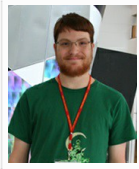# Phillip Thompkins

Hearts: Two Days Remain (Day 65 – 7/31)

Posted on July 31, 2014 by Phillip Thompkins

I'm perpetuating the theme of these last few blog titles, but it's also focusing on digging deep and getting to what really matters. I'll be making another blog post tomorrow with my final remarks and some personal things for each of my fellow interns, so keep an eye out for that if you want!

I've been thinking a lot lately about what's at the heart of my actions, my motivations, my goals, stuff like that.

People may or may not know that I'm contemplating going from HCI into a Clinical Psychology sort of direction, but I don't know if that's even possible, let alone what's right for me. It's a weird position to be in, because I feel like I'm combining the H and C in HCI on a level that hasn't necessarily been done before- most people who investigate the things I'm interested in have their backgrounds heavily in the Human or Computer ends, but not really in both. I have to muster the energy and courage to contact a few Clinical Psych programs to even figure out if they'd accept someone with that sort of background, so that's the main hurdle for now. Assuming the idea remains afloat, my plan might be to get a Master's in HCI and a PhD in Clinical Psych or something like that- maybe I'll get two PhDs for laughs and so I can be a student for as long as possible.

Many have also seen a variety of different sides of my personality, like the eccentric and enthusiastic Phil, the borderline-arrogant and hasty Phil, the focused and sardonic and distant Phil, and the tempestuous firebrand Phil. I've been having a lot of internal debate over which aspects of those are genuine, which parts are used only to cope with the world around me, and which parts are completely and utterly forced to the point of being disingenuous. It's a pain, because these sorts of things don't really have a clear-cut answer, or even an answer at all! Knowing my luck, I'll sift through it all and figure it out by the time I've changed enough for the findings to be irrelevant.

And then there's another heart-y question: is my heart really in the things I'm spending my time doing? Am I thinking these sorts of things because I'm burnt out, or am I realizing that some things might not necessarily be for me? I've already come to terms with the fact that I'm stepping down from my position in my fraternity, and I'm not even remotely sad. I've got my eyes on a few minor sidequests as far as my fall semester goes: being a student coach for the winter leadership retreat my school's Student Life office puts on, and getting Highly Exceptional RA Decorations at least once, but I've also realized that I don't really care one way or another, that I'll be just as happy if not happier without aiming for those things. I'm a little worried if that *meh* sort of outlook carries over to my academics- I know it's possible. I'm taking quite a few classes that are pretty boring, that I'm only taking because I have to, and it'll be really hard to stay motivated, especially in the spring when I start hearing back from graduate programs.

Maybe I'm just burnt out. Mentally, emotionally, physically, socially *burnt out*. I hope so.

Posted in Blog Posts | Tagged phillip | Leave a reply

Edit

Mask: Three Days Remain (Day 64 – 7/30)

Posted on July 30, 2014 by Phillip Thompkins

Today seems like it's all about masks for me.

It's becoming more and more difficult to mask my emotions, like my giddy anticipation for the week to end, or my frustration over the paper that's still not done, or the trepidation in response to our pilot study starting in about an hour. And then of course there's the absolute dread that's coming with the unending workload and lack of actual breaks, both in the internship and with my classes. My composure is starting to fade, and it's becoming harder and harder to keep the quirky-yet-excitable mask up as we get closer and closer to the end of the program.

Ideally, this iteration of the paper will be the last, and I can go into autopilot until Saturday. But that's not likely.

On the subject of the paper, the pilot study looks like it might go pretty well! There's something in the app that reminds me of a certain Happy Mask Salesman, maybe some of the study participants will be able to figure out what it is.

Posted in Blog Posts | Tagged phillip | 1 Reply

Edit

Perish Song (Day 63 – 7/29)

Posted on July 29, 2014 by Phillip Thompkins

I'm referencing Pokemon today to say that in about three days' time, we'll be done with actual work. All that'll be left will be Symposium Day. *Wow*.

We watched *The Room* last night. Still a little baffled that such a movie actually exists. I need to watch it again so I can start actually quoting it. Downside to last night was that I couldn't get any consistent sleep- I kept waking up like every hour or two, so today has been exhausting. Looking forward to Turkish Night at Caglar's place though. Tomorrow, we're doing a demo tour of some VRAC facilities, and then Team Game Day is carrying out our pilot study. It's gonna be awesome.

I'm hoping I can get some fall-semester-stuff done in the next few days, because it would make my life so much easier. If things work out right, I'm hoping to get a 10-page research paper and an outline of my fraternity's fall recruitment schedule done before I return to Maryland. I'd gotten my psych project Lit Review tentatively done on Friday, so I'm hoping I can keep the productivity a-flowing. Granted to do that I might need to have a good night's rest under my belt, so… we'll see what happens.

Posted in Blog Posts | Tagged phillip | Leave a reply

Edit

Dawn of the Final Week: Five Days Remain (Days 60 to 62 – 7/26 to 7/28)

Posted on July 28, 2014 by Phillip Thompkins

Wow, that sure was a fun weekend! Multiple outings and innings and a bunch of all-around good times. We should have had more weekends like that. On the other hand, I almost wish things weren't as social this weekend, because I could have gotten a lot of work done.

Where it stands, we really just have to get our paper figured out. And since our paper's background section is *almost* done (we just need to rearrange it into something cognizant) we're seriously almost done. Right now, I think Janae is doing some edits to the current version because looking at the paper just makes my eyes glaze over And of course, it's when things hit the home stretch that things get particularly unusual. Sharktopus VS Pteracuda is a movie. I cannot make this up. Also Stacy made my morning hilarious by suggesting I watch this video. It's been constant laughter this morning.

It sounds like we're going to get to run a few people in a pilot study in a few days, so that's really exciting! It's not going to be a *lot* of people, but a few are definitely better than nothing. In the meantime, I'm working on and off on another project for school and just trying to stay focused. Apparently, knowing that I'll be back home with all of my bestest friends in a few days is really doing a number on that laser pointer focus I had in past weeks.

Posted in Blog Posts | Tagged phillip | Leave a reply

Edit

Rain Dance (Day 59 – 7/25)

Got woken up in the middle of the night to a bunch of ridiculous storminess and wind; or at least I think that happened last night. And then, as if it were a calm and rainy day, I ended up being completely and utterly asleep, which was only problematic because my alarm didn't go off. So, I ended up being over an hour late to work. I'm not *too* sad about it because there's not a lot going on in terms of scheduled stuff, and I stuck around until like 6:30PM yesterday. I'm definitely a fan of the weather today, especially this morning- it was a little chilly and seemed like it was about to start raining like crazy, but it didn't.

Called home for the first time in like two or three weeks, yesterday. Nice to know that even when I'm a thousand miles away, some things are still pretty much the same. On the other hand, I don't know how mentally ready I am for the end of next week. The whole "video recorded end of summer interview" thing is exciting, but by that point it'll probably be far too real that the next day, I wouldn't see most of my coworkers anywhere near as often, if ever. So that's kinda saddening.

Since I decided to jump on the opportunity that showed up in our inboxes, I had a meeting with Stephen Gilbert at 2. Seems like meetings at 2 have been a thing this week, since there was the team meeting, the stadium tour, the meeting with Thelma Harding, and now the meeting with Dr. Gilbert. We talked about some graduate school stuff, and some of my research interests, and about the program and stuff; it was pretty fun. And then we got to have a brief talk about Academic Social Networking. I've always been actively indifferent about LinkedIn and all that, but I'm sure I'll have to cave sometime eventually. Oh well.

As far as today's video game reference (am I done yet?) goes, it seems like honestly I'm just so much more relaxed and prepared now than I was compared to earlier in the week. It ties in because rain relaxes me. I'm hyped for applying to grad schools, I'm motivated to work on things for when I have to go back to school in a few weeks, and I'm really ready to knock this whole symposium thing out of the park. Also, I feel like I'm gonna make it rain… progress, that is. =P

Really though, I'm just ready to sleep in for a few days.

