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December 3, 2007

### What I Learned in Interactive Entertainment

In the first day of class, Professor Smith handed two beach balls out to the class. After receiving the beach balls with no instructions, the inflated balls began to fly around the room. She soon divided the class into two teams, seated in rows of tables, and gave rules for the game: the ball must go from one end of the table to the other and back, and everyone must touch the ball. Naturally, my table simply passed the ball from one person to the other all the way down the table and back. Our approach was too slow, and we lost the game. Professor Smith then explained many other approaches we could have taken to win the contest faster. The lesson from this class introduced two crucial components of the semester: play and game. When there was a beach ball in the room, we were playing. There were no rules, there was just fun. When you start to add rules to the play, it starts to become a game. What I learned that day is that I learned that I should not be afraid to play, I should question the rules of games, and that there is no clear distinction between game and play. I also learned that story is used in most interactive entertainment venues to foster game and play.

I learned a great deal in the first few weeks of the class. The Project for Public Spaces online articles really opened my eyes for the rest of the semester. I had not thought about playgrounds in years, and now I was thinking critically about them. After reading the articles and visiting a playground, I realized what I had loved about playing as a kid, and that many playgrounds do not consider what kids like. Kids like open spaces, getting dirty, and manipulating their environments, which is why many kids still

prefer back alleys to neighborhood playgrounds. I learned that most people who build playgrounds are not experienced with children, and do not take time to think about building a really good playground. It was inspiring to think about building the imaginary “perfect playground,” and my study of playgrounds made a great basis for the rest of the semester to build upon.

That same week, I read an article on Gamasutra titled, “What Kind of Designer Are You?” It described many different types of game designers, and in doing so, also described different types of game players. For instance, some designers go past the point of challenging the player, and try to outright trick them, yet at the same time, there are many players who enjoy this type of treatment: a sort of S&M game design, if you will. But the author of this article strives to be a player-centric creator; trying to do everything he can to make the player enjoy the game. This is the model of a creative professional I want to follow as well. What I have learned is that when you are dealing with the general population, they want to enjoy the game. They want to escape reality, be challenged, succeed, and most importantly, have fun. These are the things an interactive entertainment producer should focus on.

Growing up in Florida, I got to visit theme parks quite a bit. When I was young, Mickey was real, and Disney World was the magical place it intended to be. As I got older, Mickey stopped being real to me, and as far as theme parks went, I stopped caring about the theme. I wanted to ride the rides, and that’s all. But when I visited a theme park this semester, I realized how much effort really goes into creating a good theme park experience for all ages. I visited Disney’s Animal Kingdom before I wrote my essay, and later visited Island’s of Adventure, and Universal Halloween Horror Nights,

taking with me my interactive entertainment producer's mindset. Viewing the parks as an interactive entertainment producer, I really appreciated the details that make a theme park seem real: the soundscape created by hidden speakers all over the park, the painting of every little crack to make a set look old. My favorite detail was from Islands of Adventure. In the Lost Continent Island, there was an ATM machine, which was decorated to be embedded in ancient rock. I do not think the producers meant for visitors to believe the ATM machine was thousands of years old, but the producers stuck with the theme, and it does help with the overall experience: at least it made me laugh.

Museums offer a unique learning experience to the public that no other place can. They stimulate a freeform learning, allowing people to explore the museum world created for them. Of course you can look up a picture of *Washington Crossing the Delaware* online to see what it looks like, but when you see it over twenty feet wide in the Museum of Modern Art, it is truly a special experience. For the purposes of this class, I visited the Orlando Science Center. During my visit, there were many hands-on electronics stations that looked very interesting, but were not fully functional. As hard as the museum tried to "kid proof" this exhibit, it appeared that many pieces of the station were lost. This seems to be a huge challenge for designing interactive exhibits. I learned that a "hands on" exhibit can certainly be a wonderful experience for museumgoers, but many small hands can tear apart a fragile exhibit in a matter of weeks, days, or even minutes. I also learned that museums are mainly a mix of story and play. The story is what the exhibit is about: art, history, science, and the play is the experience created by the museum. The self-paced, freeform nature of museums creates an informational, multi-sensual playground to be enjoyed by all ages.

