BrainAcademy 2006 aims to do more than just entertain

BrainAcademy, Queen Mary, University of London's answer to TV talent shows is back and aiming to engage the next generation in Computer Science and Human Computer Interaction. In sponsoring BrainaAcademy 2006, the British HCI Group not only join Microsoft, Soda, ZDNet and Omarketing but also new for this year, another major industry player: ARM. Rather than looking for musical talent, BrainAcademy is looking for a combination of creative and technical talent with prizes available not only to win a Computer Science degree place but also, for example, a place on a Digital Performance MSc where students will learn not only about creative digital technologies but also drama and performance art. On offer are also a range of career plug-ins including tailored fast-track interviews on graduation with Microsoft and ARM. The aim of the competition is to engage people with the wide range of careers computer science can lead to, helping to spread the message that when designing computers you need not only understand computers but also users and society more generally.

This year's theme is *Computer Science and the Entertainment Industry*. The web hunt quiz stage explores the way computers have moved out of the offices and into the living rooms in a variety of ways, from films to games, puzzles and alife toys, from sport to music, art, photography and playful education. In doing so it illustrates how the subject draws on many different areas; from the social sciences to engineering, from maths to the performing arts and ethics. The programming stage is a creative challenge. You need to pass the quiz stage to discover the details, but hints on the Brainacademy site suggest it has a lot to do with Digital Performance and turning your computer into a potential talent-show winner itself.

BrainAcademy was first launched in 2003. The fun "life-changing-prizes-game-show" caught the imagination and received commendations from the government's Minister for IT. The 2003 winner, Adam Kramer, from North London, is currently at the end of his second year of his Queen Mary Computer Science course prize. He is also part of Microsoft's "Most valued students" scheme. Adam, then 17, was a self-taught programmer when he entered. Simon Kinsey, winner of the 2005 competition will be returning to study on an Advanced Methods in Computer Science MSc as a mature student; after a varied career as a community health officer, manager of homelessness services, teaching mathematics and most recently as a Data Analyst with Anglian Water. Simon created an artificial life program, where a goldfish had to search for food in its virtual environment. The judges were impressed by the humour in the animation, as well as the technical competence of the programming. Simon also demonstrated a deep knowledge both of technology and its impact on society. Part of his prize is membership of the British HCI Group.

New for this year, the postgraduate competition is open to overseas students for the first time. ARM together with cs4fn are also sponsoring a new category BrainAcademy: The Next Generation. It is open to school students who are too young to enter the main competition. Prizes include the chance to get involved in HCI research in action in Queen Mary's Augmented Human Interaction Research Laboratory. The aim is to excite the next generation about Human-Computer and Human-Human Interaction research.

The BrainAcademy 2006 opens on 20th March 2006 and closes on 14 September 2006. For more information and to enter, visit www.brainacademy.qmul.ac.uk