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Tuesday, Aug 15, 2006

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All in rhythm

Aresh Shirali / New Delhi August 15, 2006

TECHNOLOGY: Microsoft's Imagine Cup 06, Agra, had enough to en-rhythm everyone, even those to whom software innards were just a webby shroud of 0s and 1s.

Zoom out of normal life a bit, and imagine a tech-enabled world of no ailments, nothing to pill-pop or die of, and no piracy too (at least no "false positives", in medical jargon). This, more or less, was the brief for Microsoft's Imagine Cup 06.

The theme: health. And the Jaypee Hotel in Agra, the site for the finals of this global software contest for students, was duly abuzz. It was abuzz with geeks in binary mode: either they'd seen the Taj, or they hadn't yet.

How does a contest with 110 participant countries this year, its fourth, conduct itself? Through universal inspirations and ideas — but on Microsoft.net.

"May the source be with you," quipped a slogan on someone's screen, getting a smile even from the most zonked-out of geeks. The Imagine Cup was evidently in consonance with Microsoft's strategic goal of rallying as many programmers to its platform as possible, to keep ahead of challenges from the "open source" movement and the like.

Word of the Cup's catching on fast, exulted its initiator and director Emanuele Ognissanti. "But I would like students everywhere, even in places like Kazakhstan, to get interested."

That Agra had the honour of hosting the Cup was no coincidence. After all, as Microsoft India director Sheila Gulati put it, the Taj Mahal's inspirational value goes beyond beauty, or even engineering, the stuff of software as much as Mughal architecture.

"An architect is an architect is an architect," she elaborated, "and software is also about beginning with the end in mind, thinking top down, and having it all come together to plan." And, a moment later, "It's about scalability as well."

Yet, the yeah-seen-it to er-not-yet ratio of responses to the Taj didn't seem to change till much later into the scene, by when enough links had been forged for the GP of "global positioning" satellites to vibrate vividly with the LA of "local area" networks.

Some contestants had been walking about like zombies, having slept not a wink for 30-32 hours. But things got enlivened, all the same, once the world's whizkids began to show off their software.

From then on, there was no resisting the rhythm.

The Algerian software design quartet, for example, had a gizmo designed to look after your nutrition, slurping up inputs to offer advice on food balance and exercise regimens. The Saudi team had soundwaves to test — while minimizing beta errors — diagnostic lab samples.

The Belgian team had an interactive advertising kiosk that could engage you at an airport lounge in more than just a cursory exchange.

The Chinese team had a video game that seemed retro-fitted to health, but was

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a stunner for its market prospects — according to Steve Konya, a British Telecom (BT) executive charged with spotting ideas that could spin money as part of BT’s Accelerator programme.

Among the most gripping was the Brazilian team, which had a contraption to help the visually-impaired “feel” their way about with wristbands vibrating to signals beamed from GP satellites watching out for them.

Aware that the Indian team was trying to fashion sonic “eyes” from technology, the Brazilians made it a point to outline their research on how acutely the impaired must rely on ambient sounds, and why it’s no good interfering with this natural sense.

As it turned out, the Indian software designers — from Ahmedabad’s Dhirubhai Ambani Institute of IT — had devised software to transform a visual field of perception into an audio field, using headphones, as a way to navigate cyberspace by the sound of the wheeee rather than sight of the cursor. Ambitious in its conceptual imagination, but alas, ineffective in its practical application.

A little extra effort perhaps...

... and empathy? That too. Brazil was runners-up. And the winner of the Imagine Cup? Italy. The software designers from the University of Turin had a snappy set of body gizmos loaded with software to track not just your pulse and physiological state, but also the environmental influencers of your psychological state.

So if you’ve had an adrenalin gush, or are in the early stages of a panic attack, your doctor and psychoanalyst would have enough information to act, in alliance, before time runs out. Clever. Contextual. Dreamy.

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