

Educators Turn to Games for Help

Video games offer worlds for players to explore. Parents and politicians aren't always happy with what goes on in digital realms, but now universities want to use gaming technology to build better teaching tools for schools. By Brad King.



AUSTIN, TEXAS -- Video games have come under tremendous political pressure in recent years because of an increase in violent and sexual content. But schools soon may be using the technology that powers those games to help teach America's children.

Earlier this year, Washington state Rep. Mary Lou Dickerson, a Democrat, tried to ban the sale of violent games. While the courts continually have struck down these types of initiatives, both state and national politicians continue looking for ways to regulate the video-game industry.

Academics, though, want to use the underlying software that powers the games to create learning simulations. The Digital Media Collaboratory, one of several technology laboratories at the University of Texas at Austin's IC2 Institute, works with partners from the public and private sectors to develop computer games that can be used by schools, businesses and governments.

"We want to look at transforming the appeal of games for entertainment into the realm of games for learning," said project director Melinda Jackson. "We want to

combine the academic resources of the Digital Media Collaboratory with the indigenous resources here in Austin."

While Austin is home to several of the largest online gaming companies, the decision to start the laboratory grew out of the institute's success with using simulations to train welfare recipients.

It created a pilot program in 1998 called EnterTech, a 45-hour training simulation that teaches 44 entry-level job skills through digital role playing. The results stunned everyone. Of the 238 participants, two-thirds of the group either found work or enrolled in continuing-education programs. Those who ended up working received a \$1.06 average increase in salary.

Bolstered by that success, the group began tailoring programs for different organizations. Versions of EnterTech have since been used in the Dallas Independent School District, the University of Texas, at-risk community schools in Waco, Texas, and adult learning centers and welfare offices throughout the state.

"Our experiences are tied to real products being used by real people," said Alex Cavalli, IC2's deputy director. "We have seen the power of using the right kind of tools -- in this case, games -- in the right types of situations, to create real change."

Despite the success of programs like EnterTech, the video-game industry hasn't been proactive with schools. Educational game sales make up only 7 percent of the software market for console games, and computer titles haven't generated enough sales to be ranked, according to the Entertainment Software Association.

Many commercial titles offer just drill-and-practice lessons, which some experts believe defeats the purpose of using video games.

"Games teach systematic things much better than they teach facts," Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor Henry Jenkins said. "(The game) Civilization teaches how history unfolds, and it also helps show how choices affect events in the future."

Jenkins helped launch MIT's Games-to-Teach Project with a \$1 million grant from Microsoft.

The project has produced playable prototypes for four games, including Biohazard, which was developed jointly by MIT and the Entertainment Technology Center at Carnegie Mellon University. The simulation helps train emergency workers to deal with a cataclysmic attack. To succeed, teams must forge new communication lines while fighting a toxic accident.

The problem is that university-created simulations can't compete with the look or game play of top-selling games like the Grand Theft Auto series.

That soon could be changing. The developers behind popular commercial game Neverwinter Nights made their design tools available to anyone, enabling players to create their own versions of the game. The move afforded MIT students the opportunity to use state-of-the-art tools to build a historical simulation called Revolution.

The game lets players take the roles of individuals living in Williamsburg, Virginia. The object is to allow people to choose on which side to fight during the Revolutionary War, and then deal with the consequences of those choices.

"This takes the Grand Theft Auto phenomenon and turns it into people dumping tea into the harbor," Jenkins said.

Ultimately, educational games may be best suited for post-high school classrooms, said James Paul Gee, a professor at the University of Wisconsin at Madison.

"People will object to games that have a variety of choices because they can't limit the choices their children make," Gee said. "However, if you remove that type of ambiguity, you've removed any sense of morality from the game because there are no consequences to bad decisions."

Gee is building a team of researchers to explore how games can offer a variety of moral choices that come with realistic consequences.

However, games won't be the magic bullet that saves education. Even EnterTech, with all its success, only adds depth to lessons taught during the 15 hours of teacher-directed discussion.

"The 'e' in e-learning stands for enhanced," said Randy Heinrichs, Microsoft Research group product manager. "What we do is create environments where students can practice what the teachers are telling them."

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