

SERIOUS GAMES

If you raise the spectre of computer games with training professionals the chances are that it will conjure up images of children's pastimes, geeky teenage boys and contentious Daily Mail headlines.

Instead, argues Kevin Corti, training professionals should be busily readying themselves to embrace a new form of technology-based learning that has the potential to significantly improve the effectiveness of training strategies for multiple audiences at multiple levels.

Games-based learning (GBL) or 'serious games' is becoming a very hot topic in the training and education space.

Organisations as diverse as the U.S. Marine Corp, the United Nations, Carnegie Mellon University, The British Council and Price Waterhouse Coopers have already applied computer game approaches to learning. Marc Prensky, a well-known writer upon the subject, has catalogued over 500 examples of 'serious games'.

But what has the computer games industry got to teach us about learning? To answer that question one only has to observe a typical gamer (who, incidentally is, on average, in their early 30s) who is utterly engaged in a 'vividly represented, task-based, interactive experience with rules, structure, objectives and highly individualised outcomes', namely a computer game. Then compare what you have observed with a demographically similar consumer of eLearning who is battling his/her way through yet another generic communication skills course.

Guess which person you have to physically pull away from the PC? Guess

which one does not measure user progression and skills competency with a simplistic multiple choice questionnaire?

How often do you encounter the problem of eLearners refusing to log off whilst pleading; "Please give me another 20 minutes...I've nearly finished another level"?

The eLearning 'revolution' allowed organisations to deliver vast quantities of information to "anyone, anywhere, anytime". It has allowed financial directors of publicly listed companies to justify huge 'ROIs' and cost savings, but to what extent did this impact on the quality of the learning experience? Hugely, many would argue, but not in a good way!

Considerable research has been undertaken into the underlying pedagogic principles of GBL by esteemed organisations as BECTa, MIT and Carnegie Mellon and hardly a day goes by without another thesis, white paper or case study emerging to illustrate the potential of the medium.

Games create an environment in which, for example, users learn: to explain, describe, construct, compare, analyse, assess and evaluate; advanced problem solving; and where they actually experience the 'F' word - fun!

Games deliver experiences that engage users on a cognitive, emotional, psychological and physiological level with the use of story, narrative, challenge, drama, humour and



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Below: Screen shots from Pixel Learning's games based business and management skills programmes



character development.

The two paragraphs above contain two keywords which should, I believe, be of supreme interest to learning professionals; environment and experience. How many eLearning 'environments' create a stimulating and motivating experience that fosters a deep level of learning?

Do not misunderstand me. eLearning is a perfectly legitimate mode of training and education. It delivers information to users in a rapid and highly cost-efficient manner. It can be quickly updated and Internet communications such as IM, chat, email and video-conferencing allow learners to communicate with their instructors and peers when

previously they may have been isolated in a room with a thick folder full of paper.

The weakness of a 100% eLearning approach (or any information-heavy mode of instruction) is that learners do not have the opportunity to put the theory into practise. Do you need your sales team to be able to recite sales theory or do you need them to be able to sell?

This is where games-based learning delivers its true value. It puts learners into a highly realistic recreation of a vocationally relevant scenario, which they will recognise, understand and buy into.

GBL allows learners to, for example,

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construct and implement complex strategies and to experience real life, detailed and multi-faceted scenarios in a safe environment thus creating “virtual veterans”. PWC used GBL to train staff in derivatives trading when learning by doing for real would have risked vast sums of money.

A U.S. Marine Corps Colonel, whilst speaking at the recent Serious Games Summit in San Francisco, commented upon the “dozens of emails” he had received from servicemen in the Middle East, who stated that their games-based training saved their lives.

Now that truly is a return on investment!

GBL will not be easy or cheap to implement for most early adopters but try typing 'serious games' or 'games-based learning' into Google and you will quickly find a huge number of organisations which are already starting to use it none-the-less.

If they are....shouldn't you? 🙄🙄🙄

About the author: Kevin Corti is Managing Director of PIXELearning, which specialises in using games-based learning for business and management skills development. He has eight years of eLearning development experience and has played computer games for 27 years.