Edit

Sidequests (Day 58 – 7/24)

It seems like my blog posts have been seeing a definite decrease in content as time has been passing. Looking at how verbose and enthused some of my past entries were, I'm not sure if it's a good thing or a bad thing.

I love how I could have left well enough alone, but I just kept reaching farther and farther. Now, in under a week's time, I've gone from about five graduate school options to seven or eight, and that's after I'd already trimmed my options down a few months ago. *Why can't it just be a static list, for the sake of my nerves?*

Last 24 hours or so have been good. I managed to make a sizable pile of revisions to our paper's Lit Review, and I created a spreadsheet to hold the user study's eventual data and provide subscores for some metrics. At 2PM, I have a meeting with Thelma Harding in the Graduate School, and that'll be interesting. I'll probably say something along the lines of "I thought I knew what I was doing for graduate school but now it's more like I'm screaming incoherently and thrashing like a Wacky Waving Inflatable Arm-Flailing Tube Man" and then see what happens. On the bright side, my lit review for my Psych Honors project is basically done, I just have to turn an outline into a few paragraphs.

At this point, I feel like a good portion of my thought processes are being devoted to wrapping things up before the next phase of my life, like doing the last few sidequests before you move onto a new area in a game. Figuring out grad school, doing the last bits of work on the Game Day project, ironing out my long-standing assignments, preparing for work, planning letters of recommendation, and cutting out hindrances to my day-to-day life have all been on my mind, and I'm hoping I'll be able to be as prepared as I want to be for a month from now.

Edit

Turn() (Day 57 – 7/23)

Laser tag was, as I expected, pretty awesome. Slythering was my gun's preexisting callsign, I knew that it was good luck the moment I saw it. I math'd out my rankings, and I was a stable 4.5th place. I blame that 8th place that happened right before we switched to free-for-all games. I also pulled off a close victory over Jesse in the last game- it looks like Slythering had a Slytherwin. Then later in the evening, I watched the first episode of Firefly with Sam, Getch, and Mari. Mari was the only one who hadn't seen the series already, and it was apparently really *interesting* watching a show that everyone else in the room had a lot of screamy feelings over.

Aside from that, things seem like they're going pretty well. Jesse is *killing it* with his work on the Football Player models and those pesky geometries. Endless kudos to him, we'd seriously be up a creek without a paddle without his constant diligence. We visited the Jack Trice Stadium earlier today, and it was *so cool*. I don't know if it looked quite the same size as the model, but it was definitely an experience. Stacy told us that when there's actually a *game*, students *flood* into the stands to get a seat, and it apparently gets *really packed*. I pulled up a few videos, and it looks like those stands get absolutely *filled* with people. And as if last week's "legit possibility of being published" wasn't awesome enough, Stacy told us today that we might be sending our project to try to get into the IS&T/SPIE Electronic Imaging 2015 conference in *frickin' San Francisco*. **WOW.** A publication *and* a conference would just be amazing beyond anything I expected from this- heck, so would just getting a publication.

As far as the video game reference in today's title goes, I really wish I could stop time. Yeah, there's the whole "stop time and get lots of things done" facet of it, but there's also the fact that stopping time means I don't get any closer to the future. I keep saying that I'm ready for this internship to be done so I can return to the comfort zone of UMBC and Residential Life, but…

Am I *really* ready?

Edit

Sunny Day (Day 56 – 7/22)

It's so weird when I pick a blog title that has multiple meanings.

I love how we had a lot of really nice weather for the first eight weeks, but as soon as week 9 hits, the weather becomes humid and gross. I'm so done with summer weather already. I need to do laundry to have more wearable shorts, because jeans are just *not* happening if this weather keeps up. I'd really appreciate it if the sun could just… not do what it's doing to make the days so inhospitable.

It's really annoying when things keep messing with my sleep schedule, because then I try to compensate for it. This means I keep accidentally doing things like having 5-hour naps that completely destroy my evenings. It's gotten really hard to get anything done because of it, which is resulting in me being really irritable and having little to no tolerance for anyone or anything. You'd think "early to bed, early to rise" would play out here, but apparently not. I think I just have to have a self-imposed napping ban for the next week and a half.

And if the terseness of this post is any indication, I'm just *not* in a good mood today. There's a lot of fire and intensity on my end, it seems. But I'm not gonna let my mood stop me from having a good day, so I'm going to emulate the gross incandescence of the sun. Whether this means forcing myself to have a brighter attitude or just moving forward despite my mood, I haven't decided yet.

Still pretty hype for laser tag; I'm hoping some grad students come along.

Edit

Soft Reset (Days 53 to 55 – 7/19 to 7/21)

That sure was a weekend.

Friday… I seriously don't even remember what *happened* on Friday night- not because anything happened, but because… I feel like nothing incredibly memorable happened? Could be wrong though. Saturday was fun, a bunch of us hung out in my apartment until like 3 in the morning. My body refused to let me go to sleep until the sun started coming up though, so that was absolutely horrible. I found myself woken up hours later, but just minutes before a knock came at my bedroom door to wake me up so I could get ready to go to Holly's lakehouse.

But I decided not to go. It wasn't a very difficult choice. Even though I really wanted to go because it would be boatloads of fun (see what I did there?) I also knew that I had accomplished literally nothing throughout the weekend so far, and going to the lakehouse would only perpetuate that. After a while of napping, I started to feel bad about not going, because I *really* wanted to go. I accomplished a fat lot of nothing then, but something just… snapped.

All of a sudden, instead of feeling sorry for myself and moping, I had decided that if I was making this choice, I was going to make it *worth it*. I was gonna get things done, because if I turned sedentary for the day, it would be a heck of a lot worse.

So, among other things, I managed to…

- Email the IRB asking if they had an idea when Game Day could start user testing
- Do like an hour or so of research and drafting on how to email professors relating to grad school.
- Email a professor expressing interest in her labs and research.
- Email said professor's PhD student to get a feel for the school's graduate atmosphere
- Email Thelma Harding again about more grad school stuff
- Plan two separate adventures with friends for the week or so after I get back to Maryland
- Read through about 20 articles and finish reading things for my Psych Honors Thesis lit review (YAY).
- Eat a meal and a half. Normally I forget to eat when I have a crazy-productive day like this.
- Lay the basic groundwork and structure for Game Day's Final Paper rough draft. There was no actual *content* yet, I just have the most rudimentary of skeletons.
- Mentally sketch out what the grouped sprite sheets are going to look like- turns out I only have to do a pair, trio, quartet, and quintet of characters, as opposed to five quintets, so that's great.

So yeah, while I'm legitimately sad that I didn't go with everyone to Holly's, I'm legitimately *ecstatic* that I had gotten so much done in what was honestly such a short time- like maybe 6-7 hours, with a bunch of distraction breaks thrown in randomly.

Today… Today was a Monday, for sure. Missed the bus by under a minute, so I decided to walk to work. Then, I got *really* lucky and managed to encounter a bus and catch a ride for the last third of the way to VRAC. Ethics course was really interesting, and it was fun to learn that apparently we're all really intimidating. And sadly, I'm skipping the gym this afternoon, because I need to do laundry and the only pair of pants I have is too tight for me to imagine biking 8 or 9 miles. I might head over a few hours after work ends, though.

