2007

Recommended Reading: Gamers Go to College

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Recommended Citation

Richard Van Eck. "Recommended Reading: Gamers Go to College" (2007). *Teaching, Leadership & Professional Practice Faculty Publications*. 26.
https://commons.und.edu/tlpp-fac/26

Gamers Go to College

Craig Westman and Penny Bouman
American Association of Collegiate
Registrars and Admissions Officers, 2006
$50 (members), $70 (nonmembers);
111 pp.
ISBN 1-57858-074-9

Reviewed by Richard Van Eck

Publications about games and learning used to be rare. The focus of early efforts was on getting educators and parents to consider the possibility that video games have educational benefits. That time and that argument are largely in the past; surveys indicate that most parents and educators accept that games may have a place in the curriculum.

Needed now, however, are practical suggestions for how parents, teachers, and administrators can make the best use of games. This is why I picked up Craig Westman and Penny Bouman's new book, *Gamers Go to College*, with much anticipation. From the title and preface, this book promised to be directed toward nonresearchers and to provide much-needed practical guidance about who the students in this new century are (the authors call them the Gamer Generation, or Gen G), why we should care, and what we should do to prepare our schools and classrooms for them.

Westman and Bouman recognize that part of their charge must be change agency, which they acknowledge in the first sentence: "One may ask, and rightly so, 'what is the need for a book on kids who play games and what is its relevance to higher education and enrollment management/services?'" They answer this question by noting, "To curtly dismiss an ever-growing cultural trend of 90 million plus individuals is risky, especially if you are on the recruitment side of the higher education house."

This is one of the aspects of this book I like the best—it does not try to discuss games and game play as part of a larger discussion of technology use by Generation Y but recognizes that a discussion of games and gamers is complex enough to warrant its own discussion. According to the authors, Gen G is not simply "a subset of the Millennial generation" but includes game players from the 1980s and today and will include those from future generations. This concept of a cohort that transcends age and generation and instead "surfs" the wave of video game playing from the 1980s into the future is fascinating. In another thought-provoking passage, Westman and Bouman argue that the widespread, diverse use of technology in this generation is actually an outgrowth of the use of video games themselves.

The authors spend most of the introduction making the familiar (but necessary) argument that game playing is a big part of what students are doing and that organizations that rely on this trans-generation cannot afford to ignore this trend if they want to remain competitive. While much of the data here will be familiar to those who have read other works on games and learning, some is new, and all is up-to-date and relevant. The authors also expand on and support their idea that Gen G is trans-generational, outlining their discussion for the rest of the book: "[We limit our] discussion of the Gamer generation to the implications for the college experience including campus life, academic program offerings, recruiting, and admissions, and alumni relations."

Chapter 1 presents an impressive array of data, facts, and figures that document the financial impact of Gen G, as well as a host of demographic data including who these students are and what games they play. The data are connected to issues relevant to higher education, and they serve to debunk several popular misconceptions. For example, many readers new to the gaming literature will be surprised to learn that two games were sold for every household in 2005; the average game player is 33 years old; 61 percent of parents think games are a positive part of their children's lives; and 71 percent feel that games provide good opportunities for socialization.

Chapter 2 continues with an overview of how this generation has learned from games and why some of the skills they acquire from games are and will continue to be valuable. For those new to digital game-based learning (DGBL), this chapter is a good survey of the landscape of games, gamers, and learning. The authors make good use of existing research, connecting key concepts and theory with real-world game examples.

Chapter 3, unfortunately, is an aberration. Although interesting, this chapter is perplexingly unrelated to both the preceding chapters and the theme of the book. Part of what makes this chapter confusing is that it was written by an expert in the gaming industry rather than by the book's credited authors. The chapter seems intended to show how game players are well suited for developing games (a growing industry, to be sure) but struggle to find an education that suitably trains them. This undercuts the point made in the first two chapters—that the skills game players acquire from game play (such as problem solving, social networking, and intelligence) are applicable to endeavors outside the relatively narrow field of game development. Some readers might wonder if games, then, are only relevant for those who want to pursue careers in game development (which is not the case) or whether the point is to convince more colleges to offer game design programs (also not the case).

Chapter 4 picks up the thread begun in Chapter 2. Again, the value of what is offered here lies not in new data and contributions to the field, but rather in providing a good overview of the issues and ideas involved in DGBL for those new to the field. As such, the chapter is an excellent Gen G primer for the Boomer generation. There are a few rough spots: the importance of narrative as a learning strategy is never described, despite the authors' later relying on its ability to promote problem solving, for example, and while the connection between narrative in

general and in games is fairly well articulated, the connection to higher education is weak. Much of the complexity of these issues is ignored in favor of providing a view of game play from 30,000 feet.

