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A Win-Win Scenario: 'Game School' Aims to Engage and Educate

By Eliza Strickland 08.06.07 | 2:00 AM

Don't use the word "fun" to describe what will go on in the Game School, a proposed New York City public school that will use "game design and game-inspired methods" to educate sixth through 12th graders.

According to Katie Salen, executive director of the [Gamelab Institute of Play](#) and one of the masterminds of the proposal, there are better words for the sensation the students will get when they solve a hard puzzle or get through a game level.

"The work feels meaningful," says Salen. "You feel like you're gaining mastery."

Salen is being careful about her phrasing because she doesn't want anyone to get the wrong idea about the proposed school, which will open in the fall of 2009 if it's approved by New York's Department of Education. "The first reaction some people have is, 'Okay, this is a school about video games, and kids are going to be playing video games all day in school.' That's not the idea," she says.

Rather, Salen and other planners are looking at how games naturally engage players and teach them new skills, and hope to apply those principles to create kids who not only ace their SATs, but are also well suited for the 21st century.

Games offer a context for problem-solving with immediate feedback, and often involve social interaction that can reinforce lessons learned, Salen wrote in a proposal. Combine that process with the skills that modern games encourage -- like computer literacy and navigating through complex information networks -- and you have the basis for a brand new pedagogy, Salen believes.

The planners will devote this year plotting a curriculum, and will test pieces of it in high school classrooms the following school year. Right now, the ideas are vague but intriguing: Alternate reality games could be used to study science, as those players typically seek out and analyze data, and then propose and test their hypotheses. Salen also envisions harnessing the creative urges that kids already express through fan fiction, blogging and the creation of avatars and online identities.

The Gamelab Institute is partnering with the New York nonprofit [New Visions for Public Schools](#), which frequently works with the Department of Education to usher innovative new schools into existence. Since 2002, New Visions has pushed forward 83 small, theme-based high schools that have shown positive results.

Robert Hughes, the president of New Visions, says there is no "absolute guarantee" that the Department of Education will go for the Game School. However, Hughes says the proposal doesn't sound any more outlandish than some other schools his organization has helped launch, like the [Museum School](#), which uses five New York City museums as "classrooms" for interdisciplinary projects. "As long as it has a credible strategy to get low-level kids through the (state) exams and on to college, I'm pretty confident we'll be able to get it approved."

Salen says the school is bound by certain rules regarding standardized testing and the number of hours devoted to various subjects. But everything else is up for grabs. For example, Salen thinks students shouldn't all be evaluated on their knowledge of the same material. "In gaming spaces, you may be valued because you know something very specific that other kids don't know," she says. Instead, the Game School would try to assess a student's contribution to the team.

In a way, the school is just trying to catch up to the reality kids live with outside of school: Rote memorization seems archaic when every fact is accessible through a Google search. As Salen wrote in the school's proposal, "The meaning of 'knowing' today has shifted from being able to remember and repeat information to being able to find and use it."

Young New York City gamers take note: The school will be recruiting its first batch of students in spring of 2009.