Also I'm real hype because it looks like laser tag is happening tomorrow night! 😀

Edit

Limit Break (Day 52 – 7/18)

Today at the gym, instead of using the bike to try the Hill Climbing run again, I tried the Mountain Biking run, which was much more exhausting. I still made it 8.7 miles though! 😀

Then we had a meeting with Vijay to touch base and keep working towards our end goals. And honestly, I expected things to go pretty painfully, since it seems like other teams are running into some rough snags in progress. Instead, things went pretty well, and Vijay gave us a nice laundry list of things to work on over the next few days. From consolidating sprite sheets to reformatting character models to juggling new and existing documents, we have quite a few things on our plate now. And I'm *excited*. Sure, we have Paintball tomorrow (we're gonna wreck the faces off of this other REU) and then an afternoon at Holly's lakehouse on Sunday (awwwww yeeeee tubing!) but *I'm excited to do work*. I'm even excited to *come into the lab over the weekend and do work*. There's a light at the end of the tunnel; it starts with a "b" and ends with "eing published". Apparently getting that end goal reaffirmed was really useful to kickstart my energy levels. I'm so hype, I seriously think I'm gonna spend some huge hours off the clock getting stuff done.

So here's what today and the rest of the weekend's workload is going to look like:

1. Get at least one or two sprite arrangements done per day- this means I'll have five combinations done by Monday, ideally.
2. Write a rough Rough Draft of our Final Paper- this means cackling maniacally as I Frankenstein together things we've already written while metaphorical lightning strikes to bring it to life.
3. Complete one of my personal tasks- either I get through the rest of my Psych Project Lit Review (22 more articles) or I write the 10-page Info Retrieval paper by the end of the weekend (3 articles to read and then I start writing).

Also, I'm going to try to have the rest of my blog posts be references to video game things. I've done it for the past three days, I may as well keep it going. 😛

Edit

Burst (Day 51 – 7/17)

It seems like most aspects of my day really *are* coming in short, concentrated bursts lately, because this is the second day I'm starting my posts with such a remark.

Yesterday, we powered through all of our sprite sheets, with special kudos to Jesse for coming in later in the evening to finish off the last one. Today, it seems like we're with little to do again. We've spent most of the past seven weeks constantly working on things, and all of a sudden we have days where we just… don't really have much to do. It's disarming, in a nice way. I've been able to redirect my efforts, doing things like renewing scholarship applications, completing ResLife training modules, reading an organization's constitution, and looking into graduate programs. Last night, I was going to unwind by playing some video games on my laptop. Instead, I ended up over my graduate options again, with a particular focus on which institutions had research that I could see myself caring about, and which degrees I felt most comfortable applying to for my short lists. While I was frothing at the mouth about the VHIL at Stanford, it was really the only thing that caught my eye, it turns out their academic programs weren't as much of a match as I'd have hoped. Instead, I ended up getting at least one or two relevant researchers per institution, and a better feel for which places I'd prefer a Master's from, which ones only caught my eye for the PhD, and which ones I could see myself doing both at. In particular, I found one professor whose education and research interests hit the vast majority of my own research interests, when professors at most other institutions barely hit more than one or two. On the bright side, I haven't even deposited my last paycheck, so I'm not foreseeing any difficulty paying for a bunch of application fees in a few months.

It seems like my time this afternoon is going to be used for personal things, since Game Day doesn't have any new tasks to work on. I'm thinking I'll keep working on the literature review for my Honors Psych project back home, because that can be interrupted pretty easily. Here's hoping the afternoon is another burst of progress!

Edit

Overdrive (Day 50 – 7/16)

So, the past 24-ish hours have involved a lot of intense, sudden leaps and bounds that I didn't quite expect. We got our next assignment for the Stadium app, to make sprite sheets of crowdmembers cheering so that we can cut down on polygon counts. I have some experience (albeit vague) with sprites and stuff, so I'm pretty in my element. Using Photoshop, on the other hand, not so much. Yesterday evening, we went and played sand volleyball. It turns out that I'm actually a lot more competent than any of us expected! Maybe volleyball is one of those things I'm just good at. 🙂

And today, to shake things up, my gym time was a specific workout on the exercise bike, as opposed to a "go as far as you can on a simulated flat surface". Turns out one of the exercises in there simulates going up a bunch of hills, and that sure was exhausting. I tried to hit at least 7.5 miles, but I ended up going a full 8.67 miles instead. I find it funny that my first foray into biking with resistance (I think it averaged at like 6-8 compared to my generic rides' resistances of 1) was about my third best overall. I was definitely feeling

the burnt this time. And in a few hours, we have the Freddy Court Volleyball Tournament. Team Autobaiottobot (Holly, Mitch, Getch, and I) might get routed in the first round, but at least it'll be entertaining.

I mean, look at this face.
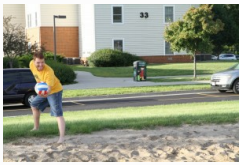
Edit

Reprieve (Day 49 – 7/15)

Posted on July 15, 2014 by Phillip Thompkins

Team Game Day got through two whole football teams worth of character models yesterday, which was awesome. Now there's on-and-off work on our poster draft. We get some downtime until our Team Meeting this afternoon, so that's nice. Lunch with Chase was cool, and he inadvertently kicked inner researcher into flailing, screeching overdrive since he was talking about therapeutic uses of VR through the SnowWorld and stuff. I looked up an article that might be used for Journal Club today, and going down its rabbit hole has me seriously contemplating trying to get into Stanford now. I thought I was *done* making lists of potential grad schools, but apparently not.

Whatevs, we have an hour to kill before our team meeting with Vijay, so I'm just gonna keep on trudging forward. Today, that means suffering through ResLife training videos. And after that, it's not gonna be long before we're done for the day. Then I get to mentally prepare to get my face inevitably cratered by volleyballs, because sportsballs bouncing off my face at high speeds is a recurring facet of my attempts at athleticism.

Edit

Nose to the Grindstone (Days 46 to 48 – 7/12 to 7/14)

2

Posted on July 14, 2014 by Phillip Thompkins

Weekend was weird, spent most of it in actual hibernation, but I actually got some pretty good sleep I think. Haircut happened on Friday, apparently I look not-horrible, which is nice. Reiman Gardens were pretty, but I don't quite get the lawn aliens. Saturday was meh, and Sunday was a lapse into immobility as far as doing things goes, so today is the day I have to accomplish boatloads of stuff. So far, that seems to be going pretty well; I wrapped up the four models that I had to get together to round out the football teams. Downside is that I spent an hour playing World of Moobcraft on one of those models only to have Jesse tell me that "y'know, football players have pads on their chests so you probably don't need to do that." It was funny though. Also Game Day has gotta get some work done on our poster rough draft (they're due Wednesday…) so that's… exciting, I guess.

I'm more concerned with making sure we can actually get to the user testing. It looks like we might be hitting that stage pretty soon, the football players are moving along a lot quicker than I expected. Seriously, look at this:

These aren't even the textures we're actually going to work with, but this looks pretty darn awesome.

Since I broke 9 miles when biking on Friday, I'm going to attempt to bike 9.25 miles after lunch today. I was actually getting pretty winded by Friday's biking, so I don't want to try and set overly lofty goals- I still have two more weeks to break 10 miles, after all. **I was only able to hit 9.02 miles, a decrease from Friday's 9.04. I'm okay with that, since I was already tired, there were cheerleaders screaming in a nearby room, and I was having weird chest feelings. Hoping to do better on Wednesday.**

Speaking of biking, here was the highlight of the weekend:

Edit

2

Hibernating (Days 44 and 45 – 7/10 and 7/11)

Posted on July 11, 2014 by Phillip Thompkins

So my nights have been plagued with interrupted sleep and trouble sleeping in general. If it's not an Unnecessary Loud Cricket, it's being woken up at either 7AM or at 5AM by the alarm of whoever lives in the room beneath mine. It's gross and horrible.

Yesterday was the Day of Unending Presentations, it was mentally exhausting if only because we weren't there in person. I feel like if we were all in Pennsylvania, I'd have been mostly alert and attentive through all of the presentations. That aside, I feel like Game Day's presentation went really well, even if we ignore the fact that the technology didn't want to cooperate. Go us! After a nap, I went with about half the group to Super Dog, and got the Super Dog or whatever it's called. The thing was covered in chips and cheese and pineapple; it was so good I needed two of them. Also, I think the vast majority of the interns now have Snapchat (like four or more of us caved yesterday at lunch) so that's got the potential to be entertaining.

