GAMES FOR CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING: SERIOUS PLAY IN THE BLENDED LEARNING CLASSROOM

W. DeFehr
University of Alberta (CANADA)

Abstract

Blended learning is an approach to teaching, supported by the Centre for Teaching and Learning at the University of Alberta, which encourages the integration of technology in the classroom. Blended learning is defined by Randy Garrison and Norm Vaughan in their 2008 book, Blended Learning in Higher Education: Framework, Principles, and Guidelines, as "the organic integration of thoughtfully selected and complementary fact-to-face and online approaches and technologies (p. 148). However positive the integration of teaching and technology sounds, instructors nonetheless face the challenge of selecting from many devices, apps, and web services the technology that will best help students achieve the learning goals of the course. The teaching situation is further complicated by the students' own variety of devices, abilities, and technological preferences. This paper argues, therefore, that one way to integrate technology in the class is through video games. The virtual worlds of games increase student engagement and provide an enriched educational experience. By creating course modules with specific achievement levels that reward learning the technology, students create avatars that interact in a 3D world, providing what University of Alberta professors Duane Szafron and Mike Carbonero in their study, Interactive Storytelling in the Classroom, describe as an opportunity to engage deeply with issues that students face, both on and off campus. Focusing on the example of a module-based games creation software developed at the U of Alberta, called ScriptEase, this essay shows how games creation in a blended learning classroom helps improve students' understanding not only of the fundamental elements of narratives, but also of what games expert, Brenda Romero, calls cultural understanding. Romero refers to the experiences of undocumented Mexican kitchen workers in a serious game that she created, but the potential applications of this lesson are even broader, helping students understand and remain open minded toward each other, in the context of the diverse international cultures that are represented in the university classes that I teach.

Keywords: Video games, multi-cultural, understanding, play, technology, software.