

Students create video games

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ZACHARY — Instead of merely playing computer video games during the past week, 24 Zachary Community School District students spent lots of time learning the fine points of creating such games.

The middle- and high-school students, along with a similar group in Lafayette, participated in a “Digital Workforce Intensive” presented by a non-profit company, 3D Squared, that is working to educate young people for 21st century work-force careers, said Joe Castille, a producer for the company.

Students working together at the Zachary and Lafayette sites communicated via Internet-based audio and video connections.

“If all else fails, we have cell phones,” said Jared Landry, of Vandebilt Catholic High School in Houma, a team leader for the week-long exercise.

“Our job is to make educational games that are also fun,” said Collin Shelton, an eighth-grader at Zachary’s Northwestern Middle School.

Shelton’s team created a game that was not only fun to play but delved into the serious issue of finding sources of “clean” energy.

The program is part of the Digital Workforce Initiative, funded by a grant from Louisiana Department of Economic Development.

Zachary gifted and talented teacher Margaret Atkinson gave up her spring break to take 12 students to a similar conference in Lafayette in April. It was their first entry into an intense environment for learning digital media concepts.

The stay in Lafayette also was not all fun and games, as the April conference challenged students to confront three problem areas for Louisiana: coastal erosion, obesity and problems in the state’s educational arena.

“Whac-A-Nutria was one of the games, because they learned that nutria are known to contribute to coastal erosion,” Atkinson said.

When the students presented their idea to video-game professionals, they had to argue against suggestions of copyright infringement because of the similarity to “Whac-A-Mole,” she said.

Atkinson said the experience was “life changing” for her students.

“They learned to problem-solve on the spot and work as a team,” she said.

The initiative also benefited students who have creative ideas but are easily frustrated if an idea does not soon pan out. Atkinson also saw students considered to be socially awkward “burst out of their shells.”

Eighth-grader Biannca Pierre said she was scared to speak before a group until she began working with her team members in Lafayette.

“This is good for people to come to if they’re on the shy side,” Pierre said.

“We’re all nerds,” Landry joked.

The students presented their games to professionals on Saturday, and Zachary High sophomore Charlie Flanders said their objective was not to have a finished product, but the basic layout or prototype for a game.

“For the presentation, it’s as if we’re at the last brick in the building,” Shelton added.

While some video game creators can become millionaires overnight, getting rich is not on everyone’s mind, students said.

“I just want to do what I love, and if you do what you love, you never have to work a day in your life,” said Cole Connelly, a workshop counselor from Runnels High School.

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