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Crunching computer code

Area students spend an hour with games that teach programming

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It may look like fun and games, but the Angry Birds on KTEC students' tablet screens were all about serious business.

Fifth-grader Alyssa Lentz and her classmates spent part of the morning Thursday at work on a series of exercises using games to teach students the basics of computer coding.

Alyssa moved up through a series of levels, using coding puzzles to move characters through games on her screens. With each success, she moved up a level to a more complicated problem.

The 'Hour of the Code'

Students across Kenosha County and around the world are working on the Hour of Code this week. The initiative is designed to teach the basics of writing computer code, and to get students to consider careers in computer science.

The program is funded by companies like Microsoft, Google and donations from tech billionaires like Bill Gates and Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg.

Available free through the website code.org, Hour of Code is designed to teach coding through simple, often game-based tutorials.

"Writing code is basically telling a computer what you want it to do. Every action you do on a computer has a code behind it," said John Ward, an intervention specialist leading the program at KTEC.

Wilmot students code

Wilmot High School freshmen Emma Espinoza and Eli Ibarra, both 14, were among more than 40 students who spent an hour using computer programming software to develop apps and games this week.

Neither have any experience programming, but picked up quickly on a lesson that challenged them to animate a character on the screen.

“It was something I have never done before and it sounded interesting,” Ibarra said of the opportunity to try programming. “With the technology industry growing so quickly, if you don’t have these skills you won’t be able to get a successful job.”

Former Wilmot high student Josh Betz, 23, shared with students what types of positions are available to computer programmers. Betz graduated from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in May with a degree in computer programming.

Betz now works for Automatic, the company that built Wordpress, which powers 20 percent of the websites on the Internet,

All at KTEC take part

At KTEC, one of several schools in Kenosha Unified doing the Hour of Code, every student in kindergarten through eighth grade spent time learning programming this week.

Kindergartners are working on simple games, while more advanced students might be creating their own smartphone apps.

Ultimately, the program’s aim is to help kids boost their skills and to consider computer science as a career.

“When kids look at their futures, they all want to do something that they have seen — they want to be a fireman, or a doctor, because they understand what that is,” Ward said.

“Many of them are not even aware computer programming or writing code is a career. We’re showing them that computer programming means more than making a video game. Their imaginations are really the only thing holding them back.”

Courses via Gateway

At Wilmot, Business, Information and Technology teacher Travis Wetzel said the school offers three levels of website design courses, but does not offer computer programming.

Wetzel said the school is discussing the idea of a course being offered to high school students through a cooperative agreement with Gateway Technical College or the University of Wisconsin-Parkside.

“It is definitely something we want to offer at Wilmot,” he said. “Apps are part of everything we do, from entertainment to work and productivity. We use apps every day.”

There will be 1.4 million jobs available in computer programming over the next decade, according to the Hour of Code organization.

Alyssa hopes to be one of them. “I want to get a job where I can help people using computers,” she said.



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KENOSHA NEWS PHOTO BY DENEEN SMITH Jordan Wheeler, right, Lee Thierry-Gertsch, center, and Ariyanna Sellers, left, students at KTEC, work on coding problems Thursday morning. The students are working on a program that uses games to teach kids the language of coding.



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Kenosha News photo by Jill Tatge-Rozell

Wilmot High School alumnus Josh Betz, who graduated from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in May with a degree in computer science, watches as freshmen Emma Espinoza, 14, and Eli Ibarra, 14, take part in an online computer programming lesson.