

Resources and Innovation Program

E-learning for Target Learner Groups (Learners with Disabilities) Project

December Report 2005

Michael Chalk

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The Australian Flexible Learning Framework
E-Learning for Target Learner Groups
December 2005 Final Report

**Name of Project: "Play the Game" : developing literacies with
screen-based games**

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The Australian Flexible Learning Framework
E-learning for Target Learner Groups (Learners with Disabilities)
December Report

"Play the Game" :

developing literacies with screen-based games

Case study approach for project teams

Exploring the world of games for learning: How much "literacy" can a group of adults with mild intellectual disabilities gain from using computer games?

At Preston Reservoir Adult Community Education (PRACE), a functional literacy group has worked for a time to develop basic literacy and computer skills.

People in the group find screen-based games an engaging way to learn. However the available games are often at a literacy level which is far too high, and this can impact badly on the learning benefits and potential. They also tend to be wary of trying new activities.

We wanted to find them some new games, and explore new ways of learning in the computer room.

So, this project has been about researching the range of literacy- and numeracy-related screen-based games to find more suitable resources. There has been time for the class teacher to work with the project leader, in developing lesson plans, team-teaching and evaluating the project.

Ideally we were looking for 'game shells' that could be adapted to fit relevant classroom texts.

Who we are:

Key stakeholders, partners.

Stakeholders are the learners, the teacher, the project manager. People around Australia who deliver similar curricula to similar learner groups. For this project, Preston Reservoir Adult Community Education was acting alone, although we do intend to share our new knowledge and resources in the new year with allied organisations. Huge thanks to eWorks and the Flexible Learning Frameworks.

Why this project: The gap we tried to address

From project description

At Preston Reservoir Adult Community Education, a functional literacy group has worked for a time to develop basic computer skills. People in the group find screen-based games an engaging way to learn. However the available games are often at a literacy level which is far too high, and this can impact badly on the learning benefits and potential.

So, this project aimed to research the range of literacy- and numeracy-related screen-based games to find more suitable resources. There was also time for the class teacher to work with the project leader, in developing lesson plans, team-teaching and evaluating the project. As we found suitable games, we introduced the group to them.

Learner characteristics - who are our Learners?

The group at PRACE has been engaged in literacy-learning for some time. There is plenty of enthusiasm for learning, however many struggle to move beyond 'pre-literacy' levels. Issues include memory-retention, attention span, and social skills.

The Friday group has twelve regular members. The Thursday session around ten.

They are adults in the community:

- both in and out of work
- with a range of mild intellectual disabilities
- "risk-averse"
- very low literacy levels
- mixed gender
- ages 25-50

What is the Game?

"Learning to develop power and agency .."

Truna aka J Turner is a literacy teacher and a game designer (working in Queensland), who operates as a 'double agent' - teaching literacy teachers how to use games, and teaching game designers how to fool the teachers. She is also a great performer, and gave a wonderful show at the Learning Conference, Granada, July 2005. I have here paraphrased and adapted from that day:

"Gaming is all about learning to develop power and agency within your environment."

Popular games include: Civilisation, Grand Theft Auto, Vice City, American McGee's Alice^[1], Sims, RollerCoaster Tycoon, Everquest, Age of Empires (microsoft), Myst - now massive multiplayer, Runescape, Sim City, Where in the World is Carmen Sandiego?

There is a strong variety of conceptual design behind the whole set of games. For example, among the game world of task-based software, you have:

- First Person Shooter (FPS)
- Sports
- Fighting
- Role Playing (RPG)
- Fantasy environment
- Real Time Strategy (RTS)
- Sims or 'god games' (where you "play God")
- Massive multiplayer

You can also still tap into games from the 70's and 80's, such as Zork 1 (known as 'abandonware' because development was abandoned). Other games draw on the aesthetic of other eras, such as "Case of the Crabs" with its film-noir detective style, and <http://escapefromwoomera.org/> which presents Woomera Detention Centre as far worse than Castle Wolfenstein (and more real!).

