Personal Narrative Essay

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Abstract

Growing up I was fascinated in electronics. I got an Atari when I was young and collected other gaming consoles during the late 1970s to early 1980s. These toys kept me busy playing the latest games. I would take apart a few of them to see how they worked from the inside. The graphics and sounds were so amazing at the time keeping me occupied. Not until the movie *WarGames* came out had my interest shifted into computers. The plot centered around a teenaged hacker who, while breaking into computers to play unreleased games, inadvertently made his way into a government system and nearly started World War III (IMDB.com, 1983). The main character was intelligent. One scene showed him easily tap into his school's computer to change his grades. At that point my fascination grew. This is what I will learn in college.

Keywords: Hacker, technology, gaming, computer

Personal Narrative Essay

In the mid-80s I got my first computer – a Commodore 64. Available for under $600, it was a popular budget home computer that was proven to outperform Apple, IBM, and Tandy in its class (National Museum of American History, n.d.). For me, there was nothing glamourous about it - just another gaming platform. Having no guidance as a preteen, I did not realize its potential. My enthusiasm soon subsided, and I would focus on other things. I started lifting weights, got into wrestling, and played football up through high school. Computers were the last thing on my mind. I met a new friend and discovered we shared a lot in common. By chance, he also had a Commodore 64. We quickly developed a bond that would bring me to the other side to computing. A whole new world would be opened should I invest in a modem. A modem would make a connection for our computers to talk with each over the telephone line (Wells, 2009). We were now able to play head-to-head, but more importantly, I was introduced to BBS's. The Bulletin Board System preceded the internet which was someone else's computer that hosted services for posting messages and sharing files with members (Zydyk, 2005). This gave us access to content, a variety of games, and interaction to an online community.

Eventually, our regard for the Commodore would fade in the late 80s to early 90s. We focused our attention to the next generation of more powerful personal computers. In contrast, the newer IBM compatible devices offered expandability, dedicated components, and higher performance (Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 2023). We built and customized our PCs for the ultimate gaming experience. This was a big advantage over the Commodore. We began to explore game development. At the time, the Internet gave us unlimited resources as it started to gain mainstream attention and availability (Elon University, n.d.). We stumbled on vast amounts

of information about different programming strategies. There were tutorials on advanced coding,

building scripts for searching hosts to download files, and optimizing PC builds. Everything was

at our fingertips. In between gaming, we would practice and perfect our craft. It would get to a

point that it would almost be second nature. Building PCs and programming them had become

our artform. This expertise ultimately paved the way to my future.

My college career started in the early 1990s. I attended Old Dominion University and

initially majored in computer engineering. That was a disaster. I hated science, specifically

chemistry. I changed it to accounting. Got bored so I switched to general business leaning on

my entrepreneurial spirit. When I was not programming or playing games, I had a side hustle

building and selling computer systems to friends and family. Things changed once more. I

found a bulletin board posting while walking to class in Chandler Hall, now known as the

Strome College of Business at Constant Hall (Old Dominion University History Wiki, n.d.). It

was a business major with a technology emphasis. It caught my attention and I distinctly

remember the details about the program. It outlined learning the basic strategies to protect

systems from viruses, applying computing techniques in business, and instruction in several

programming languages. I was hooked. My new major was now business administration with a

concentration in management information systems. I learned databases, project management,

and decision sciences – not really the glamour that you would see in the movies. Regardless, I

parlayed what I already knew and implemented my practice into my studies.

While the MIS courses were not all easy, I was able to get by. However, studying

became a low priority. I started a business from what I learned up to that point to build and sell

high end systems catering to computer science and computer engineering students. I would

attend local computer shows where I connected with other computer resellers. I met a more established dealer who also had a small consulting business. Seeing him often, I would ask for advice. He took me under his wing and offered me a position. I was second semester sophomore and worked for him in between classes doing what I enjoyed. Several months into the job, my experience would grow while accumulating a good number of clients. This was the beginning of my dive into networking. I gathered many contacts in the industry all before turning 21. During the spring of my junior year, a client advised me of an excellent opportunity with a large technology company headquartered in Richmond, Virginia. I decided to apply and secured my first real job in my information technology career. Unfortunately, I left school to accept it. Nevertheless, I did not waste that decision.

Professionals in the IT industry were in demand. High paying tech jobs were plentiful and did not require college degrees. Everything was centered around the meteoric rise of internet companies during the [dotcom boom](#) of the mid-90s. That rapid leap was due to the interest of startups and ecommerce businesses (Hayes, 2022). The timing was perfect. I could substantially increase my salary by job hopping every few months. For me to stay relevant, though, I had to continue learning new technology by keeping up with the latest industry trends. The critical aspect people need to realize is that education never stops. Throughout my working life, I have found that soft skills were often more desirable than hard skills. Having climbed the corporate ladder through my years, I could not agree more. Hard skills could easily be obtained in a short period through on the job training. Soft skills, in my opinion, takes years of practice and trial and error. This is stressed in school through many various curricula and disciplines. From sociology to public speaking and business management and writing. A common theme could be critical thinking, analysis, and reaching common ground.

This journey was about 30 years in the making. I now have a family with children in college. I tend to question my decision to leave ODU back when I as a rising senior. Was I right leaving early to reap the benefits of the dotcom boom and build it into a long and successful career? Or should I have waited until after graduation to venture into the work force? Nevertheless, I have returned to ODU to focus on interdisciplinary studies as a leadership major student to finally finish college with no regrets. The wisdom instilled from the hard lessons and hard work endured in life made me a better student this time around. I have real-world experience that I can apply in my remaining coursework and to use in interaction between other students and professors. I would consider my time away from school as nothing more than an extended internship – one of many artifacts to include in my electronic portfolio.

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