Bhāvanā

Clay Kuznia

Stacie Rice

English 102-062

April 30th, 2015

Reflection

I feel that my writing since English 101 has changed. I seem to inquire, think, and break apart things in my writing more often now. I stretch out my explanations, fill them with detail and observation, and attempt to convey a perfect picture of what I have in my mind. I feel that is one of the skills I have learned from this semester. Although I am nowhere near a seasoned author, I feel that I have come a long way. If it weren’t for this class, I wouldn’t be able to read articles, reviews, or newspapers and determine what genre(s) of writing are being used. Nor would I be able to explain how each part works to either prove a point, persuade me, or tell an emotionally driven story. I am satisfied with what I took from this class and enjoyed sharing my work with you, as you gave great advice in the short meetings that we had.

My first piece on meditation ended up becoming a mix of a personal essay, profile, and research essay. The original sketch included some personal aspects, but weighted heavily toward a profile of my English teacher, Mr. Frode. But it wasn’t my intention to make it a profile sketch. The piece isn’t about him, it’s about meditation. I wanted to show and tell people what meditation can do for us, and what its psychological and physiological effects are. The original piece made a great transition from my story of him to the research behind meditation. Although this was not a profile, Frode’s story accented the piece very well in giving an example of a living, breathing product of meditation. I added needed dialog and details on the behavior of Frode in order to fully describe and convey his personality. I completely changed the beginning of my piece to start off talking about meditation so my audience wouldn’t be confused as to if the piece was about Frode or meditation. Starting off the piece with me in my dorm allowed my audience - college students - to be able to connect with me and understand an example of meditation (a few examples are provided throughout the piece). Through further research I was able to answer my underlying question that I had about meditation and its connection to personality. Because of the many genres that “No Yesterday, No Tomorrow, Only Now” inherits from, it almost works in phases. First came the opening piece about meditation which segued quickly into the profile of Frode. In turn his profile set up a base for great research and critical insight throughout the piece. In the end I provide my final thoughts about meditation and the difference between a journey and its destination.

My second piece started out with a very strong backbone of research with very little additional insight or responses to my sources. I saw this as an opportunity to take a piece that closely resembled a report, and turn it into a piece with personal insight and reflection to back up my research. I wanted my opinion and view on mental health in the piece in order for this to drift away from a report and become more of a proposal on America’s mental health status. To do this I made my claim clear in the beginning of the piece, and took longer to describe what it was that Guy Winch was proposing about the current health crisis. I wanted my audience to know what he wanted, and why it was necessary. I not only showed why America is in a mental health crisis, but I speculated on a way it could be fixed and then found a study that tried exactly that. The study showed that my proposed solution not only worked in theory but in a real world scenario. I then took the results from the study and talked to college students about what this study means to them and what each of them can do for themselves. I noticed that my collection of research was used in such a way that they seemingly “talked” to one another. My other secondary sources continued to back up Guy Winch’s claim. “The Underlying Issue” complemented my first piece well, as each of them are related to mental health and self-help techniques.

My final piece, “An Escher like World” deviated in topic from the first two pieces. Originally my intention of this piece was to review Alexander Bruce’s video game, Antichamber. I provided great detail of the game and thought that I articulated Bruce’s thoughts about the design and implementation of his game accurately. But as I wrote the sketch I noticed that I was more interested in learning about him, and his journey in the development process. I realized that I envied him in a special kind of way, mainly because he took an idea and made it reality. So I took a turn in my revision for my final piece. I ripped apart the idea of a review, and suddenly focused on Bruce himself and brought up many of his personal experiences. Included in this change was even more dialog. I used dialog heavily in this piece mainly because I didn’t want to deviate too much from the developer’s actual opinion, and secondly because he has a special kind of humor. Because of this, the piece became a mixture of a review and then a turn towards a profile. Although my final intention wasn’t to review the game, I still provided analysis on his game because it still allowed my audience to understand the game and the basics of it. After that I dug deeper as to *why* it was so different, that in itself allowed my point to bubble up to the surface at the end. I didn’t include too much of my personal experiences of the game in order to purely focus on Bruce. My favorite part of this piece is when Alexander Bruce visits Japan and ends up getting great inspiration from a simple experience in a convenience store. I thought it really encompassed his personality and even though it was embedded about twenty minutes into an hour and a half video, I just had to include it.