Other, smaller games

In addition to the world of big gaming that Truna spoke of, there are all sorts of smaller games, puzzles and quizzes, such as Tetris and Sudoku, all sorts of coloured-ball games, free flash games such as Santa's Elf-Bowling. Then there are the crosswords and other word games, the card games, the board games adapted to screen ..

As well as this, you have advertising-supported adaptations of TV game shows, like 'Who wants to be a millionaire', "The Weakest Link", and "Wheel of Fortune" (Sony).

Games from movies, which fit several of Truna's categories above, represent the biggest market around right now - witness tv commercials for the game of King Kong, at the same time as the movie hits the big screen.

Why Use Games in Learning Situations?

"Why would anyone waste valuable time Playing a Game?"

Because playing a game - is playful. Play means relaxation and pleasure, activities that put us in a receptive mode for learning. Play means being absorbed and immersed in something you enjoy (Mitchell and Savill-Smith). A game suspends everyday tensions and pressures, and allows you to enter another world. Games motivate the attention, and engage learners. Plus, games have been shown to have positive impact in learning areas: "Computer games have been particularly effective in raising achievement levels of both children and adults in areas such as maths and language .." (Mitchell and Savill-Smith p.34)

Truna says that games are about "teaching a systematic approach" - you need to play proactively. Kids are smarter, because they get engrossed in the game, and play as a designer (to find out how the game works). It's all about engaging with an unknown universe.

According to James Gee, in "Why Video Games are Good for your Soul", games can give you insight and experience in:

- ➔ Understanding complex systems and whole world environments
- ➔ Problem-solving, logical and creative thinking - learn how the game works
- ➔ Spatial (mathematical) and visual skills
- ➔ Finding patterns
- ➔ 'Professional simulation' - as the player develops their skill, they become an amalgam of themselves, the game character, and the 'skillsets' (their own gaming skills, and the skills of the game character). Immersion in a world can give real insight into how to embed themselves in a professional world.
- ➔ Reading (the screen, the controls, the instructions, navigating worlds)

According to "Designing Learning",

- ➔ Games are seductive and immerse learners in a rich visual space.
- ➔ Games motivate learners to win or achieve a goal.
- ➔ Games immerse learners in a total experience which is fun and sparks creativity and emotions.
- ➔ Games encourage learners to think and learn in different ways.
- ➔ They can be played against real people or against the computer.
- ➔ They can deal with large amounts of content and allow different levels of completion.
- ➔ Games encourage collaboration and post game discussion and debriefing.

(Direct Quote: from <http://www.flexiblelearning.net.au/designing/>)

Mitchell and Savill-Smith outline which aspects of games might be "suitable for incorporation into educational software", in the table below. We can see there is a whole range of interest - that the narrative of many games will engage learners, and enable them to develop skills.

Technological	Narrative	Personal
Graphics	Novelty	Logic
Sound	Story-line	Memory
Interactivity	Curiosity	Reflexes
	Complexity	Mathematical skills
	Fantasy	Challenge

Technological	Narrative	Personal
		Problem solving
		Visualisation

Table taken from (Mitchell and Savill-Smith p.57)

Key features of the trial

Type and level of training:

The groups involved with the trial have weekly sessions focussing on literacy, numeracy and technology. Mostly these learners are very low level - at introductory, or even pre-introductory levels in the CGEA.

For our group, the reason to use games was that they already enjoyed playing games, and it seemed a good way to draw them into trying new activities.

Teaching and learning strategies employed:

It has been good to use a data projector, and demonstrate activities for the whole group, especially when using games that are too difficult for individuals, but achievable as a whole group activity

It was a good strategy to present activities on a limited number of computers, so that students were compelled to work together in small groups, rather than individually.

A small team approach to plan and teach the session. Group work for learners was a good balance for the individual screen-time.

Working one on one to support individual learners, so that this person can lead the way, and act as a motivating force.

Learning Strategies

The learners in this project, on occasion, decided to work in a group to navigate and learn a new piece of software. (When we had three new softwares on only three computers.)

