

Story and Photos by
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BREAK AWAY

A GAME-CHANGING WAY OF THINKING THAT COULD CHANGE THE WORLD

**Violence against women and girls
is a pervasive global problem,
often deeply rooted in
cultural stereotypes**



CHAMPLAIN COLLEGE STUDENTS and the Emergent Media Center (EMC) faculty and staff, guided by behavioral change experts, have been working for nearly two years on developing a concept that will make the world a less violent, more economically stable place for children and youth.

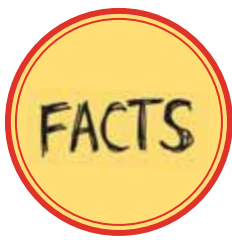
“Seems like an awfully *big* promise, doesn’t it?” says Ann DeMarle, director of Champlain’s EMC. Clearly, it’s an ambitious pledge, but it is one many feel DeMarle and her EMC project team will make good on.

In August 2008, with support from the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and initial technical advice from the United Nations Development Fund for Women, DeMarle led the charge on an innovative initiative called “Empowering Play: A Project to Help End Violence Against Women,” in which boys ages 10 through 13 learn behavior-changing lessons about violence against girls and women from a video game.



Champlain students and faculty gather around the giant globe in the lobby of the United Nations office building before presenting their work. (from left to right) Dan Peavey '10, Game Art & Animation; Alex Tabor '10, Game Programming; Jovan Ellis '13, Game Design; Amanda Jones '10, Marketing and Graphic Design & Digital Media; Ken Howell, Faculty, Game Development; Joel Pelletier '10, Game Design; Ann DeMarle, Director, EMC; Julie Bond, Assistant Director, EMC; Heather Conover '11, Game Design; Lauren Nishikawa '09, Creative Director, EMC UNVAW Project.





1 out of 3 women has been beaten, coerced into sex, or otherwise abused in her lifetime.

92% of children and adolescents age 2–17 play video games.

44% of boys play video games daily, compared to 17% of girls.

A Web site explains the “Breakaway” project and helps to solicit funding for the project to reduce violence against women and girls. An example of the game characters designed by Champlain College students at the EMC.



PINPOINTING UNIVERSAL APPEAL

Since its inception, the initiative has expanded far beyond a simple video game as new technology emerges. With a target audience of young boys, the concept currently features an episodic, interactive game and social networking application that will be delivered globally via Web and mobile technology centering on a topic of near-universal knowledge and interest—soccer.

Given the working title *Breakaway*, the game features customized characters who alternate between tactical field segments and narrative decisions about social issues, life issues, and soccer. Mini-game training drills add important skill-based action to the tactical play of the soccer matches. The integrated decisionmaking and skill-based play of *Breakaway* creates a cohesive experience, designed to keep the player coming back for new episodes.

“The game is based on international soccer fair-play rules,” DeMarle says. “The goal is to show young males that they should show respect on and off the field, not only to their teammates, but also to the females in their lives.”

Breakaway incorporates the education-entertainment theories used by the Population Media Center (PMC) of Dr. Miguel Sabido, based in Shelburne, Vermont. It is a successful methodology incorporating the behavior-theory research of Albert Bandura, developed for radio and TV formats and used all over the world to promote family planning, health, and women’s rights.

“Our solution to this global problem is grounded in proven behavior theory, designed to engage boys at a pivotal age, and to enable them to see beyond immediate culture conditioning,” says DeMarle. “It allows them to practice key behaviors to discover the rewards of positive behavior and uncover the imprisonments of negative behavior. The project is being linked to on-the-ground structures that can support individual choice for change,” enthuses DeMarle. “And it is to be launched by an international star who will provide an inspirational role model.”

The international star, whose identity has not yet been cleared for release, will be the spokesperson for *Breakaway’s* expected debut during the FIFA World Cup in South Africa this June. The game will first appear on the Web and will be deployed like a soap opera—with episodes organized into chapters. There will be four initial chapters, each containing three to four episodes. Plans are already in the works for an eventual mobile version upon impact assessment and the securing of additional funding.

INSPIRATION FROM SOUTH AFRICA

It’s only fitting that *Breakaway* should debut at the World Cup in South Africa, not only because the theme is soccer, but because the original idea to use soccer as the “game” emerged after the project team of 15 EMC and PMC personnel returned from a research trip to the townships of Cape Town, South Africa, in August 2008.

During their trip, the team gathered data from various forms of research—a series of interviews, roundtable discussions, photographs, video and sound recordings—which they brought back to the EMC (located in the Champlain Mill in Winooski) and studied for inspiration and common themes. EMC game designers—Champlain College students in paid positions—began working on the game concepts; graphic designers began sketching the characters and developing settings, and programming students examined how best to use available technologies to deliver the product.

