

Chapter 11

A Review of Previous Studies

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ABSTRACT

The chapter presents a critical analysis of the literature on simulation games identifying the research direction along which the studies conducted up until now have been following and the issues that have emerged during the research. On the basis of these considerations, a choice can be made of the most suitable simulation games to employ in a specific learning context.

INTRODUCTION

Research into simulation games in the educational field has produced contrasting results and there are still many contentious issues left to be resolved. From its introduction back in the 1960s the use of simulation games, in particular in primary and secondary education, has enjoyed a steady development especially in the field of computer simulation.

Over the last forty years, therefore, a tradition has been built up that has enabled simulation to be considered today, in many countries, to be founded on an established methodology and seen by many as a valid teaching strategy.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-60566-930-4.ch011

The value of simulation is confirmed and supported by the fact that in the countries where it is often used, there is a rich and wide-ranging literature on the subject and many simulation games in divers kinds of disciplinary fields are available on the market. However, despite this long tradition, the actual achievement of the research into the use of simulation games in education is quite modest, especially when we think of their widespread use, and there are no commonly agreed guidelines to base simulation games on; indeed, what there is has to be considered fragmentary and by no means scientifically disinterested given the fact that the purpose of many available games is to make a profit rather than purely educational in which the aims, concepts and structures are stated explicitly.

In fact, the results achieved so far are not univocal because of the different characteristics of the studies conducted, the eclectic nature of the research that involves different sectors or fields and the lack of an ontology that is able to provide a sound conceptual footing for the scientific discourse which is indispensable for any reliable assessment of the educational effectiveness of simulation games.

Many studies devoted to evaluating simulation games, moreover, are basically of an anecdotal nature: they describe the games in a detailed manner, often emphasizing the characteristics and the experience of using the games with students, rather than on their effectiveness within an overall project in which the educational aims and objectives to be met are rendered explicit.

This chapter aims to present the typologies of research on simulation games and the significant results on which there is widespread agreement. The analysis intends to focus attention on the problems that have arisen from the literature and, from this, to put forward various suggestions on the development of further work and underline the ambits and directions for future research.

CERTAIN RESULTS

The results on the effectiveness of simulation games, notwithstanding the 50 years of fruitful experience (Wolfe & Crookhall, 1998), have not always been supported by the research, and even where there has been research, one has to exercise considerable caution when reading the results. As various authors point out, for example Randel, Pierfy, Bredemeier and others, numerous studies have not been adequately structured, there is no shared taxonomy of simulation games and the final results frequently lack thorough documentation.

Three categories of research into simulation games have been identified in the literature:

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