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Making a play to bring diversity to video games

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SUN STAFF

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Black men go on digitized rampages. Hispanics field fly balls made of pixels. Black women are routinely the victims of crimes. Hispanic women rarely appear at all.

The video game industry, which had \$7.3 billion in sales last year, claims a good deal of Americans' leisure time. About half of the country, spanning the races, plays some form of video game.

Nonetheless, though most modern games are three-dimensional, their portrayals of race are often one-dimensional.

Part of the problem, industry experts say, is that most video game designers are white men.

A Maryland-based initiative to be launched in Baltimore this summer hopes to alter that. The Urban Video Game Academy is looking for young game makers from diverse backgrounds who might add authentic ethnic perspectives to the industry.





"You can't change the stories unless you develop new storytellers," said Roderick Weldon Woodruff, president and co-founder of AAGamer, short for African American Gamer, a Columbia-based advocacy group that is helping to create the school.

Scheduled to start next month at Digital Harbor High School in South Baltimore, the five-week program - promoted as the first of its kind - will teach the fundamentals of game design to about 50 high school students, many of them minorities. Similar pilot programs are starting in Washington and Atlanta.

This week in Los Angeles, several academy representatives are attending the Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3), the industry's major trade show, to promote the fledgling school and trawl for lecturers and sponsors.

'All-out networking'

"It's all-out networking," said Mario Armstrong, an academy organizer who took several days off from his job as Mayor Martin O'Malley's technology advocate to attend E3. "We're getting the word out that Baltimore is on the cutting edge and can offer solutions that can aid the industry, as well as our students."

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 **Connie and Roderick Weldon Woodruff**

(Sun photo by Nanine Hartzenbusch)
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The academy has generated interest from potential sponsors at E3, Armstrong said, including Microsoft Corp.

Baltimore isn't helping to sponsor the first session - which is being supported by partners including the [University of Baltimore](#) - but Armstrong hopes the city will help start other local academies next summer. The design programs will cultivate computer and math skills even in children not considering gaming careers, he said.

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The realization that racial stereotyping is a problem in video games is just dawning on the industry, said Doug Lowenstein, president of the Entertainment Software Association, which organizes E3.

Although awareness is growing, Lowenstein said, gamers aren't approaching the problem in "a coordinated and significant way." For instance, this year's E3 marks the launch of "50 Cent: Bulletproof," a game about the life of a gunslinging rapper that seems unlikely to debunk stereotypes.

Changes have long been called for from outside the industry. In 2001, a report by Children Now, a Los Angeles-based child advocacy group that studies the media, found that among 70 top-selling video games, 87 percent of the heroes were white and the vast majority of nonwhite characters appeared only in sports games. No Hispanic women appeared.

The study also tracked racial patterns of violence. Black females were far more likely than any other group to be victims of violence, and when black males were victimized, they were the least likely to show pain or other signs of physical harm such as bleeding.

Such themes are dangerous because children learn about the world through interactive games, along with other entertainment media, said Eileen Espejo, a senior program associate at Children Now.

Youths of various ethnicities "do want to see themselves in the media," she said. "It tells them they're of value in the world. But if all you see is African-Americans getting shoved and kicked, it comments on what African-Americans are."

Similar images, as well as racial slurs, in video games moved Woodruff, an information and technology manager and consultant, and his wife, Connie, a novelist, to found AAGamer in 2003.

Along with supporting the Urban Video Game Academy, the group lobbies game designers to include positive minority figures in games.

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