The portfolio name, *bhāvanā*, comes a slight connection from each included piece. Bhāvanā translates literally to “making become”. Meditation can be used to become or even discover who I can be. While as fixing today’s mental health crisis and keeping a stable body and mind can allow one to live and shape their life as needed and be free from mental oppression. My final piece on Antichamber shows the cultivation of a video game, and how much work was involved in the becoming of Alexander Bruce’s seven year creation.

No Yesterday, No Tomorrow, Only Now

Sunlight floods my eyes as I wake up. My phone is attempting to wake me up with relaxing music, but I don’t exactly agree with my past self about waking up at this time. Eventually I will silence my phone, and sit up in my bed. The fact that it’s covered in thick memory foam makes that first step very hard. Then I pull the sheets up to my waist to stay warm and sit either straight or cross-legged. I take barely a minute or two and then begin my meditation process. Each session is slightly different. Sometimes I can focus purely and absolutely on my breath. Sometimes the air is too warm or cold. Sometimes I’m groggy, tired, or got some of the crappiest sleep imaginable. Regardless of the circumstances, I try to focus (or even un-focus) my mind. I normally feel different after each session. Either I’m more awake or just in an overall better mood. It only takes about ten or fifteen minutes before I’m ready to crawl out of bed and begin the day.

Meditation has gotten a very positive rap lately. A majority of people know that meditating regularly can help relieve stress. But I have a hunch that meditation can play a good role on one’s behavior. I am curious as to what kind of changes the brain undergoes during meditation, and if these psychological and/or physiological changes can affect one’s personality. My hunch comes from a high school English teacher who meditated regularly and had a very peculiar personality…

It was almost as if it were yesterday. The low lighting lit up my paper just enough so my writing was visible. There were about three to four lamps around the classroom, each fitting nicely in a corner. On one of those corners sat the teacher’s desk. My high school English teacher, Mr. Frode, was a slightly old, calm, and collected man. He was extremely open to almost any idea, never judged anybody, and couldn’t resist writing. He absolutely loved to write. He was very fitting as my English and creative writing teacher. Frode was interesting, so interesting that I took his creative writing class just so I could spend a little extra time with him. In that time I noticed his posture was erect and tall, but alternatively he swayed smoothly back and forth, almost with joy and comfort. It sounds rather weird to do this, but if you stare at him, you can almost see a thought come to his mind. I could see his body semi-convulsively react to the thought, his head and body would turn to the object or person of interest. Frode acted similarly when he wrote. His handwriting (or chicken-scratch) was so bad that - in a parallel universe - he could have been a doctor.

I would rank Mr. Frode as one of the most interesting beings I have ever been with. The man simply does not compare to anybody else I know. Patience comes easy with him. A student once stole his iPod touch, and the man hardly seemed upset. He always used it to play relaxing music during our writing sessions. “I’m almost certain of who took it” he said when I mentioned something about his iPod. “Are you going to do anything about it?” I asked, but his grunt and facial expression made it look like he was going to let it go. Another student flat out swore at him in front of his students. Frode completely shut the child down while remaining almost emotionally untouched. “You are more than welcome to leave class.” He stated sternly, but calmly. He was not there to argue, he was there to teach (unless the argument illustrated a point). I remember before each class he would stand outside the door to greet everyone that came in. Occasionally he would bring a whiteboard with him outside the door and write some sort of message to get your attention. One day he wrote “Smile?” just to see how many students, or faculty members, would smile back. In his creative writing class we always conveyed writing to be a magical way of transferring or converting thoughts, feelings, and events into another form. But there were thousands if not millions of different ways you could portray and perceive an event on paper. Each way it was written, with each word, and each syllable, it was different. The connotation of literature is extremely sensitive.

