

Kate Johnson

Prof. Johnston

April 5, 2011

Ford Forum

What if teachers gave up everything they had been taught from their educational past, tossed the worksheets, burned the grade books, and reconfigured the foundation upon which nearly a century of learning has been built? What if teachers could blur the lines between the limits of a classroom, and playtime? What if teachers had access to technology as advanced as what many children use as toys? What if, instead of blindly following the path of learning that we have for centuries, we ask the children what they dream their school could be: a mind blowing video game?

Since the education system in The United States is one of the most conservative institutions that our government funds, this is an extremely radical idea. But the disconnect between technology and education is exceedingly large. The world is thriving with creativity and innovation, but our schools are not embracing this. Children learn something everyday from games, online video and social networking sites. Why is it such a hard concept to grasp that this technology is exactly what students want and need to survive with this ever-changing learning environment?

This fast paced curriculum seems to be exactly the problem for many students, but especially for boys. Ali Carr-Chellman, a professor of instructional

systems at Penn State's College of Education, cited a significant amount of data concerning boys. For every 100 girls who are suspended, 250 boys are; 335 are expelled; 324 diagnosed with emotional disorders, 276 with learning disabilities, and on and on. Carr-Chellman believes that this can be attributed to three major factors; the first is the zero tolerance policy, the second is the lack of male teachers (7%), and third is "kindergarten is the new second grade" i.e. a faster paced curriculum.¹

Ali Carr-Chellman advocates the use of video game as learning tools. One reason she believes that video games will enhance the ability for many boys to learn can be attributed to the three factors involved in the struggle for young boys to progress in school. Carr-Chellman has a son of her own, and has a hard time accepting the restrictions that the zero tolerance policy puts upon the topics a child is allowed to write about. She says for example, suppose a boy who is asked to write something wants to write about a video game or a story involving a destructive tornado, instead of something demure, like poetry. "[The teacher will] ask you, in all seriousness, 'Should we send this child to the psychologist?' The answer is no, he's just a boy."²

There are several people in both the business world as well as teachers trying to fix the growing issue of poor academic performance from elementary school students. One of them is named Claus Nehmzow, founder of the 3D Avatar

¹ Beth Hawkins, "Learning Curve," March 2011, [MinnPost](http://www.minnpost.com/learningcurve/2011/03/29/26977/ali_carr-chellman_on_how_our_schools_fail_to_engage_kids_-_boys_in_particular), April 2011 <http://www.minnpost.com/learningcurve/2011/03/29/26977/ali_carr-chellman_on_how_our_schools_fail_to_engage_kids_-_boys_in_particular>.

² Beth Hawkins, "Learning Curve," March 2011, [MinnPost](http://www.minnpost.com/learningcurve/2011/03/29/26977/ali_carr-chellman_on_how_our_schools_fail_to_engage_kids_-_boys_in_particular), April 2011 <http://www.minnpost.com/learningcurve/2011/03/29/26977/ali_carr-chellman_on_how_our_schools_fail_to_engage_kids_-_boys_in_particular>.

School. He founded this school after realizing that his ten-year-old son was able to learn complex, sophisticated games that required an immense amount of practice and focus. What he was most shocked about was that his son had not used manuals or instructional tools provided by the game manufactures. Rather he learned by exploring the game, talking with friends and strangers, most importantly learning by doing. Though his son does not struggle in school, per se, he is not happy in a classroom setting. This sparked in Nehmzow a yearning to find exactly how powerful these video games could be when they add the element of education.³

Nehmzow first decided to incorporate his 3D Avatar School at the work place. Boring conference calls, inadequate communication and unsuccessful training frustrated him. His first virtual game was created to enhance the health of his employees. Though the employees were on the computer and not exactly active while playing the game, they actually saw results in their weight loss. His next step was to take this to the education system. His research concluded that there are really only three different types of online education; the first is a computer versus student model, the second is a video of a lecture with a professor and a white board, and the third type is a videoconference between a teacher and a student. These three options did not suit Nehmzow; rather he believed that his 3D Avatar School could produce better results. The elements that he believes facilitate the best results

³ Claus Nehmzow, "3D Avatar School," YouTube,
<<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5pCvfq3MkQI>>.

are smaller class sizes, good teacher, an engaging 3D interactive game, and a story telling element. His goal in this game was to ultimately create fun. ⁴

