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Microsoft explores educational link to video games

By **DAVE KOLPACK** Associated Press Writer

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FARGO, N.D.—Devin Krauter sits on the end of his bed, tapping buttons on his video game controller to shoot down alien beasts while chatting with other players through a headset, texting on his cell phone and talking to a visitor.

The 17-year-old high school junior is ranked by a video game Web site among the best players at "Gears of War 2," in which soldiers attack the enemy with an assault rifle that has a mounted chain saw bayonet. He says the game teaches him to think on his feet—and that he thinks about succeeding, not slaying.

That intrigues Microsoft Corp.

The software company, which publishes "Gears of War," is studying the reactions of avid gamers to see whether video gaming can promote learning skills that carry over to the classroom.

"We want to figure out what's compelling about the games," said John Nordlinger, head of gaming research for Microsoft. "If we can find out how to make the games fun and not make them so violent, that would be ideal."

Microsoft has put up \$1.5 million to start The Games for Learning Institute, a joint venture with New York University and other colleges. The goal of the research is to see whether video games—and not just software specifically designed to be educational—can draw students into math, science and technology-based programs. The institute has begun lining up middle school students to study.

Microsoft is the not the first to explore whether video games could enhance education. For instance, University of Wisconsin researchers have found that playing "World of Warcraft" can encourage scientific thinking. The researchers noticed that players used mathematics and models to deal with situations in the game's fantasy world.

Even so, groups that monitor gaming say Microsoft's entry into the research will bring needed money and credibility. Many studies so far have focused on educational games, not shooter games.

"There isn't a lot of good research out there," said Linda Burch, chief program and strategy officer for Common Sense Media.

Parents also want a closer look at potential long-term psychological and sociological effects on frequent game players.

"I would hope that the goal is to have video games that can help develop reaction and problem-solving skills, without blowing everything up in sight," said Dave Walsh, president of National Institute on Media and the Family in Minneapolis.

Microsoft chief researcher Craig Mundie said during a visit to the company's Fargo campus that games could stimulate educational abilities by helping people develop "a higher-order cognitive capability."

Many shooter games force players to track "how many bullets and bombs and missiles do I have, and how do I spend and where do I go get more of them," Mundie said. In "Gears of War," players must navigate underground tunnels and buildings, monitor weapons systems, gauge their health and find places to take cover.

The idea that there is broader educational value in such activities is sure to find skeptics.

Vince Repesh, a counselor at the University of Minnesota at Duluth, said he fears that gaming is replacing education, not adding to it. He recalled a couple of students coming to him for help after they got hooked on "World of Warcraft." One student had gone from straight As to flunking out.

"I accused him of coming in loaded from smoking dope, he looked so bad," Repesh said. "Turns out he had been up for 28 hours straight playing the game."

Shelby Cossette, 17, a junior, joined a new video gaming club at Fargo South High School. She wanted to meet other gamers and believes it's a good complement to academics.

"I've played a lot of puzzle-solving games and they actually help sharpen my brain," Cossette said. "My reaction time has actually gone up, thanks to playing video games."

The club was started by English teacher Chuck Lang. He said he believes Microsoft is doing a good thing in researching the potential of games, even if it might benefit the company through increased sales.

"Why not spread this market out?" Lang said. "Why not promote something where kids are having fun?"



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