

Local Business

Job Opportunities

A summer full of video games not all bad

By Jim Harris
Staff Writer

Most parents would probably prefer that their children not spend all summer inside playing video games.

But if the kids are going to do that anyway, they might as well be preparing themselves for a career in the field, or for a post-secondary program.

Hence, the Real Programming 4 Kids program being offered all summer – and year round for that matter – at St. John's Ravenscourt.

The program teaches kids how to program popular video games from the past, like Pacman, Frogger, Asteroids, Space Invaders and Super Mario Bros. It's designed to give the students who take it an introduction to the world of computer programming by

hooking them in using a lure they can't resist: video games.

"A lot of these kids do play hours and hours of games," said Jeremy Hildebrand, the Winnipeg manager of the program. "In a sense, it's a way to trick them into learning stuff.

"Video games are the hook," he added. "We could teach them how to build databases, but then we'd get, like three kids a summer."

By using video games as the drawing card, the program has been much more successful than that. This summer, more than 100 kids will enrol in the one- and two-week courses.

Ten-year-old Mitchell Sherren, who is an avid video game player, says he enjoys Nintendo-style adventure games. The reason he enrolled in the program is simple.

"I like the fact that you

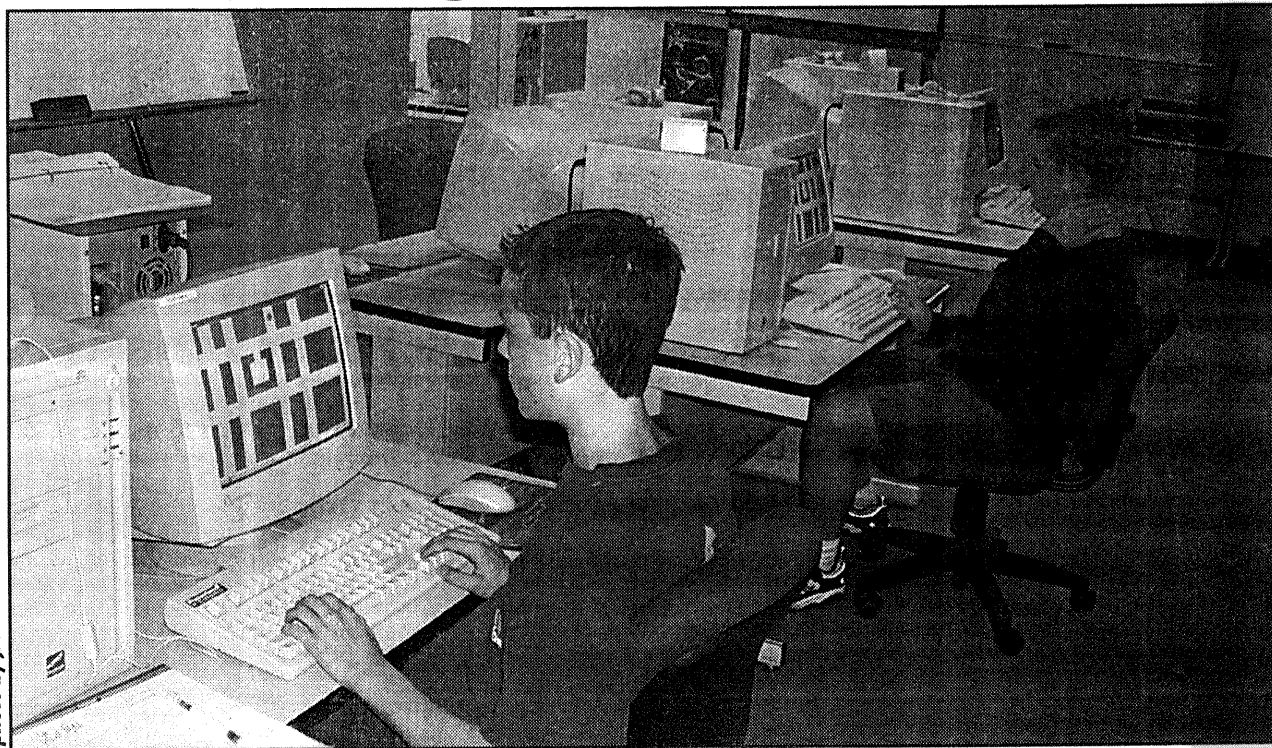


photo by Jim Harris

Alex Kropla (left) and Doug Stephen work on their own versions of the arcade classic Pacman.

can make your own computer games," he said, although he added that making the games was more difficult than he had imagined.

Nevertheless, after getting a taste of the programming life, Sherren, who was working on recreating the classic game Frogger, says he's eager for more. He intends to pursue it as a career later in life.

Doug Stephen, 13, was drawn in by the video game lure too. Stephen says he is a big gamer in his spare time and enjoys playing role-playing games the most.

Like Sherren, he would also like to pursue programming as a career.

Stephen, who lives in Destin, Fla., comes to Winnipeg each summer to visit family. His grandmother told him about the program and he thought it sounded interesting, so he signed up.

"Programming and video gaming are a natural fit," Hildebrand said. "Computer science uses mathematics in many ways, which you don't get to do in just a theory class... You'll see kids here moving things around based on the mathematical co-ordinates and the speed and the velocity."

This Trojan Horse-like type of educating began right here in Winnipeg eight years ago and has since expanded to include other camps in Toronto and Oakville, Ont.

Three or four years ago it really started to catch on. The company expects a combined total of 293 students will take the program this summer.

Most of the kids in the program wouldn't see programming until Grades 10 or 11 in school, Hildebrand said, but that doesn't impede their progress.

"I'm a former math teacher and I'm just fascinated by the way kids can pick up on this. It's a powerful learning tool.

"Everything you think might be too high-minded for them, give them a reason to learn it and these kids are like sponges. They just suck it up," he said.

However, some skills are needed before a student can take the program. Instructor Dave Kiddell says they need to have a good grasp of how to solve word problems and understand basic math logic, because those are integral skills.

"They take a practical problem and apply a mathematical solution to it, which is what a lot of programming is," Kiddell said.

In order to determine if children are ready for the program, they are chosen after undergoing a free one-hour assessment class with the staff at Real Programming.

"It's as much for the students and parents to assess our program," Hildebrand said. "It's also important that we do that class well because with small groups of four kids, if the classes don't fit together well it's chaos."

All of this learning isn't cheap, however. The cost of the program ranges from just over \$400 for a one-week introductory Visual Basic course to more than \$1,000 for the two-week advanced Visual C++ course.

Nevertheless, the training can be very worthwhile down the road, Hildebrand said.

"Many of the kids who have done C++ here find the first and second year of university classes to be quite a bit of review of what they already know," he said.

"Our goal is to create programmers here and it just so happens that we have a blast building games," he added.

"All of the skills we're teaching these kids in the programming languages are exactly the skills they're eventually going to need in the workforce."

For more information, call 284-3456.