

Not playing around: Scientists say video games can reshape education

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WASHINGTON -- Scientists call it the next great discovery, a way to captivate students so much they will spend hours learning on their own.

It's the new vision of video games.

The Federation of American Scientists -- which typically weighs in on matters of nuclear weaponry and government secrecy -- declared Tuesday that video games can redefine education.

Capping a year of study, the group called for federal research into how the addictive pizzazz of video games can be converted into serious learning tools for schools.

The theory is that games teach skills that employers want: analytical thinking, team building, multitasking and problem-solving under duress.

Unlike humans, the games never lose patience. And they are second nature to many kids.

The idea might stun those who consider games to be the symbol of teenage sloth.

Yet this is not about virtual football or skateboarding. Games would have to be created and evaluated with the goal of raising achievement, said federation president Henry Kelly.

There's already an audience; more than 45 million homes have video-game consoles.

"If we can't make the connection, shame on us," Kelly said at a news conference.

What's needed, he said, is research into which features of games are most important for learning -- and how to test students on the skills they learn in games. The departments of education and labor and the National Science Foundation would lead the way under this plan.

"This is an investment that the private industry simply is not capable of taking," said Kelly, a former White House science and technology leader during the Clinton administration.

"This is the kind of thing where the federal government has always acted in the past, to underwrite basic research that you need to drive an important movement forward," he said.

Getting costly research about games on the federal agenda is just one obstacle.

There are plenty of others. Schools, colleges and universities are a fractured market. They make their own buying decisions, and are likely to be dubious about the value of games.

The gaming industry has already figured out that educational games don't make money in the consumer marketplace. The new approach would instead market them directly to schools.

Doug Lowenstein, president of the Entertainment Software Association, said there will soon be 75 million Americans who are 10 to 30 years old -- an age bracket that grew up on video games.

"Common sense tells us that a medium so basic to the lives of these 'millennials' has potential beyond the living room," Lowenstein said. "We would be crazy not to seek ways to exploit interactive games to teach our children."

The scientific group called for action from the business and academic communities, too.

The potential is enormous, agreed Don Blake, a technology analyst for the National Education Association, which represents teachers and other classroom professionals.

But when he thought about how games would work in class, questions kept popping to mind. How much training would teachers receive? Who would persuade school leaders and the public that games aren't a waste of time? Would education schools add serious gaming to the curriculum?

Ultimately, he said, teachers need to see games as a way to help -- not as a threat.

On The Net

*The Federation of American Scientists: <http://www.fas.org>

*The Entertainment Software Association: <http://www.theesa.com/>

*National Education Association: <http://www.nea.org>