

My Studies at the Media Lab

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Abstract

This document is a reflection on close to four years of doing my Master's degree at the Media Lab in New Media Design and Production. I am overall very satisfied with the time I spent at media lab and I am hoping prolong it by moving forward toward doctoral studies. While there have been some rough times, like the Miestentie->Väre transition period, and running out of funds, I think I made a lot of good choices along the way and ended up with a very diverse and prolific study plan. I divide my study plan and experience into "Good, bad and ugly".

Introduction

A lot can happen in four years, and looking back at my studies and the time spent it is hard to to recollect and reflect on everything in a small compendium as this one. Yet, my studies can probably be summarized best by dividing the reflection into the proverbial "Good, Bad and Ugly"; inspired not only by the film, but also by GStreamer's plugin code splitup¹ - "Good" decisions are the ones that I am mostly at peace with and pleased with the results, "Ugly" decisions are ones that seemed inevitable, but were difficult to follow through and could have probably been planned differently, "Bad" decisions are ones that should have been completely avoided.

The Good

Perhaps the best decision I have made in my study plan was to try and step out of the boundaries of the media lab as much as possible. I came to the studies with a heavy practical background in software/IT engineering and an academic background in philosophy and neurobiology. The media lab courses largely offer a hands-on and practical tutoring for new media design and production, but it was important for me to not neglect my previous theoretical and scientific

¹<https://gstreamer.freedesktop.org/documentation/additional/splitup.html>

background and develop those fields - knowing that, at least for me, remaining in the front of academic research would eventually benefit my work as being “New Media”. Had I stuck mostly to media lab courses, I wouldn’t have been able to do this. Highlights of courses that I took outside of the media lab include:

- CHEM-E8125 Synthetic biology.
- BECS-E4101 Mathematical Modelling of Social Dynamics.
- CS-E5750 Nonlinear Dynamics and Chaos.
- ELEC-A4930 Astronomical View of the World.
- TAI-E3108 Living and Non-living, a Sliding Matter : Growing Gold.
- TAI-E3109 Interspecies Dialogue: Experiments in Synthetic Biology.
- TAI-E3109 Interspecies Dialogue: Leaky Loop Systems.
- TAI-E3101 Context, Site and Situation.
- ARTS-E0600 Contemporary Aesthetics.

One other notable mention is *DOM-E1006 Critical Design*, still at the department of media but from the program of graphic design. I found this course, along with *Contemporary Aesthetics*, to be the most influential on my aesthetic judgement.

The other good part of my studies was being able to go to Kyushu University in Japan for one semester, and to kick-off my thesis project there. This was another chance to further develop my existing tendencies, as I previously studies in Japan and was looking for an opportunity to strengthen my bond with the country.

The Ugly

The construction of my thesis project - A soft robot named HITODAMA, began in Japan in the spring of 2017, where we had our own 3D Printer, an available Vacuum Chamber and most importantly, I was working with a Brazilian designer for making the molds and designs of my robot. Coming back to the media lab in the end of the summer of 2017, I was a little lost. I had an idea to produce the tail of the robot, but didn’t know where to start. The vacuum chamber was in Arabia, 3D printers were in Fablab, milling was in Design Factory, and there was no Brazilian designer. On top of everything, Miestentie closed down on February 2018 and I found myself being a nomad with a suitcase full of Soft Robotic materials. The winter was ugly indeed, as I was walking and commuting back and forth between Arabia and 3 different buildings in Otaniemi. As a result and just out of bad luck and planning, my ideas for the robot’s tail largely failed. Most of that year produced no physical assets, but I did learn a lot. I also started working with Joaquin Aldunate (hiring him with my saved funds), which saved me greatly. In the summer of 2018 I was working in Design Factory as the only place that was open, and was at least able to produce the first working prototype of the robot’s arms. Looking back now, seeing how

everything became easier after the move to Väre, what I should have done was to focus 2018 on researching, writing and developing software instead of forcing the physical production. That would have probably allowed me to graduate in the spring of 2019.

Another more minor disappointment is the suspension of my Finnish studies. I am pleased with my decision to take five Finnish courses all the way up to 3A - They were a great mental exercise, a social gathering and even taught me some Finnish. I do regret, however, not taking it further. At some point I just gave up for no real reason other than being able to focus more on the thesis, and the Finnish faded away.

The Bad

I am known to be a stubborn guy, and the fact I came to study at the media lab with a specific goal in mind: Building a placing a robot between Israel and Palestine, made me commit to some bad choices along the way. I was determined to have everything done by the end of the Master's thesis, and even though I took several months off every year to do money work, I still stormed blindly on the target, and before it was too late, I realized I don't have any money left. The winter of 2018 was thus the hardest of them all, because I had to drop everything and fight for every penny. This however taught me a valuable lesson, and at the moment I decided to limit the scope of the thesis, plan for the doctoral studies and to start accepting work, everything turned for the better. I was especially happy with the serendipitous lunch meet-ups at Kipsari which landed me a teaching job and a programming job for Aalto when I needed them the most.

The shortsightedness regarding my life and my thesis also prevented me from enrolling to any courses other than the mandatory ones between 2018 and 2019, missing out on quite a lot that was happening at the media lab and elsewhere, and avoiding a lot of socializing. I should learn to be less of a martyr and more pragmatic.

Conclusion

As my thesis is still not done, and everything could still go wrong, I feel I have a more pragmatic outlook of life at this moment and I will work to take advantages of the opportunities presented to me. Still, I couldn't be more grateful for the incalculable body of knowledge that I have gained in the last four years. Thank you Media Lab and I'm here to stay!