This was the world that my teacher lived in. He was like a mad scientist that dreamed of equations and formulas. Except for Frode those formulas were more like sentences or words put together in just the correct amounts in order to convey a perfect meaning or feeling. It didn’t take long for someone to realize he seemed a bit different from the average person. He wasn’t just there to teach you English or creative writing, he was there to teach you life lessons. A true teacher. It got to the point where I began to ask myself “Why him?’, “Why is it that he seems so different?” I figured he probably had an interesting background, so I began to ask around.

Many of my friends mentioned that he used to be a Trappist monk for about four years. Trappist monks typically refrain from speaking unless absolutely necessary. Because he was a monk, he got into the habit of meditating. I thought that was an important piece in his history. I knew meditation could have a variety of health benefits, and might be contributing to his overall state of mind. Of course meditation could not possibly be the only factor in determining Frode’s behavior. Each and every one of us behaves based on our genetics and environment. But I have a hunch that his meditation practices had a decent impact on his personality. This led me wondering not just about my teacher’s personality, but the shaping of the personality itself. Which in fact can be done through meditation (Keown, 98).

One day I came in after school specifically to question him about his meditation practices. “Just try it for 5 to 10 minutes when you’re just starting out. Your mind will wander, but don’t force it to stop wandering. Just refocus your mind.” These were my teacher’s tips about meditation when I finally picked his brain about it. The idea is to sit in a calm, quiet area - a place where I will not be disturbed. Then I am to sit upright, in a comfortable position, and focus on something of my choosing. This could be my breath, or just my body itself. One by one I attempt to relax each muscle, starting from the top or bottom of my body and slowly working toward the other end, until I have every muscle in a rested and comfortable position. Then I can focus on, for example, my breath. I may notice how my body feels and moves when I slowly breathe in, and out. I may notice the temperature of the air I breathe, and the amount of air my lungs take in. At this point the mind will begin to wander and daydream. Simply refocusing my mind onto my breath, or whatever I chose to focus on, will allow me to enter a meditative state. I keep doing this for as long as I feel is needed.

As a beginner it will be hard to meditate for even just ten minutes at a time. But once we are able to block out thoughts and truly focus, what happens? What process does the brain undergo during meditation? Damien Keown, a bioethicist on Buddhism, shines some light on the subject in his book *Buddhism: A Very Short Introduction*. “Research suggests that the brain generates more alpha waves when in this [meditative] state, indicating a condition of relaxed creativity.” There is clearly something interesting happening in the brain during this mysterious process. I know that alpha waves are actually what the brain uses to maintain its sleep-wake cycle. Since these waves are prevalent during meditation, one might infer that a person may be in a lucid sleep state while meditating. We’ve all had some exotic, crazy, and imaginative dreams. Perhaps meditation can administer a similar experience. Not to say that day-to-day relaxing sessions will cause hallucinations and lucid sensations. But it may allow the senses to be experienced from a different perspective. Just analyzing thoughts as they come in and out of consciousness can help to understand ones thoughts and feelings, and maybe even an underlying state of mind.

According to Keown, meditation can be defined as “an altered state of consciousness which is induced in a controlled manner” (98). This altered state of mind actually happens more often than one would think i.e. daydreaming or “zoning out”. I’ve driven my car for only ten to fifteen minutes and realized that my mind had wondered miles away. These experiences are often closely related to that of meditation. Unlike daydreaming or drug induced trances, meditation is a controlled and intentionally induced trance with no side effects or “bad trips” (Keown 99). It’s the “controlled manner” part that doesn’t happen as often, it’s hard to get a hold on our mind when it is running amok. Over time though, the urge for the mind to wonder during meditative sessions will decrease over time. Just like playing an instrument, or learning a new skill; Practice really does make perfect. Keown mentions in his book that after several months of consistent meditation, the mind becomes much easier to tame and control (101). The goal of meditation, from a Buddhist perspective, is “not to be ‘elsewhere’ but to be right here, fully conscious and aware. The aim is to ‘get one’s head together’, and become mentally concentrated rather than fragmented” (Keown 99).

