

More Video Games, Fewer Books at Schools?

March 19 2007

Of all of the proposals aimed at improving America's failing schools, there's one idea kids will really like: more video games and fewer books. At least a number of educators hope so, arguing that children would get more excited about school and that video games can present real-life problems to solve.

Nobody is talking about putting violent video games such as "Doom" or "Mortal Kombat" into classrooms, particularly given concerns they may encourage aggressive behavior.

Instead, educators such as Indiana University associate professor Sasha Barab are developing alternative video games that can teach as well as entertain.

In one game designed by Barab, the player assumes the role of an investigator seeking to find out why fish are dying in a virtual park.

Various theories are offered such as excessive logging or farm fertilizers, and the players share data about water quality and compare hypotheses. If they recommend kicking out the loggers, the park may go bankrupt, giving students a real-world dilemma.

"I believe in digital media literacy. If we don't make changes in the way we educate our children, they will be left behind in world markets," said Barab, a former high school teacher. "Right now, I'm not that optimistic about where schools are headed."

Another backer of video games as educational tools is Katie Salen. A game designer, Salen is working with a group called New Visions for Public Schools to establish a school in New York City for grades six through 12 that would integrate video games into the entire curriculum.

"There's a lot of moral panic about addiction to games. There's a negative public perception and we know we have to deal with that. But teachers have been using games for years and years," Salen said.

"We're looking at how games work and we want to think about ways to redeliver information. It's quite unknown territory."

'The World Is Not a Video Game'

The MacArthur Foundation is investing \$50 million to investigate whether video games promote learning, and last month sponsored a panel discussion on the subject in Chicago.

"Kids don't just play games. The games inspire so they then turn to books," said Connie Yowell, director of education at the Chicago-based foundation. "There are bad games, but people tend to blame the tools instead of learning about the tools."

To be sure, there are plenty of questions about the educational value of video games, as compared with books and traditional tools.

Dr. Joshua Freedman, a neuropsychiatrist at the University of California, Los Angeles, said video games are interactive and can help with spatial concepts.

"But there's still a question about the value to the extent that most of the world is not a video game. They're not getting problems in real world situation," he said.

Video games engage children with continuous action, a concept known as "enthrallment," that raises the threshold for engagement, Freedman said.

"It's the equivalent of giving kids a lot of sweets and then wondering why they don't want to eat regular food," he said.

Several studies have shown that video-game playing corresponds to higher rates of attention deficit disorder (ADD) among children and are associated with aggressive behavior. Freedman noted, however that cause and effect are difficult to prove.

"I wouldn't say that using more games in education shouldn't be done, I'm just saying that it should be done with our eyes open," he said.

One teen, Shelby Levin, a tenth grader with a 3.5 grade point average at North Farmington High School in Farmington, Michigan, acknowledges that he plays games mostly for fun.

A fan of sports games and violent games like Grand Theft Auto, Levin, says: "I don't think you can learn more from playing video games than from reading a book or doing an assignment."

But Levin, 16, also participates in the virtual world online called Second Life, and says he does pick-up some important skills from his time on it.

"In Second Life, I'm playing with kids from France, Italy and Germany. We all come together and hang out online. You learn about entrepreneurship because you have to hustle people and make money," he said.

That's one reason some are advocating classroom time to be teaching children how to build virtual worlds - much like archeologists, engineers,

and others do - and to play games alongside others on the Web.

What's more, the trend toward administering more standardized tests does not prepare children for a digital future, said David Williamson Shaffer of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and author of "How Computer Games Help Children Learn."

"We've organized our schools using methods from the Middle Ages," Shaffer said. "We should start to have a discussion about what needs to be learned."

Barab marvels at the skills her son has mastered from video games, but limits him to six hours a week, fearing addiction.

"My 6-year-old, Julian, can step into a video game and a world of rules and figure them out. He's not scared of the unknown or scared of failing. I think that's something valuable that video games provide. But, I want him to experience much more, and relationships outside of games," Barab added.

Copyright 2007 by Ziff Davis Media, Distributed by United Press International

Citation: More Video Games, Fewer Books at Schools? (2007, March 19) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2007-03-video-games-schools.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.