The Shaffer–Gee perspective: Can epistemic games serve education?

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A B S T R A C T

This paper addresses the issue of how games can reshape education by describing current educational practices. It argues that there are conservative camps that emphasize structure and development of basic literacy and numeracy skills in education as well as liberal camps that emphasize immersion, and notices that both camps fail to train students able to address the crisis of innovation. A post-progressive pedagogy that integrates both structure and immersion to address this innovation crisis is described in the paper. It is also emphasized that epistemic games can serve as excellent tools at the hand of this post-progressive pedagogy.

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1. Introduction

The question of whether games can serve education has been addressed by several researchers over the past five decades or so. In one instance, Shaffer and Gee (2005) noticed that educational games could serve education by facilitating student development towards the requirements of the workplace in society. This paper will provide an overview of how games can serve the crisis in education.

In 2005, Friedman argued that US society was facing an educational crisis. He noted that young children, both in schools and at home, were prepared for what he called commodity jobs whereas society would very soon reward only those who could do innovative work. Commodity jobs are defined as jobs that have to do with manufacturing commodities (i.e., goods that are sold to households at a reasonable price) (Greider, 1997; Thurow, 1999). Although the United States was in the past superpower in the production of commodities, this is not the case nowadays since places like China, where production costs (e.g. labor force, raw materials, etc.) are lower, have taken the lead in manufacturing commodities. The result is that countries like the US can no longer compete; they can only survive if they can develop new technologies to manufacture innovative products that cannot be easily copied and reproduced in other places. This ability does not lie in either the labor or the materials that are used for the production of innovative products; rather, it lies in knowledge about new forms of social relationships and interactions (Drucker, 1993; Gee, Hull, & Lankshear, 1996; Kelly, 1998; Rifkin, 2000).

A new definition of commodity jobs was proposed by Shaffer and Gee (2005): a commodity job within a country is any job that can be done more cheaply and just as efficiently outside that country (cf., Mehta, 2005). A job is a commodity job if it can be easily outsourced, and it is easily outsourced if it requires only standard and standardized skills (Friedman, 2005). As such, a patient who refers to a doctor overseas is, in effect, outsourcing a job by making the job of doctors inside the country into a commodity job. Therefore, commodity jobs are no longer bound within the realm of manufacturing household goods, but have come to include technical and scientific jobs as well. This is the real crisis. To survive this crisis, countries have to move towards producing people who can do work that is centered on creativity and innovation rather than the simple reproduction of standard and standardized skills (Hagel & Brown, 2005; Kanter, 2001; Shaffer & Gee, 2005). This is where the real threat lies. It is sheer naiveté to think that countries like China or even Iran will remain 'commodity servants'. They, too, are ambitious enough to think of moving the value chain to produce innovative people in their universities and entrepreneurial centers (Shaffer & Gee, 2005). This, in and of itself, is not a bad thing; it means that the world will definitely be a better place. It becomes problematic only when the educational system within a country does the opposite (i.e., produces commodity servants instead of training innovators).