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Video-game developers step it up at museum jam session

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By Graig Graziosi

ggraziosi@vindy.com

YOUNGSTOWN

A procession of amateur video-game developers trudged through the unrelenting rain up a long flight of concrete stairs, their arms wrapped tightly around blanket-bundled computer monitors and laptops, keyboards and headphones.

Their destination Friday evening was the McDonough Museum of Art on Youngstown State University's campus, where they planned to spend the next 48 hours creating video-game prototypes from scratch.

The event – called a game jam – was hosted by Kendra Corpier, organizer of the Youngstown Game Developers group, and will run through Sunday afternoon. By the end of the event, the participating developers – 51 in total – are expected to have a working prototype for a video game, built from scratch, ready to display for the group. Participants are given a theme to tie into their game, and are not told the theme until the start of the event. This year's theme – appropriately reflecting today's April Fool's observance – is deception.

Corpier ran a similar event last year and had such positive feedback she decided to do it again. She and her co-organizer, Bill Jones, helped grow the local game-development community from three people to more than 150 over the course of three years. The game jam serves as a way for members of that local community to meet one another outside of the internet and as a practical creative challenge for those who want to go beyond simply consuming video games.

Jeff Rimko, who serves as a de facto assistant to Corpier throughout the weekend, participated in the game jam last year and used his time to develop a simple mobile game – called "Rollout" – where you guide a ball around walls of bricks without touching them, similar conceptually to the wildly popular but short-lived mobile game "Flappy Bird." What began at last year's game jam as Rimko's prototype is now available for free to download at the Android app store.

Rimko is a software developer professionally, and though he grew up playing video games, he'd never dabbled in their development before his first game jam.

"Video games are essentially just big software packages, and I thought it'd be a fun and creative challenge to try to develop one myself," he said.

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Along with their computer equipment, many of this weekend's participants brought sleeping bags to catch a few minutes of sleep throughout the event on the concrete floor of the museum, but most hope to spend as much time working as they can.

To aid them in their marathon creative sessions, Corpier has a room filled with classic "all-nighter" culinary fare: sodas and coffee, bags of cookies, chips and columns of pizza boxes.

Corpier received donations from local sponsors but largely funded the event herself.

"I made it free so that people weren't discouraged from coming to check it out. I want to continue to grow the community, so I'd rather people show up and participate," Corpier said.

After a short introduction by Corpier, the developers broke out to the floor and began their work for the evening.

Elizabeth Daley, a forensic science senior at Youngstown State University, is a member of that growing community and was brainstorming ideas for her game moments after the theme was announced.

Also a veteran from the previous game jam, Daley had acted as the art director on her team last year, but was flying solo Friday, excited to put her graphic-design skills – left over from her first major before switching – to work on a creative endeavor she cared about.

Across the room from Daley – hidden behind computer monitors and the glowing lights of a powerful gaming PC – Tom Goldthwait and Nick Uroceva were tossing ideas around about how they could make a game about deception without stumbling into the obvious waters, such as spy craft.

Surrounded on all sides by paintings, sculptures and installations, the developers posted up at round tables, wires sprawling across the floor, and began their two-day creative splurge that would end in simple, wholly original, digital art.

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