012), to confirm the degree to which what is learned in activities performed in a game context transfers to real world contexts (Barab et al., 2009), and whether games can be designed and delivered in a cost-effective manner that allows them to take hold in classrooms (Warren & Jones, 2008). Other researcher have noted a need to examine game-based, discursive literacy practices that can lead to learning as embedded in participatory cultures (Steinkuehler, 2007; Steinkuehler & Johnson, 2009) and we propose that there is a need to understand how games and play function as critical discourses that may lead to emancipatory play, social critique, and the use of a related as liberating, pedagogical tool, in what Slattery (2006) may call a post-modern curriculum.

CHALLENGES: LEARNING GAME IMPLEMENTATION

Some challenges to the use of games for learning have been noted in the literature. Researchers have identified in the way the learning game systems themselves are constructed (Baker, C., 2008; Baker, R., et al., 2008) and confounding variables stemming from complex game designs that make relationships between treatment and outcomes unclear (Rupp, Gusha, Mislevy, & Shaffer, 2010). The authors have identified other difficulties such as the use of multi-user virtual environments (MUVEs) to build learning games when the tool was not intended to support them (Warren, Dondlinger, Stein, & Barab, 2009), a poor understanding of the complexity
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