Commentary on:

The Next Generation of Educational Engagement

Robin Mason

As an awareness-raising, stimulating and provocative article, Oblinger has produced an excellent piece of work. It provides an overview of the issues, yet is backed up by specific examples and practical applications. It makes generalisations and sweeping statements, yet formulates the issues into tables which pinpoint the issues very clearly. It is sober rather than hyped; it is grounded in facts, rather than being wishy-washy. If academics put into practice even a fraction of what is hinted at in this article, we would have happier, more challenged and engaged learners.

However, what is most notable about the article is what it does NOT talk about. I will highlight three of these:

- Costs – We know that the cost of developing multimedia learning material is very high; the cost of developing successful games is even higher. The big game companies devote huge resources to the development of a game. I suspect that students would be very dismissive of a 'poor man's version' developed with the restricted budgets of educational institutions.

- Reality-check – The statistics Oblinger cites and the pictures she conjures up of young people carrying out background research in order to play a particular game more expertly, discussing meta-cognitively the strategies of game playing and socializing in groups around gaming, are the rosy-coloured end of the spectrum. At the darker end are people completely addicted to game-playing or using gaming as a way of avoiding work, study and interaction with other people. Many of the games are mindless, violent, repetitive and lacking in any kind of community processes. Of course Oblinger is right to highlight the positive and beneficial aspects of gaming; but we shouldn't lose sight of the dis-benefits completely. Between the rose coloured and the dark coloured ends of the spectrum are the young people we know and observe and teach. What I take from Oblinger's paper is that

Robin Mason, *Institute of Educational Technology, The Open University, Walton Hall Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA, r.d.mason@open.ac.uk*

the majority of young people are between the extremes and are comfortable with computers, the Internet, mobile phones, games and new technologies generally. Furthermore, while they may display the all too familiar characteristics of laziness, lack of engagement, and surface-level learning, we need to look at the processes of games to understand how to motivate them. In fact, I would put it even more strongly – I would say that both the processes and content of education need to change, not just in order to better motivate learners, but because the nature of what needs to be learned is changing. The kinds of skills and the approaches to learning that the best games and game users display does reflect the learning-to-elearn framework that underpins this new agenda for learning.

- Generational or evolutionary? – The kind of generational arguments Oblinger makes can lead us astray if pushed too far. I see the same kind of learners Oblinger describes as being born after 1982 amongst the adult post graduates I teach. I don't have the statistics to back up my intuition, but I suspect that the best aspects of the game-playing mentality have always existed in people in about the same proportion. I also suspect that there are equally valid and successful ways of capitalizing on these attributes - using game playing techniques in teaching is advocated in this article, but there are many other directions that are already being explored. For example, on our Masters Programme in Online and Distance Education, we use a range of approaches that are equally engaging, dynamic and social: problem-based learning; multimedia simulations; online debates and role-playing, collaborative projects and assignments, peer marking; real-time technologies for discussion and socialising.

Of course many of these have gaming aspects to them, so obviously there is no distinct line between what is educational gaming and what is not. The role-playing activity we use on one of our Masters courses involves the use of the Harvard Rotisserie software to structure several rounds of debate. Students pick a persona and are assigned a message to respond to by the software. One student reflected on the experience:

> I found the Rotisserie a useful exercise. To start with I liked the fact I could take on someone's persona. As person C, I stepped into the shoes of someone who "is concerned with the cost effectiveness of any new technology" . In my professional life, I'm an instructional designer for an e-learning company and tend to be the one fighting for education and innovation. It was

interesting to step into the shoes of those who are usually debating against me. I felt that my taking on this personal might let me gain insight into why for these people, or my managers, cost is always the main concern.

One of the issues Oblinger raises, but does not really explore, is that of informal learning. She calls the game environment an example of informal learning, but again there are many other ways in which we, as educators, could be building on the growth of informal learning practice sparked off primarily by the web and the explosion of information available on it. I was very struck by an example of informal learning recently, which has caused me to reflect on the outcomes of formal versus informal approaches to learning. My son was installing broadband on my rather tired laptop and because the lead supplied with the package required one to work more or less on top of the telephone point, he tried to set up a wireless connection for his own machine with bits of equipment he had acquired from here and there. What astonished me was the way he worked at the problems he faced. I know he has never taken any formal course on computers or communications, and yet his knowledge was far greater than mine despite my formal training. What he had was many of the skills Oblinger cites: problem solving skills, lateral thinking, persistence, determination, multiple strategies, willingness to try and be wrong, confidence and total lack of fear of the technology. He read a lot of help screens, came at the problem from different angles, and perhaps most interestingly, knew when to settle for a partial solution – piggy backing his machine off mine.

It set me to pondering why it is that we can all develop real expertise in certain things in apparently effortless informal learning processes, and yet struggle endlessly in others despite the best formal training. We used to talk about talent, natural ability, genetic dispositions. Obviously learning is not synonymous with teaching, but could it be the case that formal learning is actually antithetical to developing this kind of expertise? In other words, is formal teaching so far from the processes of true learning, that it is at best merely tinkering around the edges and at worst damaging the natural processes of learning? What Oblinger is almost saying, is that the informal learning processes and expertise which the internet has occasioned for young people, are not exceptions but the norm for the majority of NetGen'ers. If that is really the case, if it is really the case that talent and natural ability are not necessarily required to develop expertise, then we do really need to understand the processes Oblinger has laid out in this paper. On the other hand, if gaming is one of a range of approaches for keeping abreast of the evolution in teaching and learning, then it is a worthy but possibly short-term pursuit. Given that the young are disparaging of older people aping their ways, perhaps we need to wait until some of

the millennials are teachers in order to really capture the spirit of gaming in teaching. (Of course by then, the next generation will have moved on to something else…..).