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Composing Digital Media

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<div align="center">Self-Guided Skills Development: Final Reflection</div>

Dungeons and Dragons is, by its nature, a shared imaginative experience. The game master might have a concrete view of what the world looks like, but the only thing he/she can work with is what has been created in the players' minds. It's not like a movie or video game where everyone watching is seeing the same picture on the screen, rather every player may have a different interpretation in their heads of what exactly is going on in the same pen and paper world. Oftentimes this can lead to misunderstandings, most of which can be solved by simply talking it out or retconning events and rewinding. But sometimes, in serious moments where tensions are high, players and game masters may not agree on a retcon, and regardless of who is right or wrong in that situation someone is always going to end up frustrated or upset, and what is supposed to be a "game" becomes a lot less fun. The key to running a "good" Dungeons and Dragons game then is to minimize the amount of these misunderstandings in tense situations, and there are no situations in Dungeons and Dragons more tense than battles.

The typical Dungeons and Dragons game or "campaign" can take multiple years to fully complete, with the players playing the same characters throughout the entire length of it. But in Dungeons and Dragons character death is also a very real thing. Step on the wrong trap, fall in a pit of lava, or die in battle and that character a player has been playing for several years can suddenly and permanently cease to exist. When players are so invested in their characters, this character death can be incredibly emotional. In the best case scenario the player is able to send their character off on their terms, such as in a final moment of glory by having the character stay

behind to buy time for the rest of the party. In the worst case scenario, a player might think they have been cheated by the game master, as he/she misunderstood the situation and might have thought the fire-breathing dragon was fifty feet away when the game master believes he/she clearly described it as only five feet away. In order to avoid situations like the latter, maps are often used in battle situations in order to provide that shared, concrete, indisputable screen that movies and video games afford as mediums. A good map cannot cheat you, but in order to be good a map needs to be clear and easily interpreted. Distances need to be relative to scale, player and enemy positions need to be clear, proper shading needs to be used to denote height and depth, and important objects in the world need to be emphasized.

For my self-guided skills development I focused on honing my Photoshop skills so that I would become better able to create these battle maps. My primary goals were to become generally more comfortable with the software and also learn more shading/lighting techniques in order to create clearer maps. Dungeons and Dragons, and by extension the fantasy genre, has always been a source of fun, wonder, and relaxation for me. With that being the case, I did not install myself in Hillman and go into the studying of my created curriculum with my typical calculating academic mindset, but rather I laid down in bed, my laptop in front of me, video game soundtracks filling the air around me, and began to curiously explore the possibilities of how Photoshop could best capture the works of my imagination.

Working my way through my curriculum I did not memorize the functions of every single icon in the Photoshop CC 2018 UI, nor did I learn the math behind the image transformations which a proper Computer Science student probably would have done. Rather, I paused the tutorial videos often so that I could open fifty new tabs to explore fifty different tangents. A five minute tutorial segment on importing textures and smart objects had me scouring the internet for half an hour trying to find a pleasant looking tileset of a windswept field at harvest time. A

tutorial segment on shadow blending lead to me looking at photos of Edinburgh Castle so that I could see how exactly the shadows fell from the parapets and sunk into the crenelations. Tutorials on lighting just lead to me imagining different arcane portals and how they glowed in a darkened cavern.

This is not to say that I ignored the tutorials, after all I still needed to learn how to implement my imagination and for that the tutorials were very helpful. With that said, if I could rewind a month or so, I would have included less tutorials in my curriculum and have spent less time on them. Knowing the absurd productivity that Photoshop can enable in the hands of an experienced user, I initially overestimated the learning curve of the software. After learning the basic elements of the UI and tweaking some systems settings to better fit my workflow it actually became very easy to use very quickly. At the moment I feel confident in my ability to create three to four maps in the space of two hours, which is far quicker than I was able to do so back when I was working with a different software than Photoshop. I tend to prefer working on creative projects when I'm tired (i.e. late at night/early morning) as I feel my mind wanders a bit more freely, so it is definitely nice being able to get a full eight hours of sleep before classes instead of burning the candle at both ends trying to get maps made before the next scheduled session.

Overall I found this self-guided skills development assignment to be a very effective incentivizer to finally learn the ways of Photoshop. As a result of that I found myself deeply enjoying the process, and didn't mind setting aside nights and mornings here and there to work on it. Admittedly, I would have been working on something similar for my weekly games anyways, albeit with a lot less learning going on. I believe I've come out of this assignment much more comfortable with image processing as a whole, and definitely more comfortable with Photoshop as a program.