Chapter 30

Engaging the Un-Engageable

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ABSTRACT

Computer games offer an extremely engaging experience and are an overwhelmingly popular pastime for today’s youth. As such, they make an attractive medium for educators seeking to utilise new media to create new engaging learning experiences and provide for those with special needs. Effective integration of game-play and education is extremely difficult to achieve. This problem has plagued the educational games industry since its inception. This chapter will examine this problem with reference to a study which attempts to utilise the motivational power of computer games to aid the education of some of the most challenging students; children who are exhibiting behavioural disorders (oppositional defiant behaviour, attention deficit). Such children can find it almost impossible to focus on traditional educational activities but will give the right computer game their full attention for extended periods. Computer games can engage these children, but can this power be utilised for more than entertainment?

1. INTRODUCTION

Behavioural, emotional and social difficulties (BESD) have been an increasing problem amongst school children throughout the UK in recent years. The Special Educational Needs Code of Practice issued by the Department for Education and Skills defines BESD as:

“A learning difficulty where children and young people demonstrate features of emotional and behavioural difficulties such as: being withdrawn or isolated, disruptive and disturbing; being hyperactive and lacking concentration; having immature social skills; or presenting challenging behaviours arising from other complex special needs. Learning difficulties can arise for children and young people with BESD because their difficulties can affect their ability to cope with school routines and relationships.” (DfES, 2001)
The number of children affected has been steadily increasing. Pupil level annual school census data for the UK in 2006/7, showed the overall numbers of children reported as suffering some form of BESD increasing from 134,810 to 139,410 (DCSF, 2007). At the same time there is evidence indicating that those exhibiting behavioural difficulties during childhood are significantly more likely to develop serious and often criminal behavioural patterns later in life (Robins & Price, 1991; Offord & Bennett, 1994; Babinski, Hartsough & Lambert, 1999).

The SEAL (Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning) program is a recent initiative developed by UK government agencies to combat the growing incidence of BESD in children and to put the development of social and emotional skills into the curriculum of every student, not just those exhibiting difficulties in this regard. It is these students however, those suffering from difficulties, who represent the greatest challenge for educators. These children tend to be difficult and disruptive if not overtly aggressive, often suffer from Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and possess poor social skills. They are often excluded from mainstream classes because of their disruptive behaviour and as such are often unable to participate in group based exercises. For these reasons it is often very difficult for teachers and helpers to develop good working relationships with such students. It is a common assumption that these children are simply incapable of working on task for more than a few minutes at a time. Experiments carried out at the University of Nottingham using computer games of several different genres with a group of children all suffering from a variety of behavioural problems, including ADHD, indicated that these children could retain focus and attention on a particular game task for long periods of time provided it was sufficiently interesting and engaging. Games can be a useful tool for engaging these children, but can they provide serious educational as well as motivational benefits?

The Dual Purpose of Learning Games

The study of educational and serious games has developed into a thriving field in its own right. One only has to glimpse the levels to which young people will engage with commercial computer games to understand the effort educators put in to attempting to harness games as tools for constructive learning. Computer games offer exciting potential as a tool to help educators engage with children who are particularly difficult to connect with. This potential comes with many pitfalls however. The development of educational games requires the blending of serious educational content with game play concepts that were usually developed purely for entertainment purposes. In striving to create something genuinely educational it is all too easy to forget the essence of what makes computer games engaging and enjoyable in the first place. Conversely, it is equally easy to create a good computer game where the educational content can be ignored or skipped entirely; the game may be engaging but it is such only in the non-educational aspects of game-play. Educational games have a dual purpose, to be engaging and enjoyable but also genuinely educational. If they fail in either regard they fail to deliver that which they were created for. A good game that fails to be genuinely educational is, in the worst case, no more than entertainment - an educational title lacking the engagement and enjoyment associated with games can still be a useful tool for education but forgoes the essence and value of the medium.

This chapter will examine these issues with reference to an ongoing project to develop an educational computer game based around the SEAL program that aims to aid the social, emotional and behavioural development of children suffering from BESD in schools. The development process has highlighted issues effecting educational games, particularly those in this subject area. There is a marked tendency for such games to focus on education while often neglecting game-play. The
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