the Escapist

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In the summer of 2000, I had the good fortune of attending a summer study abroad in Greece. Our band of merry adventurers traveled around southern Greece and Crete for over a month, staying at most four days in one location, with most stops lasting only two nights.

Needless to say, we covered a lot of ground. From the agora under the acropolis of Athens to the grand palace at Knossos on Crete, our "class" saw, walked along, touched, lived the history and culture of civilizations I'd studied for years at university. As a history major with a concentration in ancient Greek civilizations, this was a dream trip. We walked through the Lion's Gate at Mycenae and drank raki under the stars while doing traditional dances with locals of a small town.

And while each of these memories is special, there's one that holds a special place: the trip to Delphi. Many have heard of Delphi, as it's the location of the famed oracle of Apollo. This was also the location of the Pythian Games, one of the pre-cursors to the modern Olympic Games.

It's easy for us today, who take religion so very seriously, and tend to view our god(s) as stern and flawless parent-ish figures, to point at the ancients' view of deities and say, "Not important to them." Indeed, the stories detailing in-fighting and human emotions the gods displayed make them seem, well, less godlike, at least insofar as I think of gods.

So, perhaps their religion was not so important an aspect of the lives of ancient Greeks? Maybe the gods were there, but kind of sidelined? An afterthought? I had relegated them to that position in my mind - that explained how the all-powerful beings were fallible.

But then I went to Delphi. Thousands of years ago, pilgrims from all over Greece made the trek to Delphi to worship and seek the advice of this revered oracle. Some on foot, some were wealthy enough to have transportation, but certainly none had it as easy as we did. And as our tour bus grinded and whined and strained on the hairpin turns, making its way into and up the mountains (and I do mean **up**), my thoughts of the gods placement in ancient Greek society changed.

This was no minor journey these people made to Delphi. Delphi is **in the mountains**, and while the mountains of Greece aren't the Himalayas, they do have a bit of heft to them. And they're pretty rocky. And I wouldn't want to climb them. But they did, to visit an oracle – who may or may not have been giving prophecies that day – just to butter up the god Apollo and see if he might offer some counsel. And I had no idea how **deeply important** it was until I made the journey myself, until I **did**.

Games offer us an opportunity to **do**. And they can make the doing fun. And because of this, games offer the ability to teach unlike any other entertainment media. Which is why this week's issue of *The Escapist*, "Learning by Doing" is all about education and games. Enjoy!

Cheers,

Julianne Greer

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

To the Editors: Dear Escapist, Excellent issue. The apocalypse never fails to fire the imagination, whether in fiction, games or seemingly, religion.

I was especially glad to see an article on the fabled RPG Aftermath. I sometimes regret the passing of such projects, because even though they offer none of the ease of video games, I sometimes think that switching over my playtime to more electronic pursuits has dulled a certain sense of imagination that we all want games to capture. Unfortunately, they are at present finite in their possibilities compared to the mind, and something remains missing.

Aftermath was too tough for us to play "correctly" back in the mid 80's, but it had a special poignancy as the idea that Reagan and the Soviets would create such a scenario was so real. Future Problem Solvers discussed the possible environmental effects of nuclear winter in school, and we rolled up our Aftermath characters when we got home. There was adventure in such anxiety!

Bravo for bringing back the bomb.

- Arlo

In response to "Ninety Percent of You Die" from The Escapist Forum: We're touching on gamism, narrativism, and simulationism here (or, more recently, here). From what you guys have said about it, Aftermath is clearly a system designed by simulationists, for simulationists. That doesn't mean it necessarily excludes narrativists and gamists, of course, but the focus of the ruleset is on modeling events realistically.

In contrast, my personal favorite PnP RPG system is Chaosium's Call of Cthulhu. It's similar to Aftermath in that it lends itself readily to an extremely bleak yet engrossing brand of storytelling, but it's very different in that the mechanics are extremely simple. Skills are a straight percentage with only minimal modifiers; the most complex mechanic is a check against opposed stats (e.g. strength vs. strength to break down a door).

The mechanics impart a crushing sense of inevitability to the gameplay, precisely in keeping with H. P. Lovecraft's vision of the Cthulhu Mythos. Combat is to be avoided at all costs, but even so, a character -- investigator -- who plays too many sessions will inevitably either die or go insane. In Cthulhu, the apocalypse hasn't happened (yet).

- Ajar

In response to "The End is Definitely Nigh" from The Escapist Forum: The key to a truly enjoyable *Urban Dead* experience is to join a good group, like The RRF for example - if you're a zombie. Better yet, join one of the RRF's strike teams and play a key part in the effort to stamp out those filthy harmans!

I used to be a member of The GMT Breakfast Club - one of the oldest RRF strike groups in the game - and they're an absolute scream to play with. The group congregates on IRC every morning and, for about 20 blood-soaked mintues, shreds those souless breathers limb from limb. Then they all fall down again and go back to sleep for another 24 hours.

What's nice about *Urban Dead* is that you can roleplay as little or as much as you like, contributing to the (now-considerable) mythos, or merely observing it as you pass by. *UD*'s also great if your play time is limited or you don't want to spend hours in front of a screen. I recommend anyone even remotely interested in MMOGs, traditional roleplaying games or turn-based strategy give it a go.

And you could do a lot worse than joining The GMT--just tell them **Mardigan** sent you!

- Wrestlevania

In response to "It's OK to Advertise - If We Like You" from The Escapist Daily: Even if marketers knew exactly how to make gamers happy through advertising, they're won't stop there. They'll continue on until they figure out the tipping point where putting in more advertising will not just reduce revenue from units sold because people are turned off; they'll push it to the point where that loss of revenue is no longer offset by increased marketing revenue. Like how sports adopted the 'TV time out'; real-life games found the audience will put up with a break in the action, and went so far a change was written into the rules for advertising.

Never disputing that people have to pay the bills and might make an unpopular (i.e., value negative) ad inclusion if it means net revenue increases. Just can't buy the explanation that gamers are more fickle than the general audience. The general audience saw added value in

putting a rock inside of a box that had the words "Pet Rock" written on it, so, I just can't buy that the gaming segment is more fickle than a general public that will buy a rock if you put the right label on it.

To me, it seems they're, ahh ... 'Jumping to Conclusions'.

- Cheeze_Pavilion

In response to "The Official Game Character Versus Game Character Thread" from The Escapist Forum: I'm going with Riddick [over Hitman's Agent 47], no contest. Also, I'm going with the "Pitch Black" Riddick (more mysterious, more dangerous, and less humane), not the "Chronicles of Riddick" one. 47 is cool, but he still seems to operate within human rules, Riddick, on the other hand is simply an animal.

And, I was thinking, Cloud would stand still and Link cut him up while "waiting his turn" and probably crying too... yeah... crying. Emo punk with his crazy hair.

How about (doubt anyone is familar enough with the first character) Goku

vs Superman. Both have comics, cartoons, and games.

- Blaxton

West Virginia's HEALTH REVOLUTION

by Lara Crigger

It's hard not to immediately like Ryan Walker. The cheerful, talkative sixth grader from Martinsburg, West Virginia crackles with prepubescent confidence and easy charm, especially when you get him talking about his favorite pastimes, basketball and videogames. In particular, he has a special fondness for Konami's *Dance Dance Revolution* (*DDR*).

"People give me a lot of compliments on how well I can do it," he boasts. "I can beat everybody. I hate to say it, but, well, you know."

