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Grid Club: A web of intrigue that adds up

James Vaughan on an educational site where primary pupils can crack codes, flee volcanoes and beat deadly viruses

First day in my new job on the fruit and veg stall and the customers aren't happy.

The trouble is, they reel off a list of what they want (2kg of potatoes, 1kg of carrots, 800g of leeks, six bunches of grapes), and then expect me not only to memorise what they've asked for, but also to keep a running tally in my head and come up with an instant total at the end.

Fail to provide an immediate figure And they start making snide remarks ("I'm still waiting" or "Get a move on"). Charge them 10p too much and they let you know about it straight away; charge them too little and the men make cryptic remarks such as, "Cheers mate, that's a bargain", while the women say, "Ooh, that's cheap", and scurry off into the distance, leaving you with the uncomfortable feeling that you've been had.

Just as well, then, that this isn't the real world but GridClub, the virtual world-cum-educational website that has recently joined forces with the Telegraph.

There are more than 100 different games on the site, all of them linked to the national curriculum, but all dressed up in a way that doesn't make it obvious.

Take the game I've been playing, called Working On A Market Stall. Looked at one way, this is a simple test of mental arithmetic aimed at children taking SATs Key Stage One or Two.

Looked at another way, it is a little away-day excursion into the imagination, in which you play at running a business in the grown-up world, with a bit of maths and customer service thrown in.

This same spirit of playfulness runs through the whole site, bringing a breath of adventure to the stuffiest classroom tasks. In the game Secret Agent, for example, you crack the entry codes to the Evil Doctor's laboratory by answering a series of weights and measures questions.

In Comma Castle, you tackle spelling and syntax puzzles in the knowledge that, if you get three wrong, you'll plummet from the battlements into the swamp.

Meanwhile, those playing Radius of the Lost Arc can expect to be snapped up by crocodiles and deluged by red-hot lava if they get their mathematical measurements wrong.

But while being attacked by a man-eating bat might sound unnerving, it's not nearly as bad as making a fool of yourself in front of your classmates.

"The whole idea of these games is that they give children the incentive to try and try again," says Simon Fuller, founder of GridClub. "Putting your hand up in class and getting an answer wrong can be demoralising. But on our website you can make lots of mistakes and no one knows. Except for the crocodile who's just eaten you.

"We take as our starting point the principle of educational constructivism, which says that real, deep learning comes when the learners become motivated to find out things for themselves, rather than having lessons implanted by rote."

It's not just a greater facility with the five-times-table that GridClub users can acquire; there are scores of games designed to bring out children's creative side as well. One example is Imaginator, which gives young writers a chance to play with the basic building blocks of storytelling (what tense to use, what timespan to adopt, whether to use first- or third-person narrative).

Another is the remarkable Art Factory, which gives you the chance to create paintings either in your own style or that of famous artists (from LS Lowry to Jackson Pollock, and Pablo Picasso to Andy Warhol).

"I loved doing the Lowry pictures with my son," says mother-of-three Sarah Wynter. "You just click the mouse, and little terrace houses appear; you click it again, and you get factory chimneys and little matchstick people.

"But the best thing from an adult point of view is that all the games are quite simple. Normally when I play computer games with my son, I find the console moves are so complicated that I don't provide much opposition, and he gets bored. This time, though, we were on an equal footing."

Meanwhile, many younger players find the biggest thrill is not so much the opportunity for quality gameplay time with mum or dad, as the pleasure of getting things repeatedly right. "I like hearing the noise when you answer a question correctly," says nine-year-old Stephen. "I start off with the easiest level and work upwards. It makes me feel like I'm really good at maths."

What's more, the drama of the game helps children forget they're really just doing a school subject. "I get really nervous in Secret Agent," says Louise, 10. "I'm always scared I'm not going to solve the clue in time and the deadly virus is going to get out into the world."

Viruses apart, the biggest fear among children is that GridClub is going to be educational; the biggest fear among parents is that it is not going to be.

"We didn't want the experience to be so rigorous that it just replicated school," says Fuller. "At the same time, parents can be reassured that the subject matter is all part of the national curriculum and that the computer skills which the children are exercising are going to be invaluable in their future working lives. Computers are no longer some kind of soft option, or alternative to education; they are part of it."