Budding student game developers win big at Pan-Pacific awards

By Lim Yan Liang

They began as a team of 11, but lost five members who did not make it to the midway through the project.

Sardonically named Minus 5 because of that incident, the six-member team from the DigiPen Institute of Technology Singapore (DigiPen) still managed to pull through and take home not one but two awards at the 3rd Annual Independent Games Festival (IGF) China which ended last Monday.

They were one of three student teams from Singapore that together managed a clean sweep of awards in the Student category of the competition, which recognises the best in independent video game development in the Pan-Pacific region.

"I totally didn't see it coming. I was already happy to be a finalist," said Ms Zoe Xinru, 25, who was the character animator on Minus 5, which created Void, their award-winning first-person adventure game.

"I'm very happy and very proud that our efforts are finally paying off."

In a field of over 100 entries from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Korea, Australia, India and beyond, they were among the main and student competition, two teams from DigiPen and one from the Singapore-MIT GAMBIT (Game Design, Aesthetics, Mechanics, Business, Innovation and Technology) Game Lab came out on top. This is the first time in the competition that all three student awards were clinched by teams from one country.

Void was made in five months with American video game company Valve’s Source software development kit (SDK). Notable games that were made with the engine include Half-Life 2 and Counter-Strike: Source.

In the game, a player solves puzzles by jumping between past and present with the help of reality-distorting gloves and a pair of eyeglasses that sees into the past. The moody, crumbling game world was inspired by Victorian and Steampunk sensibilities.

Besides winning Best Student Game, Void also clinched the Excellence in Technology award in the main competition.

"They (panel of judges) said the excellence awards for technology, visual arts and audio are actually applicable to the student entries if they prove worthy enough," said Mr Tan Chee Ming, 28, who was the Void team’s game story. "I guess we did."

The other winners are Poi, a psychedelic 2-D action game that is also from DigiPen, and Robotanary a garden-building sandbox game from the GAMBIT Game Lab.

Both DigiPen and the Singapore-MIT Game Lab are collaborations between government agencies here and the respective foreign institutions: the first with the Singapore Institute of Technology, and the second with the Media Development Authority of Singapore.

IGF China is an offshoot of the international IGF competition, a component of the Game Developers Conference. The conference is the largest annual gathering of the independent video games industry.

Those who want to try out the games are in luck: Void and Poi are available for download from DigiPen's website, while Robotanary can be played online.

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