

# Bits & Pieces

A COMPENDIUM OF NOTEWORTHY UTS TIDBITS

## Serious Games at UTS

UTS teachers do their utmost to find innovative and engaging ways to explore the curriculum. Here, Civics and World Studies Department teacher, Mike Farley, explains his use of “serious games.”

Serious Games – also known as “Games for Change” or “Social Action Games” – explore some of our most pressing local and global issues, such as climate change, refugees, urban design, poverty, gender equity, and civic action. These computer simulations are powerful teaching tools because they are highly immersive and emotionally engaging, and can handle a massive number of variables that are reflected in every decision a student makes. They also encourage failure in the most positive sense, leading students to look at issues from multiple angles and helping them understand the immensely complicated nature of most real-world situations.

Over the past five years, I have increased the use of these online Serious Games in my geography classes, – particularly at the F1, F2, and M3 (grades 7–9) levels.



Mike Farley



Screen shots from *Stop Disasters!*, a Serious Game that allows students to examine the effects of earthquakes and tsunamis.

For example, in F1 geography, I use the U.N. game *Stop Disasters!* to explore how we can mitigate the destructive effects of earthquakes and tsunamis. Students take on the role of a town planner of a small village and are responsible for researching and implementing a number of disaster defences and life-saving educational initiatives while simultaneously dealing with time and budgetary constraints. In M3 geography, I recently used the simulation *Child Soldiers* in which the

students play the role of an International Criminal Court investigator who travels to Northern Uganda to meet with Joseph Kony, the feared leader of the rebel Lords’ Resistance Army (LRA).

For each game I also provide activities and assignments for the students to engage with before, during, and after the simulations to give them a better context for the issue at hand. Class discussions, documentaries, and readings can help to complement the key topics explored in the games.



In the Serious Game *Child Soldier*, students play the role of an International Criminal Court.

Increasingly, I have been presenting my experience of using Serious Games to teachers both in Canada and the United States. The positive response has inspired me to create the “Changegamer” website through which I make available all of my teaching materials and activities to other educators.

The field of Serious Games is exploding right now with new simulations being released on a daily basis. UTS is emerging as a leader in the use of these games in the social studies curriculum both in Ontario and abroad. For more information please go to [www.changegamer.weebly.com](http://www.changegamer.weebly.com). ■

– Mike Farley, UTS teacher.

## TEDx Conference at UTS

Last spring, the UTS co-captains Emma Clarke '13 and Joshua Feldman '13 mounted the first TEDx conference hosted at UTS.

The non-profit TED (Technology, Entertainment, Design) organization is dedicated to “ideas worth spreading”. TED presentations, which began 26

years ago, were conceived as vehicles to share new ideas and engage and inspire audiences. We had seen many TED talks online, both in classes and on our own time, and thought that the engaging style of presenting unique ideas reflected the innovative atmosphere at the school and would pique the interest of all the members of the community. We really wanted to bring a TEDx event – an independently organized TED-like conference that combines live speakers with videos of TED talks – to the school. With the help and support of the school captains’ staff advisors, Principal **Rosemary Evans** and Director of Admissions & Student Integration **Garth Chalmers**, we applied for and received a license from TED to host a conference at UTS; we named the conference *TEDxYouth@UTS*.

We selected the theme “Cross-Pollination, the exploration of interdisciplinary studies and problem-solving”, which we hoped would provide focus but remain broad enough to encourage a variety of topics. We

also wanted to highlight the incredible and diverse UTS community and to include current UTS students as much as possible. We began researching and inviting guest speakers, created two student committees to help us organize the event, and enlisted many volunteer students and musicians.

On May 16, we managed to pull off an incredible event! Our speakers were insightful and inspiring. David Naylor (UofT president and parent of two UTS alumnae) examined the notion of rewiring minds and observed that the plasticity of the brain has the potential to open up new ways of learning. In his presentation “Death 101”, Prabhat Jha (an epidemiologist, professor at UofT, and current parent) pointed out that when resources are leveraged, and with the right deterrents and supports in place, “death before old age is avoidable.” UTS English teacher **Julie Stoyka** tackled the perennially challenging questions: why did Hamlet delay killing his brother and why do students delay completing assignments?