

Book review. Seelow, D. (2023). *Games as transformative experiences for critical thinking, cultural awareness, and deep learning: Strategies & resources*. CRC Press.

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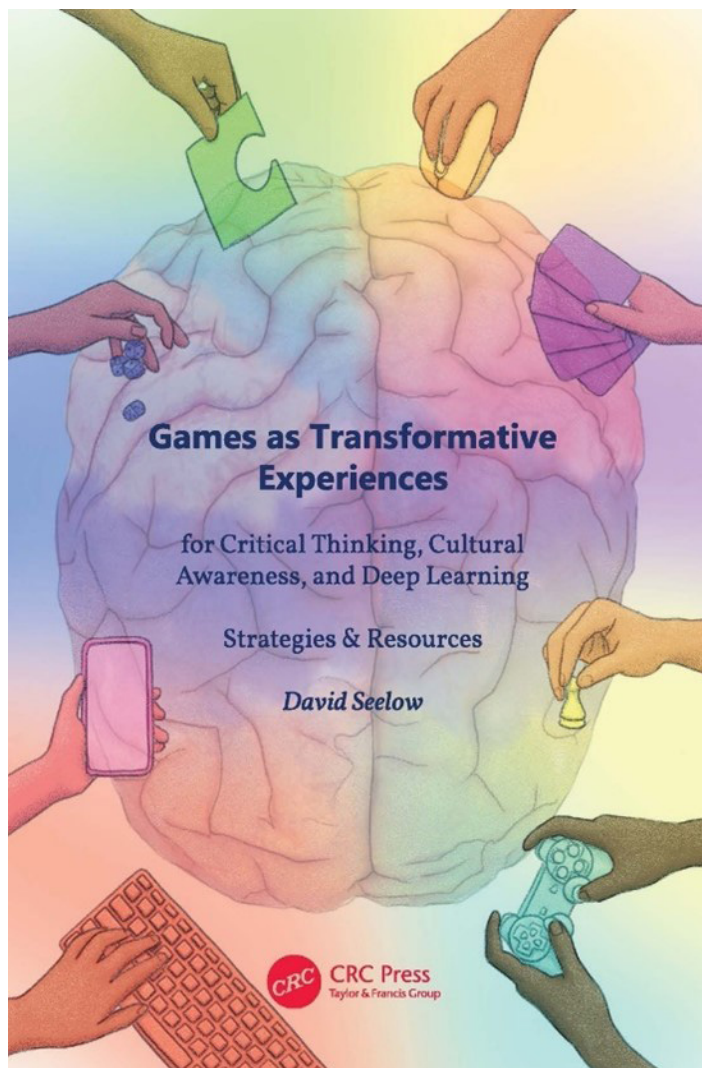


Figure 1. Book cover.

Introduction

Are you seeking a valuable compendium of game-based learning games to increase classroom engagement, commitment, and motivation? If so, this reference book of applied games will provide a treasure trove of tools to build gaming into your instructional methods successfully. This book focuses on the application of games in education to create the positive (and progressive) potential of

transformative learning experiences. Moreover, an objective for this focus is the pragmatic learning outcomes that an instructor can evaluate and assess.

Insightful outcomes are not necessarily the result of a transformative experience. If the experience gradually improves the learning and well-being of the participant in the learning space, then the educational outcome can be considered successful. The incremental development of the learner provides a resilient foundation for increased belief in oneself, one's future, and one's understanding of a place in society.

The author proposes:

to argue in favor of games as transformative experiences that can help us reimagine education... All games are potentially transformative experiences because they engage the player in dynamic action, i.e., learning by doing, in response to other players, in a complex system made up of challenges whose overcoming bring the player into a new zone of possibility. If games are used in a learning situation, inside and outside formal classrooms, guided by an instructional presence requiring critical thinking in a cultural context, then games are very likely to enable transformative experiences (p. 1).

The overall context for Dr. Seelow's catalog of transformative educational experiences through gaming is constrained by a range of issues that affect current educational environments, whether virtual, online, hybrid, or traditional:

1. A significant challenge exists when incorporating specific value-laden learning outcomes into educational game design.
2. The return on investment in game development is elusive, especially for educational institutions, administrators, and educators who are cost conscious.

3. Since educational institutions comprise a wide range of curricula, instructors, pedagogy, andragogy, learning objectives, etc., the target audience for game sales is highly fragmented.
4. The target audience for learning games includes purchasing agents who decide on items and tools without in-depth knowledge of games or their educational benefits.
5. Many educators, professors, and instructors are unfamiliar with the value proposition of casual games as learning opportunities.
6. The economic feasibility of personally designing a game for a specific class is too abstract and obscure to be helpful.

