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<div align="center">Worlds of Wonder: A Story of Digital Literacy</div>

To me, digital literacy has always meant proficiency in using electronic devices and digital applications. Though, over time I learned that my initial definition was incomplete, and that to achieve a true sense of digital literacy there was one other crucial skill that I needed to develop. I believe that to truly be digitally literate, you must have a substantial understanding of all three of those aspects. My personal adventure of digital literacy discovery began one fateful morning in 2011, when I was merely seven years old.

Snow was cascading down outside, coating everything touched by it in ice and slush. When I awoke, I sprinted downstairs, slowing down only out of respect for the stairs and the special paranoia I felt towards them as a child. Upon arriving in the living room my gaze scanned frantically for what I knew was hiding there. My eyes dared towards the tree in the corner of the room. We had decorated the tree a week or so beforehand, but at that moment it seemed much more barren – likely the doing of the furry little monsters that roamed our halls. Underneath the tree were some boxes, decorated in the flimsy, colorful paper I was searching for. My parents were seated expectantly on the couch, watching me as I ran to the tree to open my wonderful gifts. Roughly thirty minutes later, after I had finished ravaging the festive treasure chests, my parents told me that there was one more thing they had for me. I could feel my skin

stretch, my eyes going as wide as they could, as my dad hefted a black metal rectangle out of some place unknown. It was a portal to another world, a mysterious world, a lovely world.

It took me about ten minutes just to learn how to walk in this brand-new world. With some guidance from my dad, I was able to figure out the basics, and from there he left me to my own devices. I somewhat-tentatively explored this unknown expanse before me, and promptly got lost on my adventure. It was frustrating, yet my curiosity kept dragging me back in. It was challenging, but piece-by-piece I was able to get a grasp on it. I feel like this process exists at the core of most people's search for digital literacy.

There were people everywhere, and they were from across the globe. I was walking down pavement exactly like that outside my own house, yet I was walking alongside unfamiliar structures of all shapes and sizes. There could be a mundane suburban house right in front of me, and a massive medieval castle just around the corner. I was in a world of pure imagination and creativity, a world of fantasy powerful enough to connect people together – people who were otherwise oceans apart. I began contributing to this world in my own ways, interacting with the vastly different people around me, and slowly adapting more and more to this previously unfamiliar space. Everything around me was utterly fake, but it was real to me while I was in it, and that is all that truly mattered. It was then that I decided something that would change my life forever: I wished to make a world of my very own.

After exploring those magical non-realities, I decided I wanted to be a video game developer. To this end I began taking programming classes in 2016, at the age of eleven. I was taught the basics of multiple programming languages such as Python, JavaScript, and HTML. Out of those, HTML was my favorite. I got a grasp on the basics of it rather quickly, and so it

gave me the best tools for realizing my creative visions through code. Making a custom website of my very own, and filling it with whatever I wanted, was truly magical to me. Despite that, something about it still felt limiting to me.

My favorite moment to reminisce about, and a great moment to look back on in terms of digital literacy, is when I made a program to trick my mom. My instructor showed me how to create a program that could email certain people, and I decided to use this power for evil. The program I made periodically – every fifteen minutes or so - sent my mom an email that said it was from WeatherBug and was written as a notification and warning that there was an error with her app, and it required fixing immediately. In response to this, she removed the WeatherBug app from her phone, and was surprised and annoyed at the fact that she continued receiving the emails. When she arrived to pick me back up from class, she asked my teacher for help, and he tried his best to restrain a grin as he told her that he had no idea what could be causing that. When I got in the car, she mentioned her plight to me, and I cracked immediately.

Eventually I changed my mind about studying game development, but that experience remains critical to my exploration of digital literacy and creativity. I learned how to work my way around a computer much better than I had beforehand, to the extent of learning how computers worked on even the structural level. Through this experience, I mastered using electronic devices and digital applications. Therefore, all that remained was the final, crucial aspect of digital literacy: the ability to effectively navigate the internet.

I first got on the internet when I received my first laptop at age seven, as addressed earlier, so I grew up with my foot in the web. Whether it be watching videos on YouTube, or scrolling Twitter or Reddit, I've had an internet presence ever since I first entered

that beautiful world from before. Because of this, at every point in my digital literacy development I believed that I was an expert at web navigation. Despite that, I was constantly proven wrong. Even now I can't confidently confirm that I am truly an expert at it, but the most recent time my internet skills developed in a meaningful way was when I applied to Virginia Tech for creative writing.

Applying was obviously a recent process, beginning in 2021 and extending into 2022 - across the age of seventeen and eighteen. Adventuring through the maze of Virginia Tech's several different online hubs was quite challenging. At any point in the process, I felt like I could be missing something important, something tucked away into a dark corner that I did not know to check – perhaps a place I didn't even know existed! The stress of this scenario was somewhat hard on me, but it did push me into achieving more overall confidence in matters involving the internet. If I had to be more specific on what I believe I learned throughout the application process: consistency and responsibility. While I may have had the ability, I was not previously conditioned to handle that level of personal responsibility in that regard. Most of my experience beforehand originated from casual, non-academic use. I had taken online classes and knew how to do my own research through the web, but none of that put quite that much pressure on me. Despite the difficulty involved, I grew through the strife.

Overall, I am confident in my current degree of digital literacy. I can effectively use my devices, the apps on them, and the internet accessed through those apps. However, as briefly mentioned before, this sense of digital literacy is merely transient, and evolving constantly. Despite having confidence, I do not really know to what extent my skills truly go, or how long they may be retained. Over time, digital mediums will evolve beyond my abilities if

allowed to do so. Given that, my final requirement for a true sense of digital literacy is this: keep learning, keep evolving, else be overtaken and defeated by the advance of the digital world. If you fail in that regard, one day you may once again find yourself treading in a vast, foreign land, and this time around it may be more terrifying than wonderful.