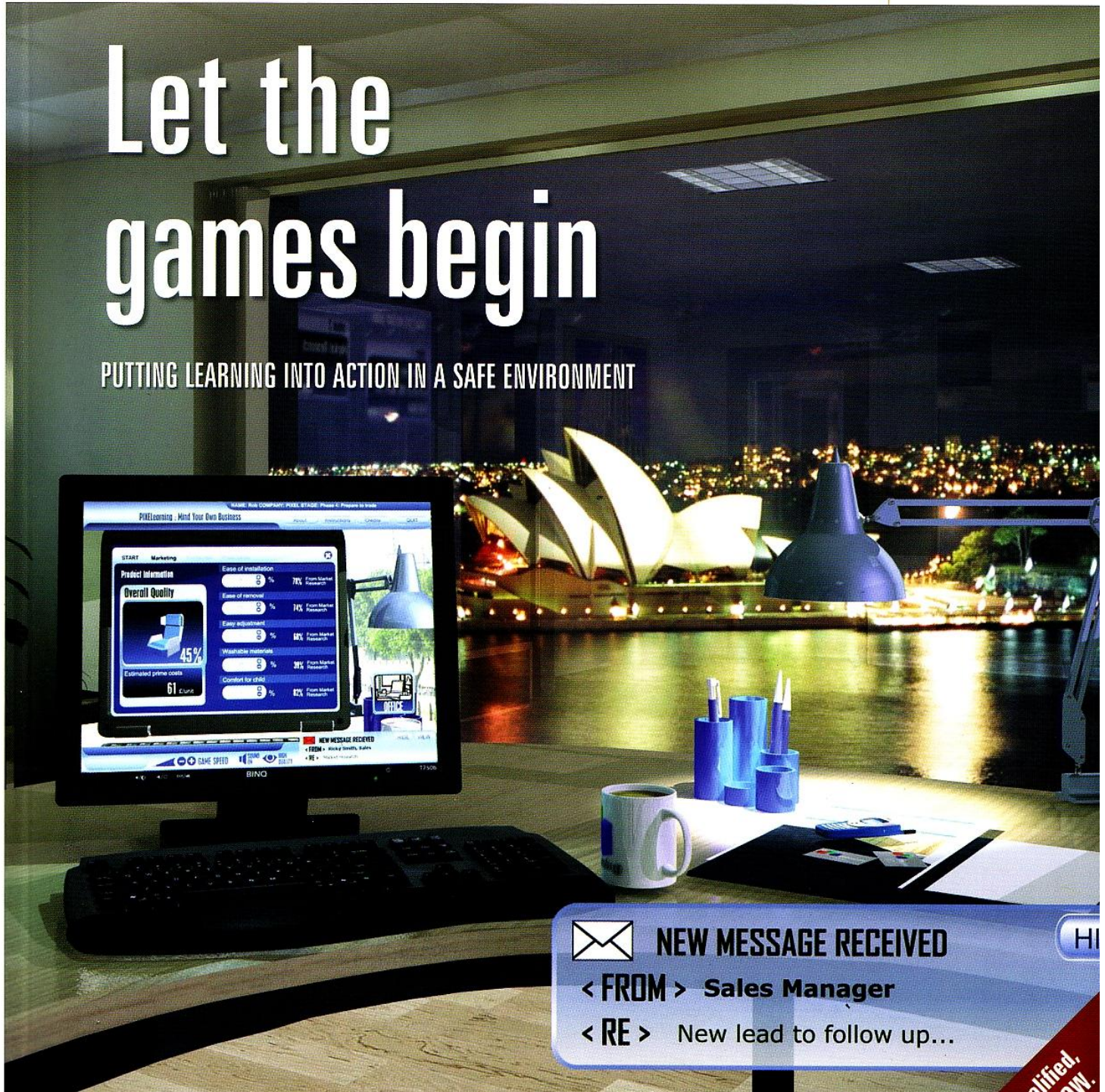# Let the games begin

PUTTING LEARNING INTO ACTION IN A SAFE ENVIRONMENT

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Let the games begin!

Elizabeth Eyre looks at a way of letting employees put learning into action without risking the business – serious gaming

You're a recent graduate, just embarking on what you hope will be a sparkling – and extremely lucrative – career in sales. In terms of experience, you're greener than Robin Hood's tights. You've just had your first, crucial meeting with one of your company's biggest clients and, not only have you failed to close the sale, you've unimpressed them to the extent that they've vowed never to buy as much as a paperclip from your company again.

Things, however, are not as bad as they may seem. If this was the real world, you'd now be claiming job seeker's allowance and rediscovering the culinary highs of Pot Noodle, your glittering career over before it's even started, while your erstwhile boss does everything he can to stop the client going to the supplier up the road.

But it's not the real world: you did indeed have a disastrous meeting but, fortunately for both you and your boss, it was within the four rubber walls of a virtual conference room and the client was merely a collection of computer-generated pixels.

You were honing your sales skills using a software package that enables you to put the theory you have learned during classroom-style training sessions into practice without putting yourself or your company's bottom line at risk.

PIXELearning's creative manager Rob James adds the finishing touches to a learning package

The concept is serious games, or games-based learning (GBL), and it is the latest innovation in the learning and development world. Essentially, it takes the interactive elements of computer games (we're talking Tomb Raider rather than Pacman), such as role-playing, simulations and strategic thinking, and uses them to 'captivate and engage' learners.

