

CLASSROOM VIGNETTE

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ABSTRACT

This vignette describes how a digital playspace environment might be implemented in a classroom setting. Specifically it highlights the positive impact that such a playspace can have on student motivation and learning.

VIGNETTE

Ms. Parker looked up from her desk and smiled. Ronna and Emily were standing in the classroom doorway with big grins on their faces. "Can we please use the computer before school starts?" Ms. Parker laughed, "This is the second time this week you've gotten to school early. I hope you're not skipping breakfast." The two girls assured Ms. Parker that they had eaten breakfast and quickly sat down at one of the three computers in the classroom.

Ronna and Emily were excited to get a head start on the game they were playing. Ronna opened up the file where they had saved their work from the previous day. They were at level five in the adventure game, "The Hidden Door", and were excited to find the next clue in solving the mystery. An e-mail message was waiting for them from Detective Washington. She had gotten Ronna and Emily's message they had written the previous day and suggested that they look for additional clues on the volcano island of Ashton.

Ronna glanced at the map in the corner of the screen. "We will need to travel 643 miles from where we are now to get to the island. Do you think we have enough fuel in our jet to get there?" Using the onscreen calculator Emily calculated that they would need an additional 20 gallons of fuel. "We better try and get some more fuel from Tank." Emily clicked on the fuel meter and was greeted by Tank. Tank controlled all the fuel in this fictitious world and was quite stingy about what he was willing to share. In fact, he never allowed anyone to purchase fuel without having to solve a problem for him.

Ronna and Emily smiled and rolled their eyes while they listened to Tank's ranting about the scarcity of fuel and what a precious commodity it was. He mentioned that he needed help in transferring fuel to three silos. When Tank was done talking, Ronna and Emily were given a problem that required them to use their knowledge of balancing equations. Emily glanced at the clock. "The bell is going to ring in a couple of minutes. We better just copy the key points in our notebook and come back to the problem when we have time later today." They finished saving their work as the morning bell rang.

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Ms. Parker smiled to herself as she watched the two girls working on the computer. She would have never guessed that they would be so enthusiastic about the game. Emily was often discouraged and struggled academically and although Ronna was a good student, she rarely extended herself in school.

Ms. Parker had introduced the "The Hidden Door" to her sixth grade class at the beginning of last week. It seemed the perfect complement to the mystery writing that her students were doing. In addition, the math concepts embedded in the game would be a good review for her class. Having only three computers in her classroom, she decided to cycle students through the game in groups of two. Each group would have a set time each day to play and could opt to use the computer during free time.

This game differed from other computer programs that Ms. Parker had used in the past. "The Hidden Door" had a female protagonist, Detective Washington, who corresponded with the students using artificial intelligence technology. This allowed the students to ask questions of and interact with the character in the game. Ms. Parker hoped that this would be motivating for her students, particularly the female students. Since her students were going to be working on mystery/adventure writing in language arts, the narrative nature of the game reinforced the skills being taught.

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Later that day, Ms. Parker meets with a small group of students in the writing center. Pairs of students working on the adventure game occupy the computers, while the rest of the class is busy working on their creative writing pieces. Shaunel, Keysha, Randy, and Maria share the stories they have been writing with each other and Ms. Parker. Shaunel and Marie are excited about their first draft of writing. They have been working on a mystery story that takes place in the town in which they live, Hunterville. Keysha, Randy, and Ms. Parker are impressed with Maria and Shaunel's ideas. After a discussion of their piece of writing, Keysha suggests that they turn their story into a game.

Shaunel and Maria are excited about the prospect of creating a more elaborate game version of their story. Shaunel asks Ms. Parker if they can use Hyperstudio to compose their game. Ms. Parker thinks it is a great idea noting, "I bet the third grade teachers would love to use your game when they start their social studies unit on Hunterville."

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As the day ends, Ms Parker makes a mental note to check on how each team is progressing in the game. She can easily log on to each computer and view each group's work and status.

Before the bell rings to signal the end of the day, Maria and Shaunel ask if they can come in early tomorrow to work on their writing piece. Ms. Parker smiles, "As long as you don't skip breakfast!"