

# **My journey to the end of the course (DEIDGBL)**

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## Introduction

This synoptic paper will consider my journey into understanding the potential of games, and other playful activities, to support and encourage learning and how my views have changed from my experiences. This will be considered through thematic lenses of motivation and emotion, storytelling and narrative and scaffolding.

Before this course, my opinion was that games are a good distraction from everyday life. I had no specific negative view but was not an advocate. Suits (2005 p.159) reflection that choosing to play video games is a 'voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles' resonated well with my starting view of games as unnecessary.

Motivation and engagement are key themes for consideration in my future work as a learning technologist, developing online science-based safety process training materials. Engagement here refers to the constructivist assumption that individuals' participation in educationally purposeful activities influences their learning (Coates 2005). My aim for IDGBL related to understanding whether games *can* support learning in my work context and which, if any, game principles could be considered to move learners towards intense engagement and intrinsic motivation by putting them 'at the centre of the learning experience to change from "passive vessel" to "active participant"' (cited in Pannesse and Carlesi 2007).

## Backstory

Play and games were a big part of my childhood. I frequently participated in formulating imaginative games with friends. I also spent considerable time playing board games with family. My most influential experience, however, was the vicarious learning (Bandura 1977) I encountered, watching my brother play video games. I frequently spent time observing his process of probing the world, creating and testing hypothesis and accepting or re-thinking them (Gee 2003), very rarely being allowed to take a turn (Murray 1998). Playing so infrequently meant that when I played, I failed quickly and was not allowed to re-try, stopping me from refining strategies (Juul 2013) or improving.

This led to me spending time watching, listening and considering his learning behaviours (Howarth *at al.* 2007, Bandura 1977). Frustration because I was not able to join in, or progress when I did, motivated me to find my own game, that did not involve turn taking and put into practice the observed behaviours.

These experiences led me to the Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG) Runescape, where I spent considerable time during my teenage years experiencing that video games are 'teaching and inspiring and engaging us in ways that reality is not' (McGonigal 2011, p.4). In Runescape, I was not the shy, introverted teenager I was in real life. I was afforded opportunities to explore identity as a player and to experiment with this as I learned (Whitton 2010). Since these experiences, I play infrequently. The most I manage are mobile-based games that I dip in and out of. A big factor, is a lack of time and motivation, to participate. I do not consider myself to be a gamer, especially as my time playing is occasional.

On reflection, my motivation to play games relates directly to how successful I perceive myself to be when playing. This mirrors the frustration I experienced when I was younger and struggled to overcome obstacles. Conversely, the games I dislike correlate with things I find challenging or weaknesses I have. However, approaching all games with these biases is constraining my ability to find success (Bruning *et al.* 2004).

## Motivation and emotion

Considering motivation, intrinsically motivating activities are undertaken with the aim of improving learning (Butler 1987), and if engaged with for its own sake (Malone 1981). Pink (2009) claims that the focus of this internal drive is getting better at something that is meaningful and matters. Where activity is undertaken or engaged with as a means to another end (Butler 1987) such as the receipt of something material, status or money (Malone 1981), it is extrinsically motivating.

### Muddying the waters

The introduction of badges in week 2 of IDGBL, provided an opportunity to consider my motivations. A desire to receive a full set of badges as a reward for my efforts motivated me towards completing associated activities, rather than a wanting to learn from the experience.

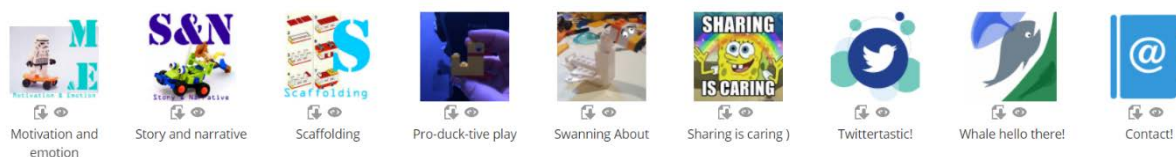


Figure 1: Badges

When working towards the CC, from week 6, however, I noticed a shift in my motivations. Juul (2013) reflects that when something is at stake, we are motivated to play. Although the CC also involved rewards, these were not my sole motivation. Involvement with 'affinity groups' who shared this goal (Gee 2003, p.212) coincided with the CC and this involvement transformed my 'stake' into focussing on social learning, not extrinsic rewards. Contributing towards group goals, a sense of satisfaction and being socially involved in meaningful learning activities (McGonigal 2013) intrinsically motivated me and kept me engaged with the CC, until its completion.

During IDGBL, I [blogged](#) about intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, with a clear divide between them, considering the two as entirely separate entities. My experiences on IDGBL however, highlighted that motivations can shift and that both can be at play simultaneously, and has brought me to the conclusion that they are not in fact opposites, as I originally thought.

