



WEB GAME BOOSTS GIRLS' INTEREST IN SCIENCE

June 16, 2009 11:46:52 AM PDT

By [Teresa Garcia](#)

OAKLAND, CA -- An East Bay school has become an inter-stellar testing ground for an innovative new idea to boost young girls' interest in science and technology.

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Exploring the planets and stars and turning some of the discoveries into an online game -- it's a girls only mission with a group of students from the ASA Academy in [Oakland](#). About a dozen girls, from 6th through 12th grade, have joined an afterschool program called Universe Quest. They're learning about astronomy and building their own 3-D, immersive online game that centers around creating characters, who explore the cosmos and answer questions along the way.

"Our main goal is to get them interested in careers in science and technology, build their own self confidence, see that there's a trajectory for them," said UC Berkeley astrophysicist Carl Pennypacker.

Pennypacker is the program leader of Universe Quest. He says girls, and especially those in the African-American community, have been traditionally underrepresented in the pipeline to science and technology careers.

"Some of the young women didn't know about [NASA](#), we found, and so clearly there are some teachable moments here," said Pennypacker.

With the help of a \$1.5 million three-year grant from the National Science Foundation to [UC Berkeley](#), Pennypacker is collaborating with the ASA Academy and the [Girl Scouts](#). Right now they're in the pilot stage at just this one school, and it's already engaging the girls.

"I like it because I like looking in the sky at night," said ASA Academy student Tiffany Farmer.

"With the astronomy that we learn in the week, we're going to put that into the game," said ASA Academy student Ruby Knight.

Knight and Farmer are two of the students helping build the online Universe Quest game.

"Stellarium is a program so that you could look like at the stars and see when different constellations and planets and nebulas are going to be up," said Knight.

"So how's the sky out there?" asked Farmer.

The girls are also using the Internet to get some global guidance. They're able to connect, for example, with Susan Murabona, an educator and astronomer in Kenya.

"Using astronomy we try and engage the students," said Murabona.

She speaks on Skype with Knight and Farmer and is teaching them how to build galaxy images for the online game. Eventually, the Universe Quest game will be open to girls around the world to play and build upon -- linking minds and hopefully swinging the door open wider to encourage a future in the fields of science and technology.

"It brings me to tears at times to think how well it's working and how these young women I think are really seeing things they haven't seen before," said Pennypacker.

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