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Success at the click of a mouse

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FIVE days. Many things can be accomplished during this period. Cities, in fact, have been destroyed in less.

But to produce an award-winning interactive CD-ROM for a competition in five days?

"Crazy," some might say.

Yet, Tey Teng Chuan, Wui Man Wai, Chuah Cheng Kim and Yap Hon Wui, final-year students of The One Academy, an art and design school, did just that.

And no, they have not lived to regret it.

The foursome are instead revelling in the joys of sweet success.

The team produced the award-winning CD-ROM, won themselves a two-week familiarisation trip to Basque, Spain, a Hewlett-Packard Omnibook 6100 laptop each, and cash totalling 43,750 pesetas or RM1,000.

The contenders were nine other local public and private institutions of higher learning.

The One Academy quartet was at a disadvantage at the outset - they were told about the project on Oct 5, five days before the deadline and five days after other contestants were informed.

The competition project: To produce a multimedia presentation of the Basque Government incorporating the past, present and future of the Basque region in conjunction with its 700th anniversary celebration.

The focus was on the three historic cities of Bilbao, Donostia-San Sebastian and Vitoria-Gasteiz.

The presentation, by the way, is no mere tourism tool.

According to competition guidelines, it is a "showcase specifically for Government leaders and worldwide investors" and is to be presented by the Basque Government at the Future Cities Global Conference in Kuala Lumpur in February next year.

Called the International Students Multimedia Project: Bilbao, the competition was one of four components of the recently-launched National Creative Multimedia Development Project.

The competition organisers are The Multimedia Development Corporation and Asia News Broadcasting.

The four have just returned from their trip to Basque and are putting the finishing touches to their CD-ROM which is due for presentation to the MDC on Dec 15 and which will then be forwarded to the ANB.

So what made them do it?

It was an "automatic reaction", they say, when told by digital animation head lecturer Seamus Tan that they had been entrusted with the task.

"Are you sure?," Tey, 21, kept asking Tan.

Tey, a Multimedia student, was in Genting Highlands at the time enjoying a brief holiday. Undaunted by the five-day timeframe, he decided to "try my best".

It was "so unreal" for Chuah, 21, also a Multimedia student.

A free trip to magical Europe had to be balanced against final projects due by the year end. All four are final-year students due to graduate this month.

Says Yap, 21, a Digital Animation student and the quietest of the four: "It sounded exciting... unbelievable".

Reality only set in later when they found themselves having all-nighters at the college.

Asked why they persevered despite the odds, they reply that teamwork was a cardinal element.

It was the "pooling together of the different strengths of everyone" that did it, explains 20-year-old Wui, an Advertising and Graphic Design student, while Tey quips: "Where there is a will, there is a way".

"I think it was really a gut feeling," chips in Wui again, the most vocal of the four.

Did they think they could do it?

"Yes, our teamwork is great."

The four, by the way, never worked as a team until the Basque project opportunity.

They were, however, members of the Graduation Committee. Tey, in fact, is president while Chuah and Man are vice-presidents.

Graduation is scheduled for Dec 21.

Says Tan of the four, "They are the best students in their respective majors and it was also their positive learning attitude that got them chosen."

The four had also proven that they were good team workers through previous projects with other colleagues.

Asked how long the CD-ROM runs, they patiently reply that it does not have a set time-frame.

It is more a "resource tool" and the user can use it for a considerable length of time.

What the four have done is to incorporate pertinent information on the three Basque regions in the form of texts, pictures and links to related websites.

Brochures on notable sites in the region were provided by competition organisers but the four also had to conduct research themselves, their main resource pool being the Internet.

It was "not that easy" though, they say. Many of the websites were in Spanish, hence the hunt for translation tools.

Speaking from hindsight, the translations, they say, were "not really accurate".

Tey and Chuah were in charge of the interactivity aspect of the project.

This meant, they explain, "making use of information" furnished by Wui, to come up with an interface that is "user-friendly and guides the user throughout the CD-ROM".

"We had to make the information interesting and attractive to users," explains Tey.

They were also tasked with the job of drafting a flow-chart of the project for the use of judges.

