

VIDEO GAMES REPRESENT EXCITING AVENUE FOR EDUCATING TODAY'S YOUTH

by Steve Cox

Where in the world are educational computer and video games? With ultra-violent games like "Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas" making waves in previous months, parents might well be concerned about games being introduced into the curriculum. But educators are beginning to grasp how this medium can reach a generation where short attention spans are par for the course.

"Research out there shows that when kids are actively involved, they learn more, they retain more," says Darryl W. Clark, National Director of Business Development for CompassLearning. "Through providing some of the engagement factor that games have, we're causing kids to become more engaged."

CompassLearning, an "innovative education technology solutions company" focusing on K-12 curricula, is looking at partnerships with Hollywood talents and creative talents in the gaming industry. "That allows us access to experts who can support the instructional design," Clark says, "to experts in the interactivity industry who can apply their fields."

CompassLearning is hoping that this foundation will help the company move into an area where, Clark believes, the future of education software lies.

"When people think of educational games, they don't think of them as really tied to direct instruction," he says. "But technology is getting to the point where games can be designed not just for remediation and drills, but where you can build in the engagement factor into direct instruction."

The next generation will see more implementation of an Interactive Conversation Interface, says Clark. iCi (pronounced "icky") is a so-called "human-machine interface" used in Jellyvision Inc.'s "You Don't Know Jack" line of games, released in the late '90s and as recently as 2003.

"It helps kids feel like they're in a conversation with the computer," says Clark. More than simply a "talking head," the iCi coordinates dialogue, music and intonations of speech, mimicking real human-to-human interaction and creating an illusory interpersonal relationship between the user and the computer.

The iCi has already been used to great success in Jellyvision's award-winning "That's A Fact Jack!" line of educational software, which uses a game show format to engage third- through tenth-grade students, asking them to answer meaningful questions about children's books and young-adult literature.

"It's going to be a tremendous support for teachers—not a replacement per se, but a tremendous tool," says Clark.

I Support Learning, Inc. likewise believes students are better engaged when they are in a gaming mindset.

"Our curriculums *are* computer games," says Steve Waddell, Lead Developer and Owner of I Support Learning. The company places middle and high school students into scenarios—turning them into AI researchers, music video producers, home developers, animators, agriculturists and accountants—that bring up a necessity to learn, but in an organic fashion.

"This is where we capture the kids' attention, with the 'gaming' feel—and then we can slip in math, language, science, technology. They learn it, but they see this as part of the game," says Waddell. "We won't teach them something that doesn't have relevance in the real world."

Waddell's previous experiences included a lot of work with teenagers and context-based learning, and with showing teachers how to "dangle" learning off of real-world frameworks. I Support Learning also aims to show young adults the direct relevance between what they're learning and the future.

With computer and video game revenues expected to surpass movie box-office revenues in 2007, says Waddell, there has been a rise in popularity for one of the company's modules in particular. "We have a game that actually teaches kids to make video games," he says. "They live the lives of interns making video games."

Students are led through a certification process that teaches them the skills to make 3D video games, and by the end of the first story, the students can take a copy of the game home. Beyond the game itself, teenagers are learning about the importance of deadlines, demographics and the social impact of video games as part of the module.

Since the company's start three years ago, I Support Learning's teaching modules have been picked up by a few hundred schools across the country.

"The response we've had is phenomenal," says Waddell. "The feedback from teachers and kids has been incredible."

He mentions one instance where a sixth grade girl pulled him by the hand during a visit. "She and the girl with her sat me down at their little workstation to show off their video game code," he recalls. "This wasn't a situation where she was intimidated by someone who really knew programming—she truly felt she could go toe-to-toe with me. You don't get that with a tutorial very often."

Waddell hopes to see more virtual experiences like these in the classroom. "As far as the potential, it's huge," he says. "Kids these days are driven to learn differently than you and I were. Technology nowadays can reach across and capture that generation and bring them into education in a way that traditional methods don't."