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The Game Book: A University Game Plan

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A University Game Plan

Shelley Kinash And Josh Kinash

The December 2011 issue of Rolling Stone magazine included an article about a child prodigy. The thirteen-year-old featured is a full-time university engineering student. In his spare time he designs apps which he sells to Apple. He has developed his creativity over years of sketching and annotating his ideas and inventions.

Annotating inventions is not only an activity for the gifted. It is an activity that many children will happily undertake and that enables children to develop graduate attributes. All universities have some variation of graduate attributes. These are the skills and capacities that employers expect of university graduates, no matter which discipline the learner has studied.

Bond University, for example, has four graduate attributes. They are:
- Knowledge and critical thinking
- Leadership, initiative and teamwork
- Communication skills
- Responsibility

The premise of this article is that keeping a Game Book is an effective way for children to develop transferable skills and attributes that they will need to undertake university study and career work.

My son Josh, who is now eleven, started his Game Book when he was seven. It started because even though our children's learning has always been a huge priority, sometimes time did not allow us to listen to all of Josh's creative ideas. From the moment he could talk, we realised that Josh always has an idea or an invention percolating. One day I gave him a notebook and suggested that he draw and write down his ideas to share when time allowed. This started the first of what are now eight A4 lined wire-coil steno-pads of creations. His inventions have increased in sophistication over time. He called his early versions "Invention Books", and they were mostly drawings with phonetic spelling of creations such as robots to clean his room and devices to mind-control his sister. His current books are "Game Books" and are mostly massively multiplayer online role playing games (MMORPG). He invents games that he wishes were around for him to play.

The articulation of his reasons for keeping up the books have developed over time, but the thought remains largely unaltered. When Josh was eight I asked him why he was still doing his Invention Books when other hobbies had waxed and waned. He responded, "When I am an adult, I will be boring. I am writing my ideas down now so that when I am old enough to actually make them, I will still have the ideas. Plus, an adult can only try to remember what an eight-year-old likes. I won't have to trust my memory because I'll have it all written down." Just as adults have fewer taste-buds than children, it is no secret that creative imagination also declines over the lifespan. Authors such as Tony Buzan and Edward de Bono write about the creative decline and ways to slow its slide. Part of the reason that adults have fewer ideas is that their minds are more occupied by day-to-day activity. Josh's uncle, who works in the USA Silicon Valley in the computer industry, rang home when in his early twenties. After a day spent grocery shopping, doing laundry and other such tasks, he lamented to his mother, "I never realised how much time it takes just to live."

Some of Josh's friends have now started their own Game Books. A visiting family friend borrowed one of Josh's books and took it to show a Bond professor who teaches Computer Game Design. The professor showed it to his students as examples of game design. The students were impressed and one described Josh as a prodigy but Josh is an ordinary eleven year-old boy whose life consists of school, family, friends, sports and playing with his dog. He is not in the gifted category, but he certainly hopes that the university students remember his name when they are the employers and he is completing his university degree and looking for a job.

Josh and I co-created the idea of sharing information about his Game Book so that other children, their teachers and parents can catalyse this fun, productive activity. I wrote Josh six questions and he wrote-down his responses. These are his answers verbatim.

SK: To create a game, what do you need to include in your Invention Book?
JK: The most important thing to include is tables, because they organise whatever you are doing. I usually use tables to organise parts of an object. For example, the scanned table of turrets is one element of a new game I am working on. The arrangement, and what you will include in the table, will vary depending on the game. The most common column headings are – name, picture, price or points and details.

SK: What are 'how to' tips and suggestions for your Game Book?

JK: It is important that if you think of an idea, you write it down right away so that you do not forget it. You should also never limit yourself. For example, the technology to make your game work might not be around when you design the game, but it may be when you are older. You must also describe your game in details so that you can understand it when you are older. It may be ten or more years before you actually make the game you designed. Sometimes you feel like destroying early games because the ideas seem dumb. It is important, however, that you keep all of your game books because the earlier games you made would be age-appropriate for the age of when you wrote it.

SK: What makes a good computer game? What makes a good educational computer game?

JK: One of the most important factors to making a good game is making it so that it works online. Online games mean that kids can interact with each other and make friends. Another important thing is graphics. The graphics need to be quite clear. It must also have low lag (no delay). The most important of all is it must be well thought-out. For example, some games don't let you do enough or have enough control over the characters' actions. The computer does most of the playing and you just watch.

To make a good educational game is way harder than a regular game. A good educational game has:
• Specific games and learning objectives.
• A smart and new idea.
• Fun, not just boring stuff.
• Interesting subjects to learn about.
• Online parts so you can play with friends.

A good example is Woogi World. www.woogiworld.com This game is especially good because it is mainly about fun. Kids will play the game without their parents telling them to, and will learn through playing it.

SK: What do eleven-year-old boys like to play?

JK: It depends on the person, but most eleven-year-old boys like challenging puzzle games, adventure shooting games and mainly massively multiplayer online role playing games (MMORPG). This is a type of game when you defeat enemies, level-up and explore with generally just one unit. Another popular type of game is a creating game where you can create worlds, play with and rate other people's creations.

SK: Where do you get your ideas?

JK: I get most of my ideas from games I have played and things I have done. Sometimes I think of improvements and level-ups to games I play. One day, for example, I was in my room and I looked at a snow globe on my shelf. I thought of a game where you tilt a snow globe to move an object. Most of my ideas come to me as games I would like to play. I think about what game I would like to play right now. If I don't think that game has been created yet, then I start designing it in my Games Book.

SK: What do you learn from keeping a Games Book?

