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Archives

Wednesday, March 22, 2006

Community

Designing video entertainment more than just a game

By ANDREA SUTTON

Tuesday, March 7, 2006 2:11 PM CST

Many teenage boys play video games in an effort to put off finishing homework or studying for an exam, but for one of HISD's Challenge Early High School students, playing games is part of his studies.



NO CLAY REQUIRED: As part of Houston Community College's Digital Gaming and Simulation program, instructor Hector Salinas helps gaming student Mitchell Thompson create 3-D images using the Omni Phantom virtual sculpting tool. — photo by ANDREA SUTTON

Trey Sharretts, 17, has been playing video games for as long as he can remember and has been interested in programming for most of his life. So last fall, when the Digital Gaming and Simulation program began at Houston Community College, it seemed like a good fit. For the most part, his parents went along with his unique opportunity.

"My mom said that's probably a good thing, since that's pretty much all (I) do" Sharretts said, noting his dad saw the program as "an excuse for constantly playing games."

Sharretts participates in the college course as part of his school's specialized program that allows students to earn both a high school diploma and an associate's degree in just five years.

Besides having three high school students and a 50-year age range among its 60 enrolled students, HCC's is the only program in Texas that offers an associate's degree in gaming.

"If people have ideas coming and they want to actually implement them, this is a place for them to make that happen," said Reni Abraham, Digital Gaming and Simulation department chair.

DGS offers two certificate levels and an associate degree for both programmers and artists. The degree plans enforce cross training, because it is important for the artists and programmers to know what the other is doing, Abraham said.

"To put a game together they need to learn programs, art — digital and fine — in addition to math and English," Abraham said. It's also


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Index	Last Trade	Change
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SP 500	1301.99	4.76 ▲
Russ 2000	740.86	4.76 ▲
AMEX	1904.66	8.18 ▲
NYSE	8243.94	44.10 ▲
30 YR BOND	47.33	-0.08 ▼

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an interdisciplinary program. Course subjects include digital imaging, life drawing, game testing, storyboarding and law and ethics. By graduation, students must produce a game by themselves and another with a student team of artists and programmers, both of which can be published.

The department has computer equipment for game development and more copies of popular games and systems than most retailers have in their inventory. Students design characters by learning to sculpt with real clay and with a computer and the Phantom Omni virtual sculpting tool. The department will have a motion capture lab this semester to allow real human form and movements to be captured.

Starlight Runner Entertainment CEO Jeff Gomez visited the school in January, and was excited by what he saw. "Some (students) were wildly imaginative and applied their ideas into interesting video games," he said. "I gave a couple of kids my card."

Gomez, whose company creates video games and videos for companies like Disney and Mattel, said it is rare for a community college to implement a gaming-development program — something usually offered by well-financed schools and universities. He advised students to take the program seriously, as if they were involved in a job interview right now. Gaming for entertainment is only one aspect of the program. Courses and equipment can also be used to create simulations for other fields, including medicine.

Classes are offered in the summer, fall and spring semesters. Before enrolling in the program's courses, students must be college-ready in math and English and speak to Abraham. For information, call 713-718-6743 or visit <http://swc2.hccs.edu/digiGame>.

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