Though public education may take a very long time to adopt such an idea, there is a school in New York City, called Quest to Learn whose embraces the idea that, "Games work as rule-based learning systems, creating a world in which players actively participate, use strategic thinking to make choices, solve complex problems, seek content knowledge, receive constant feedback, and consider the point of view of others."⁵ Quest to Learn is organized specifically around the idea that video games play a large part in today's children's lives as well as in their speed and capability to grow. What makes it so unique is not only its up-to-date technology for each child, nor because it focuses on "digital kids" but rather that it is run by a professional game designer named Katie Salen. Salen, a professor of design and technology at Parsons the New School for Design, also directs a research-based organization called Institute of Play, which examines the connections between games and learning. She has spent a great deal of time trying to find ways to make both the teacher and the student feel like what they are doing is relevant, and she has found that by connecting the students to the world of technology and digital creation she is able to achieve this goal. ⁶

⁴ Claus Nehmzow, "3D Avatar School," YouTube, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5pCvfq3MkQI>>. "3D Avatar School," <<http://www.3davatarschool.com/>>.

⁵ Mission Statement: Our Learning Model, <<http://q2l.org/node/13>>.

⁶ Andrew Pratt Plemmons, "Better Learning Through Video Games," August 2008, Science Progress, April 2011 <<http://www.scienceprogress.org/2008/08/better-learning-through-video-games/>>.

Another aspect of using video games as a form of education is the sense of reward that a student feels when they get to a new level, or defeat a dragon. Claus Nehmzow realized that there are three very important elements to add to a 3D virtual school in order to be successful; the first is to create competition, the second is to create a time pressure, and third, most importantly is to properly reward the students. At Quest for Learning students don't receive grades, rather levels of expertise, denoted on their report cards as "pre-novice," "novice," "apprentice," "senior" and "master." These students record podcasts, film and edit videos, play video games, blog daily and upon occasion receive video messages from aliens.⁷

"What Gutenberg did for writing, online video can now do for face-to-face communication." Chris Anderson, publisher of *Business 2.0* Magazine and creator of the popular game website IGN, believes that web video sparks in viewers a "crowd accelerated innovation" which can be defined as innovation motivated by people sharing a common interest, and the ability to show one another their new ideas in order to increase the speed of innovation and creativity. Anderson argues that this "crowd accelerated innovation" is powered by a clear visibility of what people are capable of, the empowerment one gains from such visibility and the desire to take what one has seen and turn it into something new. The global recognition that some of these people attain from a home video is astonishing. But it is not only the

⁷ Sara Corbett, "Learning by Playing: Video Games in the Classroom," September 2010, New York Times, April 2011 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/19/magazine/19video-t.html>>. Sara Corbett, "Learning by Playing: Video Games in the Classroom," September 2010, New York Times, April 2011 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/19/magazine/19video-t.html>>.

internet stars that benefit, it is a self fueling system that continuously sparks a flame within people to better themselves and their world. ⁸

Anderson himself has been working very hard to accelerate this innovation as much as possible. He is the lead coordinator of a project called TED. TED is a nonprofit devoted to "Ideas Worth Spreading." They started out with the focus on Technology, Entertainment, and Design. The annual TED conferences bring together the world's most fascinating thinkers and doers, who are challenged to give a talk that will change both their lives and the lives of people around the world. The most important part though is that all of these speakers are filmed and broadcasted online. Today they have over 900 videos translated into 81 languages. Allowing these incredibly thought provoking ideas to be spread through web video in Anderson's "crowd accelerated innovation." ⁹

One extremely good example of this is Kibera TV. It is a community wide initiative by people in Kibera, Kenya (one of the biggest slums in Africa) to start a TV channel for the people of Kibera and the rest of the world. They speak with optimism and work hard to make positive changes that effect both their own standard of living as well as reducing the risk of disease spread and climate change. Though I am sure that the people behind this project were always very inspiring,

⁸ Chris Anderson, "How Web Video is Igniting a Massice Cycle of Innovation," September 2010, [Huffington Post](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/chris-anderson/how-web-video-is-igniting_b_715661.html), April 2011
<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/chris-anderson/how-web-video-is-igniting_b_715661.html>.

⁹ Chris Anderson, "How Web Video is Igniting a Massice Cycle of Innovation," September 2010, [Huffington Post](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/chris-anderson/how-web-video-is-igniting_b_715661.html), April 2011
<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/chris-anderson/how-web-video-is-igniting_b_715661.html>.

before we would never have found out about them. Due to this “crowd accelerated innovation” by web video we are now able to witness the truly incredible things people are doing around the world to promote peace.¹⁰

What strikes me the most about all these ideas is the incredible impact that it would have upon students. As a global education system, sponsored by people from every walk of life, this could eliminate the lack of teachers, increase motivation and enthusiasm from students and create a global world for learning in which literally everything there is to be learned. As a global community I believe it is possible for us to create and maintain a smarter, wiser more beautiful world.

¹⁰ "Kibera TV," <<http://www.kiberatv.blogspot.com/>>.