### Game rules

I came to IDGBL with a good understanding of necessary strategies to fit my learning, acting and thinking styles, to fully immerse myself in the learning experience. Recognising that I am best motivated being surrounded by problems to solve and that I sometimes feel overwhelmed in my studies, I set myself some rules to scaffold my learning

I will (try) to:

- Understand my own and critical perspectives in a considered way
- Explore games that push myself outside of my comfort zone
- Continue playing a game, even if it feels tough
- Think about what I am learning and which elements can be applicable to my learning context
- Research more to improve my research and writing skills

## **Playing games, finding success and failure**

The first game I played was Pac-Man, which I had tried before, and failed at. Keeping motivated, really put these rules to the test. I was eaten by ghosts approximately 187 times, not realising (a) Pac-Man can go back on himself or (b) there was more than one level. However, determination to find success encouraged me to keep trying. Although I understand the game and it makes logical sense, I am practically lacking in the hand-eye co-ordination and cognitive ability to recognise nuances and patterns at such speed (Gee 2003, Greenfield 1984) which became a barrier for me. Highlighting that with Pac-Man I have what Dweck (2007) terms a fixed mindset of assuming my ability to play is static and cannot change. Juul (2013) reflects that many games are simple to learn and play but knowing how to play is not sufficient to play the game well. To succeed, I need to experience the difficulty level matched to my skill level (Gee 2003).

When starting the second course game, Minecraft. I had become an active participant in an affinity group with shared goals and endeavours (Gee 2003). In survival mode, Minecraft contains competitive elements and the goal to survive. Rather than seek out tutorials, I chose to learn how to play through trial and error (Chifter and Cipollone 2015). I made this choice knowing that I had access to the affinity group, should support be necessary (Gee 2003). I quickly discovered that being out at night, I would be killed by enemies, and lose everything.

Being charged with emotion (Turtle 1984) due to the potential of being killed at any minute, intensified the impact feelings and psychological state had on performance. Heightened emotions, such as stress, panic, or worry, negatively impacted on cognitive performances, slowing down abilities to process information in a calm manner and make rational judgements. My ability to perform increased, but only up to a point. Too high levels of arousal resulted in decreased performance (Yerkes and Dodson 1908).

## **Coming to terms with failure**

Dying was a learning experience, nevertheless, each time it happened I felt like I had failed, which impacted on my motivation. Juul (2013) posits that mood, personality and time investment influences how you feel about failure. The more time invested in overcoming a challenge, the greater the sense of loss when experiencing failure, or triumph when experiencing success. Juul (2013) reflects that failure can be considered a motivator as it helps to recognise and reconsider strategies, giving fair chance of redeeming or improving ourselves.

Play in Minecraft did not stimulate my intrinsic motivation, which gave me pause to reflect on and discover that failure played a bit part in it. I did not at any point feel like I was

succeeding, the lack of boundaries and rules meant that I did not know what success looked like. When playing Minecraft in the past I have done so to spend time with my family, or because I have had an objective to complete. Previously, my purpose for play was not related to something that mattered or was meaningful to me.

Gee (2003, p.62) recognises that some players bring a 'fearful and damaged identity to the table'. I did not see myself as one of these players until I explored the impact failure had on my motivation. Openness to making mistakes and failing in the pursuit of learning changed the way I consider both learning and play. Gee (2003, p.62) reflects that 'to repair damaged learners... there must be some such story, though the stories will be as various as the learners' (Gee 2003, p.62). Considering video games environments as a place to take risks where real-world consequences are lowered (Gee 2003), I approached WoW, ready to explore.

## **Storytelling and Scaffolding**

From the pixelated planes of Minecraft, we moved into the dazzling realms of World of Warcraft (WoW). Although I was a complete novice in WoW, I had previous experience of another MMORPG, Runescape. Playing Pac-Man and becoming aware of my fixed mindset, followed by the failure I had experienced in Minecraft, prepared me well for engaging with WoW ready to thrive on challenge, grow from failure and stretch my existing abilities. What Dweck (2007) terms a growth mindset. I was able to mix a level of prior knowledge with innovation and transfer it to this new challenge (Gee, 2003). WoW contains all the key elements of engaging games identified by Malone (1981) as being intrinsic motivators: provides a challenge, embodies fantasy elements and satisfies and arouses curiosity.

### **Storytelling: AuntyMatter's Story**

De Mul (2015) reflects that games can act as a tool for identity formulation as they display 'important aspects of human life that structure our lived experiences' and 'enable reflective identification with this structure' (de Mul 2015, p.177). Creating a WoW identity mirrored this. Having made a commitment to and taken care in choosing my race, class, specialism, appearance and name, I quickly identified with my character AuntyMatter, a human mage with a specialism in fire (Gee 2003). As soon as I arrived in Northshire Abbey, I was thrown into a whirlwind of meeting objectives and completing quests. My priority suddenly became making the right choices to ensure that AuntyMatter's path, was the right one (Gee 2003). As of now, AuntyMatter is a level 56 fire mage with interests in herbalism and mining. She can often be found roaming Azeroth with her companion and protector the level 59 shadow priest Moopeh. She is more interested in Player vs Environment than Player vs Player, her objectives include, exploring dungeons, killing monsters and contributing to her guild.



