GOING DEEP

From Bioshock to Madden, Kurt Squire's finding new, profound connections between games and learning. Ready to play?

BY CHRISTOPHER HARRIS

If you want to learn about the role that games play in education, then the University of Wisconsin at Madison is the place to go. It's home to the Games, Learning, and Society Initiative and its current director Dr. Kurt Squire. I caught up with Squire to talk about his research and learn how libraries can embrace gaming as a tool for learning.

What got you interested in games as a part of education?
I was a Montessori teacher, and I also taught at an independent school that had a lot of Montessori elements. What had a profound impact on me was the Montessori idea that we can really personalize education; that you can have mixed-age classrooms where teachers have substantial, prolonged contact with individual students.

In our case, we had 25 or 30 kids per class with two teachers over a period of years, so we really had deep relationships with them. When the children came to school, they would choose to engage in projects that were interesting to them and that were going to further their development. Thinking about games in that kind of context makes sense, because you want games that really engage kids, that speak to them, that entice them. Then your job is to help them create experiences, to set up social networks or social relationships with other kids. Montessori provides a great template for thinking about how games could work in education.

The majority of our high school students today are gamers, but are they learning anything from games?
It's a good question, and I think we don't exactly know. A lot of people have written about this, in particular, the sports writer Bill Simmons. He thinks it's interesting that you're getting a generation of kids who have played so many games of Madden NFL that they know what to do in different situations.

Take a Monday Night Football game, where if you've got a team on the 10-yard line and two minutes left. Anyone who's played Madden knows that you let the other team score, just because there's no way you're going to win. You've played a thousand games and know that's what's going to happen. Now you have kids who've grown up playing Madden that much, including many current athletes. And so they bring to their sports viewing an elite-level criticism that wasn't always there.

You didn't see this so much in older games, but I think you see it in Madden. I think as educators we will soon be looking at situations where we can develop this kind of deep knowledge.
and expertise across different areas, whether it be football, soccer, or even fantasy games. But in school-based domains, we've been reticent to give kids these deep experiences.

**Does this just apply to video games, or can modern board games have the same impact on student engagement and learning?**

For much of my career, I've shied away from modern board games. In part, I've been trying to understand what is unique about them. One thing about video games is that they have evolved this really interesting set of ways to teach you how to play the game while you play them. And that's particularly interesting to educators.

Having said that, this term I'm teaching my first modern board-game design class. I'm really entranced with the potential for using games in a much more overtly face-to-face setting. Although kids obviously love video games, I've seen no evidence that they don't like board games.

In fact, the face-to-face interpersonal interaction during board games is so rich and so far beyond what any computer game can give you that kids gravitate toward board games. We've seen this, whether it's the first time we introduce multiplayer games or when we bring board games into an after-school program. The kids really do like to interact. They love being able to play together.

So as great as video games are, I think there's no real danger that they're going to forever supplant kids being given the chance to just play together.

**Any tips for librarians trying to select good games?**

There's a real temptation to say that a game has to be super realistic to be good. For example, a lot of military historians think the *Age of Empires* series is great for the way that it models certain aspects of military history, but it's not that interesting as a game.

It's much more useful if the game inspires kids to ask questions about the field. If a kid plays *Civilization*, when they put it down it would be great if they asked, "Why did the Egyptian empire end up failing and not persisting?" Or "Why did the Roman empire fall?"

This is engagement, and it's critical for games in schools and libraries. It's not something that we've taken seriously, but I think this might be one of the most important questions to ask. Does the game really engage people, does it engage them to leverage their social networks, to become productive, to start sharing things, to try to become creators?

**Can we make a game for learning that's still a good game?**

The jury's out on that, although I do think it can work. A game built around real-world phenomenon has the potential to engage people in ways that maybe traditional entertainment games don't.

For example, here at UW we're building something called *The Oncology Game*. It's a game in which players meet virtual patients and diagnose their conditions. As they encounter different patients—all the patients, I should say, are actual cases—they start collecting patient data more or less in real time. Let's say you go to the doctor to be diagnosed, players out there would have the opportunity to also see the data and make a diagnosis and make a recommendation to the doctor.

One of the reasons we're doing this is that the prognoses that doctors make are really bad. If you ask five doctors how to treat someone with cancer, all five will probably give different responses. What we want to do is to use games as a leverage point to get the medical establishment to talk more seriously about which sort of methods of treatment work and which ones don't.

**What role can librarians play in the implementation of gaming in schools?**

Librarians are crucial players. Right now we're at this kind of weird place where games are not fitting in schools. If you want to put games in schools, there's going to be problems aligning the standards, standardized tests, and so on.

But what games are really good at doing is amplifying kids' interests in a topic and then making them ask questions or be curious about something. It may not be something that schools are ready to accommodate, but in the library you can follow your own interests, make new social networks, have new forms of peer relationships. This is an important part of learning and something schools don't do really well. And so it's a niche I think that libraries can really fill.

In closing, Squire issued a challenge to librarians. Go forth and play some games, he suggested, and give yourself a chance to see the information literacy and learning inherent in the game play. What game will you try?

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