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GUEST ESSAY

You Can't Game Your Way to a Real Education

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By Molly Worthen

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Paige Drygas, who teaches high school English at a private school just north of Dallas, feels no pressure to make learning fun. She distinguishes between "fun" — meaning stress-free amusement — and the burden she feels to "get students engaged as much as possible. I can see it in their eye contact," she told me. "I'm trying to get their minds going. For example, I don't think many people would describe Emerson and Thoreau as fun."

Maybe that's why some teachers have their students play "Walden," a video game in which players simulate Thoreau's solitary sojourn at Walden Pond. The game is free for teachers, but Ms. Drygas sticks to the texts. "The idea of self-reliance is really interesting. Once you engage that big idea, class moves quickly."

Ms. Drygas is not only a fun-skeptic. She also requires her students to hand write their essays, read books in hard copy and use laptops as little as possible. These countercultural classroom policies all go together, because fun used to be a wonderful thing in school. Then screens came to dominate instruction time and software developers answered the call to make school fun and personalize learning with a growing marketplace of online games.

This has been the greatest blunder in the past decade of K-12 education: the decision to give every child a personal computer and to gamify everything from standardized test preparation to recess. Mistaken ideas about the nature of learning have combined with a

hefty dose of Big Tech propaganda to distort our picture of what school is for. Technology must return to its proper place in the classroom — as a supplemental tool, rather than the source and summit of education.

The logic for bringing more technology into K-12 classrooms seemed intuitive, even before the Covid-19 pandemic pushed school onto screens. If adults were using the latest personal devices and software to do their jobs more efficiently, then surely using them in the classroom would make learning more efficient, too, and prepare students for the modern workplace.

Besides, so the thinking goes, kids today are digital natives. Because they've grown up around screens, their brains must be fundamentally different from those of older generations. Teachers need to "meet them where they are" by catering to shorter attention spans and swapping books for multimedia lessons. The more that math and language assignments resemble a video game, the more students will learn.

Every step in this argument is wrong. Researchers have begun to correlate falling test scores in wealthy countries around the world with aggressive adoption of devices in schools (88 percent of American public schools now follow what's known as the 1-to-1 policy, providing one laptop or tablet for every student). In the United States, math and reading scores among 13-year-olds peaked in 2012 and have declined since.

The analogy between the workplace and the classroom ignores the fact that young people learn differently from adults: They need far more direction and exposure to a variety of sensory activities. Perhaps that means sand and blocks in younger grades. For me, history came alive through the homemade costumes of a "medieval times" fair in high school, especially the memorable sensory activity of trying to make my timeline project look "really medieval" by soaking it in tea and browning it in the oven — where it caught fire. (I then spent hours recreating it.)

My quest to simulate ancient vellum may have been a little eccentric, but my basic mental wiring wasn't. The concept of a digital native is a myth. The advent of iPhones and laptops did not undo eons of brain evolution in the space of a few years — even if excessive screen time is associated with the thinning of the cerebral cortex. (The damage appears to be reversible, thanks to the brain's plasticity.)

"People are mistaking kids' preference for deep biological reality," Jared Cooney Horvath, a neuroscientist who consults with schools on digital policy, told me. "My daughter loves Popsicles. I have a choice: I could meet her where she's at and start every meal with a Popsicle. But that doesn't change the fact that, biologically, Popsicles aren't good for her, and she needs some vegetables."

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In his new book, "The Digital Delusion," Dr. Horvath surveys the vast body of research demonstrating the damage to learning that comes with overuse of so-called ed tech, the mass of digital devices and software that have saturated schools. Studies indicate that comprehension collapses when students read texts on screens. Their attention spans shrivel as well: A study of college students working on laptops during a lecture class found that they spent an average of 38 minutes of every hour off task. And even in the age of Google, old-fashioned memorization remains important: Knowledge stored in our brains, not in the cloud, is the seedbed for creative thinking.

