

Gaming in the Classroom?

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Today's young generation loves video games. A typical gamer spends a significant portion of his waking hours with eyes and fingers practically glued to a game that is no bigger than eight square centimeters.

Video games have a powerful hold on many students, and some educators believe that teachers can capitalise on this by using video games to improve the classroom learning environment. Maintaining students' attention in the classroom has always been a major concern and teachers agree that it is now worse than it was a decade or so ago. Some researchers have suggested that using video games as teaching tools might be a promising way of making learning more appealing to students while at the same time keeping them in tune with the technology. The argument for such a move is that technology is an indistinguishable part of today's student culture, and that (skilfully) integrating it into the classroom makes sense.

Turning the games' appeal to positive educational uses, however, presents a challenge on many fronts, not the least of which is adults' concern about gaming as an inappropriate learning activity. Obviously, the counter argument is the well-substantiated claim that people and, in particular, students learn significantly more by playing than they do by being told. It is a fact that a significant amount of "learning" (from the pop culture through web-based and other electronic media) occurs outside of structured schooling—a lot of which parents and teachers would prefer did not happen—and so from the perspective of a concerned adult, gaming in the classroom may be seen as part of that undesired type of "learning."

Statistics from the entertainment industry show that games and their hardware now outsell Hollywood movies. While there may be parent-teacher concerns about mature-rated games, these types of games account for only a small fraction of total sales, with games rated 'E' (Everyone) such as "Super Mario" and "Big Brain Academy" still dominating the retail markets (Entertainment Software Association, 2005).

So what is it about games that make students want to learn? Apart from the colourful, motion-filled, visual appeal, it is a fact that many of these games present children with situations that require them to try various strategies aimed at overcoming the obstacles/challenges presented in the game, and at incrementally more challenging levels. Children happily persevere with these games that in a very real sense "scaffold success." The result is that children are quite happy to fail several times as they build the skill level needed to "beat the game." This feature of

perseverance in order to overcome or solve a problem (which could easily be a classroom problem in mathematics, science, or geography) is what some researchers are saying teachers can focus on if gaming is to be used as a teaching/learning strategy. The ultimate challenge, however, will be to get more and better designed games—those suited to the classroom learning situation in terms of curriculum requirements and national standards—into the classrooms.

Of course, convincing teachers (and parents) to embrace this form of technology as part of the learning experience will not be easy. However, it is likely that with the introduction of more user-friendly software with a sound educational basis, the idea might not be totally rejected. And who knows, a web-based game with a health and lifestyle theme, in which pre-teens learn about the transmission and prevention of diseases such as AIDS and SARS while doing battle with sinister agents, might create the impact on students' lifestyles and life choices that teachers have been battling to accomplish by teaching through the textbooks!

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