Today, I'm too brain-dead and sleepless to be very excited. Read the journal article for today- it was interesting that there were significant changes in the PTSD patients, but I feel like maybe the diversity of the traumatic events may make the study harder to generalize, as well as the fact that there was only a *single* woman in the entire study. They also told us literally nothing about the psychologist doing the treatments or anything about his or her style. Too many variables, but I definitely think it's a step in the right direction. Aside from the article, I get to go to another PT appointment in the afternoon, and I have that haircut after work; but what I'm really looking forward to is getting to see how I do in the gym on one of those workout bikes after lunch.

Goal is to beat 10 miles by the end of the month. ~~Here's hoping I can beat at least 8.5 miles today.~~ I pulled off 9.04 miles in 35 minutes, which is a little over a quarter-mile per minute. Go me! 😃

Edit

Today is UN-Fired (Day 43 – 7/9)

Ugh, I am so done with today already.

Got woken up an hour before my alarm by what I *hope* was the alarm of whoever lives in the room directly beneath mine. That wouldn't have been that bad, if the obnoxious loop of rap music wasn't so loud that I was about 80% of the way to being able to know exactly what each word was even though there was a floor muffling it. I was totally okay with being awake that early, but my room was cold, so I curled up under my blanket and… slept in. Ugh.

I got to the lab later than usual today (ugh), spent far too long mindlessly playing with Maya in an attempt to figure out how to manipulate model polygons and meshes (ugh), and then I finally found an online tutorial that was *exactly what I needed*; it was titled like "Adapting one model for many characters." *I was so excited.* **And then the internet decided to implode.** It's almost reaching the point where doing work is impossible, because no pages will load. Luckily, it doesn't last very *long*, so I was still able to watch the video and take some notes before lunch. Hopefully I can get the football players or the marching band-ers progressing towards something resembling diverse body types.

And since I didn't get to it yesterday, I have to force myself to get a haircut today. Fingers crossed that it'll look good.

On the bright side, I emailed Thelma Harding, the woman who gave that talk on Grad School stuff, at the end of work yesterday, and she got back to me about an hour ago. Turns out that I've actually got a pretty formidable chance of getting into graduate schools! She told me that based off the info I gave her, she hoped I would be automatically aiming for PhD programs (wow!) and that I should definitely include some top-of-the-line programs when I apply to things. It's so awesome to get the reinforcement that all of the things I've been doing over the past four years look like they could really pay off. 🙂

Looking forward to tomorrow's presentations, but definitely not the whole "getting to the lab at 8:30AM" part. Ewwwwwww.

Post Lunch Edit: Went to the gym. On Monday, I hit 6.66 miles in 35 minutes, so I decided that I was going to try to hit 7 miles in 35 minutes this time (so like a mile per 5 minutes). I hit 7 miles in just under 30 minutes, and I hit 8 miles a meager 4 minutes later. In the end, I ended up biking 8.30 miles in 35 minutes. There was a moment where *an actual bead of sweat fell from my hair onto my glasses*, it made me feel so proud of myself. My goal for the end of the month is to hit 10 miles in either 35 or 30 minutes, depending on how lucky I feel. **And then, in jest, I suggested that because the internet is down, we should get to go home. We got to go home like 20 minutes later. Today is completely acceptable.**

Edit

…Maybe Not Quite Yet (Day 42 – 7/8)

Last night, I was trying to get to sleep early, and I couldn't. There was an excessively loud cricket probably three floors down, on the *ground*, chirping so loud that it kept me up until at least 1AM. And to top it all off, the internet is doing the opposite of cooperating. If I'm particularly irritable today, that's why. And factoring in that we have our presentations bright and early on Thursday, it looks like this week is going to absolutely insufferable. About three more weeks and it'll be done, and I can *relax*.

Griping aside, I'm planning on getting a haircut after work today- anyone have any opinions on what I should have done?

Edit

Fresh Start? (Days 37 to 41 – 7/3 to 7/7)

That long weekend was a much-needed reprieve from everything. It turns out I get a *lot* more exhausted when my weekends are cut in half by forced socializing. I got some vague work done on Thursday, but unforeseen little snags in everything made progress slow. A bunch of us went to Holly's lakehouse on Friday, and I got to do some kayaking, which was really nice; nothing was really as soothing as zoning out in a kayak while the wake from larger boats rocked me gently back and forth. I only got sunburnt in one spot, too, and that was near my left shoulder, which I guess I missed with the sunscreen. Then I actively did nothing but watch Netflix on Saturday, and vaguely returned to the world of semi-professional young-adulthood by the end of Sunday. But I guess I was more exhausted than I thought, since it was almost impossible to do anything that I would consider productive aside from watch like 12 hours of Grey's Anatomy. But now that I *am* back in the world of the semi-professional young-adult, I might be pulling some long hours in the lab soon, and weirdly enough I'm totally okay with that.

Also, today after lunch I hit the gym and biked over 6.5 miles in 35 minutes, so that's nice I guess. I'm looking forward to hopefully being able to cover longer distances. 🙂

Edit

Changes (Day 36 – 7/2)

It's interesting, how much a few simple reality checks can completely change your outlook.

Over the past week and a half or so, I've been absolutely exhausted and potentially on the verge of a *nasty* depressive descent. Anyone who paid much attention to my mood and behavior probably picked up on how I was moody, irritable, and all-around stagnant. To top it all off, last night, I learned that a figure important to part of my infrastructure back at UMBC is out of the picture, meaning that the entire landscape for my fifth year is going to be thrown on its head even more than I expected, and I still haven't started on most of the random things I have to juggle for the incoming fall semester. It legitimately felt like I was in some sort of grotesque Sisyphean gauntlet taking the form of my first structured 9-5 job.

But then I had a spontaneous meeting with Eliot. He's real good at putting things in perspective (thanks a bunch Eliot!). Due to that, I've realized that things started to take a downward turn once I stopped actively tracking everything I had to manage, once I stopped setting goals. I had all of these things I had to do, but I wasn't actually saying "I'm gonna do the thing" and then *doing it*. I sat on my hands, and got myself into the situation I'm in now.

It's time for a change.

This weekend, while I *will* be up at the apartments, I'm going to be going into a full-on secluded hermit lifestyle. As much as I love my fellow interns, I need a few days specifically for *me* so I can get things done and get out of this rut, which means I'll be actively avoiding human interaction. And to add a layer of accountability, I'm going to list out all of the things that I'm going to try to get through; I did this once in the beginning of the program and it worked surprisingly well. If it turns out that I need to do these once a day to keep myself grounded and from saying "oh I'll do more time tomorrow," then that'll happen.

1. Spend at least 4 hours throughout the weekend working on my Information Retrieval programming project. It shouldn't take too long, I think my code is mostly done, I just need to get it running, get my data, and write the little paper. I can probably get through it by the end of Friday. Child's play.
2. Spend at least 2 hours scraping together sources for my Information Retrieval final paper. If I can get over 10 sources in about 20 minutes for my Psych Honors project, I can do even more with more time on an assignment that's more "just write about a thing". If I can get the sources together into something coherent by the end of Saturday, I'll be thrilled. If I can write at least a few pages of actual paper before Monday, *even better*.
3. Spend at least 6 hours working on my Operating System project throughout the weekend. I don't know how long it'll actually take me to do anything for this, but any progress is good progress.
4. Read another three sources for my Psych Honors Lit Review. Scream as I scan the bibliographies for leads on more useful sources. This means I can do at least one a day (with one day of not reading) and I'll be in good shape.
5. Exercise for at least a half an hour on at least two days of the weekend (currently thinking Thursday and Saturday, sometime in the mid-afternoon). I'm gonna pick my physical therapist's brain at my appointment this afternoon to see what things I can actually get away with.
6. Learn how to subsist on Netflix by finishing the rest of Bob's Burgers and maybe starting Archer in my downtime from the above.

