Letter from the President

As DigiPen graduates its latest class of RTIS and art students, I would like to take a moment to congratulate these individuals on the tremendous effort they have dedicated to completing their education at DigiPen. Certainly, DigiPen students know that graduating from DigiPen is never a foregone conclusion and can only be achieved through an incredible amount of hard work and passion.

When I established DigiPen many years ago, it was my dream to found an institution of higher learning where individuals could learn how to become not just “users” of technology but creators of technology. The graduates are the embodiment of this vision, and happily they will now be joining their predecessors as talented professionals who have the knowledge and skills to make significant contributions to the growth and innovation of the digital interactive entertainment industry.

To the graduates, I wish you the very best as you move forward with the next step of your careers. Try to remember all that your instructors have taught you and realize that while you have gained much in terms of knowledge, this is actually just the beginning of what should be an amazing experience. Work hard, be humble, keep your mind open to new ideas and learn from those around you. Let your peers come to understand the value you bring to the team, not through your words but by actions. And finally, remember that you will always be a part of the DigiPen family and I sincerely hope that you will stay in touch and perhaps one day consider coming back to share some of the knowledge and wisdom you have gained with the next generation of developers here at DigiPen.

Best regards,
Claude

“Game On” at Pacific Science Center

Sponsored in part by DigiPen, the exhibit “Game On: Discover the Science, History and Culture of Video Games” will open at the Pacific Science Center in Seattle on May 26th. On platforms ranging from the PDP-1 of the early 1960s to next generation consoles, the exhibit features over 100 playable games that allow visitors to explore the technological evolution of a pastime that has impacted contemporary culture around the world. Organized by London’s Barbican Art Gallery in collaboration with the National Museums of Scotland, “Game On” gives “kids a new view of an industry that has come to the forefront of our popular culture,” says Dennis Schatz, Pacific Science Center’s vice president of education. “Many children today have grown up with video games, but now they have a chance to learn about the history, science, art and technology that is behind those games.”

“Game On” features “Game U,” an engaging hand-on experience developed by DigiPen that helps visitors learn about the game production process and what it takes to pursue a career in the field. “As the Pacific Northwest is widely considered to be one of the largest game development communities in the world, ‘Game On’ is a highly relevant exhibit that DigiPen is very proud to contribute its knowledge and experience to,” says Raymond Yan, Senior VP for DigiPen. “Game On” is sponsored by Microsoft Xbox 360, the DigiPen Institute of Technology, and Nintendo of America Inc. The exhibit will run from May 26th through August 31st.

Toyota Sponsors DigiPen Contest

With cash and prizes valued at a total of more than $50,000, Toyota has just announced a game development competition open solely to DigiPen students. Eligibility restrictions apply for this amazing opportunity, so please refer to the official rules available online at www.digipen.edu/yaris. Entrants to the Toyota Yaris Mobile Game Development Competition must create a mobile phone game that depicts the Toyota Yaris in a positive way. The Yaris is one of Toyota’s versatile, affordable, and stylish new models. All winners will be determined by Toyota, in conjunction with its sponsorship of the Evolution Fighting Game Championship (EVO). Game submissions will be judged based on originality, entertainment value, integration of the Toyota Yaris, and how well it holds players’ interest. Grand prize winners will fly to Las Vegas to attend the EVO Championship Final, receive accommodations at the Mandalay Bay Resort and Casino, and take home a $20,000 cash prize! First and second prize winners will also attend the Championship Final, stay at the Mandalay Bay, and receive $10,000 and $5,000 respectively. The contest is set to run from April 21st through July 21st, so make sure to check out the competition details and get to work on this chance of a lifetime.
Abbott Smith
Art Department

Abbott describes himself as an “eighth generation teacher.” Beyond being the family business, education is also his passion. Abbott grew up all over the U.S., but predominately in the Midwest. He graduated from Indiana’s Wabash College with a B.A. in biology and a concentrated minor in theater. He later entered the U.S. Army where he served as an X-ray technologist. In the military, Abbott developed and ran an award-winning education program designed to help soldiers receive their civilian credentials in radiology. Over 1000 soldiers ultimately used his radiology curriculum to gain their civilian registry. Abbott’s artistic skills also got him noticed and he was tapped to provide designs, drawings, and paintings on numerous military projects. After leaving the military, he worked as a contractor at various military and civilian hospitals.