Ryan's confidence, however, is a relatively new development. For years, the 11-year-old boy struggled with his weight; just nine months ago, he was close to 170 lbs (the healthy weight for a 6-foot adult male). He'd even developed activity-induced asthma. "Running, riding his bike, he'd get those red little cheeks," says his mother, Tammy. "He was out of breath a lot, and he couldn't run up steps or jog around the neighborhood." Tammy, whose own father had died at 47 from heart disease, feared her son might soon fall prey to her family's long history with cardiovascular problems and diabetes.

But then Ryan found *DDR*. Or, more accurately, *DDR* found him.

Ryan was one of 50 overweight and obese children recruited for West Virginia University's (WVU) Games for Health research project, an at-home clinical study designed to assess how Konami's mega-popular rhythm game could be used to combat childhood obesity.

The preliminary results of the study, released earlier this year, were so compelling the Public Employee's Insurance Agency (PEIA; who had funded the project) partnered with Konami to deploy the dance game in each of West Virginia's 765 schools. But the Mountain State isn't alone in its *DDR* fervor. School boards in Los Angeles and Hawaii have announced similar plans to roll out the game in their gym classes, too.

DDR in the P.E. classroom is just one weapon in America's War on Fat, a struggle that, judging by the evidence, we appear to be losing. "We're this society that's overfed but undernourished," says Emily Murphy, doctoral candidate and pediatric exercise physiologist at WVU's School of Medicine.

(The Games for Health project is her doctoral thesis.) According to the American Obesity Association, approximately 127 million Americans are overweight. Another 60 million are clinically obese. And it's not just adults battling the bulge, either; nationwide, 15 percent of all kids ages 6-19 classify as obese.

"As these kids get older, their problems are only going to get worse," says PEIA spokesman David Bailey. "This is actually one of the first generations with a shorter life expectancy than their parents. You have kids with coronary heart disease at 10 years old, who are more obese than a lot of adults you see." Rates of hypertension, asthma and cardiovascular dysfunction have skyrocketed among children in the past 30 years, and cases of Type II diabetes - once known as "adult" diabetes - have more than tripled; these days, one out of every three new Type II diabetics is a kid.

Children are particularly at risk in West Virginia, which was recently ranked by the Center for Disease Control as the number one state in the country for obesity. The Mountain State is like a microcosm of every pediatrician's worst fears. For example, the Coronary Artery Risk and Detection in Appalachian Communities survey, on which Murphy worked, found that nearly half - 48 percent - of the state's fifth graders were either overweight or at risk for developing heart disease in the future. Of the 40,832 kids screened, a full **25 percent** were clinically obese.

Pundits, politicians and parents alike are quick to blame TV and videogames for their part in making our kids fat, and for good reason: Quality time with the PlayStation generally does not shrink waistlines. But it doesn't help that schools across the country have had to drop physical education classes due to budget constraints and stricter federal testing mandates. In West Virginia, most elementary school students attend physical education classes only once a week. High schoolers get just one semester of gym in all four years.

Making matters worse, West Virginia is one of the poorest, most rural states in the country, with almost two-thirds of its 1.8 million residents living in communities with fewer than 2,500 people. That remoteness and lack of infrastructure puts West Virginians at a major health disadvantage. "Sometimes exercise isn't as easy as just walking down your street, because people live in rural areas without sidewalks," says Bailey. "That lack of access to physical equipment, and the rural nature and topography, can really lend itself to physical inactivity."

The Games for Health study came out of that frantic need to address West Virginia's childhood obesity crisis, but only serendipitously did it include *DDR*. While shopping at the mall one day, Dr. Linda Carson, director of WVU's Motor Development Center, had noticed a small crowd of kids playing *DDR* in an arcade. To her delight, she saw the children dancing, sweating and even drinking water instead of soda. The sight intrigued her, and together with PEIA's Nidia Henderson, she designed a research project to assess just how much kids could benefit from regularly playing the game.

The first rounds of testing for the Games for Health project opened in April 2004, and initially, the study was only available to the children of PEIA members. When Tammy heard about the study, she knew she wanted Ryan involved. "My son is one of those kids who loves videogames," she says. "But when they said that he'd actually have to move his feet, and he couldn't just sit there and play, we really wanted him to do it."

Nationwide, 15 percent of all kids ages 9-19 classify as obese.

For Ryan's initial health assessment, Tammy and her husband drove their son to the university's campus in Morgantown, over two and a half hours from their home. "We even drove it in a snowstorm," she says. "That's how serious we were about him doing this study."

Once there, Ryan underwent a series of clinical tests to determine his body mass index (BMI), blood pressure, cholesterol, and insulin and glucose levels, as well as his endurance and aerobic capacity. Researchers also examined the arteries in his arms to evaluate his endothelial functioning, or how well his blood vessels expanded in response to increased blood flow (like with exercise). Endothelial dysfunction is thought to be a major initiating cause in both heart disease and diabetes, and of the 35 kids in the study who had theirs tested, every single one exhibited at least some arterial dysfunction at the start.

After the tests, Ryan's family was given a game console, a dance mat and a copy of *DDR Extreme* (funded from the initial $50,000 grant from PEIA). Under the study, Ryan played *DDR* for at least 30 minutes a day, five days a week, while logging which songs he played and

when. In addition, he wore a pedometer to keep track of his daily steps, making a note of any other physical and sedentary activities he participated in. "We had to write down pretty much everything he did from the time he woke up to the time he went to bed, and send it in each week," says Tammy. To help keep Ryan motivated, a clinician from WVU would call Ryan weekly, asking about his progress and giving him plenty of encouragement.
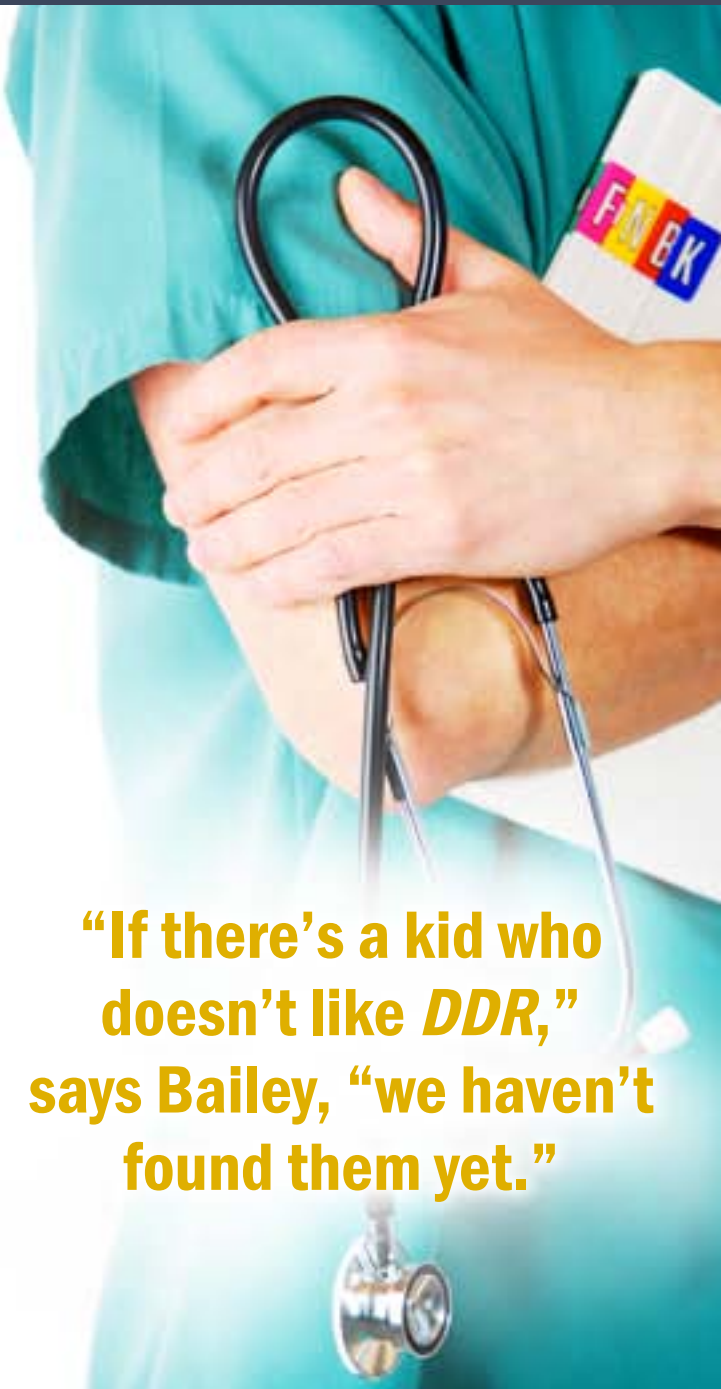
Not that he needed it, at least in the beginning. The first night of the study, after they got home, Ryan says he fired up the game and danced 31 songs in a row. "That was pretty crazy that first night," he says. "It was fun. Well, until basically I was dying."