I’m curious to know what psychological and physiological changes the mind endures over the course of meditation. The benefits of this activity are astounding. One may find an increased sense of calmness, mental stillness, and concentration (Keown 101). Keown says that “distractions, worries, doubts, and fears” fade away because the mind is living in the now. It makes sense really, there is no yesterday or tomorrow. There is only now; “before” and “after” are abstract concepts that society came up with. If I’m stuck worrying about the future, there is no room to enjoy the environment that I am in at this very moment. If I am not enjoying the only thing that truly exists, then I am hardly living a complete and genuine life.

As a freshman in college I am facing a variety of challenges that I haven’t personally come across before. I’m living on my own in my dorm. I have a new workload, a new job, and new people to talk to and be around. Some of those people I like, and some I’m not too fond of. These come along with many, many other obstacles and variables. But that’s just the beginning. Soon I will have to purchase all of my own food, pay my own bills, and take care of myself mentally and physically. College students, especially freshman, seem to be vulnerable to things like depression and social anxiety. I think that sometimes throwing somebody out into a semi-real world environment can make it obvious what they need to work on. Motivation and social issues can bubble to the surface. I don’t believe this happens to everyone but I think it happens to an awful lot of college freshman just getting a feel for the kind of environment that’s waiting for them outside their dorm walls. Perhaps if they could focus on the *now*, it might make the transition into college easier and less stressful. Meditation is a wonderful way of doing this. It allows one to let go of the past and future and let in the present. Doing this can even change the way your brain is physically wired (Keown 103). Buddhist’s practices are based on the belief that the brain is malleable and can be shaped and fitted to one’s liking. Neuroscience reinforces this idea with the discovery of neuroplasticity, which refers to the changes in neural pathways in response to a change in behavior, environment, and other factors. “For example, London taxi drivers have been shown to have a larger hippocampus probably due to the constant exercise of navigation skills” (Keown 103).

This actually has much to say about altering one’s personality. Buddhists’ general term for meditation is known as *bhāvanā* which translates to “cultivation” or literally “making become” (Keown 96). Buddhists see meditation as the high road for a journey on shaping oneself. It’s all about *making* and *becoming* a better you, whoever that “you” may be. Keown even states in his book that “meditation is the principal Buddhist strategy for making oneself what one wishes to be” (96). And if meditation can mold the mind and help shape us, it surely can shape anyone’s personality. It can help with stress, and has countless health benefits. Taking the time to relax and let thoughts run for ten or fifteen minutes each day – morning or night– can help to become a more relaxed, open-minded, and self-respecting individual. So why not start as soon as possible? College seems to be a very ideal time to start. If one creates good habits and breaks bad ones at a young age, it makes it easier down the road because those good habits are already in place. I encourage anyone, even the mildly interested, to try meditation for a short period of time.

Life is a journey; there will always be success, and failure. Everyone will come across new experiences and situations every hour of every day. It’s up to us to make those experiences worthwhile. Meditation is also a journey akin to life. It’s about change, and struggle, but not about the ending. If one always focuses their mind on the ending, they will never satisfy what leads up to it. If one enjoys the journey itself, I believe they will satisfy more goals and experiences then they ever thought they could. Frode exceeded my expectations on what a teacher encompasses. I was taught more than just papers, grammar, and how to read bad handwriting. Don’t endure, enjoy.

Works Cited

Keown, Damien. *Buddhism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: University Press. 2013. Print.

The Underlying Issue

A child wakes up one morning and walks into the bathroom. He steps up onto a stool in order to reach for a toothbrush and begin brushing. The child accidentally slips off the stool and scrapes their leg. After crying for a moment, the boy gets back up, opens the cabinet, and grips a band aid in order to cover the cut.

People are taught right from the beginning how to take care of themselves. Each individual learns how to walk, talk, act in class, make friends, go to the bathroom, etc. The human race seems fairly fond of taking care of each other physically, but can we do this emotionally? Do we learn how to deal with common mental issues like failure, rejection, and loneliness? Guy Winch, a psychologist for over 20 years notices that “We sustain psychological injuries even more often than we do physical ones”. In his TED talk last year he highlighted the fact that a child may know how to cure a cut and brush their teeth twice a day, but not how to deal with emotional injuries like rejection and failure. Physical problems can seem obvious and imminent, while mental and emotional issues appear to be pushed away or even ignored.