Perhaps the most insidious aspect of ed tech's invasion is the widespread adoption of video-game-style apps to teach, assess and entertain students. These apps feed a broader ethos of gamification that encourages students to fixate on points, badges and other digital dopamine hits — and shy away from the experimentation, frustration and struggle that real learning demands.

The problem is not games themselves. Good teachers have always used games to motivate students and connect them with classmates. But over the past 15 years or so, the hubbub of active, analog games has given way to far quieter classrooms where students spend significant blocks of time in headphones, swiping and scrolling through onscreen activities.

The company Kahoot! says that eight million teachers worldwide use its quiz games for "future-ready skill building." About 17 million students — roughly one-third of American students from pre-K through 12th grade — use iReady, a digital platform that promises "an active experience that motivates students to take ownership of their learning." If students get to school early, or bad weather keeps them inside at recess, they can kill time with iReady games like "Hungry Fish" (an arithmetic game) and "Cupcake" (a virtual cupcake business that requires math and map reading).

In some cases, the more they play, the more credits they earn to unlock new games. The curriculum giant McGraw-Hill offers a mobile study app called Sharpen, which chops up lessons into bite-size videos and quizzes. Cartoon avatars and bursts of animated confetti encourage users to "keep up your streak and earn new rewards."

Denise Champney is a speech pathologist in Rhode Island who has worked in public

schools for 25 years, mainly with neurodivergent learners. "The persuasive design of computer games is meant to keep kids using, with no interaction with other people, just with a screen," she told me. "I've seen it with iReady math. They're just clicking; they want to get through it. They are not reading, because they don't really need to read. They say, 'I kind of know what they're asking, so I'll click on what I think the answer is.'"

The overuse of online games — and screen-based technology in general — may be especially harmful to students with A.D.H.D. and autism. These students master narrow pattern recognition "instead of working on the skills they need, like reading, writing and multisensory engagement," Ms. Champney said. She has noticed that they also use laptops to escape from challenging social situations: "Kids bring these devices from class to class, and if they struggle with an interaction, they'll just pull out their computer and play video games."

Multiplayer games do not necessarily encourage healthy social skills. Inge Esping, the principal of McPherson Middle School in central Kansas, recalled the final day of school two years ago, when an all-grade online rock-paper-scissors tournament devolved into Lord of the Flies. "I don't think I've ever seen so much lying, cheating, meanness or crying," Ms. Esping told me. "It was the worst last day ever. We had to end the game early."

Her school made headlines this year by abandoning the 1-to-1 laptop policy, mainly at the behest of teachers, who argued that "gravely limiting time on technology will be a positive step for the students," Ms. Esping said.

Every kind of learning requires facing uncomfortable situations, navigating ambiguity and coping with failure — whether the subject is group dynamics at recess or the details of cell biology. Too often, online games provide friction-free pseudo-engagement, cultivate a narrow set of skills and encourage the assumption that all questions have a single correct answer.

"The more varied the contexts in which you apply a skill, the broader that skill becomes. But computers are wickedly narrow," Dr. Horvath, the neuroscientist, said. Students "get good at the game, and their score will go up, but as soon as you take them off the screen, most of those skills will go."

Emily Cherkin, who works with families and schools as "the Screentime Consultant," taught middle school English for 12 years before her frustration with technology as a teacher and a parent turned her into an "accidental activist," she told me. "When you gamify lessons, you're not enhancing learning, but holding students' attention so they stay engaged with a product longer. That's at odds with child development. Children

should not be spending hours on a screen." (Ms. Cherkin also worries about the student data that ed tech companies collect, often without parents' knowledge. She is the lead plaintiff in a class-action lawsuit against the software company PowerSchool, whose 2024 security breach affected millions of children and teachers, exposing personal information to hackers who demanded extortion payments from schools.)

Ms. Cherkin doesn't oppose technology outright. "I'm not anti-tech. I just want schools to be tech-intentional," she said. "Of course, kids should learn how technology works, but that is very different from giving 6-year-olds an iPad to learn how to read."

