

The value of video games: Playing to learn ; Sarah Schmidt ; ; Saskatoon StarPhoenix ; 06-19-2004

;

### **The value of video games: Playing to learn**

Byline: Sarah Schmidt

Edition: Final

Section: Weekend Extra

Type: News

Leona Huggins knew something wasn't quite right when she pulled her two boys away from a favourite computer game to do their homework.

"There was a lot of deep-level thinking going on. Then I'd have to say, 'OK, stop. We have to do your homework. We have to study your spelling words,'" Huggins said. "I had to interrupt what I thought was deep-level thinking for homework that I didn't think was."

Huggins, a Vancouver kindergarten teacher and mother of Sean, six, and Jeffrey, 11, is part of a new generation of parents and educators pushing to bring digital games into the classroom.

Often decried as excessively violent or a breeding ground for anti-social behaviour, video and computer games are now being looked at in an entirely different way by a small army of educational researchers. Backed by a \$3-million grant from Canada's Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, the researchers not only accept that kids are drawn to the games, they see the educational value in playing to learn.

"Play is an incredibly important way of harnessing intelligence for learning," said Suzanne de Castell, an education professor at Simon Fraser University and researcher with the federally funded Simulation and Advanced Gaming Environments for Learning (SAGE) project. "When kids are playing, I find them at their smartest mentally, at their quickest. Why rule that out of school? I don't think it's educational to keep games out of the classroom."

The project is part of a larger movement that will see international gurus of gaming technology in education converge on Vancouver this weekend for a four-day conference hosted by the University of British Columbia.

The idea of playing to learn is hardly new.

In classical times, play centred on physical activity. Today, play has gone high-tech: the video game industry is the largest entertainment industry in the world, one that earned higher revenues last year than Hollywood and the music industry combined.

"Kids' brains have been rewired. They now learn differently, at a different speed. Effectively, we're dealing with a different target audience, and we need to accommodate that," said SFU's David Kaufman, project leader for SAGE.

The experience of Huggins' younger boy, who is in Grade 1, offers a compelling case about learning opportunities through gaming. One game he plays is Ski Resort Tycoon, which requires players to plan and build a community. Sean applied the lessons to a new housing development in his neighbourhood,

said Huggins. Observing the site, Sean noted it would be hard to develop because it's on a steep slope. He also remarked that the development would increase the school population.

He gleaned another insight from the Age of Empires game, which highlights the Byzantine Empire. Huggins wasn't happy about the level of violence in the game. Nor did she like the inclusion of such ahistorical elements as a sports car and machine gun.

But the game galvanized Sean's interest in history. "He'll talk about the Byzantines and the Turks. He wants to know a lot about history, and who won. It's really created this interest in terminology he wouldn't even have a sense about," said Huggins.

The game has also expanded his vocabulary. Recently, the youngster asked where grapes come from, and asked his mother, "Would you consider that a foraging food?"

"He got the term from Age of Empires. He's bringing it up and I'm helping to mediate the experience. Is it any different from a child picking up a novel and building vocabulary that way? To me, schools could do a lot to harness that kind of knowledge," said Huggins, who is juggling work as a kindergarten teacher and completing a graduate degree in education and gaming at SFU.

But bringing video and computer games into the classroom requires attention to the ways boys and girls play and their level of interest in the games. As de Castell notes, her research team quickly "learned that any technology question is also a gender question."

Henry Jenkins, director of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Comparative Media Studies Program and co-editor of the book *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games*, has summarized some of the key differences.

Girls' leading characters tend to be everyday people to whom they can relate, unlike the fantasy-based action heroes with superpower abilities in boy friendly games. Girls explore, while boys conquer with the singular goal of winning. Girls' success is measured through the development of friendships, boys' through the elimination of competitors.

De Castell cited an analysis of a game designed by computer scientist Maria Klawe, previously dean of science at UBC and currently dean of engineering and applied science at Princeton University.

The game featured letter-writing to a female character, Julie, to help her find a way off the island on which she was trapped. The purpose of the game was to get players to learn math skills. Girls liked the game, but the girls chatted with Julie and the boys went straight to the math puzzles. "We have to be super careful. The boys get the goods and the girls get talk, talk, talk," said de Castell.

She hopes designers will resist creating bland games to suit school curricula and instead determine why kids are drawn to commercial games that encourage critical thinking and problem- solving skills.

"If we look at commercial games, if we look at forms of invention that are already offered in commercial games, and try to tinker with that and strip off some of the worst parts, we can see the potential for games to really challenge players in educationally valuable ways."

Illustrations/Photos:

**Colour Photo: CanWest News Services / Sean and brother Jeffrey Huggins play ATV2 on their Nintendo Game Cube while their mother Leona looks on**

(Copyright The StarPhoenix (Saskatoon) 2004)

**Copyright © 2004 ProQuest Information and Learning Company. All rights reserved. - Terms and Conditions**