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Teachers, engineering students design games

By MICHAEL ERB, Staff Writer

ATHENS — Sometimes playing games can be educational.

A group of Ohio teachers, professors and graduate students are banking on that idea, developing educational video games for local schools as part of a $1.67 million grant.

The Science and Technology Enrichment for Appalachian Middle-schoolers (S.T.E.A.M.) Program was showcased during a luncheon Friday at Ohio University's Human Resources Training Center in Athens. The program is a joint project of the university's College of Engineering and Technology and College of Education. Six regional schools, including Belpre Middle School and Federal Hocking Middle School, had teachers involved in the week-long collaborative session, working with engineering graduate students to build educational computer programs that help teach students difficult to master scientific lessons.

Belpre Middle School teacher Rebecca Hartline teamed with grad student Eric Petri to build a program teaching about water cycles. Petri's game, a Pac-Man-esque game where a water drop navigates a maze while being pursued by several red-hot suns, helps draw students in while imparting valuable scientific lessons, Hartline said. Each time the water droplet reaches a checkpoint in the game, facts about water cycles appear, allowing the player to advance to a new area and more information.

When teaching science, "to get the kids to attend to it for any length of time, this seems to be the way to do it," Hartline said.

Grad student Mitch Leitch worked with Federal Hocking teacher Keith Macartney to develop a game that explains how tides occur. Players can enter a virtual beach where they take control of the moon, and by moving it affect how the tide rolls onto the shore.

Leitch said he hopes to expand the simulator into a game where students would attempt to help a character off a deserted island. By manipulating the tides, players would be able to bring floating items, like driftwood or other supplies, onto the island to build a raft.

"This is just the initial step of this game," he said.

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Regardless of the final build, Macartney said he was confident the program would be a hit with students.

“I know my students, no matter how difficult, want to learn about how the world affects them,” he said. “The students really enjoy using the computer. I’m not going to call this a video game because it is a lot more than that.”

Belpre teacher Jacqueline Hubb and grad student Jim Wyllie collaborated on a game called “Blow!” which challenges players to learn Issac Newton’s laws of physics in order to navigate a ball through a maze using strategically placed fans and barriers.

Hubb said she likely will use the program to help students review scientific concepts they had learned the year before, but said the programs would evolve as classrooms needs changed.

Other projects showcased Friday included a game where players use elements and scientific principals to create their own star, and another where the concept of dependent and independent variables is taught by singing penguins.

Each student plans to create four programs to teach a variety of scientific topics, and all of the programs will be made available to the teachers, along with complete lesson plans, said David Chelberg, associate professor of the engineering school’s Electrical Engineering and Computer Science department. Chelberg said the goal will be to make all of the programs available for no- or minimal-cost to teachers throughout the area.

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