Winch’s point is that we need to start teaching mental health until the basics of it are ubiquitous. This doesn’t mean to administer counseling or to simply educate people on the effects of, say, depression or anxiety. What he aims for is a basic “toolkit” per se that everyone can use to combat everyday mental issues. He, and I too, want everyone to be educated on the basics of treating things like loneliness, depression, anxiety, and rejection. I agree with Winch, and believe that we need to show people how to handle basic mental disorders without having to seek for help. I personally know several people that think that drinking alcohol is a good way to relax and cope with a stressful event. It seems normal to have a glass of wine after a long day at work each night. But in fact that is not a healthy way to cope with stress (Smith, Robinson, and Segal).

According to John Grohol, an author of Psych Central, the number one myth about mental health is that mental health problems are uncommon. This is far from the truth when he states “In fact, nearly 1 out of every 5 Americans have a diagnosable mental disorder within their lifetimes”. One cannot just tell an individual that suffers from depression that “Oh you’re feeling depressed? Just shake it off, it’s all in your head”, imagine saying that to someone with a broken leg “Oh just walk it off, it’s all in your leg” (Winch). I have noticed that, specifically in males, people have a hard time opening up and allowing themselves to be emotional. Human beings are naturally emotional. Sometimes males (like myself) get the vibe that we are supposed to be strong. We are *supposed* to ask the girl out on a date, we aren’t *supposed* to show weakness. This is all wrong. Men and women are not supposed to act a certain way, any ways in which they act are all because of social and historical norms created by society only. Crying, feeling sad, guilty, or down are all normal feelings in moderation. I believe that everyone should be able to show emotion. The work environment doesn’t encourage emotion either, it often seems to encourage a poker-face. Every job is different, but typically an individual at work wants to be able to exude certain skills. An employed person may wish to stay focused, charismatic, and full of energy. Being positive, sociable, and easy to approach are good traits as well. But it is often hard to establish and work on these skills when there are deeper, underlying mental problems. In a high stress, fast paced environment there is little room for error and moments of emotion. Decisions must be made quickly and accurately. And people could get the wrong impression on one’s overall performance if that individual has unnoticed issues. I feel that it’s hard to stay above the water when it seems everything is against me. That’s why it’s of paramount importance that society is taught to deal with minor forms of mental health problems before they become major issues that affect our ability to function.

There is heavy evidence that America or even the world itself needs to start honing in on mental disorders. America has experienced far too many school shootings, 356,000 inmates have severe mental disorders compared to only 35,000 patients in “state psychiatric hospitals” (Rather). Mass homicides and suicides are the product of individuals with serious mental health problems who aren’t getting the help they desperately need. I believe that everyone intends to do the right thing and be morally just. But I also know that mental instability can cause illogical and obsessive thoughts, which can lead to an individual making decisions that seem right to them, but are fundamentally incorrect. Society has been plagued with episodes of depression, eating disorders, anxiety, and various other issues. In 2014 Guy Winch mentions in his TED talk that “chronic loneliness increases your chance of an early death by 14%”. Mental health is the kryptonite of today’s well-being.

Although America may be suffering a mental health crisis, there are some actions we can take that would most likely help. In the same way that we teach kids about math, science, art, and many other skills – we can teach them how to handle their mental health. Mental hygiene isn’t something that only a few should practice, its hygiene, everybody should be doing it. Just as one may go to a doctor to check up on their blood pressure, one can assess themselves in order to treat their issue quickly and effectively and only then get help if external assistance is required. Anxiety, depression, loneliness, and fear are all far too common to have to see a specialist every time they come up. Instead our education system can be teaching the public how to manage themselves emotionally and giving them a mental first aid kit (Elmore). Simply knowing how to calm oneself down, block or omit negative thoughts, and logically and/or efficiently work in stressful situations can help sustain healthy emotions.

