Family Focus

A camp for video gamers

BY CRAIG MACBRIDE
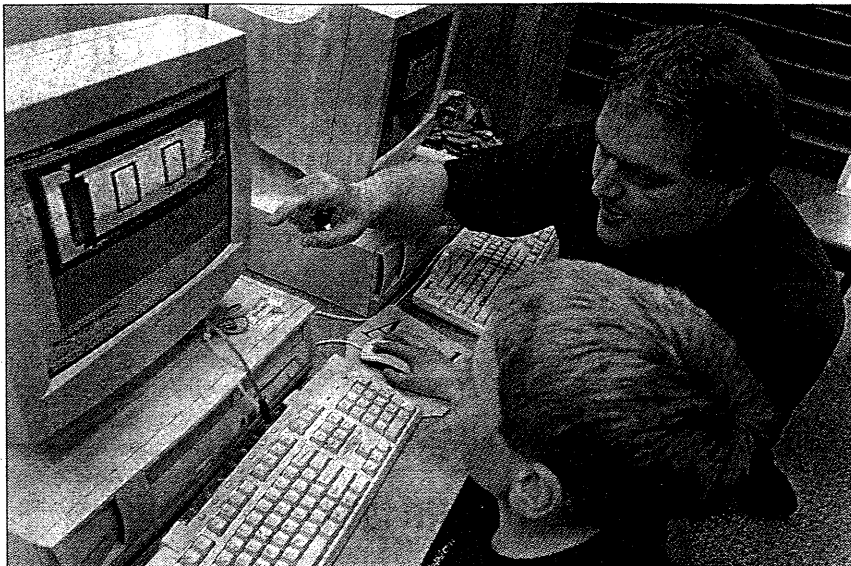### SPECIAL TO THE OAKVILLE BEAVER

Thirteen-year-old Michael Pefhany was speaking a different language, his words intermingled with some English, while trying to demonstrate for me how his video game worked.

He looked at me to make sure I understood his language of computer coding. I nodded to assure him I did, but he saw through me and attempted to dumb it down.

I still didn't understand.

Pefhany has been enrolled in Real Programming 4 Kids for nearly a year and is now in the advanced Visual Basics course.

At class on a recent Tuesday

Peter C. McCuker OAKVILLE BEAVER
Bob Burgess gives pointers to Ryan Pacinda at Game Development Camp.

evening at St. Mildred's-Lightbourn School, he was tweaking the game he programmed under the guidance of his instructor.

Like a lot of the boys at the video game programming class – and they are all boys – Pefhany wants to make video games for a living when he grows up.

Bobb Burgess and Elliott Bay, co-founders of Real Programming 4 Kids, realized that such lives are the dreams of many kids these days, and that's why they began to focus on teaching them how to make video games.

Their company began as a math tutoring service in Winnipeg a decade ago, before many of the kids currently in their program were born.

Their company transformed several times, and it continues to evolve.

As is it now, the video game school runs 20-week programs throughout the school year in three locations – Toronto, Vaughan and Oakville – and will be opening their fourth location, in Ottawa, in time for their summer program.

The summer programs run between one week and three weeks, depending on the difficulty of the programs being learned, and range in price from $472 to $1,782.

The camp is expensive, but Bay thinks it's worth it, claiming that the kids are learning more than most adults would in IT courses.

Coding isn't all that they learn though. Most of these kids are naturally good at math and problem solving, and, according to Bay, they learn a lot about gravity and velocity in the class.

"If they weren't in this program, they wouldn't be learning physics until Grade 12," Bay said, watching over three groups of four students and three instructors.

Never having a larger group than four students for every instructor, Bay keeps the classes moving quickly, and the kids always challenged and getting the attention they need.

Instructors learn from students

He chooses the instructors carefully. They are all undergraduates in Computer Science or Computer Engineering at university and they are all quite young, play the same video games as the kids play and can relate to them on that level.

Rovic Perdon, one of the instructors, enjoys interacting with the kids and finds that he ends up learning quite a bit himself.

"Some of the things these kids come up with are amazing," he said. "Sometimes I think, why didn't I come up with that?"

Barb Douglas, whose son Jordan is in the class, echoed his sentiment.

"My husband, who's in software, is going to Jordan for help," she said. "It really helps Jordan with his problem solving."

Unlike a lot of computer camps, Bay said that this one isn't just a babysitter for the summer.

"The idea is to challenge the kids and get them thinking on their own. We don't do adult classes, we don't do daycare," he said, going on to relate his business strategy to a video game. "That's what I learned from *Wargames*: concentration of force, attacking along a narrow front. In business, it's called specialization. *Wargames* teaches more about business than an MBA."

Titles like *Wargames* do invite critics though, and Real Programming 4 Kids have their share. Burgess, who co-founded the company with Bay, brushes off the theory that video games lead to violent behaviour, saying bluntly, "I think hockey causes more violence than video games."

And when concerns were raised that perhaps kids shouldn't be sitting inside in front of computers all summer, he said, "It's only half a day. The kids we get would be sitting in front of a computer all day anyway. It's better to have them programming instead of just playing the games."

For more information on the programs offered by Real Programming 4 Kids, call Elliott Bay at 416-469-9676.