

Space invaders is not a video game

Home / 2016 / April / Opinion piece / Space invaders is not a video game



A simple fundamental shift in approach can have a huge impact on the accessibility, inclusiveness, and efficacy of e-learning. That's my opinion, born of personal experience, and the premise of this article.

The shift that I am proposing is from page (or screen) to space (or environment). If the e-learning designer will stop thinking in terms of a page, and start thinking in terms of a virtual space, then many beneficial things will start to fall into place automatically.

A brief history

Back in the day, sometime around 1995, a lot of homepages stuck strongly to a real-world metaphor. One's homepage reflected the objects in one's home, study, or on one's desk. It was all pretty basic by today's hi-res standards, but it was fun and it worked. Individual web authors were nought but humble hackers, bending the HTML rules to do fun stuff. We learned how to do things we liked by going, 'view source', and then copying, pasting, and adapting the code. It was frontier stuff. The homepages were first and foremost a virtual presence on the web. What we did not do was try to represent ourselves to be more than we were.

Absorption mode

This brave new world of the multi-function Learning Management System, or the gee-whizz animated learning app, is one where the people are in real danger of being shunted out. In many Learning Management Systems the user has a sense of being lost in an enormous and deserted records office. Students of this era especially, experiencing the typical MOOC video lecture, feel rising cynicism blocking the pathway to their learning. Barbara Oakley and Terrence Sejnowski run an excellent course called [Learning How to Learn](#). They are informative, amusing, and personable; but, still, I am alone, sitting in the middle of an empty cinema, faintly amused by their antics. I have no part to play in their light-hearted documentary production. I am in absorption mode. This mode is okay for some elements of a course, but it only sustains a user for so long. Like television, you can only watch so much of it before your brain flatlines. Many people use television as a sedative, to give them a rest from thinking. They could use a lot of e-learning the same way.

Workshop mode

Instead, imagine yourself as a course designer entering an old warehouse space where you are going to run workshops. What will people need to do in these workshops? What facilities, fittings, and furnishings will be useful to them? How will they be able to reconfigure these spaces to meet the needs of their programme? How will you fit out this space to promote and maintain high energy levels? How will you support the needs of different people?

Is the fundamental difference revealing itself?

Where the approach is a page or the script of a video, that is content-driven. Where the approach is a space, be it physical or virtual, then that is people-driven.

If you think in terms of an interactive space:

- Management is more likely to sponsor your project. When the space is configurable, it can be repurposed and reused. There is a better and longer return on the investment put into its development.
- Teachers are more likely to buy in. If they can change things around to meet their need, to converse with their students, and to observe their progress, then e-learning starts to deliver on its promise.
- Learners are more likely to engage with your programme. When they can do stuff, talk to other students, talk with their teacher, and export their outputs then e-learning becomes effective for them.
- Parents are more likely to support your venture. When whānau can visit the virtual classroom and see what the kids are doing, then they're going to take an interest and see the value.

Scott Doorely and Scott Witthoft have written a book called, [Make Space: How to Set the Stage for Creative Collaboration](#), published by Wiley. The authors' inspiration stemmed from their work in the d.school — the [Hatto Plattner Institute of Design at Stanford](#). If I were to design an online programme, I would study the spaces described in this book and ask myself, How can I create equivalent spaces in a virtual world?

A challenge...

I have quite a challenge for you e-learning designers out there. If you have not done so already, then [book a desk in a collaborative space for a day](#), and go and do your day's work in there. Ponder on how you could design your online courses in the same way, with people in mind first, and with the delivery and manipulation of content second. I'm not saying that content is not important. I'm just saying that it comes after, because what is really important is people, people, people.

Image: by [Deskmag at Wikimedia](#) under [CC](#)



Stephen Lowe

[Stephen Lowe](#) has an MSc in Computer Science from University of Liverpool in the UK. He developed and taught a 3-year multimedia course at Aoraki Polytechnic before coming to CORE Education seven years ago as a Learning Designer.