

From: "Jason Weesner" <designtron3000@yahoo.com>
To: "Aidan Millhouse" <kickassgamer@aol.com>
Subject: Re: Hi! and question!

Hi Aidan,

Thank you for your email!

Now, I hate to be a bummer, but during my time in the video game industry, I've gotten a few emails like yours. Sure you sound like a nice guy, but, honestly, you don't stand much of a chance of getting into the crowded and competitive video game industry with an email where your signature shows more creativity and forethought than your actual message! If you're going to take the time to contact somebody, make it count! And, you know, it's true what they say: **you only get one chance to make a first impression!**

There are MUCH better ways to get a foot in the door and the next few chapters cover what you can do to learn about game design before you have any professional or academic experience! First, we'll take a look at what I like to call "life experience" and it only requires two things to get started: **PASSION** and **ENTHUSIASM**. Passion means that you believe in yourself and you have a love for what you're interested in: hobbies, movies, games, music, art, writing, etc. Enthusiasm means that you can recognize opportunities, always try your hardest when provided with them, and make other people believe in your passion!

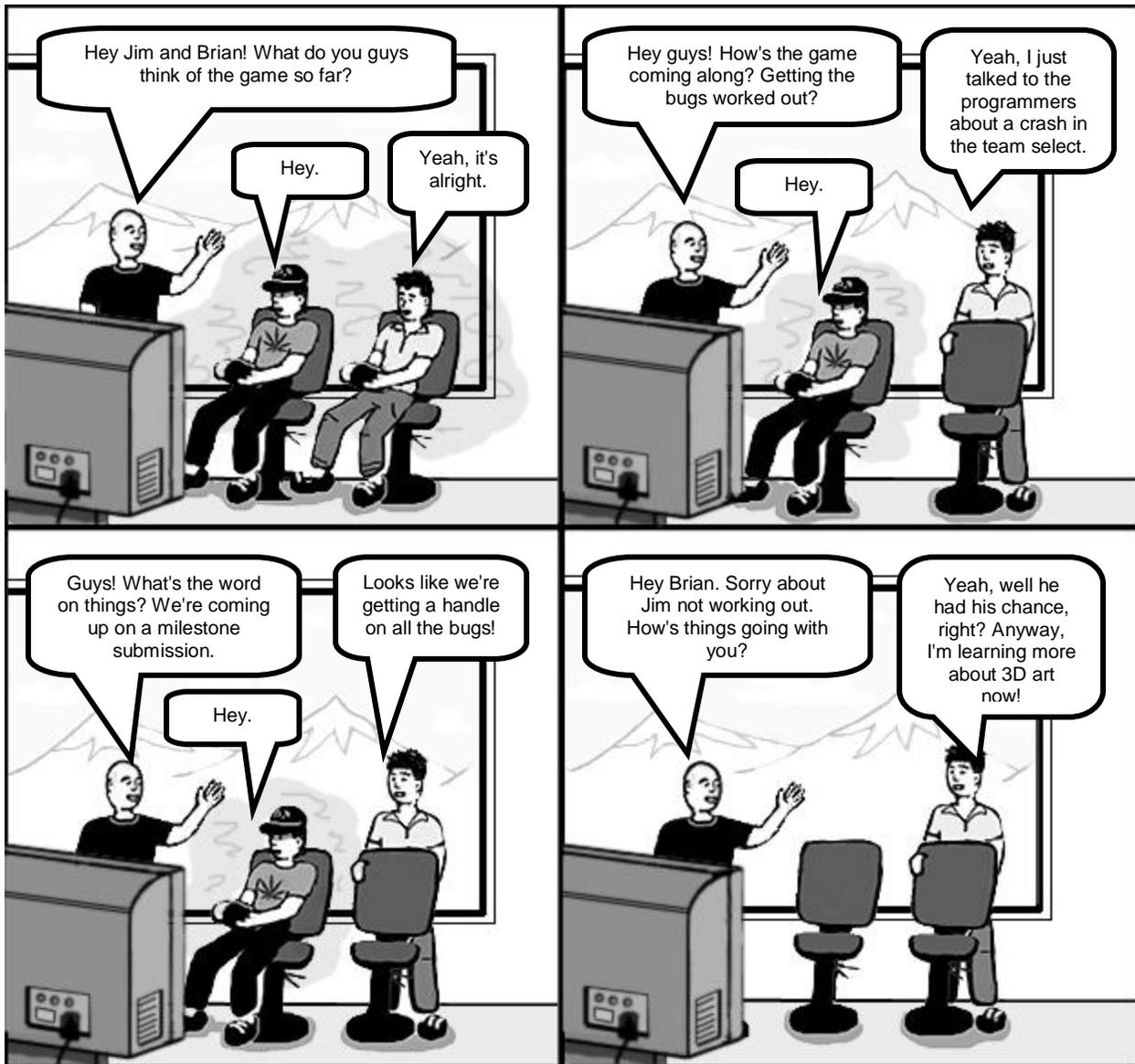
Do you know how Tim Schafer (designer of Brutal Legend, Psychonauts, Full Throttle, Maniac Mansion, etc.) got a job at LucasArts? He drew a one page comic in the form of a graphic adventure which showed him working at LucasArts. True story! Look it up if you don't believe me! Keywords: Schafer + Lucas + Start.

