

Personal Narrative Essay

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IDS493: Electronic Portfolio Project

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3/29/2024

Abstract

In this essay, I share my journey from early influences of computer systems through gaming to how having a computer at a young age profoundly impacted my life for the better. I recount my first encounter with cybersecurity and how it steered me towards choosing this field as my area of study. Further, I detail my college experiences, including the challenges I faced and the achievements I secured, highlighting how these experiences changed me for the better. I reflect on the value of self-motivation, hard work, and the significance of overcoming obstacles in pursuit of my goals. Through my journey, I emphasize the profound impact that early exposure to technology and the experience I have gained through college have had on my personal and professional development. My narrative concludes with what I hope to achieve within the near future.

Early Influences

My first encounter with a computer was when I played an older game called Minecraft on my friend's laptop one day after school. This experience sparked my fascination with what computers can do. For the following years, all I wanted was my own laptop. I earned money through odd jobs like mowing lawns, walking dogs, and cleaning, saving up about half the cost of a basic laptop. Fortunately, this convinced my father to cover the remaining cost, allowing me to get my own computer. Since my laptop had relatively low specifications, it could not run many games well, except for a few like Minecraft and other low resource intensive games. At that time, I believed that if a game didn't run smoothly, it must be a virus or malware because it would cause my computer to crash. Over time, I learned more about computers, including hardware, software, and basic cybersecurity, like how to avoid scams and viruses. I also learned about basic networking, including port forwarding and understanding connection speeds. I made many friends online and learned to identify warning signs of untrustworthy behavior. Sometimes, I learned the hard way, like when I had in-game items stolen. But these experiences taught me to value learning from my mistakes, especially when I didn't have much to lose. I am thankful to my parents for letting me have my own computer and for the opportunity to learn on my own. Playing video games online was a significant part of my childhood. It's how I met many of my friends and first became interested in computer science.

Initial interest in Cybersecurity

Later in my life, my mother remarried, and while my stepfather is an upstanding person, he was much stricter than my father. He adopted a militaristic approach to parenting and was less

accepting of my passion for online gaming. Although I had other activities that occupied my time, it's fair to say that I spent more time online than I should have. As a result, he bought a new router with integrated firewall software, which allowed him to control when I could access the internet on my devices. Furthermore, I wasn't allowed to know the internet password, and it would be changed if he found out I had learned it. At first, I was compliant with these changes; however, my patience soon wore thin, and I began looking for ways around them. My main issue with the restrictions was the limited timeframe I had access to the internet, which was from 2:00 PM to 8:00 PM, including weekends. This severely limited my freedom and even hindered my ability to do homework outside of school hours. After some research, I discovered a few Command Prompt commands that allowed me to view the passwords for networks I had previously connected to. I then investigated the router my stepfather had purchased and tried the same password for the firewall software. To my surprise, he had been reusing passwords, and with this knowledge, I managed to change the firewall rules to grant me internet access at any time. This experience piqued my initial interest in cybersecurity and later became a major reason for my decision to pursue this field of study.

College Experience

Cybersecurity remains one of the fastest-growing fields to this day, and my prior interest in it led me to pursue a degree in this field. After completing high school, I moved in with my grandparents here in Chesapeake, Virginia. I am immensely thankful to them for providing me with a home, allowing me to focus on my academic pursuits without the burden of housing costs. I enrolled at Tidewater Community College, conveniently located just minutes from my residence. After speaking with my academic advisor, I decided to pursue an articulation agreement with Old Dominion University. This arrangement would allow me to earn an associate

degree in cybersecurity and secure 70 credits transferable towards a bachelor's degree at ODU.

My time at TCC was largely trouble free: tuition was affordable, the commute was short, and the faculty were excellent. I encountered no issues with class scheduling or maintaining good grades.

Given the smooth sailing, I rarely felt the need to meet with my advisor. Because of this when it came time to graduate, I found out that I was too late to enroll at ODU the following semester.

Unaware that admission applications required submission months in advance, I faced a gap semester. Initially, this was a source of stress, but it turned out to be only a minor setback. The break allowed me to work additional hours and save more money, teaching me valuable lessons in managing stress and avoiding overthinking such situations. After this gap, I successfully enrolled at Old Dominion University to pursue my bachelor's degree in cybersecurity. As a current senior, I have thoroughly enjoyed my time at ODU, eagerly anticipating each new semester. I've encountered a lot of wonderful people and participated in many great experiences that have deepened my understanding of and passion for cybersecurity. The faculty and staff at ODU have been incredibly supportive, their guidance and insights helping significantly to my academic and personal development. The university's diverse community has enriched my learning, offering varied perspectives and cultures that have improved my teamwork and adaptability skills. As I near the completion of my degree, I am filled with excitement for the future and the opportunities that lie ahead in cybersecurity. I am grateful for my experiences at ODU and the lasting connections I've made. I am confident these connections and experiences will greatly benefit me in the future.

Achievements and Future Goals

A highlight of my college career was successfully obtaining my Security+ certification after months of dedicated study. In my second year, I decided to register for the CompTIA Security+ certification exam and paid for the test months in advance. I hoped the looming test date would motivate me to study daily. After approximately three months of studying for two hours each day, I managed to pass the test by a single point on a 900-point scale (751/900, with 750 needed to pass). This remains one of the greatest achievements from my college career, and I believe it has helped me become more independent and achieve goals that I set for myself. In my junior year at ODU, I was taking a networking class, IT315: Intro to Network and Security, to be precise. I needed an “A” on the final project to maintain an “A” in the class. Thus, I spent over 12 hours ensuring I completed it to the best of my ability. Once it was completed, not only did I receive a 100% on the assignment, but the teacher also felt that my project was so well put together that it was shown to the entire class. I fondly remember this as one of the highlights of my coursework at ODU. Throughout college, I worked as a carpenter's assistant in my father's construction company. This experience allowed me to pay my tuition each semester entirely on my own. Although this job does not directly relate to my field of study, I am very proud of this achievement. Being able to graduate debt free is a significant relief, and I am thankful for the effort I put in to make it happen. My next objective is to gain real world work experience in cybersecurity, whether through an internship, job shadowing, or an entry level position. I am open to various roles related to my major, such as cybersecurity analyst or network administrator. As I look forward to this next chapter, I am both excited and slightly nervous about what the future holds.

