

# Austin American-Statesman

## Playing video games is fine, but creating them builds more skills

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AUSTIN, Texas—Playing video games for more than three decades will teach you a few life lessons.

When you're defeated, put another quarter in the machine and try again.

Cheat codes may work, but they won't make a game more fun or rewarding.

Avoid fireballs, giant angry apes and ninja warriors who know how to rip out your spine with their bare hands.



It turns out, though, that there are many more lessons and skills to be learned by creating video games instead of just playing them. If only there had been a class to teach video game design as I was growing up gaming in the 1980s.

For the students at East Austin College Prep, a charter school that opened in 2009, designing video games happens every day in a program called Globaloria. Starting in sixth grade, students spend at least an hour a day as part of the curriculum, learning how to design Web and mobile games. They work on their own games, but they also collaborate in groups, developing many tech skills along the way.

Globaloria was created by a company called World Wide Workshop and is supported by corporate partners. East Austin Prep has received equipment from AMD Inc., allowing students to work on laptops to build games.

On a recent Monday afternoon, Globaloria teacher and instructional technology specialist Nyssa Arcos Evans was teaching a group of ninth graders working on mobile games. "I know that most of you have the player moving. Raise your hand if your enemy is drawn out and moving as well," she said. Some students were still working on the problem of getting a character on screen to respond, while others had moved ahead to fix other bugs in their projects.

It's one thing to hear about a program like Globaloria and to view the games online (many of them are on the Web, free to play at [globaloria.org](http://globaloria.org)). It's another to meet the students and see how passionate they are about creating games that are alternately fun (a progressively harder arcade-style game called "Ball World") and educational with a social message ("No Gang; More Maze") about the world around them.

The creators of those two games, ninth-graders Laura Plascencio and Michael Alvarez, have each won awards for their work. Alvarez has so far won two laptops in two years for games he created. Plascencio was awarded a grant to run a summer camp for middle schools on game design. Plascencio is working on an as-yet-untitled game about nutrition, and Alvarez is knocking out a game about safe driving called "Interstate 55."

Evans says that in addition to STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) learning, the students are developing talents in other areas that are likely to help them through college and in work. "They're learning

social skills. They're learning how to work with other students, collaborating effectively and managing projects so one student's not doing all the work," she said.

The students become increasingly tech-savvy, but that's not how they all start out. Many East Austin Prep students come from an economically disadvantaged community. Many arrive never having had a computer or Internet access in their homes. Laura Minnigerode, a research program manager who works for World Wide Workshop, has been studying the students and believes that the Globaloria requirement makes a huge difference in helping students.

In other local schools with Globaloria, including Manor Middle and High schools as well as Decker Middle School, it's an elective. At East Austin Prep, every student has to learn video games. "Instead of having kids coming in calling themselves geeks and gamers, you have kids who never dreamed of doing anything like this," Minnigerode said. Those kids learn computational problem-solving skills, self-expression through digital media and, perhaps most important, the confidence to see themselves in science, design and tech careers.

Joe Gonzales, the superintendent of East Austin Prep, says he's been impressed with how engaged the students have been; it doesn't hurt that video games are already a part of their lives and interest many of them. "The subject matter is appropriate to the students in the way that they see their future," Gonzales said, "the world and workforce are become more technology-based."

Austin was a special, unique snowflake for just over a week.

After it was confirmed two weeks ago that Google was bringing its Fiber Gigabit Internet service here, Google announced last week that another city would get it: Provo, Utah. Kansas City was the first to get Fiber, but Austin got a flood of national attention for being named the second Google Fiber city. You have to wonder if the Provo deal deflates our balloon a bit.

Does this mean even more cities are on tap for Google in the coming weeks? We'll have to wait and see.