Cheers!
Jason Weesner

P.S. Why don't you check out the following story about two kids not unlike yourself and what happened to them. I like to call it...

"Wasted" Opportunity

All kinds of friends ask for favors: best friends, good friends, acquaintances, friends of friends, etc. Back in 1996, I worked at a small Sega Genesis game developer called BlueSky Software. A close friend of mine asked me if there were any job openings that her brother might be qualified for. Let's call her brother "Jim". Luckily for Jim, he was a huge baseball fan and we needed a couple of testers to help out with some last bugs on Sportstalk World Series Baseball. At the same time, a coworker recommended his brother for the other test position. We'll call him "Brian". During their first week, both Jim and Brian came to work buzzed every day and didn't do much more than warm a couple of seats in the office. In the morning when they came in, I would take a stroll by their test area to be supportive and see how they were doing...



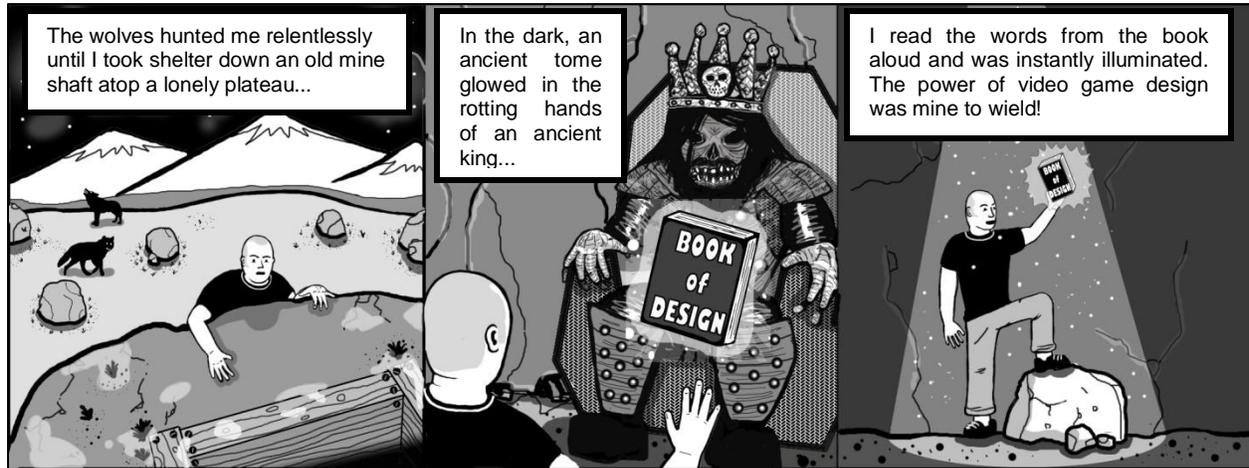
By the second week Jim was still coming to work high all the time (when he bothered to show up) while Brian started to develop an interest in the development process. When Brian reported a bug, he made it a point to provide as much information as possible and also ask the development team lots of questions if he didn't understand something. By the third week, Jim was let go after he just quit showing up and Brian's brother was teaching him 3D modeling in addition to testing the game. Nobody knows what happened to Jim, but Brian is now a professional, successful game artist whose work can be seen in many big games that you may have played!

PROTIPS!