When I think of Family Entertainment Centers, I think of plastic tubes, ball pits, pizza, and Whac-a-mole. I visited Wonderworks on International Drive, knowing full well that these FEC staples were most likely not going to appear. But having seen the building for years without going inside, I had pretty high expectations. But the building is plagued with outdated technology, which I am sure was expensive and cutting-edge at the time. Through this experience I learned that for family entertainment centers should stick with tried and true play experiences. If Family Entertainment Center producers decide to go the “high-tech” route, they should prepare to constantly update the facilities, or prepare for dwindling repeat visitors.

This class stretched my vocabulary with a term for a type of entertainment I had never considered before: retailtainment. The need for retailtainment has only sprouted in the past ten years or so, as Americans are buying more and more products from the Internet. Using the Internet, people can get products from anywhere in the world, most likely at a cheaper price than retail stores. I have learned that retail stores must offer customers a special experience that will keep them coming back again and again, no matter if they buy or not. Great examples of retailtainment are Best Buy and the Apple Store. I personally saw the need for retailtainment this semester when my girlfriend’s aunt came to Orlando, and I drove them over to Waterford Lakes to shop at Ulta. I had all the hair and makeup products I needed, so I just spent my time at Best Buy. I did not end up buying anything, but I did kill about an hour and a half just walking around, watching TVs, and playing video games. I had a similar experience this Thanksgiving. I spent about two hours following my girlfriend and her aunt around in makeup stores around a plaza in Naples, and on the way out I saw the Apple Store. I would have loved

to be in there instead of makeup stores: I would have spent two hours just playing with the iPhone menu.

While retailtainment is more of a play environment for consumers, sporting events are naturally all about the game. But for sporting venues to make the most money, and get the most repeat visits, they need to think outside the field. I attended most of the UCF home football games this season, and learned a lot from them. It is worth noting that I took my girlfriend, who does not particularly care for the sport, to most of the games. Since she is not a sport's fan, it was interesting to hear her reactions to the experience. The first interactive element I noticed at the games was the announcer. Throughout the entire game the crowd reacted to the announcer and the music played on the PA. I think that new venues should go through a very deliberate talent search to find the right announcer. UCF's announcer is not perfect, but is definitely doing a good job. I started to notice more interactive elements as the season went on. By far one of the most fun forms of interactive entertainment at a sporting event is a giveaway, and there were many giveaways at the UCF games. Before the homecoming game, I observed a pass and catch game going on in an open field nearby the stadium. Through our discussions in class, I learned how all of these events surrounding the game create a more exciting, enjoyable experience for fans and non-fans alike.

Another special experience I had this semester was taking a trip to Sci-Fi City, because Sci-Fi City is certainly a place I would never have gone to if it were not for being in this class. I am not one to pass judgment on nerdiness: trust me, I liked the Lord of the Rings movies as much as the next guy. But I did not like them enough to want to reenact the Battle of the Hornburg with action figures. Role-playing when one is an adult is just

like “playing pretend” as a child. One assumes the role of a character and makes decisions based upon the character one plays. Although these concepts were somewhat foreign to me as an adult, I learned that role-playing games have a lot to offer to people’s basic play needs. They foster exploration, creativity, and competition. RPGs do have rules, which make them games, but they are mainly made up of story and play.

When our class took a tour of the Institute for Simulation and Training building, we got a good look into the future of interactive entertainment. The driving simulation room was a great experience because it showcased different levels of realism. One station I tried out was not very realistic feeling, but many of the other ones looked very promising, as the future of interactive entertainment seems to be getting more and more physically interactive and realistic. The combat simulation seemed to be mixing levels of realism. There were virtual reality stations where people could train, but there was also a LAN room where trainees could play combat software. Although this simulation uses keyboards and mice, I think it can still help train in the military. The LAN training is more of a story feel and the virtual reality is more of a game. At this point in technology, both forms of virtual training are necessary.

This class has truly changed how I perceive interactive entertainment. I now consider story, game, and play, for every kind of entertainment. This class has been an exciting experience that I should not soon forget. All through the semester I have constantly talked outside of class about what I have learned to my friends and family. I do not think this is going to stop after this semester. I feel like I can become an interactive entertainment producer in many different fields.