As Seelow (2019) outlined in an article on innovative approaches to assessment:

When I claim games and simulations are necessary forms of assessment, that claim implies that current assessment practices need disruption and furthermore that games/simulations provide an excellent opportunity for positive disruption and innovation in the assessment field. In order to truly innovate, Game Based Assessments must do something different than the current practice (p. 2).

He suggested an alternative and more pragmatic label for the often-overused phrase “serious games.” He proposes “applied games” as a more relevant characterization for this genre of transformational instructional methods:

Applied Games are designed specifically to affect transformative experiences in non-entertainment situations such as the classroom, health conditions, behavioral issues, social or political impact, empathy, and other prosocial attitudes and behaviors. These are games that are designed to have an impact on learning, attitude, behavior, or society (p. 4).

Subsequently, David Seelow advocates an additional action:

Applying games, refers to any game-commercial or not, video, board, athletic, card, etc., that can be deployed in some fashion to a learning situation. Applying games is akin to using a film, song, or novel in a classroom not specific to that media (p. 6).

Why is this subtle difference significant for the author's thesis? He argues for the superiority of creative works of art over bland, boring textbook material. Moreover, he outlines how commercial, casual, and even esports games can be transformed into critical tools to stimulate a dynamic, interactive learning environment. The fundamental outcome is increased learner motivation and engagement, relating the external experiences from the lived world with the more formally structured learning from school.



Figure 2. Photo of Trekking: The National Parks (2nd edition).

Dr. Seelow's underlying premise with applied and applying games is that the successful application of games in educational institutions is predicated upon an effective delivery of critical thinking instruction through effective teaching. Critical thinking is the “critical success factor” for developing balanced individuals living within our less-than-balanced world of social media saturation and misinformation.

Analysis and significance

David Seelow's seminal work is congruent with numerous other authors researching and producing scholarly works in the genre of game-based learning (GBL). Although a section outlining the conceptual framework, pedagogy, and theoretical foundations for GBL was omitted, it did not detract from the overall contribution of his work.

Loosely defined, pedagogy encompasses the educational theory and practices that stimulate learning in children (Murphy, 2003). Pedagogy is not absolute since it reflects the act of teaching within a cultural, philosophical, political, social, and theological educational ecosystem. In pedagogy, the instructor is often portrayed as a tutor or guide. On the other hand, andragogy may be described as a suite of theories and practices specifically focused on adult learners. Adult learners generally exhibit self-directed actions and autonomous participation in the learning experience, where the role of the teacher is more often that of a facilitator or coach (Knowles, 1989).

Both pedagogy and andragogy encompass a range of theories, conceptual frameworks, and models. GBL is considered by many to be pedagogy and andragogy (Camacho-Sánchez et al., 2022; Cheung, et al., 2008; Emin-Martinez & Ney, 2013). GBL is often described in terms of self-determination theory, such that intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, and demotivation are foundational concepts (Gee, 2008; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Squire & Jenkins, 2003). GBL also incorporates constructivist theory, project-based learning, active learning, learning by doing, discovery learning, experiential learning, and inquiry-based learning,

to name a few underlying theories and practices. As Litman (2021, p. 53) succinctly put it:

Game-based learning is the simple belief that children [or adults—my addition] are inherently motivated to learn when playing, and if a school could capture the joy and spirit of game play in the curricula, then academic success and deep learning would certainly follow.

This book provides another significant contribution to the range of texts that cover a broad spectrum of applied games (serious games) useful within the university classroom:

1. *A systematic guide to Game-Based Learning (GBL) in organizational teams* (Thompson & Jennings, 2016);
2. *Everything you need to know about designing effective learning games* (Boller & Kapp, 2017);
3. *Game-based learning across the disciplines* (Aprea & Ifenthaler (Eds.), 2021);
4. *Game-based learning, gamification in education and serious games* (de Carvalho & Coelho, 2022);
5. *Games and simulations in teacher education* (Bradley (Ed.), 2020)
6. *Gamify your classroom: A field guide to game-based learning* (Farber, 2015)
7. *Handbook of game-based learning* (Plass et al. (Eds.), 2020); and
8. *The educator's guide to designing games and creative active-learning exercises: The allure of play* (Bisz & Mondelli, 2023).

Relevance and intended audience

I am confident the intended target audience should be educators, university administrators and faculty, high school administrators and faculty, newly minted instructors, and researchers and scholars across all disciplines.

The author succeeds in engaging his target audience on multiple levels by furnishing specific lesson plans, games, books, notes, websites, game development tools (game makers), and other resources to construct a practical and pragmatic citizenry based on democratic principles.

Those principles are founded upon a solid framework of critical thinking skills, regardless of the VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous) environment that now envelopes our globe. Applied and applying games might positively reorder the cultural, social, and political outcomes permeating society, thus, building informed, personal knowledge to overcome the blatant ignorant state permeating our institutions and less informed citizenry.

