LABlearning and *game design learning*

Elmo asked a good question lately about: "Yes, games and designing games are interesting in LABlearning, but how do we get in contact with game designers to support the processes?"

The question is based on the assumption that media based learning might not only include the *use* of serious games or other games, but might indeed include the *design*, *development* and *production* of serious games.

In fact, we know that the design of digital games is one of the most powerful ways to engage, motivate and empower young people, especially the so-called non-academic or disengaged groups.

As you might know the Aarhus College is engaged in a number of European projects aiming to bring together education, game designers and the world of work. I attach a few hand-outs on this – and also a College case I recently produced for the Commission's research group on *Digital Games for Empowerment and Inclusion*.

So, Elmo's question is not so much about the relevance of using good games in media based learning, but more specifically about how to link up with professional people that can support the processes of active game design and collaborate with our LABs.

Of course, it is not possible to provide a general answer to this question, as it very much depends on the LAB's interests, resources and local networks.

At the Aarhus College we are lucky to be able to establish strong synergies between our LABlearning project and projects precisely aiming to establish collaboration with young game developers from the region.
This happens in *Scandinavian Game Developers*, and in the new project *GameWise*, our teachers will be trained in entrepreneurship linked to the game sector.
The resources of these projects are, of course, available to the LABlearning project.

Furthermore we foresee a number of new project initiatives in this field – as the Commission will have a strong focus on these challenges in the 2014-20 programs. In fact, we expect the Commission to develop a specific policy in this field during 2013, to which the Aarhus College has contributed considerably, by the way.

Let us, then, approach Elmo's question: *How can we establish collaboration with professional game developers to work together with teachers and students?*

First of all I believe that the institution or school should reflect on its strategic interest in being engaged in the field of *learning through design of digital games*. Why?

Because *learning through designing games* might be a long process. You can develop a good video in a few days, but not a game.

This means that the institution must be interested in and able to maintain a long-term collaboration with game designers.

> The idea is to include one or more game designers in the media based learning teams, working side by side with teachers, mentors and young learners.
>
> Not necessarily every day, of course, but perhaps one day a week or organized in certain clusters along the LABlearning activities.

Such collaboration might offer tremendous and powerful learning opportunities for everybody, including the game designers!

The problem is, of course, that it is not easy to establish this kind of ongoing collaboration: in fact, we are talking about developing a *new culture of learning*!

The teachers don't know how to do it, neither do the game designers.

They need to learn to work together, to create a common language, common missions.

It should be noted that such activities are very close to the promotion of entrepreneurial mentality, thus targeting yet another high priority for education in Europe. Why? Because perhaps the game design leads to social innovation or the development of resources for different people in the community…

And, because learning through game design develops strong entrepreneurial competences among the young learners.

So, how can educations establish collaboration with game designers?

(Of course we should focus on *serious games designers*, but not exclusively)

Let's roll out some first recommendations:

1

The game design activities should be integrated in the everyday learning activities and be about the education's key topics.

2

The game design activities should include teams of teachers, students and game designers.

3

The game design activities should be based on a joint mission, for example to help solve a problem in the community, or to produce innovate material for other learners (primary school, elderly, patients, whatever…).

4

The game design activities should involve game developers with a clear interest in new types of jobs or creating new markets for their professional competences, first of all in the field of serious games.

5

The education might wish to approach one or more of the following local or regional game design environments:

- Game design or multimedia educations ($\Rightarrow$ the students need real-life cases and practice during the education)
- Game design incubators ($\Rightarrow$ the young game designers need start-up projects, practice and networks)
- Small game companies ($\Rightarrow$ looking for new markets, new costumers and new opportunities)
- Universities with game or multimedia research departments ($\Rightarrow$ interested in real-life projects and in linking their research to social reality and users)
- Well-established game companies might also be addresses ($\Rightarrow$ due to an interest in new markets, new opportunities)
- Informal communities of young people interested in or with a talent for game design ($\Rightarrow$ they would love being involved in real-life projects)

6
It is very important that the collaboration with such resources can run smoothly, meaning that the geographical distance and time available must be realistic.

7
It is of the utmost importance that the game designers can see the perspective and can benefit from the collaboration, as to future employment, European engagement or being included in new networks (for example educational networks) with further market perspectives.

8
Local or regional youth (un)employment provisions might be interested in supporting such meetings between game designers and educations.

9
Pro-active educations might wish to include game developers or multimedia designers in their staff: instead of 50 teachers, 48 teachers + a game designer + a multimedia designer.

10
Pro-active educations might wish to train a team of teachers in developing serious games as a part of their further professional training, or to spot talented students wishing to be trained in game design in parallel to their vocational studies…

As you see, there are many opportunities and some of them could be combined. They all call for *new ways of thinking*, *pro-active mentality*, *strong local and regional networking* (linking educational activities to game designers and community missions), but: this is exactly what the European Commission calls for!

Most of us would reply: yes, we see the opportunities, but who will pay for these activities?
So, funding.

Creativity is needed, but in fact there are many opportunities, especially for those institutions wishing to engage in learning through game design in a strategic perspective, meaning: focus on this field for many years ahead.

Let's list some of the opportunities, as we progress from the simplest to the most complex funding:

~ Game designer students in education, in practice or in labour market incubators are often free of charge, or might receive a limited payment, as it is a part of their education and training

- Unemployed game designers might wish to engage on short-term or step-by-step conditions
- Young game companies or teams or individuals might accept a limited payment in the first experimental phases of the collaboration, especially if promised better conditions if the collaboration proves successful to all parties
- The education itself might wish to invest in part-time contracts with game designers (1 or 2 days a week, for example), or to plan more mixed staff (not only teachers should be working in education)
- The local or regional authorities might be interested in supporting activities fighting youth unemployment and opening new markets and employment opportunities (sometimes specific and open funding is available)
- The education's labour market stakeholders might be interested in supporting such innovation, and even in using the outcomes of such activities
- Community stakeholders, to which the education is linked, might also be interested in providing financial support
- Local or regional companies, such as banks and insurance companies, often have social responsibility programs for young people, and the game design activities are perfect for such programs, as they include entrepreneurship
- Local or regional educational and youth authorities might have an interest in supporting such innovate approaches and benefit from them
- In a further perspective, it will indeed be possible to fund such innovation through the European programs (at regional as well as European level) in all or most educational sectors, so a continued development of high quality and forefront European projects is still of high value

Such steps might be combined with different forms of community initiatives: if there are no incubators available, or there are no labour market measures installed for youth in the community, maybe the education could kick-start such processes, in collaboration with relevant stakeholders in the community.

But, it also true that we are at the doorstep of exploring all these new ideas in Europe.
Perhaps other ways are more efficient or relevant or useful. Europe will be looking for such examples for many years ahead. Digital games for learning, inclusion and empowerment is one of the most important emerging fields in Europe and at global level - now and will continue to be so for many years.

It is important that pioneer work and innovative practice is linked to all kinds of educations, not simply imprisoned at the universities…!

Let us remove the obstacles and get going!