**Educational video games charity flourishes during lockdown**

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After almost a year of online lessons, you could forgive teenagers for wanting to take a break from remote learning on the weekends.

Nevertheless, on an icy Saturday morning in early February, forty teens from across the US crowded into a Zoom classroom, excited and eager to learn.

This was no ordinary class. It was the first game jam of the year hosted by [Games for Change](http://gamesforchange.org/) (G4C), a non-profit that advocates for social change and education through video games.

With bouncy electro playing in the background, a team of professional developers walked the 13–18-year-old students through how to create their very own games. The teenagers followed each step on screen intently. Many were hoping to enter this year’s Student Challenge, in which participants must design a game around a positive theme like “advocating for animals” or “building resilience,” for the chance to win an impressive $1000 grand prize.

A look at last year’s entries shows how high the bar is set. One winner from 2020 is [Companion Rescue](https://nolanhill2002.itch.io/companion-rescue), a frenetic adventure game in which you and your canine companion must save the neighborhood dogs from an evil robot army. Created by a high-schooler from Detroit, the theme of the game is “the benefits of the animal-human bond,” so the world is packed with facts about how pets lower cortisol levels and combat isolation. The theme is woven into the gameplay too, with a combination of your dog’s bark and the player’s attack needed to defeat the robots. Even as you dodge lasers and whizz past 8-bit baddies, it is impossible not to learn.

It is this ability for games to hold your attention while you absorb new information that makes them such a strong educational tool – and one that has been increasingly popular since Covid struck. While the pandemic was an existential threat for many charities, G4C flourished as interest in video games skyrocketed and students needed new ways to learn during lockdown.

“We have had an overwhelmingly positive experience as an organization since Covid hit,” said Senior Director of Programs Tania Hack. Until recently, she explained, G4C had largely been focused on a handful of large cities, but plans had been in the works since late 2019 to expand to a more national and even international platform. The pandemic accelerated those plans significantly.

“We’ve all seen games become such important parts of our lives,” Ms. Hack said. “They have the power to do a lot of things: they’re incredible tools for education; they’re incredible tools for connecting with other people; they allow us to build empathy and have agency over our experience. All those things have lent themselves very well to the challenges of Covid.”

G4C saw engagement with its programs boom since last March. In 2019, their annual G4C conference had just over a thousand attendees; in 2020, their new virtual conference welcomed over six times that number, with attendees flocking in from over fifty different countries. During the same period, the number of teachers G4C taught to use games in the classroom almost doubled, and the organization is now reaching more students than ever through its game design competitions.

The idea of using video games for education might horrify some parents who struggle to drag their children away from Fortnite, but educational games have become increasingly mainstream over the past decade. iCivics, a company that develops games about US politics, has reached over 5 million students across the country and has been used by 200,000 teachers. Minecraft’s educational content has been downloaded 65 million times.

Triple-A developers are jumping on the trend as well. When Ubisoft found out that teachers were using their bestselling Assassin’s Creed series to teach history, they created a Discovery Tour version of the games that stripped out the violent gameplay and put the historical details front and center. With the global games industry growing to almost $160 billion during lockdown, educational games like these are only going to become more commonplace.

“Learners are more willing to spend time playing a game than they are listening to a lecture, reading a book, watching a movie – pretty much anything else,” said Bill Watson, Director of the Perdue Center for Serious Games. “And obviously, the more time you spend trying to learn something, typically the better you will have learned it.”

He pointed out that in games we can experience situations we cannot in real life, such as launching a rocket into space, and can learn from our mistakes in a low-stakes environment.

G4C’s game jams encourage teenagers to learn not only by playing games but by building them as well. In February’s session, the students were introduced to Scratch, a game design platform developed by MIT. Using simple virtual blocks, they created functional games in only a few hours.

The students’ excitement at showing off their creations at the end of the day was palpable. One boy controlling an animated dog burst into a fit of giggles when his jumping animation broke, leaving his dog stranded in mid-air. Others were still at the planning stage, working out the complex mechanics involved in a game about saving household centipedes. The lack of polish did not matter – in no time at all, they had gained skills that gave them total creative control over their own virtual realms.

With connection in the real world next to impossible at the moment, G4C’s message of social impact through virtual worlds has struck a chord. The charity plans to keep their new online audience in the future with a hybrid model of in-person and online events. In the meantime, their programs will go on helping students learn, finding opportunity in the darkness of the pandemic.

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