Getting Learning's Game On!

To recreate the age-old apprenticeship model of learning within a new-age immersive gaming context, it is important to consider eight key design principles.

BY TONY O'DRISCOLL

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As someone who had the good fortune to travel the world as a child—living on four different continents and attending 14 different schools before university—I can personally relate to the age-old adage, "Experience is the greatest teacher."

Being repeatedly thrown into unfamiliar contexts created an almost perpetual need within me to learn as much as I could as quickly as I could. In essence, much of my youth was spent in a state of what Ed Schein calls "survival anxiety": a state in which one's immediate desire to survive trumps one's inherent reluctance to learn.

As the Internet morphs into the "immernet," the virtual mash-up of learning and gaming has become the poster child for the world's next disruptive societal step-change. The key to education is motivation, and—it is argued—games can provide the real-time narratives and incentives to accelerate the learning process on a global scale.

That said, the learning experience within the game must be engineered so teachable moments surface at every turn. Those teachable moments, however, are not the same for each learner. Instead, the underlying content is encountered, applied, and reflected upon based on the learner's experience rather than the teacher's mandate. In many ways, the application of gaming to learning harkens back to the age of apprenticeship when learning and doing were fused and situated in a context where action and execution synthesized concept and content in real time.

KEY DESIGN PRINCIPLES

To recreate the age-old apprenticeship model of learning within a new-age immersive gaming context, it is important to consider eight key design principles:

1. Instructionally grounded: Learning experiences that take advantage of immersive narrative contexts and gaming mechanics must serve the learning objectives that have been developed to address a specific business need. The first design principle requires that the gaming context serve the instructional content, not the other way around.

2. Participant centered: In immersive learning contexts, the locus of control moves from the teacher to the learner. The second design principle requires that the participant—not the instructor—be positioned at the center of the learning experience.

3. Contextually situated: Immersive learning contexts must be believable and action oriented. They also must be bounded, so participants encounter all the learning objectives without it feeling too obvious or onerous. The third learning principle requires maintaining the right balance between situational context and learning content.

4. Inquisitively discovered: To create a sense of engagement and flow within the immersive learning context, the appropriate level of ambiguity must be established. The fourth principle requires participants to be provided with minimal guidelines and encouraged to discover cues and clues as they progress through the narrative.

5. Action oriented: The success or failure of immersive learning environments hinges upon the actions and interactions of participants as they engage in episodic activities designed to surface teachable moments that synthesize the learning objectives in a meaningful, relevant way. The fifth design principle requires that the learning experience be rooted in action.

6. Consequentially experienced: Learning is an iterative process. Trial and error is core to the development of competence. The sixth design principle requires that participants viscerally experience the consequences of their actions within the immersive learning environment.

7. Collaboratively motivated: Participants are simultaneously consumers of, and contributors to, the learning experience. Their collective action and collaborative co-creation drives generative insights that cannot be individually derived by any single member of the group. The seventh learning principle requires that the learning shifts from structured teaching to social and situated peer-based learning.

8. Reflectively synthesized: Given the experiential and collaborative nature of immersive learning contexts, the need for self-reflection and group-based synthesis of the experience is not an option; it is a must. The eighth design principle requires that reflection be an integral element of the overall design.

Do have your learning game on? If not, perhaps the path to changing the game in learning within your organization begins with these eight design principles. Let the games begin!