Biography of an influential software engineer – Terry A. Davis

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In the late 1970s, a young boy from West Allis, Wisconsin named Terry A. Davis learned assmbly language on a Commodore 64. In 1992, he graduated from Arizona State University with a 3.63 GPA with a masters degree in electric engineering. Then an exciting prospect in his field, he began his career at Ticketmaster, helping to develop their VAX operating system.

Davis seemed destined for great success, until he began experiencing manic episodes in 1996. His mental health issues resulted in him being in and out of jails and psychiatric hospitals, and an eventual schizophrenia diagnosis. By the early 21st century, Davis was living with his parents and unemployed, living off disability cheques.

His mental illness first presented itself when, in 1996, he started seeing people follow him around in suits. This paranoia led him to abandon his job, leave town, and drive south to Texas. There, he stripped his car in the desert looking for tracking devices. Eventually a cop picked him up, only for Davis to then jump out of the police cruiser and break his collarbone.

He was brought to a hospital, from which he escaped. He then got arrested immediately afterwards when he tried to steal a truck. He was brought to jail and then, eventually, a mental hospital, where he refused to eat food out of fear of being poisoned. He was released after two weeks there, and when he got out he began trying to emulate Jesus by giving away everything he owned to charity and living on the streets.

By the early 21st Century, however, Davis was back living with his parents, unemployed, and living on disability payments. In 2003, Davis claimed that he began communicating directly with God. Despite living much of his adult life as an atheist, he was now convinced that God Himself told him that it was his mission to build His Third Temple of Jerusalem – after Solomon's Temple and the Second Temple – in the form of an operating system.

Davis spent roughly twelve years working on this OS, writing over 100,000 lines of code. He wrote this code in a language of his own creation – his variation of C which he called "HolyC". For a long time he remained unsure about what he should call his creation, his temple. Initially it was called the "J Operating System". For a while it was called "LoseThos". He eventually settled on a final name: TempleOS.

When he unveiled his work online, reaction was mostly sympathetic, with many being both impressed and amused by his unique achievement. Speaking to a reporter for Tech Republic in 2014, he described his system as "an x86_64, multi-tasking, multi-cored, public domain, open source, ring-0-only, single-address-map, non-networked, PC operating system for recreational programming."

TempleOS ships with its own compiler (which Davis claimed in a livestream he wrote in 3 days) as well as HolyC, a file system "Red Sea", and Fat32 support. It also comes with 8-bit ASCII support and a 2D and 3D graphic library, all of which run at 640x480 with 16 colours. It outputs all sound through one-voice PC speaker. It of course also comes with keyboard and mouse support. According to Davis, many of the stranger specifications listed, such as the resolution and 16 colour display, were instructed by God himself. Indeed, the resolution and 16 colour display are, in Davis' words, "a covenant like circumcision".

Davis was partly driven to create TempleOS because he wanted to create something educational, like his beloved Commodore 64. The most basic tasks are complex for the end user. The design is barebones, and gives users direct access to the hardware. The system is made up of 121, 691 lines of code, but 22,242 of thoe lines are for demos, and another 4,292 are for software for composing organ music. Ignoring those, TempleOS fits easily into less than 100,00 lines, "as God intended".

But the main reason Davis created TempleOS is clearly religious. HolyC and Red Sea are filled with Biblical references. The entire OS is essentially a platform for communicating with God. One prominent program featured is called After Egypt. In it, you walk up a mountain called Mt. Horeb alongside Moses to talk to God, but only after dodging sheep and trees to find the burning bush.

There are other religious features. If you press F7 anywhere in TempleOS a pseudo-random "tongues word" is summoned. This is a wordlist which generates pseudo-random text which Davis calls an "oracle". The results are, as intended, absolutely incomprehensible. Shift F7 generates a random Bible passage. The program Jukebox offers a collection of PC-speaker tunes with Biblically inspired lyrics.

According to an article written about Davis by Vice back in 2014, "he drinks a lot of caffeine and lives mostly on a 48-hour schedule". At around this time he was still living with his parents and remained unemployed. After TempleOS was completed, Davis would apparently spend most of his time coding, web-surfing, and talking to God by using the output from the National Institute of Standards and Technology randomness beacon. He would post the results on his webpage under "Terry Davis rants". He claimed that he hardly interacted with his parents, despite living with them under the same roof. When asked about his relationship with his seven siblings, he said that "Jesus did not talk to his siblings...I am the same way."

In the years since Terry presented his creation to the world, he became a controversial figure online. He would often rant aggressively about his critics, or about various conspiracies, typically involving the CIA. These rants would be laced with disgusting

profanity, including a frequent use of the n-word to describe anyone he didn't like. This led to him having accounts on SomethingAwful and Reddit (where TempleOS has its own subreddit) banned. He was also shadowbanned on Hackernews and was banned from OS News, who had previously published positive articles about his work.

Terry's behaviour led to a lot of conversation among his small fanbase, where many grappled with their conflicted feelings about the man and whether or not they should condemn him or show empathy to a man who was clearly mentally ill. All the while Terry's legend slowly grew. In the many video blogs he released he regularly referred to himself as "the smartest programmer that's ever lived" and many of his followers believed that to be true.

Earlier this year, it was discovered by his fans that he was homeless. A friend of Terry's told a local newspaper that he had stopped taking the medication that he had been on for more than a decade, now believing that it stifled his creativity.

While he was homeless, his fans would regularly bring him supplies, but throughout he refused any offers of housing. And he remained homeless for several months up until the night of August 11 this year, when he was hit by a train and died. He was 48.

For up to several weeks, some held the belief that reports of Davis' death were just baseless online rumours. Eventually confirmation of his death spread, and tributes to the man began to pour out. Fans posted videos of Terry in moments where he was happy, such as a 22 second clip of him dancing in public.

The last video Terry uploaded was recorded hours before his death. In it, Davis is bearded, haggard, and unkempt. He explains that he had been living homeless for several months and was using a computer at his local library. He also explained that he had recently removed most of his videos because he didn't want to "litter" the internet. While investigators at the scene of his death couldn't determine whether the cause was suicide or accidental, this video makes it seem as if Terry knew the end was near for him.

Ultimately, Terry's life was a tragic one. As a boy and young man, he seemed destined for great things, things that might have changed the world. His mental health issues made it so that that wouldn't happen, and the rest of his too short life was mostly just a terifying, sad downward spiral that led him to being in front of that train that night. The only glimpse we truly got of his talent was in TempleOS, which is on one hand a remarkable achievement but is also little more than an internet curiosity, leaving no lasting impact outside of a small cult following.

Sources

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