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It's all in the game: The European project 'Multiple choice identity', educational gaming and a win-win-situation

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*It's our life, it's hard fun, is this our ID? Do you want another one?
Another one. It's all right, all right'*
(from 'It's all right', Wim Kratsborn and Martine Lijkelema)

Gaming is hot and educational gaming is popular among millions of young people all over the world. They are members of the Net-generation living in a Network-society. They construct large communities by themselves, communicating inside 'affinity groups'. They feel at home in cyberspace, developing parallel identities with multi-tasks, creative and hypertext minds. For them the physical world is just another window. They may have different real and virtual identities, changing according to the place and the time. They are really fascinated by all these new digital possibilities.

Some educators are worried about the consequences of this development. Young people may get lost and confused. Do they use it as an escape into a virtual world? Or is it just a new and creative way to discover their own identity or identities? Young people have to learn long, complex and difficult things in school, to develop concepts, skills and relationships that will allow them to explore new worlds. Educational games may help them to experience learning as a source of enjoyment and as a way to explore who they are: Learning as a form of pleasure.

There are more right answers to these questions and the future of education will not be like it was before. Gaming is 'the key to a "virtual social space"' (Oblinger). It's a 'social revolution' with an enormous impact on students and teachers. Some teachers are worried. That's ok, but they first have to learn how these 'screenagers' have learned to learn. How and why do they play 'massive multi-player role playing games', constructing their identity, family and friends ('The Sims' and 'The Choice')? Do they have an ID? Game designers recognise that learning and identity are interrelated. Why are young people so fascinated to use 'avatars' as representations of themselves and their parallel identities? Teachers will have to understand young people with an open, flexible and creative mind, because otherwise they'll lose contact with the 'Net-generation' and the 'Network-society'. They are also part of the game.

So welcome to 'the game of the real', an everlasting discourse, a deep play with multi-tasks, interactivity and virtuality. It's hard fun.

What's in it for the European project 'Multiple choice identity'? Educational gaming may be used as a sense opener, a source of knowledge, a problem-solver, a way of communication, presentation and reflection. It's another option to create a 'multiple choice identity'.

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In the Europe-project we use more entry points such as 'blended learning', multiple intelligent, natural and real learning. Learners make real objects or materials with their hands, listen and dance to music, do research in their environment and use aesthetics. Let's try to link the surplus value of educational gaming with the Europe-project. Let's try to make the project more 'game-like' for the learning player and the playing learner. The aim is to make the experience of learning as motivating, stimulating, collaborative, and rewarding as the experience of playing a well-designed educational game.

1. The motivation of the player is very strong, because he is constantly challenged by new and complex situations. He has to take time. That's what (young) people like. It's motivating to be surprised by something new, unpredictable or unexpected. Simultaneously curiosity and fantasy is stimulated. The player has the feeling to have control ('empowerment') and a choice ('contingency'). In the route all these elements are present too through the use of music, drama, problem-solving tasks and prior knowledge. Every step is a step further and higher in the learning process. In each step he is challenged to do or make something new and creative. He's invited to Europe 25, a foreign and new land. He's not only a discoverer and a constructor of Europe, but also of himself. He's making new friends who are not like him. He shares knowledge, skills and attitudes. Although the context is very complex, he will find his own way. It will take a long time and great effort, but the reward is the presentation and the feedback on it by others. It's hard fun.
2. In gaming a one-to-one interaction is realised and the player may adapt the game to his own person ('trade-offs'), despite rules and restrictions (time). Also the learner has to follow the route step-by-step and for each step a limited time is allowed. Everything is well ordered in steps. Knowledge, skills and attitudes may be used later to solve problems. However inside a step a lot of free and empty space is created, to make choices ('choicism'). This clear structure and free space are not paradoxes, but two sides of the same coin. It's personal and cooperative at the same time. At the end he should have the feeling that this game or route is especially made for him.
3. Gaming is about 'experiential exercises'. It's 'learning by doing' on an individual or a cooperative level. He learns as he plays or the other way around. Research shows that learners learn best when they learn in context - that is when they relate concepts, skills or strategies to prior experience. Step 1 is a sense opener to prior knowledge. In a game winning is an important challenge. In the Europe-project, the sharing of diverse feelings for Europe and the design of a multiple-choice identity is the first prize, a win-win-result. Essentially it's about the experience and about communication and not about competition and winning. The player/learner may furthermore increase his competences to seek advice from other learners in a chat-room or on the forum. Cooperative learning is essential to gather new knowledge, to solve a problem or to look at things from another perspective. It's about knowing, understanding and respecting the differences (cross-functional teams). Like in gaming, it stimulates the learners to think in terms of relationships, not isolated events or facts. Howard Gardner calls it: 'thinking outside the box'. These are good skills for a multiplayer in a world full

of complex, high risk systems: 'the risk society' (Ulrich Beck). The aim is to become a flexible, adaptive, lifelong learner.

4. During a game and the route the teacher may coach or monitor the learner individually and interactively, because it's visualised concretely step-by-step. The teacher knows exactly in what phase the learner is playing/learning and knows where he's going to. That's why just-in-time-learning and coaching are possible. He knows the rules/key terms and the aims of the game/route as well as the learner. Together they may give meaning to the free space and practice the constructivist learning theory in the best way. The teacher should not be a long distance coach.
5. The player/learner may use different entry points to gather knowledge, skills and an attitude. The multi-player is also a multiple intelligent learner and vice versa. All these different entry points are available as well as materials. It's essential that it makes sense to the player/learner in reality or in virtuality. The player/learner realises that a choice may effect future actions or steps. Like in a game he recognises what he has done before and it makes him feel responsible. The straightest and swiftest path is not always the best way.
6. The player/learner may discover a new area in an active, creative and flexible way and feel respected (self-regulation). He does mini-research and assimilates the result in mental schemes or organisers ('the sense opener', 'the field of view' or the 'feedback ladder'). A colleague once called the Europe project 'Project Minus Zero', because most young people not only know little about the other quadrants, but that they even have wrong stereotypical knowledge and attitudes. The learner should not get that 'Columbus feeling' to not really know where he's going to and finally to arrive at the wrong spot.
7. Playing the game or following the route is not restricted to school. It may be done all the time and at all places ('outdoor activity'). When young people play the SIMS-CD about family and friends they also link it with their real family and friends. Parents and teachers have an important task to assist the multi-player/multi-learner to become empathic innovators, discoverers and lifelong learners and to create their own multiple-choice identity.

'We are Europeans, everybody is a star'
(From 'Let's go urban', Wim Kratsborn)