

Video Games and the Attack on America

By Marc Prensky

When my best friend told me that her six-year-old son was so scared that he wouldn't watch TV and that his lip started to quiver any time the attack was mentioned, I began to wonder where all that fear came from. Some of its source is obvious – the husband of his older brother's teacher perished in one of the planes. But as his "uncle" who is responsible for introducing videogames into their household, and who has watched them become the boys' single biggest desire for non-school time consumption (though their parents wisely ration their time with the games) I began to wonder whether there was any connection.

I am a passionate believer in video games' ability to teach. In fact they now do so on a scale that dwarfs anything ever seen (think Pokemon). This is because repetition and time are two of the biggest keys to learning, and kids enjoy playing the same games over and over and over hundreds of times. The statistics show that the average American has now played over 10,000 hours of video games before he starts work. People who spend so much time with anything can't *help* but learn its messages. And the players learn whatever ideas, concepts, fantasies and ethos the game designers build in.

Interestingly, these are *not* the messages that have often been suggested. Most experts agree that we are *not* – despite the provocative title of one book – training our kids to kill. But in our game designers' quest to make their games more and more addictive, and to extend the play time of a single game to 30, 60 even 100 hours, here's what I believe we *are* teaching our kids.

They are learning that "enemies" are hard to defeat. They are learning that fighting is ugly, and dangerous. They are learning that as soon as you beat one enemy, there is another, harder one on a higher level, and that at the top sits a really big, really evil "boss" who requires all the skills you can master to conquer. If a six year old really thought his games were about to become real, I can understand how this would scare him to death.

But there are other, more positive lessons he is learning as well. That if you persevere and learn enough, you *can* defeat all the enemies and beat the game. That unlike the movies, the outcome depends on *you* and not on some writer – on *your* choices, *your* skill, *your* persistence. That information from your friends and other sources can help you defeat the enemies more quickly. That while there is always another game and another struggle, it is something to look forward to – it further tests your mettle and your skill.

I have found that with imagination it is possible to combine these positive messages – *plus* all the engagement of video games – with useful and appropriate learning content. The military, which has over a quarter of a million 17 year-olds to train every year, has

been among the earliest to employ the power of video games as a learning tool, using video games with military content to train all levels from recruit to commander.

But up until now, this immersive, Digital Game-Based Learning has often received skeptical reactions from traditional educators, who wonder “does it really work?” It is hideously ironic that after last Tuesday we now have irrefutable proof of just how well training by games and simulation *does* work. It comes from the mouth of the horrified and unknowing aircraft trainer who said on TV that the terrorist pilots just sat in his simulator and "practiced turns."

I also watched a TV reporter sadly demonstrate how, in an under-\$100 Flight Simulator Game, one can practice flying a 757 into the World Trade Center over and over again.

Now that we have seen their formidable power used for evil, it is our duty and obligation to turn these same powerful, learning tools to as many good and positive uses as possible. This clearly includes the task of fighting terrorism in all its forms.

We will all have a lot to learn quickly in these coming months and years. Those talented game designers who have captured our kids’ imaginations and time so brilliantly up to now may have a lot bigger role to play in their players’ futures – and in the future of our country and the world – than they ever dreamed.

Marc Prensky is CEO of games2train.com and the author of the book *Digital Game-Based Learning* (McGraw Hill 2001)