Chapter XIV
The Role of MMORPGs in Social Studies Education

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the authors will report evidence for the potential of MMORPGs for social studies education by providing a detailed review of relevant literature from the fields of game studies, educational technology, and the social networking universe. This evidence will include game scholars' efforts to develop classroom applications of MMORPGs in the social sciences and related disciplines, and also provide examples of 'citizenship education' already occurring with MMORPGs. The authors will also provide an overview of perceived costs and benefits associated with classroom MMORPG use, including logistical hurdles that need to be overcome. They will also share a list of recommendations to the field for classroom use of MMORPGs, as well as implications for policy changes and future study.

INTRODUCTION

World of Warcraft. Ultima Online. Everquest. Second Life. Star Wars Galaxies. Asheron's Call. While these titles may sound like the latest 'straight-to-DVD' titles at your neighborhood video store, they are not. What do these have in common? They are some of the most popular MMORPGs (massively multiplayer online role-playing games; pronounced 'mor-pegs') in the world today. With the proliferation of broadband Internet access, MMORPGs, and the number of

players who play them, have exploded over the past five years. Indeed, there are currently more than 13 million active MMORPG players around the world (Woodcock, 2005).

These MMORPGs are not our parents' (or, for that matter, our own) video games. Rather a MMORPG is a form of online computer role-playing game in which a very large number of players (in some games, upward of 100,000) interact with one another in a synthetic world (Castronova, 2005). Within the MMORPG, a player takes on a fictional character (an in-game representation known as an *avatar*) and is responsible for nearly all of that character's actions within the synthetic world: from earning a living, to buying food and clothing, to—most importantly—interacting with fellow players.

Many MMORPG players spend much of their waking free-time playing their 'game.' For many MMORPGs this might mean joining a guild, learning a trade, building a house, trading with fellow players, or starting a shop. These players take on a persona in these synthetic worlds and interact with thousands of other players role-playing similar characters. What lessons do they—or can they—learn about how to participate in a society, how to earn a living, and how to protect their rights? In short, what do these players learn about how to develop and hone their skills as citizens in society?

Gee (2004) goes so far as to state that "computer and video games are going to become the predominate form of popular culture interaction in our society" (p. 2). Mitch Kapur, CEO of Linden Labs (creator of *Second Life*), believes that MMORPGs have "the potential to fundamentally change how humans interact" and that MMORPGs may even "accelerate the social evolution of humanity" (The Week, 2007, p. 11). What might these online games and gaming (specifically MMORPGs) have to do with social studies and citizenship education?

In this chapter, the authors will report evidence for the potential of MMORPGs for social studies education by providing a rich and detailed review of the relevant literature from the fields of games studies, educational technology, and the social networking universe. This evidence will include game scholars' efforts to develop classroom applications of MMORPGs in the social sciences and related disciplines (Prensky, 2001a; Castronova, 2005) and also provide examples of 'citizenship education' already occurring in MMORPGs (Arnseth, 2006; Jenkins, 2006).

Indeed, we are just now at the cusp of researching the potential of MMORPGs to improve the teaching and learning of citizenship education, and so this chapter is a call to investigate the efficacy of their use in social studies and citizenship education today and in the future.

The authors will also provide an overview—from the literature—of perceived costs and benefits associated with classroom MMORPG use, including logistical hurdles that need to be overcome. They will also share a list of recommendations to the field for classroom use of MMORPGs and for future study by social studies educators which includes the following:

- Developing MMORPG-based instructional environments that include specific, obtainable, and measurable objectives;
- Developing teaching and assessment methodologies that utilize MMORPGs in ways that enhance student learning that otherwise would not be available, as Mason et al. (2000) advocate; and
- Addressing curricular issues and implications for policy changes related to the effective and appropriate integration of MMORPGs into the social studies curriculum.

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