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Communikey kickoff: Students, local startups learn robotics

Tech workshop kicks off Communikey Festival

By Whitney Bryen bryen@coloradodaily.com
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University of Colorado student Steven Hubert, front, and Taylor Beseda participate in a robotics workshop on the Boulder campus. (Chancey Bush)

If you go

What: Workshop: Sound Design 101 with Smirk

When: 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. Thursday

Where: Atlas, Black Box Theater

More: communikey.us/festival2011

University of Colorado students and some local techies joined robotics expert Eric Singer for a behind the scenes look at interactive technology to kick-off the fourth annual Communikey Festival Wednesday.

The six-hour workshop is the first and longest workshop of the five-day festival of electronic arts. While the workshop drew a small crowd of about 10 participants, the intensive robotics study gave students and start-up owners a crash course in technology programming.

"This is an introduction explaining how to control real world devices," said Singer, a robotics artist from Pittsburgh. "If a geek wanted to control her toaster using her cell phone and the Internet, she could use this programming and have hot toast when she comes home."

Steve Hubert, producer for Boulder-based software start up Quick Left, said the crash course will allow the company to include interactive technology into future projects.

"We could put a programmer at the door to this room and have a website that records the number of people who walked into the room," Hubert said.

CU graduate student Dave Biagioni said he needed a quick lesson on a program -- Arduino -- that was addressed during the workshop.

"I'll likely use Arduino for some of my research," said Biagioni, in the applied math department. "I haven't really used it before so I'm starting from scratch and this is a quick lesson to get me started."

Singer collaborated on the musical installation "Gamelatron," which debuted in the foyer of the Atlas Institute Wednesday and will remain through Monday. The installation includes 117 robotic mechanisms creating a percussive sound similar to a traditional Balinese orchestra.

EJ Posselius, CU alumni and organizer of the workshop, said Singer is sharing his "cutting edge creativity and robotic genius" with Communikey participants.

"It's an unusual workshop because it's all day and it's pretty intensive," Posselius said.

Singer said the Arduino program and programming skills taught during the workshop are useful for a variety of specialties.

Engineers, computer techs, musicians and artists could all adapt the programming to their specific needs, Singer said.

Participants said the biggest perk of the workshop is getting to take home some basic programming materials.

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"We'll take this back to the office and keep playing with it and see what we can come up with," Hubert said.

The workshops will continue Thursday with Sound Design 101 and Friday with a class on electronic music.

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