In my conversations with the growing community of parents, teachers and researchers who criticize ed tech, no one seemed to share my enthusiasm for going back to vellum and quills. The solution, instead, is thoughtful moderation.

Schools should drop the 1-to-1 policy that has encouraged students to see their laptops and tablets as extensions of themselves. Digital games can be effective tools — as long as they emphasize collaboration, creativity and risk-taking rather than lonely scrolling for the next dopamine hit.

I'm intrigued — warily — by Skyler Carr's approach. He co-founded Mission.io after a few years working in charter schools. As a STEM specialist, he tried "to reach students who were struggling to be engaged in a traditional classroom environment," he told me. Mission.io creates simulations that embed Common Core grade-level standards in dramatic scenarios that inject real-life stakes into class material. Mission.io is trying to do gamification the right way.

For example, if a sixth-grade teacher uses the company's program to test students on molecular biology, "we encourage the teacher to say, 'We'll be learning about particles and compounds, and you need to know this stuff because tomorrow we're going on a mission. If you don't know it, we won't succeed.' We want you to introduce it with an understanding that it's got purpose," Mr. Carr said.

On mission day, students learn that a nearby lab has suffered a dangerous chemical leak, leaving a researcher trapped. They split into teams and analyze data on airborne molecules in different parts of the lab to figure out which atom they can change to make the floating molecules nontoxic.

Mission.io's online interface is full of cool graphics and adaptive, choose-your-own-adventure-style story lines. "We've got some amazing artists who were unfulfilled making skins for video games," Mr. Carr said. But the point is to get students on their feet and moving around the classroom, sharing information and brainstorming solutions face

to face.

Laptops become tools for in-person collaboration, rather than private gaming consoles (if — and it's a big "if" — players resist the temptations of the internet). At the end of a mission, students and teachers evaluate both the outcome and the process.

"You can fail the mission and still get good scores on collaboration and critical thinking," Mr. Carr said. "That's enlightening for kids who are used to failing. It can open up their minds about how they should be working."

Mr. Carr and his colleagues have made one decision that sets Mission.io apart from many ed tech companies: Their funding comes from foundation grants and the schools that purchase their programs. "We had a chance to bring on investors early on, and it was an intense conversation. But we knew venture capital and the expectations," he said. He had seen investors acquire other games and prioritize profit over education. "We needed to be able to let schools call the shots," he said.

To call the right shots, however, teachers, administrators and families need a clear vision of what education is for. It's no accident that American schools fell hard and fast for ed tech while the old consensus about what it means to be "college and career ready" was unraveling.

For decades, culture-war debates over American history and science curriculums have consumed public schools. At the same time, many researchers have called the Common Core national curriculum standards a failure. Even elite private schools now struggle to define their purpose, to figure out what mishmash of personal taste and identity categories should replace the politically incorrect Western canon.

"Even highly educated parents don't put a lot of thought into the deeper purpose of school," Ms. Drygas, the English teacher in Texas, said. "They just think about how to get their kids into whatever college they want to get to."

So it has been comforting to think that everyone can still agree on one thing: The more innovation, the better. "Most schools have no guiding ballast anymore," Dr. Horvath told me. "Tech filled that void for a while."

But no technology is philosophically neutral. The apps and games that provide a simulacrum of educational progress also encourage students to absorb a certain worldview, an idea of what they should strive for. They end up with the impression that learning is a matter of box ticking, pattern recognition, completing discrete tasks and "leveling up."

When they get to college and face open-ended essay questions and other forms of ambiguity — when they begin thinking about what they should do after graduation and try to figure out the point of it all — they panic. When a professor asks them to read an entire novel, the task feels overwhelming.

They got into college by mastering a gamified system. But that's a false picture of the world. Take it from Emerson. He wrote in "Self-Reliance" that real education requires a person to learn that there is no algorithm for fulfillment: "Though the wide universe is full of good, no kernel of nourishing corn can come to him but through his toil." Serious intellectual work and moral reasoning cannot be gamified.

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