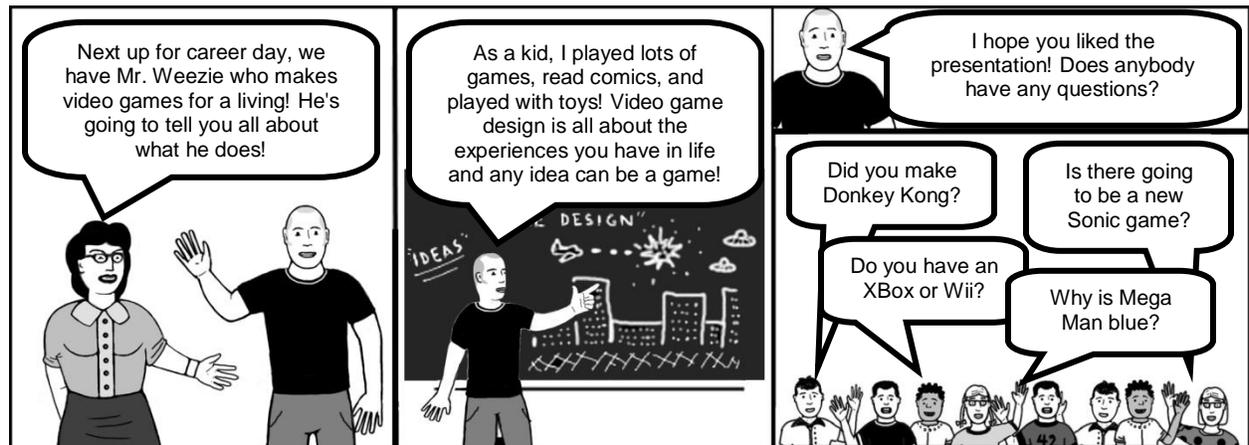
- Be aware of how you are perceived! First impressions are lasting!
- Every interaction is an opportunity to learn something.
- Answer questions intelligently!

How I Got My Start

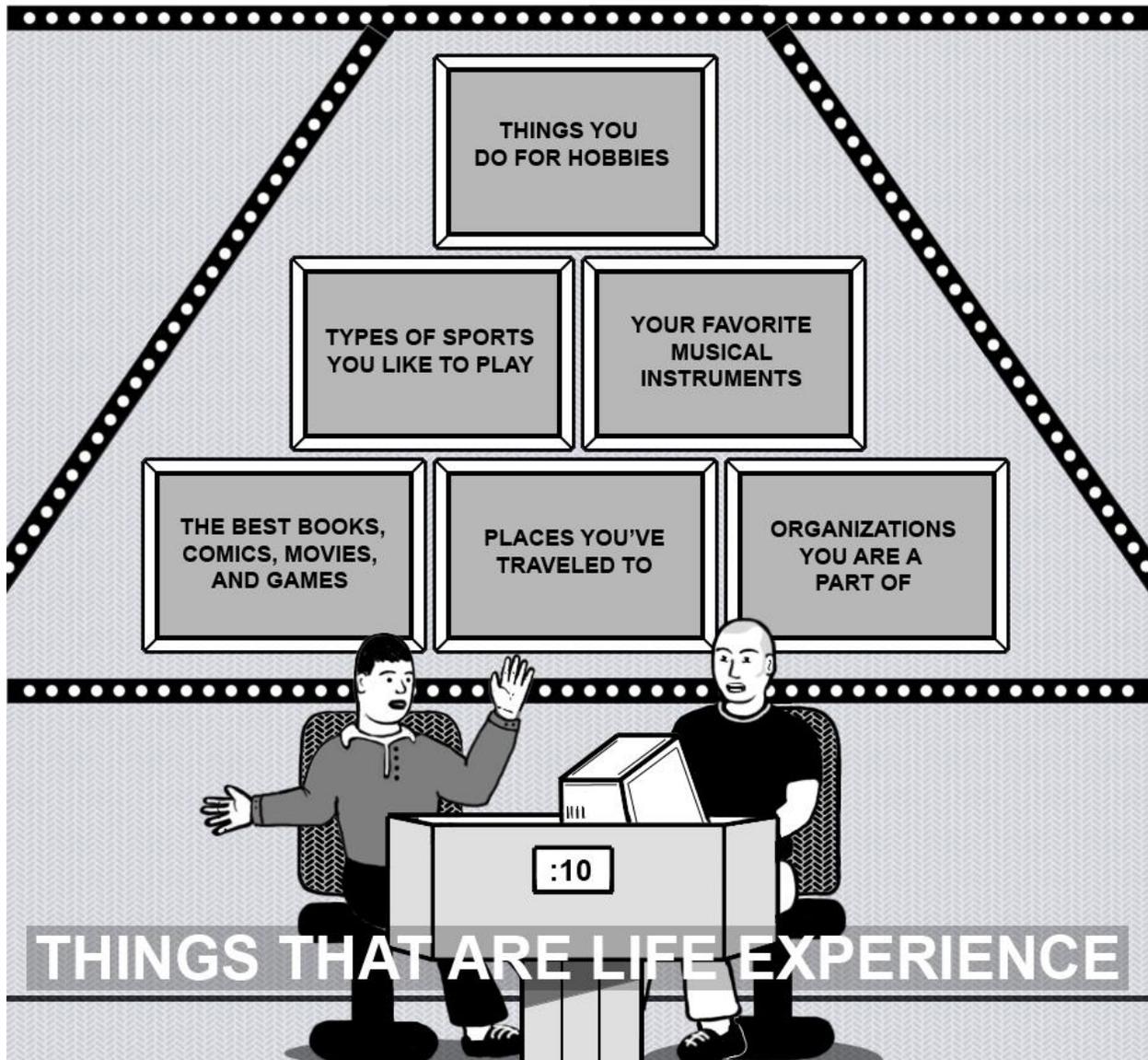
People always ask me how I got my start designing video games:



