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LSU's game design camp lets students design, play original games

The Advocate

In the computer world of Jiggler, the maze is tough. Then the walls start moving.

Designed by Hannah Vautrot and Courtney Lawrence, both 14, over two-and-a-half days at LSU's game design camp, GameCrash, Jiggler may be a little too hard.

"We may have over-complicated it for ourselves," says Vautrot with a slight smile as she furiously types in the final touches before the game's big presentation.

The two girls crowd around a laptop surrounded by empty soda cans, juice boxes and snack-cake wrappers, a scene replicated throughout the classroom, where two dozen teens type away at lines of programming code and test their new creations, digital worlds invented over 20 hours at the keyboard.

A trio from Covington has stayed up nights away from camp to create its virtual world, a quest not unlike Super Mario Brothers where a squat little man runs from tower to tower fighting enemies in order to find a small pyramid statue.

Their game world comes complete with gravity along with its effects on friction and mass.

"We would've gotten a lot more done, but we spent a lot of time making the physics," says Kenneth Bruhl, 15.

This camp gives Bruhl a chance to combine his two main loves.

"The only two things I've ever been good at are art and programming," he says.

One of four camps offered by the LSU Center for Computation and Technology, GameCrash aims to jump-start students' game-designing skills.

For the first two-and-a-half days, the students — mostly 14- to 16-year-olds — write the code for a classic video game, Space Invaders, to learn how the guts of a game look.

They must type out about 2,000 lines of code, says Marc Aubanel, the lead instructor at GameCrash and director of the Digital Media Arts & Engineering program at LSU, which teaches video game design.

"If I just explained the interface, it would be kind of boring," Aubanel says. "It's kind of like teaching someone to swim by throwing them in the pool. We go right into making the game."

A generation ago, this camp could not have existed. Then, a development kit for a video game system cost thousands of dollars, Aubanel said.

Now, the students can download free game-building programs, and the camp only costs $95.

The other computer camps focus on teaching basic programming languages, engineering and music recording and production. While they help recruit future students to the university, they also teach teens complex critical thinking skills important in today's high school curriculum, says J. "Ram" Ramanujam, director of the Center for Computation & Technology.

"It's teaching them to think through the process of making a game," he says. "They learn lots of things about how to organize their thoughts, where they make a mistake and quickly learn something new."

Students like Vautrot and Lawrence encourage Aubanel, who worked in the gaming industry and sees a need for more women in the industry. While nearly half of gamers are women, most designers are men.

Learning to design the games they love is tough, says Lawrence, who almost never removes her bright green headphones.

"Writing all that code and trying to get it all right — if you write one thing wrong it crashes," she says. "But it's all worth it at the end if you make a game."

At the end of camp, all the young designers present their games on the big screen in a theater before their parents, fellow students and instructors.

A few press the start key and watch the dreaded warning pop onto the screen: Code Error — Fatal error. The crowd empathizes with a loud "Ahhhh!"

The difficult maze from Vautrot and Lawrence is so tough that neither can beat the game during the presentation.

"It's so hard!" one boy yells from the crowd.

Aubanel compares it to a classic game Frogger.

"I love Frogger!" he says.

Before the crowd applauds, Vautrot finishes the pitch: "As you can see, this game has a lot of potential."

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