

Selling Health Through Entertainment

By Eddie North-Hager on October 5, 2010 7:38 AM

USC students who developed a video game that encourages children to exercise while educating them about nutrition captured the top two prizes in a national competition.

Nearly a dozen USC students and faculty members flew to Washington, D.C., to accept the award on Sept. 29 in a ceremony at the White House.

"Trainer," a game that takes users to an enchanted island where they care for creatures who have dietary and fitness needs, took the grand prize and the GE Healthymagination Student Award for a total of \$20,000.

As part of first lady Michelle Obama's Let's Move! initiative, the Apps for Healthy Kids competition received about 100 submissions from students, software developers and game designers.

The USC game was built jointly in a two-course sequence by the interactive media division at the USC School of Cinematic Arts and the GamePipe Laboratory at the USC Viterbi School of Engineering. Expertise was provided by health concentration researchers at the USC School of Social Work in addition to a \$100,000 gift from the Humana Innovation Center.

"Games are an interactive medium with an ability to transmit a message," said Michael Zyda, director of the USC GamePipe Laboratory. "Games are the media for the young. And this type of game will have more impact over the long run than TV."

Zyda was the principal investigator with co-principal investigators Marientina Gotsis of cinematic arts and Maryalice Jordan-Marsh of the USC School of Social Work.

"When you sell health, most people think of illness," Gotsis said. "But selling health through entertainment is a much better strategy. If it is designed well and marketed, you can get great results, just as good as any other treatment."

The game was developed by USC students Erin Reynolds, Tony Tseung, John Banayan, Erik Nichols, David Villatoro, Rita Yeung, Joseph Kohn, Adam Berkett and Ross Danielson.

Judges included Steve Wozniak, the co-founder of Apple Computer; Mike Gallagher, president and CEO of the Entertainment Software Association; and Eric Johnston, a senior software engineer for LucasArts.

"We wanted to make the game a discovery process for users to learn on their own," said Villatoro, who graduated in December with a degree in interactive entertainment and a minor in 3-D animation from the USC School of Cinematic Arts.

It was the game's ability to get youngsters up and moving that set it apart. The game uses a computer's Webcam to monitor the motions of the player and transfers those motions - such as dancing or skipping - to the on-screen character.

David Herring, a nutritionist with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, said the player trains with the creatures. When one of the creature needs to swim, ski or run for exercise, he explained, the player joins in.

The journey from concept to completion began in spring 2009 with 15 USC students, experienced game-builders, applying their knowledge to create a game that advances health objectives as part of an experimental games class.

The initial class, taught by Jordan-Marsh and Gotsis, created narrative arcs and worked out the mechanics. The students



Erin Reynolds, left, Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack, Rita Yeung, David Villatoro, USC School of Social Work professor Maryalice Jordan-Marsh, Tony Tseung and Ross Danielson

Photo/Bob Nichols

thought about what would happen in the game, what the graphics would look like, what the rules would be and what technological innovations might translate into real-world activities.

Jordan-Marsh, a nurse psychologist whose expertise in health issues ranges from infants to older adults, emphasized the accuracy of health information in the games.

“Marientina insists that first a game has to be fun,” Jordan-Marsh said. “For me that’s a new perspective. You have to be engaging to have real learning about health and getting people to take on new health behaviors.”

The top concepts from the class then were turned into playable games at GamePipe. Students from the USC Roski School of Fine Arts were brought in for artwork and graphics and students from the USC Thornton School added music.

Humana chose to further develop another one of the games that dealt with germs and immunity.

“We hoped that the students would have viable products, and we hoped they could market them,” Jordan-Marsh said. “And the games were pretty spectacular.”

Gotsis is not surprised that a course that starts with theory can lead to a product that works a year later.

“Students are very motivated for their ideas to live,” Gotsis said. “Our students are trained to take their ideas out there and have people experience them.”

To play the game online, go to <http://www.davidvillatoro.com/games/trainer/index.php>

To watch a video about the game, visit http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0iKEjFd-G78&feature=player_embedded#

The Apps for Healthy Kids competition was sponsored and administered by the USDA Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion. Funding for the GE Healthymagination Student Award was provided by General Electric.

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