

Student engineers show off skills developed during UVI program

By **AESHA DUVAL**
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ST. CROIX — Twenty young students showcased their skills in robotics engineering and animation Thursday during a close-out ceremony for the annual University of the Virgin Islands' Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics summer program.

The group wowed parents and UVI professors and staff who packed the Evans Center's theater Thursday morning. The youngsters showed how they used programming software to guide and manipulate miniature robotic devices called rovers, which are similar to the remote-controlled robots used by NASA for excavation and exploration work on Mars.

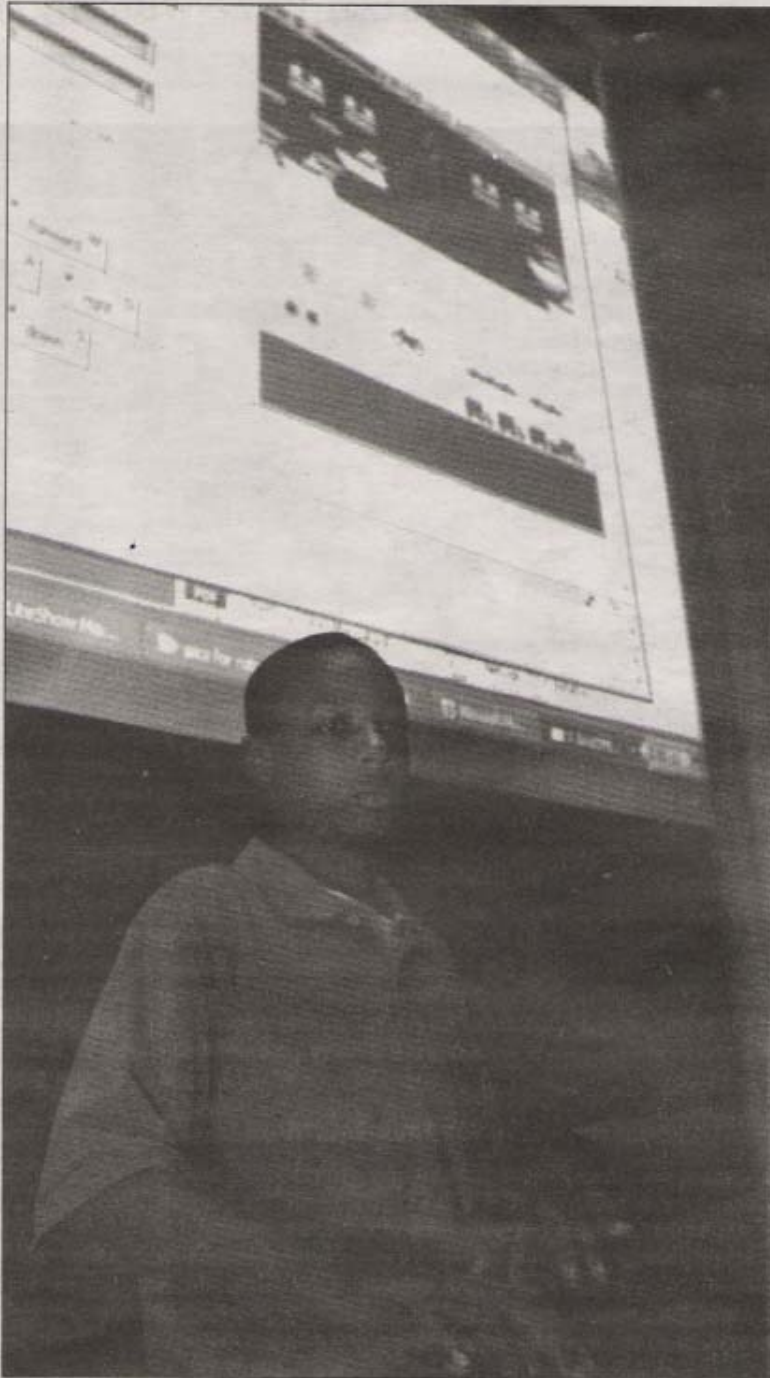
The students — who mastered NetLOGO, a software that develops complex models to simulate scientific research — presented computer-animated cartoons and games they created.

The two-week course, funded in part by NASA, St. Croix Foundation and UVI's Research and Technology Park, involved the use of math and science. Program coordinator Velma Tyson said the students, who were mostly eighth- and ninth-graders, also learned teamwork, critical thinking and how to better express themselves.

The STEM program began in 2005 through a partnership between UVI and St. Croix Foundation. It is open to junior high and high school students.

"These kids were exposed to the same type of frustration engineers are faced with," Tyson said. "If something went wrong or wasn't working right, they were told to figure it out among themselves and to not just give up. We encourage them to apply this same discipline to their school work and everyday life."

Fifteen-year-old Duvante Vegas, a rising sophomore at St. Joseph's High School, said the painstaking process of entering codes and pro-



Daily News Photo by CRISTIAN SIMESCU

Romeo Bergan, 12, works on a video game — Chopper — that he developed along with Duvante Vegas, 15, during closing ceremonies Thursday for the annual UVI Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics program.

gramming was mind-numbing at times and he would grow frustrated when there were glitches or the robots did not operate as they

During the two-week course, funded by NASA, St. Croix Foundation and UVI's Research and Technology Park, the teenagers learned how to program software to guide miniature robotic devices and to create computer-generated animation.

should. Vegas said he would eventually figure out what was wrong.

"The program was invigorating," he said. "It wasn't about the teacher spoon-feeding information and having you regurgitate it back to them. We had to apply what we learned. It was a lot of fun."

Olga Martinez, 15, said she was weak in math before she joined the program.

"I'm not challenged in math anymore," she said. "I can do it now."

Tyson said the program accepted students who were interested in math and science, worked well in teams and who are good public speakers. The students also had to write in a journal every day on what they learned and the challenges they faced.

"We trained them on the importance of speaking clearly and having good posture when speaking in public," Tyson said. "While it's OK to speak Crucian and hold on to your culture, it's also important that they express themselves in a way that people will listen and respect them. We worked on the whole person."

At the closing ceremony, each student was given a certificate for completing the STEM program.

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