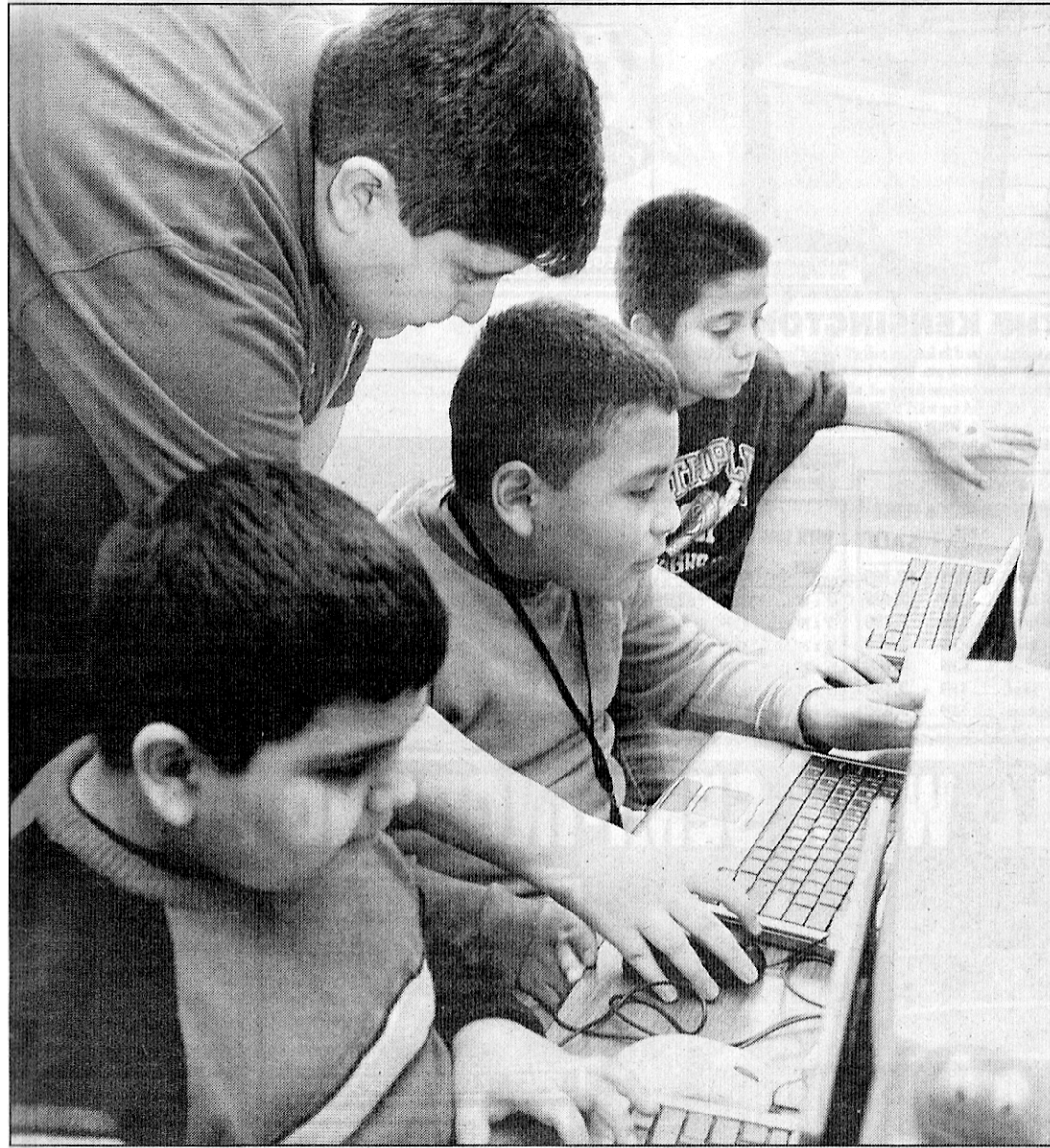


WESTBURY

Video game class wins points as learning tool



Michael Pugliese of Westbury-based Game Builders Academy helps fifth-graders create video games yesterday at Drexel Avenue School. Students say they learn while having fun.

BY CHRISTINA HERNANDEZ
christina.hernandez@newsday.com

At a Westbury elementary school yesterday, Yousaf Shakil was engrossed in a Pac-Man-style educational video game about Christopher Columbus.

"It's really fun," said Yousaf, 10, who attends Powells Lane School. "This is the best game ever, I think."

He could have been another video-game-crazed kid. But in this case, Yousaf was playing a game he had created. He was one of 15 gifted and talented fifth-graders from Drexel Avenue and Powells Lane schools to have their final video game building class yesterday.

Westbury is the first public school district to host the program, which was launched in 2006 and consists of 10 two-hour lessons, said Phil Lipsky, president of Game Builders Academy, the Westbury-based company that runs the program. Students build two-dimensional video games based on what they're studying in school, he said.

Skills including graphing, algebra, creative thinking and writing are all put to use in the video game building process, Lipsky said, helping students to understand why their school lessons are important. "It is the perfect answer to the question they ask either tacitly or out loud: 'When am I going to use that stuff?'" he said.

Students created their video games, which focused on history's great explorers, using free game building software called "Game Maker." Lipsky said

Game Builders Academy hopes to bring the program to other local schools.

Wanda Toledo, Drexel Avenue's principal, said the program was "groundbreaking."

"They're bringing in all the curriculum areas," she said.

Or, as Akinda Goode, 10, of Drexel Avenue School, put it, "It's like learning while having fun."

A 2006 report by Washington-based Federation of American Scientists, a nonprofit promoting information technology for learning, found features of digital games, including game design, "can be applied to address the increasing demand for high quality education."

Henry Kelly, president of the group, said while video game building in the classroom is "very uncommon," games are becoming more popular as an unconventional way to teach skills and complex ideas. "The important thing about a game is you're constantly acting," he said. "You're acting, you're imagining, you're building."

Also, Kelly said, video games quiz students in a fun environment. "You're being tested all the time and you don't mind it," he said.

As yesterday's class ended, the students played one another's games. The classroom filled with bangs and booms as students blasted past monsters to answer trivia questions. The students said they were sad to see the class end. "I want to do more," said Justin Brown, 10, who attends Drexel Avenue. "I want to make more levels and make it more challenging."

NEWSDAY PHOTO / ALAN RAI