

The Reluctant Reader, Gaming Environments, and the Future of Teaching and Learning

by Kate Wittenberg

What are the implications of the reality that most students arrive in school assuming that a Google Search is the way to do research; that MySpace is the place to “meet” friends; and that video games are the model for practicing strategic thinking, teamwork, and leadership skills? If this is how students are using the online environment, then what does this mean for teachers? If these digital natives are our audience, should we be thinking about new ways of using games in an educational setting? Instead of scolding students for spending too much time on digital “entertainment,” maybe we should instead start to think creatively about how to meet them on their own turf, using gaming environments toward educational goals.

To move in this direction, we must first understand the ways in which this generation of learners interacts with, and benefits from, these gaming environments. The next step is to change our behavior accordingly. Gaming companies, manufacturers of electronic devices, and middle and high school students will soon become our advisers and collaborators. To understand the world in which students live and work, we must talk with teenagers; must observe students socializing, studying, and relaxing; and must purchase (and play) video games. As teachers, we now need to understand not just the content that we wish to convey to students but also the ways in which they process and use information.

*Excerpted from **RHI: Reaching Reluctant Readers**, a publication of Random House, Inc. To request a complimentary copy of RHI, email highschool@randomhouse.com, subject: “RHI: Reluctant Readers”*

Video and online multiplayer games are already beginning to attract significant attention among professionals in industries looking for young employees. Employers sometimes see experience and success with video games as a positive addition to a résumé. With rich role-playing environments capable of fascinating so many users, games can be a powerful medium for learning and a valuable tool for building skills necessary in today's workplace. Video games such as *Dungeons and Dragons*® and multiplayer games like *World of Warcraft*® require participants to develop skills in leadership, strategic thinking, team building, conflict management, and problem solving — skills valued in teaching students and training professionals in a variety of fields. Using these games in a teaching environment may engage students who tune out when confronted with traditional learning materials but who spend hours outside of class in these gaming environments.

Users of these games report that they often engage in elaborate strategizing and discussion before attempting a battle or quest; they claim that success often hinges upon repeated trials or on working with a team of players. Teachers could create scenarios in which students work as an online team, "playing" games that, for example, allow them to test leadership styles, develop strategies, or take on decision-making roles during a crisis. Readings could be assigned before the game is used in the classroom, and teachers could build curricula around the experience, focusing on leadership, cooperation, teamwork, analysis of information, and communication with peers. Once gaming companies see how these products are being used, they will likely begin to develop games specifically aimed at teaching particular skills, thus creating additional resources for teachers.

Students have adapted to communicating in sophisticated, interactive, and collaborative gaming environments. The traditional forms of educational materials could therefore be at risk of becoming irrelevant if they do not evolve. Although the first reaction of teachers and parents is often to scold students for

Excerpted from RHI: Reaching Reluctant Readers, a publication of Random House, Inc. To request a complimentary copy of RHI, email highschool@randomhouse.com, subject: "RHI: Reluctant Readers"

“wasting” time on entertainment when they should be “learning,” I believe it is worth taking a closer look and considering the possibility that the use of an online, “virtual” environment could actually be an important and positive change. As this engagement with gaming environments evolves, we may see a broader transformation, one in which learning becomes a process of participation in a community rather than of receiving knowledge from an “expert.” If this is the case, we will then have to confront the issue of how to allow participation and interaction to take on increasing value without lowering standards or risking the dissemination of erroneous information.

Mechanisms for engaging students both inside and outside the classroom are undergoing rapid development and change within the current digital environment. It is unclear, however, who will creatively use these changes for a positive learning outcome. Will the traditional arbiters of content quality (such as educational publishers and teachers) step up to propose and use new models, or will younger users themselves establish systems for learning from these games? Teachers and publishers have an opportunity to incorporate students’ fascination with online collaboration and gaming strategies as they design curriculum and educational resources; these professionals can thus become central players in the digital environment as it evolves. Developing these new approaches, however, will require a change in mindset within the teaching and publishing communities. Professionals in these fields will need to initiate conversations with new players and new partners. Developers of video games, manufacturers of electronic devices, and middle and high school students will necessarily become advisors and collaborators. Market research for publishers, in order to understand the world in which students live and work, will now include arranging focus groups with teenagers, becoming familiar with video games and social networking sites, and observing students socializing and studying in their digital communities. The resulting conversation needs to include a focus on less technical but perhaps more intractable issues: changing assumptions about learning, and acknowledging users — especially those

*Excerpted from **RHI: Reaching Reluctant Readers**, a publication of Random House, Inc. To request a complimentary copy of RHI, email highschool@randomhouse.com, subject: “RHI: Reluctant Readers”*

representing the younger generation — as active collaborators in the creation of new teaching resources.

As teachers and publishers, we must try to understand the processes at work and to define our roles more broadly as leaders who integrate an understanding of the user, the learning process, and the value of digital information in our work. Even though such redefinition does not mean catering to every preference expressed by students regarding their educational structure, it does mean seeing these users as partners who can lead the innovation process because they understand the new ways in which they communicate, learn, and engage with material. By combining this vital user perspective with the expertise we bring as teachers and publishers, it may be possible to create useful new models for learning resources. At times it will be difficult to grapple with the new assumptions and habits ingrained in younger information users. By dismissing their perspective or ignoring this challenge, however, we will lose an opportunity to make an important contribution to the new world of learning and information that this new generation of students will create.

About the Writer

Kate Wittenberg is Director of the Electronic Publishing Initiative at Columbia (EPIC), where she developed and directs the electronic publications *Columbia International Affairs Online (CIAO)*, *Columbia Earthscape*, and the *Gutenberg-online History Series*. Other recent projects include a digital teaching resource in anthropology, and the Core Integration system for the National Science Digital Library. Her work focuses in particular on sustainable organizational and business plans for online publications and on collaborative organization models for online publishing.

*Excerpted from **RHI: Reaching Reluctant Readers**, a publication of Random House, Inc. To request a complimentary copy of RHI, email highschool@randomhouse.com, subject: "RHI: Reluctant Readers"*

<http://www.randomhouse.com/highschool/RHI/>

*Excerpted from **RHI: Reaching Reluctant Readers**, a publication of Random House, Inc. To request a complimentary copy of RHI, email highschool@randomhouse.com, subject: "RHI: Reluctant Readers"*