Surviving the game:
Interaction in an adult online learning community

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Summary

In many Higher Education institutions, fun or enjoyment represents purposelessness, and is often characterised as something that should only be indulged in at specific times, in measured ways, and on special occasions. Play and games are thus often assigned a role that is secondary to ‘real’ work. This essentially artificial separation between work and play has had a profound effect on traditional learning theories and educational design.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the role of the metaphor of a game in the interaction, dynamics and complexities of a web-based module that is presented to adult learners. The uniqueness of this study is attributable to a combination of the following elements:

• games and play, and their motivational potential and value for adults
• adult learners, group complexities and dynamics, and the various kinds of online interactions to which learners are subjected
• the World Wide Web as a learning environment.

The case study upon which this thesis is based is the facilitation of a particular module that is presented as part of a two-year tutored Masters degree in Computer Integrated Education at the University of Pretoria. The presentation of the module simulated the spirit and atmosphere of Survivor© – an award-winning reality series that has been shown on national television.

This study aimed to throw light on the impact of the metaphor of the game on the complexities of adult learning in a web-based module. In order to do this, the following elements of the game were investigated: Group Composition, Isolation (on the virtual island), Tribal Activities, Individual Activities, Reward Challenges, Immunity Challenges, Tribal Councils, Voting, and The Grand Prize.

The interactions, dynamics and other complexities in the group were explored in terms of the following focal points: Learning outcomes and expectations, peer support, feedback from peers and the facilitator, peer assessment, interpersonal conflict, language issues, stress factors, time concerns, competition, humour,
personal lives, synchronous and asynchronous communication, costs implications, online culture, and retention rate.

An approach that is both qualitative and interpretivist informed this study. The study yielded a huge amount of rich detail for analysis. By crystallising and triangulating the qualitative results obtained from the data a powerful tool with which to investigate the interactions that occurred in CyberSurviver was constructed. My focus was thus primarily qualitative because the study, as it was conceptualised, required for a detailed, in-depth interpretation of the case.

The study demonstrated how the CyberSurviver design provided learners with opportunities to interact among themselves, with myself as facilitator – and with the content, the technology, and their various environments. It showed that interactivity need not be excluded from online learning – especially since the introduction of games can be successfully utilised to encourage interaction. It also highlighted the complexities, challenges, and concerns that both the learners and the facilitator face in a module with this type of design.

The findings from the study indicate that the introduction of a game metaphor can inspire high levels of motivation in adult learners and provide a stimulating, all be it challenging, online learning environment.

**Keywords**

Play, Fun, Games, Interaction, Group dynamics, Complexities of group functioning, Survivor®, CyberSurviver, Game metaphor, Online learning, Adult learners, Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, Flow.
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