Wui, in turn, who calls herself the Content Person, helped provide the concept, draft the project proposal and art direction for the CD-ROM. The concept, she explains, relates to the introduction and the amount of interactive time.

She also designed the project's marketing kit which packages the CD-ROM.

Yap, the team's "3-D Man", was basically in charge of the CD-ROM's animation aspect, particularly, the 40-second introduction. He was also tasked with the job of transforming screen icons into 3-D forms.

They had also allotted themselves specific research areas: Chuah was in charge of Bilbao, Tey - Donostia-San Sebastian, Wui - Vitoria, and Yap, a summary of world-class attractions of the three cities.

In true advertising industry fashion, the four had to "pitch" their product during a 45-minute presentation before five judges at MDC in Cyberjaya.

Wui was the main speaker during the presentation while Tey explained the technicalities.

Were they nervous?

"Not really. We were so tired," Wui says.

"We had no sleep the previous day. The presentation was at noon and we only completed our proposal at 9am.

"It's a wonder things went smoothly as we didn't rehearse at all".

And the trip to Basque?

A "magical experience", they say. The 11-day trip was more a working holiday for the four who were tasked with the job of gathering more information to add the final touches to their project.

They also had to take photographs of these areas (1,400 to be exact!) as well as meet up with a city mayor and the Regional Planning and Economic Minister.

"The trip gave us a better understanding of the area and this helped us implement our content better," explains Tey.

"It's a brand new experience ... everything is different," he adds, particularly impressed by the fact that the community practises siesta from noon to 3pm.

"Memorable" is how Chuah sums up the trip.

"Getting to know the local people and their way of life gave us a better view of the country and helped us work on the CD-ROM more effectively," affirms Wui.

The Basque Country is "very different from Malaysia", says Yap, whose favourite place was the fish-shaped high-technology Guggenheim Museum.

Asked about places visited, the four rattle off a seemingly endless list.

They visited the Casco Viejo or historic district of all three cities.

The attractions include Getxo (a beach-front location comprising traditional architecture in Metropolitan Bilbao), the Buen Pastor Church in San Sebastian, La Concha Bay ("a key element of San Sebastian's physical identity," explains Tey), the Victoria Eugenia Theatre of San Sebastian and the Plaza De La Virgen Blanca (Plaza of the White Virgin) in the heart of Vitoria and the Nervion River of Bilbao.

Elation at winning the competition is still evident in the faces of the four.

"We've learned a lot of things in this project," says Wai.

"Amazing," says Tey, "because our work will be shown to the world."

The four are particularly gratified that their entry has been deemed of international standard.

The modesty of these young adults belie an impressive track record.

Tey, for one, is no stranger to industry achievements.

His website design clinched the top prize in this year's Formula Malaysia and the young man received his award from no less a personage than Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

He was also shortlisted for IT Computimes PIKOM's web-designing contest last year.

Wui, in turn, won the the gold in the student category in the advertising industry's prestigious Kancil Awards last year. Her entry was a print advertisement aimed at promoting tourism in Malaysia.

Chuah and Yap may not have won anything as yet but they look set for success.

Upon receiving her diploma this month, Chuah will "explore her options" and perhaps secure a job in a multimedia agency.

For this Subang Jaya resident and Chung Hwa School old girl, an "overseas job" may be one of those options.

Yap, who hails from Semenyih, Selangor, has always liked drawing "since kindergarten". A job as an animator is the obvious choice. He hopes to study cinematography overseas in the years to come.

His final destination career-wise?

To be "involved in animation" at Pixar Studio in the United States - the birthplace of Toy Story and Bug's Life.

A creative director in an advertising agency is how Wui sees herself in the years to come.

"Of course, I would also like to work overseas to expand my horizons."

This young lady is already freelancing and has a job waiting, if she chooses, as a lecturer at The One Academy.

Tey sees himself as a multimedia director, and web designing his forte.

He is, by the way, already a tutor at The One Academy and freelances for local and overseas companies.

Tey also hopes to form a "small company over the Internet and work in Europe".

His ultimate project (which he is already working on) is an "intelligent city comprising the harmonious interaction of environmental and electronic elements". It is called Personal Interaction with Extraordinary Electronic Life.

Perhaps that's why five days wasn't that impossible after all.