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Little soccer game with big goal: Kicking violence

by [Leslie Katz](#)

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Veteran team member Zak in the online game Breakaway gently reminds me that I might want to consider practicing side-tackling and scoring before I face the coach for team tryouts. (Credit: Screenshot by Leslie Katz/CNET)

A group of Vermont college students has come up with a soccer-centric video game that teaches boys how to pass, dribble, tackle, score--and, hopefully, respect girls.

If that seems like an unlikely connection, students from the [Emergent Media Center](#) at Champlain College in Burlington would disagree. They've spent two years developing [Breakaway](#), a free interactive online game that manages to impart lessons about violence to boys 8 to 15--while tossing them some lively gameplay.

"Breakaway is a game experience that offers youth the chance to discover how to become a champion both on and off the field," said Ann DeMarle, director of Champlain's Emergent Media Center.

The game--which debuted at the World Cup in South Africa this summer and today saw the release of its third and latest chapter--has attracted 1,000 registered users from 95 countries including Ghana, Mali, Tunisia, Indonesia, and Azerbaijan. In the early days of the game's creation, student developers journeyed to the townships of Cape Town, South Africa, as part of their research into social conditions that can lead to abuse.

The outgrowth of a United Nations-supported initiative aimed at using games to teach respect for girls and women, Breakaway has been endorsed by Cameroonian soccer star [Samuel Eto'o](#), who also appears in the game as a virtual football mentor.

The title presents interactive storylines, each featuring new characters, that have players bouncing between skill-building mini-games focusing on speed, strength, agility, and timing, and narrative challenges that require collaborative decision making on social issues such as gender equality and racial stereotypes.

In one instance, a team captain who's talented and popular but tends to be a bully becomes progressively verbally abusive toward your sister as she stands on the field. In another, a member of your all-boys' team moves away with his family, and a girl replaces him.

Who you choose to side with during such situations--those team members who defend the



Players in Breakaway can customize their hair and skin color (click to enlarge). The game can be played in English, Spanish, French, and Portuguese.

(Credit: Screenshot by Leslie Katz/CNET)

girl being bullied or excluded or those who contribute to her ostracization--influences the caliber of soccer training you get, and thus, your chances of advancing as a player.

"All of them will teach you moves that you can use on the football field, but the ones that the positive characters can teach you are significantly better," Lauren Nishikawa, who worked on Breakaway as a game design student, told CNET. "There are a couple of places in the narrative where the team splits in half and you play either with the negative characters or the positive characters. You're always slated to lose if you play with the negative characters."

Ninety percent of players, she added, "are making positive decisions instead of negative ones."



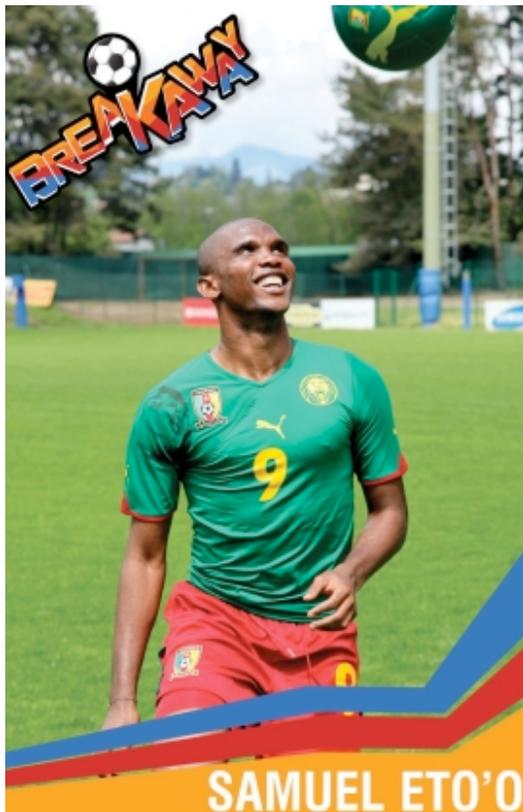
Players use points and clicks to navigate the soccer field in practices and games.
(Credit: Champlain College Emergent Media Center)

Nishikawa is among the students who journeyed to Cape Town two years ago to interview high school-age kids about situations that might lead to abuse.

"A lot of the things we learned about there were culturally specific," said Nishikawa, who

is now creative director of the Emergent Media Technology Center. Girls "would talk about how if you didn't answer to someone whistling at you, they would carve with a knife your face or your legs. Or that they understood that most guys had multiple girlfriends. They weren't angry at the boy. They were angry at the other girls they had to compete with."

Such eye-opening anecdotes have indirectly informed the 100 or so students who have worked on the game as designers, writers, programmers, and globetrotting photographers taking pictures that help create in-game environments reflective of those inhabited by players. Some of them traveled to New York earlier this year to demonstrate the game 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.



A sports card featuring Samuel Eto'o, who has endorsed the game. By January, Breakaway will have 5 chapters containing a total of 13 cliff-hanger levels.

(Credit: Champlain College Emergent Media Center)

played with musicians like Herbie Hancock. Mbappe said he wanted to compose tunes for Breakaway "because of [the game's] contribution to the continued struggle of human

"We do a lot of crazy things at the U.N.," Toure said. "But we had never played a game before in one of our meetings."

One in the genre of so-called [serious games](#) that attempt to train, educate, investigate, or advertise, Breakaway is being developed in partnership with the [Population Media Center](#), which promotes entertainment-education as a path to social change.

Other serious-game titles include [DebtSki](#), which teaches college students how to balance their finances; [Darfur is Dying](#), which provides a window into life in a Darfur refugee camp; and [PosOrNot](#), which challenges assumptions about people living with HIV and AIDS.

Proponents of the genre [argue](#) that the biggest hurdle serious games face is keeping them exciting enough that their messages get across.

To that end, the action in Breakaway features colorful graphics and takes place to the lively beats of original African-funk by [Francis Mbappe](#), a bass player from Cameroon who has

rights around the world."

As many as one in every three women around the world has been beaten, coerced into sex, or abused in some other way, according to U.N. statistics. Through their trip to South Africa and subsequent research, DeMarle said, the students discovered the range of ways women are abused--from being hit at home to being date-raped, sold as sex slaves, and burned in honor killings.

She says she applauds them for identifying soccer as a universal conduit for relaying lessons about preventing such violence.

"There are more countries that play soccer on a national scale than there are countries in the U.N., so that was the language that they chose to embrace," DeMarle said. "Then the idea of what does it mean to be a team member and what does it mean to be a champion? Those became the tools the students have used to communicate with diverse cultures."



[Leslie Katz](#)

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Leslie Katz, senior editor of CNET's Crave, covers gadgets, games, and myriad other digital distractions. As a co-host of the recently retired CNET News Daily Podcast, she was sometimes known to channel Terry Gross and still uses her trained "podcast voice" to bully the speech recognition software on automated customer service lines. [E-mail Leslie.](#)

