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## Educational PDA Games Engage Students, Teach Essential Language Skills

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### September 2003 - Industry Perspective

Teachers frown upon students playing their Nintendo Game Boys at school, but another kind of handheld gadget is increasingly becoming accepted, encouraged and often provided by the school: PDAs. This is because handheld computers are a much less expensive alternative to laptop or desktop PCs for each student.



While schools that have deployed a large number of PDAs to students might also be providing a number of productivity applications useful in a school setting (e.g., word processor, homework planner, timetable reminder, printing utilities, etc.), they can also include some fun, yet educational, games for the PDAs. Why not grab students' attention with a PDA game, while simultaneously teaching him or her valuable lessons in vocabulary and spelling.

### Alternative Teaching Methods

To keep up in today's ever-changing world, teachers are more often than not faced with the challenge of developing alternative teaching methods to motivate students in learning basic subjects. It is a challenge to find new ways to engage students in a manner that both holds their attention and teaches them essential skills. Word games on PDAs are one such solution, providing "game play" that students enjoy, while also honing their language and vocabulary skills.

Inundated with computers, handheld gadgetry, the Internet, video games and various other technologies, today's students

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are effortlessly merging into the same fast-paced, mainstream pattern accepted and even encouraged by our culture. It's no secret that many children spend more time playing video games than they do working on their homework when they are outside of the school environment, and that's even before considering television. It's no wonder that educators often become frustrated in their attempts to maintain student attention. How can reading, writing and arithmetic compete with all of the diversions that beckon from beyond the classroom walls?

## PDAs in the Classroom

Handhelds and organizers are increasing in popularity - fast becoming an affordable alternative to desktop PCs and laptops. With a host of educational software and portable keyboards available, these devices have become modern high-tech motivational tools for students and educators alike. Some schools have already incorporated



these mobile computing technologies on a widespread basis, occasionally using grant funds to obtain PDAs for students or adding the handheld devices to school supply lists, while others provide them in exchange for small rental fees.

Teachers find the devices helpful for classroom management and organization of daily tasks. Given their small size, portability is not an issue. Also, their ability to access information without waiting for a laptop to boot is a big time-saver. Students use PDAs to take notes, track grades and assignments, share information, and even complete homework. In addition, PDAs assist students in developing stronger organizational skills, while concurrently providing them a means to improve their technological efficiency.

A multitude of educational applications exist for PDAs, and companies are sometimes known to donate software for educational purposes or provide them at reduced rates based on quantity. From applications that allow students to register for classes, obtain assignments or review curriculum, to programs that assist with history, science and mathematics, the possibilities are truly endless. Yet, educational software doesn't



stop there. Some of the most overlooked learning-related software applications are those that have the potential to teach, while providing an entertainment value that holds a student's attention and makes learning more fun.

## That's Entertainment!

While some students have a natural ambition for learning, others need to be inspired or challenged. A teacher's ability to maintain a student's interest is key to his or her effective learning. Just as television, the Internet and video games attract students' attention during off-school hours, the same concept (used wisely) can be used as a motivational tool in the classroom.

Consider, for example, the use of PDA games in the development of vocabulary skills. There are a number of word games that are now available for PDAs that make putting words together fun and challenging. Since many students learn more from doing than from simply listening, these games are ideal spelling comprehension tools. They offer challenges for solving various word puzzles and even allow students to compete against others as a method of motivation. We know that students are driven to excel when given the opportunity to compete. So, it only seems wise to use that natural characteristic to increase their interest in learning.

## The Educational Value of Word Games

Many educators perceive games as only time-fillers - something to use at the end of the day or during periods when there is nothing better to do. We've all got a neat set of word-search sheets copied and ready for use in case of an emergency, but I hope everyone agrees that this is not the best way to educate students. Word games on PDAs allow learning to continue outside of the classroom walls, because students can take their devices with them wherever they go. In addition, word games can create an incentive for learning language skills, especially for students who find it hard to focus over a long period of time.

Here are some of the areas that can be clearly enhanced through the use of well-developed PDA games:

- Concentration and attention span
- Memory skills
- Hand-eye coordination
- Reading skills
- Writing skills (learning to write in the "Graffiti" style for handhelds requires considerable care for accurate letter recognition)
- Vocabulary and numeracy
- Confidence (appropriate feedback in games can be a great confidence boost)
- Problem solving

Based on my previous experience as a teacher, I know that students vary widely in their learning styles. It makes sense for

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modern teachers to have as many teaching methods available in their armory as possible; educational PDA games would add neatly to the methods they've already employed. While some students may benefit from copying vocabulary words on a chalkboard, others would rather get cavities filled than willingly work on spelling skills. Wouldn't your students rather build their vocabulary while playing a fun game? Wouldn't you?

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