

BOOK REVIEW

Video Games and Learning: Teaching and Participatory Culture in the Digital Age

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*Video Games and Learning: Teaching and
Participatory Culture in the Digital Age*

Kurt Squire

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In *Video Games and Learning*, Dr. Kurt Squire describes from personal experience numerous video games and the relationships they have created with learners. Squire's extensive knowledge and accomplishments permeate through his extensive examples of various games and their impact on social interactions, communities of learning, and culture. Dr. Kurt Squire is an associate professor at University of Wisconsin - Madison, and Director of the Games, Learning and Society Initiative. He is acknowledged as a leading expert in the utility of games for educational purposes. *Video Games and Learning* is composed primarily of chronological journal entries of Squire's

extensive studies and experiences in the planning, development, assessment, participation and integration of games for learning purposes.

Squire begins with the question – why study video games? Squire takes the position that studying games can contribute enormously in the educational pursuit of reaching the digital age student. Squire agrees that games have a unique potential of teaching and learning unlike any other medium. Squire believes that play enables the intellectual and social growth of the participant over the long term and permeates into his or her learning repertoire. He believes that content, overlapping goals, continuous problem solving, social interactions and gaming cultures are critical aspects of learning through games. Squire proclaims that “any time that we turn a child off to learning rather than awakening their intellectual curiosity, we’ve failed” (Squire, 2011, pg. 15).

According to Squire, the ability to identify and develop a good educational game is vital if a student is to remain engaged, excited, in-

teract, problem solve and learn simultaneously. Squire articulates several criteria to support the development of good educational games. These criteria include: games must be a collaborative work of both designers and educators; they should be entertaining and academically accurate; they should be both fun and insightful; they should be sophisticated, proven design techniques; the games should provide social networks, group interactions, pique interests and inspire creativity.

Tapping on his Montessori teaching experience, Squire presents several issues that need to be addressed in order to establish a powerful learning environment for game-based learning. Educational institutions and faculty must demonstrate a strong commitment to game-based and interest-driven learning. The environment must empower faculty to perform the roles of coach, advisor and producer and minimize the roles of dispenser of knowledge and enforcer. Lastly, the environment must value game-based learning as a worthy recipient of time, money, and effort.

Games provide interests in new domains and inspire design. Squire shares his experience with peers and how games have been shown to spark interest-driven learning among students and teachers alike. They establish new interests that the student further explores and investigates. They inspire students to pursue questions and answers to developing questions while playing. Finally, they create an environment that leads to intrinsically motivated authoring. Students have been shown to pursue communities and activities outside of the game to accomplish altruist goals.

The importance of community and collective intelligence permeates the book. Squire believes that communities develop values of a participatory culture that are critical for students' integration of learning in the real world. He even goes so far to state that the game itself may not be what is important in learning for this digital age. Rather, it is that games that encourage a cultural and participatory environment for experimentation, systemic thinking, and authentic participation.

While discussing how to design games for learning, an interesting thought was presented. Because girls may not want to out excel boys and it is not 'cool' to be a nerd, do games allow students that feel uncomfortable in appearing 'smart' in front of their peers, an opportunity to excel in the gaming environment without getting beaten up, teased or picked on? According to Squire, he has determined after numerous student interviews that games provide this safe environment for students to be themselves.

Several critical components in developing games are articulated through Squire's presentation of logs and discussions. The importance of designers, developers and educators collaborating is pervasive throughout the book. However, there are also some strategies presented for teaching with games. These include the importance of teacher knowing and understanding all aspects of the game in order to provide assistance and possible mini-lectures to help students. Facilitating students' successes and encouraging students' perseverance supports the premise that playing the game drives the learning. Teachers must also provide just-in-time lectures to tie the game to content and connect students with resources. Supporting gaming communities and facilitating inquiry encourages collaboration, collective intelligence and successes.

Squire believes that educational games provide an intrinsic desire for learning, enhanced citizenship and can develop strong partnerships within the educational systems and community groups. He offers dynamic examples of how game-based learning can be integrated into educational curriculums and how research can be developed and accomplished to demonstrate the benefits of game-based learning to education. His love of teaching with game-based approaches, his excitement for the future of game-based learning, and his desire to be a part of it are apparent throughout the book.

A real strength of this book are the examples of the research that was accomplished by Squire. The advice provided through his experiences should prove invaluable to the game-based learning researcher. He provides solid advice on 'what not to do' as well as what works best

in different situations. His open and honest discussions and revelations from his research are refreshing and insightful.

Video Games and Learning provides many situations for the game-based learning researcher or developer to discover and potentially employ in their educational environment. While the examples are extensive and provide significant insight into the game-based learning environment of a teacher and researcher, the entries can become monotonous and the ideas seem to wander at times.

Removing oneself from this inordinate amount of information, the reader can begin to appreciate the “true enthusiast for games, gaming, and gamers” as Gee describes in the Forward (Squire, 2011, pg. ix). Squire’s ease and honesty in sharing his trials and tribulations provides a depiction of the difficulties of incorporating game-based learning into the curriculum and educational institution environment. His enthusiasm for this venue is so intense that the reader is easily excited about the subject matter.

Video Games and Learning is in one way an extensive diary of the research Squire has performed over several years. He provides

numerous anecdotal notations on interviews with students, researchers and teachers. In the preface, he explains that his desire is that “educators will at least skim the sections on game criticism and that game designers will review the sections on teaching” (pg. xiii). Skimming and reviewing are highly recommended, as Squire himself states that this information could have been presented in three separate books.

This book provides important guidance and insight into the ‘how to’ and ‘how not to’ develop educational games and integrate them into the curriculum. The book is a contribution to understanding what characteristics embody good educational gaming. Squire provides invaluable contributions into the processes required for future research to determine what characteristics are needed of games that create good learning environments. He further proposes that research must compare game-based pedagogies with other pedagogies to determine how to most efficiently combine the two. Throughout the book, the reader can feel Squire’s excitement about the future of learning and the development of participatory evaluation tools for determining learning of tomorrow.