

Research & Resources

DISCOVERIES AND PARTNERSHIPS BENEFITTING NEW MEXICO AND BEYOND

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The game master

by Norman Martin

Barbara Chamberlin taps growing interest in educational computer games

New Mexico moms and dads who worry their kids are wasting their lives parked in front of a video game console can take heart. A research program focusing on educational computer games is being developed at NMSU and pushing the boundaries of finding fun and entertaining ways to deliver information to children.

Branching out from fantasy lands into real-world problems, Barbara Chamberlin, an educational media and instructional technology specialist with NMSU's Cooperative Extension Service, is leading a team working on games that explore new ways to foster productive scholarship.

"Barbara is the heart of NMSU's progress in game development," said Rebecca Kongs, chairman of Dona Ana Community College's Digital Imaging and Design Department.

Computer games and console-based video games are important teaching tools. They often incorporate sophisticated learning principles. Some improve literacy and problem-solving, while their collaborative nature promotes teamwork.

"Kids play games," Chamberlin said. "We think there's a way to weave learning opportunities into that play. The types of games we're developing teach specific content."

Among Chamberlin's latest projects is an interdisciplinary effort with NMSU's College of Education and mathematical sciences department, developing math learning games using the popular Apple iPod. "We'll be spending the next five years developing new games with math content that will help middle schoolers spend more time thinking, learning and practicing math."

To test new games, Chamberlin opened a video game research center in Knox Hall on the western edge of campus. The facility features an arcade-like setting – including portable devices and video gaming systems such as Playstation and Nintendo, along with PC and Internet gaming consoles.

"We've been doing game development at NMSU for 17 years," Chamberlin said. "This new lab allows us to expand our interdisciplinary programs to other departments, as well as focus on the research aspects of game development."

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Barbara Chamberlin

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Chamberlin honed her research skills at the University of Virginia, where she earned a doctorate in instructional technology. Her dissertation documented learning on a Webbased game for a U.S. Department of Agriculture Web site. The site, titled "The Food Detectives Fight BAC," features games that teach 9- to 11-year-old students how to avoid food borne illness as they prepare snacks, reheat leftovers and help in the kitchen.

So popular is the game that it's been released on compact disc in both English and Spanish. So far, some 30,000 versions of the CD have been distributed nationwide.

Jeanne Gleason, head of NMSU's communications' production division, said Chamberlin has a passion for her work. "She's developed highly successful protocols for gleaning valuable insights into how and why kids and adults enjoy all types of games," she said.

Born and raised in Albuquerque, Chamberlin holds a bachelor's degree in communication studies and a master's in agricultural and extension education, both from NMSU. She lives in Las Cruces with husband, multimedia developer John "C.C." Chamberlin, and their 18-monthold son, Alexander.

Chamberlin also has public-speaking talents, working as a conference speaker and professional stand-up comedian. "I really owe much of my comic material to NMSU, particularly my first defensive state driving course," she said. "The manual was simply hilarious."

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