Game on at school

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A Melbourne teacher is embracing new technology and the world of gaming to help make the classroom fun, as NUI TE KOHA investigates

ADRIAN Janson enjoys a teaching rarity. Students prefer spending their lunch breaks in Janson's class to do school work.

Janson, director of information and communication technology (ICT) at Melbourne High School smiles: "We finished last semester. And students came in during spare time to develop projects.

"For most, who had handed in their work, it was all done and dusted. But they wanted to do more."

And why wouldn't they?

Janson uses an irresistible teaching aid - the XBox 360.

Actually, make that six Xboxes. As part of his ICT course, Janson teaches game programming on Microsoft's popular console.

"In the past, we've used lots of different tools, but there's always been a disconnect between what we've been doing in the classroom and what happens in the industry."

But Janson uses so-called XNA tools, downloadable on Xbox, in his classes.

"With XNA, I have been able to provide students with an industry type experience," he says. "So, essentially, we now have a programming course, with industry standard programming, that translates to the IT industry."

Janson began the courses, using the Xbox, this year. It was an instant hit.

"It's taken everything to a new level," he says.

"It's not like I'm telling students: `OK, let's make a tic-tac-toe game.' Suddenly, we are doing something legitimate. We're writing a game for the Xbox. The kids go bananas."

Obviously, Microsoft is supportive. It has given Xboxes to courses at Melbourne High School, Deakin University, La Trobe University and Monash University.

Jeremy Hinton, Microsoft group category manager (Xbox 360), says: "We are working behind the scenes.

"There is no greater amplifier, from an education perspective, than making things fun. These days, an overwhelming number of teenagers, particularly, but also younger kids enjoy playing video games.

"So, if you take that, and say: `How many of you would like to design your own game in school time?' It's a wonderful way to draw people into the world of IT.

"It's an amazing scenario," says Hinton. "You can literally design a game in the classroom that you can sell around the world."

Hinton says Xbox teaches students different skill sets.

"We have seen research that suggests games help with hand-eye co-ordination. But also with logic and reason perspective."

He also cites British studies that say video games such as Guitar Hero promote interest in music. British research

claimed 19 per cent of children started playing instruments after trying Guitar Hero.

Hinton adds: "It also gave them appreciation of music, from the 1970s and 1980s, that they wouldn't have otherwise been exposed to."

But is it right to be exposed to Xbox in the classroom? Or is it an excuse to play video games in school?

"It's serious - but not incredibly serious," Janson, of Melbourne High School, says. "I encourage students to play their own games, or each other's games. That's more the focus."

Hinton, of Microsoft, adds: "The youth of today needs to be engaged in different ways.

"When I went to school, it was the teachers who made the learning environment fun, that you enjoyed and learned the most from."

He praised the ICT course at Melbourne High School.

"It's about building a curriculum around the right tools," Hinton says.

"It's an absolutely powerful way to engage kids and give them a great start to a future career in the fastest growing entertainment industry in the world."