

PopCap Profile

Heather Renz/Judy Shasek

PopCap Games Builds Students' Physical and Mental Fitness

With 47 years of educating experience between them, Heather Renz, 52, and Judy Shasek, 61, are both creating innovative teaching techniques that incorporate one of the most frequently criticized competitors for today's student's attention: videogames. Based in Bend, Oregon, Heather and Judy have done more than just make peace with this supposed enemy of education, they have enlisted it to help them reach their students and have seen remarkable results, especially with previously at-risk kids. Driven by their mutual desire to help kids, videogames have become part of the daily routine in Heather's 4th grade classroom with a large portion of those games being PopCap creations.

The two women met roughly eight years ago thanks to a shared interest in technology and youth fitness. "I was concerned that kids in school sit a lot," explains Judy. "A lack of physical activity can lead to so many health issues that I was determined to find a way to address this." Heather's class at McCall Elementary provided a convenient lab for Judy to explore ways to get kids up and moving. Inspired by the enthusiasm the class showed playing a basic dance game on the PlayStation, Judy teamed up with programmer Kevin Colburn to create a more flexible foot-driven mat that could do much more than the simple directional gameplay options of a traditional dance mat. After six years the two inventors had created the Foot POWR foot mouse, which allowed users to use their feet to play any PC game that used a mouse. Since they were no longer tethered to a limited game console, the women scoured the Internet for quality computer games which quickly led them to PopCap classics like Bookworm, Zuma, Bejeweled, Peggle, and many more. "We needed extremely engaging, highly entertaining games that were easy to learn and had reasonably straightforward input controls and the PopCap games fit the bill perfectly," says Judy.

Over the last two years Heather's students have been playing these games regularly and the results have exceeded all expectations. The fitness benefits are the easiest to see, according to Heather. "The kids are up and moving and, most importantly, are motivated," she says. This past year district budget cuts cost the school their PE teacher and physical education duties fell to Heather. "At first I was worried, but then I thought, 'No, I have this.'" Throughout the ensuing school year Heather guided the students through a number of different eye-tracking and aerobics activities using Judy's Foot POWR mats and PopCap games. The program was so popular that the school expanded upon it and launched a reciprocal mentoring program of sorts where each of the students helped guide one of the school's teachers through a program to reach their own personal fitness goals. The teacher wellness program was a definite winner, with the instructors working hard to meet their goals under the kids' tutelage.

In addition to the fitness payoffs, the teachers have seen tremendous gains in learning thanks to the foot gaming. “The biggest thing I see is the motivation of the kids because they believe it helps them in the classroom, so they’re working harder” explains Heather. “That increased level of enthusiasm and belief is huge.” Used as a reward for class work done well, the foot gaming spurs the students to achieve more in order to earn more time playing games like Bookworm Deluxe which has the added benefit of boosting students’ spelling and vocabulary skills.

The biggest strides have been seen in at-risk kids: those that struggle with attention problems, attendance issues, and trouble completing homework. These children are made the leaders of the program and they work twice as hard in order to earn extra leadership turns playing Peggle and other games. Their leadership position builds their self-esteem, they grow more confident, they work harder in class, their effort pays off in better schoolwork, and a positive learning cycle is established. Heather has seen students that couldn’t pass the 3rd grade competency test exceed the standards for the 4th grade test by the end of the year.

Heather’s classes consistently perform at the top of the school district and while she believes that the games are a significant component of her students’ success, “I like to think *I* have something to do with it as well,” she laughs. The gains of Heather’s students are no surprise to Judy. “Every single brain cell needs oxygen, so if every now and then you do something active that gets your head a little out of balance and makes you breathe more, that’s good for your brain,” explains Judy. “So having these breaks in the long run greatly increases productivity.”

Next year, Heather hopes to use the Foot POWR pad and a suite of PopCap games for a student science project tracking their fitness gains. “This would allow me to teach math skills, graphing, the scientific method, and more with the bonus of the health benefits,” she enthuses. With Judy’s continued involvement, Heather’s steady stewardship, and an increasing supply of quality PopCap titles, the students of McCall Elementary should continue to make physical and educational strides for years to come.