Games: The WD-40 of Learning – Unlocks Engagement, Smooths Collaboration!

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The educational landscape has undergone a paradigm shift in recent years, particularly due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The rapid transition to remote learning environments, while ensuring educational continuity, may have inadvertently compromised the development of essential soft skills necessary for in-person interactions, such as communication, collaboration, and teamwork—skills that are vital for success in the workplace (Knight et al., 2021).

While games have long been used in education (Conney & Darcy, 2020; Pagel et al., n.d.; Yuan et al., 2020), this study explores the potential of modernizing traditional game-based learning by integrating digital consoles and physical games into contemporary business classroom settings. This approach leverages the inherent appeal and engagement of games (Conney & Darcy, 2020; Hunicke et al., 2004), while fostering the development of critical soft skills. Building upon established frameworks for evaluating educational games, we explore the effectiveness of collaborative games in promoting positive learning experiences.

Studies have shown that GBL can enhance motivation, knowledge retention, and problem-solving skills (Lester et al., 2023). Furthermore, collaborative games, by their very nature, necessitate effective communication, teamwork, and strategic planning among players (Pagel et al., n.d.). This project delves deeper into this aspect, investigating the potential of collaborative games to specifically address the regression of soft skills observed in the post-pandemic era.

The initial pilot phase of this research focused on Pico Park on the Nintendo Switch and the Team 3 board game as potential collaborative games to cultivate soft skills. Using the MDA Framework (Hunicke et al., 2004), a well-established educational game evaluation tool, we assessed the games' ability to foster desired soft skills. Both games require effective communication, coordination, and strategic thinking, which are essential for fostering teamwork, collaboration, and problem-solving. Additionally, their accessibility and diverse formats (digital and physical) offer opportunities for students to practice soft skills in different learning environments, ultimately contributing to the research's goal of investigating the effectiveness of collaborative games in promoting positive learning experiences.

The pilot involved approximately 50 students across three classes of the same course. Anonymous open-ended feedback was collected from participants using a survey questionnaire adapted from Conney and Darcy's (2020) design, which was based on the Kirkpatrick Four Level Evaluation Model (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 1959, 1994). Participants were asked to provide their perceptions of the games, what they learnt, and the potential impact on their future group work. Preliminary findings from the pilot data are promising. Students found the games "fun", "different learning", "useful", "refreshing", "amazing", "engaging", "excellent for communication" and more (n=50). 98% of students (n=50) felt more confident in their ability to collaborate with others after playing the games and nearly 95% (n=50) indicated that it helped them identify potential teammates for their group assignments. Anecdotal evidence from academics and students corroborates the quantitative results, reporting increased motivation, improved team dynamics, and a more positive overall learning experience, suggesting that these activities

significantly improved teamwork skills. To compliment this qualitative feedback, academics (n=3) observed a decrease in group issues and an increase in grades of around 5% for the major group assessment, bringing the average up from 60% in previous semesters to 65% in the trial period.

This research aims to contribute to the existing literature on educational games and soft skills development. By demonstrating the positive impact of collaborative games on student engagement, teamwork, and soft skill development, we hope to encourage further exploration and implementation of this approach in classrooms. The findings of this pilot study highlight the potential of games to not only revitalise traditional pedagogy but also exhibits how technology can be used to address the critical need of fostering essential soft skills in a post-pandemic educational landscape.

Keywords: Collaborative Games, Soft Skills, Engagement, Teamwork, Communication, Leadership, Console Gaming, Education technology

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