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Olathe

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GAMING FOR EDUCATION Virtual lessons part of class

PLAYING TO LEARN

Software helps landscape students prepare for hands-on experiences through simulations.

BY LING-MEI WONG
The Kansas City Star

Students don't have to stop playing computer games when they reach the classroom.

With educational software being used in the Olathe North landscape science program, students are virtual interns, learning through projects.

"I really like the program," said senior Charlie Schneider. "You get a hands-on feel without going to the site."

The software company, called I Support Learning, offers nine curricula ranging from robotics to music video production. The company has been in Olathe since 2003, and its programs have reached schools as near as its hometown and as far as Singapore.

The "Green Industry — Landscape Design" game will be integrated into Olathe East High's landscape science program next school year.

Schneider at first had trouble with computer aided drafting,



SHANE KEYSER/THE KANSAS CITY STAR

Lauren Bradley and Caleb Anderson, with Olathe North's landscape science, planted blueberry and blackberry bushes. Software games and hands-on work give students

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but the program allowed him to go back and review the concepts as many times as he needed. The game allowed him to take pictures of an Olathe North courtyard and work in it virtually.

In each game, students are virtual interns for a company and learn about the subject through projects, said Steve Waddell, lead developer. The projects reinforce problem-solving skills and teach textbook knowledge in an interactive way.

"It teaches kids what they need to know, so they do well on state assessments," he said. In the landscape design game, students design an Alzheimer's garden that needs to meet budget and safety standards. They use computer aided drafting (CAD) and irrigation knowledge for the project.

"We're trying to get the average teacher to understand how much you actually learn from any video game," Waddell said. "Lara Croft (of the Tomb Raider games) has a story line, that's why stuff works with boys and girls. It engages the generation out there — everybody likes a story, likes to live."

Having animation in educational software is fairly standard, said Sean Smith, education professor at the University of Kansas.

"It's kind of critical because a lot of kids respond to it," he said. "Learners have a context, connection."

One of North's projects was building a garden for an elderly couple with an \$8,000 budget. Schneider and his classmates competed for the best bid, selected by teacher Greg Krenke.

After using the program, Schneider interned with The Sod Shop in Olathe.

"I'm working on starting a smaller branch within the company," he said. "As boss of a smaller company, I'd work with customers, what I learned here."

Paul Payne, a horticulture teacher at Lakeshore High School in Slidell, La., tried similar projects. When hurricanes hit the Gulf Coast, they destroyed the school greenhouses, making the program a good alternative. The software, along with the video game development curriculum, were donated to the school.

The game has practical implications.

"At the end of the program, I make each student develop their own company, own flyer, own business cards," Krenke said. "For high school, it's easy to start out with a lawn care business ... they're able to go out and take what they've learned."

Krenke was the company's first customer, asking Waddell for help designing the

real-world experience.



SHANE KEYSER | THE KANSAS CITY STAR

Greg Krenke (left), landscape science instructor, helped Robert Quizenberry, a student in the program, plant blueberry and blackberry bushes in the nursery this week.

Landscape Science curriculum three years ago. Waddell had planned to develop artificial intelligence software first.

The environment is appealing, Waddell said.

“Everybody likes to be a star, likes to win,” Waddell said. “They’re not doing it late at night on a Xbox, they’re doing it in school.”

I Support Learning

To see the full line of educational software, visit www.isupportlearning.com.

To reach Ling-Mei Wong, call (816) 234-7729.



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