

# CAMPUS TECHNOLOGY

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## Let The Games Begin

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Last fall, November 9th marked a much-anticipated technology event for many in the campus community. Are you wondering what you missed? An amazing new computer? Some breakthrough software application? Did you perhaps miss a critical, hack-proof security patch for your Internet browser or operating system? Software that will forever protect your computer from pop-ups, viruses, and spyware?

Alas, if only it were so. On that November day, Microsoft released the much-anticipated Halo 2 video game, which literally flew off the shelves and out of the Amazon.com warehouse, selling 2.4 million units in 24 hours. Those sales should have sent up flares to educators and those who design technology for the purpose of improving educational delivery. Let's take a look at the numbers.

The Entertainment Software Association (ESA; [www.theesa.com](http://www.theesa.com)) notes that Halo 2 "took in more revenue on its first day of sales than any movie has ever taken in on opening day." (The box office champ for 2004 was Spiderman 2, which booked some \$40 million on opening day, compared to \$125 million for Halo 2). According to the ESA and CNN news, Halo 2 went on to sell some 4.2 million units in 2004, and ranked second for the year, only behind the 5.1 million units of the video game Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas. Overall, US video game software sales totaled \$7.3 billion in 2004. In contrast, US sales of professional/scholarly books and college textbooks totaled some \$7.5 billion in 2004.

### Who's Playing Games?

A fact sheet on the ESA Web site provides a quick—and for some, startling—reminder about the ubiquity of video games. Some highlights: Fully half of Americans age six or older play computer or video games. The average age of video gamers is 30, and two-fifths (39 percent) are women. Despite the violence sometimes associated with video games, the ESA reports that "83 percent of all video and computer games sold in 2004 were rated 'E' for everyone or 'T' for teen." An ESA press release on video game sales notes that "in 2004... eight titles were sold every second" of every day.

Then there are the national data on the video gaming behaviors of college students. Student Monitor ([www.studentmonitor.com](http://www.studentmonitor.com)) reports that as of Fall 2004, fully two-fifths (40 percent) of full-time undergraduates in four-year colleges and universities owned video gaming machines: 68 percent of the men and 29

percent of the women in the Student Monitor survey own video gaming systems. Time diary data on the activities of entering college freshmen from UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute ([www.gseis.ucla.edu/heri/heri.html](http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/heri/heri.html)) reveal that more than a fifth (22.7 percent) of last fall's full-time freshman men (and just 3.0 percent of full-time freshman women) played video games six or more hours per week during their last year in high school. In contrast, 27.7 percent of freshman men and 44.3 percent of freshman women spent six or more hours per week on homework the year prior to entering college.

### Colleges Get Into the Act

The rise and role of video games has not been lost on some entrepreneurial postsecondary institutions. A small but growing number of traditional colleges and universities, along with art institutes and for-profit career colleges, now offer on-campus degree and certificate programs in video gaming. Entrepreneurial institutions are also tapping the video game industry for dollars. For example, in March 2004, Electronic Arts ([www.ea.com](http://www.ea.com)), the world's leading video game publisher, donated \$8 million to the University of Southern California to "advance [USC's] efforts in game design and innovation." The Electronic Arts money will support academic programs in interactive media and also fund an endowed faculty chair.

Seems we've come a long way from the simple Pong games that many middle-age/mid-career faculty recall from their grad school days in the mid/late 1970s. We've also come a long way from the days of the early faculty instructional development programs built around providing individual faculty with an IBM-PC with "user-friendly DOS." Indeed, the ubiquity of video games as a pre-college pastime (and passion!) serves as a digital gauntlet for faculty and for commercial software publishers who create digital instructional resources and simulations for college students.

Of course, some in the campus community (and elsewhere) will respond to these data about video games with yet another rant about the challenge that entertainment poses to education. The time and money that students spend on gaming, goes the lament, is another indicator of the (sadly) pervasive role of entertainment in our culture.

Yet, if we step back and take a deep breath, what emerges (or should emerge) is a conversation about engagement, not entertainment. Yes, video games are indeed a digital gauntlet; they should challenge

schools, colleges, teachers, and professors to foster engagement in learning.

Ah, I can already hear the rejoinders: "The problem, dear Digital Tweed, is not us, it is our students. Too much coming-of-age time spent with MTV and video games; not enough time spent reading. Too many students come to campus unprepared, unengaged, and unmotivated..." Perhaps. Yet, I recall that a generation ago, the same rant was offered about that generation of students: the early baby boomers (today's middle-age, mid-career academics!) who had come of age with television.

Generation after generation, faculty have complained about the declining attention span, academic preparation, and intellectual commitment of their students. No doubt the Harvard tutors of 1640 would enter a

bitter complaint about the Crimson class of 2005, concerned that today's students know far less Greek, Hebrew, and Latin than their peers of three centuries ago.

Yet, things change. Unhappy as many of us may be about the time and money students spend on video games, we need to ask, "How can we do better in our efforts to create engaging and effective electronic instructional content for a generation of students who enjoy learning through gaming?" We need to ask this, rather than ask the age-old question our parents and their parents before them asked: "Why, oh why, are these kids doing this? CT