

App/Web student has hack knack

Just like the witches in "The Wizard of Oz", there are good hackers and bad hackers in the world.

St. Clair's Devin Pavao is a very, very good hacker.

In the mainstream media, the term "hacking" most often appears in its negative sense: "to circumvent security and break into a server or website with malicious intent".

But, in the world of electronic professionals, "hacking" means the process of creativity: the invention-from-scratch of a computer program, or the clever improvement of an existing one.

It was the latter process that was on display at the University of Waterloo on the September 19-21 weekend.

That school, and dozens of hi-tech corporate partners, played host to 1,000 computer programming and app-development innovators - most of them students - at the first (probably annual) "Hack The North Hackathon".

After the fact, it was praised as probably the largest gathering of its technological sort in Canadian history - and one of the best organized, most innovative get-togethers in North America.

Approximately a third of the 1,000 attendees were from the United States, and others flew in from South Korea, China, Brazil and a number of other overseas nations.

Among that throng was Devin Pavao, a second-year student in St. Clair's Internet Applications and Web Development program.

It had already been a pretty eventful year for Devin.

In May, he won a silver medal in the Website Development category of the annual Ontario Skills competition (also staged in Waterloo).

He departed Hack The North with potential interest from a software company in the continued development of a web application that was unveiled during the hackathon.

Seeking individuals of similar programming interests among the conference delegates, Devin eventually teamed up with "two complete strangers" to work on the app's development - fellow students Robert Nguyen of California and Paula Barcante of British Columbia.

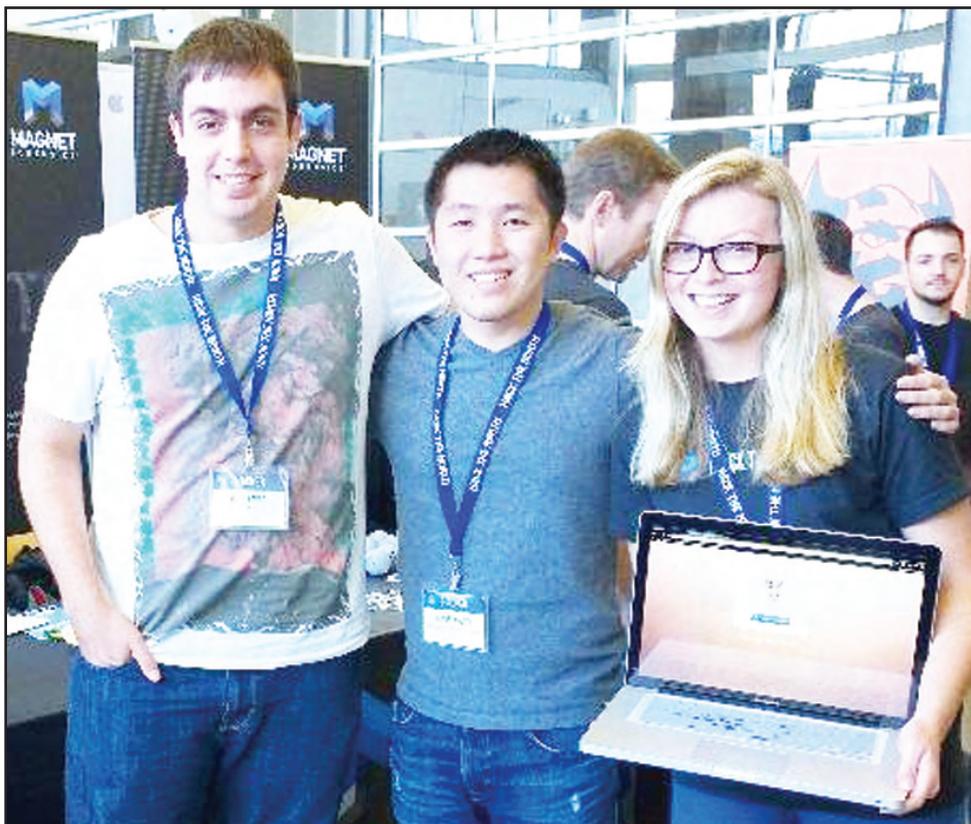
During the 36 hours of Hack The North's brainstorming and coding, Devin, Robert and Paula came up with "Korral".

The web-app-to-be eliminates the need for continuously bookmarking electronic items-of-interest. Instead, the app's users build a portfolio that gathers such items into a personal archive - subdivided into videos, tutorials, news-articles, academic research, etc..

Every once in a while, the app will send you a reminder about the item that you found so interesting, so that you can review it and maybe seek (or make) updates about the topic. If you disregard such reminders repeatedly, the app will eventually (and automatically) delete the item.

Accessible by others/friends, Korral will - indirectly, at least - create a personal profile of the sort of topics of interest to you.

Korral wasn't one of the ten finalist prize-winners at Hack The North. Many of those were "hardware-based", gadgety or game-related. Those finalists, for the most part, walked away with machinery as



Korral creators (left to right) Devin Pavao of St. Clair, Robert Nguyen and Paula Barcante.

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prizes: tablets, gaming consoles, etc..

But the Devin/Robert/Paula creation piqued the interest of one of the participating companies at the hackathon.

"It's not a situation of 'We'll buy that - here's a bunch of money'," Devin said in a recent interview. "We have the possibility of tapping into the company's tools, advice, mentorship, know-how and stepping-stone support.

"I'm going to keep working with Robert and Paula, and we've probably still got at least six months of work left before the app is completed.

"Even then, the company may not want

the final product. But it may find elements of it that it likes and could use.

"And that's really what struck me about this hackathon. All of the corporate people there were just looking for ideas and potential - not necessarily at finalized products. The fact that our idea, alone, was of interest to one of those companies was just phenomenal. It should be very inspiring to students in this field that you can do all sorts of things without having to worry about sponsorship from the outset. Get a great idea first; and support, of one degree or another, will find its way to you."

That corporate encouragement was evident throughout the nuts-and-bolts portion of the event, he added. "At previous (much smaller) hackathons that I've attended, participants were pretty much on their own during the design process. At Hack The North (in contrast), representatives from all of the companies were wandering around the whole time, asking, 'What are you working on? Maybe my company's software could help you. Let's try to make what you're doing compatible with this platform or device.' It was so helpful and constructive for everyone."

The professional networking opportunities were, likewise, unprecedented. "Hardware and software companies, app developers, website companies - all of the biggest companies in the industry were there," Devin said. "Most of them were taking resumes on the spot. You could even submit your resume to a central registry, and it would be distributed for internship openings, or even just to have your resume critiqued."

In the wider realm, Hack The North really served to put Canada on the "app-map". "That world, professionally, is still pretty much dominated by Silicon Valley in the U.S.," Devin said. "A well-organized event of this size, with so much corporate backing and involvement, made a lot of people realize that Canada is interested in high-tech after all, and really has a great deal of expertise to offer. And not just the University of Waterloo benefited from the exposure - I think a lot of the international students who attended may start looking at Canadian schools to pursue their educations."

In that nationalistic vein, Hack The North had a distinctly Canadian flavour - literally: in addition to the gallons upon gallons of Red Bull that fueled the 36 hours of frenzied coding, the event featured such classic cuisine as poutine and a midnight snack of 7,000 Timbits.