In February 2007, WVU released preliminary results from the study, announcing that in just 12 weeks, the test kids had significantly improved their overall fitness level and endothelial functioning. Better yet, on average the test group hadn't gained any weight, unlike the control group, which had gained an average of six pounds over the three month period.

Most importantly, however, the study found the test kids' self-esteem had dramatically increased, making them more likely to try other forms of physical activity. "*DDR* was kind of a gateway," says Murphy. "[The kids] mastered something, so they felt good about themselves. And then they're more willing to go try out for the cross country team or the basketball team or other sports."

In addition to losing about 10 or 15 pounds on the program, Ryan's good cholesterol shot up 21 points, and his endurance improved by 25 percent. Plus, he's only needed to use his inhaler once or twice in nine months since he started the study. But Tammy says the biggest change has been in Ryan's demeanor. "Before, he didn't really want to go to kids' houses and play or spend the night," she says. "He couldn't keep up with the other kids. But now, I can't even keep up with him half the time. He's spending the night with friends, or passing the football with his dad at night, or riding his bike, or playing basketball. This change, it's - it's just amazing."

So why did the test kids respond so well to *DDR*, when traditional team-based sports had left them cold? Murphy

"If there's a kid who doesn't like *DDR*," says Bailey, "we haven't found them yet."

Word of the study's preliminary results quickly reached the West Virginia Department of Education, and officials there were so impressed that they started testing out *DDR* in the gym classes of 20 state schools. That pilot program generated national media attention, garnering mentions by *USA Today*, *The New York Times*, *Good Morning America* and even MTV.

In early 2006, the West Virginia Department of Education decided to expand its pilot program to encompass all of its school systems, starting with the state's more than 150 middle schools. "That's the time in a child's development when they start to make choices for themselves," explains Bailey. The new *DDR* crusade, which was an official partnership between PEIA and Konami, received additional financial backing from Acordia National, Mountain State Blue Cross Blue Shield, the Benedum Foundation and the Governor's Office.

DDR is now in all West Virginia middle schools, and while its use in the curriculum varies from teacher to teacher, the setup itself is generally the same. Two kids at a time can play on the dance mats, hopping to the speeding arrows, while their classmates shadow their movements on either practice pads or the bare floor as they wait for their turn. Some schools with a little more money use a video projector to cast the game screen onto the gymnasium walls.

Far from kids getting bored with the mass arrangement, Ryan says his classmates at Hedgesville Middle School love the game. "When [the gym teacher] has the mats out, the line's always a mile long," he says. "We just got two more mats, so you can get four people playing it now. So, like, it was cool before, but now you actually have a line."

If there's a kid who doesn't like *DDR*, says Bailey, "we haven't found them yet. Almost all the kids who've played it enjoyed it, and wanted to continue to play it."

Perhaps one of the best benefits of the study, says Bailey, is how the children's newfound enthusiasm for exercise has brought their families together. "There were quite a few people in the study who said that it's become a family thing, that

instead of watching TV after dinner, they now play *DDR*," he says.

Tammy agrees, admitting her entire family has caught the *DDR* bug. "My husband and I would do the mat with Ryan. Of course, he's a lot better than we are," she laughs. "We also have a 6-year-old little girl, and she tries it too, but her legs just aren't long enough yet."

Ryan has spoken about his experiences in the study at several national health conferences and expos, and he has helped Carson and Murphy train new P.E. teachers unfamiliar with the *DDR* equipment. And although he plays *DDR* less often these days than he once did, he's still a big fan. "With *DDR*, I was doing something I liked," he says. "I worked up a sweat, and I felt really good when I did it. It felt like, you know, since you were sweating, you were actually getting something accomplished. I, well, I - I really liked it. A lot." ⌨ COMMENTS

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suspects it had something to do with how mainstream videogames have become. "Kids are so videogame oriented," she says. "Half the time I don't think the kids even realize they're exercising, because they're having so much fun."

BIZSIMS

by Allen Varney

When companies play games with themselves, **it's all business**

The biggest game I ever designed had 100 players and 10 referees, lasted three days and got covered in *The Wall Street Journal*. It's OK if you've never heard of my game, *Executive Challenge*. You probably also haven't heard of hundreds of other games like it, produced for decades by a long-established, billion-dollar international game industry dominated by publicly traded game publishers with market caps north of $100 million.

The makers of business simulation games are **soooo** far off our subculture's radar, they're practically Martians. Yet their target markets – businesses both large and small, and university business schools – are huge and growing. Some of their design techniques would interest jaded computer game designers. What's most interesting, and most worthy of emulation: These biz-sim companies, unlike the blind wizards of videogame development, do research.

But whether you know or care about these simulation publishers, they certainly don't want to know you. The farther they distance themselves from games and gamers, the better they like it.

Should we care? As a matter of fact, yes.

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These games differ from conventional stock-market simulations, such as *ASX* and others; from prediction markets; and from "serious" games that inform general audiences about some business issue, such as *Oil God* or *Trade Ruler*. Instead, business simulations model a real company's business processes and issues so its employees can, through play, discover how to improve them: project management, supply chain management, development assessment, ethics and so on. Some games educate employees in esoterica like compliance with Sarbanes-Oxley reforms or *shari'a* (Islamic) banking doctrines. Though almost always multiplayer, these sims take many forms, from board and card games to roleplaying to online turn-based strategy.

You can't just buy these games off-the-shelf. They're all proprietary in-house designs, each owned by one publisher – or rather, one consulting firm. These firms typically run the simulations for their clients as part of a larger consulting package, pitched as analysis and optimization of the client company's

particular issues. The field's big money is in customization. The consultants tailor their generic game designs for specific clients in many different industries: retail, high-tech, pharmaceuticals and health care, insurance, airlines, and many more. The tailoring process involves extensive interviews, reading, research and – believe me – meetings meetings meetings meetings meetings. (There are sims about how to run meetings.)