During this time Abbott continued to build upon his skills. He was awarded a merit-based scholarship to attend Augusta College (now Augusta State University) in Georgia, where he received a B.F.A. in studio art. His thesis exhibition focused on figurative drawing and abstract sculpture. While at Augusta College, Abbott also received many private commissions in subjects ranging from graphic design to portraiture. He describes his undergraduate education as teaching him “how to communicate and how to take chances.” It is a lesson that has stayed with him and one he imparts to his current students. Abbott moved to Seattle in the 1990s and continued to work as a technologist and artist. He attended The Art Institute of Seattle, where he received his A.A.A. in multimedia and computer animation. Following his graduation, he worked as a contractor providing graphic design, illustration, and animation services to a number of local companies, including Microsoft. In true Abbott fashion, he couldn’t remain a student without being a teacher too, and returned as faculty to The Art Institute a year after graduation. During this time he also taught at a number of local studios, including Nintendo.

He has been associated with DigiPen since 2000, and since 2002 has served as full-time Professor of Art and the Art Department chair. During his tenure, the Art Department has grown from a handful of full-time faculty members to nine full-time faculty members, and enrollment has risen from a few dozen students to over 110 students in the B.F.A. program alone. He also recently completed his graduate studies, earning a M.A. in illustration from Syracuse University. For an educator with such a wandering spirit, Abbott has finally found his home in front of DigiPen’s classrooms, saying, “DigiPen affords me the ability to teach art and make a difference in a school that does it right. I can’t think of anything I’d rather do or any place I’d rather be.”

DigiPen Grad Takes Home IGF Honors

Jake Grandchamp, a graduate of the class of 2000, now lives in California where he runs the independent studio, Rabidlab. His game, Dodge that Anvil!, won the 2006 Independent Games Festival (IGF) special award for innovation and technical excellence sponsored by AdultSwim.com. Dodge that Anvil! was also nominated in the IGF’s “Best Web Browser” and “Innovation in Audio” categories. His game is available for download from www.rabidlab.com, but to find out more about Jake’s funny and fun-to-play game, read our interview with this award-winning DigiPen graduate.

Q: Can you describe your game?
Dodge That Anvil! is a 3D platformer with a somewhat unusual means of introducing obstacles. You play as a cartoon rabbit, harvesting carrots from patches in forest clearings. Every few seconds, something deadly—aan anvil, an exploding beach ball, perhaps a flying saucer—appears above your head. You have to zig, zag, or otherwise misdirect the obstacles that are targeted at you, then resume your harvest in the interim. Once you’ve met your carrot quota, you can escape from the anvil storm and burrow to the next field.

Q: Did you design and program the game completely on your own? Yes, the game is a one man production, developed part-time over the last two years or so. The soon-to-be-released, downloadable full version contains over 40 levels, with additional game modes to unlock.

Q: Since graduating, what have you been up to other than working on your game? After graduating, I returned to my hometown of Chicago and joined a multimedia production studio as a senior programmer. In 2002, I moved to Los Angeles and began taking on freelance contracts. The bulk of my contract work has consisted of coding online advergames for companies such as Nickelodeon, Universal, and Mattel. I also create art, sound, and music for projects when required.

Q: You’re obviously very accomplished. How has DigiPen contributed to your work? This will sound like hyperbole, but more than once I have said that in the time I spent at DigiPen, my coding skills improved a hundred times over. Prior to attending DIT, I had been focused on a career in animation. I studied traditional and computer animation for two years at Columbia College in Chicago, taking a couple of C programming classes as electives. At that time, I was also learning to use the Macromedia Director authoring tool, which includes a robust scripting language. Nonetheless, when I came to DIT as part of the Redmond campus’ first class in 1998, my coding experience was pretty minimal, and I had plenty of bad habits. When I look back on my first year at DigiPen, phrases like “sink or swim” and “trial by fire” come to mind. There were a few days in the second semester where I wasn’t sure if I could keep up with all of the coursework, but in the end, I learned a great deal in a relatively brief period of time. In short, I can’t really imagine a more thorough C/C++ curriculum than the one I encountered at DIT.

Q: It sounds as if you worked very hard while you were here.
The intensity of the program aside, the main benefit of my time at DigiPen was the experience gained from the team game projects. The time spent working with classmates on those projects was extremely valuable, and nothing could be more relevant to a career in the game industry. Although we never had enough time to implement all of our crazy ideas, there was still a great sense of satisfaction in completing a playable game each semester.
RTIS junior Mike Kersey recently returned from the 2006 Game Developers Conference (GDC) ready to share his experiences in the form of a conference survival guide:

“...So you’re not a senior, and you’re undecided about whether or not you want to go to the GDC? You’re looking for an internship, but you’re also just curious what GDC is all about? Well, maybe these tips will help you plan for next year’s event.