JK: One thing my mum and dad like about the Games Book is it keeps me off the computer for a while. Through my Games Book, I learn to be creative because I feel free to go with my ideas. I like that I am not getting marked on the spelling and neatness of the book. From preventing glitches through design, I learn to solve problems before they happen. From creating games, I develop persistence and evaluation. This means that I have to stick to a game until it is done, even when I am over the details and want to move on to the next idea. Sometimes it is better to admit that an idea just won't work, even when I've spent lots of hours developing it. This is a good life lesson too.

In the introduction to this article, the Games Book was framed in relation to University Graduate Attributes. Josh is motivated to do well in primary and secondary school so that he is admitted into a computer games design program at university. His Games Book keeps this dream alive for him and he continues to develop and practice his design skills.

A Games Book is also recommended for children whose ambitions do not include becoming computer programmers. A Games Book develops transferable skills that are necessary for university study and for graduate career performance. The book is an example of intrinsic motivation; carrots and sticks are unnecessary, as children are sincerely interested in the pursuit purely for the enjoyment factor of creation. Developing the games requires children to list, organise, classify and prioritise, all important note-taking and life-skills. Visualisation is an important aptitude for empathy, problem solving and critical thinking. In order to design a game, children need to think abstractly and into the future, imagining 'what would happen if…'. This ability helps them to understand how others perceive the world differently from themselves or choose different paths and proactively identify problems and solutions.

Perhaps the most important aspect of games designing is the play with possibilities. It is in all of our best interests to encourage the adults of tomorrow to free their mind from constraints, play with possibilities and create new opportunities. **ETS**
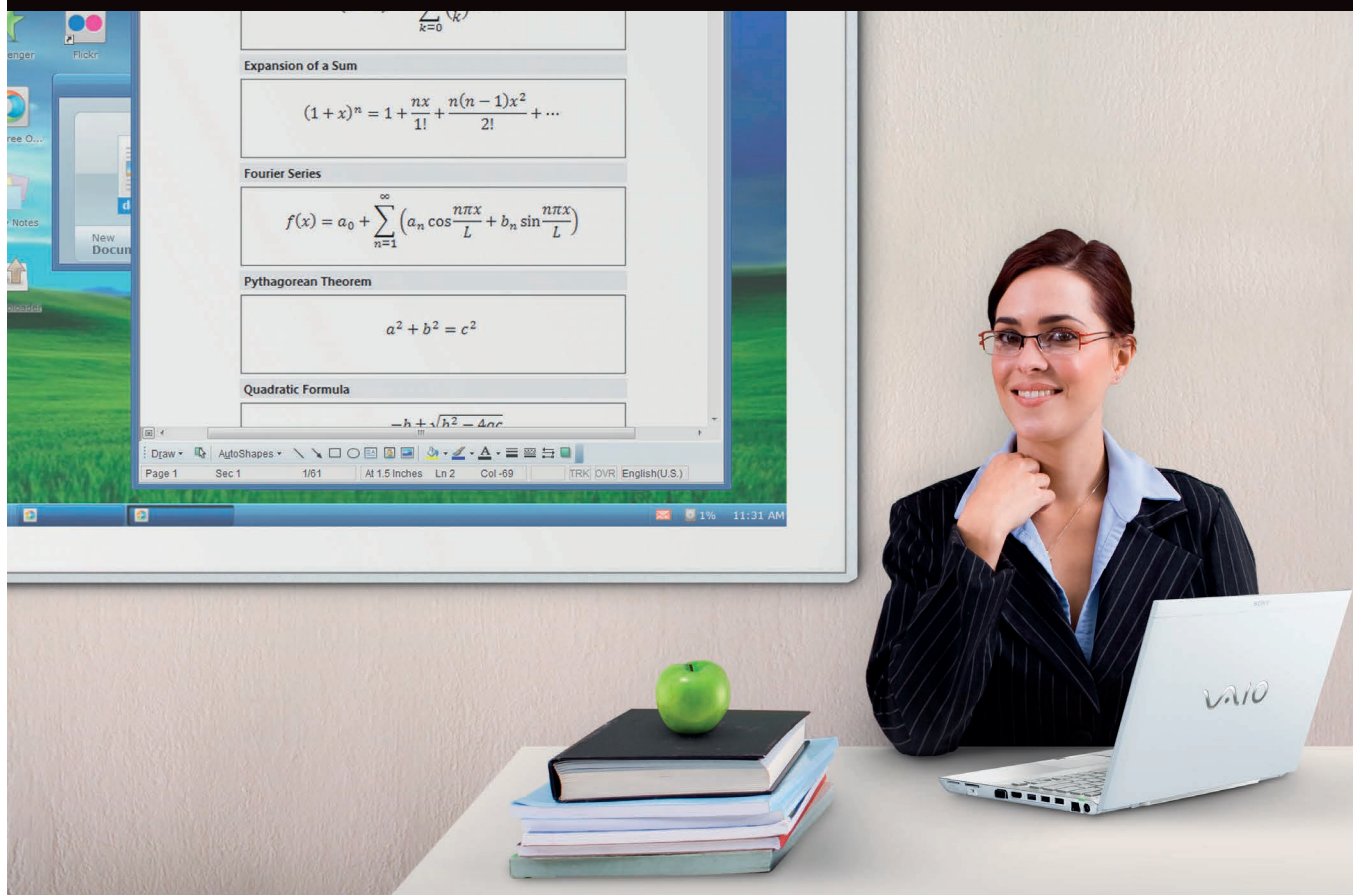
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Josh Kinash is an 11 year-old boy attending Year 7 at Varsity College on the Gold Coast, Queensland. Josh's career ambition is to become a Computer Games Designer, for which he plans to enrol in a degree program at Bond University. Josh plays three kinds of hockey - ice, inline and field. He is passionate about anything with a screen, including PCs, iPads, Asus Eee, PlayStation3, Wii and Nintendo DSi.