

## Chapter 3

# European Schoolnet<sup>1</sup>'s Games in Schools Study: The Current State of Play in European Schools and the Game Ahead

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This chapter summarizes the main results of the comparative study, How are digital games used in schools? (European Schoolnet, April 2009), representing the most recent and comprehensive attempt to understand the current situation regarding games-based learning in schools across Europe. The study's various elements are described, including: a literature review, teachers' survey, case studies, and interviews with educational policy makers and experts. It concludes that some teachers do indeed use digital games (educational as well as commercial) in schools regardless of their gender, age, number of years in the profession, familiarity with games, age of their pupils, or the subject they teach. However, the use of games-based learning in schools across Europe remains limited. The study sheds some interesting light on the facilitators and barriers to using digital games in the classroom, the necessary conditions for their successful integration into the school context, and the role of the teacher. Recommendations for the education sector and industry are put forward, and new projects at European level aimed at further integrating games-based learning in schools are documented.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Why investigate the learning potential of digital games? Considering their increased popularity as a leisure activity amongst young people, and

the skills, knowledge and values young people inevitably assimilate through gaming, it is time education systems seriously reflected on their educational potential. In a digital age many have professed the need to transform education to make it more relevant to students' needs and those of the

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labour market. Equipping schools with information and communication technologies (ICT) and training teachers to use them has been a starting point for the modernization of pedagogical processes, however it has certainly not been sufficient. We now know from the latest educational and psychological research that learner empowerment, personalized learning, trans-disciplinary approaches and meta-cognitive development are very important for successful learning. These criteria are not automatically guaranteed simply by providing schools with ICT. New ICT tools, such as digital games, need to be understood and used in an informed and conscious way in order to have the potential to produce good results. The study described in this chapter, *How are digital games used in schools?* (European Schoolnet, April 2009), investigated whether digital games, if used in the right way, do have the potential to contribute to successful learning.

This chapter summarizes the main results of the study which represents the most recent attempt at European level to better understand in what ways and to what extent digital games could contribute to improving teaching and learning in schools. The study is a good starting point in an area that has seen an increasing amount of research on the learning benefits of digital games, but far less reporting and monitoring of how they are actually being used in educational settings. In this context the study provides a valuable pool of evidence which can be built on to better understand the facilitators and barriers of integrating digital games in schools.

European Schoolnet is active in this area, having previously been a partner in a project called *eMapps.com*<sup>3</sup>, which focused on games and mobile technology in formal and informal learning contexts. It is also currently involved as a partner in new projects related to games-based learning, described in the final section of this chapter. The current study in question was perceived as a chance to deepen the knowledge arising from these projects, and to obtain answers to the following questions: why do teachers use

digital games in their lessons?; how do they do this?; what pedagogical objectives do they aim at?; what is the impact on their pupils' learning?; what approach do European education systems currently use with regards games-based learning, and is there potential for collaboration between the education sector and the games industry? The study approaches these specific questions within a larger framework of reflection on the major challenges education faces today. Namely; at a time when students have never felt more disaffected, demotivated and alien to the education system, and the latest research in the cognitive sciences tell us that traditional teaching methods are not the most effective for learning, can digital games offer a partial solution? Can they contribute to the learning of key skills which education systems across Europe are increasingly prioritizing above the acquisition of knowledge? All these questions were considered objectively, without any preconceptions for or against the use of digital games as learning tools.

The study comprised of several elements: a preliminary literature review of the academic research in this area, a teachers' survey, case studies, interviews with educational policy makers and experts, an online community of practice, and a handbook for teachers. This mixed methodology using quantitative but mostly qualitative approaches was considered most appropriate to get a comprehensive as possible first overview of the situation at European level. Eight countries were targeted in particular, in order to get enough in-depth information to provide thorough analysis. These countries included: Austria, Denmark, France, Italy, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Spain (Catalonia), and the United Kingdom. The selection was made with the intention of covering a range of situations, including countries where games-based learning is known to be taking place in schools, and other countries where this is rare, so as to better understand the facilitators and barriers. To facilitate the study's organization of information gathering, a national

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