Authoritative foundation of the author

David Seelow is a widely respected academic and educator, beginning his university and college teaching in 1989. He also taught in public schools. Dr. Seelow founded the Center for Game and Simulation-Based Learning and the Online Writing Lab at Excelsior University.

Over multi-decades, Dr. Seelow has designed and delivered online courses and developed entire online programs. This experience would suggest that he brings a wealth of knowledge to the recent and current emphasis on virtual and blended learning models. His publication experience is wide-ranging, including the humanities, education, and learning games, most notably for this book. His most recent text was the *Game based classroom: Practical strategies for grades 6-12*.

Critique and recommendation

The text is organized into an introduction, four parts, 21 chapters, and a conclusion. The four book parts are categorized as:

1. Games as transformative classroom experiences
2. Games as transformative experiences for community and culture
3. Casual games as transformative online learning experiences
4. Playing across boundaries: Interdisciplinary instruction with films, games, and literature

The text is well-structured and easy to understand. The publisher has introduced an egregious editorial error in labeling Parts I & II with the same title. This mistake should be fixed in the subsequent printing of the text. I received the actual title of Part 2 from the author. Extensive notes and comprehensive bibliographies are included in most chapters.

Each chapter furnishes the reader with a deep dive into a particular applied game. When I use the term "deep dive," I really mean it. The game description, rules, learner reactions, learning outcomes, insights, etc., will help any educator or instructor develop a critical appreciation of how a game could positively impact learner motivation and engagement.

Let's look in detail at Chapter 13: Playing small business owners—Teaching management, self-efficacy, and authentic skills through casual games. This chapter is after my own heart, mind, and spirit since I delve a great deal into teaching entrepreneurship in my undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral courses. Many chapters expose the learners and instructors to the challenges of teaching during the last three years of the pandemic experience, along with the sociological and psychological issues associated with race, gender, ethnicity, etc., immersing the learners in the real world outside the university.

In *Papa's Pizzeria to go*, the learner acquires time management skills and customer service skills—two skill sets seldom developed or located in today's small business enterprises. In *Tiny tower*, community development, financial success, and customer satisfaction are outcomes balanced against overbuilding, overdevelopment, capitalist greed, and consumerism.

Real estate portfolio development is taught in *Landlord Go*. This game facilitates learners to move about their home locale or the campus region where they attend school and assess properties to buy. The game's sophisticated artificial intelligence and GPS feed real-time data into the game making the player's experience genuinely authentic (Pocket Gamer, 2020). "In fact, when someone enters a real property that you own in the game world, you earn virtual rent!" (p. 219). Concepts such as monopolies, free market capitalism, and cut-throat competition provide a grounding into the historical and economic lessons on greed vs. service to the public.

In *Punch Club*, players enact a kickboxer moving up the ladder to become a champion. The players are presented with ethical dilemmas around legal and illegal tournaments. The goal is to develop and balance three skills: strength, agility, and stamina. Participants become immersed in the pros and cons of daily life within the career field of sports management, from the manager to the boxer. Finally, *Lesson Ideas* are proposed for taking the games into the classroom, increasing their relevance, and building a deeper learning experience.

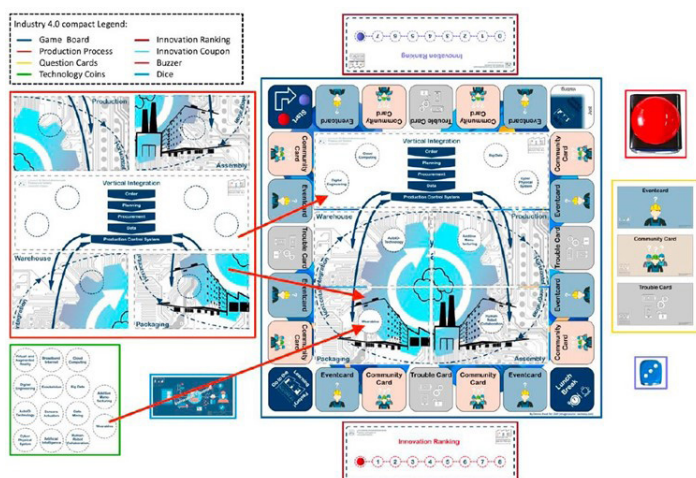


Figure 3. Game elements of Industry 4.0 Factory Game (Teichmann, et al., 2020, p. 262). CC BY-NC-ND license.

The conclusion provides a metaphysical perspective of where GBL fits into an overall philosophy of life. I would posit that David Seelow should be esteemed in the same way we treat John Paul Gee, Jane McGonigal, Jesse Schell, and Lee Sheldon. The book contains significant benefits and is well worth the investment of time and money required to acquire and read the book. This book is highly recommended if you are looking to experiment with GBL in the classroom, either via online, virtual, or hybrid approaches. You will find a wide range of successfully applied games that could be used to

stimulate your learners' interest in achieving a deeper level of learning.

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