Serious games packages are particularly useful in allowing users to 'undertake tasks and experience situations which would otherwise be impossible and/or undesirable for cost, time, logistical and safety reasons', according to Kevin Corti, managing director and founder of one of the UK's leading providers of bespoke serious games learning packages PIXELearning.

To use a wildlife analogy, serious games provide the same kind of safe environment in which to learn as playing does for lion

Employees using serious games packages can learn how to survive and prosper on their own workplace Serengeti without getting eaten alive

PIXELearning founder and MD Kevin Corti

cubs. The little lions get to find out what their teeth and claws are for, and learn serious survival skills such as stalking and killing, without getting dangerously close to the flying hooves of stamped-ing wildebeest or the bone-crack-ing jaws of a pack of hyenas.

Similarly, employees using seri-ous games packages can learn how to survive and prosper on their own workplace Serengeti without getting eaten alive.

Corti describes serious games as 'a very hot topic' in training and education, with the 'potential to significantly improve training activities and initiatives'. And he should know – he helped set up PIXELearning four years ago and has since seen the concept cross the Atlantic and take off in the UK in a big way.

The 36-year-old computer games enthusiast owned a small e-learning studio 'for a few years'

and ran a company's e-learning division before branching into games-based learning. 'As a gamer I know what games can do, in terms of stimulating things in your head; that patently wasn't happening with e-learning. I did a few games-based learning projects internally but the thought that the technology was here and we could be doing so much more with it than we were was very frustrating. That's when I decided to start doing it full-time,' he says.

'PIXELearning specialises purely in using games as simula-tions for training. That's all we do. It's all built around business education, business management and skills development.'

The company has ten employ-ees, who produce packages spe-cially tailored to their clients' needs. The sales process can take from six to 12 months, making sure that the client knows exactly

what they want a serious games package for and what they want it to achieve – 'Customer focus is key,' says Corti – but once that has been established, the actual work to put the package together only takes between two and four months, sometimes less.

'We have a library of stock games and we tailor them to the needs of each customer,' Corti told TJ. 'We work with the sub-ject matter, trying to marry what's needed with what's sensible. We spend time with the client to get the customer focus. Sometimes we can spend four or five weeks trawling through their content, stripping out bits we don't think we can cater for. There's a lot of paperwork flying backwards and forwards!

'In 75 per cent of instances, if someone's unlocked the budget for games-based learning, it's because they have a problem that needs addressing quickly. It takes us two to four months to produce a package, although sometimes we turn it round in three weeks.'

Corti hopes to attract invest-ment into his company within the next six months that will enable him to expand the workforce to between 20 and 30.

Serious games have been big business in the United States for

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a number of years now – there are numerous websites devoted to it and a number of universities have done research into it. For example, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Pennsylvania State University, Carnegie Mellon, the University of Southern California and Stanford University have all undertaken research programmes.

The Woodrow Wilson International Centre for Scholars in Washington D.C. launched the Serious Games Initiative to encourage games to be developed that address policy and management issues. And there is a growing network of professionals working on the design, implementation and evaluation of games and simulation to improve professional learning – the North American Simulation and Gaming Association, which can now boast members from more than 50 countries.

And it's taking off in the UK, too, which is hardly surprising when you consider that computer game enthusiasts, far from conforming to the stereotype of the spotty teenager with no social skills and an intense liking for thrash metal music, comprise both sexes, all age groups and all income brackets.

Computer games manufacturer EA Games has funded research in the UK into the educational benefits of commercially-produced games, while the University of Birmingham is involved in a government-funded serious games research project. And Coventry University, where PIXELearning is based, is about to set up a Serious Games Institute.

Says Corti: 'The speed at which games-based learning is taking off is quite phenomenal.'

So how does GBL help organisations deliver effective professional development for employees? In a paper published in February – *Games-based learning; a serious business application*

THE MARKETING GAME

THE MARKETING GAME

'The speed at which games-based learning is taking off is phenomenal'

– Corti explains: 'Entertainment games are demonstrably "engaging". In comparison, when the training industry uses the word "engaging", there is an all-too-obvious incongruity. When was the last time you had to drag a learner from their PC at 11 o'clock at night while they pleaded "please ... just another hour ... I really want to finish this level"?

'The motivational virtues of video games are what initially entice training and development professionals into looking at games-based approaches, but there is a lot more to GBL than simply using fun as a means to engage learners.

'Simulations and role playing are two key genres of entertainment-orientated games that many people deem to be particularly appropriate for adoption as training tools.

'A simulated environment (for example, the user support desk), a simulated system (for example, a production line) or a realistically recreated role play scenario (for example, a sales meeting) can allow learners to experience something that is too costly, too risky or even physically impossible to achieve in the real world. You would not let your new management trainees run your business but you would like them to fully understand every facet of your business as early as possible. GBL can help you achieve this.'

GBL allows learners to try different approaches to solving problems, or play out different strategies, again and again until they get it right. It uses drama, storyline, humour and characters to encourage learners to remember what has happened and why, making it easier to embed knowledge that can be used in the workplace. GBL can also assess and analyse learners' performances, providing trainers with 'staggering levels of detail'.

So is serious games going to supplant e-learning? Corti thinks it will to some extent, but will never detract from e-learning's role as a fast disseminator of information. Instead, it will complement e-learning by providing a safe environment in which employees can put into practice the theory they learned online. 'E-learning is very good at getting information to people very quickly,' he says. 'GBL will never replace that. It's not some golden panacea that will replace everything else but it is yet another weapon in the trainer's armoury. It's a medium that people especially around the age of 35 are more comfortable with, and will demand, and I don't think it will be long before the big commercial games companies get involved.' ■