DigiPen S'pore makes indelible mark

Seven years after US college set up here, its students are bagging international game awards

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A game developed by DigiPen Institute of Technology Singapore students (from left) Justin Ng, Dexter Chng, Soo Zhong Min and Bryan Teo clinched the award for best student game at the Independent Games Festival last year. The team took six months to create their survival-horror game Lurking. ST PHOTO: ONG WEE JIN

When Mr Claude Comair, president and founder of the DigiPen Institute of Technology, took up the Singapore Government's invitation to offer its degrees here in 2008, some warned him against diluting the school's brand name.

After all, the Canadian had, over two decades, carefully built up the school in Redmond, Washington, into the Harvard for game developers and animators.

Not only was the school famous for being difficult to get into – because of the high level of mathematics and science required – but it was also known for its high attrition rates of up to 30 per cent.

It makes big demands on its students. But many go on to make a name for themselves even before they graduate by winning awards at global game design competitions. As soon as they graduate, they are snapped up by top game developers and publishers.

Mr Comair had warned Singapore officials that he would apply the same rigorous standards here and this would likely result in high attrition rates, unheard of in local universities. They promised not to interfere. Seven years later, both sides have kept their word.

The attrition rate for DigiPen's programmes here remains high – at 30 per cent. But Mr Comair is glad that DigiPen came and later partnered the Singapore Institute of Technology (SIT) to offer its degrees.

DigiPen now has a total enrolment of 625 students in its four degree courses – in animation, computer science and two in game design – as well as a new systems engineering degree it jointly offers with SIT. This is a big jump from the 50 students it started with in 2008.

The attrition rate has started to ease in recent years – partly because of the bridging mathematics classes it runs for polytechnic students aiming to enter DigiPen. Those lagging behind are required to go for extra maths tutorials.

Said Mr Comair: "It is not meant to be easy. The gaming industry is an exciting industry but it is also a tough one. Besides, I didn't come here to build a second-class DigiPen. I wanted the students here to be equal if not better than their peers in the US campus."

He said applying the same standards has resulted in good job prospects for its graduates.

In the first graduate employment survey released last week by SIT, graduates from three of the four DigiPen degree courses had a 100 per cent employment rate. The rate was 90 per cent for graduates of the fourth degree course.

Game design graduates are snapped up by game developers and publishers such as Koei Tecmo, Ubisoft and Bandai Namco. Their starting salaries ranged from $2,600 to $3,000.

Singapore's DigiPen students have also bagged several awards since they first participated in the 2011 Independent Games Festival (IGF) China. Over the past four years, they have won three times in the Best Student Game category.

One student creation that Mr Comair is most proud of is a video game titled Lurking, which won the Best Student Game award last year. The survival-horror game also won an award for excellence in technology in the main competition open to all independent developers.

Last month, at the IGF in Shanghai, Dungeon Delvers, a strategy game created by a team of four from DigiPen Singapore took home the Best Student Game prize.

Earlier this year, the school set up the DigiPen Game Studios with Japanese gaming giant Nintendo to publish new games from Singapore.

Mr Comair is just as proud of the 22-strong faculty, and stresses that they were not transplanted from the US, but recruited from Singapore. "I don't believe in plucking people from the US and bringing them here. They will eventually want to go back after a few years."

Initially, he was worried about getting faculty who can teach the fine arts degree course. "I know Singaporeans are top in the hard sciences, but I wasn't sure about the talents in arts. But I have had no problem recruiting teachers from here, and they are talented as well."

DigiPen has contributed to the build-up of the gaming industry in the US. When it was first set up in Redmond in 1998, there were only seven game companies around the university. Now there are over 350 game-related companies within a 32km radius of DigiPen's Redmond campus, including Nintendo, Valve and Bungie.

Has it done the same here?

Ms Angeline Poh, assistant chief executive (industry) at the Media Development Authority, credited it with helping fuel the growth of the local games sector, which she noted is going through an exciting growth phase.

"DigiPen's presence here has been essential in grooming the local game development talent who have fuelled this growth," she said.

All in, there are more than 60 game development, publishing and services companies here now, including major industry players such as Gumi Asia, Konami Singapore, Koei Tecmo and Ubisoft. Said Mr Comair: "They are here partly because of the huge talent pool of budding game developers, artists, engineers and coders. And DigiPen helped to build that talent pool."

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FIRST CLASS ALL THE WAY

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>
> **MR CLAUDE COMAIR,** president and founder of the DigiPen Institute of Technology

Mr Claude Comair said that applying the high standards of DigiPen's Redmond campus in Singapore has resulted in good job prospects for its graduates here. PHOTO: DIGIPEN