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London: Routledge.

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Whitton, N. (2010). *Learning with digital games: A practical guide to engaging students in Higher Education*. London: Routledge. ISBN 9780415997751, 232 pages, \$46.95 US.

Gaming is a multi-million dollar industry with ever growing participation rates, cultural reach and sophistication. Many students entering higher education now are likely to have experience playing digital games. Academics who grew up in the 1980s and 1990s will have grown up in a world of Atari, *Jet Set Willy* and *Super Mario*. Whitton persuasively suggests that it is time to use what we know in the classroom.

As a self-confessed gamer, Nicola Whitton approaches the topic with a thorough understanding of what makes good play, and as a researcher in the field of education she appreciates what makes good learning. These two concepts run through the book from beginning to end, and make it an ideal introduction to anyone with an interest in using games to teach and learn.

The book is divided into three sections: 'Theory', 'Practice' and 'Technology'. In the first section the author defines her terms, provides a rationale for digital games in higher education and outlines game types and potential learning outcomes. The second section focuses on the integration, design and assessment of digital games and learning, and the final section advises the reader on how to evaluate or modify existing games, or develop games from scratch.

Whitton seeks to separate herself from the digital native/digital native paradigm from the outset of the book making it clear that, in her opinion, 'individual approaches to technology and information are not necessarily fixed' (p. 6). Whitton takes great care to explain that digital games are not an easy way to engage the younger generation, nor are they motivational in themselves. What they can do is enable learners to engage and collaborate to hone their skills and ideas in a constructivist approach, regardless of age or outside interests.

In Whitton's introduction, we also encounter the first 'activity' box. These are dotted throughout the book to encourage reflection and exploration, and link well with the accompanying website. We are also introduced to three example games with which to test the ideas we encounter as we read further. Books on technology have a tendency to date fairly quickly, but the online resources have been updated regularly since publication and add an extra dimension to this particular volume.

In Part One 'Theory', Whitton tackles the question of defining digital games methodically without tying herself down to an answer. After discussing various existing definitions, providing characteristics and posing questions, she comes to the sensible conclusion that "adopting an inclusive definitionenables us to move on from the (somewhat unhelpful) debate of whether an activity is or is not a game, to consider whether the game-like characteristics it possesses do, or do not, have potential for enhancing learning" (p. 30).

Chapter Three 'Understanding the Pedagogy of Games' lays out a convincing rationale for the use of digital games in higher education, that is well-situated in existing literature (citing constructivist and flow theorists, for example). Whitton has to make a decision about whether to focus on learning motivation theories related to adults or

children, and although university students are clearly not children, I am not convinced that they are fully adults, either. It may be outside the remit of this book, but I would like to know more specifically about what motivates university students, and how we might nurture them as they traverse the pathway into adulthood.

The final chapter in the first section identifies both types of digital games and the types of learning they can enable. After summarizing the variety of games available, the author focuses on the facilitation of intellectual skills and cognitive strategies as the most important and appropriate for university students. This segues into the second section of the book, Part Two – ‘Practice’.

If section one explains why, this section goes into more depth about how one would use games in a higher education context. It becomes clearer in part two that Whitton is concerned mainly with blended learning, and she emphasizes the integration of appropriate technology, purpose and context. She talks of the “learning package that surrounds an educational game, debriefing, post-game discussion and reflection” (p. 95), fixing games firmly into a cycle of learning, involving in and out of game activities.

Assessment and evaluation are given careful attention in Chapter 7 ‘Assessing the Impact of Digital Games on Learning’. This is important not only to meet student and institutional expectations for formal assessments and grades, but to validate the use of digital gaming in education itself. The author offers useful advice on both student evaluation within gaming activity, and research design to help us teacher-researchers gather data for continued development.

The final section ‘Technology’ examines the implementation or adaptation of existing games, or the design of new, purpose built games. This section is likely to date the most quickly, but with this in mind the accompanying website provides current resources and links (and at time of writing, the website continues to be regularly updated). Once again, Whitton is meticulous in describing the process of game development, from concept stage onwards. In conjunction with the online resources, one really feels it is possible for amateurs to design effective digital games for particular learning outcomes. I would guess that anyone who gets this far in the book would be capable of creating a working educational game, time, energy and enthusiasm notwithstanding. Fitting, then, that the section concludes with a selection of six case studies, to demonstrate that these ideas can work in practice. In the actual conclusion, however, Whitton draws together the strands for a final review, and makes a rather affecting call for further research.

Despite the shifts in society as a whole, many educators are still afraid or dismissive of technology, and games in particular can be a hard sell. Whitton’s calm and rational descriptions of why and how games have a place in the future of education will serve as ammunition for those seeking to convince their colleagues or institutions, and perhaps persuade nervous or skeptical teachers to reconsider. It is clear that Whitton feels there is great potential for gaming in education, and having read this well-organized and well-considered book, I can see why.

Biographical Statement

Darren Elliott has been teaching and training teachers in Japan since 1999, and currently works at Nanzan University in Nagoya, Japan. His research interests include teacher development, reflective practice and technology in education. His website is at www.livesofteachers.com

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