

MSW : News & Events : Inside Track

Take a Ride through Cairo, Imagine Cup 2009 with E

E McNeill, a student at Dartmouth College in New Hampshire, took his alternative energy game *Alternex* to the Imagine Cup world finals in Cairo. MSW followed him throughout his five days in the shadow of the pyramids. Find out if he emerged a world champion.

By Lukas Velush
July 8, 2009

CAIRO, Egypt – E McNeill spent five days in Cairo competing in the 2009 Imagine Cup world finals. McNeill, a rare one-man team, competed in the Game and Development finals. He was one of more than 300,000 students from around the world who competed in nine technology and software development categories, and one of only 440 of those who made it to the world finals.

MSW followed McNeill throughout the competition. Here is an abbreviated version of his experience, which was posted on the [Imagine Cup blog](#).

McNeill Brings His Game to Egypt (posted July 2, 2009, 6:08 p.m.)

E McNeill is a one-man team who hopes to use his "hardcore educational" game as a fun way to help people become more aware of the importance of alternative energy and the issues surrounding it. The sophomore at Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire, is competing in the Game and Development competition. McNeill is majoring in computer science with a focus on the digital arts. Check out his game, called *Alternex*.

McNeill left home today at 11 a.m. Eastern Standard Time and expects to arrive in Cairo at 3 p.m. local time. Add it up, and that means a 21-hour trip. Good travels, E, and we'll check in with you when you get to Egypt.

Journey to Cairo Makes World Traveler out of E (posted July 4, 2009, 10:32 a.m.)

Nearly 22 hours later, McNeill arrived in Cairo and is now a world traveler. "I guess my statement on the matter is I can't complain about a free flight," McNeill said. He didn't sleep much as he traveled east from Boston to Frankfurt. "I experienced the shortest night I've ever seen," he said. Traveling east at speeds greater than 550 mph will do that to you, especially when flying in summer in the northern hemisphere. "It was evening, then I watched a movie, then it was dawn."

McNeill had time to enjoy a German soda and meet a team from Romania before hopping on his connecting flight to Cairo. The trip through the quarantine area, getting a visa, and getting through customs was easier than he thought it would be.

"I suppose my first take of Egyptian culture was the traffic," he said. He called the trip from the airport to the hotel an adventure, especially when the guide joked that they had arrived at Casablanca, not Cairo. When he walked off the plane, the first thing that hit him was the heat. "It was confirmation that, yes, I was in a very real desert for the first time."

McNeill enjoyed Friday night's opening ceremony and loved running down the walkway to the stage with his fellow Americans and hearing his fellow competitors getting riled up for the night. "The opening ceremony was an amazing ceremony," he said. He was glad he found out that his bit of running down to the stage was on the big screen after he got to his seat. "I had no idea what was coming," he said.



McNeill's Imagine Cup entry is a game called *Alternex*, which makes people more aware of the importance of alternative energy and the issues surrounding it.

McNeill Goes before Judges, Awaits Fate (posted July 4, 2009, 2:52 p.m.)

McNeill has shown the judges his educational (yet fun, he says) alternative energy game, and now he waits in judgment to see if he will advance in the Game and Development competition.

McNeill gave a PowerPoint presentation and demoed his game for the judges. He said it went well, but the real test comes later today when the judges take it out for a test spin. He's seen some of the competition's work. "They all look very impressive," he said. "I'm a little bit intimidated, but don't tell the judges."

McNeill Makes It Big, Advances to Final Round (posted July 4, 2009, 9:35 p.m.)

When McNeill found out he had advanced to the final round in the Imagine Cup's Games and Development category Saturday evening, he was shocked. "Joe Wilson [a Microsoft senior director of academic evangelism] called out Brazil, then the UK, and then the United States," McNeill said. "We didn't know which one it was because the United States had two teams in the finals."

Finally, after a bit of confusion, he found out that it was Epsilon Games that had advanced—his one-man team and the alternative energy game that he brought to Cairo had nabbed one of the top three spots in the competition and will compete for first place on Tuesday. Not too bad, he said. "I was really surprised. There was really strong competition. I am but one man, so I set my expectations accordingly."

As far as McNeill is concerned, he came out a winner when he made it the finals in Cairo. Advancing not once, but twice is just gravy, as will be winning \$5,000, \$10,000, or even \$25,000. Getting his picture taken in front of the Pyramid of Giza will be equally as cool, he said.