This works more than just in theory. A study conducted by Ohio State University researchers found a program called COPE (Creating Opportunities for Personal Empowerment) that had teen students work on cognitive behavior skills, nutrition, and exercise. The course was not a simple counseling in the classroom approach – Each student attended fifty minute sessions weekly for fifteen weeks. “We teach kids how to monitor for activator events and show them that instead of embracing a negative belief, they can turn that around to a positive belief about themselves” noted the lead author of the study, Bernadette Melnyk. Rick Nauert’s article on Psych Central highlights the effects of this program, and the results are very promising. The participants of the study had a lower average body mass index, better social skills, increased health class grades, and actually consumed less alcohol than teens who took standard health lessons. In addition Teens that were severely depressed beforehand had improved, dropping their depression to normal levels, while the control group’s mental health issues remained elevated. “Most of the positive outcomes of the program were sustained for six months” (Nauert). The interesting part is that the instructors who taught the health classes in the study had absolutely no extra knowledge or background on the subjects, proving that no certifications are needed to teach the material. This shows how much implementing physical and mental health classes into schools can impact our society’s overall wellbeing.

Rick Nauert showed that the Ohio State researchers agreed on the existence of the current mental health crisis that Guy Winch proposed. “Less than 25 percent of adolescents who have mental health problems get any help, and here we have an intervention that addresses that suffering and also can prevent or reduce obesity”. Teens have significant health issues, and schools aren’t meeting the needs for knowledge on physical and mental health in today’s world (Nauert). On a final note Melnyk wanted the adolescents to be more active, and a balanced diet can do wonders. “But a very key piece is the mental health and cognitive piece” she stated (Nauert).

As a college student, this information might not seem very helpful. But in fact we can look at what the participants in the study were taught to give us an idea of what we can do to help ourselves. There may not be classes available that specifically pinpoint how to deal with mental disorders. But we can start exercising by going to a local gym. Counselors are normally available on campus or nearby. Even for those who are less financially fortunate, counselors (especially campus health centers) are normally willing to help regardless of ability to pay. Even watching educational videos and articles online about how to deal with basic mental hygiene can be helpful. In addition all of us could work on a healthy diet. That’s right, no more ramen day in and day out. Personally my doctor has told me that a daily multivitamin can act as a strong backbone to a healthy diet, and I follow his advice. Meditation can actually help block out mental chatter. Sustaining a healthy body and mind keeps our health at an equilibrium. A relaxation session once a day can factor out a lot more problems than one would think. Each one of these are good steps toward a healthy body and mind, but combined can really help us with our current health crisis.

The secret is just getting the basics down. Understanding how addiction works, the symptoms of depression, treatments for loneliness, and where we can get the help we need is what society needs to know. Now there are people who know how to do this. There are groups of people that understand why they feel the way that they do, and because of this they are better off not just mentally, but even physically as well. By understanding and caring for ourselves physically and mentally we can set society up for success.

Works Cited

Elmore, Tim. “Six Steps to Help Students Practice Better Emotional Hygiene”. *Growing Leaders: Tim Elmore*. Tim Elmore. 19 Feb. 2015. Web. 16 Mar 2015

Grohol, John. “Top 10 Myths about Mental Health”. *PsychCentral*. Psych Central. 39 Mar. 2015. Web. 14 March 2015. 11 Sept. 2013.

Nauert, Rick. “Mental Health in High School: Teach Students Link between Thinking Patterns, Emotions & Behavior”. *PsychCentral*. Psych Central. 29 Apr. 2015. Web.

Rather, Dan. “’Greyhound Therapy’ and America’s Mental Health Crisis”. *Huffpost Health Living*. TheHuffingtonPost.com, Inc., 5 May 2014. Web. 13 Mar. 2015.

Smith, Melinda, Lawrence Robinson, and Jeanne Segal. “Alcoholism and Alcohol Abuse”. *HelpGuide.org*. HelpGuide.org. Apr. 2015. Web. 29 Apr. 2015.

Winch, Guy. “How to practice emotional hygiene | Guy Winch | TEDxLinnaeusUniversity”. *TED*. TED Conferences, LLC. 2 Dec. 2015. Web. 16 Mar. 2015.