Games can be a good way to analyze businesses, because both are complex systems. Game players, like company employees, take a range of actions to navigate what mathematicians call a "decision space" toward a goal – game victory or business success. Simulations can model this by characterizing the inputs and effects players/employees should learn about, and abstracting the rest.

For instance, many simulations teach coordination and communication. Shortfalls in a complex system can cascade and produce drastic, even fatal consequences down the line. You may know this as the "butterfly effect"; in applying the idea to supply chain management, business consultants use the more dramatic name "Bullwhip

Effect." In the 1960s, MIT's Sloan School of Management illustrated this idea with an early business simulation that cast players as manufacturers of a commodity dear to a college student's heart: beer. Forio Business Simulations updated the game and now offers a free online version, *The Near Beer Game*.

Forio is just one firm in the crowded corporate market; others include Celemi, Pantelis, TargetSim, Hall Marketing, Learning Dynamics, PriSim Business War Games and bunches more. A few, like Knowledge Matters, target the educational market. Business Game Factory runs web-based game tournaments.

The market leader is Stockholm-based BTS, the biggest game company in Sweden. Founded in 1985, BTS made $91 million profit last year; its market cap is 842 million Swedish kronor, about $122 million. The BTS client list includes lots of Fortune 500 companies (and a few Fortune 10s!).

Would any of these sims interest a hardcore gamer? Wellll, a sports fan might look at *XFL SimWorld* and *Oakland Baseball SimWorld*, both by SBS (Sports Business Simulation). These are

educational games about sports as a business. SBS founder Zenophon "Zennie" Abraham created them using Forio's Broadcast engine. (Forio's site offers a Broadcast tutorial.) In *Oakland Baseball*, you evaluate new stadium proposals and their effect on the Oakland Athletics team's bottom line. XFL charges you with rescuing the doomed football league.

Generally, though, it's hard for an ordinary consumer to even get a look at most business sims, let alone play them. Leaving aside the firms who guard their designs as trade secrets, just setting up these games is a costly hassle. My *Executive Challenge* required hundreds of sheets of cardstock, multiple custom-printed card decks, ungodly numbers of poker chips, a custom database and a three-hour presentation and run-through. The computer version from Enspire Learning also requires elaborate setup. Wanna play it? Sure – $20,000, please.

What's more, these games – though inarguably games – feel different from those we play for fun. These sims are incredibly targeted. They pull you in because they're about **your** job and **your** co-workers at **your** company. When they work right, they engage you

it's hard for an ordinary consumer to even get a look at most business sims, **LET ALONE PLAY THEM.**

at levels you never knew existed, and you hate to stop playing. But they're not meant to be "fun," as such.

In fact, though some of these consultants do let the word "game" sneak into their pitches, "fun" is an F-word. They aim for respectability. And

cultural stigma runs deep. Many companies need heavy re-education before they'll go near **ANYTHING CALLED A GAME.**

believe it: In this respect, computer game publishers could learn from them.

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On their sites, all these consulting companies cite scientific studies of simulations as learning tools. The field has drawn attention from venerable business journals like *The McKinsey Quarterly*, and has spawned its own nascent academic infrastructure, with refereed journals like *Simulations & Gaming* and a scholarly association, ABSEL (Association for Business Simulation and Experiential Learning). (*Simulations & Gaming* provides a list of simulation bibliographies.)

These articles distinguish between effective and poor simulations, describe best practices and summarize case studies with before-and-after metrics. Contrast this approach with the scholarship that gamers endure: either A, wingnut witch-hunts out to validate Jack Thompson, or B, endless publish-or-perish circle-jerks for untenured "game studies" humanities post-docs chewing over the meanings of "narrative," "narrativist" and "narrativism."

The evidence of these studies shows simulations really can work. An October 2004 *Science News* article, "Reworking Intuition" by Bruce Bowers, describes the experience of three financially troubled and dysfunctional manufacturing companies – makers of medical devices, industrial products and nuclear fuel rods. Psychologist Lia DiBello ran workers from each company through a two-day simulation. On day 1, they followed their established routine and quickly faced disaster; after devising new procedures, they repeated the exercise on day 2 and performed much better. Then they adopted those new processes for real, with good, measurable results.

Why does this work? Many people define themselves, in part, through their job. To learn new work techniques, they build on what they already know. A simulation puts employees in a novel situation where they see the consequences of their actions and can then redefine their behaviors and their own roles. Just as important, they bond and build paths for later communication. This sure beats reading dopey business fables (*One-Minute Manager*, *Who Moved My Cheese?*, *Fish!*) and attending eye-glazing

seminars, known generically as AFTRBs ("Another F---ing Three-Ring Binder"). Learning by doing – what a concept!

But as the *Science News* article makes clear, cultural stigma runs deep. Many companies need heavy re-education before they'll go near anything called a game. The consultants are undertaking this re-education, and good for them. Computer and videogames companies could help. We could sponsor research about our own games, and develop business cases for recreational games in building teamwork and communication.

What's more, we ourselves might learn from these consulting firms. Our field could learn that cooperative multiplayer business games can be profitable and fun.

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Sure, there are all those Tycoon games – not only *Roller Coaster Tycoon* and *Railroad Tycoon*, but *Lemonade*, *Fast Food*, *Golf Resort*, *Bass Tournament*, *Skateboard Park*, *Caterpillar Construction*, *Mall of America* and *Shrine Circus Tycoons*, plus three dozen more. (The Wikipedia Tycoon Game project has gone dormant but includes a game list.) We've

seen many other economic simulations – Trevor Chan's *Capitalism I* and *II*, the SimCity series, Giant games, *The Movies*, *The Corporate Machine*, the *Settlers* series – and, lest we forget, *Monopoly*. Online, there's *Airline*, *Informatist Open Economics Game* and a few others.

But all these games miss an opportunity. Invariably, these god-games put one single player in charge of every detail of his business; multiplayer scenarios, if any, are head-to-head competitions. But solo play doesn't really simulate the topic, and it can be quite hard. The *Capitalism* games, in particular, have a reputation for ferocious difficulty; the player must micromanage everything from purchasing to factory design.

Our economic games could borrow the business sims' more realistic and sensible approach. Like real businesses, the games could allocate tasks to a team of players. This can play really well. Team games require constant social interaction. Financial returns give clear metrics. The different roles in a business have specialized powers and offer interesting choices, all with the same viscerally understandable consequences: Get rich or go broke.

The natural format would be a team-based massively multiplayer online game (MMOG). A business game doesn't need fancy graphics, so a small team could develop it affordably as a boutique MMOG.

What businesses could you simulate? Many of the published *Tycoon* games would make good team multiplayer games. So would running a TV network (buying shows, selling advertising, creating promos) and managing sports teams and athletes as a business enterprise (scouting talent, weighing offers, offering or seeking

endorsement contracts). If real-world business seems too mundane, you could adapt the team-biz approach to medieval magical guilds or science fiction. (The *Jetsons* "Spacely Sprockets" license is probably still available.)

Even if these particular ideas don't excite developers, there are others that should – but they probably won't. Developers may have trouble seeing the lure of business simulations, until they get to play a good one. That's our loss. For better or worse, business is a huge part

of our lives, conditioning our attitudes. Games that exploit this can connect with players in a meaningful way – even, in the best case, open a player's mind to new real-world insights.

In this industry, as in the larger business world, the problem is cultural. We really need a game that simulates the gaming market (something better than Game *Tycoon*, please), and shows how a small developer can profitably appeal to a niche audience. Hey, by playtesting that game and getting good at it, you'd automatically earn the skills you need to make the game succeed! But then you'd have to keep your competitors from playing it, or they'd learn how to steal your business. Wait, my brain hurts.

