

# MAJOR PLAYER

**At Champlain College,  
trailblazing game-design studio  
vaults to national prominence**

By KIRK KARDASHIAN  
Photographed by JERRY SWOPE

**T**HE MILLER CENTER is a modern, angular building on Lakeside Avenue in Burlington that houses Champlain College's Emergent Media Center. When school is in session, students and teachers work together in the open floor plan lab, using the contemporary tools of the technology trades: desktop computers, flat-screen monitors, scanners, 3-D printers, virtual reality headsets, and video game controllers. Ann DeMarle, the director of the center, has some of those things in her office too, but she also has a few relics from bygone eras: a black-and-white photo of the "communications corner" of a 1950s home, with a TV and a rotary phone; Gumby and Pokey toys; and a Neopet plush toy, the physical embodiment of the popular online pet game launched in 1999. The items serve as reminders of her idea, in 2003, to start the Champlain College Game Studio, a suite of majors for students aiming to work in the video game industry. In order to convince the college's curriculum committee that creating video games was a valid career, DeMarle showed them the objects and made a powerful point. "My argument was that children were already playing with digital games and toys at a very young age," she recalled,



**ON CAMPUS** The Center for Communication and Creative Media, a \$24.3 million building housing game-design labs and other media facilities.

“ We prided ourselves on bringing programs to the market long before others did. ”



**LEFT** Ann DeMarle, who pushed the college in 2002 to launch a video game degree program. “As educators, we needed to prepare our students for their future, not our grandparents’ or even our own world.” **OPPOSITE, TOP** Jonathan Ferguson teaches a class on game history. On this day, students focused on Magnavox Odyssey, one of the earliest commercial home video game consoles. **OPPOSITE, BOTTOM** Experimenting with virtual reality and the sense of smell. Students were collaborating on the project with two Burlington businesses who saw commercial potential in the idea.



**FACT FILE**

**The Game Studio at Champlain College**

**2004:** Launches with 35 students, three faculty

**2017:** More than 425 students, 13 faculty

**National status:** Ranked 14th nationally among undergraduate game-design schools by the Princeton Review in 2017

**Hiring rate:** 81 percent of class of 2016 employed in gaming industry within six months

**Source of talent for the following:**

Sony Studios, Electronic Arts, Warner Bros. Games/Turbine, and many other major companies

**Quote:** “Game design is an exciting field and programs are springing up all over the world,” said Princeton Review Editor-in-Chief Robert Franek. “The top schools on our list have outstanding faculties and great facilities ...”

“and as educators, we needed to prepare our students for their future, not our grandparents’ or even our own world.”

The data was on her side. Even back then, the video game industry was bigger than Hollywood, in terms of revenue, and growing fast. And the Northeast was quickly becoming a hotbed for game-development companies, with Montreal, Boston, and New York each hosting at least a few firms. But the academic world hadn’t caught on.

Today, DeMarle’s idea seems prescient. The video game market is now worth about \$100 billion. And Champlain’s Game Studio has risen to the upper echelons of its field. Last year, the program was ranked No. 14 by the Princeton Review among more than 500 game-design undergraduate programs in the United States.

It begs the question: How did a small college in Vermont do this?

**R**OGER PERRY, president of Champlain College from 1992 to 2005, says the school has a distinct DNA that traces back to its origins. “The Game Studio reflects the entrepreneurial spirit and digital history of the college,” he said. “It just didn’t come out of the blue. We started computer programming way back in the 1960s. We also prided ourselves on bringing programs to the market long before others did.”

In the late ‘90s, DeMarle joined Champlain to start one such program: a degree in multimedia and graphic design. DeMarle had become fascinated by computer graphics while in college, graduating with a BFA from SUNY New Paltz in 1979, and an MFA from Rochester Institute of Technology in 1986. Three years later, she moved to Vermont, where she created animation for companies such as IBM. In 1998, she launched the

degree in multimedia at Champlain, and the following year, she started a technology-focused version of the Governor's Institute, a summer program for high school students. For eight days at Champlain's campus, she was surrounded by smart teenagers coding websites and creating graphics and videos. "And they loved video games," she said. "They jury-rigged the labs at the school so they could play all these games, and it was really interesting to me how youth were pushing into this field beyond what was available for them to learn."

Then, in 2002, DeMarle met with Perry to pitch her idea for a video game degree program. Since there were very few comparable programs at other schools, traditional market research wouldn't have been fruitful. Instead, Perry used his 48-hour-decision-making rule. "It was clear e-gaming was mushrooming on the recreational side, but what really captured my imagination was that military and corporate training, via simulations, was beginning to go wild in terms of demand," he said. "Within 48 hours, I told Ann it was a go-ahead situation and she needed to go through the normal process of a new program. But she had my full support."

Perry was accustomed to empowering his staff to get big initiatives started. When he served on the graduate faculty at Washington University, in St. Louis, he had talked with executives of corporations, such as McDonnell Douglas and Monsanto, and learned how they were eliminating traditional corporate hierarchies and decentralizing decision-making. "When I came to Vermont, those lessons got me to think more about how to support people on the firing line," he said, "how you give them a lot of authority and responsibility and the budget to get the job done."