McNeill was a busy guy after he found out he had advanced. "I've been shaking a lot of hands and e-mailing friends and family back home," he said. "I've been telling them that the winnings will be a really nice sum, but that I have to share with my team."

Cy Khormae, a Microsoft academic developer evangelist who has been helping look after McNeill and the rest of the American contingent, had a good laugh at his jest. "You're a one-man army," he said. "You earned it."

McNeill appeared to be taking it all in stride, saying that he is a pretty low-key guy. "This is about as excited as I get," he said, standing on stage with his hands in his pockets while getting his picture taken. Nearby,



E McNeill is a computer science student from Dartmouth College competing in the Games and Development finals at Imagine Cup.

other winning teams were shouting, chanting, and generally getting fired up about advancing.

McNeill Makes Trip to Pyramids, Nile River after Finishing His Last Presentation (posted July 6, 2009, 2:09 p.m.)

McNeill enjoyed his trip to see the pyramids and Great Sphinx today—immensely. "Everything was impressive. It's incredible to think that they've literally been around for several millennia. We had to wade through the tourist traps, but that's just a different type of fun. I felt like a stereotypical American tourist with my desert hat and my big camera. I joked to some friends that I was really just there for the Facebook pictures."



When the final presentation was over, McNeill was happy to start enjoying Egypt a little more.

He finds out tomorrow if he has finished first, second, or third. His fun day today followed one last presentation on Sunday, his last chance to woo the judges. "The actual presentation was fairly easy," he said. "I had only prepared a 30-minute version before the competition, so I had to cut it down to 20 last night for the new format. I pretty much just cut out anything that wasn't critical to the explanation, so it was still familiar territory for me."

When it was done, he was happy to start enjoying Egypt a little more. That night (Sunday for those of you having a hard time keeping track) he skipped the scheduled dinner to go do a felucca cruise on the Nile River. "It was cool to see the city at sundown from the river, and I got to hang out with all my new friends from the U.S. team," McNeill said.

They then went to Khan el-Khalili where they stopped at a restaurant and "had a nice Egyptian meal of veal and lamb along with lentil soup, flatbread of some sort, and other stuff that I can't remember."

Then they went into a bazaar. "I'm not very good at saying no, so I was completely out of my element in all the aggressive salesmanship," he said. "Those guys are good at what they do. Still, I managed not to spend too much money. I bought, among other things, a cane, so that I could look upper-class when I wore a suit and fedora back home. Unfortunately, it doesn't fit in my suitcase, so I might have to carry it all the way back home and feel silly all the while."



McNeill enjoyed a trip to the Great Pyramids and the Great Sphinx during some down time from the competition.

McNeill Walks Away with Second Place, \$10,000 and a Pocketful of Memories (Posted July 8, 2009, 12:01 a.m.)

McNeill was called up on stage one last time at the Imagine Cup, with the Great Pyramids looming in front of him as he walked up to receive his award—a second place finish in the worldwide Imagine Cup's Games and Development finals.

Alternex had impressed the judges enough to say his game was second best among all those submitted. Taking home \$10,000 for second place isn't bad, especially because he doesn't have to share it. "It's pretty crazy," McNeill said. "Of course, I was never in it for the money."

He said he still hasn't gotten around to realizing that he actually made it to the finals, much less finished second. "I just couldn't stop smiling," he McNeill. "I physically could not stop—my cheeks hurt."

The MSW team has been following E, a team of one, throughout the Imagine Cup. Hope you enjoyed getting to know him. Check out his game, Alternex, and [everything else about him](#).

Read about [other teams](#) at Imagine Cup 09.

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Jul 09, 2009 / 7:37 pm

Here's 1 video of the game in action...

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ASog0cC2vsQ> 😊
- Anonymous

Jul 09, 2009 / 7:33 pm

I 2nd that, where's the video :)
- Anonymous

Jul 09, 2009 / 3:26 pm

Where's the video?
- Anonymous

Jul 08, 2009 / 9:41 am

Windows folks! Have you read this already?

http://tech.yahoo.com/news/nm/20090708/tc_nm/us_google_5

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Last Updated: July 9, 2009 | [Send feedback](#)