SBCC computer science team hacks its way to top prizes

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Three City College students, (from left) Joel Green, Erwan Lent and Alberto Villalobos, display their prize, an iPad mini, after winning the Hacktech hackathon.

Surrounded by Red Bull and Cheetos, three City College students remained glued to their laptops for 36 hours straight at the largest hackathon on the West Coast.

The team competed against 2,000 computer programmers from across California to create the best app. They won the highest DigitalOcean prize, which included $6,000 worth of DigitalOcean credit and an iPad mini. The iPhone app, called Jarvis, was created by students Joel Green, Erwan Lent and Alberto Villalobos.

Hacktech was held in Santa Monica. The competition started at 11 p.m. Friday, Jan. 24, and the final products were presented to the judges at noon Sunday, Jan. 26. Each team created an application that was judged on its originality, usefulness and technical skill it took build.

The team went into the competition not expecting much.

"We went to have fun, we had fun, and on top of that we got this huge prize," Lent said.

Their app collects the users data, including information such as the their stocks, email and calendar. They designed Jarvis to act as an alarm clock; users are awoken by music and the app reads a paragraph of information based off of the data provided.

"We pretty much didn't have anything planned going into it," Green said.

The event was 48 hours long and the teams hacked for 36 of those hours. The other 12 hours were comprised of presentations and judging. Equipped with an air mattress, blankets and pillows, the team was well prepared.

Big name companies such as Amazon, Google and Microsoft sponsored the event. The competition was open to all undergraduate and graduate students. High school students were admitted on a case-by-case basis.

Hackathons are a great way for computer programmers to get in touch with big corporations.

"If you want a shot at getting a job with the most respected companies this is definitely the place to go," Lent said.

It was smooth sailing for the team as soon as they started their code; deliriousness was the only obstacle in their way.

The sounds of music and keyboards ticking kept the boys wired through this long process. They were able to keep their minds fresh by exploring Santa Monica.

"You need those mental breaks," Villalobos said. "Sometimes when you're coding you reach mental exhaustion."

This was the first time Lent and Villalobos had participated in any sort of hackathon. Green, on the other hand, participated in a Facebook hackathon once before.

Green, 21, hopes to transfer to UC Berkeley this fall. Lent, 18, works for UCSB as a developer in the Financial Aid Department. Lent graduated from high school a year early and joined Middle College.

Villalobos, 23, is also transferring this fall. He spends extra time creating software for his parents' company.

All three students are computer science majors.

The team has at least two more hackathons in their future, one on March 7and another on April 11.

"It's more than a hobby," Villalobos said. "It's a passion."