Gonsalves: Time to take gaming seriously

By Sean Gonsalves
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Analog parents in this digital age are hard-wired to reflexively reject the rising popularity of video games.

The "gamification" of youth culture is lamented by scores of serious people as some kind of vile virus, producing legions of "couch potatoes" overly engaged in nothing more than burning up precious brain cells on escapist entertainment instead of calories.

I share those concerns if only because of the desperate need for young people to develop spiritual technology. But, if we get off our high horses for a sec and look around, we can find some interesting economic and educational opportunities, especially for Cape Cod.

It's no secret we need to diversify — move away from our too-many-eggs-in-one-basket, low-wage, tourist-based economy. And everyone knows about the AARP-ization of this gorgeous peninsula and the challenges it presents attracting and retaining young people.

For those two reasons alone, it's worth scrolling over the case for why we should reprogram and rethink old, one-dimensional views of this ascendant industry. Fortunately, Massachusetts is one of five states in the nation that have carved a nice little market niche for video game development.

"We are well-positioned to capture more than our fair share of the global market over the coming decade," Timothy Loew, executive director of the Massachusetts Digital Games Institute, told me Wednesday.

With more than 75 video game developers in the state, employing about 1,300 workers, and with college rating services such as The Princeton Review listing schools such as Becker College and Worcester Polytechnic Institute as offering among the best video game design programs in the country, Loew believes the commonwealth is poised to be a major player.

And we're not talking about chump change either. As Commonwealth magazine reports, domestic video game sales totaled $15 billion in 2010 — $5 billion more than domestic box office revenue.

The global market is even bigger. According to the industry tracking "Gaming Ecosystem, 2011" report, spending on video game hardware and games last year was about $74 billion, up from $67 billion in 2009.

Given Massachusetts' world-class educational infrastructure, strong public-private leadership, entrepreneurial spirit and track record of high-tech innovation, Loew said, "All of the elements are in place. Now, it's about positioning ourselves to retain that, expand existing companies and develop new opportunities."

"And," he added, "there's no reason why that can't happen on the Cape. Take Mashpee. They're doing some cool stuff down there right now."

Loew is talking about Mashpee Middle School teacher Sal Nocella's classes (www.mashpeetech.com).

"Our computer game design class ties together math, physics, graphic design, 3-D modeling and animation," Nocella gushed when I caught up with him earlier this week.

"Gaming is a multibillion-dollar industry, and they can't find enough people to fill all the positions available," he said, proudly naming graduating students who were inspired by his class to pursue degrees in engineering and/or game design.

Meanwhile, the "Junior Tech" arm of the Cape Cod Technology Council has been tapping that same vein.

"Our mission is to try to bring hands-on enrichment and workshops to kids to broaden their exposure to different fields and careers, spark an interest and keep them engaged while they're in school so they'll hopefully go on to

pursue those studies in college," Jr. Tech's Executive Director Phyllis Russell told me.

And that's why during the coming school vacation (Feb. 21 to 23), Jr. Tech is "calling all computer gamers," offering an introductory course in building and designing computer games at the Upper Cape Cod Regional Technical School in Bourne. (For more information go to www.juniortech.org).

And when you think of video games, don't just think escapist entertainment. "Beyond entertainment, there are incredible opportunities — in education, business simulations, medical simulations, military simulations. There's even the Concord Consortium that makes a really cool chemistry game," Loew said.

"This stuff is like rock 'n' roll in the '50s. It's here to stay. And I see the Cape as potentially being a very successful piece of the economic puzzle. There's no reason why there couldn't be these start-ups setting up in places like Bourne or Brewster."

On the education front, Loew said, "One of the best ways to reach students and engage them is put them in a context of something they enjoy."

Then it occurred to me. If you're a parent struggling to get your kid away from the video game console, maybe instead of putting up direct resistance, take it one step further — in the other direction; as in, "well, if you want to play video games (in moderation), OK. But I don't want you to just play. Figure out how the game system works. Learn to write some code or maybe build and fix computers."

It may be counterintuitive. But there's something to be said both for intellectual playfulness and for taking play seriously. And who knows — Cape Cod might still become the "silicon sandbar" after all.

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