

The Boston Globe

THEY'VE GOT (VIDEO) GAME

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Date: March 31, 2005 **Page:** 1 **Section:** Globe NorthWest

On a recent Friday in Jason Reposa's college classroom, the in-class assignment is to shoot at everything.

"For the next few minutes, it's kill or be killed," says Reposa, an adjunct professor in the computer science department at Middlesex Community College in Bedford. He walks about his computer-lined classroom, instructing students to boot up "Unreal Tournament," a first-person shooter video game that arms its players with such weapons as "The Enforcer," "The Ripper," and the "Flak Cannon." Within seconds, the group of 18 otherwise peaceable undergraduates is blowing up enemy "Bots" and dodging ammunition from razor-spewing handguns and rocket-propelled grenade launchers.

And this year, for the first time in the college's history, the students are earning credit for it.

Last fall, Middlesex Community College became one of only a handful of Boston-area colleges to offer courses in video gaming, an exponentially growing area of industry that increasingly requires

employees with specific technical skills.

"It has always been extremely difficult to break into the video game industry because there is no formal educational process," said Reposa, a computer consultant and game designer who, at the moment, is Middlesex Community College's only video-gaming instructor. At 26, he is one of the college's youngest faculty members, and has become the designer and driving force behind the school's video-game classes. "The hope is to introduce people to the video-game world that's out there and, if they choose to pursue it further, to prepare them to get their foot in the door," he says.

For three credits, students can take Reposa's Introduction to Video Games, an interactive primer on the issues surrounding the computer-gaming industry: what makes a good video game, what makes it marketable (the two are not always synonymous), what goes into designing a game, and what social issues such as censorship, addiction, and piracy have arisen in their wake.

Reposa is also teaching five noncredit

video-gaming classes this semester at Middlesex, including Video Game Analysis, Video Game Design, and Video Game Programming, all offered as weekend or online courses through the college's Community Education and Career Training program.

On this day in Reposa's introductory class, the lecture topic is video games and violence, and he has asked his students to play "Unreal Tournament" for some hands-on experience. When Reposa mentions the 1999 massacre at Columbine High School in Colorado, a tragedy that has often been blamed on the shooters' fascination with violent games, the class breaks into a heated debate.

"Video games can't make you more violent in real life," says a student preoccupied by the game in front of him. A moment later, he slams his mouse against the table when his on-screen avatar is blown to pieces.

This exercise, says Reposa, is a great example of the relevance of his class. He is not there to prove or disprove the effect of video games on behavior, he says. Rather, he is there to talk about the role they have come to play in our modern culture. Like film, television, and other media, video games have worked their way into our national conversation, he says, and the effect on our society socially, technologically, and economically has been huge.

According to recent statistics released by the Entertainment Software Association, a national organization dedicated to the business and public affairs of the interactive-game industry, more than half of all Americans age 6 and older

play computer and video games. "Halo 2," one of the best-selling video game titles of 2004, took in \$125 million on its first day of sales. That's about \$85 million more than the record for first-day revenue of any movie, held by "Spiderman 2." For Reposa, this is a new reality worth studying.

"The video game is the medium of this generation," he said. A 2002 graduate of Worcester Polytechnic Institute and cofounder of the WPI Game Development Club, Reposa is only a few years older than the students he is teaching. This semester, he trumps his oldest video-gaming student by three years, a chronological advantage he cannot count on in his other computer classes.

Reposa often wears a suit to distinguish himself from his Middlesex students, but hasn't yet warmed to the title of "professor." Most of his students call him by his first name, and on rare occasions, take him to task in the student lounge, going head-to-head on the video-game consoles plugged into the lounge's television set. ("He tends to lose," said 20-year-old Tim McGee, a student in Reposa's introductory class.)

But despite his informal demeanor and entertaining classroom, Reposa's courses are serious business. "I thought this class would be something to fill my schedule," said Jason Giragosian, a 19-year-old student from Burlington. "There is so much that goes into these games that I never realized."

"Video-game programming is one of the most difficult things you can do," Reposa said in an interview outside of class. "It borrows from every discipline,

from computer science, to visual art, to creative writing. That's what I'm emphasizing in this introductory class. In the future, we hope to add for-credit classes in design and programming."

It is only over the last decade that video gaming has appeared in academia. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Comparative Media Studies Program offers some of the most in-depth, formal video-game courses in the Boston area.

"Video-game education now is a lot like film schools 30 years ago," said Henry Jenkins, director of the MIT program. "Film schools were just establishing themselves back then, but when they did, they trained the next generation of filmmakers with a common vocabulary so that artists and tech crews could communicate and collaborate across the field. The result was an explosion of new techniques, better-educated critics, and a more innovative, more important medium."

Over the last five years, the International Game Developers Association, a nonprofit digital-game advocacy organization based in San Francisco, has worked closely with members of the academic community to begin to formally educate the future workforce, developing a curriculum framework for collegiate video-gaming programs.

"People from the gaming generation are just now coming into positions of power," said the association's executive director, Jason Della Rocca, "and as they enter those positions in the ivory tower, they are increasingly welcoming video games into academia."

So what are video-game development

companies looking for in their employees? At the moment, it is not yet a video-gaming degree. Mark Rein, vice president of Epic Games, which created "Unreal Tournament," said, "We're more likely to find someone because they've created their own games than because they've gone to school. That's not to say school's a bad idea we're just more interested in a portfolio."

"There is a large hobbyist game community out there," agreed Mike Gesner, president and chief executive officer of Dragonfly Game Design in Worcester. "To stand out, you have to complete a [game]. It doesn't need to be polished, it just has to be finished."

In the next few years, Reposa and his department at Middlesex Community College plan to offer courses that will help students do precisely that. "By the end of the video-game programming course we've envisioned, the students will have created their own video games," said Reposa. "We want them to learn something, and help them to hit the ground running."