Language extra: spelling

Trying to get the spelling of English words right can be a real headache. Of course, nowadays we have spell-checkers, but there are still a few rules that one ought to be familiar with. Here are a handful:

1. We know the verbs **refer** and **rebel**, and we know that when we add –ed they look like this: **referred** and **rebelled**. Here the last consonant is doubled. But why isn't it doubled in **labeled** and **benefited**? Try this to find out what the rule is: Say the verbs **refer**, **rebel**, **label** and **benefit** aloud. These are words of more than one syllable, and you should notice that in the two groups the stress falls on different syllables. Can you work out the rule? Which syllable is stressed in those words whose last consonant must be doubled when we add –ed?

2. Those were words of more than one syllable. But what about one-syllable words like **peel** (as in: peel an orange before you eat it) or **rap** (which can mean "hit" or, in American English, "have a friendly conversation")? With **peel** we don't double the consonant when we add –ed (**peeled)**, but with **rap** we do (**rapped**). Again, say the words out loud, think about the length of the vowel sound and try to work out the rule. Explain how the rule works in these cases: **wipe**, **whip**.

   A similar rule applies to words like **holy** (of great religious significance) and **holly** (a tree with small red berries and spiky green leaves used as decoration at Christmas). Which word has the double consonant: the one with the longer vowel sound or the one with the shorter?

3. The spelling rule that every English kid learns at school is: "I before E except after C." This as a fairly good rule for words with one particular vowel sound. Hence, we have **mischief**, **field**, **thief**, **grief** and **siege**, and then we have **receive**, **receipt**, **deceive** and **ceiling**. Can you say the vowel sound (-ei- or –ie-) that these words have in common? Now you should be able to explain why it applies to these words but not to words like: **either**, **neither**, **weight** and **height**.

   Unfortunately, as with every rule, there are exceptions, such as: **protein**, **species**, **seize**, and **caffeine**.

Console and PC Games:
harmless fun or a worrying development?

Let's turn to computer games. Everyone has a list of fun things to do in their free time. How high up on your list are computer games? Discuss this as a class and compare your levels of interest. What are your favourite games?

Now we will have a look at three short texts on the topic of computer games as preparation for the writing task at the end of the unit.

1. Toys for Boys?

Computer games are often said to be toys for boys. The overwhelming majority of the programmers are men and they design games that are of interest primarily to fellow males. Hence the **proliferation** of games to do with guns and cars. The female characters that populate these virtual worlds are often the product of **inflated** male fantasies. After taking a critical look at digital girls like Lara Croft, the feminist Germaine Greer said: "Whatever these characters are, they are not real women." One result of this sexism is that many women are put off computer games.

Henry Jenkins, director of comparative media studies at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, has even argued that the **prevalence** of sexist stereotypes in games is one of the reasons for the huge gender gap in the world of computing. Since electronic games are often a person's first introduction to the world of computing, **off-putting** sexist stereotypes in those games are bound to be one reason why so few women choose to pursue a career in IT.

Doug Lowenstein, president of the US trade body, the Entertainment Software Association (ESA), expressed his **reservations** about the narrow appeal many games have for women. Although ESA figures show that a third of **console** players are women, many of these women are casual gamers, who play far fewer games, far less frequently than their male counterparts. Lowenstein concluded: "We need a cultural **shift** so that young girls and women feel that playing games is not a hobby reserved for their boyfriends and husbands."

Vocabulary

Match the words in bold with the following meanings:

a. discouraging
b. a little box with switches and knobs used to control a machine or play a game
c. change
d. spread, multiplication
e. widespread existence
f. mild criticisms
g. overly developed, swollen

Note: Notice the way the phrasal verb **put off** is turned into **off-putting**. The same pattern is evident in these words: **upbringing**, **outspoken**, **downtrodden**, **outstanding**.

Questions

1. The passage concentrates on one feature of computer games that might justify calling them "toys for boys". What feature is that?
2. What is Henry James' concern about the long-term influence of male-orientated computer games?
3. Given Doug Lowenstein's job he is unlikely to give overriding priority to the moral issue of gender equality, so why do you think he urged the entertainment software industry to produce more female-orientated games?

Over to you

a. Do you agree that girls are put off computer games? If so, what makes them off-putting?
b. How sympathetic are you to Germaine Greer's point of view? Is it reasonable to expect to see realistic characters in games? Do boys mind if male characters in games are not entirely true to life?
c. Henry Jenkins blames computer games. Can you think of any other reasons why so few girls are interested in a career in information technology?

2. Dumbing Down?

A. The phrasal verb **to dumb down** is a recent addition to the English language – it is an informal expression meaning "to reduce the intellectual level of something". Back in unit 18 we came across the idea that TV is helping to dumb down the culture that kids are acquiring.

Discussion: Do you think computer games might help to develop certain intellectual abilities? Could they hold back other aspects of a child's development?

B. Now read these three paragraphs and answer the questions which follow:

> Some critics have **frown**ed **upon** computer games because they help to **consolidate** a culture that does not promote the intellectual development of the child. There are a number of aspects that have been picked out. One is language. Some critics who were brought up on a diet of literature are **grieve**d to see generations of young people spending less and less time on activities that might help them to become more **articulate**. Books used to be a form of escape for some children, and reading them improved their language skills. Computer games join movies and music as forms of entertainment that require much less effort and do nothing to improve a child's **command** of his or her language.
>
> Other critics are more concerned about the fate of critical thought in contemporary culture. These games, like all forms of easily consumed entertainment, never **prompt** us to **reflect upon** ourselves and our world – they encourage an approach to the world which could be called **superficial**. Fast-paced, visually stimulating games suck kids into a virtual world where they are trained to shoot first and ask questions later (although, in practice, the questions never get asked at all). Admittedly the games are far from mindless activities, but the intellect that they require is merely one which can quickly solve technical problems – it is not one which might question the rules of the game. These games quietly convey the message that anyone who wastes time **contemplating** the ultimate values that the game promotes is going to lose.
>
> Another aspect is emotional intelligence (EQ). Even when playing football in the street, there is a chance that children's emotional intelligence might flourish. When they play with real kids people get hurt from time to time and they need to learn how to deal with that to ensure that everyone wants to carry on playing together. With virtual opponents in electronic games the other guy always comes back to play as soon as you press the button even though you've shot him a thousand times and have never gone over to say you are sorry. If kids spend too much time in virtual, push-button worlds, there is a real possibility that the development of their emotional intelligence will be **retard**ed.

