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## Students learn to program games at sold-out design class

By Deborah Burstyn  
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What's wrong with this picture? Here's a room full of 19 excited, energetic boys, ages 9 to 12 who have spent all day in school. But no one is wrestling, karate-chopping or dueling anyone with a pretend light saber. Instead, they sit attentive and focused.

Nothing's wrong. In fact everything is just right, according to Danville Parks & Recreation Director Michelle Lacy. It's a new class in computer game design offered at the Danville Community Center, and Lacy is pleased, even a bit surprised, by the enthusiastic response it's generated.

"This is the first time we've ever offered it and it filled almost immediately. That is very unusual," Lacy said,

Especially for boys in the tween age group who may consider themselves way too cool to sign up for a Parks & Rec class. Especially after school when they'd all rather be gaming on computers.

And there you have it -- the secret to the success of the six-week Wednesday afternoon class. It lets boys do what boys today like to do -- play games on the computer.

Only -- to borrow a phrase from gamers -- it takes them to the next level.

Explains instructor Anita Khurana, "I prefer to see kids making their own games rather than buying games. Instead of merely being passive consumers, it's good for them to use their creativity."

Khurana, 41, heads Vision Tech, a family-run San Ramon company offering hands-on classes for children in software and technology through after school and summer programs. Thanks to VisionTech's supply of laptops -- Toshiba, Apple and IBMs -- the classes are hands-on. And the class she and her daughter, Anuradaha, 22, are teaching in Danville is no exception.

Both women weave continuously around the U-shaped configuration of tables where 19 boys -- and one girl -- excitedly plan and play the games they've been designing. They teach the students using a basic game-design program called Multimedia Fusion 1.5.

"It's a good starter program for kids," Khurana said. Meteors, aliens, and bullets are among the options of onscreen projectiles that the students can choose to have their characters fire and dodge.

But no bullets appear on the screen of Nicole Faubert, an 11-year-old Danville resident. The sole girl in the class, Faubert's creation is a baseball game. "This is fun," said Faubert who added that because she is home-schooled with her two brothers, she is used to being the only girl.

With the class nearly over (it will be offered again in the summer), most of the students have just about completed their games. Once the class ends this week, Khurana will burn a copy of each student's game onto a CD and mail it to them.

At the moment, the room resounds with the cacophony of onscreen explosions and tinny computer game music punctuated with shouts of "Yes!" and "Awesome!"

"Hey, I'll play your game and you can play mine," suggested Eric Meitzke, a 12-year-old, seventh-grade student at Charlotte Wood Middle School, to one of his buddies.

"I've never beaten my game," he confides. "I'm probably going to make it easier."

The younger Khurana crouches and studies a game under construction by Richard Archer, a 9-year-old third-grader at

Baldwin Elementary. "You want to give this guy a platform for movement," she explains. After helping a few more students, she stands up and calls out, "Hey everyone, when you're running your game, you need a password to jump to the third level. Does that make sense to everyone?"

Of course it does. Nothing makes more sense than computer games to these students.

In fact Daniel Goldberg, a 12-year-old Danville resident who attends sixth grade at Charlotte Wood Middle School, understands gaming well enough to see a picture bigger than the one on his screen. "I want to start my own gaming Web site," he said. "Advertisers pay a lot for those."

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