

## **Training African American Teens as Game Testers**

This poster will address a new project to develop a game tester training program for urban African American males. Our larger hypothesis is that cultural context of video game play provides affordances and barriers in transferring the cognitive skills developed by playing games to more formal learning or employment skills. We seek to address these affordances and barriers to increase opportunities for one of the most active demographic in video gaming that is at the greatest risk for less-education and unemployment.

### **Target Audience**

We have selected to study this question of cultural context and game play in relationship to urban African American males, from low performing schools for two reasons. First, there is evidence that video games often spark an interest in computing and engage students with computers (Schulte & Knobelsdorf, 2007; Gorriz & Medina, 2000). However, market research has shown that African American and Hispanic males are actually playing games more often than any other demographic (Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, 2002; Children NOW, 2001; Forrester, 2003), yet their representation in computing and the game industry is low (Computing Research Association, 2007; Commission on Professionals in Science and Technology, 2003; International Game Developers Association, 2005). This contradictory evidence is intriguing and prompts further investigation.

Second, utilizing the interest of a demographic that is at such a high risk for less education and unemployment (Edelman, Holzer, & Offner, 2006, Mincy, 2006) to engage them with learning seems wise. Games are or can be part of "*islands of expertise*", defined by Palmquist and Crowley in 2007 as, "a collection of knowledge, interest, and activities around a specific topic." In collecting this knowledge social support is critical to the development of information processing skills that allow children to develop an interest into more than a collection of facts, vocabulary of a practice, or strategies for winning. This demographic is difficult to reach for any educator for complex social and economic reasons. We propose that understanding these students interest in games in the framework of *islands of expertise* will assist us in creating interventions that help bridge their interest in games to other aspects of their lives.

In a preliminary study of African American boys<sup>1</sup> we found that cultural norms for play influenced their behavior, including:

- Playing games on console platforms instead of computers
- More conversation, but almost exclusively on competitive talk rather than strategies, or higher level thinking skills
- Little and highly regulated use of cheats, strategy guides, and other user modification of the game.

### **Game-Tester Workshop**

In the Spring 2008 we will develop and test short workshops to teach 11 – 18 year old inner-city black males about video game testing. We propose that a video game-tester job-training program could provide a way to bridge the enthusiastic interest and immense effort young men are putting into their game play to:

- Provide tangible exposure to career options that involve technology beyond just being a “computer geek”.
- Increasing the ability for participants to transfer their knowledge, skills and interest in games to other aspects of their lives.
- Pull back the veil surrounding technology, particularly of seamlessly designed console systems and games, so participants begin to see the computational power available to them.
- Expose them to workforce rewards and customs.

We will design a three-hour workshop curriculum introducing game testing to students including hands-on activities such as testing and brainstorming games. This introduction to game testing will consist of three components; an overview of game testing, an extended activity for students to experience the day-to-day activities performed by a game tester, and an overview of the gaming industry and the game tester’s role in that industry.

#### I. Overview of Game Testing

- a. Introduction - The goal is for students to understand that game testing includes a range of activities, from debugging to feedback on the game design and style.

---

<sup>1</sup> This study by DiSalvo, Croweley, and Norwood (in press) consisted of observations of a social game setting and group interviews with 8 middle school students from an economically depressed urban neighborhood in Pittsburgh, PA.

- b. Students will play a game and try to identify the bug in the game in the game.
  - c. Students will play a game and provide feedback on the game play and style.
- II. Day of Game Tester
- a. A narrative of the game testers day
  - b. Students will be asked to role-play an activity that replicates part of that narrative
  - c. A review of forms and procedures that game testers use.
- III. Industry Overview
- a. Relationship between game developers, producers, and retail
    - i. Brainstorm a game and walk it through the process of development, production and sales.
    - ii. Game Tester Overview
      - 1. Outline basic training and skills needed for game testers
      - 2. Information on pay, benefits and job security
      - 3. Opportunities for future
      - 4. Other careers game testing can prepare you for

## References

- Children NOW. (2001). *Fair play: Violence, gender and race in video games*. Berkeley, CA.
- Commission on Professionals in Science and Technology. (2003, May). *Trends in African American and Native American participation in STEM higher education*. Washington, DC: E. L. Babco.
- Computer Research Association. (2007, July 31) *CRA Taulbee Trends: Ph.D. Programs and Ethnicity*. Vargo, J. ([www.cra.org/info/taulbee/ethnicity.html](http://www.cra.org/info/taulbee/ethnicity.html)) 1/9/08
- DiSalvo, B., Crowely, C., and Norwood, R. Learning in context: Digital games & young black men. *Games and Culture*, In Press.
- Edelman, P., Holzer, H., & Offner, P. (2006). *Reconnecting Young Black Men*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute.
- Forrester, Consumer Technographics North America. (2003, June). *Hispanics and Blacks game more*. Boston, MA: J. Kolko, C. Q. Strohm, & A. Lonian.
- Gorritz, C. M., & Medina, C. (2000). Engaging girls with computers through software games. *Communications of the ACM*, 43(1), 42-49.

The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation. (2002, Fall). *Key facts: Children and video games*, Washington, DC.

International Game Developers Association. (2005, October) *Game developer demographics: An exploration of workforce diversity*. San Francisco, CA: Gourdin, A.

Mincy, R. (Ed) (2006) *Black Males Left Behind*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute.

Palmquist, S. and Crowley, K. From teachers to testers: How parents talk to novice and expert children in a natural history museum. *Science Education*, In Press.

Schulte, C. and Knobelsdorf, M. (2007) Attitudes towards computer science-computing experiences as a starting point and barrier to computer science. *Proceedings of the third international workshop on computing education research*, Atlanta, GA, USA,. ACM Press.