`[` COMMENTS `]`

Even if these particular ideas don't excite developers, there are others **THAT SHOULD**

– BUT THEY PROBABLY WON'T.

DEWEY DECIMALS and Dance Dance Revolution

by Jared Newman

Three years ago, Eli Neiburger was just an IT guy at the Ann Arbor District Library in Michigan. It was no secret at work that Neiburger loves videogames — he has a Triforce tattooed on his arm — so when Erin Helmrich, a librarian who focuses on teens, wanted to bring gaming into the library, she turned to him for advice.

Less than a year and about $8,000 later, Neiburger and Helmrich had set up one of the first and largest gaming tournaments at any municipal library in the country. Kids came out of the woodwork to play *Mario Kart: Double Dash* and *Super Smash Bros: Melee*. Roughly a quarter of them had never been to a library before.

According to Neiburger, "One kid told us videogames are gateway drugs for libraries." Now he gives presentations and holds sample tournaments for librarians across the country. He's one of about a dozen crusaders who see videogames as a way of attracting kids, especially teenagers, to the library, and among them, Jenny Levine is considered the overlord.

A self-described "technology-training evangelist," Levine works on internet development for the American Library Association, but recently the bulk of her work has gone into gaming. In 2005, she organized the first gaming in libraries symposium.

"These days, it's a pretty easy sell to tell libraries they should have a blog, RSS or instant messaging," she said. "But you talk about gaming, and so many times there's just this immediate negative reaction." She spends a lot of time getting librarians to try *Dance Dance Revolution*.

Levine started thinking more about gaming in 2005, when she attended a conference in Madison, Wisconsin, on the educational and social values of games. The keynote speakers were Henry Jenkins and James Paul Gee, both college professors who are well-known for their academic work with games.

Levine said she was "blown away" by the topic of education in videogames. Her stepson Brent, who was 9 at the time, was slumping in school, and the speakers' ideas about games as

educational tools resonated. "I did a blog post in which I talked about how I could see that Brent was not learning what he should be," she said. "To me, schools spend too much time teaching things like handwriting, and the kids are barely learning science and math."

Despite this revelation, the conference made no mention of libraries, and Levine couldn't understand why. "I decided that in the age of No Child Left Behind, there's just no way you can do this in the school without starting in the school library," she said. Since then, she's been reading about the subject, posting about it on her blog, The Shifted Librarian, and introducing gaming to her peers at conferences and workshops.

Modern librarians worry about appearing uncool in the eyes of teens — the stereotypical old lady in a knit cardigan, always shushing. Librarians fear if they can't connect with young adults and children now, they'll have a hard time getting taxpayer funding when those kids grow up. If getting their attention means sacrificing an emphasis on books in favor of a little fun and games, so be it.

> **"The fact is the mainstream audience ain't interested in learning."**

"I've heard people say public libraries are here to foster lifelong learning," Eli Neiburger says, "but the fact is the mainstream audience ain't interested in learning."

Neiburger stresses that libraries should be places for recreation, too. Their size, resources and virtually unlimited membership mean they can do gaming kids can't do at home, like hold a *Mario Kart* tournament with eight TVs or broadcast the matches on cable access television. For that reason, Neiburger and others push harder for tournaments than for circulating games, a common practice with CDs and DVDs.

"That's one way to do it," Neiburger said, "but what I'm always telling people is it's extremely difficult to offer a videogame collection that doesn't look like crap next to what's offered at Blockbuster."

The tournament program in Ann Arbor is actually a gaming season that plays out over a few months, culminating in one final tournament. Prizes are given to the winners, and gamers who grow out of the teenage bracket have a chance to enter the Hall of Fame.

"These kids feel totally differently about the institution than they ever did before," Neiburger said, "because we're meeting them where they want to be rather than trying to shove classics down their throat."

Certainly there are skeptics, parents and librarians whose arguments are that games are degenerative and mind-rotting, "the same things that parents have been saying about their children's content for decades," Neiburger said. He always makes the point that people have said the same thing about certain books. Even now, plenty of people use the library to borrow trashy romance novels. Still, Neiburger said it sometimes pays to be careful and avoid more violent games when a program is starting out. "Parental backlash can kill a program dead," he said. "That's why our first game was *Mario Kart*. I mean, who can complain about *Mario Kart*?"

Last fall, Levine wrote an 80-page paper on gaming and libraries, simply titled "Gaming and Libraries: Intersection of Services." It's partly a how-to manual, with game ideas, cost ranges and sample materials. But there's no denying the paper's "anyone can do it" attitude, and

it partly reads like a promotional brochure for the completely oblivious.

The meat of the paper is the section of case studies, where Levine researches gaming in school, academic and public libraries around the country.

It's harder to make the case for gaming at academic libraries, Levine said, because university students can easily gather in their dorm rooms. However, the same idea of bringing people to the library for a good time applies. "I don't think that's a bad thing for an academic library to do," Levine said.

College campuses also have the potential to use games for more academic purposes, and this is where Levine's paper diverges from the basic tournament model. In one case study, professors at James Madison University in Virginia are creating a game that teaches "information literacy" (librarian-speak for being able to find and process information). It's an extension of what games already do — present players with lots of data at the same time and require them to sort it out logically.

For Levine, helping people become better at finding information is the ultimate goal, and gaming isn't the only answer. She points out that there are plenty of interactive tools, such as board games, interactive fiction and online quizzes, that are better for teaching research skills to kids than lectures and textbooks.

"Librarians think teaching information literacy means standing up in front of crowd and talking," she said. "That just doesn't work anymore."

Even if Levine's motives are grander than Neiburger's, she still thinks it's important just to have kids show up at the library to play games. If it gets kids in the door, as Neiburger found, it can be a gateway to bigger things.

"Whatever needs they have in the future, if [gaming in libraries] gets them to think about the library, that's really my goal," Levine said.

Two books on the subject will be released this year. Beth Gallaway, a library consultant from New Hampshire, is the author of one, and Neiburger is

writing another. "I think this is starting to hit some critical mass," he said.

For this July, Levine is organizing a second gaming in libraries symposium in the Chicago area. Neiburger will be there, as will Jenkins and Gee. While there's no data yet on how widespread library gaming has become, board game aficionado and Syracuse University professor Scott Nicholson has been conducting a survey and will present his results at the symposium. Levine hopes his study and attendance at the conference will give her a better sense of how big gaming in libraries has become.

"There's a growing group, but no formal organization of it," Levine said. "And I think that's what's going to change this year." COMMENTS

Jared Newman is a New York City-based journalist. He also writes a gaming blog at www.jarednewmabn.com/blog.

For Levine, helping people become better at finding information is the ultimate goal, and gaming isn't the only answer.

WHYVILLE:
SAVING THE CHILDREN
by Russ Pitts

"I have never let my schooling interfere with my education." - Mark Twain

Part social networking site, part edutisement, Whyville is somewhat of an anomaly in the growing field of kid-oriented online communities. Proclaimed the nation's 10th largest city in 2004, Whyville blends entertainment, advertising and fun, drawing so-called "tweeners" by the millions. And although its growing list of sponsors includes commercial entities like Toyota's Scion division and Sun Microsystems, its largest contributors are educational groups like NASA, The University of Texas and the Getty Museum.

