Dare to be digital

STUDENTS TAKE PART IN ISLANDWIDE VIDEO GAME COMPETITION
By Paul Malas

Cyprus may not have a thriving computer games industry yet, but there are plenty of young programmers eager to demonstrate their creativity in the field of electronic and computer engineering.

In recent years, video gaming has joined other mainstream media as worthy of academic study and many universities are now rushing to offer support for student interest in the field.

Acknowledging this interest, the University of Cyprus together with the Ministry of Education have organised an annual computer games competition for secondary school and university students to showcase their talents.

Last month thirteen teams took part in the Logipaignion 2010, a local video game contest open to all students in Cyprus with an interest in computer game design.

“We started the competition last year and the idea was to generate more interest in the field of digital media among young people on the island,” said Vassos Vasiliou, Lecturer of Computer Networking at the University of Cyprus.

“Our goal is primarily to promote a fun and educational way for students to gain experience in computer programming through a popular format.”

Vasiliou explained that because the students work in teams each member can handle different aspects of the game production such as the music, animation or storyboarding but some overall knowledge of programming is required from everyone.

The competition, the only one of its kind in Cyprus, has so far created great interest both among the contestants and the public, who are invited to come and play the games.

“There are up to four members in every team who are supervised by a lecturer,” added Vasilou.

“At the initial stage of the contest, all the games are evaluated before they go into the final round of the competition,” said Vasiliou.

While grades for the games are based mainly on technical merit, entries in the competition are also judged on originality, game play and plot and character development.

“There are some other factors that are taken into account such as the game’s general entertainment value and how successfully the difficulty levels increase at each stage,” added Vasilou.

The panel of judges are also on the lookout for any noticeable glitches in the games and whether they run as intended by their programmers.

This year’s winners were all created on one of two platforms: Game Maker, a Windows computer programme designed to allow users to easily develop computer games without the requirement of prior computer programming experience, and Microsoft’s XNA, a kit for more experienced programmers wishing to venture into video game design.

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Each team received a grand prize of €600 in cash and an Xbox Elite new generation console.

Marios Papas, team mentor for the States of Environment team, said the level of entries in the competition this year were truly amazing.

States of Environment, a Sims style game with an environmental twist, challenges the player to create a forest park and sustain and simulate a green infrastructure.

Charis Marangos, one of its creators, said the aim of the game was to teach people how to respect the environment by completing a series of strategic tasks.

In the game you can also expect visitors who will review the work you have done in your forest park and leave cash donations that you can use to further improve your infrastructure.

But beware! The visitors can also harm the park by discarding rubbish or leaving cigarette butts that can put the forest in danger.

“We put in a lot of hard work and we’re very happy that we came first in our category. We would have been disappointed with any other place,” said Marangos.

Anyone interested in playing States of Environment can download a demo of the game at http://graphics.cs.ucy.ac.cy/forestkeeper/