Figure 2: AuntyMatter



Figure 3: AuntyMatter and Moopah

My feelings and motives are attributed to AuntyMatter, and go beyond the confines of the game world, this projective identity or 'interface between one's real-world identities and the virtual identity' (Gee 2003, p.66) became apparent when I realised I was concerned with writing the right story for her, to ensure that I was proud of her history (Gee 2003). Gee (2003, p.59) posits that 'people cannot learn in a deep way within a semiotic domain if they are not willing to commit themselves fully to the learning in terms of time, effort, and active engagement'.

My experiences of identity development in WoW brought to mind what Turtle (1984 p.500) describes as the 'holding power' games have and the way in which they appear to engage players, in an almost 'hypnotic fascination'. The identity I built in WoW was done so in the constraints of the game and should be reflected upon with those limitations in mind.

### Scaffolding and narrative

WoW demonstrated fantastic examples of problem-solving for the player in the forms of introductory tasks, tutorials and quests. Completing these scaffolded (Wood *et al.* 1976) my play, by teaching and supporting me as I learned to take control of my character. Information was provided 'just in time and on demand' enabling continued progression through the story (Gee 2003). Having a purpose kept me engaged in the game and motivated me (Pink 2009) to progress.

A key feature of WoW is the architecture it provides for telling (Roberts *et al.* 2009) both individual and shared experiences of stories or narratives. Narratives are the representation of a series of logically and chronologically related events in a specific setting, where the story unfolds as a result of the actions of the player (de Mul 2015), helping the player to become part of the storyline (Gee 2003).

A particularly impactful experience playing WoW was exploring Stranglethorn Vale. Here I experienced the freedom of carrying out quests (de Mul 2015) and exploring the influence this had on the way Auntymatter's story unfolded. Having a series of goals to decipher, with obstructions to me achieving these goals (de Mul 2015), such as the need to defeat a character of a higher level than me, kept me on the edge of my 'Zone of Proximal Development' (ZPD) (Vygotsky 1978), the space between what is known and what is not known (Black 2010). As discussed, I played with a 'More Knowledgeable Other' (Vygotsky 1978) Moopah. He supported me on the edge of my ZPD, pushing me towards what was not known, reducing the gap between what was learnable with suitable help (Black 2010). An unexpected discovery I made in Stranglethorn Vale was how much I enjoyed killing monsters. While fighting, especially in long-winded battles, I came to experience what McGonigal terms 'fiero' the feeling of triumph over adversity (2013 p.33).

Progressing further through WoW highlighted that there is a ceiling to what can be learned from the game. Also, levelling up takes a lot of time. I am working towards getting a flying mount and have been doing so for almost 3 months. Considering applying something like WoW in my work context is unthinkable as people would not have time available to commit.

## End Game

Motivation and engagement have historically been hard to foster in my learners. At clients request, learning is currently delivered using a behaviourist-inspired approach whereby learners responses to stimuli are conditioned (Selwyn, 2017, p.74) by rewards and punishments (Caine and Caine 1994, p.17) both inside learning environments and within learning objects. Feedback has highlighted that learners are guessing answers to pass exams, rather than learning. This is resulting in low attrition rates, high staff turnover and increasing job-related safety concerns.

A surprising discover during IDGBL is how closely learning and games are linked. This discovery encouraged me to consider a playful approach to my work. Schnell (2008) refers to a game as a problem-solving pursuit with a playful attitude. Ideally, I would employ McGonigal's (2013) four key game traits; goals, rules, feedback systems and voluntary participation, as a games framework. However, this makes a few assumptions. Firstly, that all staff are willing to engage, voluntarily, in games and will not be of fixed mindsets (Dweck 2007). Secondly, that all participants bring the same identity to the game (Gee 2003) and will engage with and be motivated in the same way and not experience negative emotional experiences (Yerkes and Dodson 1908). Thirdly, that the impact of failure can be controlled (Juul 2003). Finally, and most critically, that in applying game principles to these safety-based training materials, content will retain importance and the game-like elements will not distract from the intended outcomes.

Applying game principles to support learning in my work context will provide opportunities to improve engagement and motivation, but must be done in a considered way. Promoting problem-based, goal-oriented, active learning with an emphasis on social learning, such as affinity groups (Gee 2003) should motivate learners to be more safety cautious and self-aware in their work. To be successful in this, I will consider the thematic lens' I have explored throughout this course and my games experiences.

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