Learning From Games

By Javier Elizondo

Like many parents around the world, I was concerned and fascinated to see my 8-year-old spend hour after hour squinting at the tiny screen of her Game Boy Advance. I have also been intrigued that the phenomenon known as Pokemon, with video games, trading cards, TV shows, movies, toys, magazines—and whatever else I am forgetting—has been sweeping the entire world, and, in doing so, is helping kids learn to read and count. Now to be honest, I am not the only one taking notice. There are books that talk about the enticement of games, and there is at least one bestseller that talks about the Pokemon phenomenon (see sidebar).

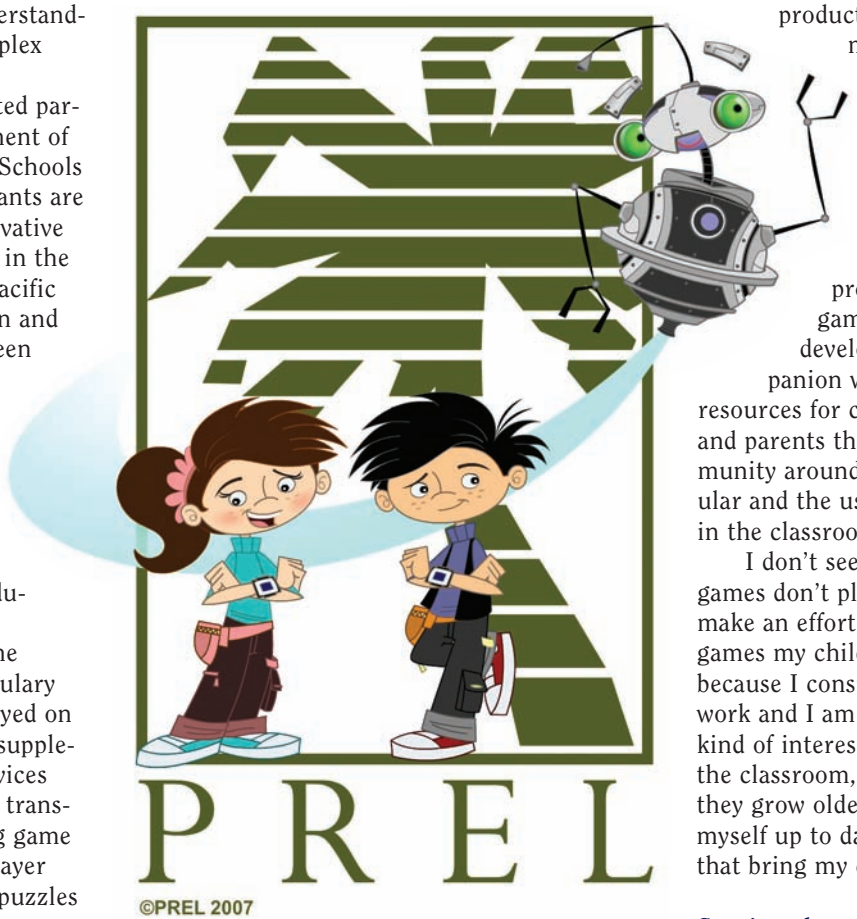
The interest in how games capture the attention of children in particular and gamers in general has grown at a steady and fast pace, not only because it defines a new generation of children, but also because games are complex systems that require high levels of learning to take place in order to be enjoyed. It is in that learning experience where we look now for clues that will guide the future of education, where children are engaged and enjoy understanding and mastering complex environments.

Among the interested parties is the U.S. Department of Education via the Star Schools grants. Star Schools grants are always looking for innovative ways to use technology in the classroom, and so far Pacific Resources for Education and Learning (PREL) has been rather successful—obtaining three grants to date. The most recent, JUMP Into Reading for Meaning (JUMP), focuses precisely on the use of gaming in education.

JUMP focuses on the development of a vocabulary game that will be deployed on a mobile platform in a supplemental educational services (SES) setting. That has translated into a role playing game in which the student/player has to solve a series of puzzles that involve the learning of 450 new words and several vocabulary strategies. The game will be deployed on the Nintendo DS platform and could be used as a tool in an SES program once its effectiveness has been proven via scientific evaluation.

So far, the project has shown indications of early success, in part due to the support of an extraordinary advisory panel that includes Michael Kamil from Stanford University, James Gee from the University of Wisconsin at Madison, Cathy Collins Block from Texas Christian University, and John Mangieri from the Institute for Literacy Enhancement. Together, they represent some of the most forward thinking in reading education and gaming.

To conciliate classroom education and gaming has not always been easy, but it is reassuring that with the best intentions and smart dedicated people working on the project, new ways to approach traditional learning problems are always at hand.



We have just finished preproduction and, in the months to come, we will start pilot tests in Hawai'i schools, followed by tests in school sites still to be determined.

Parallel to the production of the game, JUMP will begin development of a companion website with resources for children, teachers, and parents that will foster a community around our game in particular and the use of games as tools in the classroom in general.

I don't see a future in which games don't play a part. Today, I make an effort to understand the games my children play, not only because I consider it part of my work and I am eager to bring that kind of interest and dedication to the classroom, but also because, as they grow older, I want to keep myself up to date on the things that bring my children joy.

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Books About Games and Learning

- *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy* by James Paul Gee
- *How Computer Games Help Children Learn* by David Williamson Shaffer and James Paul Gee
- *Pikachu's Global Adventure: The Rise and Fall of Pokémon* by Hirofumi Katsuno, Gilles Brougere, David Buckingham, and Rebekah Willet

I think games will come to the classroom and they will stay. I am sure teachers will welcome these engaging new tools.

Please check future editions of *Pacific Educator* to get more information about the JUMP project and its progress.

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