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Teachers use video, online games to help bring lessons to life



Mark Hoffman

Teacher Chris Lazarski listens to student David Yang during an American public policy class at Wauwatosa West High School. Lazarski has introduced online and video games to enhance the learning experience. In this case, Yang is redrawing boundaries for election districts.

By [Amy Hetzner](#) of the Journal Sentinel

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Sitting before a computer in the library at Wauwatosa West High School, senior Ricky Porter clicks his

mouse and moves a squiggly web of multicolored lines across a computerized map speckled with red and blue dots.

Move one line wrong and an elected representative whose district he has redrawn will stand up in protest, a warning that Porter's new map might not be able to pass an imaginary state legislature, governor and court review. But if he gets his lines just right and manages to please all the incumbents, while staying on the right side of the law, his mission is complete.

The [Redistricting Game](#) played by Porter and classmates in his American Public Policy class at West is one of a number of new online and video games that offer educational experiences for schools and teachers willing to experiment. Porter's teacher, Chris Lazarski, who also plans to use a game named [Peacemaker](#) to teach students about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, said such games give students chances to interact and solve problems in a way with which they're comfortable.

Porter agrees.

"I don't think the concept is that hard to grasp, but this helps you visualize it," he said of the redistricting game. "Kids nowadays, I think they learn different from kids back then. If they don't make it fun, kids don't want to learn."

The use of video and online gaming in education ranges from after-school tutoring programs to some maverick teachers using them to help teach content in schools, said Kurt Squire, an associate professor of educational communications and technology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. In an age that emphasizes performance on standardized tests, however, it's been more difficult for games to catch on in schools, he said.

"There are ways for really good, creative teachers to do it," he said. "But it's sort of hard to do that - and math."

Squire and his colleagues developed a couple of "augmented reality games" for students in the Milwaukee area. One that is being used at Milwaukee's [Urban Ecology Center](#) has children go through Riverside Park with hand-held devices that have global positioning systems in them.

As the students reach different parts of the park, they interact through the devices with virtual characters who tell them about the park. For example, when students reach ash trees, they learn about the emerald ash borer, said Erick Anderson, an environmental educator at the center.

"It's our first attempt at linking video games and outside education, and I think it works pretty well," said Anderson, who estimates 750 students have played the game in the last three years. "Kids like computers and are good at using them, and they like going outdoors."

Schools don't have to wait for a program like the one at the Urban Ecology Center to sprout near them, however, to incorporate games into their instruction. In recent years, several free online games have become available.

Former U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor has started the [Our Courts Web site](#), an interactive civics program that includes several games that teach students about the rights guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution.

And, this year, the [Council for Economic Education](#) launched an online game to teach financial literacy

to students. Seventeen teachers and about 120 students in the Milwaukee area have registered to use the Gen i Revolution game, according to Christopher Caltabiano, the council's vice president for program administration.

The game can be used either as part of classroom instruction, or for homework assignments, said Mark Schug, an emeritus professor at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee who helped develop the game, which he said was inspired by the popularity of stock market games in schools.

Instead of emphasizing short-term gains in the stock market, however, Gen i teaches students about concepts such as compounding interest and planning for the future, he said.

"We were looking for something that's more solid and provides more complete and correct financial education, and yet is still engaging like these stock market games are," Schug said. "We were just looking for an alternative approach."

At Wauwatosa West, Lazarski and fellow social studies teacher Adrienne Keppler also were looking for new approaches to appeal to their students.

"We both looked at a lot of research that says why don't you look at what's interesting to them and what they actually do on a daily basis," Keppler said.

The teachers found some games that seemed to jell with their curriculum - the Peacemaker game for Lazarski and [Muzzy Lane's Making History](#) to help Keppler teach about World War II - and received a grant from the Education Foundation of Wauwatosa to buy the software.

West junior Dylan Jenkins, who completed Lazarski's Redistricting Game ahead of time for extra credit and helped his classmates as they went through it Friday, said he likes the idea of incorporating games into the classroom.

"It's visual learning, which is better, and interactive learning," he said. "You retain it a lot better than if you're told it."

Emma Jushka, another junior who completed the game before class, said she appreciated the opportunity to try something new, although she also would like to see teachers give students more projects and collaborative assignments as well.

"I definitely think it beats doing a worksheet," she said. "It's a lot more fun."

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