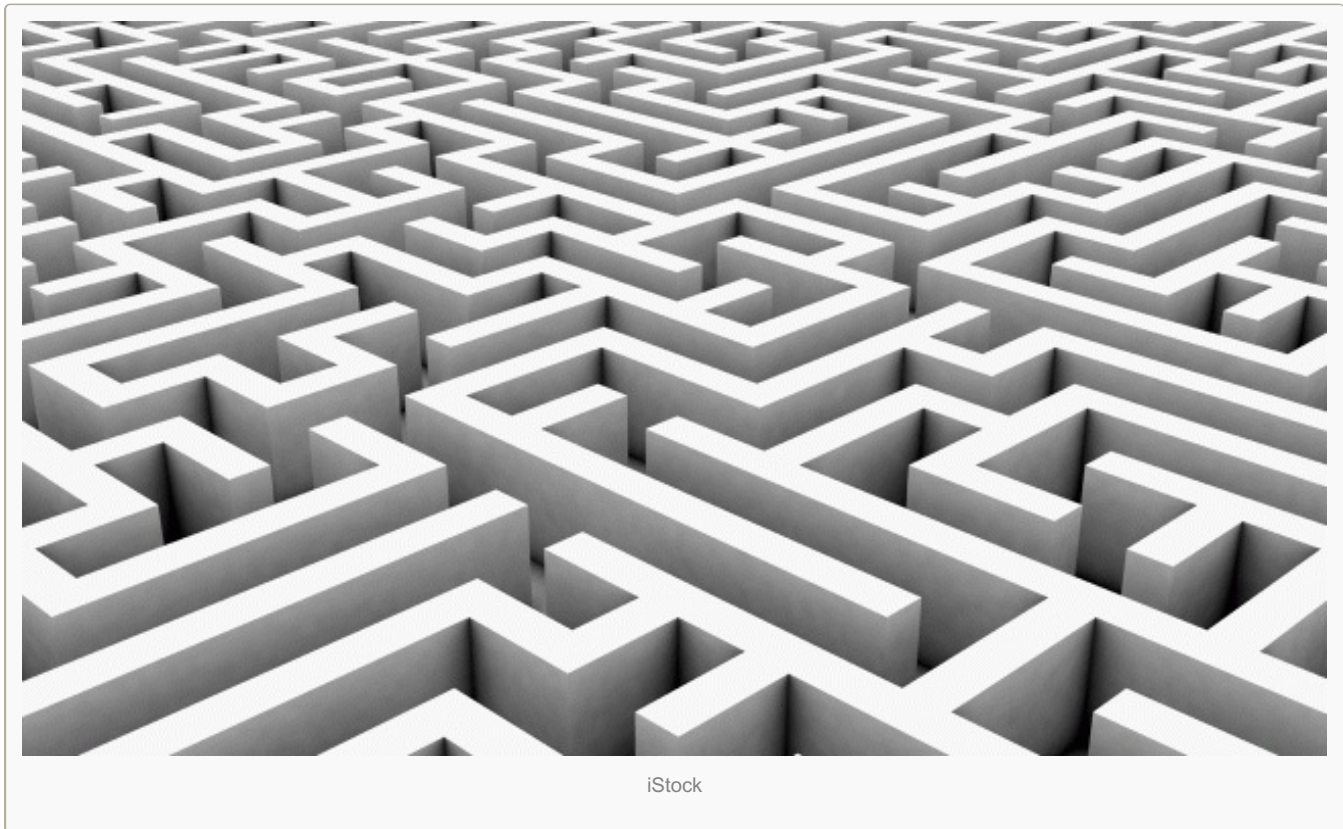


# Some Struggles Teachers Face Using Games in the Classroom

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Teachers have long known that making content more playful can be a great way to engage students and add diversity to classroom activities. As technology becomes an ever more significant part of modern classrooms, it makes sense that teachers are using video games for everything from teaching content, to keeping tabs on learning progress, and for skills practice. In a recent survey, the Joan Ganz Cooney Center found that 74 percent of K-8 [teachers surveyed](#) use digital games for instruction in some way and 55 percent use them weekly.

While digital games are becoming more common, many teachers still use them primarily as supplemental material or as a reward when the “real work” has been accomplished, not as the main instructional tool. Many teachers are still skeptical that students will learn mandated content from digital games well enough to prove mastery on state exams.

## TIME IS THE BIGGEST BARRIER

Tony Mai experimented with some digital games in his middle school English Language Arts classroom as part of a pilot project at [William McKinley IS 259](#), a junior high school in New York City. His principal chose him to participate because he’s comfortable with technology and likes to play video games himself. The game, [The Sports Network 2](#), required students to take on the roles of employees at a media company trying to market a product to a younger audience.

“Localized leadership allows me to use games during intervention time, but it’s not something that’s supported broadly.”

In addition to the virtual gameplay, students had to do offline research on solutions they could use within the game.