- Register EARLY for the volunteer program. For a little bit of easy work, you’ll get a valuable full-access pass to ALL the conference lectures—the best part of GDC.

- Don’t be a kook and overdress like me. A collared shirt and jeans are all you need.

- Yes, all the cool video game celebrities and personalities will be there, but try not to totally “fan out.”

- Definitely bring along some resumes and portfolio CDs, but also consider making business cards, especially if they have your web portfolio URL. Even better, consider bringing a laptop to demo your game if you’ve got something you really want to show people.

- You will have a much easier time getting free shirts at GDC than E3.

- If you’re only going for a day, don’t do what I did and go to the very last and shortest day. Make it to the first day, see the keynote address, and check out the IGF awards.

- Don’t be shy. Make sure you talk to all the employers in the career pavilion, even if you aren’t looking for something full-time just yet.

- If you end up piling a bunch of people into a hotel room, don’t forget your earplugs or headphones.

Even if you can’t make it to GDC, but you’re still determined to find that internship, remember you have equally good chances searching online. In fact, many of the booths in the career pavilion will just direct you to apply online. Good luck, and remember it’s never too early to plan for next year.”

Faculty Forum: Games as Art

Controversies over violence in video games have obscured the positive appraisals video games have received from academics and creative professionals. Three DigiPen faculty members agreed to take part in an interdisciplinary forum to answer the question: “Will video games develop into a serious art form?” An excerpt appears below:

B.J. Becker (Art): Where do we look for “seriousness” in art? Although at various times in history, some media have been considered nobler than others, as each technological advance in media has occurred, the new media were used to make art of the first order. The charge of triviality has been made against lithography, photography, motion pictures, radio and television. Although doubtless much trivial art has been made in each of these media, it was never the medium itself that made it so. One need not search too far to find examples of serious work done in each of these media. It is rather the medium’s association with trivial subjects that have led us to think of certain media as less serious, or less “artistic,” than others. The form of a work of art has more to do with how successful it is than how serious it is. Every artist knows that it is the form of a work that attracts us, engages us and holds us to an interaction with it.

For all art is interactive, we use our imagination as well as our eyes when we look at art. Art can deal with the banal and still be beautiful; that is, it is a matter of form. When you get right down to it, what is so earth shaking about a bowl of fruit? On the other hand, the history of art is littered with bad art about portentous subjects; the subject alone is no guarantee of seriousness in art. [...] “Serious” art is, and always has been, a minority taste, an acquired taste. Society can be taught, I believe, to acquire a taste for quality. Whether or not computer games become a serious art form is answered by a counter question, “How much do you want serious computer games?”

Michael Moore (Game Software Design & Production): I consider video games to be as much an art form as I do a Three Stooges film. Both are forms of entertainment. Both keep me amused for a certain amount of time. Both appeal more to my intellect than to my emotions. Both include some interesting visuals and appealing music held together by a thread of a plot. Video games are so encompassing and cover such a wide range of subjects, from sports to racing to simulations to role-playing to action-shooters and so on, that someone may even make a commercially successful game that is considered “high art” comparable to an opera, a ballet, or a drama. Video games, unlike other traditional art forms, have a huge advantage in being interactive and allowing players to tell their own individual stories as they progress through a game. There is great personal satisfaction in completing a game, but currently a player does not get the same emotional response and catharsis as watching a great movie or viewing a great piece of art. Games are an art form, but they appeal more to the mind than to the emotions.

Adam Rovner (General Education): I agree you have to take an historical perspective and that the borders between popular and canonical culture are permeable. As a literature professor, it may seem odd that I’m interested in both Shakespeare and video games. We have to remember that Shakespeare was popular culture, and only later was his work considered “high culture.” Once upon a time, novels were thought to undermine society, subvert established values, and cause people to lose their ability to distinguish between reality and imagination. Sound familiar? Remember also that until the 1960s or so, film studies hardly existed in the U.S. Not too long ago, a student who wanted to study the art of cinema would have been laughed out of her guidance counselor’s office. Now we send her to NYU or USC. In another decade, studying the design and craft of video games will be as commonplace. Every new medium incites a “moral panic,” which then subsides into widespread acceptance and institutionalization. The analogy may not be perfect, but video games may be at the level of development of cinema in 1930s America: the techniques are being refined, genres are being established, experiments are appearing, but creativity is still secondary to economic considerations. When video games find their auteurs who imprint their work with a discernible style and world view, then video games will widely be considered an art worthy of study and reflection. So for me, the question isn’t ‘Will games become serious art,’ but ‘In what ways might they already be a serious way to artfully tell stories?’

