

# **Kids and Computers: Discovering Learning in the Game of Solitaire**

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For many of us, there comes a time when we need a time passer. Games and puzzles are good for this. Games, the good ones anyway, spark concentration and engagement. Developing strategies and plotting moves require thinking; often so much thinking that there is no room in our heads for more worrisome or scary thoughts about our real lives. Learning to play a game, too, is more fun than learning to do arithmetic, yet it calls forth the same sort of analytic skills.

Still, I've always harbored private doubts about, for example, a game like solitaire. I've seen people in computer centers (and in offices) play it by the hour. "This," I think privately, "is a time waster, not even a time passer. Perhaps we ought to take this game off all the computers."

A recent experience in Greensboro, NC, has altered my thinking. I was visiting for the first time the Triad Minority Development Corporation (TMDC) affiliate. This impressive program is working toward economic development for its community by giving young people and adults the opportunity to develop computer skills that will open up new ways of learning and new career paths.

It was an informal occasion and, as I walked into the computer lab, I noticed that one boy was playing solitaire. You can imagine the thoughts that went through my head. I continued back in the lab to where a kid of about three or four was struggling to get into a chair in front of a computer, her mother standing anxiously by. It turned out the kid wanted the solitaire game, not that she'd ever played it, but she wanted what she'd seen on the other boy's screen.

As kids will, she put her hand over the mouse and started Clicking. The game shrank, and almost disappeared. I helped her find the corner of the game screen and guided her hand to pull it back to full size. Well, she pulled it back and forth, to large and then to small, again and again, but finally tired, and then she started Clicking on the card shapes on the screen. Sometimes something happened, sometimes not. It didn't seem to matter. She was all Clicks.

"Slow down," I suggested. "Try to figure out what's going on. What is the computer doing when you Click?" She had a red eight. I suggested she move it to a black nine. She did, and it stayed there. I cheered. After trying to move virtually every other card on the screen and with me asking "Why did it stay there?" or "Why didn't it stay?" she eventually got the idea: numbers go down, black goes on red or red on black. The big thrill came when she found she could move a whole stack if only she could place the cursor on the top card in the stack. That was a problem!

The computer room closed before she could finish the game. On the way out, her mother confided to me that she hadn't realized the child even knew her numbers, much less had any understanding of sequence. She'd been afraid the game would be way beyond the girl's ability and would simply be a frustration. She was delighted!

I, on the other hand, was reflecting on lost opportunities. I had thoroughly enjoyed working with this girl. She had shown me solitaire as a vehicle for developing number recognition, sequencing skills, and for strategizing, to say nothing of increasing hand-eye coordination and acquiring computer manipulation skills. But I had missed the chance to go back to the older boy who had also been playing

the game. Missed the chance to talk with him about his strategies, about how he'd learned to play it, about how he was thinking; missed the chance to find out what it was that intrigued him<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>the challenge, the passing of time, something else? And I was mindful of all the similarly missed chances in my past and hopeful that I would not let any future opportunities glide by me so easily.

Don't misunderstand. I'm not advocating universal acceptance of endless amounts of time spent by individuals playing solitaire on the computer<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>or any other game that seems, once learned, to demand little in the way of skill or strategy. Rather, what I learned in Greensboro is that it's important, before condemning such involvement out of hand, to raise questions, to engage the player in human dialogue, to make sure that solitaire, or any similar activity, is not a solitary pursuit.