

GREAT SINGAPORE SALE 2008

THE FUN-SEEKER ISSUE

A TODAY SUPPLEMENT

BROUGHT TO YOU BY



ALVIN LEE



PHOTOS WEE TECK HIAN

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In addition to corporate clients, the company also plans entertainment for private events, such as hen parties.

Aaghir, who masterminds many of the concepts, finds inspiration almost everywhere.

The provocatively named Grinder Girl, one of the company's newest creations, was inspired by a magnesium-based firestarter. Watching the sparks created by the firestarter, Aaghir hit on the idea of creating magnesium-coated metal plates which would be worn by a dancer.

Holding a metal grinder — whirring at 11,000 revolutions per minute — against the plates, the dancer creates sparks which look especially spectacular in a dimly-lit dance club.

For Aaghir, one of the most rewarding things about his job is bringing his madcap ideas to fruition.

Ultimately, said Aaghir, he and his partners are show producers. "We have a vision and we bring in people who can help us realise the vision," he said.

MR SANDMAN: ALVIN LEE/BEAUTIFUL MINDS

"Pooh!" According to Alvin Lee, the founder of corporate training organisation Beautiful Minds, dismissive reactions of this ilk are common when people first learn that he teaches teambuilding using sandcastles.

With a grin, he added: "People often think that sandcastles are very juvenile, but when they see what we can build, they don't go 'pooh' anymore."

Indeed, watching his project crew put the final touches on a sand sculpture entitled "Global City — Home For All", it is clear that Alvin's sandcastles bear little resemblance to those slapped

together by children armed with plastic buckets and spades. The "sandscapes", built using Alvin's patented Beachworks kit, comprise various striking structures, including towers a few feet tall.

Later that day, some 800 participants, divided into four teams, will arrive at the East Coast Lagoon to build their own idea of the "Global City", the theme for this year's Pre-U Seminar.

The Pre-U Seminar is an annual event which brings together students from different schools to engage in discussions on various issues of the day.

Taking time out from overseeing his crew, Alvin explained the rationale behind the unusual teambuilding activity, which has earned accolades from his clients, including schools, ministries and companies of all sizes.

He said, a tad jokingly: "At first, people stand there looking at the tools and at each other, hoping that the sandcastle will build itself. We want to convey the message that nothing will be given to them and that they have to build their own future."

Explaining that the participants have to plan their structures based on a given theme beforehand, Alvin elaborated: "This process applies to all situations. First, you have to envision what you want to be. Then, you lay the foundation before you build the structures. And finally, you put in the details."

It is a sound lesson and one that Alvin wants people to have fun learning.

Alvin, who was drawing a five-figure salary as the general manager of an electronics factory before leaving for the US to develop Beachworks, said: "I used to be an engineer. So, I have nothing against technology. But there's something about the pure delight of going back to Mother Nature and feeling the sand, the hot sun and the breeze."

The father of three firmly believes that this "back to basics" activity is just as effective in strengthening familial bonds. On weekends, hordes of families head to East Coast Park to build sandcastles, thanks to Castle Beach, a social enterprise he founded with the aim of encouraging families to spend time together.

Said Alvin: "When I see three generations building castles together, it reminds me that this is why I do what I do."

THE GAME BOY: TAN BENG KUN/ELECTRONIC ARTS

In his younger days, Tan Beng Kun — BK to his friends — liked video or computer games so much that he would sidestep his mother's exam-period gaming ban by getting up at 3am to play football or basketball games on his Sega Saturn console or PC.

Now that he is a full-time games tester for American computer and video games company Electronic Arts, the youthful-looking 25-year-old is paid to

play FIFA Online and NBA Street Online all day. Except that instead of playing to win, BK spends his time attempting seemingly bizarre gaming moves including scoring own goals and fouling the goalkeeper.

With a slight smile, BK, who possesses a degree in Information Systems and Management from the Singapore Institute of Management, explained: "When the software engineers develop new games, or add new features in the games, we have to test them for bugs (programming errors) and send reports. Once, for example, there was a player in the NBA game who would slide with the ball when he was supposed to be dribbling it."

Things can get tedious at times — when rare bugs occur, for instance. In multiplayer online games, this can lead to frustrating events such as frequent disconnections in the course of the game.

To pinpoint the source of the error, said BK, you just have to keep playing. "At times, (the other testers and I) play against each other. Sometimes, we just use two computers," he added.

That said, BK acknowledges that his is still pretty much a dream job. During lunch time or after hours, the production and development team members are free to pit their gaming skills against each other on the large, full-HD television sets in the office. On alternate Fridays, Happy Hour — which in reality, often lasts beyond 60 minutes — starts at 4:30pm, where food, drinks and, of course, games are provided.

This may sound like plenty of gaming to some, but to BK — a fan of games such as Grand Theft Auto, Heavenly Sword and Army of Two — it is not quite enough.

He elaborated: "On weekdays, I may play for an hour when I get home at night. On weekends, I'm usually out in the day, but I'll come back and play from 8pm to midnight."

For now, BK's passion for his work does not show any signs of abating. He pointed out: "I've met people from many different countries at work and I've also learnt a lot about how gaming organisations work."

"Getting this job was definitely unexpected, but now, I'm not sure where I'd be if I wasn't here!"

