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Chemistry Cat, other teams take the eMerge Hackathon challenge

HIGHLIGHTS

200 programers and students turned out for the eMerge Americas Hackathon that started Saturday

Coders compete for a $10,000 grand prize, and the winners present at eMerge Americas on Tuesday

One of the teams is made up of sixth-graders from Little Havana's Coral Way K-8 Center

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What can 200 geeks build in a day? We'll find out Sunday.

As has been a traditional kickoff to the eMerge Americas technology conference, the third annual eMerge Americas Hackathon opened Saturday morning at the Idea Center, Miami Dade College's entrepreneurship hub. The two-day eMerge Americas celebrating all-things tech opens Monday at the Miami Beach Convention Center.

A hackathon is a weekend-long event where teams come together to create apps or other tech solutions, often competing for prizes. This one includes 24 hours of coding and then presentations on Sunday. Up for grabs: $10,000 for the grand prize winner and the two runners-up will receive a package of in-kind prizes, said Ariel Quinones, co-founder of the IronHack coding bootcamp, which was putting on the hackathon, along with VISA and other sponsors.

The top three winners will present their applications on stage at eMerge Americas at 10:45 a.m. on Tuesday, Quinones said.

One group stood out in the sea of mostly millennial-aged males: The MUTT Club, a team of 6th graders from Coral Way K-8 Center in Little Havana and sponsored by 4Geeks Academy coding school. The MUTT Club — that's Makers Using Technology Tools — came to win.

Bruno Corbo, Theo Miller, Benjamin Pla, Joaquin Royer and Julio Contreras are creating "Chemistry Cat," a learning quiz game that makes mastering your chemistry fun. There will be different levels of mastery: Kitten, Cat, Student, Scholar and ... Meowbert Einstein.

These kids are veteran game developers, each of them rattling off games they have created. Benjamin asked this reporter for a plug for his YouTube channel. Gotta love the gumption. (It's ThePixelCat, by the way.)

The MUTT Club, made up of 22 4th- through 8th-grade students, has been meeting after school on Thursdays for about two years under the direction of volunteer and Theo's dad, Allan Miller. For the school's STEM Night in January, MUTT members created an arcade full of video games they made themselves.

Allan Miller said he provides "a little guidance and lots of freedom to go experiment." One student organized the other club members to make a video about school bullying. "They self-organized, learn how to use the software, wrote the script and filmed it themselves," said Miller. "I am so proud of these kids."

But with 200 or so hackers crowding the Idea Center's large event room and spilling over into adjacent rooms and common areas, the MUTTS' Chemistry Cat will have plenty of competition, including:

▪ "Two brothers and an Oscar," who were building a financial literary tool for kids, essentially "allowance 2.0" with some parental controls built in.

▪ Team Aeternum (eternally in Latin), who were building a peer-to-peer lending app.

▪ The FVI team, who believe the world needs "The Resolutionator," enabling willpower.

▪ Team SITE (Student Information for Teachers Electronically), who want to sell schools a local website where staff can collaborate more effectively.

To compete for prizes, the solutions created at the hackathon use VISA's API, or its set of tools for building software and applications. VISA tech specialists were on-hand to mentor the teams and answer questions.

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