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QUEST

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Indiana University and part of the "Quest Atlantis" design team.

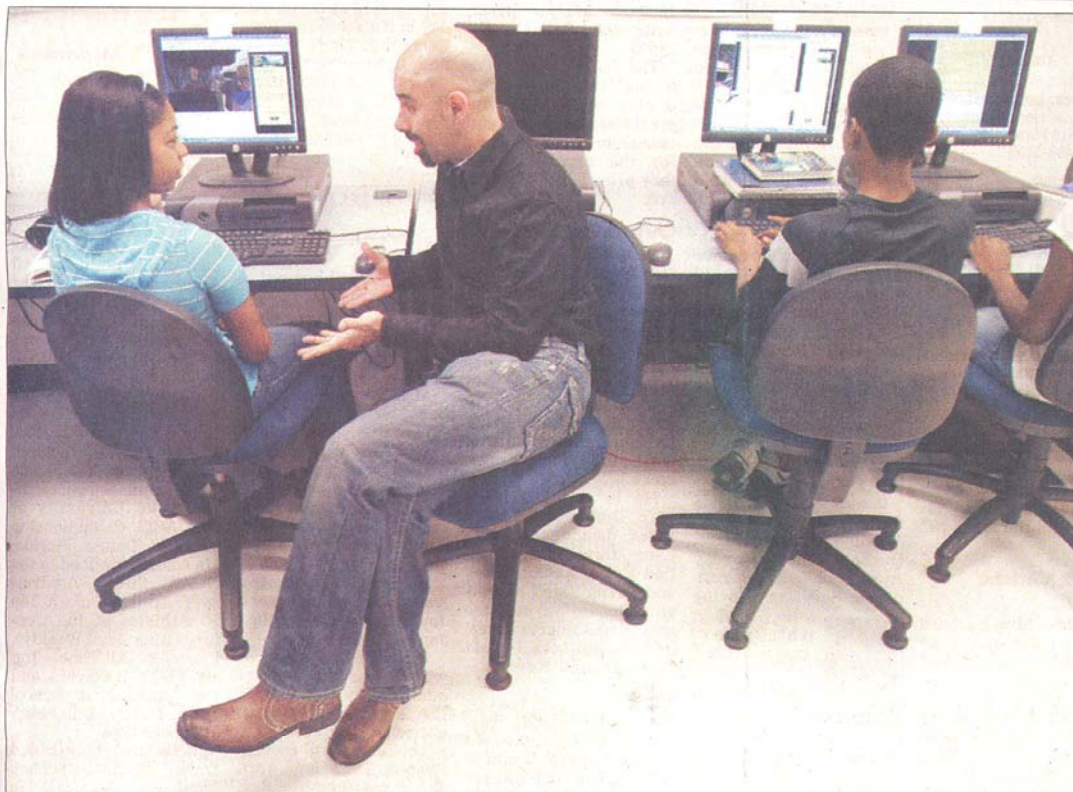
Rogers-Herr students last year were the first to use a previous version of "Quest Atlantis." The school was chosen because there was interest among those at the school, and because Rogers-Herr had the technology in place to facilitate the innovation. Newman said Rogers-Herr likely will serve as a test site before future versions of "Quest Atlantis" are rolled out.

In "Modern Prometheus," students virtually go around gathering quotes from townspeople. That information is aimed at helping them write persuasive essays on how to go about finding a cure for the plague. So not only do students get in a little history and science and math while brushing up on their reading and writing — uh, kids still have to know how to read and write in order to deal with this here virtual learning — but they also get some bioethics.

See, Barab kept it real and current by getting away from the virtual plague and challenging students to think through whether or not it would be OK for them to experiment on him if it meant everybody in Durham and Raleigh would be protected from the clear and present danger that is the swine flu.

Well, only if the professor consented to being a guinea pig, explained 13-year-old Daria Robinson — bioethics, you see.

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Sasha Barab (center) talks with seventh-grader Kristena Armwood (left) as the students use the Quest Atlantis software that he helped create, at Rogers-Herr Middle School on Wednesday.

