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Cracking the code

Computer whiz Brandon Watts, 21, has created a program to teach computer programming to the masses

When Brandon Watts was just 13, he had a dream — and its name was Leopard.

As a home-schooled eighth-grader living in Gainesville, Watts began dedicating his time to researching computer programming. Eight years later, at age 21, Watts has developed the Leopard computer program that teaches how to build a computer solution.

"I'd always wanted to create stuff with technology; I'd always thought it was really cool," Watts said. "And I didn't want to just use it, but I wanted to actually create it. So I said once I learn some knowledge I'll actually try to build a tool for people like me who want to build things with computers but are overwhelmed by the difficulty."

Leopard allows users to build programs from start to finish, using Web content such as movies, music, widgets, Web sites, videos and even YouTube clips.

Using plain English as the computer code, Watts said Leopard has empowered even elementary school students and senior citizens to build their own computer software.

Watts explained that most computer programs use tricky and lengthy code, but his program has broken the code down line-by-line into numbers and keywords so that even someone who knows little about programming could understand the functions described in each line.

For example, Watts said to create a new window, you just have to name it. So, you would type "window" and then "name."

The young programmer has partnered with WeatherBug to develop technology that allows students across the country to build their own solutions with WeatherBug applications, such as live camera feeds illustrating local weather, along with maps, current temperatures and forecasts.

But Watts said working with WeatherBug is just one way to apply his program. He maintains that it can be used in nearly every subject, from technology and history to geography and science.

Leopard simply enables users to build any type of solution, and Watts encourages teachers to use it as a tool for teaching.

He said teachers from around the country, including New York and Maryland, have e-mailed him detailing the success they've had in using Leopard for lesson plans.

Teachers can develop lessons for various subjects, using video applications or any Internet capacity, to teach students about the life of a historical figure, for example. Students can then take a graded quiz through the Leopard-created program their teacher built specifically for their class.

But Watts said Leopard isn't just for teachers. He aims to integrate Leopard into local classrooms so students can learn to use the technology themselves. His program is being used in computer technology courses at Lumpkin County High School.

"Basically, it teaches students the basis of technology," Watts said. "They're learning how computers work and how to make things on computers. You just start from beginning to end. Add the window, add the controls, add the elements. It's really simple to use."

Through the online WeatherBug Achieve program, Lumpkin County students are using Leopard to create their own WeatherBug applications, where they are required to use several components to satisfactorily complete the project.

Lumpkin County High School technology teacher Jim Chamberlain said the program has been a success in his classroom.

"I'm very impressed with Brandon," he said. "It's pretty amazing that he took the initiative to learn it on his own ... and at such a young age, too."

Chamberlain said every student in his course has been able to create a WeatherBug application using Leopard.

"It's definitely easy," he said. "It's a good way to introduce programming for kids. The language is very simple, and the code you use is very streamlined."

Chamberlain said Watts has pre-packaged some elements that kids can put into their programs, making it very simple and easy to use.

Matt Hellman, a junior at Lumpkin County High School, has used Leopard to make his own WeatherBug program that he and another student will enter into a WeatherBug competition that requires the use of Leopard.

"It's not a fancy computer language, it's plain English," Hellman said. "Everyone thought it was easy, and the people who aren't adapted to technology didn't have problems."

Hellman said he believed students interested in becoming computer programmers could benefit from exposure to Leopard.

In an effort to spread the use of Leopard, Watts has written for some technology publications.

He is now working with technology and technology-publishing companies in San Francisco, Seattle and Paris.

From his Gainesville home, Watts works full-time to develop his software and to implement it in local schools' curriculums.

"Whenever I teach a group of teachers about this," Watts said, "I say, 'give me five minutes of your time, and I'll turn you into a programmer.'"

Although Watts' goals are global, he wants to grow his software career right here.

Following the success of his program in Lumpkin County, Watts wants to work with administrators to incorporate Leopard into Hall County schools.

"Locally is the best way to start in my mind," he said. "Gainesville is a huge thing ... because if I can get it here, that would allow me to branch out through Georgia."

"My whole goal is to go district by district, state by state, and keep going like that. So Hall County is the best place to start."

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