The opinions expressed in this article are solely those of the individuals interviewed and may not reflect the position of the DigiPen Institute of Technology.

A Rough Guide to GDC

Career Day a Success

DigiPen’s Third Annual Career Day, held on April 7, attracted over two dozen companies from Washington, Oregon, California, Maryland, and British Columbia. Representatives from some of the top corporations and design studios came to DigiPen to interview programmers and artists to fill vacancies in a strong job market. Employers were invited to review portfolios and projects of our graduating classes, and were offered the opportunity to discuss our program with faculty. Of the more than fifty individuals who came to tout their employment opportunities and interview candidates on Career Day, over a dozen were former DigiPen graduates eager to hire the next generation of talent. Thanks to the efforts of DigiPen faculty and staff from all departments for making Career Day a showcase for our students.

DigiPen Expansion

Plans are in motion to expand DigiPen’s Redmond campus by approximately 24,000 square feet. The additional space is located about three blocks from the existing campus and will be home to DigiPen’s art and animation programs. DigiPen’s new facilities are expected to include classroom, production and studio space, as well as additional faculty offices. More information will be announced this summer as construction and renovation are completed. Be sure to keep an eye on DigiPen’s main website at www.digipen.edu for more news of this exciting development!
It is an incredible honor to work with students of such astounding intelligence and personality. From the moment fall orientation started last August, I knew this year could only be positive for the students, faculty, and administration. I’m relieved to say, eight months later, you easily proved me right.

When I asked first year students last fall to recognize, prioritize, and pursue their goals, I didn’t realize so many DigiPen students would take it seriously. You did. The group effort involved in Student Association this year made my job enjoyable. Things were accomplished not only for this school, but SA really found a deeper understanding of its own purpose here. All of the activities we held were possible because of the students, and I’m very proud.

Before I say farewell one last time as your President, I first need to say thank you. Thank you for coming to SA activities. Thank you for sharing your ideas and concerns at Open Forums. I even want to thank the Regulators for bringing up real issues for this body to discuss with the administration. This support made me realize that DigiPen is a “real college.” You proved that the most intelligent people in the world will succeed when they are called upon.

For the graduating seniors, I want to wish you good luck. Armed with the knowledge and skills you received at this school, there is no problem too difficult to solve. No tangible situation can get in your way. Get out there and show the world what you’re capable of creating!

Russ Wardinsky
Outgoing Student Association President

GDC Recap

The Game Developer’s Conference (GDC), held in March in San Jose, California, is one of the major gatherings for developers to learn about the latest technology, discuss game production techniques and of course, to network. This year’s conference theme was “What’s Next,” a reference to “next-gen” development. Keynote speeches were made by Phil Harrison, President, Worldwide Students, Sony Computer Entertainment, and Satoru Iwata, President, Nintendo Co., Ltd. They provided new information about their respective console systems, with Sony informing attendees that the PS3 would hit shelves worldwide in November 2006, and Nintendo boasting impressive numbers regarding Nintendo DS sales (six million in 14 months).

But beyond touting their sales, both speakers addressed strategies for “digital distribution”—delivering content over the Internet. Following on the heels of Microsoft’s Xbox Live Arcade service, more and more companies are looking toward digital distribution. Established corporations like the idea since they can receive valuable information about consumer preferences based on system configurations and purchasing patterns, but independents also see digital distribution as a way to reduce cost and pioneer creative gameplay. Nintendo’s next-gen console, codenamed “Revolution,” features the “Virtual Console,” an innovation that allows players to download selected games from the archives of the Super Nintendo Entertainment System, Nintendo 64, and Sega Genesis. Considering the success of iTunes, and with major movie studios and television networks exploring digital distribution, it’s clear that digital delivery will continue to be a hot topic.

Every GDC features an Expo where vendors are able to present their latest technology and production tools. Another important area of the Expo is the Career Pavilion, where publishers and studios interview potential employees. Based on feedback from the many DigiPen students who visited the Pavilion, it seems that employers are scrambling to fill both technical and creative positions. Finally, the GDC presents the Independent Game Festival (IGF), which was established to encourage innovation in game development and to showcase the best independent game developers. In the main IGF competition, DigiPen’s Rumblebox received a nomination for “Innovation in Game Design.” While Rumblebox did not win, the fact that it was the only student-produced project nominated in that category speaks volumes for the quality of our students’ work. Three more DigiPen student games, OrBlitz, Sea of Chaos, and Narbacular Drop, were selected for the IGF Student Showcase. Congratulations to all of the developers involved with these productions!

More detailed information about GDC is available at http://www.gdconf.com. Next year’s conference is already booked for San Francisco. Hope to see you there!