Talk about the power of music

Managing expectations, stepping up to the plate, and that choice

“Shorter workloads, fasted deadlines, you will learn that this doesn’t”

“There is a type of struggle that is the must frustrating thing, yet the most addictive, because once you overcome and succeed over that struggle is it’s the most rewarding experience you will ever have”

OPENING

I’ve always said I’ve had a bad mix of bad genes; but the worst of them all, and most impactful to my life was Cystic Fibrosis (CF). CF changed my life in every way imaginable. From a young age I had to complete daily treatments, using heavy, noisy equipment. This made doing anything almost impossible, but one thing my parents found that I could do was use a computer. This quickly became my favorite thing to do while doing my treatments, specifically playing video games.

As a toddler I started playing an Atari emulator, and the Window’s entertainment package. Then I received the gift of wireless internet! On the internet I found New Grounds during the heyday of flash games and animations. Then as I grew older I started buying PC games on CD, until finally online stores like Steam took over the market. Spending so much time playing these games throughout my life, I started to develop an eye for design unconsciously. I found the things I like about the games and/or commented to myself on things that could be improved. However, it wasn’t until 2013 when I built a gaming computer that I was truly set on my path of wanting to make video games as a career. While looking for guides on building a gaming computer I came across a podcast called TechTalk with JayzTwoCents. Jay’s co-host was a senior software developer for Microsoft, who worked on the Windows platform. He ran a series, on his YouTube channel that taught entry level programing, using a very hands-on method. Although the series didn’t run for long, it got me hooked into programing. I had messed around with some programing in video games, writing scripts for in-game computers and machines, but never anything more than a couple dozen lines.

Once I found this series I started trying to find anything else I could on introductory programing, from books, to videos, to websites. I bought old programing textbooks from used book stores and asked for them as birthday presents. I read and studied and fought with my programs. And I loved the struggle of getting my code to work. I started programing during my treatments instead of playing video games, and that’s when an idea came to me. I had always struggled with keeping track of time with my treatments, traditional timers often wouldn’t work. I would turn the timer off but then get distracted before I finished the task the timer was set to remind me of. As I tried to find a better way to keep track of the time it took to complete my treatments, an idea for a timer application came to me. One that wasn’t just a collection of timers such as Apple, or Samsung timers, but a system of timers that was programed as a collective treatment. Each timer would be able to effect and interact with the other timers as delays occurred. As each medication was completed it the program would log the time the medication was finished and how long it took to complete. The timers also demanded more interaction then traditional timers, asking specific questions of the user; all of the logged data would then be used to help track the user’s health.

This application dominated my programing interest for years, and it went through many revisions as I tried to teach myself more and more about programing I learned better and better ways to code the timers and log systems. This was what I focused on right up until I took my first game development course, at which point I promptly realized that I didn’t want to develop software. I wanted to develop video games, as it combined both of my passions, gaming and programing. I loved game design. My freshman year in high school I took both available game design classes back to back. It was the only thing I wanted to work on!

Throughout my first game design class I emulated several Atari games, the elegance and efficiency with which the games where designed and programed was awe inspiring to me. Games I had played for hours on end as a kid, and play to this day, were yet so simple in nature. And as I was emulating these games I was writing down ideas for my own games, many inspired by the flash games of my early childhood.

Once I completed both game design classes at my high school, I turned to the advanced computer science classes offered. Over the course of the next two years I continued to learn about programing in and out of classes. I also taught myself to use Unity and Blender with the help of online tutorials. This allowed me to move on from Game Maker; the switch to Unity (among other software) enabled me to create more complicated, 3D games, with custom models and animations.

I often worked on my projects while doing my treatment. I lost myself in the work, hours slipping by without me even noticing. I love working on the games, it was just as much of an escape for me as playing them. The frustration that came with debugging and designing these games, while potentially infuriating, is one of the most rewarding and inspiring feelings I have ever experienced.

As I continued to work on my own, I also took classes in school which continued to teach me programing theory. I attended classes through a level 200 collage Data Structures and Algorithms course, accredited by Marquette University. In this course I learned much about managing group work to meet both self-set, and instructor-set deadlines. After this class I attended a learning seminar on Full Stack application development and deployment, this not only taught me much about server and database programing, but about managing group dynamics, workloads, and creative process.

At the start of last spring, I shifted my focus from high level computer science and application development, back to game design, and set my sights on college. During the end of my junior year I started working on my portfolio for DigiPen, as well as spending more time 3D modeling in Blender. I started writing more stories for my games, taking ideas in my head and fleshing them out somewhat on paper, keeping notes and ideas for the future.

Last summer when I first visited the DigiPen campus in Redmond the school was exactly how I had imagined. I fell in love with Redmond and the life on campus was incredible. The students I meet where exactly the type of people I want to work with - both motivated and brilliant. As I walked the halls of the school, the works of past and present students took my breath away with each step I took. I fell in love with the school, its’ teachers and its’ students. I knew that DigiPen was not only the school that would enable me to chase my dreams and also let me live those dreams while learning about my craft.

After visiting DigiPen this summer I turned much of my focus to creating my application portfolio and studying psychology. As I worked on my application I read books and article on game design phycology, I listened to developer podcasts, read game reviews, and I started compiling a picture in my head of how to design the experiences and emotional interactions we love in video games.

I started deconstructing every piece of fiction I came across this summer, mostly movies, and T.V. shows. I questioned after the design of every element. From the most eye-catching props and CGI characters, to the most minor of background filler; each was chosen for a specific reason, and I tried to understand those reasons. I did the same with the psychology of the characters, trying to understand their motives, desires, and fears. I would try and predict how they would react to situations, or what they would do next based of what I understood of them.

Deconstructing other’s work like this was nothing new to me, I had been doing it with video games for years already, but I was looking at different elements in the movies I watched, then those of the games I played. Instead of asking myself how something was programed, or if a U.I. could be simplified, I asked about the rationale the director choose the set they did, or why a character responded in a specific manor.

I also explored why music was such an impactful thing to most people. It is an incredibly complex topic, one that I don’t think has ever been holistically explained by a single theory. However, what I did realize is that music had the power to, and more often than not, made people feel a certain way. Just like how actually seeing a sunset is far more beautiful than it would ever be if someone merely explained it to, music doesn’t just tell you how someone feels, it makes you feel the same way. That is why scoring movies, games, or theater, is so important, because one song, at the right moment can be the difference between an audience get goose bumps, and them finding no interest in your work.

As I have explored more and more parts of game design, I learn more and more about how little I actually know, despite how much I’ve already learned. Even so, I don’t quiver before that knowledge, rather I thirst to understand more. Game design, or more universally, entertainment design, and psychology is one topic I never get tired of learning about. I know that game design is what I want to study, and I know that DigiPen is the school that will drive me excel at it.