Vocabulary

Match the words in bold with the following meanings:

a. sadden
b. think about
c. thinking about
d. able to use language to express yourself well
e. hold back the development of something
f. control, mastery
g. look down on
h. cause, encourage
i. make something stronger
j. concerned only with the surface of things

Questions

1. What are the three different aspects of the intellect that these critics are concerned about.
2. According to the first paragraph which of the following is true?
   a. Playing computer games can actually reduce the level of a child's linguistic abilities.
   b. Children who do not play computer games will improve their command of their language.
   c. computer games do not help children become more articulate.
   d. Playing computer games is the worst way a child could spend his or her time.
3. As it is used in the second paragraph, does suck mean:
   a. the opposite of "blow"
   b. be bad
   c. attract

Over to you

1. In some parts of the world candidates for pilot training programmes in the air force are put in front of a computer to see if they can play two games at the same time. Clearly, the air force thinks that certain computer games can be used to demonstrate that the player has some kind of intellectual ability. Does this undermine the argument in the second paragraph?
2. To what extent do you agree with the idea that computer games give kids a training in insensitivity?
3. Would it be better if kids played games in which they had to solve conflicts instead of trying to slaughter the enemy and conquer the world?

3. Will Wright's defence of gaming

Will Wright has been hugely influential in the world of entertainment software, particularly in creating games with **simulated** virtual worlds that players can design and watch develop. Sim City was the first of these in 1989, and the Sims, which went on sale in 2000, became the best-selling computer game of all time, **spawning** numerous expansion packs and related games. Here are some of his thoughts about the value of games like his.

> The human imagination is an amazing thing. As children, we spend much of our time in imaginary worlds, **substituting** toys and make-believe for our real surroundings. As we play, we learn. We develop and practise strategies for meeting the challenges that **confront** us – strategies that are equally useful in the real world.
>
> For instance, when kids nowadays have a new game to play they don't bother with the **manual**, they just pick up the controller and start pressing buttons to see what happens. A process of trial and error gives the players the **empirical** evidence they need to start to **grasp** the underlying rules of the game. As the players **refine** their understanding, they begin to master the game world. It's a rapid cycle of hypothesis, experiment, and analysis. This isn't a **random** process; it's the essence of the scientific method, and a great form of intellectual training.
>
> People who **denigrate** computer games as violent, addictive, childish or worthless are on the whole non-gamers. The fact that they can't appreciate the positive aspects of gaming stems from the fact that watching someone play a game and actually playing it are vastly different. Only by playing a good interactive computer game can you appreciate the opportunities it gives the player to explore a new environment, and then use their **ingenuity** to try to direct the drama that **unfold**s within it. Instead of just passively following a **linear** narrative, as you do with a novel or a film, you are actively involved in shaping the lives of the characters. Contrary to the criticism that videogames lead to a

withering of the imagination, interactive PC games actually amplify our powers of imagination.

There is also a social dimension that people often forget. This is not limited to multiplayer games. There are also online communities for players and these are some of the most **vibrant** on the Web. For these players, games are not just entertainment but a vehicle for self-expression and an invaluable opportunity to interact with other people who share the same interests.

Vocabulary

A. Look for words in bold in the text and in the introduction that have the following meanings:

a. put down, criticize severely
b. using one thing in the place of another
c. that look like the real thing
d. based on experience
e. face, stand in front of
f. creating, leading to
g. understand
h. cleverness
i. by chance
j. to take something to a higher level of perfection
k. becoming weaker, less well developed
l. lively
m. going in a straight line
n. a booklet telling you how to use something

B. You know how to fold a piece of paper, but what does it mean when we say that a **story unfolds**?

Questions

1. According to Will Wright, how does playing computer games help prepare a child for the world of modern science and technology?
2. According to Will Wright, why is playing a computer game superior to reading a novel?
3. Some people have criticised computer games for retarding children's social development. What is Will Wright's response to this criticism?

Writing

Having discussed this rich array of ideas the following writing task should be a piece of cake.

> One US senator (Hillary Clinton) made the following comment: "The disturbing material in many games is stealing the innocence of our children and it's making the difficult job of being a parent even harder..." She is not alone in being concerned about the impact computer games are having on the development of the younger generation. To what extent do you think that anxieties like these are justified, and what response, if any, do you think parents and others ought to make?

Planning: If you are either ambivalent (in two minds) about computer games or if you are generally positive it might be a good idea to concentrate on the positive aspects in the second paragraph. Then you could mention your **misgivings** or other people's misgivings about certain aspects of the phenomenon in the third paragraph. Alternatively, if you disagree with the critics you could present some of their ideas and try to show why they are wrong. You should save your advice to parents for the last paragraph.

Try to come up with a plan now and discuss it with the rest of the class. Share your ideas about the advice to be given to parents.

There isn't any extra help with the language in this unit but you should feel free to look back at other units if you want to borrow phrases that we have already come across.

Just do it! (to borrow a motto from an American sportswear manufacturer)