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DROID

Students compete in droid construction

By Janet Wozna
The Grand Rapids Press

Jose Rodriguez has never played a computer game, but he's about to learn how. The 17-year-old senior from Grand Rapids Central High School volunteered to take part in a unique computer-game competition.

"It looks pretty cool," Rodriguez said, after listening to an hour-long introduction to the rivalry that involves the Star Wars DroidWorks software.

The educational game is a combination of construction set and adventure game that enables players to learn and apply scientific principles.

Six two-member teams will design and build a droid to infiltrate a secret factory and reprogram an army of assassin droids. The game has eight missions with three levels of expertise.

The droids are built on a holographic design grid that allows 360-degree, 3-D viewing. There are 87 robotic parts that can be combined to make millions of unique droids. Mission critical factors, such as speed, strength, vocabulary and flexibility, have to be taken into account.

Rodriguez, who came to this country from Mexico with his family when he was 5 years old, said the game looks cool, but hard.

The 12 students involved in the three-month competition, which is sponsored by PhilanthroTech Inc., a West Michigan, nonprofit organization, Lucas Learning Ltd. of San Rafael, Calif., and US Interactive of Los Angeles, Calif., are from Lowell High School and Grand Rapids Central and Union High schools.

Union High School principal Joyce Johnson said the game generates critical thinking.

"It's an opportunity to think out of the box," Bassin said to help level the playing field,

students with similar academic backgrounds were selected.

"Their experience is less important than their innate problem-solving skills," said Bassin, explaining that the goal is to show students that technology offers another avenue for learning.

Bassin is also hoping educators will realize what a great tool game-play is and integrate it into curriculum programs.

Lowell High School principal Scott Vashaw knew, so soon as he heard about the project, that his school had to get involved.

"It hasn't been done before," Vashaw said. "We're out on an edge where there isn't a path, and we don't know how it will end up."

Edward Harris, a 10th-grader from Union High School, hopes the game is challenging. "Regular school is too easy," he said.

The competition appealed to Lowell junior Jeff Jones because of his Star Wars connection.

"I've seen all four movies," said the 17-year-old, who has a computer at home, spending about four hours a week on it.

The competition, which has strict time guidelines and requires written and oral progress reports, concludes Jan. 26 with an awards ceremony. Members of the



WESLEY PHOTO

Students from Grand Rapids Central High School, Lowell High School and Grand Rapids Central Union High School are competing in a new program that will teach computer skills and learning.



*"When you venture
into the unknown,
you can only lose,
you can't fail."*

— RANDY BASSIN,

PhilanthroTech founder and chairman