

BREATHING LIFE INTO GAMES

By Julailah Wahid

A recent DigiPen (Singapore) graduate talks about the thrills, challenges, and highlights of his time at the leading institution in game development education.

What makes a game fun? Some say the game mechanics – the set of rules or methods that enable players to enact individual actions – determine a game's level of engagement. Some might even associate an entertaining game with good graphics or narratives. To Jovi Kartolo, it is the core gameplay that truly matters in bringing the element of fun to players. The Bachelor of Arts in Game Design (BAGD) graduate details his enriching journey at DigiPen (Singapore) and gives us some insights into the world of game design.

YOU WERE ACCEPTED INTO NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE (NUS) AFTER COMPLETING YOUR GCE 'A' LEVELS AT TAMPINES JUNIOR COLLEGE. WHY DID YOU DECIDE TO ENROL INTO DIGIPEN (SINGAPORE) INSTEAD?

Jovi Kartolo: Coupled with my love for role-playing games, I had always wanted to pursue something creative since young. When I first heard about DigiPen, I thought, "This looks like fun!"

While other public universities like NUS have similar interactive media modules, I recognised that DigiPen (Singapore)'s syllabus is more holistic. This is because DigiPen (Singapore) trains us to apply our knowledge into practical applications in making games. You are taught everything from the ground up, which is highly valuable for those without much background in game development.

TELL US MORE ABOUT WHAT STUDENTS LEARN IN THE BAGD PROGRAMME AT DIGIPEN (SINGAPORE).

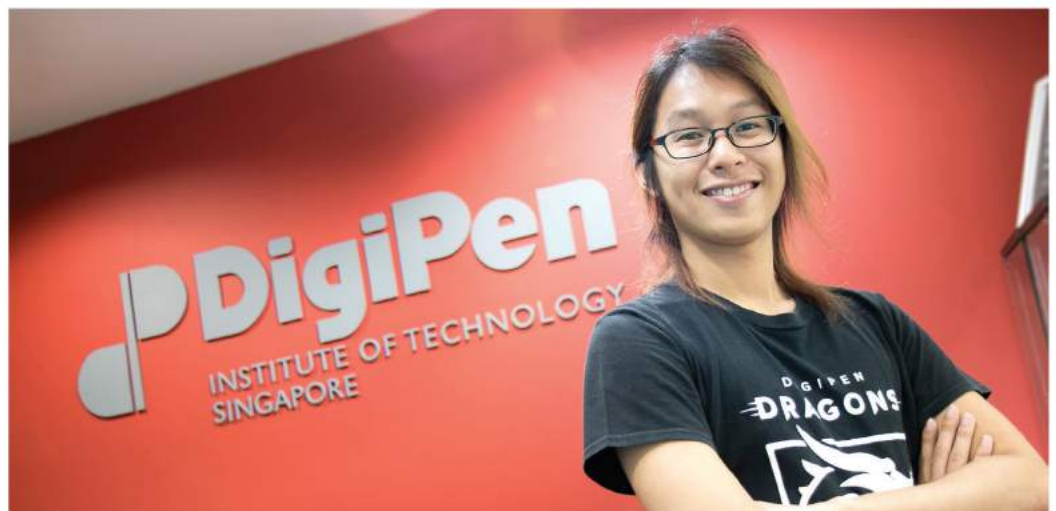
Jovi: As game designers, we are at the helm of controlling the pace, intensity, and difficulty of a game. We learn how to balance all these components by constantly iterating our design by getting feedback from others.

We also learn about adding visual and aural feedback into our games, as well as level and systems design. In addition, we have weekly rapid prototyping classes, during which we are tasked to come up with a game concept and create a prototype of it. Prototyping is very important for a game designer because it would allow everyone to identify the

JOVI KARTOLO

Bachelor of Arts in Game Design

Game Designer at Koei Tecmo





core gameplay that provides players with the nugget of fun. In reality, no matter how hard we try to mask a game with flashy animation or music, players would lose interest if it does not have the element of fun. This is something we are taught since our first semester here. We are taught that as a game designer, it is our job to ensure that the core gameplay is fun first, before being more ambitious and working on the game's aesthetics, such as the narrative and graphics.

On top of that, we have interdisciplinary classes that allow us to team up with peers from the computer science or programming courses. We come together to create a game from scratch within 14 weeks by using either game engines such as Unity and Unreal, or by using our own custom engines.

And while students in the BAGD programme major in Game Design, we study a variety of other disciplines such as economics, psychology, and art. We are groomed to be all-rounders with a strong knowledge of what it takes to build a good game.

DESCRIBE YOUR UNDERGRADUATE EXPERIENCE.

Jovi: Honestly, I felt a little scared at first because I was surrounded by polytechnic students and mid-career professionals with industry experience. To top it off, we are thrown many curveballs along the course of our studies. I remember doing a surprise Computer Science quiz in my second week at school! We also had a pretty tough mid-term exam where we had to create Centipede, an old Atari 2D game, by using concepts that we were not very familiar with.

This is so different from doing the 10-year series in Junior College. Our assignments and exams at DigiPen (Singapore) often have a twist to them, which prevents us from simply regurgitating what we have learnt. We are encouraged to find new solutions and think well on our feet.

With all that said, it has indeed been an enriching experience, and I have learnt many things that I doubt I would learn elsewhere! The projects and assignments may have been stressful but on hindsight, the experience has definitely been fun.

SHARE WITH US ABOUT YOUR EXCHANGE PROGRAMME AT DIGIPEN'S PIONEER CAMPUS IN REDMOND, WASHINGTON.

Jovi: I had a blast during my three-month Overseas Immersion Programme (OIP) at DigiPen's Redmond campus. In fact, I would call it one of the highlights of my undergraduate education. I had the opportunity to study Film under Kent Beeson, in which I learnt about composition, film analysis, editing, and short film production. As I have a minor in English, I decided to take a creative writing class by Matt Muth during my OIP. English classes there are really fun because students learn to write and critique shorts stories through interactive workshops. I also took an Art module taught by an amazing lecturer called Richard Thames Rowan. All in all, I really enjoyed immersing myself in the engaging lessons and warm and slow-paced culture there.

YOU HAVE SECURED EMPLOYMENT WITH KOEI TECMO AS A GAME DESIGNER. HOW DO YOU SEE YOUR EXPERIENCES AT DIGIPEN PRIMING YOU FOR YOUR CAREER?

Jovi: Students often joke that DigiPen (Singapore) is a lot harder than the outside world. We face a variety of new challenges during our projects, but this moulds us into critical thinkers and problem-solvers. By the time we step out into the real world, challenges will cease to faze us!

Additionally, Vivek Melwani, DigiPen (Singapore)'s former Chair of the Department of Game Software Design and Production and former Lead Game Designer at Nintendo, had instilled in me the design philosophy of creating games with strong and engaging core mechanics. Former Professor John M. Quick had also taught us that scoping our projects and managing the team's expectations are important in the process of making games.

These are concepts and insights that I will carry with me and employ throughout my career.

ANY ADVICE FOR PROSPECTIVE DIGIPEN (SINGAPORE) STUDENTS?

Jovi: The video game industry in Singapore is small, so aim to network around! At the same time, I encourage all students to gain real world exposure through internships at both indie and AAA game development companies.

You can be assured of a wholesome and rewarding education here at DigiPen (Singapore). Do not worry if you know nothing about game development. As long as you are deeply passionate about making games fun, you will stand to gain plenty at DigiPen (Singapore).