

**VIDEO GAME PROGRAMMING**



SAMUEL ROGERS PHOTOS | SPECIAL TO THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

From left, Robbie Browning, Andrew Harrah and Austin Browning, all participants in Tidewater Community College's four-day gaming and simulation camp for Suffolk Public Schools students, test their video game before presenting their project to fellow campers.

## Getting into gaming. Seriously.

### MIDDLE-SCHOOLERS

use story-telling, creativity and teamwork to produce final video presentations.

By Hattie Brown Garrow  
*The Virginian-Pilot*

Jonathan Sharpe and teammate Michael Betts created "Maze of Doom," in which a koala tries to avoid fireballs as it travels through a maze.

Darryl Colbert and Joshua Durham called their project "Aliens." The hero, John, has to defeat a doctor who has summoned aliens to destroy the Earth.

Group by group, the rising sixth-through-eighth-graders in Jody Strausser's gaming and simulation summer program stood up to share their final projects - video games they designed. Most were of the good-versus-evil variety with lasers and ghosts and rockets.



From left, Symone Wilson, Chelsea Whitney and Jordan West test their game. The camp was at ODU's Tri-Cities Higher Education Center in Portsmouth.

Then came the final group of four girls, the only females in the class. The title screen for "Peach Power 2" featured a heart floating in clouds. On the next screen, the girls demonstrated how Peach, a blonde princess with a pink dress, collected diamonds so she could return to her castle.

"She's going to be her own hero this time," team member Jordan West, a Forest Glen Middle School student, said later that afternoon.

See GAMING. Page 8

I like programming, telling it what to do. That's pretty fun."

Michael Betts,  
a John Yeates  
Middle School  
student



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**Above** Jordan West, left, and Symone Wilson try to work out a computer glitch minutes before their video game presentation.  
**Right** Robbie Browning, left, helps fellow campers Andrew Harrah, center, and Marcus Davis test the final draft of their game design.



## GAMING

*Continued from Page 1*

Even the boys had to admit it was pretty cool. Only hours earlier, the girls had scrambled to redo the game after they accidentally deleted it from the computer.

"You guys did a nice job, especially for all that you had to overcome," Strausser told the group.

No matter the theme of their game, all 17 students learned skills that are transferable to modeling and simulation – a growing career field in Hampton Roads, and Suffolk in particular. And some are just out of elementary school.

The goal is to reach kids early and perhaps interest them in a high-tech career, said Strausser, an assistant professor of modeling and simulation at Tidewater Community College, Suffolk Public Schools offered the camp July 27-30.

The middle-schoolers worked for nine hours each day in a TCC classroom at Old Dominion University's Tri-Cities Higher Education Center in Portsmouth, near the Suffolk line. They developed storylines for their games, gathered animated images and other resources, learned to work as a

team and, ultimately, created products they could be proud of, Strausser said.

"I like programming, telling it what to do," said Michael, a student at John Yeates Middle School. "That's pretty fun."

John F. Kennedy Middle School students Josh Graham and Karl Liebert spent about two days developing a game they called "Pac-Man's Flight." Their version of Pac-Man – a video game icon from the 1980s – battles ghosts over five levels with lasers and the ability to fly.

Both boys said they like computers and are avid fans of the online game "World of Warcraft."

"Whoa, that's cool!" one student blurted out as Josh and Karl debuted their creation for the class.

Strausser said all the students would become so engrossed in their projects that he had to urge them to take breaks. On the final day, one student showed up before the 8 a.m. start time, eager to begin work.

"They were focused. They were on task. They were excited," Strausser said. "It was great to work with them because they wanted to be there."

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