

FACTSHEET

Are educational games the only ones that have a place in education?

What are educational games?

Educational games are computer programs that aim to pass knowledge to the players while entertaining them.

Starting in the 1980 but especially in the 1990s, quite a few educational games were created, such as Broderbund's 'Where in the world is Carmen San Diego' (1985) or Coktel Vision's Adi and Adibou series (1992). In the first one, the player discovers the world by chasing a spy turned art thief, and in the second one, the player completes exercises in school basic skills while discovering the daily life of a character from outer space.

Nowadays, it is easy to find apps or short games that allow students to complete exercises in basic skills that answer the needs of the school curricula. Wouldn't they sound like the perfect tools to use in class? Here is some perspective to show that educational games are not always appropriate for secondary education.

The limits of educational games in secondary education

First, educational games tend to cater to the needs of primary education and lower levels of secondary education. It is easier to create programs that can check the results of spelling exercises and simple calculus rather than checking whether a student wrote a logical essay.

Secondly, educational games are often developed with the parents or educators' needs in mind. They can often have narrow outcomes and be infantilising. They are not always very engaging to the learner as there is rarely any real story behind

completing the tasks. A bad educational game could alienate your students.

The bottom line is not to expect video games to be just a digital transposition of what you already do well in your lessons.

While educational games could fit some educational purposes, they rarely make the most of all the opportunities offered by playing a real game.



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How can mainstream games contribute to education?

Mainstream or 'non-educational' games have their place in an educational setting. Some games that were not originally conceived to be educational, such as Sid Meier's Civilization or SimCity series, can develop players' soft skills and prompt them to research historical facts and examples to understand game mechanics. In Civilization, the players start their civilization on Earth and advance through historical times by managing resources and developing their influence. In SimCity, the player is the Mayor of the modern city they create and they have to make it grow while managing many challenges (crime, natural catastrophes, utility supply, etc.). Both can offer a practical look into history, geography, urbanism, and politics. Examples are countless,

and even basic games such as Super Mario Bros could be a good introduction to show that learning is not a smooth process.

Educational versions of mainstream games

More and more mainstream games are now offering educational versions. In Minecraft EDU, classes can create their environment and complete exercises. The producers of Assassin's Creed have created Discovery Tour versions that allow us to explore Ancient Egypt and Ancient Greece. These education editions allow to build from player's relationship with the original game, but depending on the possibilities they offer, they are not always the most engaging games either. For instance, in Assassin's Creed's Discovery Tours, the player can walk around, listen to the narrator, and dialogue with characters, but there are no fighting nor other game mechanics. It would not be honest to say that they are not interesting to use in the classroom as they offer beautiful renderings and more interaction than a textbook or a video.

I am confused: what kinds of games should I use?

The simplest answer is to choose a game according to the learning outcome you are aiming for in terms of skills and or knowledge. A good rule of thumb is not to focus only on games that are branded as educational but to use different games that tackle the topic you wish to explore in your lessons.

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The #Gaming4skills project has been funded with support from the European Commission. Its content and material reflect the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

Project code: 2020-1-FR01-KA201-080669

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