

A Lesson for Parents: How Kids Learn to Cooperate in Video Games

By Marc Prensky

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[1532 words]

“The three words that best describe me are ‘athletic,’ ‘smart,’ and ‘GameBoy-addicted.’”
– A 10 year old

A great many parents are concerned that the electronic games their kids play are teaching the kids “negative” messages such as aggression, violence, and isolation from real people. I want to illustrate here how computer and video game playing, can have *positive* effects on kids. This includes even the “addictive” game playing associated with many of these games. The learning from these games is well worth the effort the kids put in playing them, and kids typically sense this at some level, which is one reason they fight so hard for their games.

One key lesson many of their games is teaching them is the value of people working together and helping each other. To illustrate how this occurs, I will use one particular game, *Toontown*, as an example.

Toontown (www.toontown.com) is the Walt Disney Company’s entry into the Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG) category. For the non-initiated, that means a computer game that supports thousands of players online simultaneously, all of whom can see and interact with each other. A key feature of these worlds is that they are “persistent,” meaning that the worlds continue to exist and change whether or not you are there, just any other place in the real world.

[Note: There are two types of multiplayer online games, both of which have their advantages. One type, the “multiplayer” game, lets you interact with a limited group of people, such as those on your team or squad, in a game world that typically exists for only the time you are playing. The game *America’s Army* is a good example of this. The second type, the “massively multiplayer” game, lets you interact with everyone you meet in

the ongoing world. Massively multiplayer games like *EverQuest*, *Asheron's Call*, and *Dark Age of Camelot* have captured the time and imaginations of hundreds of thousands of US teenage and older players. The Korean massively multiplayer game *Lineage* has over 4 million registered users, often with up to half a million players on-line at once. The players typically meet in relatively thinly-populated areas of very large and often interconnected virtual worlds, so even with these huge numbers, it is not like pushing your way through Times Square on New Year's Eve.]

Toontown is the first massively multiplayer game specifically designed for younger kids (pre-teens, I think, though they don't specifically say.) In addition, many older kids and even adults enjoy playing it. In the game you create, name and dress a character, and then you take it out to play in the virtual world. Your character is the representation ("avatar") of you playing in the world – it is the "you" that other players know.

Although if you wanted to you could spend your entire time in *Toontown* merely running around the virtual world, the "object" of the game is to defeat "Cogs," members of the evil gang that wants to take over the town. The Cogs to fight come in many varieties and strengths. To defeat a Cog you employ "gags"– such as squirt bottles or pies in the face – that you purchase with jelly bean currency that you earn in a number of ways.

In your early days in *Toontown*, when you have earned relatively few gags, you typically run around alone, deciding when to confront a low-level Cog you pass in the street. (You do this by running into it.) You and the Cog then square off and do battle, taking turns throwing gags at each other. If you defeat the Cog, he explodes and you are rewarded with points towards additional gags. If the Cog defeats you, you "die," which means you lose all your gags (although, importantly, you do not lose the "experience" you attained – i.e. the types and levels of gags you are allowed to purchase and use.)

There are a lot of other twists, but that's essentially the game: Earn and buy gags, use them to fight Cogs.

But here's where the cooperative part comes in. As you move to higher experience levels, the tasks you are required to accomplish become more and more difficult. You often have to "rescue" buildings that the Cogs have taken over, buildings that have multiple floors filled with high-level, hard-to-defeat Cogs.

And you can't do this alone, no matter how much experience you have. So you begin to learn to play the game with others. The game encourages this, with "friends lists" and built in "speed chat" menus consisting, for kids' protection, of a limited number of phrases you can use. For example, you can invite your friends to help you defeat a building (or, if you prefer, you can just wait outside for others to show up.)

But it gets subtle. Just because someone is your friend (or wants to be) or happens to show up, doesn't mean he or she has the experience to defeat the higher-level Cogs. You can check out someone's gags when they are in range to help you decide whom to work with, but success depends not only on the level and number of gags one has, but also on knowing how to use them in battle. You learn over time what players you want on your team to achieve success in particular situations. Sometimes, to be sure all of you survive, you have to reject players who ask to work with you on a certain task. One of the things you can say through the speed chat is "I think this is too risky for you." Just as in the real world, such advice is not always well-received, and the game gives you the opportunity to learn to deal with this.

In the midst of any battle – players typically fight higher-level Cogs in groups of four – a player can choose, rather than to throw a gag at the Cogs, to instead give his or her fellow players additional "laff points" (i.e. health). Doing this helps prevent them from "dying" and dropping out of the battle. One skill typically gained from frequent play is knowing when to help your teammates versus when to attack the Cogs. This is not trivial. One adult player described her first battle with ultra-high-level Cogs as "extremely nerve wracking," and characterized the strategies she had to employ to work successfully with the other players as "the most emotional experience I've ever had in a game." And this is the version for kids!

And there is yet another way *Toontown* players learn there is value in cooperation. Some of the tasks available to higher-level players allow them to earn jelly beans by helping out new players. When these experienced players see a Newbie fighting a Cog on the street, they can join in and assist. When the Cog is defeated, both the experienced player and the Newbie get rewarded game at their own level.

Is it Boring?

Still, while the tasks at the start of the game involve defeating only one Cog at a time and the tasks at higher levels require players to defeat hundreds of Cogs on their way to liberate bigger and bigger buildings, the battles are very similar. "Isn't that boring?" I asked one "addicted" player. "After all it's basically the same thing over and over – fighting Cogs."

"I like going up the levels," she replied. And of course the only way she can do this is by learning to cooperate well with *real* people, in *real* time – while sitting at her own computer.

I encourage readers of this article to try *Toontown*, both with your kids, and even on your own. (You can go to www.toontown.com to get started.) See how far you can get. If you happen to enjoy the experience, you can go on to the aforementioned "older players" games, where the enemies are fantasy monsters and the buildings castles to storm, yet where the principles of cooperation are basically the same. If you actually get addicted to cooperative play, don't blame me – these games are designed to reel you in.

But even if you don't get hooked yourself – and the more you are from the “Digital Immigrant” generation the less likely it is that you will – hopefully you will have learned this important and generally-overlooked lesson:

What keeps the kids playing these games is not the violence (that's all fake and the kids know it), but rather the ability to work together with others to achieve more and more difficult goals.

Can you think of any skill more useful for children to spend their time learning? I can't.

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