Chapter 5

Civilization IV in 7th Grade Social Studies:
Motivating and Enriching Student Learning with Constructivism, Content standards, and 21st Century Skills

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Civilization IV allows a player to experience the development and management of complex components of an empire, like technology acquisition, trade, and diplomacy. It includes a thorough encyclopedia-like reference tool, Civilopedia, which a player can use to inform one's decision making. When the game is broken down into parts and approached with thoughtful, creative pedagogy, students are motivated to learn historical concepts, systems thinking, and skills like information fluency and creativity at their own pace.

OVERALL DESCRIPTION

The purpose of this case was to explore how using the digital game Civilization IV could encourage constructivist learning, target social studies content standards, cultivate 21st century skills, and increase student engagement. In Civilization IV, a player assumes the leadership of a civilization and develops cities and infrastructure, trade and economic policy, government, technology and various other elements. In this case, students played the game in pairs.

This case study was of a 7th grade social studies class. There are two enduring understandings of the Beliefs and History unit in which the game was played. The first is that events in history have shaped, and been shaped by beliefs and cultures. The second is that historians use specific tools and thought processes to make sense of the past. To support these enduring understandings, instruction was focused on the American Education Reaches Out (AERO) standards primarily on historical knowledge, skills and concepts, and also other strands. (See Table 1 in Appendix A) The case also targeted 21st century skills, as defined by the American School of Bombay, including creativity, critical thinking, collaboration, information fluency, and managing complexity. The game was played in classes over approximately 20 days. The 80 minute block class structure was divided into segments with approximately half the time dedicated to game play, and the rest to learning specific historical topics in other traditional ways, including readings, research, and discussions.

This case took place in an international school in Mumbai, India with a student population representing at least 20 nationalities. Classes of the case study range from 14-18 students, of which approximately 5-8% receive ESOL support and 5-8% academic support. By 7th grade, nearly all students in the study have used laptops for learning in a 1:1 environment since 6th grade. The school has a very active and supportive tech department, of 8-10 people, who are available to assist students and teachers before, after and throughout the school day. During the case study period, tech support staff was available and present in the classroom to help when needed, approximately 2-4 hours total over the 20 days.

The teacher in this case participated in school taskforces researching and developing best practice in areas like Game Based Learning, Personalized Learning, and 21st Century Skills. At the time of the case study, the teacher had been teaching in a 1:1 laptop program for 3 years.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Various writings focus on digital games in Middle School Classrooms and how they can impact motivation, teach historical skills and concepts, and develop 21st Century Skills. Ray and Coulter (2010) identify authentic learning and active engagement, as well as motivation, as being key to integrating games in the Middle School. They acknowledge in their review of literature that "early studies suggest that carefully selected digital games can support content learning at middle school levels." (Ray and Coulter, 2010, p.94) Ray and Coulter also state that, "digital games provide clear roles for learners to assume, thus motivating students to learn." (2010, p.94) Ray and Coulter's study of pre-service teachers also concludes that "how teacher

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