Learners would watch another student learn a new piece of software, before attempting for themselves. (One student was more adventurous, and demonstrated rapidly-growing skill with a shape-based problem-solving activity called "Oktagon". Another student watched him for some time before attempting the activity herself.)

Many of the stronger learners would support the weaker learners during group work.

Available facilities (computers):

There is a single computer room at Merrilands Community Centre (PRACE), with 10-12 computers. The room also has a large table which can be used for group work. We are very fortunate to have a laptop and data projector. All of these computers are networked - to the internet and to the local network files.

Criteria for trialling

In our search, we looked for games that were ease to use and navigate, easy to explain and demonstrate, with a relevant purpose, that were fun and challenging. We looked for games that challenged a range of relevant skills - both literacy and technological.

E-learning resources trialled

→ Numbers: Add 'em Up from Miniclip.com

- Puzzles: Oktagon (Family Games) and Butterfly Jigsaw (queendom.com)
- Office: Waste Paper, a waste-paper throwing game with numeracy demands
- Fish Market, from Savv-e
- Supermarket shopping
- "Maths in space"
- Memory games from flashgamesclassroom.com

Other notable software and games not yet fully trialled with this group

(Known from other classes / projects)

- Protea Textware: Measuring Up, Issues in English, the Alphabet, Picture Dictionary
- Life online - a screen-based literacy / survival curriculum for adults with mild intellectual disability
- "Case of the Crabs", Diner Dash, Lemonade Tycoon,
- Sim City, Age of Empires,
- "Hot Potatoes" style web-based learning activities such as crosswords, based in existing curriculum

Strategies for sharing information

.. with the wider stakeholder community: as well as publishing this report via eworks and the flexible learning community, we are setting up an ongoing web space at <http://prace.vic.edu.au/pd/game>

Challenges

Finding suitable resources - in terms of technology and language. To find games which focus on and extend practical, everyday skills, eg budgeting, getting the right change, use public transport, social boundaries (eg dressing for the occasion) etc. For example, a maths game, that involves a lifelike simulation of shopping, or working in a cafe.

Engaging learner interest: people in this group in the habit of individual work, same activity each week.

There are far too many games - how do we find the best ones? With so many options, how do we contain the search and the trial?

Many games have high level literacy content - too many words.

Changes made

Initially we presented games as links in the Windows Explorer - unfortunately this gives no description of the activity, only its name. This is fine if a student already knows the game, but no good as a way to engage new interest.

So, to counter this, as well as the links on disk, we provided some illustration and description via a web page that all learners can access from the desktop.

One learner had a great deal of success with a Yahoo! Game - Ten Pin Bowling. Interestingly she is very good at the physical game, and this success translated into the screen-based version. However, the large version of the game expires after a time, and you need to login to Yahoo to access the web-based version. This process of registering for Yahoo services was tricky - as the learner had trouble remembering ID and password, and michael forgot to remind her to write them down.

Other ideas for learning activities around games and computers

- Print off a series of screen shots, and have people write either instructions for using the game,

description of what happens or a narrative sequence, depending on the game.

- Run the game overhead as a group discussion activity.
- Set up small groups for evaluating a game (and give them, or group-devise some criteria). Give each person a role, such as scribe, timekeeper, evaluator, player.
- Students write a review of a game (game reviews are big business online).
- Join an online discussion or chat group that focuses on the game.
- Search the web for "cheats".
- Try some of Thiagi's "email games" with higher level literacy learners.

Expected and unexpected outcomes

During our travels, we

- Discovered a huge abundance of games - and networks of people involved with games for learning. It was a big surprise to find how many games there are in the world of free software. The mass of available games should not really have come as a surprise, given how much free software there is - but really it continues to amaze me!
- Learned to use the data projector for group work, extending one game to the whole group
- Observed increased confidence for the learners - more open to risk-taking.
- Noticed lightly increased confidence for the teacher (working with computers).
- Found that small group work can be fun and effective in the computer room (It was almost by accident that we discovered this - by setting up programs on only three computers, we limited students' options: to work in small groups, or merely await their turn. In fact nearly all the students moved to work in teams straight away.)

