S’pore-made video game beats all in global contest

CarnyVale may be sold on Xbox online store after topping Microsoft contest

A video game made in Singapore could soon have its debut on the world stage, after it beat almost 350 other entries in a global game development competition. The puzzle game, made by a team of seven young local developers from the Singapore-MIT Gambit Game Lab, came out tops in a contest organised by technology giant Microsoft.

Along with a cash prize of US$40,000 ($60,000), it also gets a stab at being launched on the online store for the Xbox game console. The service, which gamers use to download titles directly onto their system, has 14 million members around the world.

If successful, CarnyVale by the Gambit team will be available alongside more than 150 other titles from high-name publishers. It would be a coup for the game lab, which is a collaboration between the Media Development Authority (MDA) and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in the United States.

CarnyVale, inspired by pinball, is set in a circus. Players have to file a clown through obstacles, such as bricks and rings of fire, while collecting balloons to level up.

Judges for the competition said in an e-mail interview that the game was picked for its fun factor, innovation and high quality of production.

The game allows players to create their own levels, a feature the judges were particularly impressed with.

"It’s map-editor mode helped it to stand out from other entries," said Mr Ian Tan, marketing communications manager for Microsoft Singapore.

Executives from Microsoft will assess the game’s suitability for the online video games store. Games that won last year’s version of the competition, called Dream-Build-Play, are already being commercialised.

"We’re very pleased to see our efforts bear fruit," said Ms Teo Cher Guan, programme director at the Gambit lab.

"All along, people have been wondering if Singapore can create a game that will make it on the international stage, and this shows we can do it." If the game makes it online, the MDA will receive royalties for each copy sold, which it will channel back to the Gambit programme.

Gambit – which stands for Gamers, Aesthetics, Mechanics, Business, Innovation, Technology – was one of the first initiatives announced in 2006 to stimulate research and development in digital media here.

The Government hopes to create 10,000 new jobs in the digital media sector by 2015.

Since its inception, the lab has made waves internationally for AudiOdyssey, a music-based PC game that the blind can play.

As part of efforts to nurture local game developers, it sends about 40 students to MIT’s Cambridge, Massachusetts campus for a nine-week internship every year.

Members from the team that won the developer challenge had gone through this programme.

The team of four programmers, an artist, a sound engineer and a producer – ranging from 18 to 27 years old – worked full-time on the winning game from June to last month.

"We wanted to make a game that is easy to play and yet still engaging, and that those who are watching can enjoy," said National University of Singapore undergraduate Bruce Chia, 24, the team’s lead programmer.