

Edu-Games

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Kids trying to sell Mom and Dad on video games as gifts have a new angle — some of those hot titles may actually be educational. Long snubbed by game-savvy kids who prefer action and horror titles, such as “Gears of War,” educational computer games are making a comeback. The problem in recent years has been finding educational games that can match the graphic quality and speed of other video games. But that’s changing.

“They’re using techniques that mainstream commercial games are using in order to catch kids’ interest and hold their interest, but coupling that with educational theory and educational content,” said Ethan Watrall, an assistant professor of information studies and media at Michigan State University who’s a researcher with MSU’s Games for Entertainment and Learning Lab.

For older children, experts say, games that put abstract concepts into real world situations, making the subject much easier to learn, can be good choices. Tabula Digita, for example, has developed “Dimenxian,” a game that teaches Algebra I by using graphics similar to those in Xbox games. Players crash-land on a planet with a grid system, full of X and Y coordinates, and they need algebra to survive. The online trailer ends with the words: “Learn math or die trying.”

For younger children, comprehension programs that make sure they understand what they read are good choices. So are games that make them work in several disciplines at the same time. 3D-Readers by the NeuronFarm, which specializes in Web-based educational games, allows kids to read about a science project and build it on the computer. Regardless of children’s ages, a common trait of highly rated educational games is an ability to analyze players’ incorrect responses and make them work on areas with which they struggle to keep playing.

“If you’ve got something right three times, there’s not much point in getting it right seven times,” said Mina Johnson-Glenberg, a lecturer in cognitive psychology at the University of Wisconsin and president of the NeuronFarm.

Some “bad” games are good.

Computerized learning has some clear advantages. Children can learn at their own pace, whether it’s faster or slower than the classroom’s. They can focus on particular subjects, and parents can look for games tailored to a particular weakness.

It all sounds good in theory, but educational game sales took a nosedive in recent years. From 2000 to 2005, educational software sales shrank 23.7 percent, said Chris Swenson, director of software industry analysis for the NPD Group, which provides market research information for the software industry. Educational game sales increased about 4.4 percent last year, he added, but their makers still face an uphill battle convincing kids

that they are as dynamic and use the same high-quality graphics as those made for PlayStation or Xbox.

“Video games do seem to be faster and do seem to have better graphics,” Libby Setchell, 14, a ninth-grader at L’Anse Creuse High School in Harrison Township, Mich., said of the mainstream games. Tom Mager’s two sons, Jacob, 11, and Ryan, 7, are among thousands of children who play video games — and they’re not educational games. “It’s a constant fight, using timers and charts and everything else,” said Mager, from Harrison Township. “If you don’t, they will play forever.”

But some games on kids’ wish lists also have educational benefits. “Final Fantasy XII,” a role-playing game that simulates resistance against a tyrannical empire, can teach critical thinking and problem-solving skills, said Jesse Soleil, director of adaptive reading technology at Scholastic Inc. Other video games place players in positive situations. For example, “Trauma Center: Second Opinion,” a new game for the Nintendo Wii, allows the player to be a doctor. “You may not think that’s educational, but actually it will help many kids think, ‘I could be a doctor,’” Soleil said.

And some games are historically accurate simulations, such as “Civilization 4,” which allows players to develop their own civilizations, making decisions about development and economics on which the civilizations will thrive or die. To see reviews of educational games for young students, go to <http://superkids.com>.