

Kids battle to become heroic flood fighters

Packing down in front of a computer to take on natural disasters is all part of the learning curve

Published: [11 Jan 2014](#) at 00.00

Newspaper section: [News](#)

'Game over now". Many parents have undoubtedly been driven to such cries of frustration by offspring who spend hours at internet shops or refuse to even look up from their devices lest they meet a quick virtual death.



A girl plays an online game. Unesco Thailand and software developer Opendream have created a game for iOS and Android mobile devices called Sai Fah (flood fighter) to educate youngsters on flood preparedness in a fun and engaging way. APICHART JINAKUL

all users are between the ages of 15 and 24, according to analytics firm ComScore.

Results from a government study released in October, meanwhile, suggest that 2.7 million youths in the kingdom are "addicted" to video games, which, experts said, were ruining their ability to function in the "real world".

One need look no further than a weekend mass transit train in Bangkok to see how ubiquitous mobile tech, and gaming in particular, has become among young people.

However, harnessed properly, gaming can be a strong force for positive change among youth - their social and educational development need not, as some parents fear, be consigned to the latest iteration of the Candy Crush Saga.

As an example of this, Unesco Bangkok has partnered with social enterprise and software developer Opendream to create a mobile app that seizes on this potential to tap into the appeal of gaming for benefits that go far beyond scoreboard dominance.

The project, a game for iOS and Android mobile devices called Sai Fah (flood fighter), will be launched today at the day-long "Wan Dek", or Children's Day event organised by the Education Ministry at Sanam Sua Pa close to Dusit Zoo.

The game offers potentially life-saving lessons in flood preparedness, but does so in a fun and engaging way. Though addressing important themes, the game's design is cartoon-like and leans heavily on the all-important narak (cuteness) factor - an approach tailored directly for the youthful target market.

Sai Fah is part of the wider trend of "gamification" - incorporating elements of games into non-game settings - that has proven successful in the commercial sector and is now making inroads in education.

The Sai Fah project focuses on behaviour outside of the classroom.

The 2011 floods resulted in billions of baht worth of damage and left hundreds dead, 128 of whom were electrocuted. Moreover, rates of leptospirosis, dengue fever and diarrhoea were also high in flood hit areas.

Recognising the key role of education in raising awareness around such preventable causes of death and incidences of disease, Unesco enlisted the assistance of Opendream.

The software development company had previously worked with the Thai Health Promotion Foundation to develop apps and games to help children understand the importance of hand washing and better educate them on climate change.

In Sai Fah, the player progresses through a series of levels, each of which has a central challenge that contains a lesson on flood preparedness - from stocking up on supplies to dodging poisonous snakes that the floodwaters might bring.

While these form the main challenges, mini-puzzles are also built into the game, giving players a chance to earn extra points and ensuring that the enterprise is balanced between fun and facts.

The game is based on the same psychology behind other games that keep youngsters glued to screens throughout the kingdom: a system of rapid feedback, rewards and increasingly difficult challenges that keep players interested and, in this case, learning.



The introductory page of the Sai Fah app and what the game looks like as the player progresses through it.

Set to initially target Thailand, the game will be available in Thai before an English translation is completed later this month and the app promoted in flood-prone areas throughout Asia-Pacific.

Sai Fah reflects the growing potential of mobile gaming in education. Professor Lindsay Grace of American University and one of the leading international proponents of using games in education told ScienceDaily.com. "Mobile gaming can work very well within a classroom setting. It gives students a chance to individually interact with a learning tool."

As for concerns that the last thing young people these days need is another reason not to loosen their grip on their devices, Mr Grace notes, "Any significant medium is going to be used for a multitude of purposes. It's up to us as a society to determine which way we want to go with it."

Games have been a part of classrooms long before the buzzword gamification was ever used. That includes putting stars on the blackboard to mark classroom achievements, with a prize for the student with the most stars at month's end, for example.

These days, technology has transformed gamification in education. The psychology behind the games remains the same - instantaneous feedback, rewarding progress and providing incentives to continue to advance - but their potential has expanded exponentially.

ClassDojo, an app from the San Francisco-based company of the same name, for example, brings the old "stickers on the blackboard" system into the 21st century, replacing the stars with points on a virtual scoreboard. Teachers give students (or their avatars, as is the case here) points for positive behaviour and subtract them for infractions.

The scoreboard creates a healthy competition among the students and if the review comments posted online are anything to judge by, teachers are generally pleased by the results.

Noel Boivin is the media and communications officer for Unesco Bangkok.