

Paper: Oregonian, The (Portland, OR)
Title: LIVING SMART FAMILY LIFE CLASS GIVES GIRLS INSIDE LOOK AT
COMPUTER GAME-MAKING
Author: LINDA BAKER - Special Writer, The Oregonian
Date: November 18, 2004
Section: LIVING
Page: E05

Summary: Saturday Academy aims to broaden the playing (and programming) field in the male-dominated industry

On a recent afternoon at Portland State University, Saturday Academy instructor Edwin Pilobello is telling his four students, all girls, about the untapped potential of the female computer game market. "In a \$10 billion industry, which is mostly about death and destruction, you could be the first generation to invent 'chick' games," he says.

Twelve-year-old Eileen Deming, one of the girls in Pilobello's Game Maker class, is ready to let her creative -- and analytical -- juices flow. Sitting in front of a PC, where she is programming the fire in her maze game to flicker more quickly, Deming explains her idea for a game girls would like. "You're in a mall," she begins. The game borrows from the classic board game Clue to follow a detective trying to solve a burglary in one of the stores. From a programming standpoint, Deming notes, one of the challenges would be programming a 45-second shopping spree for suspects who answer the detective's questions correctly.

"It would be kind of cool to build a game other people used," she said.

A joint program of Portland State University and Oregon Health & Science University, Saturday Academy offers academic-enrichment classes, workshops and internships. The classes are taught by local professionals who share facilities, equipment and expertise. Tuition assistance is available for families with an annual income of less than \$36,000.

Pilobello, who is a consultant for the computer game industry, said more than 90 percent of computer programmers are men. In the computer game industry, the figure goes up to 98 percent.

Saturday Academy decided to offer an all-girls game-maker class to provide "a portal for girls to step into the (computer) industry," Pilobello said. The gender-specific session allows teachers to tailor their teaching methods to girls' learning styles. "Boys like to hack away on their own," Pilobello said. "But the girls like more presentation; they like to look at the whole picture."

During the second week of the class, Pilobello is teaching the students how to write the code that governs the set and narrative of the game. Today, they are learning how to create rooms, and use sound effects,

such as the "zap" for a collision, as well as background music. The girls also learn about the concept of an "alarm" that directs an object to follow a specific behavior after a certain space-time interval.

Over the course of the two-and-a half-hour class, Pilobello emphasizes the importance of programming every move. "If the bear collides with a ghost," he says, referring to two possible objects in a game. "You need to tell the bear to explode when it collides." Examples like these also make it clear that game-maker programs are heavily weighted toward, well, blowing things up.

"I like to play video games," said 11-year-old Keirstyn Price, who is shading the colors on an animated stick of dynamite. "I'm trying to figure out how to design one so I like it."

Her daughter is "thrilled" with the class, said Hope Price, Keirstyn's mother. A science buff herself, Price said it's a "huge responsibility" to make sure her daughter is challenged in math and science. Providing girls with opportunities such as the Saturday Academy class, she adds, is the best way to close the gender gap in science and engineering.

For many of the girls, that gap already has closed. "I changed the start-up picture on my dad's digital camera," said Eileen, who has taken several Saturday Academy classes, including a Lego physics and a digital Lego class. "He didn't know what I did."

Next week, Pilobello told Eileen, he will help her configure the rooms for her mall game. "The kind of games that need to be invented are starting here," he said.

Contact: Saturday Academy, 503-725-2330, www.saturdayacademy.pdx.edu/

You can reach Linda Baker c/o The Oregonian Living section, 1320 S.W. Broadway, Portland, OR 97201.

Photo by BOB ELLIS - of The Oregonian staff

Author: LINDA BAKER - Special Writer, The Oregonian
Section: LIVING
Page: E05

Copyright (c) 2004 Oregonian Publishing Co.