Also, to keep myself on my toes and moving forward, I think I might try eating quickly and hitting the gym during our lunch hour today to try to get a half hour on a treadmill or bike- I'm already gonna have that half hour of blogging free from doing this in advance.

I'd say to wish me luck, but luck will have little to do with this, so give me encouragement instead. 🙂

Post-Lunch Edit: After lunch, I hit the gym and covered 3.5 miles in 16 minutes on one of the bikes. I'd have stayed longer but we had that workshop on conference presentations.

Edit

In Circles (Day 35 – 7/1)

2

Maybe you're looking for someone to blame
fighting for air while you circle the drain

I'm feeling a growing sense of frustration and irritation with things lately, almost to the point where I want to try and do all of my work in a conference room or the library or something. I've never been one to thrive or even concentrate in places where there are constantly people socializing around me- I always do my studying and projects in empty rooms with headphones in to neutralize any extraneous noise. I've been able to manage for the past five and a half weeks with no trouble, but I guess being around people so much is starting to wear on me more than I thought. It doesn't help that I feel like we're just going in circles with some of this, like we're not really making any progress. *Just today*, I finally managed to set up Unity and run the Game Day Viz app; I haven't even made any progress towards being able to edit anything or even open up the code yet. Yesterday, I finished my contributions to our literature review (albeit a rough draft to be sure) and today I started expanding upon my literature review for my psych project back home. I still have hours and hours of work to get through from the spring, and everything else I need to do to prepare for the fall, from meetings to countless emails to planning and planning and more planning. I'm feeling more than a little overwhelmed.

Never be sorry for your little time
it's not when you get there, it's always the climb

Even though I'm horribly stressed and grotesquely overextended, I'm still pretty optimistic. Luncheon Lecture with JO today was nice, he talked about his life trajectory and about some of the intricacies of graduate school. Funnily enough, my short list for graduate programs is aimed mostly at top-notch schools; it was only because I liked their programs, not because I knew anything about the associated institutional prestige. On top of that, I've learned that I really have nothing to lose, so I'll be applying to a slew of (maybe six?) PhD programs come the fall. I'm more than a little horrified, but if I defied my self-imposed odds to get into a program like this, I might have better chances of getting in than I give myself credit for. More in the present, I've been having a lot of fun with video games. Getch and I have been varying amounts of *obsessed* with Transistor, a new game with perhaps one of the best soundtracks *ever*. Today's post title and italicized sections are all taken from one of the songs that I've really been enjoying. I haven't gotten to play it for more than half an hour, but I'm really looking forward to logging an afternoon making a bunch of incomprehensible noises because of how good it is.

Here's hoping my productivity and mood get onto an upswing soon…

Edit

Green Skies (Days 32 to 34 – 6/28 to 6/30)

Seriously, the sky is this gorgeous gray-blue-green color and I forgot how much I loved storms until I walked back from lunch in the light drizzle.

Mall of America was real fun. Getch, Mitchell, Alexis and I rode two of the rides there; apparently they didn't expect me to have the capacity to shriek like a banshee. I bought Okami for the Wii for about $20, and Getch bought some fancy cheeses. Both of us also each bought 100 Lindt chocolate truffles; I'm glad neither of us are doing that whole "diet" thing because we'd both be losing. Also, Getch and Mari and I got massages, and they were *heavenly*. I might need to look into getting another one sometime before the summer's done.

Yesterday was all well and good, I slept for like 14 hours and sat around relaxing and playing video games. The girls made some fantastic cookies, too.

Today… meh. There's more IRB to do (**so close to done!!!**) and I have to finish articulating my contributions to our Lit Review. Once those are done, it's headfirst into everything else. *Ugh*. If I only had to deal with REU affairs, I'd be so much happier, but I have *so many things* demanding my attention from the Spring and the upcoming Fall. If I manage to get everything done (ideally I can…) then I'm going to be *so thrilled*. But… one step at a time, for now.

~~Apparently we just had a Tornado Warning! This is so cool. I might just have to make another blog post afterwards.~~ 🙂
Never mind, the Tornado Warning lasted like five whole minutes. The atrium sounds absolutely gorgeous though!

Edit

One of Those Days (Day 31 – 6/27)

2

Meh.

Today's a thing. I guess.

Decided I'm just going to be a hermit here over the holiday.

Finding it difficult to be mentally invested in anything.

Meh.

Edit

…With Chainsaws (Day 30 – 6/26)

I feel like things are about to start picking up speed like crazy, and it's really exciting. It's also stressful, because we're already doing a ton of stuff, but that seems pretty reasonable.

LITERATURE REVIEWS

Guess who just finished the last of his 24 articles for the Game Day Lit Review? The answer is me, and I had to resist the urge to start screaming when the realization hit me. Now I get to have the complete and utter *joy* of diving into summarizing all of this information in the confines of like… not a huge gross essay. Each member of Team Game Day is writing up a summary of all of their articles, and then we're just going to Frankenstein them together into something (hopefully) coherent. Once that wraps up and I get some downtime, I'm diving into my Psych project's lit review- those articles look like they might be easier to work with.

IRB DOCUMENTS

We're so close to done, and even if we lose we win. Stacy came up to us with like five minutes before we could leave and was like "Hey let's have a meeting with Vijay" and we were all like worried and stuff. Turns out he just wanted to give us some verbal feedback on the IRB stuff on top of what he would be sending us in the near future for edits to make. We have *maybe* like one or two more iterations of this and I think we'll probably be done- we've had Stacy's feedback and Norene's feedback and Vijay's feedback and then we're probably going to end up getting Eliot's and maybe Stephen's feedback before we're finally done. And if you ask me, it can't come soon enough, all this paperwork is starting to get really tedious.

VIDEO GAMES

We had a bit of an impromptu game night last night. Anton had a mentally exhausting day, so I forced him to come play video games with me for a few hours; it turns out Nintendo Land has a really fun Legend of Zelda minigame. That whole game is just unexpectedly great. Later on we played some Mario Kart, and that was as entertaining as always, even though the computer tends to beat all of us. Game Night tonight is going to be really fun, I'm excited for the grad students and mentors who'll be there to see some of us in mindsets far removed from the workplace. I'll count the activity as a win if I get to play at least one round of some kind of Super Smash Bros, no matter which version it is. I'm really wishing I'd gotten my copy of Brawl sent out here by now because that would be a load of fun.

SPORTSBALL

Today, instead of a luncheon lecture, we instead got to watch the USA vs Germany soccer game as part of an office-wide thing. That's totally fine, even though the professor we'd have gotten to meet seems really cool. This is a really funny change of pace though, because I can just sit at my workstation and watch the whole game as if I was in the conference room with everyone else, so I can just tune out the game if I feel like working on something… like this blog post. Or eating.

Posted in Blog Posts | Tagged phillip | Leave a reply

Edit

High-Speed Juggling… (Day 29 – 6/25)

Posted on June 25, 2014 by Phillip Thompkins

Always so much to do! It's nice to have an unending backlog of things that actually matter, as opposed to during the school year. There are always things to do, and I'm finding it harder and harder to justify any long-term excursions. We did some tweaks to our IRB documents, so hopefully we'll be ready to finalize those things within the next day or two. It's also likely that we'll have to write some scripts for our study, and that's going to be gross no matter what.

Once we finished working on the IRB documents, I spent maybe half an hour doing some lit review for my Psych Honors Thesis thing back at UMBC. I pulled together over 10 potential sources without any trouble- hopefully I can turn them into something useful. It's absolutely horrible because I'm realizing I'll never be done with literature reviews for the rest of my life, but it seems like I don't have to get as intensive with this psychology project, because there's just not as much to work in the general area that's actually *relevant*. If I've done all the researching that I'll need to already, I'll be so happy.

After lunch, we had an HCI lecture with Dr. Debra Satterfield, and holy *wow* she is so cool. She's on the list for a luncheon lecture on July 17th. Get *hyped*.

