RESERCH NOTE

Narration vs. Simulation: 
Videogame Genre Affordances 
for Teaching History

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, the author outlines a framework for videogames in History education. The author analyzes the genre’s features and investigates potential mappings to specific didactic approaches in the context of History education. To guide the analysis, the author briefly reviews didactic approaches for History and identifies qualities that can be projected into game features and systems. Based on the characteristics of those didactic approaches and their requirements for narration and interaction, the author evaluates each videogame genre’s potential for narration and simulation as well as the reflection and assessment opportunities supported. The paper concludes by discussing the implications on serious game design and the integration of games for History education in school environments.

Keywords: Assessment, Computer-Based Training, Educational Technology, Learning Outcomes, Pedagogy, Virtual Learning

INTRODUCTION

Teaching History using videogames has been the focus of extensive academic research using both commercial (Squire, 2004; Egenfeldt-Nielsen, 2005; Sandford, Ulicsak, Facer, & Rudd, 2006; McMichael, 2007; Whelchel, 2007) and custom-made games (Jenkins & Squire, 2004). The research has produced solid indications that videogames can actually enhance the learning process. Videogames offer a complex, interactive and visual environment with clear goals, rules and feedback that can stimulate and engage students. In games students formulate theories on how to approach a problem, work to overcome it and, in case of failure, adjust the theory and try again (Shaffer, Squire, Halverson, & Gee, 2004).

On the other hand, designing serious games for History education or using commercial games for the same purpose is not a straightforward process. History is taught in many educational environments as a representation of the past, as a single chronological narrative of an evolution (Granatstein, 1998). A demonstration of this approach can be found within the Greek educational system. According to Avdela (2000) “in the national narrative reproduced in [Greek] schools, the teaching of History neither moves beyond this ethnocentric concept of the nation nor familiarizes students with the production of historical knowledge”. Modern didactic approaches question this impartial, fixed, view of the past, advocating in favor of more flexible
systems that simulate History rather than represent it. Such systems call upon the students to make choices that affect the outcome of the simulation, in the process to understand the intricate inner-workings of History making (Urricchio, 2005).

The videogame medium is comprised of many genres and each genre provides a different support for each didactic approach. More specifically, each game genre has different narrative and simulation qualities and varying capacity to tell a story, teach facts or produce a virtual constructivist environment where the user can interact with its elements, follow her own course of action and produce her own understanding.

In this paper we analyze the main videogame genres and investigate mappings to specific didactic approaches in the context of History education. In the context of our work videogame genres refer to a videogame taxonomy on the game system and interaction model. To guide our analysis, we briefly review didactic approaches in teaching History and identify qualities that can be projected into game features. We then investigate videogame genres’ affordances for narration and simulation and their potential to support History education. We conclude by discussing the opportunities and mechanisms for reflection and assessment supported by the selected videogame genres. Our aim is to produce a framework of videogames genres’ affordances in History education that could guide instructors wishing to use videogames in class as well as game designers that wish to create educational videogames.

HISTORY EDUCATION AND TEACHING APPROACHES

The traditional view of History is as a chronological series of facts and events that happened in the past. Accordingly the traditional approach to teaching History is through information transmission from teacher to student via narration (oral or written). Students in such learning environments read textbooks, memorize facts, and recite “ready-made” knowledge (Squire, 2004). This is the “Best Possible Story” approach which conforms to the behaviorist view of learning. This approach focuses on content and often leads to a decreased interest of students in the subject of History (Seixas, 2000; Kee, 2008).

Another approach to learning History is that of “causation” and historical reasoning. This entails establishing relationships between a particular event and antecedent events, including the intentional actions of human beings, that may have brought about that event (Counsell, 2000; Masterman & Sharples, 2002). In this case the actual events are not important, as much as the processes that triggered them. According to van Drie and van Boxtel (2008) “...the term historical reasoning emphasizes the activity of students and the fact that when learning history, students not only acquire knowledge of the past, but also use this knowledge for interpreting phenomena from the past and the present”. This “postmodern” approach focuses more on the process, tools and activity which is in line with constructivist and socio-cultural learning theories.

The “Best Possible Story” approach relies on narrative, linear mediums such as books and lectures. The sequence of events and facts to be taught are embedded in a story which is relayed to the student. The student herself is not an active part of this process, and can only passively absorb information. On the other hand historical reasoning requires active student participation in order for her to formulate a hypothesis, experiment using authentic models of historical eras and reach her own conclusions. This didactic approach involves highly interactive systems that realistically model specific historic periods along with many adjustable parameters that affect the system’s behavior.

The introduction of videogames in History teaching is not the first attempt to utilize games as educational, interactive, models of historic eras. Non-digital games, such as role-playing and simulation games, have also been used to enhance History teaching.
Quantifying “Magic”: Learnings from User Research for Creating Good Player Experiences on Xbox Kinect
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Categorizing Play Styles in Competitive Gaming
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