NRCC plans degrees in gaming design

The $10 billion video game industry has spawned similar programs in other states.

By Albert Raboteau

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DUBLIN -- New River Community College officials want to see students spending long hours on video games in the not-too-distant future. In fall 2007, they plan to start offering two degrees in gaming design.

School officials say it will be the first program of its kind in any of Virginia's accredited colleges or universities.

Game design schools, which develop skills ranging from computer programming to drawing, are becoming increasingly common as the $10.5 billion video game industry continues to grow and gain respect.

New River's plans are still in the early stages. College officials had no estimate of what establishing the gaming program will cost. But the school already has most of the technology it needs for the program, which would be run jointly by the information technology and computer-aided design departments, said CAD department head Jeff Levy.

"We can include this and get students not only excited about playing games but creating them," he said.

"I've been getting calls from students and parents for the last couple of years asking for such a program," said New River information technology professor Carlotta Eaton.

Plans for the new degrees come as New River has been looking to distinguish itself with high-technology programs. It has four billboards advertising its CAD program, for example, and in the past two years has spent more than $200,000 equipping and renovating that program's lab, which includes a machine for creating three-dimensional prototypes.

New River students recently placed fifth in the national SkillsUSA competition for three-dimensional animation and visualization. Levy said his school is reaching out to high schools to try to make guidance counselors more likely to steer students toward his school.

Even if they do not wind up working for a video game company, students' tapping into their interest in making games can get them on the path to a career in Web design, IT or other computer fields, Eaton said.

Virginia has some game companies, including SouthPeak Interactive of Midlothian and Mythic Entertainment of Fairfax, but its prominence in the consumer video game industry pales in comparison to places such as San Francisco, Seattle and Austin, Texas.

Austin Community College established a gaming program two years ago, after learning companies were having a hard time finding qualified workers, said Bob McGoldrick, that program's coordinator. "To me, industry presence was very key because I'm in work force development," he said.

Southwest Virginia lacks the same industry presence, but many of the design skills that gaming programs teach are in demand in other industries, including defense, for which Virginia is strong, said Pia Mafei, president of Applied IDEAS Inc. of Temecula, Calif.

Levy said Mafei may be used as a consultant in establishing the gaming program, but no official arrangements have been made.

Raleigh, N.C., which has about 30 game companies, is probably the closest hotbed of the industry, Eaton said.
While working at a video game company might seem like a dream come true for people who love to play the games, it is still a job, and a challenging one at that, warn people who follow the industry.

"Game developers work extremely hard, often working nights and weekends, and usually without extra pay," said Jill Duffy, managing editor of Game Developer magazine.

Last year the industry generated more than $10.5 billion in sales, passing the record of $10.3 billion from 2002, according to the NPD Group, a market research firm.

Nonetheless, paying for a son or daughter to learn to make video games still does not sit well with all moms or dads.

"Some parents still will roll their eyes," said McGoldrick of Austin Community College. "Other parents think: 'Well, finally they're interested in a career.' "