Well, actually, it didn't happen quite like that. My path to video game design involved lots of life experience, knowing the right people, being in the right place at the right time, and taking advantage of an opportunity. So, how does that all work?



Many people I talk to express a common frustration that they don't know how to get a job in video games without specific experience. The kids in this class didn't quite have the perspective to understand my explanation of **life experience**. They don't understand that everything they're learning in school and every hobby or interest they have can be turned into useful, applicable experience. Seriously, if you know that Mega Man is blue, that makes you more well-informed about video games than a lot of professionally employed video game developers! I like to think of life experience as everything that happens to you from the moment you pop out of the womb to the moment you jump back into the earth.



Some of those categories may seem a little random, but there is a method to my madness, so bare with me! OK. Hobbies can teach you valuable new skills or build upon existing skills while giving you access to a network of fellow hobbyists who share your interests. Sports help improve your coordination while imparting important lessons about teamwork. Musical instruments create harmony and melody and facilitate pattern recognition. As we'll discuss later, books, movies, comics, and just about any other type of popular media are common ground as reference for video game design. Whether you like to cruise around town or fly around the world, travel exposes you to different cultures and different ways of thinking. Organizations like the Boy Scouts teach important survival skills which could be very important if a zombie epidemic hits!

So, how about my life experience? It's safe for me to say that everything I did in my life leading up to my career was leading me in that direction whether I realized it or not.

- I was born in South Ruislip, England on the far end of the west-bound Central Line out of London. My Mom was a stylish British lass and my Dad was a strapping Navy dude.
- As a child I traveled all over Europe with my parents and was exposed to many different cultures.
- My Dad read the Lord of the Rings and Narnia books to me every night before I went to sleep.



2000 A.D. is a weekly anthology that introduced many famous comic characters like Judge Dredd, Rogue Trooper, and Nemesis. The comic was taken over in 2000 by Rebellion Development who got its start as a video game developer with Alien Vs. Predator for the Atari Jaguar!

- My Nano (English Grandmother) bought me 2000 A.D. comics which exposed me to some of my favorite comic book writers and artists like Alan Moore, Brian Bolland, Garth Ennis, Alan Grant, Dave Gibbons, and Kevin O'Neill. She continued to send me these comics every month even after...
- ...I moved to the United States when my Dad was transferred from South Ruislip to Kingsville, Texas. On my first day of class, I introduced myself as Master Jason Weesner (my private school upbringing) and got laughed at by the entire school (including the teachers).
- Luckily my Dad got transferred again from Texas to Coronado, California where my quaint British accent and slight Texan twang resulted in my entire class laughing.
- My parents took me on long road trips all over the west half of America. I spent many boring hours reading horror comics, science fiction books, and Slurpee cups.
- In 3rd grade I was placed in an experimental class of creative misfits where we wrote a musical about a dragon, learned math by creating three dimensional shapes out of construction paper, and gave our teacher a nervous breakdown.
- My Dad bought an Apple II to do spreadsheets and write the great American novel. He never used it, so I taught myself how to program video games in basic and assembly language.