The Sports Network 2 is aligned with Common Core ELA standards but places the skills within the context of real-life tasks. “They had to read fake email and highlight important things on screen,” Mai said. “I saw improvement with students’ ability to figure out difficult vocabulary words using context clues.” He also said students stayed more motivated.

Still, playing the game took precious time and Mai slowly started to fall behind the other eighth-grade ELA teachers on the mandated curriculum. “It does take someone who’s willing to make sure the rest of the curriculum is covered while using these games in the classroom,” Mai said. Teachers are under a lot of pressure to make sure they cover a jam-packed curriculum, and that can make any game feel like one more thing to do, something extra or supplemental.

“At the end of the day, if the teachers know that their curriculum already addresses all the other standards, then they won’t feel there’s a need for the game in the classroom,” Mai said. That’s why he thinks games that have robust data tracking and clear corollaries to standards will get the most teacher buy-in. “Teachers want to be able to see the gains that students are making on a specific skill and be able to link it to a specific question or part of the game,” Mai said.

The immersive quality of the game deeply engaged students and showed them how the skills they were learning applied to the real world, Mai said. But it was those same game qualities that made him worry that he wasn’t covering the basics. The more that a game maps exactly to the standards, the less game-like it becomes, he acknowledged, and the more it resembles educational software, not a game.

Concerns about time and explicit instructional standards being met are mirrored in the Cooney Center report. “Few teachers are using learning games of the immersive variety, the kind that lend themselves to deep exploration and participation in the types of activities that set digital games apart from more didactic forms of instruction,” writes Lori Takeuchi in the report’s executive summary. “Most teachers instead report using short-form games that students can finish within a single class period. While lack of time is a likely explanation, teachers may also find shorter-form games to be easier to map to curriculum standards.”

## ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT

Heather Robertson teaches English language learners (ELL) in a K-5 school in Wisconsin.

The district has great access to technology — they’ve gone one-to-one with Chromebooks, but the devices are mainly used for what Robertson calls “worksheets on a computer.” She’d like those setting policies and vision in schools to recognize that while online testing may have brought the devices into schools, they can be used for far more than that. “We’re so focused on our testing and we’re not going deep in our learning,” Robertson said. “We’re just really trying to get through the surface of it.”

[The MindShift Guide to Digital Games and Learning](#)

[Three Video Games That Teach Programming Through Play](#)

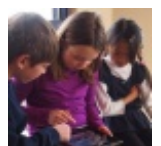
[Social And Emotional Benefits Of Video Games: Metacognition and Relationships](#)

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Robertson used to teach in a less conventional district in Madison where she had more freedom to explore different teaching strategies. “The most exciting thing is that research around ELLs shows that concrete experiences are the best way for them to learn,” Robertson said. But how can teachers give students concrete experiences of abstract ideas like government? Robertson has used the [digital game iCivics](#) to help give students that virtual experience.

“Games like that allow kids to interact in an almost concrete way that is very powerful,” she said. “They take on the role of the characters and understand it in a much deeper way than they would otherwise.”

That [virtual experience](#), [paired with conversation](#), can be very powerful for students who are having



trouble accessing the content. “I believe what English language learners need more than anything is a lot of talking and interaction,” Robertson said. “Game-playing is actually a key component of that.” She treats games a bit like she would a text, scaffolding learning around gameplay, and using students’ excitement about the game to connect more meaningfully. Kids play the game for a while and then stop and talk about it with Robertson.



“I think [games are] best when paired with reflective conversation,” Robertson said. “It’s developing the awareness of what you’re doing. The only way to really develop metacognition is to have a conversation with someone who can ask Socratic questions.”

Robertson still uses games in her classroom, because she has support from her principal, but she doesn’t feel that same commitment from the district leadership. “Localized leadership allows me to use games during intervention time, but it’s not something that’s supported broadly,” Richardson said. Despite the barriers, she pushes on with the practice because she has experienced how motivated struggling learners can be by games and how much that inspires her.

But without support it’s getting harder to hold onto that conviction. For example, this year Robertson put [MinecraftEDU](#) on her supplies list and got it approved by her principal, only to have the request held up at the district level. Another time, Robertson was invited to help develop a game-based assessment by World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA), an assessment consortium focused on English Language Learner growth. “Which seems to me like an incredible learning experience, but I was told no because I’d already used my three professional development days,” Robertson said.

It’s these experiences that make Robertson understand why so many teachers are reluctant to step out of line or try something new. Most teacher professional development focuses on the subjects that are tested — reading, writing and math — not tools like digital games that could provide a more engaging way of teaching those things. And teachers don’t have a lot of extra time to experiment and play with unfamiliar games, let alone find quality games that suit their needs.

There are [some good game-rating sites](#) now available, but too few teachers know about them. And, when districts are actively encouraging teachers to focus on prescribed curriculum, there’s little incentive to put in the time to play around and test out more immersive games.

The obstacles to widespread teacher adoption of games as the primary means of instruction are many, but despite the struggles, many teachers do use digital games creatively to push students to think critically. Those early-adopting teachers will be the ones to inspire and teach their colleagues about what works and where the pitfalls lie as this trend grows.

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