Factors critical to the success of this project

Using the data projector was crucial - this allowed us to involve people more easily in whole group and small group work.

That some learners were prepared to take risks, and learn new skills, leading their peers.

Chance and opportunity - networks of people offering ideas, feedback and links.

Finding some computer time outside of the regular session, allowed us to approach the learning differently.

Critical learning from this project?

Games can have a range of useful pedagogical benefits, however, locating suitable resources can be very time-consuming.

Groupwork, both small and whole, can be an effective idea when working in the computer room, or in technology-related learning. However, it can be difficult to arrange, especially when students are used to having their own individual machine. For this reason, a model of having some computers in a classroom, could be more useful than taking classes into a computer lab.

Team-teaching can be a great strategy, and a terrific opportunity, for teachers and learners - especially in the computer room. Team-teaching can be a very good way to boost the "ideas base" for both teachers: to develop technology-awareness in the 'non-tech' teacher, and teaching strategies in the 'tech-aware' teacher.

Networking, even within a provider, is a wonderful way to combat the isolation that sessional teachers face.

We need to strengthen our induction program for teachers embarking on computer-based learning.

Future directions

Continue to work with teacher to extend her capacity to find / build other suitable resources.

Adapt eg. a "who wants to be a millionaire" game shell for some easy literacy learning (there are shell/versions in Powerpoint, Javascript and Flash).

Publish more findings, in a way that enables visitors to comment or add information (more reviews of other games) - further mapping of games against skills (eg recognise shape and colour, calculate value, develop mouse ability etc).

Showcase with neighbour organisations, and adapt for employment organisations.

Learn to build games in eg. Flash, or PowerPoint (or seek partnerships and funding to develop further - according to Designing Learning, this is a huge, even monumental task).

Build our own "Unit" on public transport - develop small on-screen resource with teacher and techie (public transport - presentation with voice, images, activities - find a way to expand the exploration further and embed a small amount of game-based learning into such a unit of work.

We found the one-on-one approach a good strategy for developing teacher awareness and skills in using ty in learning situations - this allows a highly tailored conversation around what is possible, and what can be most easily learned. This is one way we would like to extend our professional development program, to other teachers in our organisation - to offer the chance to discuss their particular learners and their own learning needs around technology.

Reviews of some games

Criteria: we were Looking for . . .

Games that were Easy to use, easy to explain and demonstrate,

Relevance and purpose, engagement and context, challenge,

Skills focus (literacy, numeracy, logical / spatial, problem solving, team work, gather information ..)

Easy2Learn Money and Shopping Ages 6 to 12

(Supermarket shopping:) This game is a simulated shopping experience - a learning experience built into a game-like environment. The player is shopping at the supermarket, with a shopping list, and a budget.

This was one of the games that we trialled on a day when learners are not usually at their computers - and so people easily moved into a small group approach. Three people huddled around the one screen, co-operating to solve the puzzles of navigation (the game and its situation), calculation, achieving the goals (getting the right), working out the rules of the system, drag-and-drop, and so forth.

Ease: people needed a bit of help navigating the screen initially, and through the game. The aisles, the checkout, the shopping list are all items in a large visual menu screen-left.

Relevance, fun and challenge: very relevant - a real life experience. The game has a moderately lifelike appearance

Skills focus:

- problem solving: to discover how the game works
- math: add up your total bill at the checkout (the player is asked to confirm whether the cashier has given the right total)
- (One difficulty here, is that the game does not tell you how many of each item you have in your basket. You may have picked three cans of tomatoes, but it only looks like one, both on your shopping list and in the basket. Skill required - to realise that the game has a mistake in it.)

License and location: commercial, around aud\$70

Curriculum Corporation: http://www.curriculum.edu.au/catalogue/product.php?cat_id=912

Technology needed: unsure - installs on windows

Add em Up

This game has an obvious maths focus. The goal is to clear the board by placing a single digit figure, from the queue, in a place on the board where it touches a group of numbers that sum to its equal. Clear? Hm, you need to take a look at this one, as it's hard to describe without viewing.