"It's almost like PBS meets Neopets if you will," says Jay Goss, Chief Operating Officer of Whyville. "If you go to the museum of Whyville, you're not learning superficially about art. It's actually an entire virtual museum that we put together with the Getty Museum, the real Getty Museum."

What sets Whyville apart is not **what** it teaches kids about the world around them, but **how** it teaches them. Whyville takes a hands-on approach, introducing kids to the science they take for granted.

"If you decide that you want to eat lunch at the Whyville cafeteria," explains Goss, "we actually keep track of your calories, nutrients and macronutrients, run it through an algorithm together with a nutritionist dietician advisory committee from the University of Texas and we give you disease if your diet is unhealthy. So a good example in Whyville is if you don't get enough vitamin C for a few days in a row, we actually give you scurvy."

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Secondary school curricula have been homogenized, diluted, and diffused to the point that they no longer have a central purpose. In effect, we have a cafeteria style curriculum in which the appetizers and desserts can easily be mistaken for the main courses. - A Nation at Risk

"The company was founded by a bunch of scientists at Cal Tech," says Goss. "What motivated these scientists was not any kind of commercial notoriety or even simply being a good educational site, but what motivated them was really the science crisis in this country.

"It turns out when you look at our kindergartners up through fifth grade and you look at the data and you compare our kids to the rest of the industrialized world, and our kids are doing just fine, and then … our kids just fall off the chart. And if you look at that data a little more closely, where we're falling off most violently … is in math and science."

Whyville isn't the only organization concerned about the growing apathy among America's schoolchildren for science and mathematics, nor is it the first time the science crisis has reared its ugly head in America's schools.

In 1981, then Secretary of Education T. H. Bell created the National Commission on Excellence to determine the state of America's educational system. Their conclusions, published in the groundbreaking 1983 report "A Nation at Risk: The Imperative For Educational Reform," were terrifying.

The commission discovered that standardized test scores had been steadily declining for almost 20 years, over 10 percent of children entering adulthood were functionally illiterate and the science achievement test scores of graduating high school seniors had been plummeting steadily since the 1970s.

"Our Nation is at risk," the Commission concluded. "The United States and the well-being of its people, the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people."

The report propelled the nation into action. A new wave of science and space initiatives were launched by the department of education and NASA sent teachers into space. The result? Test scores improved, dropout rates declined and more students left the public education system with the ability to read, write and 'rithmetic.

Twenty years later, the founders of Whyville believe we're in need of another renaissance. Founded in 1999, Whyville now boasts nearly 2 million users - most between the ages of 8 and 15, the so-called "tweeners." One of their primary sponsors is NASA.

"Once you get a kid sort of self declaring that they're not good at or not interested in math or science," says Goss, "the likelihood that they ever circle back later on in their educational careers is next to nothing. Whereas if you and I decide we don't like American History as 12th graders, we might very well get into American History come college or in a graduate program. But once you kind of turn yourself off of math and science, you never go back.

"When you put a man on the moon, that kind of carries the day for a couple decades, but nowadays putting a man on the moon's just not going to do it. … One of the things that will do it is if we start teaching science in a more hands on manner and inquiry based fashion.

"That's exactly why NASA is in Whyville. NASA is the sponsor of the Whyville Aeronautics and Space Administration, and in that particular place in Whyville, you get to learn about rocket science and spectroscopy and ion engine technology, and they're literally playing what you and I would call almost videogame vignettes. [Kids are] sitting

" In 1981, then Secretary of Education T. H. Bell created the National Commission on Excellence to determine the state of america's educational system. Their conclusions were **TERRIFYING.**"
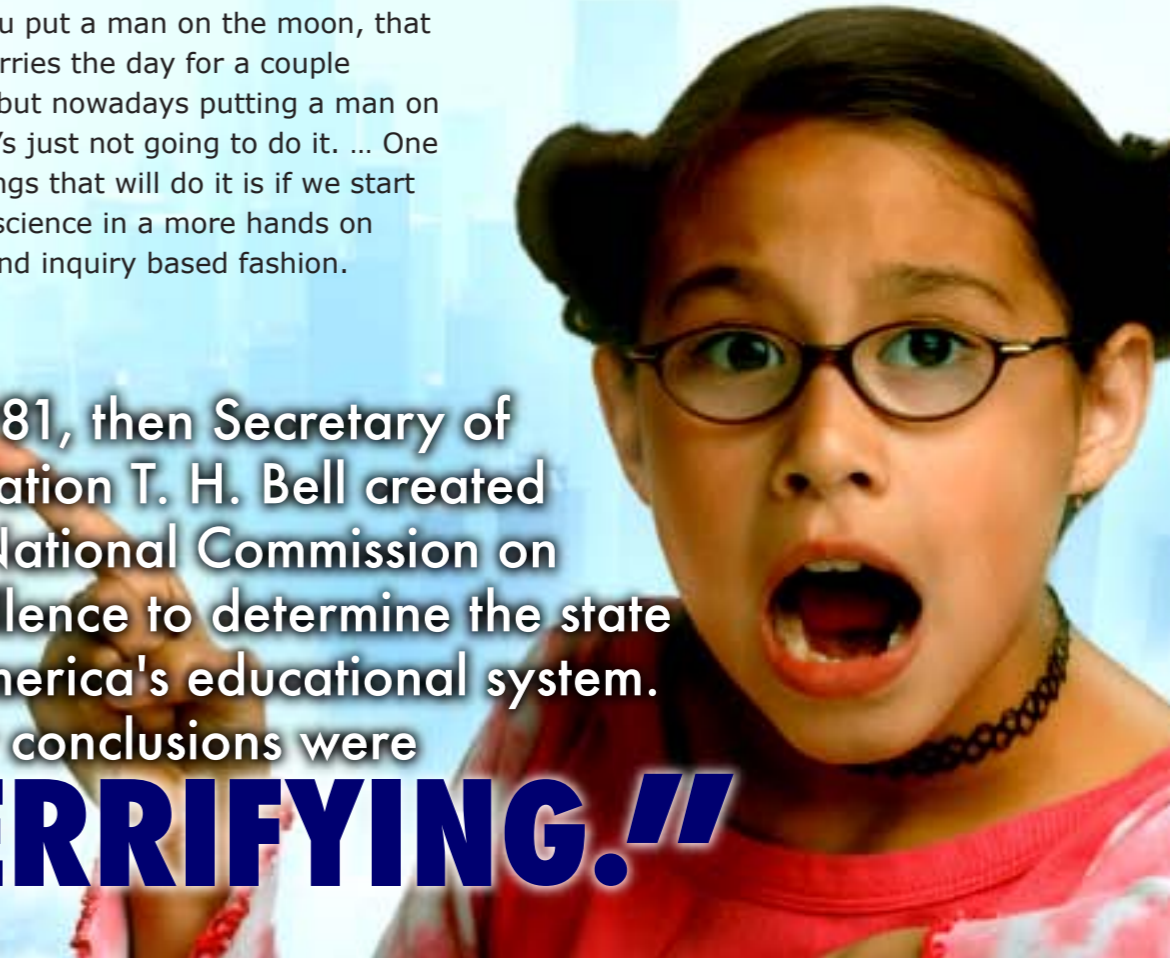
down to play *Tetris*, only in order to succeed in *Tetris* you have to learn something about spectroscopy."

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"The secret of education lies in respecting the pupil." - Ralph Waldo Emerson

As Mary Poppins would testify, kids will do almost anything if you can convince them it's a game. And the capacity to make an interesting and fun game for kids is almost unlimited in the virtual world. This can be good and bad. I wondered how selective Whyville was in choosing advertising and educational partners, and how the community dealt with troublemakers and "bad seeds."

