

Chapter 17

Theories of Motivation for Adults Learning with Games

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ABSTRACT

This chapter considers motivation from the adult learning perspective, specifically in the context of Higher Education. It is common for the findings of research carried out on children in this area to be used as a justification for game-based learning in university settings. However, adults' motivations for playing games are unlike those of young people, and motivations to play games for leisure and learning also differ. This chapter considers these differences by first examining the literature on motivation and games, and secondly by presenting and critically discussing two recent theories of adult motivation. It aims to provide an overview of motivations for game-playing outside the post-compulsory education sector, and to present guidelines to better understand how adult motivations can improve learning.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter examines motivation with games and learning from the perspective of adults, particularly focusing on the context of Higher Education. It provides an overview and critique of relevant theoretical frameworks of games and motivation, and it also considers some of the latest empirical research findings in the area. The chapter

examines the ways in which university students approach educational gaming, and discusses the two motivational frameworks that emerged from these projects.

Much of the use of games for learning is inspired by the assumption that games are motivational for the majority of people. Throughout the literature on game-based learning, in the case of both adults and children, it is commonly assumed that the rationale for using games for learning is that games are intrinsically motivat-

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ing for most people (e.g. Alessi & Trollip, 2001; McFarlane et al, 2002; Miller & Robertson, 2010). This hypothetical motivation is then used as an argument for using games to learn, the argument being that if the motivational factors associated with games can be transferred to learning, then the learning will be more effective (e.g. Oblinger, 2004; Prensky, 2007). However, it is evident that not all people (and particularly adults) find games motivational; while they may motivate some, for others they will be extremely off-putting, and there must be a convincing argument for using games before some learners (particularly at university level where time is precious) will engage. In the context of formal education, the majority of research on games and learning in formal settings has been undertaken with children (as opposed to learners in Higher Education) although it is acknowledged that there is also considerable research with adults in the military, training and medical arenas. It is when the assumptions and findings of the research undertaken with children are applied to adult learning in Higher Education that problems arise, when in fact adult motivations for playing games often differ significantly from those of children. This chapter highlights adult motivations for playing games, and considers how these motivations might be harnessed for learning purposes.

There are several possible explanations for the widely held assumption that games are intrinsically motivating for most people. It could also be hypothesised that games researchers may be motivated to play games themselves, and perhaps do not consider that playing games is not motivating, or indeed is actually demotivating, for some individuals. It is also self-selecting enthusiasts who elect to participate in many educational gaming studies, which only serves to propagate these assumptions.

Adults and children typically play computer games for different reasons. Play is a fundamental part of a child's development (Colarusso, 1993; Koster, 2005) and is generally seen as an

appropriate way for children to learn. For most adults, game playing is more closely associated with leisure time than with learning or work, and it is not an activity in which all adults engage (Whitton, 2007). While some adults will happily play computer games for fun or relaxation, others prefer alternative ways of spending their free time. When faced with limited time, playing games is not an appealing option for everyone.

The ways in which the concepts of *play* and *fun* are perceived in relation to learning differs from early years to primary and tertiary education and beyond. While fun and games may be seen as appropriate within the context of children's learning, they are seen by some adults as a frivolous distraction and inappropriate in the context of formal learning (Whitton, 2009). Games, and in particular computer games, also have many negative associations, such as leading to aggressive or antisocial behaviours (Sandford & Williamson, 2005) or promoting gender discrimination (Becta, 2001). These connotations further limit the potential acceptability of games for learning with adults.

Children and adults have different reasons for engaging in formal learning. In formal education, children typically learn because something is on a curriculum or required to meet an assessment requirement; they may also have an interest in the subject but this is not the primary reason they learn about it formally. Adults have a range of different reasons for taking part in further education and training, whether to further their careers or simply out of interest. While children may be interested in playing games regardless of what they might be learning, simply because they are fun and novel, older learners may be more strategic (particularly those who are paying for their education) and games may be seen as 'dumbing down', 'frivolous' or simply a 'waste of time'. These perceptions may be held by teachers and lecturers as well as students, so it is important that games are seen to have a value beyond that of simply being motivating, and that the true potential of games as robust

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