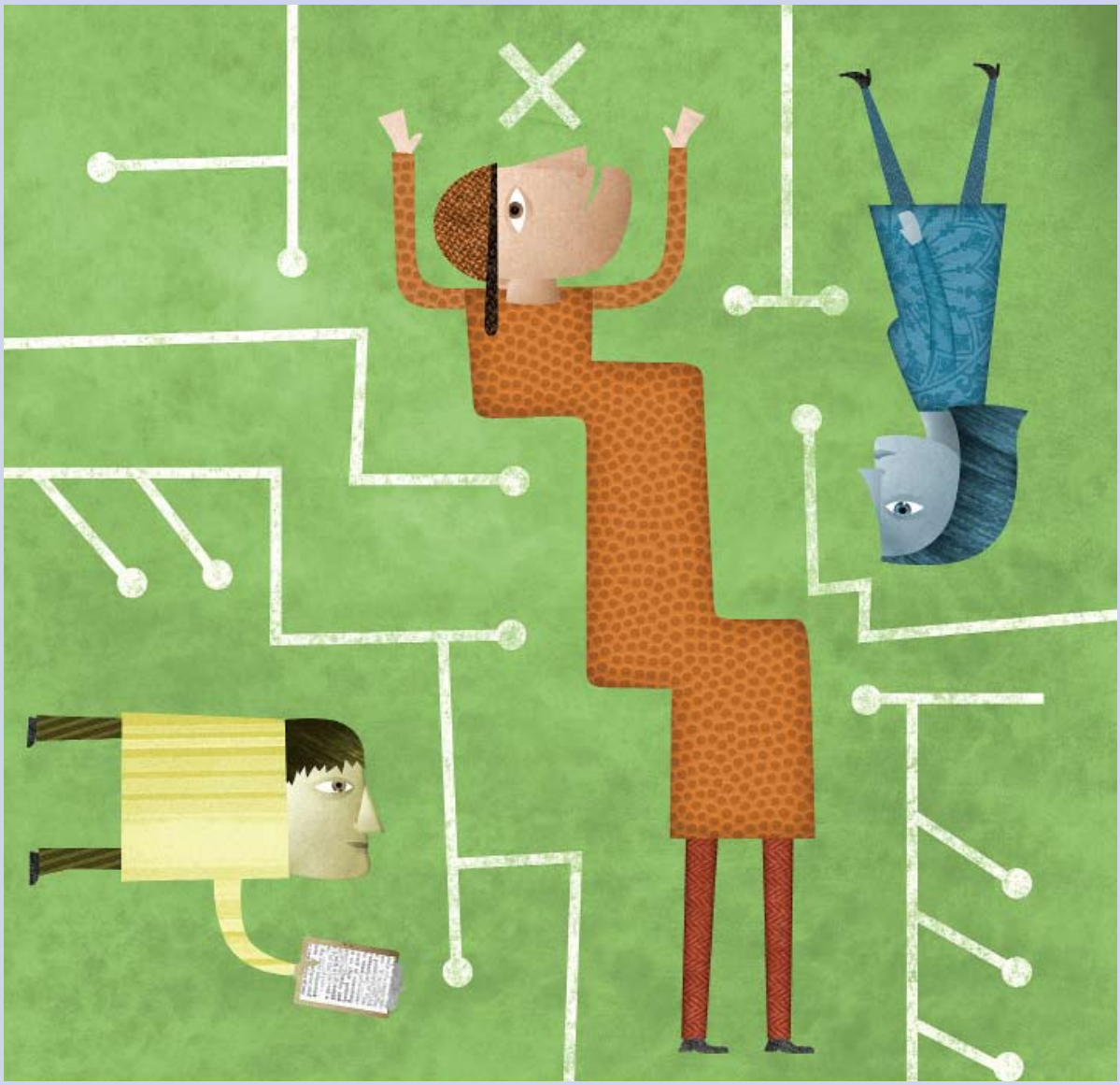
Scavenger Hunt



ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOYCE HESSELBERTH

Nevine AbouGhazaleh waves her ID card in front of a reader-device that detects radio waves emitted by a microchip in the plastic card. A computer identifies the Pitt graduate student by her alias for the afternoon.

"Alexander the Great, you weren't supposed to come here," the screen warns, "but you can get back on track by finding the maker of Windows, not doors, on the fifth floor."

The clever hint—generated by a prototype system designed by students and faculty at Pitt's Advanced Data Management Technologies Laboratory—prompts AbouGhazaleh to navigate the crowded hallways of Sennott Square in search of the Microsoft information booth. Nearly 200 other students—posing as Marie Curie, Ptolemy, and other famous discoverers—are competing against her on this electronic scavenger hunt. They're all on a mission to scan their ID cards at 10 booths at a Department of Computer Science open house in hopes of winning iPods or gift certificates. The electronic hunt is a new feature of the department's annual Computer Science Day festivities. This year, faculty, students, alumni, and industry representatives have gathered to celebrate the department's 42 years of teaching and research excellence.

"It's the highlight of the year," says AbouGhazaleh, who will soon earn a PhD in computer science and begin a job at Intel in Oregon. At the Microsoft booth, she swipes her card at another reader, which directs her to talk with a representative from the software giant. After chatting about Microsoft's mountainous campus near Seattle, she hurries off to swipe her card at the booth for Northrop Grumman, a global defense firm. While the scavenger hunt adds fun and adventure to the yearly celebration, it also serves a research purpose.

The microchip technology that's powering the race is called Radio Frequency Identification, or RFID, a field of research in which the University is world-renowned. Pitt computer science professors Alexandros Labrinidis and Panos K. Chrysanthis, who codirect the ADMT Lab, are exploring the data-management possibilities of RFID technology as part of a National Science Foundation-funded project to build a next-generation data management system. They're collecting information during the game to improve their prototype system, which was designed, with their guidance, by three undergraduate computer science students: Alexander Connor, Chad Spensky, and Jim Bonant. The data also will assist the lab's efforts to develop software to coordinate emergency response efforts as part of the federally funded Secure Critical Information Technology Infrastructure project. "Whenever we create something new, we need to have some real data to test its performance," Chrysanthis says. "The game provides us with a fantastic way to collect that information."

This year, AbouGhazaleh's last Computer Science Day couldn't have gone better—she walked away a winner of a bookstore gift certificate, a little reward before stepping into the real world.

—Jennifer Bails