"We had to draw a line in the sand and decide who we would not let in," Goss says. "Let's take Coca Cola. So the cat's out of the bag, it turns out that Coke's really not a good product for you to drink. … But if you want to bring Coke into Whyville, there are still a lot of things we could do. We could open up a Coca Cola bottling plant, and [then] we could teach kids about something that Coca Cola could take credit for, that might be more acceptable to us than just having a Coca Cola vending machines sprinkled through Whyville. It's not so much who and what we would let into Whyville but **how** we let them into Whyville."

This philosophy extends to Whyville's residents. The site is, after all, a virtual community, and anyone who's watched network TV news can attest that online predators are after our kids. Many parents reject the site out of hand, fearing its connection to the internet (and therefore internet users) makes it impossible to restrict who and what their children will encounter there. According to Goss and others, there's no need to worry.

Last year Whyville's safety features won it a "Best Product" award from iParenting and Linda Knapp, writing for *McClatchy-Tribune* News Service, called Whyville "safer than most" online communities for kids. Chief among Whyville's safety measures is its encouragement that parents take an active role in their children's online lives, knowing where they go and why. To encourage this, Whyville makes it difficult for children to sign up for accounts without a parent's knowledge and employs the usual array of technological and human measures. Among them: a simple test.

"So for example, a kid … can register today and play all the games today, but if they want to chat with their friends they have to [take] a chat test," says Goss.

The pre-chat test, designed to be taken by children with adult supervision, poses various situational scenarios and suggests how children are expected to respond; who to talk to, for example, and what subjects are not appropriate.

"Whyville is pretty much the most **boring** site in the world if you do not take this test," says one online review. One supposes, from a child safety standpoint, this is a good thing.

"It's just one layer of our sort of defense mechanism that [keeps] kids from coming in that want to be a loud mouth

"As Mary Poppins would testify, kids will do ALMOST ANYTHING IF you can convince them IT'S A GAME. "

and cause trouble," says Goss. "We [also] have artificial intelligence that prevents the kids from talking about things we don't want them talking about. We have live monitoring, so you wander around Whyville and see kids with a piece of duct tape over their mouth, and that's because we've found them guilty of some crime in Whyville, and one of the punishments in Whyville is to lose your chat privileges … for 'X' number of days. There's nothing more frustrating than logging in to Whyville and not being able to talk to your friends."

***

"I believe that children are our future. Teach them well and let them lead the way." - Whitney Houston

"On a bad day, we get a thousand new kids, and on a good day, we get three or four thousand brand new kids," says Goss. "We've basically gotten to the 2 million kids we have now by word of mouth. … Every day, tens of thousands of visits are paid to Whyville. Every month, tens of thousands of new kids register for Whyville. Every way we tried to score this thing, it works."

Yet in spite of all it has going for it, Whyville still faces an uphill acceptance battle, mainly because it's not the most attractive site of its kind out there, and some kids are put off by its circa 1998 graphical interface. Goss considers this a strength, not a weakness.

"The more sophisticated the home computing environment gets," he says, "the equally true statement is the more heterogeneous that home computing environment gets. … I have kids that can operate Whyville on a machine that's eight years old running on a 56k modem with nothing special going on, and they're having almost the exact same experience as you and I would if we went and bought a state of the art machine from Circuit City right now. So from an access standpoint it's been a huge competitive advantage.

"But I'll be the first to admit that 10 years from now, once the most the outdated machine in America is 10 years newer than it is today, we might change our tune a little bit, but we think it's definitely been the right strategy for the last eight years, and it's probably the right strategy for the next five."

Graphics aside, what Whyville brings to the kiddie table is an environment in which kids can explore all that science has to offer, and have fun while doing it. And NASA isn't the only institution that's taken notice.

"We just got a giant contract from a state organization … that wants to promote a particular career path," says Goss. "This is an organization that wants kids to get excited about biotechnology so that in high school they're thinking about biotechnology, so when they get in college they pursue careers and they pursue majors in biotechnology, so they go on to become employees of that state's biotechnology firms.

"So we're going to unleash viruses on Whyville, and these kids are going to have to respond by going into their biology lab and creating anti-viruses."

Necessity, it would seem, is still the mother of invention. Even for children.

C COMMENTS

Russ Pitts is an Associate Editor for The Escapist. His blog can be found at www. falsegravity.com.

" we're going to **UNLEASH VIRUSES** on Whyville "

TIGHTEN Those Graphics
A Look At Small College Game Dev
by Erin Hoffman

That commercial. Everyone's seen it. A pair of living anachronisms from the world of *Doogie Howser, MD* pound a pair of controllers, gyrating and darting their heads to various stock blips and bloops. "Oh, hurry up, man, boss is comin' in," one says to the other, who whines, "Dude, almost got it," cuing the entrance of a pony-tailed brunette with an "oh, those boys" smile. "Hey guys, finished testing that game yet? I've got another one I need designed." Cringe number one. '90s Boy No. 2 gives his best My First Briefcase performance:

"We just finished level 3 and need to tighten the graphics a little bit." Cringe number two.

Then the kicker: The ever-smiling "boss" (was she a producer? A testing lead? A delusional sociopath? The world may never know) departs, and '90s Boy No. 2, sly and conspiratorial, says, "Hey, I can't believe we got jobs doing this." His partner: "I know! And my mom said I'd never get **anywhere** with these games!"

The now two-year-old commercial for Denver-based Westwood College was intended to snare gamers and aired on cable channels across the U.S. But not only was it chock full of unintentional humor (even spawning numerous parodies), it offended the information-savvy subculture with its prolific errors: What exactly were the actors doing? What were they testing, why did it require both of them, and why did neither of them seem to be particularly good at it? Were they testers? Designers? Either case demands the question: "Tighten the graphics"? What does that even **mean**?

The commercial marked the vanguard of a disturbing trend in game education: advertised instructional programs so out of touch with actual game development they couldn't tell a sound effect from a polygon.

The Minefield

But what most offended the gaming community was that the commercial almost certainly resulted in increased enrollment for Westwood. The wildfire internet popularity of the ad touched off an issue waiting to explode: Westwood, like many colleges, was taking advantage of the tremendous upsurge in gaming popularity coupled with the unavailability of formal game development instruction.

Over the past several years, numerous universities have branched slowly into game development as an art and a science (as well as occasionally a psychology, an ethic, a philosophy – you name it; the huge popularity of games as a rising new media meant everybody wanted to get involved). But these large institutions move slowly, with attention to their reputations; the careful growth of such programs meant that niche markets for game instruction opened up ahead of the larger universities. Enter the community college.

Community and small private colleges in particular had the flexibility to move quickly and also target a vast majority of individuals outside the university scene. Not everyone can afford major university tuition, and a big chunk of that "not everyone" is passionately interested in videogames. Unlike electrical engineering or business management, game development carries an appeal to a full vertical slice through society, as games-as-media often reach deeper into society than movies do.

But the educational minefield is not restricted to gaming world novices or those without access to prestigious universities. We all want to learn, and that learning comes with an ever-increasing price tag. The CMP Game Group alone – pilot of the still eminent Game Developers Conference in northern California – offers more than **seven** conferences throughout the year, and each is billed as a "can't miss"; even a full-time game developer could go bankrupt jet-setting to them all. On top of CMP's offerings, the Montreal International Games Summit continues to gain momentum, and subject-specific conferences such as the recent Online Game Development Conference (OGDC) and steadily growing Games for Health Conference add to the bill. These venues – at least the commercially sponsored ones – have also caught on to the growing student audience; CMP's roster now includes the heavily advertised "Game Career Seminar Series," specifically targeting starry-eyed dev hopefuls.