An Escher like World

A game hobbyist picks up the controller of their preferred gaming system, powers up the television, ramps up the sound, and finally relaxes on a comfy chair, couch, or possibly even the floor. “What am I going to play?” he may ask himself. This is the frontline question that every gamer must answer. Battling it out in the new Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare may be fun, or maybe he could take a dive at racing… from the cops. Or this excited gamer could build a replica of the Empire State Building out of blocks in the famous game, Minecraft. Each game claims the title of a piece of art, or sometimes as a masterpiece created by many or even a single ambitious and visionary developer.

In Alexander Bruce’s Antichamber, released in 2013, the player is immersed in what Alexander was striving for - a masterpiece. He states in an interview that “Antichamber is a psychological, first person, exploration puzzle game set within an Escher like world.” (Tek Syndicate). Although there isn’t any of MC Escher’s art in the game itself, it does display scenarios and obstacles that seem impossible in the real world (Bruce). This is because the game works off of non-Euclidean (or nonphysical) geometry. An in-game example of this is when I came across my first puzzle. I walked down a white hallway with the edge of each wall outlined in black; suddenly I saw a fork in the path. On my left is a red staircase that leads downstairs, and on the right is a blue staircase that leads upstairs. Say I go downstairs; I’m wrapped around a corner to head down another hallway. Suddenly this new hallway has another fork; and I’m presented with the exact same staircase as I had just gone through. Naturally the player would then try to go upstairs through the blue staircase instead of downstairs. After that the player is again wrapped around onto another hallway that contains the exact same staircases. “Umm… what?” I think to myself. No matter which path I chose the outcome is the same. The answer to the puzzle is simple, but not always obvious.

Antichamber is rich with brain teasers that range from simple and humorous, to near impossible. Instead of the player taking on each level one by one, the player is dumped into a vast world of puzzles and mind games. The world is big enough and the puzzles are complex enough that one could easily spend hours finding their way throughout the world. This gives a feeling of seamlessness throughout the game. Alexander Bruce tried specifically not to break the immersion in the game (Tek Syndicate). He mentioned that in another popular puzzle game called Portal, the immersion is broken when the player dies by falling into a pit of lava, and is then teleported back to the start. “That’s game logic, that’s completely ripped me out of the world and there is no story or explanation for that” Alexander states when posed a question about Portal. During the interview he also noted that “I want to try and make a game that doesn’t have death, and while I’m at it I’m going to do the same thing to menus. Because just having a menu pop up totally breaks all the immersion, I’m not happy with that.” Antichamber’s menu differs from normal menus due to the fact that you are still playing the game when one enters the menu (Bruce). When I press the escape key, I’m suddenly teleported to a room covered in black tiles. On one wall contains all the game options (i.e. resolution, controls, mouse sensitivity, etc.). In order to change the settings I simply walk up to the wall and click on the enable/disable buttons. Another wall holds the map of the game, showing all the areas that you have explored, and also allowing me to jump to any location I wish – provided I have been there before. Keeping me “in” the game kept it immersive and unique.

The art and graphics in the game also stand out. For a user that has played this game before, they could easily look at the screen and be able to determine if you were playing Antichamber. If you took some scratch paper, created simple geometric objects with a black sharpie, and filled some of those objects in with other colored sharpies, this is similar to what the world of Antichamber resembles. It’s a mainly a black and white game, that’s accented with bright colors. A very simplistic approach was taken for the graphics of this game; it gives you a clean, minimalistic feeling. Being that Alexander Bruce was the only developer for Antichamber, he most likely wanted to keep the graphics within the means of his ability. This does not mean that getting the graphics just right wasn’t difficult, no matter the level of graphical realism in a game, keeping a visual sense of a theme, convention, or style is challenging and important. The down side of Alexander’s piece of art is that it seems to bring out occasional headaches. After a roommate and I each played for an hour of two, we both started to get either a headache or slightly dizzy. Going from solid black to a vibrant blue, to deep red, and then to a pure white gives you a slow-mo strobe-like feeling.