Pumped for the rest of the week, we have a Game Night tomorrow, Mall of America on Saturday, and Dungeons & Dragons can possibly get moving sometime in the next… day or so.

Posted in Blog Posts | Tagged phillip | Leave a reply

Edit

1

Good Days (Day 28 – 6/24)

Posted on June 24, 2014 by Phillip Thompkins

Last night after work, I went to a local game store and shopped so hard I got the average price per video game down to under $30, which is cool considering one of them was worth twice that. Then, a bunch of us went out to the local Mongolian Buffet and that was really good. Sam, Mari and I all did this "wasabi challenge" and it really wasn't that bad. I ate *so much food* though, and there were some ridiculous selfies and whatnot. When we got back to our apartments, a few of us sat around playing Nintendo Land, this quirky theme-park-mini-game monstrosity, and it was surprisingly fun. Nothing quite as hilarious as realizing the hubris associated with particularly absurd games of tag. Or an octopus-themed "dancing" mini-game. It was good times.

Today was very relaxed. We had a presentation about writing personal statements, that was okay. We had a luncheon lecture with Dr. Larysa Nadolny, who works a lot with education and gaming, and her lecture, research areas, and the subsequent discussions were really engaging and interesting. Mari was really invested in every minute of it, and that was really fun to see.

Tonight we're going to be touring the Seed Science Lab and that'll be… interesting. Plants aren't normally my thing, but we'll see what happens.

Afterwards, I'm thinking it might be time for some more Nintendo Land. 😀

Posted in Blog Posts | Tagged phillip | 1 Reply

Edit

2

## Happy Birthday To Me! (Day 25 to 27 – 6/21 to 6/23)

Posted on June 23, 2014 by Phillip Thompkins

Okay, so what were these past two and a half days even…

Friday night was definitely nice. A bunch of us got together and hung out and it was a well-needed burst of fun. Saturday was an absolute blast. We went for a big ol' walk around Des Moines while we waited for Zombie Burger to have space for us. We stopped at a little coffee shop and I got a mango-and-apple smoothie and it was great. And then when we got the call, Kelsey and Sam ran over there and saved our table. When we ordered, I ended up getting a Rice Krispie Milkshake, an order of Garlic Bacon and Blue Cheese Fries, and most importantly, the "They're Coming to Get You Barbara" burger, which is stated on the menu as "'two grilled-cheese-sandwich' bun, American cheese, caramelized onion, bacon, Zombie sauce." I'm not normally the type to incessantly photograph my food, but…
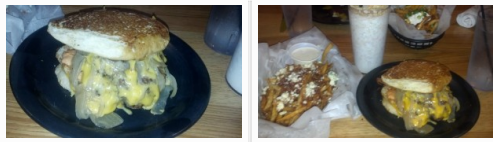

It was so massive and so good! I should have gotten the triple-patty burger, but oh well. I also got to watch Sam and Getch and people react to the Germany vs Ghana game in the World Cup or whatever it's called, and that was fun. Then I got back and slept for like twelve hours.

Sunday consisted of rest and relaxation. I did a fat lot of nothing for the majority of the day, and bulldozed through a bunch of episodes of Sword Art Online with Mitchell and Getch. I think we're going to move on to Gurren Lagann afterwards so Mitchell can see it. Mitchell also ended up triggering the smoke alarm- it turns out that we can only turn those off if we get a CA to do it.

Today is my birthday. I'm 22. Half an hour after midnight, Mitchell walks out into the living room playing some song that I didn't realize was relevant (it was Taylor Swift's 22) until about a minute later. I'd say I don't feel older or any more awesome, but it seems like everything's on the upswing! I'm legitimately driven to start exercising (bring on the arm days!) and eating a little healthier, and the stretches and stuff I was told to do in today's physical therapy appointment are easy enough to incorporate into my life. I'm tired of being grossly out of shape and now I'm all of a sudden energized to do something about it, yay! After work, I'm riding the Blue bus downtown to hit the game stores as a present to myself. Then I'm thinking I might try to go out to dinner to that fancy Italian place that literally everyone keeps talking about, the one with the Actual Italian Guy.

THIS MORNING I GOT TO THE LAB AND THEN
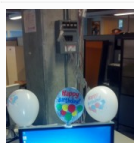
AND THEN IN THE AFTERNOON ANDREA APPEARED OUT OF NOWHERE AND THEN

It immediately reminded me of a thing I read on the internet that made birthdays a lot creepier: "*a small gathering of people huddle around a object on fire, chanting ritualistically a repetitive song in unison until the fire is blown out and a knife is stabbed into the object.*" I just had to share it even though it's kind of unsettling.

Happy Monday!

Edit

1

Acceleration? (Day 24 – 6/20)

I think Team Game Day is starting to pick up some considerable speed. After a prolonged game of Spaceteam (Thanks for recommending it Sam!) between Jesse and I, we sat down and hashed out a large amount of the details for our IRB application in about an hour or so. We pieced together which measures we would be using in little to no time, and we've reached the point where we're hypothetically almost done with the whole thing. I've learned that it's really advantageous to have pre-existing measures and documents that can be used as a starting point. Creating entirely new content for everything would be gross and overwhelming.

Really excited for this weekend, Skyzone sounds really fun and I'm pumped to have some downtime again. Plus, my birthday is on Monday (insert Taylor Swift joke here) and we're gonna be done with our morning classes. So I get a day of unstoppable fun and a lot more downtime to work on the Game Day stuff. I'm hesitantly excited to be able to mess around with the character models and stuff in Maya and start seeing the project come together in a more visible way. And then there's the ever-looming Literature Review (maybe I'll end up getting through the last like 10 or so sources in a reasonable amount of time?) that has a paragraph due on Thursday. Add on Wednesday's Research Question (what are we going to try to figure out with science) and Friday's Methods Paragraph (how are we going to go about trying to figure something out) and it's clear that we'll be busy. Maybe not as back-to-back-endless-work busy as this week, but still pretty busy. I've got my fingers crossed that between what my team already knows and what we've done with the IRB document, next week's milestones (deliverables????) shouldn't be too bad at all.

Also I'm shaving my beard tonight! The rest of the interns saw an old picture of my face from when I went to prom and still tried to be clean-shaven, and they had some really priceless reactions about how I had (and maybe still have) a chiseled jawline and whatnot, so I figured I'd see if that's still the case four years later. It'll be entertaining, at least!

Edit

One Step at a Time (Day 23 – 6/19)

We're under 72 hours from Sunday, I really need a full day to myself to do absolutely nothing. We're almost done with all of our morning classes for the rest of the summer, and that's really exciting! I'm ready to be done with all of them and start focusing on the Game Day project more. We sat down late last night and ironed out a *very* rough draft of our IRB proposal, but we still started making progress. Based off of what we did last night, we still have a lot of ground to cover. I want to sit down and revise some write-ups we've had to do, namely a personal comparison of various VR techs and our Problem Paragraph, because I feel like there's no point in getting feedback if you're not going to do anything with it. And then there's, y'know, the endless pile of research articles I still need to get through for the Literature Review; I've gotten through 16 articles and want to get through another 12 more, which is assuming that everything is going to be useful and coherent. And then there's the still-looming few assignments from the past semester that are tenaciously avoiding my motivation.

On the bright side of the massive workload, we get to go to Skyzone on Saturday, I get to go to a Physical Therapy appointment on Monday (my birthday!!) to get my leg looked at, it seems like we might have another semi-impromptu Mario Kart night, since Disc Golf got cancelled due to weather, and the Dungeons and Dragons game is getting pretty close to starting. So the work days are calming down, and the non-work things are kind of on an upswing. And that's really nice after the stress of the past two weeks. =)

Edit

Gridlocked (Day 22 – 6/18)

In terms of scheduling alone, this is the busiest time in the whole summer. I'm definitely feeling that now. OpenGL course for 2.5 hours, lunch break, and then 3 hours of Statistics and an hour to work on other things. Ugggggh. Calling it now, Statistics for three hours is going to *absolutely obliterate* my ability to be a human being for the day. My brain's going to be the consistency of pumpkin guts until the clock strikes midnight and it's a new day.

