

“Teachers Spend Pro-D time playing a video game...”

No, it isn't a byline from a tabloid. It's for real...on October 29th teachers from the Social Studies Department at Ballenas Secondary played a game called [Civilization IV](#). Why? Isn't this a waste of taxpayer's money? Not at all. In fact, the overall idea is to use what is known as Game Based Learning (GBL) in order to engage and motivate students and further their knowledge of the Social Studies 9 learning outcomes. The just recently released SS9 curriculum draft by the Ministry of Education totally supports the use of this alternate form of learning. Not only does Civ IV's "Colonization" component allow for personalized learning but it also provides an environment that supports historical decisions that have immediate consequences for students. Further, it leverages actual past history (leaders, events, places) to teach the player about bigger picture outcomes using critical thinking skills. The kicker is...it's fun to play and is sneakily addictive. A surprising outcome of our session was that a few staff members never stopped playing and the allotted time ended up having to be doubled.

Is there science/research to support using this tool in the classroom? More than enough. Names like James Paul Gee, Kurt Squire and Constance Steinkuhler have spent much of their academic careers studying the way people learn, game design and how best to engage learners in the classroom using GBL. "Serious" or educational games are usually designed around the use of critical thinking skills - throughout the Civilization series, one sees a massively in-depth environment which is terribly open ended with many paths to success...and failure. One of the reasons so many students enjoy playing this type of game is that they can fail in a relatively "safe environment", internalize why this occurred, make changes and then go on to succeed. The game does provide a measure of success in terms of the points acquired in relation to other leaders and civilizations that co-exist at the same time. Indeed, one of the major decisions to be made is "diplomacy or death" - is it better to trade and make treaties or is war inevitable and necessary at times? Concepts such as nationalism, trade, and the role of technology and religion are explored through the choices made by the student.

Many parents may worry about the addictive nature of "gaming" - I agree - this needs to be regulated...and taken advantage of. Instead of holding back or banning what students do in their spare time for fun, why don't we channel this energy in order to explore or practice "inquiry" on issues that existed in the past and still exist today? Playing the game is only part of the overall process. Successful models require some form of meta-cognition or self-reflection showing what the student learned, how learning occurred, and provides "guiding questions" that connect to modern social issues. Examining one's society and culture and then playing Civ IV truly brings home the adage, "the more things change, the more they stay the same" - so how can we evolve or change or "do better"? Game Based Learning provides opportunities for students to practice making decisions that could affect the whole world.

Greg Lewis is a Social Studies teacher at Ballenas Secondary and a sessional instructor at Vancouver Island University. You may contact him at glewis@sd69.bc.ca