- I spent many afternoons in the Coronado movie theater watching horror, science fiction, and obscure Japanese movies: Alien, Star Wars, Message From Space, etc. There were no spoilers¹ back then, so every movie was a complete surprise!
- Coronado was a big beach town, but I was the only pale kid around because I spent most of my free time hanging out in a local arcade called SuperCade. I made friends with the owner who would give me free tokens and show me how he repaired video games and pinballs.



This isn't Supercade, it's the Sassony Arcade in downtown Los Angeles. Sketchy looking, huh? This is pretty much what they all looked like in the 1970's. Most of them were located next door to bus depots and adult movie theatres! In the 1980's, the arcade scene cleaned up considerably and became more family-oriented.

- Even better, my friend's mother worked as a translator for Sega Gremlin² which was located in San Diego. Sometimes after school we would get to go play arcade games in their warehouse.

¹ The Empire Strikes Back was the first movie I remember being spoiled when news of Darth Vader's relationship to Luke (no spoilers here!) was accidentally revealed in an interview with David Prowse (who played Darth with James Earl Jones as the voice) and then reported on by a local news program!

² Sega used to be called Sega Gremlin. Gremlin was a San Diego-based arcade manufacturer who merged with Sega and went on to release a ton of famous arcade games in the US: Frogger, Zaxxon, and Carnival just to name a few! Most of these were licensed from Japanese developers and then localized (translated into English) for US audiences. Sega also ran numerous arcades in shopping malls around San Diego called Sega Centers!

- I spent a lot of time playing soccer and a lot more time playing Dungeons & Dragons! I loved being the Dungeon Master; designing campaigns and paper maps.
- I joined the local Boy Scouts, Troop 801, and had lots of adventures where I learned how to canoe, hike with a full pack, use an axe, start a fire with flint, and navigate using the stars.
- I won a local science fair and went to a state science fair where I met some guys who were making games on their Atari 800. When the judges came by to look at my project, I wasn't there because I was off learning how sprites worked on the Atari hardware. The Apple only had lame shape tables which were impossible to use.
- In college, one of my high school friends introduced me to a mutual friend who worked at American Film Technologies; a company that colorized black & white movies and television shows. I went and interviewed at the company and got a job on the graveyard shift.
- At American Film Technologies, I became friends with a girl in the quality assurance department who's boyfriend worked at a small Sega Genesis developer called BlueSky Software. We played pool together after work and he found out that I was a big video game enthusiast. This was definitely a case of being in the right place at the right time!



This is where I got my foot in the door in the video game industry - Victor's Cocktails at 4365 Convoy St, San Diego, California.

- Since I knew the right person, I was brought into BlueSky Software³ to help test out a Joe Montana football game. Even though I didn't like football and didn't get paid much, I busted my butt to make the game as bug-free as possible and took every opportunity to learn tricks of the trade from the programmers and artists.
- The owner of the company found out that I had a programming background and hired me full time as a junior programmer. I wasn't a great programmer, but I found I had a natural talent for game design and became the company's only dedicated video game designer. Strangely enough, I didn't get the official title because the creative director felt it would upset too many people.
- But anyway, the point of all this is....



EVERYTHING IS CONNECTED!



If you boil everything I've been talking about so far into one simple concept, it's the fact that everything in life is connected: who you are, where you are, who you know, what you're doing, what you know, where you've been, etc. Even somebody like Shigeru Miyamoto got his start by connecting his childhood experiences around town (both Zelda and Mario were inspired by his childhood) with music and art and a friend of his father's who already worked at Nintendo. Once the connections were made, he used passion and enthusiasm to get him in the door! A lot of the time, connections like these are just sitting around waiting to be made, but we ignore the opportunities because we're lazy or afraid or completely unaware!

³ BlueSky Software started off as a sports' game developer with the Joe Montana football series for the Sega Genesis. Later on they would find a larger audience and even greater success with titles like Jurassic Park, Shadowrun, and Vectorman. Some of the programmers at BlueSky were old school guys who'd worked on ColecoVision and Atari games during the first age of videogames in the 1970's!