This game definitely needed the whole group to trial it - when i introduced it to one learner on his own, the basic premise was too challenging: "What adds up to eight?" can be a very difficult question. However, in the whole group, there were a few who would know the answer, and others who would try and not always get it right. This became an activity where it was all right to hazard a guess.

Ease: the rules can be challenging to understand, but you have no problem with time running out, in the 'Classic version'.

Relevance, fun and challenge: this game provides very useful practice for basic addition. It's very colourful and engaging (if you get the full downse and location: free online version via miniclip.com (resellers)

<http://miniclip.com/addemup.htm> The game is made by Blue Bug Games, and there is a commercial full version as well, which has much more possibilities, such as timed mode (which we wouldn't need for this group).



Skills focus:

- math: adding numbers, calculating many possibilities to find the best option
- problem-solving: discover how the game works

Technology needed: web access, with flash player (There is a download-able version also for disconnected times.)

Waste Paper,

This is a silly time-wasting game, designed for people with too much time on their hands. At least, that's what you think at first, until you realise there are a couple of complex mathematical concepts at play. You're throwing crumpled paper into a waste paper basket - but the speed and direction of the 'wind' (coming off an electric fan) has a strong impact on your throw.

One of our learners picked up the idea relatively quickly and had some success, but another became very distressed after missing four shots in a row. Not a huge win.

Ease: very easy for the ordinary user, very challenging for our learners. This screen needed a lot of explanation, as people don't realise the importance of the fan.

Relevance, fun and challenge: designed for people who have worked in office jobs where they were very bored. This context is missing for our learners. Definitely very challenging until you understand

Skills focus:

- mathematical - wind speed and direction
- computer - mouse clicking at a precise time

License and location: online, free, but cannot download
<http://www.widro.com/throwpaper.html>



Technology needed: web access, with flash player

Puzzles: Oktagon (Family Games)

This is a puzzle / problem-solving game. An octagon is divided into four or more pieces, and the player must put the pieces back together, using the mouse to rotate and drag segments.

This was one game where we found that an adventurous individual can influence his peers. One learner was open to trying a new learning experience - and he turned out to be really good at the game, once he'd worked out how to play. Other students were saying, "Oh, no, I could never play that game." But after some time watching, two other learners had a go also - and found they could master the problem-solving activity too.

Ease: this game depends on mouse only, to drag the shapes into the arena (where they expand in size to)

Relevance, fun and challenge: very relevant in mathematical situations where people are learning to fit shapes together. Very challenging, but achievable (multiple levels).

Skills focus:

- spatial - recognizing shapes, logical - piecing shapes together,
- computer - mouse skills (click left & right mouse buttons to turn, dragging, precise navigation)

License and location: freeware, from familygames.com

Technology needed: runs on windows only

and Butterfly Jigsaw (queendom.com)

This (type of) puzzle will give you an idea of the visual literacy of your learners. There is a whole range of skills to do with recognising patterns, and matching parts to the whole. Most learners who tried this found it very challenging. Have used this in the past in cases of learners with mild intellectual disability and a higher level of literacy - finding that some people would take up this challenge week after week until they mastered the skill.



Ease: if you haven't seen a screen jigsaw before, this could surprise. Isn't strictly a jigsaw, because you are swapping parts of the puzzle to match the preview on the left.

Relevance, fun and challenge: very fun if you like visual puzzles

Skills focus: visual and spatial literacy, problem-solving,

License and location: free, via Queendom.com

Technology needed: web access, and the java plugin

Fish Market,

This game is designed for primary school children (years 5-6), however it is not too 'childlike' for our adult learners. The game is meant to give an idea of buying and selling - that prices can fluctuate. (The idea of fluctuating prices is out of the reach of our learners, at first or second go.) We trialled this game as a small group activity on the data projector, inviting students to control the game action 'on the overhead'. Two weeks later, one student who was reluctant to join in, because she said it was too hard, specifically asked to have a go at the game. She doubled her money in fifteen minutes.