On a 'Quest' — and on TV

Welcome to learning in the 21st century, Rogers-Herr Middle School

Crayons and using rocks as counting tools was how the learning happened dating back to, oh, say, when Laura Ingalls was sitting in that one-room school on "Little House on the Prairie."

Now all of a sudden that's not good enough anymore. Of course, some would argue that a whole bunch of children got left behind in that learning model. And the mantra among progressive educators is that folks hanging on to old-school approaches to academics might as well pry that primitive chalk from their stubborn little fingers and get with it.

So in Rogers-Herr Middle



JOHN MCCANN

School teacher Dov Rosenberg's computer lab, students have entered a virtual world wherein they reprise the role of modern-day investigative journalists transported to the town of Ingolstadt in 19th-century Europe to help the people

find a cure for the plague. The video game is called "Quest Atlantis," and this particular version is loosely modeled after author Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein."

By the way, a crew from "Designing Spaces" was in Rosenberg's lab Wednesday getting footage for a show that will air in August on The Learning Channel.

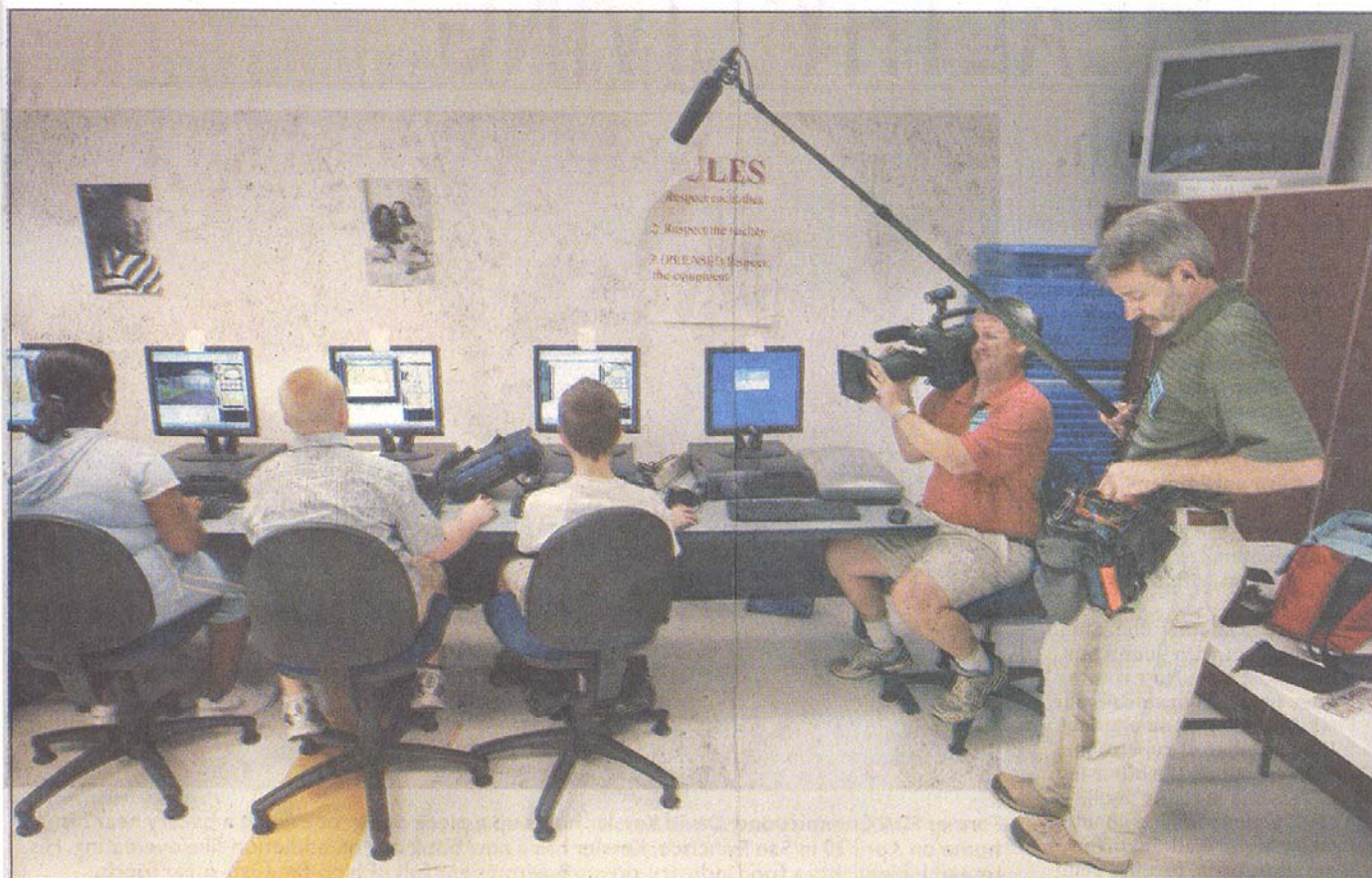
The version of the game Rogers-Herr students were fiddling with is called "Modern Prometheus" and is supposed to make kids better at persuasive writing. The students were the first in the entire world to play this version of

