It all started with a smile. Maybe it was a smile about the cartoonish pictures or maybe it was about the childlike interaction, but it was a smile. A smile that was obvious enough to show me that our feelings went through; A connection that was unlike words or sentences; A brand-new way of communication that made me deeply fall in love with interactive media.

I had two best friends in high school, R.Q., and Y.B. If you asked us what we enjoy to do in our free time, all of us would answer: playing video games. To me, video games at that time was simply another kind of media that I could spend my time on with my friends, only it was more enjoyable and less demanding in space and time. Instead of booking and going to a soccer field, I could simply open up my computer at home and become a hero in DOTA in no time. Even though Y.B. and I had certain knowledge of programming, we never thought of making a game ourselves. Why. It would be too hard for us and not fun at all.

High school life didn't stay all the same for three years. Our lives changed drastically when R.Q. sprained his ankle before the national high-school hurdle competition. R.Q was a talented hurdler and this competition could have granted him 10% bonus points for GaoKao, the Chinese college entrance exam, which guaranteed the first-class university even if he behaved averagely in the exam. We were all devastated to hear the news, only to find R.Q becoming depressed after the event. Y.B. and I tried our best at everything to cheer him up, from inviting him to a good lunch to playing his favorite games with him, but none worked. R.Q remained the same.

Then right before the summer, Y.B. came to me and told me in a low volume voice probably the most exciting plan we ever came up with: why not make R.Q. a game? A game that he would enjoy so much to cheer him up? We got so excited that we forgot we barely got any knowledge to technically create a game, let alone other aspects of a game or the possibility of a high-schooler-made game curing depression. We only had limited programming experience with no one knowing how to use an engine that we planned to use later, Cocos2d.

Not surprisingly, we got stuck. And we got stuck on the very first step of making games: Defining the core mechanics. We both came up with several ideas, with the purpose to cheer up our friend. So, all of them were youthful, childish and funny. Other than that, we were both just trying to persuade one another that one's idea is better but we failed. Soon we realized the problem: we had nothing to show but only some silly drawings on a paper. So, we started our dreary process of learning Cocos2d. We were both trying to showcase our idea on the screen while going through Cocos2d's manual and searching endlessly on the internet when we got stuck. Basically, we searched the whole time, but we also started to understand basics of game creation in cocos2d like physics, frames, etc. After endless trials and errors, we put everything on screen. It became suddenly clear which one was better when we actually played with them instead of using imagination. We ended up choosing the idea of scrubbing objects to erase them like using an eraser.

Coming up with a theme was not hard at all compared to the first step. We both enjoyed silly jokes so we chose Alpaca as our protagonist, because Alpaca in Chinese

has a funny pun meaning, and pigs as our antagonists. This unique narrative of defending the village of alpacas from invading evil pigs led to our level progression. In design, we drafted levels using timelines, splitting scenes from Spring morning, Spring noon, Spring night all the way to Winter night, and creating unique pigs and alpacas per-season and per-time. For example, we had four different alpacas standing in front of the village with different abilities for four different seasons. And pigs with high movement speed would appear at summer because summer stands for vibrancy.

  We soon realized that we need to split up, each one doing a specialized portion of work so that we could better streamline the process. Since I came up with the level progression and narrative, I went on with designing different abilities of pigs and alpacas as well as drafting numeric values for various things in game such as the health of pigs, time of scrub to death, rocket's fly speed, etc. And since Y.B. was better equipped with programming knowledge, he went on implementing my designs.

  Coming up with designs was easy, implementing and balancing the designs were as hard and as dull as possible. For over a month or two we gave up all the time we could have been playing games into developing the game. I would take the subway every day for half an hour to just meet up with him and work on it. Someday I just sit there, built the game repeatedly and played to balance the numbers I once wrote on an excel sheet.

  But all hard works paid off. When we finally finished implementing all our designs, balanced all our levels, we showed it to R.Q. As soon as he saw the Alpacas on the menu, he smiled. He smiled all the way when he was scrubbing on the screen, defending the alpaca village. I could still recall that day clearly. Even though we didn't cure his depression or changed the world, we did make him smile. That is a smile different from any other smile in the world; That is a smile so rewarding that it almost became an addiction; That is a smile as a different level of communication, stronger than any words or sentences. I was not even doing anything yet I felt like I know and understand what R.Q. was thinking and experiencing. This feeling made me want to pursue more and that's when I decided to keep making games.

  Alpaca Village, even though was my first made game, provided me with insights about video games that I have never thought about before. I used to consider video games as another media to provide escapism similar to fast-food movie or internet novels, but I never thought of video game as an experience that conveys the designer's feelings and emotions to the players through interactions, until R.Q. told me a year later that: when he was scrubbing through the pigs, he felt like a child playing with a drawing book again. It was the exact same feeling we are trying to convey! From then on, I have always been trying to creating video games as an experience to express my ideas, feelings, and emotions to the players.