Fun with gaming

Mr Timothy Tham wants to develop computer games that people love to play

by mike lee

MR TIMOTHY Tham is in an intensive degree programmes where staying past 11pm in school is normal. But he doesn’t moan about classroom drudgery or having little time for anything else.

“You won’t complain that it takes away all your social life. It’s fun. It does not feel like studying anymore,” says Mr Tham, who is working towards a Bachelor of Science in real-time interactive simulation at the DigiPen Institute of Technology Singapore.

Fuelled by his passion for games development, this Singapore Polytechnic alumnus is working towards a career in the burgeoning digital interactive media industry.

Mr Tham, who turns 23 this year, received both the University Engineering Scholarship and the Lee Kuan Yew Scholarship to Encourage Upgrading Award. He was among the pioneer batch of students admitted to DigiPen through the Singapore Institute of Technology (SIT).

Established in 2009, SIT provides industry-focused degree programmes targeted at growth sectors of the economy, in partnership with local polytechnics and renowned overseas universities.

Based in Redmond, Washington, DigiPen is dubbed the Harvard of game developers and animators. At its Singapore campus, Mr Tham is in an accelerated programme which effectively packs four years of modules into two. Otherwise identical to that of the home campus, it combines highly academic courses and team-based projects. He will also attend a module at the home campus at the end of the programme.

During his first semester, Mr Tham juggled modules like C programming, programming lab, math and computer architecture, alongside English and art appreciation. There was also a game project to complete.

C programming taught him the strict coding standards required by the industry. It was taught by Professor Prasanna Ghali, a DigiPen veteran who was also a vice-president at Nintendo.

English and art may look like an odd fit in a specialised computer science degree. However, these modules are relevant and useful, says Mr Tham.

In English, he honed skills in presentation and essay writing, learning about the different rhetorical patterns. Such training helps ensure good usage of English in communicating storylines or games documentation, for instance.

For art appreciation, he gained a fundamental understanding of art, including how it relates to science. The groundwork will be useful when he works with production artists and animators.

Indeed, during his game project he had to collaborate with an artist, besides another programmer. The trio created a puzzle game where the player links eggs together to clear enemies coming from the flanks.

DigiPen’s programme is intensive and there is no let-up anytime soon for Mr Tham — advanced modules like mythology for game designers, algorithm analysis and motion dynamics lies ahead, not to mention bigger game projects to tackle. But he is taking it in his stride to achieve his games development ambition.

“It’s great to see people having fun playing your game. I would like to see my game on the market, let people play it and hear people talk about it. This drives me to continue to work on games,” he says.

Despite the long hours he has to put in, Mr Tham has no complaints.

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