"Quest Atlantis." Their experience will be used to tweak the game before it's released for distribution.

Don't go to the store looking for "Quest Atlantis." It's not like "Madden NFL 09" or "Guitar Hero." "Quest Atlantis" is just for schools right now, but the idea is to spin off versions for home, as well as places like parks and museums that will allow for virtual experiences of those facilities, said One Planet Education Network CEO George Newman, who is a business partner with Dr. Sasha Barab, a professor at

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LOCAL



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Videographer Matt Boles (second from right) and sound mixer Jim Cote (right) tape students from Beth Spataro's seventh grade language arts class as they use the Quest Atlantis software at Rogers-Herr Middle School on Wednesday.

High-tech teaching turns sleepyheads into achievers

BY JOHN MCCANN

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DURHAM — Had Indiana University School of Education professor Sasha Barab and his team not come up with their newfangled "Quest Atlantis" video game, Rogers-Herr Middle School students Kayla Daniels and Quianna Brown would've had to resign themselves to doing those prehistoric writing drills to get ready for next week's state writing exam.

Mind you, those methods still work. But "Quest Atlantis," particularly the version of it called "Modern Prometheus," is being hailed as an out-of-this-world learning tool. The game gets students to gather the information

necessary to present a persuasive written argument.

And the proof is in the test scores, according to Dov Rosenberg, the instructional technology facilitator at Rogers-Herr. Students there last year experimented with another version of "Quest Atlantis" and for whatever reason did better on the state writing exam than other Durham Public Schools students. Rosenberg links that to the video game.

"I think there is a direct result there," Rosenberg said.

Is that all good, though? Kayla and Quianna, both 12, said poking around with virtual learning makes it tougher to sit through other classes where the instruction is traditional. Delecia Utley,

13, said she feels the same way, except when it comes to traditional reading. Oh, she's really into reading — Kayla and Quianna, not so much.

Educational traditionalists who worry that virtual learning gets students away from the basics really need to start thinking outside of the box, Barab suggested. Memorizing a bunch of facts and getting lectured to don't promote innovation, he said. There has to be room for mistakes. Video games and reset buttons allow for that.

Kayla and Quianna and Delecia have never known a world without the Internet. That's where they're accustomed to accessing content. Yet they still have to be able to read and write in order

to point and click on computer screens. You might argue it's no different than teachers back in the day pointing at blackboards with chalk and yardsticks, because that's all those schoolmarm had back then.

Right now, Rogers-Herr is the only DPS school using "Quest Atlantis." But other DPS schools have experimented with virtual learning from another provider. One of those sites was Lowe's Grove Middle School, where the principal at the time said the high-tech teaching turned a sleepyhead who'd nod off during class into a student who was attentive and engaged, DPS executive director of educational technology Ron Wahlen said.