Ease: in the trial, we read the instructions through together, and demonstrated each stage. The interface is very friendly and easy to find your way around. Our learners managed to make their way around, without too much assistance. One difficulty they occasionally had was distinguishing between buying (red), and selling (green).

Relevance, fun and challenge: this game has plenty of colour and movement, with a really catchy premise -

you are a 'buyer and seller' of exotic fish, travelling around Australia to different markets. Not strictly relevant to everyday needs, but certainly fun and challenging. (In fact, we needed to make the distinction between buying fish to eat and buying exotic fish.)

Skills focus:

- numbers (more than, less than), recognise colours and complex shapes (the fish)
- computer dragging objects with mouse
- reading: the player receives feedback on each sale - this feedback disappears after a time, so you need to be a quick reader - this aspect we found needed teacher assistance, even to notice the feedback.

License and location: demonstration product only, via the Knowledge Tree, from Savv-e
http://demo.r3dant.com/fishmarket/default_aimia.html (Unsure how long this will remain. Article at http://www.flexiblelearning.net.au/knowledgetree/edition07/html/i_savve.html)

Technology needed: the game runs on the web, in the flash player.

References and Links

Articles

Alice Mitchell and Carol Savill-Smith. The use of computer and video for learning: A review of the literature.
<http://www.lsda.org.uk/files/PDF/1529.pdf>

Designing (e-)Learning, via Flexible Learning Australia, <http://www.flexiblelearning.net.au/designing/>

James Paul Gee. Why Video Games are Good for your Soul. Common Ground, Aust. 2005.

The Savv-e experience of building games for learning: Knowledge Tree 07:

http://www.flexiblelearning.net.au/knowledgetree/edition07/html/i_savve.html

Games

Our own ABC.net.au has some terrific learning games, such as their GameOn competition

<http://abc.net.au/gameon/> and their Rollercoaster games for learning

<http://abc.net.au/rollercoaster/games/> including the 'piece together a dinosaur' skeleton game (all ages).

Addemup, from Blue Bug Games (<http://www.bluebuggames.com/>), at <http://miniclip.com/addemup.htm>

BBC has some brilliant learning games, eg. their history set, at

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/forkids/index.shtml>

Butterfly Jigsaw, from Queendom.com <http://www.queendom.com/mindgames/jigsaw/puzzle13.html>

Case of the Crabs, "Tech-noir" Detective Game <http://www.otterarchives.com/bountygame.html> (from <http://www.pinheadgames.com/>)

Easy2Learn, from Curriculum Corporation Catalogue, at

http://www.curriculum.edu.au/catalogue/product.php?cat_id=912

Escape from Woomera <http://escapefromwoomera.org/>

Fish Market, from Savv-e http://demo.r3dant.com/fishmarket/default_aimia.html

Food Force - a humanitarian game where you have to feed thousands of starving people

<http://www.megagames.com/news/html/freegames/foodforce.shtml> Also at <http://www.food-force.com/>

Social Impact games: <http://www.socialimpactgames.com/> - this crowd specialises in games that do good in the world. It has an educational games, as well as a health and well being section.

Thiagi's email games: <http://www.thiagi.com/email.html> and web-shell games (put your material into their game shells): <http://www.thiagi.com/wgs-menu.html>

Oktagon from Family Games, <http://www.familygames.com/freelane.html>

Waste paper game, from Widro, <http://www.widro.com/throwpaper.html>

Not all the games we found are in this paper

Although most of the ones we reviewed are: Stay in Touch via

<http://prace.vic.edu.au/pd/game>

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[1] (.. as one reviewer says about American McGee's Alice: "Who would of thought of turning Lewis Carroll's (a.k.a. Charles Dogson) sweat cup of tea, into a morbid third-person-killing machine. Its morbid, it's strange, and its one of the best games to come out this year."

<http://digitalvigilante.keenspace.com/Crazyface/Reviews>)