The most interesting part is how all of this came to be. Alexander Bruce actually worked on Antichamber for about seven years. He wasn’t developing the entire time. In fact when he started working on it, he didn’t even know he was working on a game. In his spare time he began developing algorithms and simulation engines for nonphysical geometry (Holmes). Think of an MC Escher world that one could walk around in. This essentially allowed him to render objects that were impossible in the real world. In his interview with Jonathan Holmes, Bruce explained how and why he designed the game to look the way it did. He wanted to use his nonphysical geometry project and turn it into a game. He didn’t want a world that had clear distinctions between objects, he wanted everything to blend together. So he started out with a completely white world. Then he wanted to add light, but since everything was already white he had to use colors for light and shade. On top of that he ended up writing his own lighting algorithm just so he could color objects the way he wanted - which ended up being an inverse lighting technique. All this means is that if you see green in the game, that’s because there is there is a negative red and blue light combined together. Combining his nonphysical geometry system and custom lighting algorithm, he was already fundamentally different from many games (Holmes).

But it didn’t end there, the developer even got some inspiration from a trip outside his hometown, Australia. In his hour and a half long interview with Jonathan Holmes he told a story about how he got inspired by a simple experience in Japan. Bruce didn’t travel a lot, so when he went to Japan he was in a completely different world. He didn’t know anybody, nor where to go, and could barely speak Japanese. He decided to head into a convenience store to buy some chocolate, which he thought should be a simple task; “That’s an easy thing I can do that in two seconds in Australia”. He walks into the store and has no idea what any of the products are. So one by one he looks at all of the items and was “mind boggled” at how hard it was to find something that resembled a chocolate bar. After reading through a minor amount of Japanese that he was capable of, he translated one of the labels to “peanut block”, “Peanut block! That sounds like chocolate for me. Ok, what do I do now?” (Holmes). He instinctively goes over to the cash register to pay, and is overwhelmed by the cashier speaking Japanese at mock speed. The man then points at the cash register. Stunned, Bruce pulls money out of his pocket and finally pays for his, so called, peanut block. “Those are all totally basic things that you take for granted in your own setting” (Holmes). And he is completely right, here for me in America that would be extremely easy to go and buy some chocolate. We are so used to our surroundings that we take them for granted. “I then took the game that I had and was like ‘How do I capture that experience [in Japan] and put that into the game?’”. The developer applied a real life experience and added this as a fundamental aspect in Antichamber. His game puts you in a completely bizarre world where almost nothing is familiar. He captured that experience, because when I played, I didn’t know where to start.

“In school I’ve always been the kind of person that thinks outside the box” Bruce mentioned when asked about why he thought he was different from other developers. “My way of attacking assignments and stuff in school was to read the specs and then be like ‘alright this is what they were asking for, I don’t actually think this is what they want, [so] I’m going to give them this other thing’… and they’d be like what the fuck?! It’s really good!” Alexander Bruce doesn’t play by the rules. He shapes the rules the way that he wants them to be. He doesn’t allow specifications, grades, nor people to tell him what should and shouldn’t be tried. That is the reason why he created “A game about taking twenty years of gaming history and turning it on its head” (Holmes).

Alexander Bruce represents a creative genius and deep thinker. He challenged almost every aspect of game design, from the art, to the play style, down to the algorithms for lighting and texture. He recreated the wheel – and made something better. He is different because he doesn’t go along with the norms in society. On top of this he not only stands out, but he created a masterpiece that will always stay with him. I never realized how much thought could go into such a simple idea, and how much time it could take just to make things absolutely perfect.

It’s very inspiring that through simple ideas and real world experiences he was able to take the thought of creating something and make it a reality. I would encourage everyone to create something of their own (game related or not) by *not* following the norms. Think outside the box, rip apart specifications that something should meet and make it better. Antichamber is an example of pure creativity and many, many hours of hard work and agony trying to put it all together.

Works Cited

Bruce, Alexander. Antichamber [Video game]. Melbourne, Australia: Alexander Bruce.

Holmes, Jonathan. “Sup, Holmes? Ep 30 w/ Alexander Bruce, designer of Antichamber”. *YouTube*. YouTube. Apr 28 2015. Web. 7 Oct. 2012.

Tek Syndicate. “PAX East: Antichamber Interview with Alexander Bruce”. *YouTube*. YouTube, Apr 10, 2012. Web. 22 Feb. 2015.