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For the second time ever, SMU School of Information Systems (SIS) organised its annual National Coding Championships in Singapore. This year, over 200 junior college and polytechnic students took part in the coding competition.

According to the school, this competition aims to increase students' exposure to coding, as well as raise their awareness about the career choices available to those who pursue an education in information systems and computer science.

In the qualifying round of the competition, which took place in early January, students had to log on to CodeCombat, a hybrid web learning platform that makes learning to code fun and interactive at the same time.

In this multiplayer programming game, students have to code to control their hero's actions - be it to cast a spell, or command allies to crush your enemies - in order to complete missions; and every completed mission would earn the students badges.

The top 60 participants - those who earned the most number of badges - made it to the finals of the competition, which was held at SIS on 21 March 2015.

The first stage of the finals involved a pair-programming session where two students from different schools collaborated to work on an algorithm. They were tasked to program the artificial intelligence of their team's hero, which then competes head-to-head with other virtual heroes in the CodeCombat arena.

After the combative coding session, students were then tested on their individual programming skills via SingPath, another web-based learning tool. They were required to solve a series of eight coding problems individually in the shortest time possible. The quicker ones, who had completed the individual challenge early, were then assigned to mentor a fellow student.

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SIS Associate Professor Chris Boesch, organiser of the national coding competition, said, "I enjoyed observing how the teams started off with very basic strategies at the beginning of the Code Combat arena event. Over time, their strategies and sophistication began to evolve as the students learned more about the application programmable interface (API) that was available."

Leong Tnay Teng from Republic Polytechnic earned the first place in the Polytechnic category, while a student from Raffles Institution with the screen name GrandMasterWizard won the top prize for the JC category.

The latter student said that CodeCombat.com's gaming concept of coding makes the whole learning process more interesting. He added that coding is a very useful skill to acquire; hence more emphasis should be placed on code learning.