Hackathon teams at Ohio State create code to success

2 students’ music app winner of 22-hour contest

By Ben Sutherly
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Soon after you show up at a party, a friend puts you in an awkward spot. You’re in charge of the music, but clueless about everyone’s tastes.

A team of two Ohio State University students during the weekend developed an app for that, dubbing it “Atmosphere.” It produces a playlist tailored to a crowd after aggregating the songs and musical genres that party-goers have “liked” through their Facebook pages. All the app needs to know is who’s there.

Ross Johnstal and Rituvik Vasudevan, both 19-year-old sophomores from Cincinnati, took first place for their work yesterday at the conclusion of Ohio State’s first-annual Hackathon. As prizes, each received a Wi-Fi-connected drone.

“I really wanted to end up with a functioning program, something that would be useful at the end of the day,” said Johnstal, an electrical-engineering major who sees commercial potential in Atmosphere. “The whole concept of a hackathon forces you to really focus on one application and get it done and make it work.”

The event, sponsored by Hortonworks and Teradata — whose software supports the “big data” needs of businesses — pitted more than 100 students against one another. The students, who formed dozens of teams, wrote code for 22 hours straight, from 4 p.m. Saturday to 1 p.m. yesterday, in the basement of the university’s 18th Avenue Library. Their work was judged on its creativity, technical depth, degree of difficulty and
"real-world" usefulness.

"Hacking" might bring to mind troublemakers who are trying to breach a computer system. But it also refers to a process of cobbuling together code, said Arnab Nandi, an Ohio State assistant professor of computer science.

"Hacking is about conveying this awesome vision," Nandi said. "To be able to get it running to the point where you can see the result, that's what we want in 24 hours. Hopefully these students will go back and say, 'Let's make it perfect.' It doesn't have to be perfect to start off."

Nandi hopes the hackathon, a sleep-depriving experience fueled by caffeinated drinks and pizza, gives students a new appreciation for the computer applications they use.

"Any simple project or any simple product that you see out there is actually an extremely challenging set of tasks," he said.

IBM’s opening of a one-stop shop for data analytics last year in Columbus demonstrates that central Ohio is becoming a hotbed in that field, and events such as the hackathon show that Ohio State "has students passionate about building cool and interesting things," Nandi said.

The deadline-oriented format of a hackathon brings an urgency to writing code, participants said.

"Generally when you're developing products, you want to work slowly to make sure you're doing it right," said Jonathan Arnett, a 19-year-old sophomore from Cincinnati. "With a deadline, you have to work quickly and trust your luck."

The event also can be an important networking tool.

"I enjoyed being around other people who do similar things to what I do and share similar interests," Johnstal said. "I definitely made some connections."

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