

Quest for educational success: University creates gaming platform to help reach students through technology

May 25 2011, By Kristin Rodine

The Doors' hypnotic rhythms provide the musical backdrop as students in Chris Haskell's educational technology class use laptops to work their way through their final quests.

As they complete a task, [students](#) may earn a reward or advance to a higher level. The highest rank is "teacher." That's what most of these undergraduate students want to become in real life, and along the way they're among the first to venture into a new teacher-training approach devised by Haskell and Boise State's Department of [Educational Technology](#) Chairwoman Lisa Dawley.

The two are using the platform to teach those future teachers, and they hope those new teachers will, in turn, use it with their students.

It's called 3D GameLab and sports the tag line, "Turn your classroom into a living game."

This August, Dawley and Haskell will host a three-week online summer camp expected to train 500 teachers from across the world, each of whom can use the quest-based [gaming platform](#) to teach up to 60 students this fall.

"That's 30,000 people," Dawley said. "Eventually, it will easily become millions." Owned by Boise State, the platform is in "closed beta" trial

mode now but will later go public and "become commercialized in some way, shape or form," she said. That could happen as early as next spring, she said.

"We're exploring the business model behind it now," she said.

Eventually, Dawley would like to see GameLab take off as a sort of "[Facebook](#) for education," an online social network that would offer basic access to its learning programs for free, worldwide.

To some, applying the lessons of the game [World of Warcraft](#) to a teacher-training curriculum may seem odd. But it's really a natural avenue, one that taps into students' interests and aptitudes, Dawley said.

"Ninety-seven percent of kids play games," she said. "They understand it: Choose a quest, work on your quest, turn in your quest." The approach is far from frivolous, Haskell said. It engages students' imaginations and allows them control and choice in how to navigate the course.

So far he has developed a couple hundred quests, each keyed to state and national core standards.

Some quests take a couple of days; some can take as little as 15 minutes. Some embrace new technologies such as "voice thread" online conversations. Others are as old-school as a spreadsheet.

The key, Haskell said, is that students get to choose which quests to pursue, and in which order.

"Having a lot of different options creates excitement for students," said Summer Dalgarn, who is seeking a second degree so she can teach English with a writing emphasis. "There's positive forward momentum, and it makes you want to do something harder because you'll get farther.

"Each quest, in its essence, is something that's valuable to know as a teacher."

Many students keep embarking on quests after they've completed all the requirements, Haskell said, because it's fun.

"This is my favorite class out of all the ones I've taken," said Boise State sophomore Anna Richter, a kinesiology student. "It's interactive; it's not me sitting and listening to a teacher talk.

"I would say it's as challenging as other courses. I just feel like it's an easier learning style and less stressful." Richter's not a gamer, and she's not sure she wants to be a teacher. But the class has helped her learn techniques and tools that have helped her not only cruise through the quests but also do better on papers and presentations for other courses.

For example, she said, a quest in PowerPoint helped her make a key presentation for another class "much more visually appealing." Students in Haskell's classes range from avid gamers like Dalgarn to technologically tentative future teachers such as Debbie Messecar.

She doesn't see the class as a game. "I see a lot of kids playing games, and that's not what this is. I consider it a technology lab." Messecar's favorite quest was a spreadsheet for gradebooks. She said the course has helped her get more comfortable with computers, which in the past she'd only used for email or downloading photographs. And that, she said, will be an asset in her future classrooms.

Boise State's Department of Educational Technology trains more online K-12 teachers than any other university in the nation, Dawley said, with about 550 graduate students this past year. Only about 28 percent of those students live in Idaho, but since the graduate program is completely online, that's not a problem.

The program is self-supporting. Tuition from those graduate students generated about \$1.8 million in the past year, she said, enough to cover the salaries of 12 full-time faculty members, pay around 25 adjunct faculty members, fund a scholarship and grant graduate assistantship stipends to about 10 students.

The educational technology department's core mission is to explore and employ "current and emergent technologies," Dawley said. "We're the geeky ones." The GameLab platform got its start last spring when World of Warcraft fans Haskell and Dawley were talking about ways to tap into the structure and appeal of such games.

"It began the way a lot of our conversations begin," Haskell said. "Wouldn't it be really cool? ... " They enlisted Rocket, a local web-development company, to help create the platform. Its first outing was a camp last summer for teenagers, who helped refine the program as they gamed their way through lessons.

In the fall, Haskell started using 3D GameLab to teach two sections of Education Technology 202, a required course for students who want to become teachers. So far, about 100 students have participated in that pilot program.

Students rate each quest, which helps teachers know what works best, Haskell said. So far, he said, his students taking the game-based version of Ed Tech 202 have been doing better than their traditional-classroom counterparts.

The BSU professors' efforts are part of a nationwide trend of using gaming and other online approaches in education, said Luci Willits, chief of staff for Idaho Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Luna.

"And it certainly aligns very well with the superintendent's initiatives for

technology," she said. "It offers immediate feedback, and it's a reflection of the world our students live in." "It's content that drives technology - embedded lessons in a game," Willits said.

At each step, students receive near-instant feedback from Haskell. And when they earn the required 2,000 points to complete the course, they receive an email from him.

It says, simply, "you win."

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