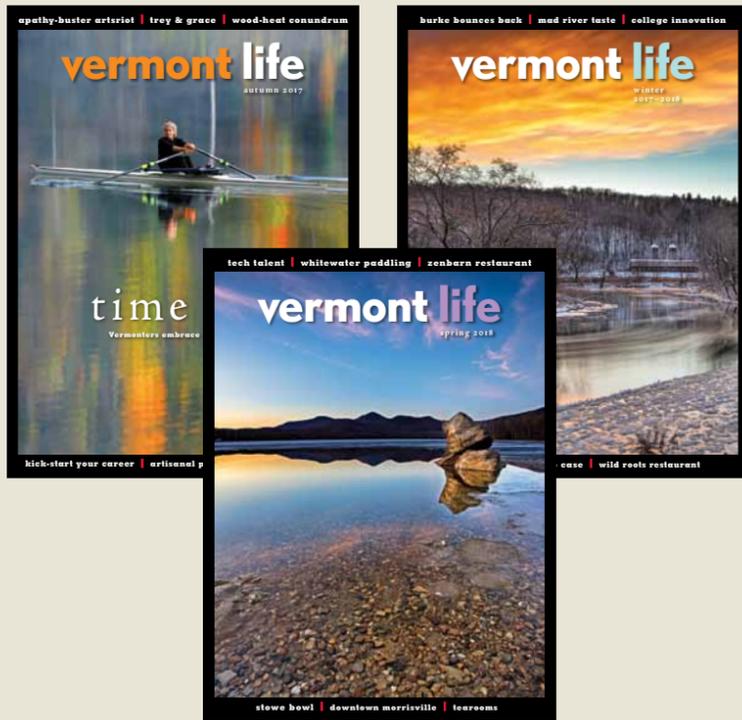
**RIGHT** Assistant professor Ken Howell is hands-on with a project planned for display in the Chicago Design Museum. **BELOW** Inside the Center for Communication and Creative Media. **OPPOSITE** First-year student Spencer Hawes and classmates at play.

DeMarle's next step was to book a plane ticket to San Francisco to attend the annual Game Developers Conference. At that time, in 2002, the conference was still relatively undiscovered and nothing like it is today, when 25,000 programmers, artists, designers, and managers practically take over the city. DeMarle returned to the conference in 2003, accompanied by Daphne Walker, then the career coach assigned to students in the multimedia program. During this initial phase, DeMarle says meetings were held across the spectrum "to understand what skills and mindsets were needed in the industry." Gradually, events moved toward writing a degree proposal, a process that continued to draw on industry expertise and firmly established the principle of maintaining ties with companies that might eventually hire Champlain grads.

The vision for the degree was to offer three interconnected majors: art and animation; game design; and game programming. Like the members of real game studios at Electronic Arts and Sony, students from each discipline would collaborate from day one. "We were copying industry, and education in general," DeMarle said. "The multimedia degree had a lot of early explorations in collaboration. Now the whole college is versed in it." The curriculum committee approved the art and animation and game design majors first, because they would be part

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of the division DeMarle was working in. The game programming major was approved a year later. Now a fourth major, game-production management, is part of the program.

Amanda Crispel, the assistant dean for game development, joined the Game Studio in its second year. She began her career in the late 1980s at Broderbund Software and has worked at Mattel, Living Books, and LeapFrog, specializing in kids and family entertainment. Now she's interested in games that make a positive social impact, like helping people to quit smoking. From the early days of the Game Studio, Crispel saw how it filled a latent demand among students. "It was like 'if you build it, they will come,' and they did. And that's been great, because it allowed us to have institutional support for something that was on a growth track," she said.

**O**NE EXAMPLE of that support is the Game Studio's satellite campus in Montreal, which was founded in 2007. Montreal, according to the college, is the second-largest gaming hub in North America, and when students spend a semester there, they are taught in the evening by game developers who work at a studio during the day. When they're not in class, students experience what it's like to live in a game hub: they attend game jams, International Game Developers Association meetings, and the Montreal International Game Summit. "It really gives students an opportunity to swim in a large game industry for a year, or even longer if they end up staying for an internship," Crispel said, "and it's opened up a lot of employment opportunities for them." More than 600 Champlain students have studied there, and some 22 alumni work in game studios in the city.

The capstone of a student's time in the Game Studio is the senior show. Preparations for the show begin in the

fall of the fourth year, where teams pitch video game ideas to students, administrators, and alumni. The best ideas go forward, and the winning teams recruit more members from the teams whose ideas weren't selected. When the final teams of eight to 20 students are set, they complete two 12-week production cycles and get their games ready for the show, which takes place in the spring. The exercise is a chance to spend a considerable amount of time building a game from scratch and preparing it for a public release. It's also an opportunity for students to show off their skills; every year, studio representatives from Sony PlayStation, Activision, and other firms attend the show to recruit.

Judging by statistics, the Champlain Game Studio's formula — a rigorous, collaboration-based curriculum combined with real-world learning — produces results. Eighty-one percent of the class of 2016 secured a game-related job within six months of graduation, and, Walker says, they are steeled for the task ahead. "When employers hire our graduates, they have reported back to me that our students are ready to start working," Walker said. "And our alumni have reported that it's actually easier to have a job in the game industry than it is to be studying at Champlain in the Game Studio."

On a warm day last fall, one student's project bore that out. It was a virtual reality game with a headset equipped with a scent-making device. When the player walked through the game and picked up certain objects, the scent device was supposed to emit the corresponding smell, like spring rain, or perfume. The visual component of the game was rich and lifelike, and it was easy to imagine losing track of time in the virtual world. The scent device, however, wasn't quite there yet. But that's the point: Students are pushing boundaries in the gaming landscape, and the Game Studio is backing them up. 🌱

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