One of the enduring concepts I took from this book, however, is on Lakota narratives and video games (and only partly because I live in the area of the country where the majority of the Lakota live today). Anyone who wants to understand how narrative, story, and problem solving work together should read this section. This is a key strength of games—they combine powerful learning strategies in narrative-driven situated problem solving. Unfortunately, our classrooms and workplaces do not provide these same kinds of activities, despite their proven ability to promote the very problem-solving skills we desire in students and our workforce.

By this point in the book, the authors have convinced us that Gen G is trans-generational and thus too large to ignore. They have done this by providing a wealth of information about Gen G and the changes that video games have wrought in the ways they learn and experience the world. We expect the book to shift toward making use of these ideas and concepts to propose ways for higher education to make changes in the ways it recruits, mentors, and retains Gen G. Unfortunately, the next few chapters do little to extend these important ideas into practice.

Chapter 5 discusses "the experience economy," focusing on how other organizations have attracted large numbers of people (presumably Gen G) by attending to themes and experience rather than information. The authors rely on discussions of television, theme parks and restaurants, and so forth. There is little or no connection to games, despite overt attempts to articulate such a connection. I found myself wondering why the authors focused on this theme rather than others that are more commonly related to games. A more cogent argument could have been made by focusing on engagement and interactivity—two hallmarks of games that are also relevant to the ideas they discuss—rather than

moving away from games to popular culture and entertainment.

Chapter 6 purports to move more directly into a discussion of Gen G and what higher education needs to do to meet its needs and expectations. Once again, however, little meaningful connection is made between higher education environments and the ideas, skills, and abilities of Gen G. The authors abandon the majority of the groundwork, ideas, and themes laid out in the previous chapters in favor of a laundry list of ideas, such as hosting LAN parties, giving out PSPs to administrators, and using humor to recruit students. Again, these are interesting ideas. They are largely unrelated to games and Gen G, however, and none of these ideas will lead to meaningful change in how institutions function or in how they can make use of the power and functionality of games.

To be fair, the authors do discuss how institutions can leverage the idea of the experience economy to make significant changes in campus life. But given the weak connection between the experience economy and games, this is not a very effective argument. The authors focus more on marketing than on institutional change, and even their suggestions for leveraging games for marketing ignore the strengths of games and Gen G. Instead of discussing how to market to Gen G, why not talk about marketing *through* games, as the U.S. Army does with its game *America's Army*? Or why not talk about what institutions must do to retain students? After all, recruiting is not just about getting students to your institution; it is also about retaining them. Much of the advice in this chapter could easily have come from a book on using technology to market to current audiences.

In Chapter 7, the authors say, "While other analogies exist, the comparisons above get the point across that video games and institutions of higher education share many similarities." Then, however, they say, "To look at an institution of higher education as a simple video game may seem a crude analogy at best." I found myself agreeing and wondering why they had taken the time in chapters 5 through 7 to explore this

analogy, especially after having gone to such great lengths to lay the groundwork in early chapters for so much more.

The problem in their approach lies not so much in what they *do* say in the latter half of the book but in what they *don't* say. They leave unaddressed the larger part of the academic world—not once do they mention the classroom or current educational practices in the context of Gen G. Nor do they address the questions many educators and administrators are asking: How must we change our approach to teaching to take advantage of the strengths of Gen G? What kinds of infrastructure and training will we need to do this? How will this generation change the mission and means of education as we have come to know it? Granted, the purpose of the book is largely to discuss marketing and recruitment rather than teaching and learning, but it is surprising nonetheless that there is no discussion regarding what is, after all, the primary purpose of academic institutions. Ignoring the biggest strength games hold for the future of our educational systems—their ability to teach and promote deep learning—does a disservice to the larger conversation about games and higher education.

The rest of the book is composed of appendices (including a Lakota narrative and an essay about the growing number of women and girl gamers), which are interesting and worth reading. Ultimately, the first four chapters of this book are an excellent introduction to the world of games and learning, written in an easy-to-read manner requiring no previous experience with video games. As such, many in higher education will find it valuable. But, although chapters 5 through 7 are individually interesting, they do little to provide the practical guidance we need to effect meaningful changes in our institutions as we strive to remain relevant and take what is best from games to improve all aspects of our educational system. *e*

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