Those that teach, can also do (at least at NRCC)

Floyd County native
Carlotta Eaton pioneers game technology at New River Community College in Dublin

By Michelle Long

So what do you do if your teenager has no interest in college but loves to play video games?

If you ask Carlotta Eaton, director of game technology programs and professor of information technology at New River Community College in Dublin, she'll suggest you send them to college to create computer games. Eleven students are doing just that in the first program of study in game technology in the state of Virginia.

There goes the stigma against kids who play video games.

Eaton appears the perfect match of energy, enthusiasm and skill to put together a program like this. Over lunch, she barely had time to swallow her food between the words that pour out. With enthusiasm brimming, she says her unique mix of credentials includes a bachelor's degree in math and statistics with a minor in interior design from Radford University, a master's degree in statistics from Virginia Tech, a 10-year stint with IBM's Industrial Park in Raleigh, and a 5-year adjunct teaching position at RU.

After four years of forging this path, Eaton's efforts came to fruition Nov. 15 of this year. Earning approval as a formal concentration, the degree minor puts NRCC on the cutting edge. Along with a handful of other schools in the nation, it is among the first to offer an academic discipline in gaming technology, Eaton says. It's a good thing, too, because she has a class already underway.

Coming soon

Fall 2007 is the official start date for the five-course minor in Game Design Specialization for both the Computer Aided Design and Drafting (CADD) and the Information Technology (IT) associates degrees offered at New River. "The majors are different but the minors also called 'concentrations' are the same," explains Eaton.

Due to a big enrollment downturn in IT, which seems to be following a nationwide trend, NRCC is piloting the academic discipline of game technology in Virginia. Eaton attributes the lack of interest in IT to news reports over the last few years that companies are outsourcing those functions.

According to Eaton, enrollment in the IT program at NRCC in 2000 was approximately 300 students, but this year only 125 signed up. That represents a 58 percent drop in enrollment over the course of six years.

Other institutions of higher learning in the state that offer gaming technology include ECPI, which has a few classes, the University of Virginia, which offers one class, and Virginia Tech, which merely does simulations, Eaton explains.

The program in gaming at NRCC was made possible in part by a National Science Foundation (NSF) grant to the Virginia Community College System to promote Information Technology. Other colleges in Virginia like Northern Virginia Community College are looking to Eaton's program to set the example.

Simulations

Game technology is basically an academic discipline that specializes in creating computer software for simulations. A host of professions use simulations for hands-on teaching and training like the U.S. Navy, nursing, and airline pilots, to name a few. These are referred to as "the serious games," Eaton says.

There is no end to the usefulness of these types of computer

Above, planning a game: (clockwise from back) Joe Pahl, Dusty Roop, Lauren Robertson, Carlotta Eaton, Patrick Beamish; at left, Patrick Beamish plays the computer game created in class
Gaming

From Page 28

games, she adds. All age groups can benefit from the serious games of learning skills through doing: school age children can have fun learning multiplication through gaming; adults use computer games for entertainment; and the elderly who want to keep their minds challenged can play the Japanese logic-based placement puzzle Sudoku using simulations from game technology.

For example, Nintendo has just introduced a device using game technology. “It is designed to appeal to the non-gamer market,” Eaton explains as she-whips out her Nintendo DS Lite (dual gaming screens): a powder-pink (for breast cancer awareness) purse-sized (just a smidge wider and thicker than a checkbook) gaming console—an obvious attempt to win over the female non-gamer.

Compatibility

It is compatible with the old and new games. It appeals to all ages, says Eaton, because it can calculate a player’s brain age by testing her aptitude and it tracks progress. The cost is $129.50 for the computer and the software costs $30 to $50 depending on where you buy it, Eaton says.

And how’s the market for the gaming industry? Hot.

Just last month, the Sony Playstation 3 came out to lines as long as a New York City block and fights among custom-

ers in Wal-Mart stores. Advertisers on the Internet are now incorporating games to engage people of all ages as a form of marketing products. According to Eaton, it is a huge industry whose revenue has surpassed movies.

Gaming technology is a multifaceted field involving a variety of skill sets, Eaton says. “One cool thing about the game industry is that they have so many different job types,” she explains. They need artists who draw the animations, writers who write the scripts, and programmers with good math and logic skills. It helps if they have taken programming in high school, she adds.

For more information on the Game Design Specialization programs in both the CADD and IT Degrees at NRCC, check out the Web site at www.ncc.edu or reach Carlotta Eaton directly at nreatoc@ncc.edu or 540-674-3600, ext. 4250.

(Michelle Long is a freelance writer who lives in Pilot.)