Can interactive computer games help resolve schoolyard conflicts?

EU-funded researchers recently sought to harness the popularity and teaching potential of computer games, to help children think about and handle conflict. The new games can be used by school teachers all over Europe.

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From scuffles in the schoolyard to bullying in the workplace, conflict can have a truly damaging effect not only on personal development and happiness, but also on the collective wellbeing. Improving conflict resolution skills at an early age could therefore have a positive effect on interpersonal relations, creating a happier, more confident generation and a society more at ease with itself.

This is why EU-funded researchers recently sought to harness the popularity and teaching potential of computer games, to help children think about and handle conflict. The recently completed SIREN ↗ project developed games that automatically generate conflict situations to fit different scenarios, enabling the system to be used by school teachers all over Europe. It also aimed to prove that educational games with a 'serious' purpose need not be boring.

The project led to three years of hard work by researchers from Greece, Denmark, Portugal, the UK and the US. A game – Village Voices – has since been developed with the help of designers from the Institute of Digital Games at the University of Malta, promising to take classroom-oriented game based learning to the next level. Indeed, Village Voices was voted the best learning game in Europe at the 2013 Serious Game Awards.

The basic premise of Village Voices is that pupils are one of four characters in a medieval village. All the game characters are interdependent, and this becomes more

apparent as the game progresses. From the outset, a key objective of the game was to explore the different kinds of everyday conflicts that take place in school-yards, from friendship disputes and differences in opinion to arguments over possessions.

By combining interactive narrative and emotional modelling technologies, the games are fun and have an implicit educational objective. Computational intelligence automatically detects how high the level of conflict is through player actions and predicts how the player is feeling. In addition, there are no laws or law enforcement measures in the game; you have to work through conflicts in order to succeed. Players are free to steal things and even damage other people's property. Flashpoint situations are created that enable players to choose whether to collaborate or retaliate.

Finally, the project sought to accurately evaluate the impact of learning games like Village Voices on young students. The team found that a vital learning component actually came after the playing experience, when players were able to sit down together and discuss the choices they had made while playing. In this way the game underlines the importance of strengthening social networks – in the original sense of this phrase – the networks of friends, colleagues and fellow pupils we interact with on a daily basis. The key point here, perhaps, is that what one learns in the online world has to applicable in a face-to-face environment, in order to make a difference.

While the SIREN project has now ended, the success of Village Voices should ensure that other learning-focused games will be in the pipeline shortly.

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