UF students create artificially intelligent computer games

By TOMMY GRAHAM
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You wake up in a strange room standing over the newly murdered body of a woman you went to bed with just hours before.

You don't know how the victim died or even whether or not you killed her. Police sirens break the silence of the city night, closing in just outside the room walls.

You have to make some decisions and make them fast.

Ralph Mills and Ryan Busser, both University of Florida computer-engineering juniors, have designed an interactive computer game where the gamer is dropped into this scenario.

The interactive game is just one of a handful being showcased by UF's first-ever Artificial Intelligence in Computer Games course. More than 20 students that took part in the new course and had a chance to learn about various techniques that make computer games more natural and real through the use of artificial intelligence, according to Douglas Dankel, course instructor and assistant professor in computer science.

The main character in Mills' and Busser's interactive storyline is named Marv, and through Marv, the gamer is faced with a series of difficult decisions that will eventually allow him to uncover a multiple murder conspiracy involving prostitutes, clergy members and politicians.

If the plot sounds familiar, it's because Mills and Busser and the three other members of their group used the movie "Sin City" as the inspiration for their plot.

"It's a simplified as well as an interactive version of the movie," Busser said.

Basically, the students got a chance to come up with their own interactive, text-based video game. The outcome of the game is based on the decisions of the gamer. As inspiration for game plots, the students not only chose popular movies, but found television shows such as "CSI: Crime Scene Investigation" and "MacGyver" good for gaming material.

"We're programmers, not creative writers," said Mitul Patel, a computer and information science senior.

Going into the course, the students had a grasp of how to program a video game by the numbers. Many got a chance to program a computer puzzle game similar to "Tetris" last semester, but designing a game that involves a gamer's decision-making is far more complex. Coming up with a good storyline proved to be one of the most challenging aspects of the class.

"Tetris is like a math class," Mills said. "This is like an English literature class. The reason why we chose the movie 'Sin City' is because it's an easy transition to an interactive video game. It's just a lot of data entry."

Many students in UF's first artificial intelligence class consider game design to be a glamorous field to enter into - something akin to Hollywood movies.

"The gaming industry, right now, is bigger than the entire movie industry," Dankel said. "It's amazing how much they've taken off since Pong."

Although not animated, the games' text is interactive and many of the games, including Mills' and Busser's, guide the gamer through the plot with still pictures.