Gateway sophomore takes first prize at Game Lab

Huntington – Tenth grader Rebecca Austin enjoys art. A LOT. She especially enjoys creating digital art-- the kind used in the computer gaming industry.

So it was no surprise to her mother, Madelyn, when Rebecca asked to attend Game Lab—a free workshop for high school students offered at Springfield College on November 4. Rebecca’s video production teacher, Chris O’Malley, had received a Game Lab flyer in the mail and shared it with Austin.

“She was the first person I thought of,” O’Malley said. “She is always the first student I think of for something like this.”

The full day event included workshops with industry experts, a tour of Springfield College, and a Q & A with a panel of industry experts. Madelyn agreed to bring Rebecca, who then registered and uploaded her latest digital art sample for a contest to win a free iPad, with the winner to be announced at Game Lab.

Austin enjoyed the many workshops and demonstrations held in the morning, which focused on artificial intelligence and games, simulators, virtual reality, photo shop, 3D models, navigation, and putting color and texture into digital artwork. She enjoyed touring the campus, and having lunch, and listening to the panelists—game developers, a college professor and a college student—field questions about the gaming industry and its future.

And then came the first prize announcement. And it was Rebecca.

She reflects on how it felt to hear her name announced as the winner. “It was very surprising to me. All of the submitted art was displayed on the wall and there was another work that I thought would win,” she said.

“When she ever said ‘Rebecca Austin’!” exclaimed Madelyn, who had stayed for the day. “It was so exciting. I was just dumbfounded!”

Organizer Ruth West, Director of Computer Graphics and Digital Arts at the college reported, “Rebecca’s work showed a professional level understanding of designing a character for a game. She has the makings of a great character designer.”
Rebecca certainly works at it. Over the last few years, she has filled notebook after notebook (hard cover, about an inch thick) with characters for the games she envisions. She typically fills a notebook a month, but her sketching has recently taken a more serious turn.

“This notebook has taken me 3 – 4 months. My other notebooks consist of half-finished ideas and characters. My goal with this notebook is to finish every drawing.” She won the award for portraying her main character, Astrid, a shape-shifter who is the heroine in a game Rebecca would name “Star Child” if it is ever made. Astrid is half-alien and is working with her allies, who include Evilyn and Blythe, to keep aliens from taking over their world. She has also developed the antagonists—Poppy and Sadie.

Austin says her inspirations are Pokemon, Steven Universe and the new reboot of Duck Tales. She studies character designs and looks at player reviews to learn what they liked and didn’t like about the characters.

“I notice things,” Austin said. “I take things apart and analyze them. A thing I care a lot about in my characters is inspiring and affecting the people who encounter them.”

As she flips through her notebooks, she shows characters of all races and abilities. Terra, another of her characters, uses a wheelchair. And Astrid does not speak—she has a robotic assistant who speaks for her.

“A few of my characters are coded to be autistic,” Rebecca explains. “Astrid doesn’t speak and that can be a characteristic of autism.”

Something Rebecca knows first-hand because she lives with Aspergers. “It can be both a help and a hindrance for me,” she admits, when talking about how being on the autism spectrum impacts her art. “I don’t think I’d have been able to design Astrid if I hadn’t been able to hyper-focus on her. But at times I can get too stressed out.”

She was thrilled to attend Game Lab. She was honored to win the award. But the ultimate prize would be to someday have a career as a character artist in the game development industry. And to see Astrid’s world come to life in a video game that others can play.

In the meantime, the sophomore attends her classes at Gateway Regional High School. She takes a video production course there, and has started using her new iPad to make her first video. And she aspires to learn how to turn her digital art into 3D characters capable of moving, and moving herself closer to a future career as a game character artist.

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Photos (top): Ruth West presents Rebecca Austin with an iPad for winning the Best Game Character at Springfield College’s “Game Lab” November 4. (below) The digital game art that Rebecca submitted for the contest and the primary character in the game she hopes to someday make.