

Minn. teacher is using video games to teach middle schoolers a variety of skills

June 2 2009, By Randy A. Salas

Learning is a game to Brock Dubbels and the students in his class at Seward Montessori in Minneapolis.

They spend their school time together playing off-the-shelf video games for the [Nintendo Wii](#) and other popular systems. But the 26 sixth- to eighth-graders aren't learning from the games' content. They're gaining key skills simply by playing and studying the games.

"It connects to their lives," Dubbels explained. "Research shows that kids want to perform where they have competence. Games are part of their lives."

That's where Dubbels' Video Games as Learning Tools class comes in. Over a three-week period, the kids split up into groups and play video games. They also take notes. The goal is to explain how the game is played, how a player might win and how the game is designed. By the end of the session, the students will have created a multimedia presentation, including lots of writing, about their games that is then uploaded to the Web.

It's the modern version of a book report.

Sure, the kids are playing. But Dubbels, who has a background in [cognitive psychology](#), says they're also improving reading comprehension, learning to work cooperatively, building technical-writing skills and incorporating technology into their studies.

That resonates with the kids who elected to take Dubbels' class, such as Genevieve Paule, 14.

"I like video games a lot, and I thought it would be cool learning about how to learn from them," she said on the first day of the class in the school's media center. "It's going to be really interesting, because all I've ever done before is play them for fun. But now I get to play them for class and actually learn about how they help people learn."

As Genevieve confabbed with three other girls about what game they wanted to play, Simon Quevedo, 12, and Jess Sanchez, 14, worked together to set up an old Nintendo 64 system that Sanchez had borrowed from his dad.

"I like the part about learning how the games can help you in the future and how they're made, instead of just playing them," Jess said as he connected the game console to a TV. "It makes me think of them in a different way."

Both boys said they might one day like to learn how to design video games.

"Oftentimes, kids don't think very deeply or analytically about the video games that they play," Dubbels said. "They don't learn how to deconstruct; we don't give them the time to seriously reflect and we don't ask them to evaluate. I think that makes us helpless in a consumer vacuum, where we are inundated with so much stuff that we never get the time to think carefully and thoughtfully about it. And as a child, that's your chance."

MODERN LEARNERS WIRED DIFFERENTLY

Other educators want to explore that opportunity, too. Dubbels will

spend much of his summer showing other teachers how the class works. His training projects include an online course for Minneapolis Public Schools, in-service training for Richfield Public Schools and seminars for a consortium of school districts in upstate New York. He also will be presenting at the Games in Education Conference in New York and at the Games+Learning+Society Conference in Wisconsin.

Dean Breuer, instructional technology coordinator for Richfield Public Schools in the Twin Cities suburbs, says he knows exactly where Dubbels is coming from in reaching out to kids through something they know well.

"These modern learners, their brains are just wired differently," Breuer said.

He said that he also teaches with books, of course, and that there are times when discussions and lectures are important. But, Breuer added, "if all you do are more traditional methods of instruction, it may not be as clear to 21st-century learners that you are relevant, that you get that they are different."

Andy Reiner, 33, executive editor of Minneapolis-based Game Informer magazine, likes Dubbels' approach. Reiner said he was fed "a steady diet of book reviews" when he was in school. "In retrospect, you'd think I attended school in the 1800s," he said.

Reiner clarified that he's not diminishing the importance of books. But he pointed out that evaluating a [video game](#), for example, requires a different writing style and critical analysis than a book review.

"This isn't just about students having fun with their homework," Reiner said. "By incorporating video games into his teaching, Dubbels is expanding his students' technical-writing skills."

He added: "And why shouldn't school be fun? For one student, a fun review might be reading the work of Edgar Allan Poe. For another, it could be playing 'The Legend of Zelda,' watching 'Star Trek,' or listening to Green Day. We choose our occupation later in life. Why can't we choose our homework if our teacher is willing to teach us the skills that go with it?"

THE MORE COMPLEX, THE BETTER

Dubbels, 42, is a lifelong gamer who grew up in the shadow of Atari in Cupertino, Calif. In class, he has a PlayStation 2, an Xbox and a [Wii](#) -- all his personal systems. The students bring in their systems, too.

The kids also can bring in any game they want, as long as it is rated Everyone or Everyone 10+ by the Entertainment Software Rating Board. Teen-rated games, which are suitable for players 13 and older, can be played with parents' permission.

Any game will do, Dubbels says. His classroom favorites include the cerebral first-person shooter "Metroid Prime 3: Corruption," sports games such as "Tiger Woods Golf" and "NBA Live," and movement-based titles such as "Shaun White Snowboarding" and "Dance Dance Revolution." The Xbox 360 version of the latter is what Paule and her group decided to do.

"The more complex the game, the better -- because the deeper we can dig into the game, the more I love it," Dubbels said.

Parents must sign a permission slip for kids to take the class. But Dubbels acknowledges that traditionalists might not like his video-game approach to teaching basic skills.

"To be quite honest, most parents have bought their kids game systems,"

he said. "There are some people who are a little bit up in arms, but they just don't understand about games and kids."

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