And now I'm going to vent about some overwhelmed **frustrations**.

Even though I'm excited to do more work with OpenGL because graphics are fun for me, I'm finding it almost impossible to stay motivated. We're drinking from the metaphorical fire hose for the program in general, and then this class is like a garden hose aimed by someone a few feet to the side that's not necessarily even aiming for your mouth. We're probably going to pick up some things here and there just because the garden hose is also shooting some water at us, but the fire hose is our main concern because the moment you stop paying attention to it, it knocks you off your feet. It's Wednesday, and because we have these huge projects where we have to make a solar system, I haven't had time to work on my articles for the Lit Review, or hash out details of our IRB application (which is *actually* due in a few days). We haven't even had time to work on our OpenGL project; and that's supposed to be the culmination of this week's learning. Unless we all start living in the lab after hours and losing sleep, we're probably not going to get everything done. And if I have to choose between "being burnt out but getting every assignment done" or "being healthy and happy and letting one or two things be less than my best", I'm picking the latter; I'm not playing that dangerous game where you don't sleep. Despite what the tone of these OpenGL classes may imply, a Solar System and Pong aren't important enough to trump the reason I'm here to begin with (the Game Day Viz).

Don't get me wrong, I totally understand that the summer is supposed to be a glimpse into how Grad School kind of works and how busy it is. Classes in the shorter-term, research interests that are decidedly more long-term, working some kind of academic-related job, and personal development throughout. And I think that's a great experience for myself and others to have during our undergrad years. But, I feel like we're getting pulled in *way* too many directions throughout this week, and there's no way for our plates to be balanced.

I just hope it's not going to have any negative effects on our abilities to get things done and make it to the endgame in August. I'm starting to feel kind of paralyzed by how much we're expected to keep up with… :/

And now I'm going to be **optimistic**, and end this post on higher notes.

Here's hoping tomorrow's a change of pace. We've got a luncheon lecture with Jared Danielson, Assistant Professor of Veterinary Pathology and HCI, which is bound to be interesting through the professor's departments alone. And then 30 pages worth of reading to do for Craft of Research, which looks like it's going to be all about picking good sources, which would have been more useful a few weeks ago. So… we'll see if tomorrow's any less draining. Maybe if Disc Golf gets cancelled we can have an impromptu game night like we did a few times last week. On the bright side, last night was a blast. For most of it, I was walking people through how to make characters for Dungeons and Dragons, and it was one of the funnest (and funniest!) evenings I've had so far this summer. Here's hoping that the game can actually happen and be an enjoyable experience for the people involved. =D

Optimism…! (Day 21 – 6/17)

Well, that's the plan, at least…

So in under an hour, I have a doctor's appointment about my leg. I'm kind of *anxiously horrified* because, y'know, what if something's going horribly wrong? It's also entirely possible that I just worked too hard sometime in the past few weeks and I haven't actually sat down and relaxed yet. I really hope it's the latter scenario, because that means I'll be in better mental shape.

OpenGL is *really fun* for me. I forgot how much I enjoyed similar (although lower-tech) stuff that I did in a C++ Game Design class I took back in High School. I'm working on that Planetary Simulation assignment (progress so far is here) and I'm having a lot more fun than I expected. I'm really pumped to start figuring out how Pong is gonna be implemented, and I'm *even more pumped* to maybe add features to it if we can get it done quickly enough.

Today, we also had a Luncheon Lecture with a gaggle of grad students who answered our barrages of questions. It was fun, I guess; I was already kind of familiar with the idea of it being stressful and busy and all that. I'm probably gonna email some people and try and get more personalized information on topics like how to pick a professor or what sorts of undergraduate paradigms need to be abandoned. Hopefully that gets me some good information.

Even though I have a TON of stuff to do both in and out of the program (lookin' at you, old compsci projects), I'm finally getting fed up with *not* being done with some of these that I'm getting all sorts of gung-ho. I moved an entire document repository into my flash drive so I can get a minor little programming project done probably after dinner. Over the past few days I've been doing a lot of emailing towards bosses and subordinates and professors so that I can keep juggling all of the obligations that are waiting for me the moment I get back to Maryland. I even bought a textbook yesterday! If I'm sufficiently motivated and lucky, I should be able to start the fall semester without anything looming over my stress levels.

Hopefully.

That's what the optimism is for.

Rejuvenated (Day 18 to 20 – 6/14 to 6/16)

Wow, I didn't realize how much I needed that weekend until Monday rolled around.

I was irritable, mentally exhausted, and all-around just **done** with people as a whole until I spent the majority of Sunday all by myself. I mean, don't get me wrong, there were some nice interactions on Friday, and Saturday was a blast (we got to sleep in!) but I *needed* Sunday to be as far away from humanity as possible. I'm still not used to this whole "waking up early" thing, which is a huge pain, but I'm managing well enough. I didn't doze off even a little during class today!

On the subject of class, we're starting Computer Graphics using OpenGL. I'm grimly excited, since on one hand, graphics are cool, but on the other, everything I've heard about the graphics course at UMBC is a horror story. We'll see how things go by the end of the week; regardless I'm excited for the group graphics-y project ~~and what Team Game Day comes up with~~ **Team Game Day is doing Pong for our project, and we may or may not be adding in some Breakout-like elements to make it cooler.**

Hiking trip at Ledges on Saturday was really fun. My leg started acting up within the first three steps when we started climbing a hill, so I already knew that the day wasn't going to be ideal. After some short bursts of forward progress, Caglar and I decide to head back to the cars for a bit before venturing off to try and find the big river we saw from the Crow's Nest. What we didn't expect was for me to slip and fall on the little stepping-stone things where the road met the river. I slipped and fell right into like three inches deep of river water, and I drenched my *entire* right side. Caglar was really worried, but I was just *laughing* because *of course something hilarious like that would happen.* I didn't notice until like a minute after the fall that I'd apparently scuffed up my right arm a bit, and was bleeding in like three or four places. Oops! For the rest of the weekend, my right arm was somewhat out of commission, but it seems to be back to normal now.

After dinner, we went to the Trestle Trail Bridge, which was another like three miles in all. The bridge was really pretty, between the gorgeous view of the river valley and the fact that the bridge *lit up*. I was incredibly uncomfortable because of the obnoxious wind mixed with the heights (I can do one or the other, not both; case in point the top of the ropes course tower) so I pretty much just booked it across both ways and tried as hard as I could to not be in the middle of all the socializing because I probably would have bit someone's head off. But it was fun and my leg wasn't acting up too much!

Sunday was entertaining. My forays into civilized society included oven-ing a pizza and consuming it whole, gawking at fleeting glimpses of the anime *Berserk*, cackling as Getch grossly underestimated how much pizza I regularly order, and watching some *Sword Art Online* (another anime) and then *Silicon Valley* (a hilarious show on HBO).

But in all honesty, this is the most important part of the weekend:

honk (Day 17 – 6/13)

click this

That's it; that's the whole joke. Mario Kart last night was a fantastic and well-needed diversion from all of the stress and assignments.

Looking forward to the weekend: sleeping in, hiking, video games, and more sleeping in. Might try to get a schedule of when summer groups are on-campus so we know when not to go to UDCC, lunch today was ridiculous.

Functionally Unconscious (Day 16 – 6/12)

I was unintentionally awake until about 3 in the morning, finishing up *Orange is the New Black*. I was *so close* to going to bed at a normal time, but then the plot got *crazy* and I only had two more episodes. And the season finale was *two hours long*. It was definitely worth it, though, the season wrapped up *wonderfully* and in so many ways that I didn't even remotely expect at the start. This is the third day in a row that I've been staying up late and being grossly sleep-deprived. I read in a textbook that after a few days of not getting enough sleep, you're basically drunk. A Google search turned up this article, which is interesting I guess. I've been *getting* sleep, just not enough, so I wonder if the effects are similar.