This proliferation of potential instruction is nothing if not overwhelming to the new and passionate game development apprentice. And with colleges offering programs left and right, for premium prices, the sharks are circling. But who are they?

The Players

Westwood College isn't alone, but it certainly – for good or ill – has become one of the most visible players in the small college instruction niche. I spoke with Sean Lynott, Career Development advisor for Westwood's game development programs (of which there are two: Game Art and Design and Game Software Development), about what Westwood had to offer.

Remote instruction programs such as those offered by Westwood and California-based Cerra Coso College offer students a variety of general skill classes (particularly in areas of 3-D animation and programming) as well as practical instruction on the compilation of competitive portfolios, working professionally in teams and planning one's career. With no need to generalize about theory, these colleges can directly address the vocational needs of their students, preparing them for a work environment in a way that major universities often consider "beneath" them.

> "with colleges offering programs left and right, for premium prices, the SHARKS ARE CIRCLING. But who are they?"

In addition to the low cost of enrollment, community and small colleges offer practicality and skill focus. But are they delivering the best education possible? The primary criticism of these programs has been their lack of connection with actual game development – criticism also levied at larger universities, which suffer a catch-22: Upscale universities require all of their professors to have Ph.D.s, but with few exceptions, there are no Ph.D.s for game development, and even if there were, you wouldn't commonly see a practicing developer carrying one.

The bugbear, ultimately, is in the instruction of game design. While game art and game programming are distinct specializations with their own manifold quirks and details, it is possible to be a phenomenal artist and never work on games; it is possible to be a genius caliber programmer and never code gameplay. It is not, however, possible to be a game designer without making games. The notion is patently absurd. Yet this is exactly what many private college instructors – and even, in some cases, faculty at major universities – are claiming they can do.

So what about the voice of experience? Lynott agreed that the only true test of an instruction program was the success of its students, and programs like Westwood's, he said, were too young yet to have encountered those tests. But through technology and industry connections, Westwood is doing its best to maximize opportunity for its students, including negotiating with major developers for internship programs and bringing in professional developers to speak to their classes.

Through use of the same technology the online colleges use to instruct their students – in Westwood's case, Adobe's Breeze software – the Career Development department arranges sessions where the students can watch an instructor's computer actions remotely while listening to a lecture delivered over online audio. At the end of the session, they participate in a conference call with the speaker for Q&A. Recently, Westwood arranged for IGDA Executive Director Jason Della Rocca to speak to their game dev classes.

"The students seemed quite engaged and had a lot of good questions," Della Rocca said. While he felt there was no real substitute for live instruction, he said Westwood's technology and the tools used by colleges like it potentially gave students access to industry experts even larger universities might never see. In addition to bringing in industry notables, Westwood is also organizing an advisory board composed of game development professionals to review their programs – a step a number of universities are taking and a feature prospective students would do well to watch for and request in their own programs.

And the infamous commercial? A marketing department debacle of which the college was quite aware. "They didn't really know much about the gaming world," Lynott said. New advertisements are currently in development and will be reviewed by the new professional advisory board.

Object Lessons
In the European game community, programs that claimed to teach game development but offered no experienced

> "It is not, however, possible to be a game designer without MAKING GAMES. The notion is patently absurd. Yet this is exactly what many private college instructors – and even, in some cases, faculty at major universities – are CLAIMING they can do."

instruction of any sort leapt into prevalence a few years ago. "There was a mad dash to capitalize on game degrees. Most of it was utter crap, which resulted in an industry backlash and lack of acceptance," Della Rocca said. "This led to a more formal approach to accrediting programs."

The U.K. went through a graphics tightening incident severe enough to make Westwood look like masters of the marketing universe. The result was the formation of a game industry branch of the Sector Skills Council for the Audio Visual Industries. In 2006, the Computer Games Skills Forum, chaired by Eidos Product Acquisitions Director Ian Livingstone, selected four university programs in the U.K. for accreditation: two at the University of Abertay Dundee, one at the University of Paisley and one at the Glamorgan Center for Art & Design Technology.

Today, Skillset sponsors a GAMES:EDU conference to discuss games in education, held in Brighton.

Whether accreditation is next in the U.S. remains to be seen. With the large body of "live" game development occurring in

the States, aspiring developers tend to educate and police themselves and the organizations that would offer instruction. And the question appears often: What should students do?

The IGDA itself is the first natural resource for students, and certainly has provided a vector into the industry for many. Student membership is arguably one of the best investments – outside of

the development of concrete skills – that a student can make in his career. For the IGDA, Della Rocca was direct: "We want to be a valuable resource to all educators interested in game dev education and provide the resources and guidance they need to not suck."

The Passion
The game community's response to Westwood's commercial exemplifies its character. In nearly every other industry, education scams are accepted as a matter of course. To some they even serve a purpose, separating the wheat from the chaff – it's every dev for themselves, in other words, and if you get sucked into a scam, it's your own fault for being stupid.

But that's not the gaming community. Gamers and developers alike were outraged at this commercial; almost curiously so. One YouTube user who posted the video, "randomgenius," was especially upset: "The hill to success is hard enough without money grubbing colleges who offer no true training, but so eagerly take your money." While the advertisement was clearly a marketing mistake rather than representative of what Westwood actually teaches, this sentiment is rife among those trying to get a job making games. That no one goes into games for the money is an accepted truth, and the corollary to that fact is that anyone truly serious about a game career must be intensely passionate about the biz.

"the infamous commercial? A **MARKETING DEPARTMENT DEBACLE** of which the college was quite aware."

It is the job of any commercial to make life look easy. Commercials offer a dream world where our visions are delivered to us gently scintillating on silver platters. But for people like randomgenius, this illusion is salt in the wound. "[T]o make it appear that breaking into the industry is a cake walk is simply naive," he adds in his introduction to the video.

A number of questions remain to be answered. Can a college really claim to be teaching game development if their faculty has no game development experience? Where does theory end and practice begin? Is it more important to be a strong communicator and teach solid skills, or to have spent time in the trenches? On one issue the industry is unanimous: There is no replacement for live experience. But experience making games does not immediately correlate to skill in instructing and inspiring students.

Time will have the final say – which is unwelcome news for current hopefuls. But the bright side is game instruction in academia gets better every year, and this can only mean good things for the industry as a whole. Increasing numbers of programs, small and large, are bringing in developers as adjunct

instructors, and game analysis itself is a tremendous skill growing in academia apart from its production-based siblings. Smaller programs like Westwood's offer options for the part-time and passionate, and, if a driven student can navigate through the qualitative labyrinth of program options, ask sharp questions, make some professional connections and land an internship, he has a better chance at making it into the industry than most of us had before these programs existed.

With passion and energy, doors will open, and as academic game programs mature, they keep getting wider. Just don't forget to tighten those graphics.

COMMENTS

Erin Hoffman is a professional game designer, freelance writer, and hobbyist troublemaker. She moderates Gamewatch.org and fights crime on the streets by night.

"It is the job of any commercial to make life look easy. Commercials offer a dream world where our visions are delivered to us gently scintillating ON SILVER PLATTERS."

the escapist

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