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COMPUTER DATING FOR GORILLAS: COMPUTER SCIENTISTS DEVELOP WEB-BASED GAME TO TEACH CONSERVATION PRINCIPLES

An interactive Web-based game designed for Zoo Atlanta by Georgia Institute of Technology computer scientists is teaching Zoo visitors and Web surfers about the conservation of gorillas.

"The Mating Game" teaches players how zoos use science to select which individual gorillas to breed for the captive management of these animals. The concept, created by Zoo personnel, is based on 1970s game shows and is hosted by "Bob Zoobanks."

Brian Jones and Tiffany O'Quinn in Georgia Tech's Interactive Media Technology Center (IMTC) implemented the Zoo's idea with their computer programming and graphics expertise.

"Educators agree that interactive learning like this is very valuable to students," says Jones, the lead researcher.

Richard Hezlep, the video production manager in Zoo Atlanta's Department of Conservation Technology, says, "By approaching the subject in a light and fun way, the game is successful at reaching not only kids with its interactive animation, but also adults by means of the nostalgic game show theme."

Zoo staff members, as well as middle school students, have reviewed the game and given it a "thumbs up," Hezlep adds.



Congratulations screen from "The Mating Game," a Web-based game that teaches the principles of conservation.

IMTC staff designed "The Mating Game" to run on a kiosk in the Zoo; that kiosk will be installed soon. Then to give the game a wider audience, IMTC staff created a Web version. The game is intended for students in fourth grade and up, and is available online at (www.animalexplorers.org) as the first installment of programming in the Caring for Gorillas initiative. The Web site is hosted by PeachStar, a division of Georgia Public Broadcasting.

In the introduction, Zoobanks explains to players that the methods for selecting

individual gorillas to breed are sort of like computer dating for animals. The goal is to keep populations healthy by choosing the right individual gorillas for captive breeding. To do this, zoos need a good understanding of genetics, animal behavior and logistics, Zoobanks adds. To demonstrate, he invites players to participate in "The Mating Game."

The game can be played by one to three people at the same computer workstation. With one player, the game offers a choice of three gorilla bachelors. The player answers for her selected bachelor, and the computer answers for the other two. The gorilla bachelorette asks the bachelors randomly selected questions -- via signs, not voice -- to determine the right mate.

"How old are your parents?" the bachelorette inquires in one game. "Where do you live?" and "What are you afraid of?" are other questions.

Zoobanks asks the three bachelors to answer by choosing from the three possible answers provided. The host awards the bachelors five, 10 or 15 points based on the explanation that he gives after the answers have been entered. If the players tie, Zoobanks asks a tiebreaker question.

Before revealing the best bachelor, the game presents a brief animated "commercial" for bananas. Then Zoobanks is back to announce which "lucky bachelor" wins a date with the bachelorette. The winners receive an all-expense-paid trip to Zoo Atlanta's Ford African Rain Forest, a naturalistic habitat for gorillas.

While IMTC has vast experience in digital media processing, the staff got its first taste of creating an interactive educational game when they worked on "The Mating Game." It was a challenge they enjoyed, Jones says.

IMTC built "The Mating Game" for the kiosk using Flash, a JavaScript-based animation program, and then optimized its operation for better performance via the Internet. For users with dial-up access, a lite-audio version is available. A Pentium II 600 mHz processor is the minimum configuration required to run the game properly.

Beyond "The Mating Game," Jones and his colleagues in IMTC have worked with Georgia Tech's Center for Education Integrating Science, Mathematics and Computing (CEISMC) program on an educational virtual-reality-based

project to teach American students about Japanese culture. Called i-irasshai, which means "welcome" in Japanese, the project -- funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities -- will be nationally distributed soon on CD-ROM to schools via public broadcasters.

The CD and a companion Web site (www.gpb.org/peachstar/i-irasshai) use Shockwave to integrate a theme-based to-do list, a contextual map and an animated assistant, and QuickTime software to provide a 360-degree view of Japanese cultural sites, such as homes, shrines, temples, markets, ports and trains. The result is a virtual tour of Japan, Jones says.

"We have observed middle school students using this program, and the student response has been positive," Jones says of i-irasshai. "That's very rewarding."

Now, IMTC is proposing to the National Endowment for the Humanities the development of other interactive educational programs. First on the list is a program to teach American students about Mexican culture with the underlying goal of promoting cultural sensitivity. IMTC would collaborate with CEISMC and the Georgia Tech Department of Modern Languages on the Web- and CD-ROM-based program.

"For people to understand another culture, you have to immerse them in that environment," Jones says. "The activities and tasks in these interactive educational games do that."

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URL: <http://gtresearchnews.gatech.edu/newsrelease/zoogame.htm>