

Play is the most natural form of learning, so why has society paused the game?

What inspires you to jump out of bed each day? Achieving new growth targets? Tracking down a new business to fund? I'm passionate about education and engaging youngsters – and not just because it's a job requirement of working at an edtech gaming company.

I've never grown up. I carry myself as a (very experienced) kid in a world where other people my age are far more serious – the Pan to their Hook.

School played a major role in my outlook. For me, primary school learning felt like recess, so receiving an award naming me best student all-rounder for my enthusiasm was a surprise since it felt like I was playing rather than being educated.

By stark contrast, the formal teaching methods of high school were a shock to my system, prompting daydreaming during lessons because that engaging combination of explorative learning and play I knew and loved had vanished quicker than the sun during a British summer.

Fast forward to the present and I still fantasise about that educational cocktail. It comes with the territory working at Kuato Studios – but also because the

education landscape has been shaken more vigorously than a Long Island iced tea in recent times.

Tackling real-life challenges and building skills

For those who fall into the categories of Baby Boomer, Generation X or older millennials, the classroom lights dimming to make way for the warm glow of a projector – or the TV trolley being wheeled out if we were lucky – was as good as it got for having technology feature in our early lives. Today, seeing a toddler holding a tablet isn't uncommon.

UNESCO recorded over 1.6 billion students as having their education disrupted when schools worldwide were closed at the height of the pandemic, halting the typical classroom setup. Parents and teachers had to adapt how children were taught and develop a new game plan. Soaring out of the smouldering ashes of school-based teaching came online learning, with global education app downloads surging 90% when lockdown began in March 2020.

There's no denying devices are a great ally for busy parents. As a result of school closures, 75% of UK parents said their children spent more time on screens, watching TV and playing with tablets. This shouldn't be unexpected – not everyone has the means to replicate a classroom at home, while others juggled childcare alongside working remotely. But the report highlighted children being at a disadvantage from heightened device use, while I would argue there are major benefits screen-play can bring – crucially around building skills.

The art of play

Primarily everything babies and pre-schoolers are taught comes from play. Abilities such as smelling, touching, seeing, drawing and reading are all delivered through experiential, thought-triggering fun. This changes dramatically the older we get, as textbooks become the mainstay of learning.

I'm not for a second suggesting we should build a sky-high bonfire for books and never look back. But is having fun while learning a bad thing? Not at all – quite the opposite, actually. Gaming is a gateway to colourful learning from yesteryear, reminiscent of what we knew as infants, allowing children to develop their coordination, imagination, problem-solving and wellbeing in safe surroundings. Gameplay even has an active role in encouraging reading.

Four out of five video game-playing 11 to 16-year-olds read in-game

communications, blogs and books relating to the pastime, and a third believe that gaming improves their reading ability. Beyond this, they'll talk to friends and family about what they're playing and work their communication muscles in the process, ignite creativity as they write about their experiences and even understand what is required to empathise by thinking like the character whose shoes/battle armour/fur they've stepped into on the digital plane.

Kuato's managing director Mark Horneff is very open about growing up with dyslexia and has detailed his disinterest in books until he started exploring Spider-Man comics. This is something that we, as educators, developers and parents, need to collectively recognise: not every child will learn in the same way and forcing them to do so won't always work. The technology we have access to today should at the very least prompt us to observe the options available to us.

Be more Mario: exploration, resilience and validation

The evolution of games means the industry is no longer limited from a developmental perspective, as essentially anything that's envisioned can be realised. Understanding this – and the potential for skills development in children – and it should become clear there's room for startups to build educational environments to support specific lessons within schools or for extracurricular activities.

With a game, you can explore and fail a thousand times but in doing so, you'll ultimately succeed. Take Mario, for example. If you only received one life, it would be a terrible user experience, but having 99 lives at your disposal means learning from any mistakes and overcoming them. By the end of the game, having played and explored, a player has learnt a phenomenal amount about that landscape – the resilience built up in defeating a boss, anyone?

If we're to make a true shift forward in how games are perceived, it's important that teachers are given the knowledge from innovators to see there's more to a game than meets the eye. Like it or not, startups wanting to move the needle in this arena require that educator buy-in as much as we do that of parents – and that's not inherently a bad thing.

From reticence and concerns among some teachers, online learning was eventually recognised as a valuable (and essential) tool over the past year or more. And with difficulty around ensuring student engagement, gamification such as leaderboards, scoring zones and achievement badges is one way to enrich the digital learning experience.

Imagine, then, introducing gaming itself as a component of education – the merits of the medium are evident. But it means nothing without first gaining trust. Teacher validation presents a qualitative aspect whereby developers can ensure that specific needs of students and educators alike can be met. Getting that firm stamp of approval is the first step.

I want people to keep playing. I want people to play with me and to remember what it was like to be a kid. It's perhaps a strange way to look at the world, but George Bernard Shaw hit the nail on the head when he declared: "We don't stop playing because we grow old; we grow old because we stop playing."

I have no intention of pressing pause, and neither should those innovators passionate about shaking up the status quo. Ready, player? Game on.

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