Amanda Jones ’10, a Champlain senior majoring in Marketing and Graphic Design, has been with the project from the start, and has witnessed every step of the journey,

from talking with young women in South Africa to testing the game with students in Winooski, to explaining the marketing of the game before a room of high-ranking United Nations representatives in New York City.

“I have to admit that I was skeptical of the project in the beginning, saying, ‘How are we going to do this; we’re just a small center?’” says Jones. “But working at the EMC, I’ve learned that even as students, we can make good decisions and apply our classroom knowledge to a very big, very global problem in a format that quite literally has never been produced before.”

“In all my Champlain business classes, we got to do real projects for real clients,” she continues. “But this project has been a huge, long lesson in creative problem solving. All of my work at the EMC gives me a better understanding of everything I’ve learned in class and how to apply it outside.”

PRESENTING TO THE U.N.

Those skills and talents were called into play in January when Jones and a team of other Champlain students traveled to New York City to present a progress report to Aminata Toure, chief of the Gender, Human Rights, and Culture branch of the United Nations Population Fund and about a dozen U.N. officials. Part of the presentation included working in small teams at laptops to demonstrate the first episode of *Breakaway*.

“We do a lot of crazy things at the U.N.,” Toure laughs. “But we had never played a game before in one of our meetings.” Her underlying message to the student team, however, remains serious—that using a video game to try to change behavior is “revolutionary for the U.N.” and an idea that still faces many hurdles and critics along the way toward implementation.

Toure, an internationally known leader in human rights, has championed the project from her initial contact with DeMarle in July 2008, and she provided more than \$640,000 in UNFPA funding. “A relative deal in the game production world,” points out DeMarle.

While visiting Champlain College in October 2008, Toure explained the importance of the project’s mission: “Women and girls are disproportionately affected by conflicts and

wars,” she says. “One out of three women faces being beaten, coerced into sex, or abused.” Her willingness to try something new and different is also an indication that previous efforts using traditional methods of addressing the problem have not been successful.

“Coordinating the game with the U.N. Secretary-General’s goal

Aminata Toure, head of the Gender, Human Rights, and Culture branch of the United Nations Population Fund (center); Upala Devi, a U.N. gender-based violence advisor, (left), and Leyla Sharafi, technical specialist, Gender, Human Rights, and Culture branch of the UNFPA, talk with Champlain students about the next steps for the *Breakaway* project during their visit to New York City in January.



EMPLOYING THE GLOBAL POPULARITY OF SOCCER, the game design links the winning benefits of respect on the playing field to respectful behavior toward girls and women in the player’s social sphere. The game, designed by students at the Emergent Media Center, utilizes three successful components:

- UNFPA tool kit of culturally sensitive approaches to create change.
- Sabido methodology of entertainment-education.
- FIFA (Federation Internationale de Football) “Fair Play” rules.



Dwight Asset Management Honors Former CEO and Champlain Trustee with Gift to the EMC

Champlain College's Emergent Media Center received three gifts, totaling \$21,000, in honor of former Dwight Asset Management CEO Laura Dagan and her 22 years of service to the company before her recent retirement.

The financial gifts from Dwight Asset Management, its parent company, Old Mutual Asset Management and its client, Graybar Electric Company, were presented to Ann DeMarle, director of Champlain College's Emergent Media Center (EMC).

Dagan, who lives in South Hero with her husband, Barry, has been a member of the Champlain College Board of Trustees since 2006 and will continue to serve in that role.

"I am inspired by the Champlain College students, the activities at the EMC, and how the *Breakaway* project is already changing lives around the world," said Dagan. "The results of these gifts will be far reaching and represent a perfect conclusion to the wonderful career I have enjoyed at Dwight."

Under Dagan's leadership, Dwight Asset was active in reaching out to the communities in which Dwight's employees work and live by supporting various charitable organizations, educational institutions and the arts. Over the years, the firm has targeted children and families, aging and wellness and historical and land preservation, for its contributions.

"SUPPORTING THE EMC and the project they are currently working on with the Population Media Center and the United Nations Population Fund to create an e-game designed to help reduce violence against women fit perfectly with Laura's desire to make a significant difference in the community."

— David J. Thompson, Dwight's CEO and President

to end violence against women is key to its success and to further ongoing funding from the U.N.," she says. Numerous questions from the U.N. officials were raised during the meeting about the planned marketing and roll-out of *Breakaway* at this summer's World Cup and a number of challenges to make the game more global in nature were set forth:

- **Find ways to allow** customizing the players' skin color and hair so they look like the people playing the game.
- **Use names for the characters** that will be accepted in different countries and cultures.
- **Determine how to depict** the underlying examples of gender violence in the games.

