

**A** compulsory education, to a rigidly prescribed curriculum, in a classroom of 30 in a school of hundreds, at set hours, Monday to Friday, is splendid preparation for life as a 19th-century factory hand. But it is precisely, almost brilliantly, wrong for creating self-starters, entrepreneurs, free thinkers, risk takers, leaders, visionaries, inventors, innovators, flexible employees, creative artists or anyone Britain actually needs. We no longer force adults to work in Victorian workhouses. So why do we force children to learn in Victorian schools?

When the Prussians first introduced compulsory schooling back in 1763, you could force the child to learn by threat of violence. But as vigorous beatings were phased out, state education became impossible. It now eats up 13 per cent of public spending to produce adults who can't read, write or speak English, let alone any other language. Clearly, state education should be abolished. What should we replace it with? Nothing.

What will Britain's children do with no schools? They'll sit at home immersed in the internet (reading), texting (writing), and playing computer games (arithmetic, physics, geography, history). Learning is impossible if you are neither motivated nor focused; but it is unavoidable if you are both. Monitor the brain activity of a kid in a maths class—nothing going on. Now monitor it at home while he plays *Bioshock* at level 13: his brain is growing new neural pathways as though his life depended on it. Only the fear of either death or massive status loss can motivate a teenager to do anything, and computer games are optimised to do just that—even more effectively than a Victorian with a stick.

The entertainment industry is the educational system. Yet the government maintains its iron control over the latter, which doesn't educate, while letting the former—which is literally forming our children's minds, neuron by neuron—do whatever it likes. Which is, mostly, crapping in your kid's head. If governments can regulate toxic chemicals in food, they can regulate computer games—which don't have to be toxic. Immensely successful ones are already produced by artists, educators and visionaries. Have you ever played Sid Meier's almost ludicrously educational and entertaining *Civilization*? (More than 9m people have.) Or the his-

torically and strategically accurate *Combat Mission: Barbarossa to Berlin*? The evolution game, *Spore*? You can lose yourself in all of these for days, while learning incredibly complex lessons in the only way that will stick with you: making choices under pressure, while totally focused, and dealing with the consequences.

True, 95 per cent of modern culture is mere commodity product; luckily, that makes it amenable to regulation and financial incentives. Just tax the crap out of derivative, mindless games, television and films. Once the entertainment industry grasps that the ground rules have changed, permanently, it will hire the best historians, biologists and physicists to subtly enrich its products. Education, when done right, is immensely profitable. (With *Romeo + Juliet*, Baz Luhrmann got teenagers to cough up \$148m to go see Shakespeare, in the original language. Shakespeare!)

Once you've let the industry sort out games quality (which will take a while: good games are far richer and more complex than the national curriculum), let them organise a championship system for the leading games—from village level to premier league. Televisе the finals, and make cultural heroes of the best players, as the Koreans already do. (Kids care about their status with peers, not teachers.) Then leave the children alone, to educate themselves. They'll put in 14-hour days.

Every society in history, until ours, trained and taught its youth through totally immersive gameplay and storytelling. Children (and adults) learn and grow by pursuing their individual obsessions passionately, at the ever-advancing frontline of their own ability, on a schedule of their choosing. Trying to turn children into literate, creative, flexible free thinkers by adding things to the national curriculum is like trying to transform witches into Christians by piling ever-heavier rocks on their chests.

Want kids to learn French? Get Activision to launch the French-language *Modern Warfare 3* two months before the English version. A million kids will buy it on its day of release: the next two months of total immersion will teach them basic French. Japanese? License a Japanese porn channel. The children of the world speak English not because they have brilliant

teachers or schools but because they watch English-language television and listen to pop. In eastern Europe, it was the countries that were too poor, or lazy, to redub television into their own language that now speak the best English.

School sucks because it's boring, not because it's too challenging. Don't make learning easier. Make it more difficult: set a clock running. And shoot at kids with lasers. We used to learn because a tiger would kill and eat us if we didn't. Abolish schools, and bring back tigers.  For more ideas on cutting public spending see p42. Julian Gough is the author of "Jude: Level 1." (Old Street Publishing)



**Computer games are even better at getting kids to do things than a Victorian with a stick**

