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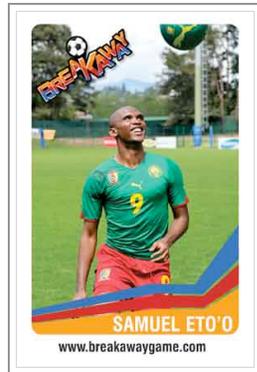
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Shelburne business and Champlain College launch online soccer game to global audience

Wed, Jun 23rd 2010 11:00 am

by Margo Callaghan



A two-year project with Population Media Center (PMC) in Shelburne and Champlain College, with the support of the United Nations, made its worldwide debut this week during the 2010 FIFA World Cup in South Africa. PMC, an organization with expertise in behavior change, and Champlain College designed an online game, entitled "Breakaway," a tactical and narrative soccer (football) game that has been under development and testing since 2008. The game has been developed to tackle issues such as gender equality, fair team play, and racial stereotypes all within the constructs of a fun and interactive online experience.

According to Katie Elmore, director of communication for PMC in Shelburne, the venture began with discussions between Bill Ryerson, president of PMC, Ann DeMarle, director of Champlain College's Emergent Media Center (EMC) and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), which assisted in funding the project.

"We needed to determine exactly what the issues were, what technology was accessible, and how to integrate key concepts into a gaming model," explained Elmore. This was followed by testing, training, and research for what was essentially a new media outlet for PMC. (PMC is the leading authority in using the Sabido methodology for encouraging pro-social and behavioral change by using radio and television dramas). Elmore continued, "By using an electronic game format [in lieu of traditional radio and television media], we moved from observational learning to participatory learning."

In using an intensifying story arc and unique game mechanics, the "Breakaway" player encounters real life situations that resonate with a teenager's experience such as peer pressure, competition, collaboration, teamwork, bullying, and negative gender stereotypes. "Breakaway" gives the players choices that allow them to make decisions, face consequences, reflect, and practice behaviors using a game and story format," DeMarle explained. "The goal is to show young males that they should show respect on and off the field, not only to teammates, but to others in their life and community."

Representatives from PMC joined students from the EMC traveling to South Africa to research how best to tailor a game toward youth on a global level. Testing of the game took place in St. Lucia.

Soccer star spokesperson on board

World famous football star Samuel Eto'o of Cameroon - striker for the Football Club Internazionale Milano - joined the "Breakaway" project as a celebrity spokesman. According to DeMarle, it is expected that his participation will help to gain international attention for the game and the interest of its intended audience of young boys.

Eto'o spent a day in mid-May working with students and faculty from the EMC and representatives from the United Nations in Milan, Italy. He recorded interviews for game trailers, developed public service announcements, and served as the model for his animated in-game character that is included in the "Breakaway" narrative.

"Eto'o is dedicated to the issues this game addresses," Elmore said. "Breakaway" challenges players to understand the nature of a true champion while having fun practicing football and personal skills.

"Millions of boys and young men look up to you," said Leyla Sharafi, a technical specialist with the

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Thousands of boys and young men look up to you, said Legia Okun, a technical specialist with the Gender, Human Rights and Culture branch of the UNFPA at the Milan meeting with Eto'o. "It is such a critical age when boys' ideas about manhood, parenthood, and being a partner are shaped. You have a chance to impress them with the positive values and behaviors so that they grow up respecting their mothers, sisters, wives, and daughters."

"Breakaway" is a game that offers youth the chance to discover how to become a champion both on and off the field. The game offers an engaging and fun way to develop successful intrapersonal skills," explained DeMarle.

A major marketing effort promoting the new game is being conducted this week, according to Elmore. Thousands of copies of the game in CD format are being distributed to youth in South Africa who are taking part in concurrent programs to support the mission of the game. The project has received attention from major news outlets, online bloggers and dozens of online video game sites. Using suggestions and comments from early online players, students at the EMC have continued to refine and improve the game,

"Breakaway" is available free online at www.breakawaygame.com.

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