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Area students gaming smartly

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Eva Grippa / For The Post / eg220204@ohiou.edu

The fine line between gaming for fun and gaming to learn continues to blur, thanks in part to the team behind the STEAM project, who showcased their ongoing work Friday at Ohio University.

STEAM, which stands for Science and Technology Enrichment for Appalachian Middle-schoolers, is a three-year, \$1.67 million project funded by the National Science Foundation.

The program teams up graduate engineer fellows from Ohio University with eight teachers from six regional middle schools to develop educational games for students. The games are intended to reinforce concepts identified by the teachers as hard-to-teach.

The graduate fellows spent at least 10 hours per week in the classroom, and both fellows and teachers saw a positive response from their students.

The teacher-fellow pairs presented four games Friday. One game simulated a science lab in which the students could do experiments not possible in the classroom, and another taught them how to calculate the velocity of baseballs hit into a virtual field.

Angela Adams, an eighth grade science teacher at Miller Middle School, said that she saw her students “come alive” in the computer lab. Her students’ science grades have improved since the program began, and she has seen an increased overall interest in the subject.

Measurable success can be seen in improving test scores. Test scores at Belpre Middle School have gone up 12 percent since the program began, said Renée A. Middleton, dean of the College of Education. “They really aren’t just games. They’re learning modules,” she said.

One of the goals of the program is to encourage the children to go to college and to study science, said Teresa Franklin, associate professor of instructional technology in the College of Education.

In the future, the team would love to associate the games with platforms such as the Microsoft Xbox and other gaming systems, said David Chelberg, an associate professor in the Russ College of Engineering and Technology.

The ultimate goal of the NSF is to make this type of program available nationwide, Franklin said. Modules should be available through the Web and on compact disc for other regional schools this fall.

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