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March 24, 1999

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The Medieval World of Microchips . . .

College Programming Teams Set to Compete

March 27-28 in The Adventures of Stickman

To Test Artificial Intelligence Computer Skills

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. The medieval world of magic potions, swashbuckling sword fighting, armor-clad warriors, and grotesque monsters will dance across computer screens at Illinois Wesleyan University as 20 teams of college students from across the Midwest compete for honors in an innovative computer programming contest.

The second annual Intercollegiate Programming Contest will take place on the weekend of March 27-28 at IWU's Center for Natural Sciences, 201 E. Beecher St., Bloomington. The Saturday (March 27) program will run from 7 a.m.-11:30 p.m.; the Sunday (March 28) program is scheduled for 8 a.m.-4 p.m.

The contest is sponsored by IWU's student chapter of the Association for Computing Machinery (IWU ACM).

The contest is dubbed, The Adventures of Stickman II: Out of the Maze, Into the Fire.

Andy Ritger, an IWU senior majoring in computer science and music from Random Lake, Wis., said: "The goal of the contest is to design the most effective artificial intelligence program to guide Stickman through a video game environment."

The challenge for each team's Stickman, according to Ritger, is to survive a "dangerous" virtual medieval world filled with vampires, zombies, three-toed sloths and less fearsome creatures like squirrels and sheep. Stickman's survival skills are automatically scored as he carries out various maneuvers.

The computer manual devised by the IWU students for the contest says: "Stickman II is a multiplayer fantasy/roleplaying-style contest wherein the primary goal is to kill the other players before they kill you. Besides the other players, there are also assorted monsters (of varying degrees of danger) with which to contend.

"To aid in your quest," the document adds, "there are many helpful items to be collected along the way, such as weapons, armor, and books of arcane mystic powers."

The manual explains scoring this way: "The winner of each game is the one left standing, or the player with the highest total of experience points (among the remaining players) at the end of the game."

Stickman is endowed with certain character attributes, which are assigned numerical values determining his abilities. Among these are strength, intelligence, wisdom, dexterity, and constitution. Stickman can move, attack, cast a spell, and take other actions to survive.

Ritger, who recently stepped down as president of IWU's ACM chapter when his term expired, served as chair of the programming contest committee, staffed by about a dozen IWU students.

"There are a lot of advantages to participating in the contest," according to Ritger. "One of the biggest is that you spend a weekend with computer science majors from across the Midwest you meet your peers from other universities and those contacts might be useful in the future.

"The contest," Ritger added, "is educational. It promotes good computer programming techniques. You also learn about how to work in a group as a team under severe time constraints, which is a good simulation for computer work in the real world."

IWU's ACM chapter, which was founded in the early 1990s, has about 25 members. Lon Shapiro, assistant professor of computer science, serves as the group's faculty advisor.

Each of the 20 programming teams will have up to three members. Teams are expected from the University of Illinois/Urbana-Champaign, University of Evansville (Indiana), Butler University (Indianapolis), and elsewhere. High school teams registering for the contest compete at the collegiate level.

After more than 15 hours of computer lab time over two days, each team's program will be run against the other's in tournament fashion, with prizes awarded to the most successful programmers.

IWU students devised computer software for the contest designed to send messages from a central game engine to programs written by each team software that can ask for actions and report on Stickman's current world. This software plugs into various graphic environments available to contestants: medieval, caveman, futuristic, classic, and happy land.

"Last year's problem was simpler," Ritger explained. "It was Pac Man-like. The character could just move in the four cardinal directions [left, right, up, and down]. The complexity of this year's computer programming has increased several orders of magnitude."

The contest will begin with a 7-9 a.m. registration period and breakfast on Saturday, March 27. Programming will begin at 10 a.m. Lunch will be available from Noon to 12:30 p.m., while programming continues. Computer labs will be closed 6:30-7:30 p.m. for dinner. Programming will continue from 7:30-11:30 p.m.

On Sunday, March 28, breakfast will be served from 7:30-8 a.m. Contestants will resume computer programming at 8 a.m. Programming will be wrapped up at 11 a.m. Lunch will be served from 11 a.m.-Noon. The computer programming tournament will run from Noon-4 p.m. All contestants' programs will be shown in the Anderson (C-101) and Beckman (C-102) auditoriums in the CNS on overhead projectors. The championship round will follow those presentations in C-101.

The awards ceremony will begin at 4 p.m., Sunday. Prizes will be awarded to the top three teams. Participants also will receive T-shirts, marking the event.

Several IWU students have played leadership roles in organizing the computer programming contest:

- Chris Stewart, a senior computer science major from Marion, Iowa. Stewart was one of the contest's principal programmers.
- Michael Zalokar, a junior majoring in computer science and mathematics from Wheaton, Ill. He was a principal programmer involved in devising the interface between the game engine and the various teams' programs.
- Jay Bryant, a sophomore majoring in computer science from Cedar Rapids, Iowa. He was responsible for contest logistics.
- Rebecca Schroeder, a junior majoring in computer science from Peoria, Ill. She was responsible for contest logistics.
- Jeff De Napoli, a junior majoring in computer science from Skokie, Ill. He was responsible for devising computer graphics used in the contest.
- Steve Najim, a junior majoring in computer science and business from Springfield, Ill. He served as the contest's webmaster and as liaison with teams registered for the contest.
- Jennifer Humowiecki, a senior majoring in computer science from Riverside, Ill. She served as secretary of the administrative committee for the contest.
- Aaron Feakins, a junior majoring in computer science and business from Aurora, Ill. He was involved in overall design of the computer game.
- Sunil Jagwani, a junior majoring in computer science and business is from India. He served as liaison with IWU's Student Senate.

- Kelli Doonan, a sophomore majoring in computer science from Ladd, Ill. She worked with the administrative group.

There is a \$15 entry fee per team, payable at the door.

The contest is open to undergraduates, graduate students, and professionals. Materials such as books and printouts for coding assistance are allowed, but no on-line sources are permitted.

Ritger is a graduate of Dominican High School in Whitefish Bay, Wis.

IWU, founded in 1850, enrolls about 2,000 students in a College of Liberal Arts, and individual schools of Music, Theatre Arts, Art, and Nursing. Since 1994, these facilities have been added to the IWU campus: a \$15 million athletics and recreation center, a \$25 million science center, a \$6.8 million residence hall, and a \$5.1 million Center for Liberal Arts.

Editor's Note: *The Adventures of Stickman II: Out of the Maze, Into the Fire is open for news media coverage. This news release is embargoed to ensure that all participants compete on a level playing field with no advance knowledge about contest specifics. The embargo was lifted at 8 a.m., March 25, when the Application Programmer's Interface, the computer manual guiding the contest, is released to all contestants.*