ON YOUR MARKS

Could educational computer games offer a creative and constructive alternative to the tedium of the red pen? Greg Pallis thinks so...
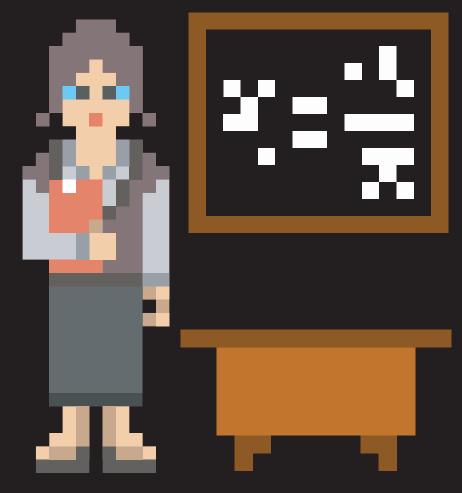
Among the million tiny and delightfully varied vanities of secondary teachers lurk a few so common as to be present in virtually all of us. Some take pride in being regarded as an expert in something, for example – albeit by an audience that would largely prefer us to be experts in something more interesting. Others derive pleasure from the progress of our own authority, the sense that those first few humiliating lessons fresh out of college are fading ever further into the distance. And for an awful lot of us, our smugness stems from the fact that *we don't work in an office*.

There's something really wonderful about that. After all, instead of spreadsheets and Sage Line 200, you're interacting with lots of little characters. You're not passing out invoices and Post-It notes, but handing on the foundations of human culture. Instead of Blackberries and next-generation headsets, you have a whole room full of the next generation itself...

Which, of course, is when the office drudgery – not banished but merely lurking with the chewing gum under the desk – reawakens, and its name is *marking*. You know that marking is office drudgery because it even has its own distinctive office-speak: measuring performance against AfL objectives and uploading outcomes onto the VLE to enhance whole-school engagement.

Needs must

It's possible that the problem may be especially acute in this country. Having watched at

least three episodes of 'Saved by the Bell', I'm fairly certain that over in the States, teachers have no truck at all with the idea of spending Saturday afternoon puzzling out whether young Wilbert scrawled 'accept' or 'except' as part of his English assignment. Instead, our teaching cousins over the pond appear happy to assess the entire sum of human knowledge through the medium of Multiple Choice, which really barely counts as marking at all – although a side effect is that it hardly counts as teaching either.

And that's unfortunate, because the worst thing is – all of this stuff is necessary. You really would be a poor teacher if you weren't monitoring what your pupils know, and it can feel like a sad fact of the job to confess that ticking and crossing bits of paper is how that gets done. But… what if it weren't? After all, if teaching is about inspiring minds, then repetitive tasks like marking are for robots, aren't they?

Games plan

Which, neatly enough, is where the robots come in. And the superheroes, rockets, submarines and evil villains. Educational computing affairs, such as MangaHigh for Maths, Education City for primary students and PlayBrighter for languages and science, come in all shapes and sizes, but their basic premise is constant: an entertaining storyline

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

GREG PALLIS IS THE SELF-CONFESSED 'CLASSROOM TESTED GEEK' BEHIND PLAYBRIGHTER (PLAYBRIGHTER.COM); AN ONLINE RESOURCE, CURRENTLY FREE TO USE, ESTABLISHED WITH THE AIM OF PROVIDING CURRICULUM FOCUSED, ENDLESSLY ADAPTABLE GAMES THAT 11-16 YEAR OLDS MIGHT ACTUALLY WANT TO PLAY.

with obstacles to overcome is, in fact, a Trojan horse for testing whether the students know their curriculum, and then, under the guise of in-game progression, rewarding them – or not – when they supply an answer. And as for those so-precious answers? They're delivered untainted to a virtual markbook, red-ink pre-applied, feedback delivered, and even transformed into neat graphs for those obliged or inclined to read patterns out of the random noise of week-on-week student performance.

Of course, no automatic markbook can substitute for building a proper relationship with your pupils. It's one thing to know a student struggles to add fractions but not to multiply them, and quite another to help him overcome his difficulties. But helping him is the inspirational, teaching part of the job we all signed up for, while poring through his exercise-books to identify the fault is much more along the lines of what Michael in Accounts does from 9 to 5. Perhaps with educational computer games, the monotony of marking can be beaten back into the office stationery cupboard (with the lock where you have to do the special thing to open it), where it belongs.