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Computer Game Writers Receive \$3,000 Jackson Lab Contract

Contact: George Markowsky, (207) 581-3941; George Manlove, (207) 581-3756

ORONO — A team of University of Maine computer students recently received a \$3,000 contract from the Jackson Laboratory to write an educational computer program for middle and high school students.

The contract was awarded by Jackson Lab's Center for Genome Dynamics, directed by Gary Churchill, following a December computer game-writing exhibition held at UMaine in conjunction with Computer Education Week.

The team selected for the Jackson Lab contract was one of eight exhibiting teams from computer science professor George Markowsky's Introduction to Problem Solving through Python Programming class. It created a game called "Blasteroids," in which the player guides a space ship through an asteroid field, blowing up or dodging asteroids to collect points, says team member Daniel Hayes, a fourth-year mechanical engineering student from Buckfield, Maine.

Jackson Lab wanted to come up with a clever computer program to attract student interest in bioinformatics and computational biology, according to Randy Smith, director of educational programs for Jackson Lab. The UMaine computer game exhibition seemed to be a good way to select the students to create the new educationally oriented game, he says.

"We chose to make a program that replicated ants and how they search for food around their home," Hayes says.

The team, led by Lydia Chang of Biddeford, created the program, "ANTZ," which models the foraging habits of ants and allows players to change variables that affect ants' abilities to find and carry food back to their nests and leave behind pheromones as a path marker for other ants between the food source and nest. Changing parameters like distance, pheromone deposits, number of ants or the ants' degree of sensitivity to the pheromones all becomes mathematically part of the simulated food-gathering outcomes for the insects, according to Hayes and Smith.

ANTZ should be on the Jackson Lab website in April for schools or anyone else to download at no cost, according to Smith.

The Blasteroids team included Chang, Hayes, code-writer Peter Delong of Westbrook and Michael Chasson of Bangor, who split the \$3,000

award.

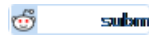
Students designed the process as well as the program to get the game written and tested, mostly via the Internet and email, “which I think is the ultimate in coolness,” Smith says.

He says the impetus for the project is to get word out in Maine communities and schools about careers in science. Jackson Lab hopes to make a similar award in 2012.

Markowsky says creating computer games to exhibit “really fires students up” and gets them excited about their work.

“I am always pleasantly surprised at the high quality of work that is produced by students having only a semester of programming under their belt,” he says. “Maine students worked hard. This hard work and their abilities produced great results.”

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