BrainAcademy 2005 promotes HCI

Can you answer Computer Science questions on subjects as diverse as logic, interactive art, Don Norman and the history of computing...and program creatively to boot? BrainAcademy, the online Computer Science talent spotting competition, run by Queen Mary, University of London and supported by Microsoft and the British HCI Group, is back…and the winner will do just that. An aim of the competition is to challenge stereotypes about Computer Science in a fun way showing that the subject is much more varied and interesting than School ICT, and that it draws on a wide range of other, human-centred, subject areas. It is about people as well as computers.

The competition involves completing an online research quiz to qualify for the second round: a programming challenge. This year BrainAcademy explores the diversity inherent in computer science and includes a strong HCI flavour. Don Norman features in a question highlighting the importance of both Design and HCI to Computer Scientists. Another question is about the merging of Art and Computer Science: BAFTA award winning Interactive Art company Soda Limited are one of the competition's supporters this year. Another question concerns the Therac Radiation Therapy Machine. It is a classic case of a computer product gone wrong in a tragic way: where a poor user interface and general lack of consideration of human factors was instrumental in the death of patients. Finally, the programming challenge, accessible only once all 12 questions have been correctly answered, is concerned with computers and emotion.

Even those that do not make it to the second round should learn about Computer Science in the process as well as having some fun. The competition is free to enter: anyone can test their knowledge and research skills on the quiz stage. For those more dedicated, serious prizes are available: for example an undergraduate degree place with fees paid, together with career enhancing plug-ins. In addition to software and other prizes, Microsoft are offering a guaranteed interview for their student internship and graduate recruitment programmes: the chance to win a place at Microsoft. Top Internet publishers ZDNet are offering summer work experience, likely to involve doing product evaluations, for the winner.

The competition has also been expanded this year to include prizes of Masters bursaries, with one winner getting the chance to study on, amongst others an advanced HCI course: Intelligent Web Technologies or the Advanced Research Methods MSc that includes a strong HCI component. There is also a Conversion Masters bursary up for grabs: suitable for someone from a non-computer Science background looking for a career change.

BrainAcademy was first launched in 2003. The quiz received over 80,000 hits, with 120 hopefuls making it through to the programming challenge, and a handful making it as far as the interview stage. The fun "life-changing-prizes-game-show" caught the imagination and even received commendations from the government Minister for IT. The competition also won Queen Mary's Drapers prize for teaching and learning. The 2003 winner, Adam Kramer, from North London, is currently entering his second year and is one of the top students on the Queen Mary Computer Science course. Adam, then 17, was a self-taught programmer when he entered.

To enter the Academy and for more information go to http://www.brainacademy.qmul.ac.uk/
Are you up for the challenge?

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Gavin King (right) of Microsoft and Jon Rowson (left) of Queen Mary, University of London with the 2003 winner, Adam Kramer (centre) at the prize ceremony.