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## Satirical Video Game Skewers NCLB, Charter Schools, Testing

By Benjamin Herold on September 26, 2014 4:52 PM



Video games in schools have become serious business, as you may have read about here on Digital Education a time or two.

But today I received an email pitch about a new in-development educational game, "No Pineapple Left Behind" that made me laugh out loud:

"In NPLB, an evil wizard turns all of the students to pineapples. Pineapples are very simple; all they do is take tests and get grades. If they get good grades, their school makes more money. But if left unattended, pineapples turn back into children. Children are very complicated and much harder to deal with. You are the principal and you have to run the school."

Of course, I had to hit reply.

Turns out the man behind the pitch is a 25-year old former teacher named Seth Alter, who has since christened himself the "Captain of Industry" at [Subaltern Games](#), an indie game-development company he founded in 2012.

On the phone, Alter told me about the concept behind "NPLB."

"It's kind of like Sim City, but takes place in a school," he said. "The 'lose' condition is if the school goes bankrupt. The theoretical 'win' condition would be every student has an 'A' grade and the school has a balanced budget. But we're working to make a system where that's not possible."

Clearly, this guy has a sense of humor.

He said he taught math to 6th graders with special needs for six months at a school in Boston:

"The kids were wonderful, but I was butting heads a lot with the administration."

No surprise there.

The source of Alter's frustration?

"When it came down to it, my students were very easy to manage as long as I assumed they were numbers," he said. "The moment I started to treat them as people, it became clear the resources they needed weren't available."

A long-time video-game lover, Alter was at the time also developing his first creation: Neocolonialism, an "online multiplayer game about global financial ruin."

In that game, players assume the role of fat-cat capitalists whose goal is to extract as much money from the rest of the world as possible through buying votes, influencing policy, initiating free trade agreements, and generally trying to be as exploitative as possible, per Subaltern's decidedly leftist worldview.

"It is a game of world domination that does not have nukes, but does have austerity packages," Subaltern's site says.

Alter's biting political humor certainly extends to the education sector, as well.

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"We think that No Child Left Behind and the massive charterization of schools are systemic problems," he said in our interview.

A key power given to the players of NPLB is the ability to "manipulate teacher salaries and fire them on a whim," he said. The anti-charter bias is explicit: "Teachers [in the game] are all inexperienced and underpaid."

And the game's name is a satirical reference to the infamous "Pineapple Question," a confusing and generally nonsensical reading question that **was pulled from standardized tests in New York in 2012** after complaints from parents and wicked takedowns from anti-testing activists.

"Above all else, this game is to raise awareness," Alter said. "Unless you're a teacher or you have a kid in the system, I don't think you actually know what's going on."

Here's a video that explains the game, which is currently in an alpha stage and "three to four weeks from playability," according to Alter.

(It's for the company's Kickstarter campaign, which *Education Week* of course does not endorse one way or the other.)

Enjoy, and happy weekend everybody:



Screenshot courtesy Subaltern Games.

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