

Fun n' Games

Put the words “educational” and “game” together, and you've usually got a recipe for trouble – one spelled b-o-r-i-n-g.

This month's column looks at three games that succeed in bringing together education and fun. These games are all free and do not require loads of computer power.

Really, every game – even the simplest one – has underlying assumptions that teach something. Two of North America's most popular games – The Game of Life and Monopoly – not-so-subtly enforce the consumer culture notion that whoever has the most money and stuff wins. (The new version of Life comes with no cash – instead you get a Visa card that allows you to keep playing even when you're broke. Now there's a great lesson.)

ElectroCity

ElectroCity (www.electrocity.co.nz) is an addictive little sim-type game that helps drive home lessons about power management and environmental impact. It was originally designed for school children in New Zealand, but anyone can play and show off their finished cities in a gallery on the site.

You control the destiny of a small town, deciding what kinds of power sources and amenities to build. Coal plants are cheap, but the population is not pleased when a cloud of smog hangs over the town. And when your own coal supplies run out, you're dependent on fluctuating market prices. Go nuclear, on the other hand, and you'll have abundant power but really annoy your citizens.

The first time I played ElectroCity (which launched in August 2007) I was determined to be green: lots of windfarms and hydro power. But I couldn't keep up with growing demand for power. Pretty soon I was mining coal and drilling for gas while planting forests to try to offset the pollution.

The game was developed by a private New Zealand power company, and has been criticized on various websites for downplaying the importance of renewable energy to justify its polluting ways. But that criticism is far from universal.

Regardless of its politics, the game is fun, easy to learn (my 10-year-old daughter was playing in minutes) and offers insights into climate change and power management to boot.

Line Rider

Line Rider (www.official-linerider.com) is less obviously educational, but no less fun. Using the mouse, you draw a line. Then, a little guy in a sled (simply dubbed Dude by game creator Boštjan Čadež, a Slovenian university student) rides the line. Whether he stays on the line, grinds to a halt, or goes flying off into empty space depends on the physics of your creation. You've got to let the dude pick up speed before trying to put him through a loop, and too sharp a drop will send him flying. This little game is perfect for anyone with interests in both physics and art, though its appeal is a lot broader, and its ease of use makes it fun for anyone.

N

N (www.harveycartel.org/metanet/) is another game that makes use of physics. In this case, you control a little Ninja who, in the words of the game's creators, is “running around in a puzzle-y world inhabited by enemies. But in N, there's a twist: the ninja is driven not only by a thirst for gold, but also by a physics simulation.”

You move your little guy in and out of various levels, dodging enemies and obstacles. You don't need to be able to articulate the principles of physics that lead to success or failure – but in playing the game they quickly become apparent. Adding to the fun are additional levels created by various users, but playable by anyone.

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