Now the challenge facing the EMC in late January was for the *Breakaway* team to take the game from its pre-production state to a final version that could be presented to the world at the World Cup Soccer Championship—in June.

EXPERIENCE THAT EDUCATES

It's a serious deadline for the EMC student workers with a great deal of pressure. From Champlain President David F. Finney's view, this project offers several levels of educational opportunities. "We are able to offer our students a chance to really work in the game industry, to get work experience and to play a senior-level role in a project that is well beyond the internship level," he says.

Wendy Stein, program assistant at Population Media Center, whose organization's role in the project has been to help guide the student designers, writers, and programmers in creating the storylines for the narrative portion of the game, agrees that students working in the EMC are doing impressive, professional work.

"It's the PMC's first collaboration with a college. I must say, all along the way, we have been so impressed with the dedication, thoughtfulness, and openness to feedback from the student teams," Stein says. "They are young and this is a big project for students at this level, but the team brings youth, ideas, and their expertise with games and electronics, so there is definitely an affinity for the work."

Working with any college has its challenges, she says. "There are time limits for students working around classes, so it is a little more difficult, and perhaps there is more turnover than other situations. It is, however, ultimately a real experience for Champlain students, learning to work for a paying client with high accountability standards that often require compromise and adaptability on the students' part."

"Working with the PMC and its expertise," says Finney, "we are creating a very powerful medium. We're stepping into a brave new frontier and I think that is very Champlain-like: the techniques being developed for *Breakaway* may also revolutionize some aspects of education."

Champlain College showed its support of the project last summer when a budget gap threatened to shutdown work until additional U.N. funding would become available. DeMarle, Finney and others waged a “mini e-mail campaign” that raised \$54,000 to bridge the shortfall and allow work to continue through the summer. The project currently is in the last phase of funding and is still looking to raise another \$200,000 to deliver all 14 game episodes to reach its ultimate goals for behavior change.


“Champlain had a chance to model the behavior we want to instill in our students, and our people really stepped up to the plate to help,” Finney recalls.

The impact on students is evident. Steve Beaulieu, the lead programmer on the project, reflected on his experience after returning from St. Lucia to test the game with children on the tropical Caribbean island in December. “I saw a game I helped create get played by dozens of kids,” Beaulieu says. “This whole project seemed unreal, and the work has been thrilling ... and I couldn’t help but feel lucky to be doing my part to try and end this problem; I don’t think many people can say that about their work.”

BEGINNING THE END GAME

The morning after the U.N. presentation, DeMarle sat in the JFK Jet Blue terminal awaiting an early flight back to Vermont. She was thinking about the U.N.’s commitment of \$200,000 for the next phase of the project and the work ahead. While that funding would enable the team to launch *Breakaway*, in the short months before June, the EMC team needed to move out of the pre-production phase to build, test, and finalize Episodes 1–3 for the Web launch.

“There are a lot of positives we are taking back with us,” DeMarle reflected at the time. “To have powerful people playing and reacting to the game at the U.N. was huge for our students. It is also rewarding to see how well-prepared they all were. I get goose bumps when I see how well they work together and the teamwork that is at the center of it all.”

And for just a moment, she relaxed and enjoyed the sense of homecoming—confident that her team of students and staff have a serious shot at changing the way women and others are treated around the world—one game at a time. 

Follow the progress online at Games Take on Violence Against Women:

<http://emc-gamestakeonvaw.blogspot.com/>



“YES, I CAN SEE a world achievable within my lifetime where the status quo is one of peace and prosperity. One where 9-year-old girls are not sold or abducted for trade as sex slaves, as described in the documentary *Half the Sky* or their mothers are not violently ‘disciplined’ by their fathers (as we learned in Africa); a world in which babies can grow up to be equal partners working side-by-side toward a positive future for their babies and for us all. A world in balance.” — Ann DeMarle, EMC director

The Emergent Media Center (EMC)

Champlain’s Emergent Media Center, located in the Champlain Mill in Winooski, works directly with industry, public institutions, and nonprofit or organizations to provide a laboratory/studio environment for discovering concepts, processes, and applications in electronic and video games and emergent media.

At the heart of the EMC’s educational value are two key objectives, Director Ann DeMarle explained. “To enable Champlain students to become thoughtful leaders in areas of technology, media, and learning; and to help define the future of immersive mediums and technologies.”

The EMC brings together Champlain students and faculty in collaboration with industry professionals to also work on projects such as the Cystic Fibrosis breath biofeedback game for the UVM College of Medicine, the Visualize Burlington 3D mapping project with the City of Burlington, and a virtual archeology museum in conjunction with the State of Vermont Agency of Commerce and Division of Historic Preservation.