

Learning through gaming



By [Clyde Thomas](#)

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World of Warcraft has been described by experts as "more addictive than crack cocaine". Players can spend up to 16 hours, without a break, playing the game and often neglect their physical needs reports psychiatrist Dr Richard Grahamⁱ. For players this addicted to computer games the consequences can be severe, but imagine the learning power that could be achieved by harnessing the kind of intense concentration and enjoyment provided by games.

Neil Gow is a programmer who loves computer gaming and has a self-confessed addiction to one of the Warcraft offshoots: DotA (Defense of the Ancients). He attributes the games remarkably addictive quality to its "highly competitive nature, team play aspect and that it is difficult to master". Neil admits that he sometimes struggles to pull himself away from his computer and get himself to the beach to go surfing or kiteboarding. In fact, it is not unknown for Neil to run home at lunchtime to get his fix for an hour in-between work. Luckily, Neil's other activities keep him grounded.

Gaming has also given a lot back to Neil; one of his passions has been born directly out of a video game. In 2008 Neil started playing Drum Hero, a relation of Guitar Hero. Neil's love of music and the game's captivating nature led him to spend hours practicing on his "toy" drum kit (complete with cymbals, drums and peddles) as he followed along with real songs by his favourite bands. As Neil played he developed his musical rhythm and timing, as the co-ordination and independence that is needed to play an instrument like the drums.

A skill that was born out of a game

Neil says: "The first three fills of Young Man Blues by The Who got me addicted to Drum Hero." He quickly signed himself up for drum lessons so he could progress beyond the limits of the game and get closer to the achievements of his musical icons. Now Neil spends hours practicing on a real drum kit, all because of a skill that was born out of a game.

Computer games rely on their ability to keep people coming back for more, fuelling the desire to improve in order to achieve a higher score. Just how powerful this urge can be is clear in Neil's determination to keep practising to improve his score. This urge for perfection comes from a balance of reward and competition, where being better than the next player, and the virtual rewards that come with this achievement, inspires the gamer to try harder.

Jeremy Tate explains how players are taught skills instantly as part of the game, as a culture of improvement through practice is engrained: "Want a better score? Do it right next time." Jeremy Tate is an ex-middle school choir teacher who now works for one of Microsoft's software-testing units. He is in the process of talking to several teachers from his old school district about bringing music video games like Guitar Hero and Lips into the classroom to help teach children musicⁱⁱ.

The power of games and technology to captivate

This push for games to be introduced into schools flies in the face of the common belief of adults that computer gaming offers little value. In fact, many educators are seeking to use the power of games and technology to captivate their audience and inspire passion in a goal-orientated learning environment. Learning, through education and training, needs to be fun to grab students' attention.

Games are already being played in schools and finance for non-financial managers courses around South Africa. Banango Traders, a game created by the Johannesburg School of Finance is a finance-related game that teaches players entrepreneurial, economic and business skills and has already been played by more than 70 000 people. An online version has recently been created that has five levels, from the free Starter level to Expert level, and is aimed at increasing financial knowledge within the corporate environment.

MBA students even play games at business schools around the world. Harvard Business School has created a number of real-world context simulations where students make decisions in the game environment in order to reinforce student learning. Simulations such as "Pricing Simulation: Universal Rental Car V2", where students assume the role of a district manager at a rental car agency responsible for setting prices for rental cars across three Florida citiesⁱⁱⁱ. These simulations come with a large textbook outlining the rules of the game, which could decrease the entertaining aspect of learning through games.

Finally, the value of learning through games will come from converting the skill of mastering the game in its limited environment to learning the lessons behind the skills and being able to implement them in the far broader real world.

i. [*Warcraft Game 'More Addictive Than Crack'*](#), Sky News

ii. [*Learning Through Games*](#), Leah Hoffmann 2009

iii. Harvard Business Publishing, [*Online Simulations*](#)

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