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Selection Criteria for Using Commercial Off the Shelf Games (COTS) for Learning

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Abstract:

Digital games are being used more and more often as teaching resources in the classroom (H. Ainsworth, 2011). Some are games designed specifically for educational purposes, and others—known as COTS (commercial off-the-shelf) games—are commercial games that were designed for entertainment, but have educational value as well. Some of these, like *The Sims*, *Civilization*, and *Pac-Man* come to be seen as educational games despite having commercial success outside of education. Games may be free to download or play, or games that must be purchased. They can be for any platform, including mobile. While there appears to be a gradually growing acceptance of the use of games for learning, this acceptance is largely focused on games designed specifically for learning, in other words, serious games where the educational purpose of the game is explicit and was likely part of the design goals right from the start. When it comes to using COTS games in the classroom, acceptance is still often replaced with skepticism (Van Eck, 2006). Some have proposed their own theories about which attributes of COTS games make them suitable candidates for use in a formal learning context, and while the body of research on the use of games for learning continues to grow, there is still no definitive evidence that any specific theory carries more weight than any other. What is clear is that the use of games for learning holds sufficient promise to warrant continued inquiry (Perrotta, Featherstone, Aston, & Houghton, 2013). To avoid the negative backlash of the games that occurred in the “Edutainment Era” we need to adopt a more moderate approach supported by evidence that our efforts are at least as good as traditional approaches, and preferably better (Wilson, 2006). The so-called Edutainment Era, which started in the mid- to late 1980s and lasted to the mid-1990s, was the first time that computer games for education became popular, and they were promoted by several

panacea. All one needed to do was wrap a game around a lesson, and it would magically become fun. Of course, this is not true, and the fall from grace for many educational games developers left them reeling. Again preaching that games are effective and useful for learning we give the impression that all good for everyone to learn everything (Van Eck, 2006). Clearly, this is an overstatement of fact. It is understandable how this message might turn people off to the idea of using some games to teach things. It is important to emphasize that whether a game is intended for use in formal education (preschool, K-12, higher education), corporate training, or other professional development, the context and activities surrounding the game are key to reaping whatever potential benefits a particular game offers. The size of the game, that is, the amount of time it takes to learn how to play the game as well as the length of play are also important factors when considering games for learning. Ultimately, the fitness of a particular game, like any other instructional technology, will depend not only on the game itself, but also on the requirements, features, and limitations of the environment in which it will be used and the people who will be using it. This chapter provides a snapshot of where we are now in our understanding of the issues and how to address them.

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