Microsoft helps startups create business connecting with Kinect

July 5 2012, By Janet I. Tu

In a conference center room on Microsoft's Redmond campus last week, a slim, bespectacled CEO clad in a white lab coat was waving his arms wildly.

Behind him, on a flat screen, a cartoon blackbird flapped its wings.

And that is the simple charm behind CEO Kyle Kesterson's create-your-own-animation project for Microsoft's Accelerator for Kinect program.

The Seattle startup Kesterson founded, Freak'n Genius, is one of 11 companies chosen for the inaugural class of Accelerator for Kinect, a three-month incubation program for startups run by Microsoft and startup accelerator TechStars. The program provides seed money, mentoring, technical support and networking opportunities for startups with ideas for commercial applications using Microsoft Kinect's motion-and voice-sensing technologies.

Those companies recently gathered for Demo Day, which was intended to show off the fruits of their labors to venture capitalists and potential investors in hopes they can secure funding to continue to grow their companies.

In one section of the room, Kesterson and his team were throwing in a few "Thriller" dance moves as they demonstrated their project, which uses Kinect for Xbox 360 to create and share short animated videos.
It works like this: You choose from an array of animated characters and backgrounds, stand in front of the Kinect sensor in your home, then make some 2-D movements such as raising your arms or doing a dance move that animates the character on screen. The animation is recorded on video, which can then be shared instantly to, say, YouTube or Facebook.

Users can send an animated Hershey's Kiss on Valentine's Day, for instance, or post a video of an animated gingerbread man during the winter holidays.

The company had already gotten off the ground, but the Accelerator program put booster rockets on it.

"The connections we made both within the startup community and within Microsoft were invaluable," said Clayton Weller, chief marketing officer of Freak'n Genius.

The Accelerator for Kinect program is the first of several Accelerator programs for startups that Microsoft is hosting. Later this year, it will offer an Accelerator for Windows Azure program aimed at cloud-based startups.

The Kinect program capitalizes on something Microsoft observed after the launch of the device in November 2010. People developed unexpected uses for the Kinect, which was sold as an accessory for the Xbox 360 gaming console.

Microsoft dubbed that the "Kinect Effect," and launched a program for established businesses, as well as startups, to develop commercial Kinect applications.

Microsoft managers expected to get maybe 200 applications for the
Accelerator for Kinect program. They ended up with 500 from 60 countries.

"It validated something we suspected but now really saw: That people wanted to build business applications or consumer experiences on this platform," said Michael Mott, general manager of Microsoft Studios.

The 11 companies chosen - from the U.S., Argentina, France, Germany and Canada - each received an investment of $20,000, an Xbox development kit, the Windows Kinect software development kit, resources from BizSpark (Microsoft's program to aid startups), technical training and support, and mentorship from entrepreneurs, investors and Microsoft executives.

They also worked in a shared space in a Microsoft's offices in Seattle, ending up collaborating sometimes with founders of some companies serving as volunteer customers for other companies.

Microsoft got some things out of it, too, that it didn't expect, Mott said.

The mentors from the company "got to soak up some of that entrepreneurial energy and bring it to Redmond," he said. And, "The team working on the Kinect for Windows platform got to see their technology used in real time by the companies trying to build applications and experiences on it. It sped their insight into what was needed for the platform to be successful for us. That was an 'aha' for us."

According to the program rules, in exchange for the training and seed funding, TechStars will receive 6 percent equity in each of the companies, in the form of common stock. Microsoft does not retain equity in or intellectual property from the participating companies.
Other companies demonstrating their projects included:

- IKKOS, another Seattle startup, which is incorporating Kinect into its movement-training program. IKKOS works with athletes, training them to perform better. It's also teaming up with the Department of Veterans Affairs on a pilot project using its methods, and Kinect, to teach stroke patients how to regain movement.

- GestSure Technologies, which allows surgeons to navigate MRI and CT scans in the operating room with simple arm gestures, preserving the sterile environment without the surgeon having to scrub out and scrub back in.

- Kimetric, which allows retail stores to use Kinect sensors to track data about their shoppers, including gender, height and emotions. Retailers get aggregated data about their shoppers and what products sell well with whom.

- Jintronix, which uses Kinect to track patients' physical rehabilitation movements and relay the information to the health-care provider.

- Manctl, which is producing 3-D scanning software solutions based on Kinect for Windows. It could be used for game content production, 3-D modeling or 3-D printing.

- NConnex, which allows people with Kinect for Windows to scan rooms and then digitally put furniture into the rooms. Retailers would send images and data on their furniture to NConnex, allowing consumers to scan, say, their living room, then put the furniture in the rooms to get a 3-D look at their space before buying.

- Styku, which allows consumers to scan their body using Kinect, then try on a number of recommended clothing items from retailers.
- Ubi Interactive, which uses Kinect for Windows to turn any surface into a multitouch screen.

- Voxon, which is developing open hardware reference designs and standards for volumetric 3-D movie capture and display.

- Zebcare, which monitors the well-being of seniors using a method designed to be more private than video monitoring.

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