Even if they are, it doesn't seem like it's *all* bad. We did some tinkering with Maya today, and apparently the five minutes I spent while nearly unconscious and making a bunch of rectangular prisms actually looked pretty good! Our teacher for today thought that I knew what I was doing; the reaction on his face when I told him I had literally never touched Maya (or really any artistic-y program) and was half-asleep the whole time was honestly kind of priceless. Shout to Sam for telling me that I can apparently get Maya for free by using a .edu email address. I'm not going to say that I'm on the verge of maniacal laughter, but I'm excited to learn more about how to do things in Maya. It seems really fun and more… *artistically inclined* than SolidWorks. The artsy spin on this sort of thing works better for me than the engineering-y perspective.

Excited to do Bowling (and maybe some arcade-ing) at the MU tonight. **It seems like afterwards, we're all hanging out in Holly, Mari and Kelsey's apartment to play Mario Kart and it's going to be awesome and all of us should be there!!!!**

Posted in Blog Posts | Tagged phillip | **2 Replies**

Edit

Exuberance, Excess, and Exhaustion (Day 15 – 6/11)

I'm starting to feel some burnout, and that's not okay. It's getting harder and harder to juggle the high-energy Phillip from the first two weeks with all of the things we *have* to do and all of the unrelated things that I *want* to do. I think I need to take like a whole day to myself and just do absolutely nothing.

Exuberance: Yesterday, due to reasons mostly involving me being slow to get from point A to B, I skipped out on the Rock Climbing gym trip, and that was sad because I was pretty gosh darn excited. To compensate for that and the lack of open treadmills at the gym, I decided to just go on a walk instead. In the end, I ended up covering at least 6 miles, which is really impressive, since my aforementioned leg pains were completely and utterly nonexistant! But as I went on this walk, I realized that there was something I had to do, given the current occurrences in the world.

I bought a Nintendo Wii U.

So the last 2.5 miles of my walk, I was carrying an awkwardly large five-ish pound box, which I choose to believe gave my arms a bit of a workout. I get back to Freddy with timing just perfect enough to pop out of my bedroom with the box in hand within 10 seconds of Getch walking through the door. I think he had a sustained scream of excitement for like five whole seconds. Holly let us hook the console up to her TV (thanks Holly you're the best!) but we had at least half an hour of *hideous system updates* before we got the chance to actually sit down and play Mario Kart 8. That game is *so* worth the hype, and there's something special about watching Mitchell get *hilariously loud* and Getch getting *incredibly snide* as we all fought for first place.

Excess: While the Wii U was an inevitable purchase (Nintendo's E3 line-up was pretty killer, don't mention Super Smash Bros around me), it was still expensive. I'm trying (and hopefully not failing) at saving my money to ensure that if I need to, I can pay for Winter classes and maybe even Summer classes for my last year, and handle the financial aspects of graduate school applications and visits. I also have to keep my birthday in mind, as I'm the type of person to spend a lot of money on himself when June 23rd comes around. Pinching my pennies will prove to be prudent, I presume. Aww yeeeah alliteration! Money aside, I've been trying to balance my workplace expectations with my desires to sleep excessively, finish binge-watching Orange is the New Black, play video games, and think about exercising. I'm slowly trying to figure out the best way to balance all of the various things I want to spend my time doing, without overextending my mental resources.

Exhaustion: I'm incredibly tired, so very often. I was basically unconscious through the Modeling course this morning (it was just "3D printing is cool this is kind of how it works," there wasn't a lot of stuff I felt compelled to write down or commit to memory…) and the past two days have had me getting nowhere near enough sleep and waking up for work in the middle of sleep cycles. So I'm pretty much a walking zombie in the mornings, and that makes accomplishing anything almost impossible. I'm looking forward to this weekend, since our extracurricular adventure doesn't start until like 4:30 in the afternoon, which will let me sleep in. Worst case, I'll take a sort of mental health day and be mentally checked out from the day's activities and actively do as little work as possible.

And now, as we're moving towards the close of Week 3, I'm realizing that the summer's not as long as I expected, and that I have *so much stuff* to get through for the fall. Can't stop, won't stop, I suppose. =P

Posted in Blog Posts | Tagged phillip | Leave a reply

Edit

Mindblown (Day 14 – 6/10)

I had a blog post already sketched up for today, titled "Modeling and Mental Gymnastics." I was going to talk about how SolidWorks makes me really irritated, how the interface is too complex, and how I'm glad we only have one more day of it before diving into like Maya or something. I was going to vent a bit about how some research last night led to another 10 or so articles I can look into, and how these things are clearly never going to end.

But the Luncheon Lecture just kind of kicked that into space, like in this gif of one of my favorite video games: link

Holy crap, Rey Junco is the coolest and most interesting person ever. Not only is he hilarious and clever enough to request "geek" as his official Iowa State University email (he's *that guy* that we heard about in the first week!) but he works with *so many things that I didn't know people actually worked with*. He's a part of the Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard. I didn't even know that was a *thing*, but the moment I heard it, he had my attention for the rest of the lecture. See, while I said during introductions that I think I might want to go into video games, artificial intelligence, HCI, VR, or something like that, I *also* think it would be really cool to dive into the effects of the internet and technology on people, on how they work and how they think. So factor in this lecture from Rey, who just started here a short while ago, and how he is *doing actual high-notoriety research* **in things that I'm really interested in and he's looking forward to working with graduate students AND HE TOLD ME TO KEEP IN TOUCH AND EMAIL HIM**.

I know I normally say things like "I literally cannot right now" but *I seriously just cannot believe that those past two hours just happened*. Because I'm in an emphatic mood, here's another gif relative to my current state: link

EDIT:

1) HOLY WOW I just posted the 100th blog post, that's cool! 😀

2) I know that people have been interested in some of the articles and such that I've mentioned these past few weeks, so I dug up some links:

- Nevermind: A Biofeedback Horror Game (HuffPost, Kickstarter with info and videos). It didn't get funded on Kickstarter, but the head person might be trying to make it happen through other means.
- Universe Recreated in Computer Simulation (link). This isn't the same one that I mentioned about how the universe might be a hologrammy simulation thing (a similar link to that is here) but it's still kind of crazy to think about.

Posted in Blog Posts | Tagged phillip | **2 Replies**

Edit

Weekend Binge (Days 11, 12, and 13 – 6/7 to 6/9)

Hello! 🙂

The weekend was… interesting. Farmer's Market on Saturday was real nice, I got to try Bubble Tea or whatever it is for the first time. And then my leg decided to actively rebel against any and all locomotion yesterday, and even this morning. Walking any distance longer than like "around my apartment" is actively an inconvenience; if it keeps up I might have to look into seeing a doctor. On the

bright side, I've been gradually working my way through season 2 of *Orange is the New Black* in like 2-3 hour binges, and it's incredibly entertaining. Five more episodes and I'll be done!

The 3D modeling course is… interesting. On one hand, I'm excited that the conceptual side, the shapes and stuff, is pretty straightforward to me. On the other hand, SolidWorks itself is really complicated, and I doubt Maya will be anything easier. We'll get to 3D print… *something* by the end of all this, so that's a plus. I just have to figure out these interfaces and I think I'll be fine. Maybe I'll log a few extra hours in the lab just slogging through some of these tutorials.

Rest of today is gonna consist of barreling headfirst into the last few articles I've rustled up for the Lit Review, and composing a (hopefully) brief paragraph comparing peripherals for the Game Day meeting tomorrow. *Bluh.* I just want to be done with copious amounts of reading and dive into the writing; at least *that* gets less painful with progress.

Oh, also, I almost forgot! On Friday, we got to mess around with the Oculus Rift VR Head-Mounted Display. I couldn't get any Oculus Selfies since the peripheral is a little… cumbersome, so instead here are pictures of Jesse and Janae with the Oculus on. 😛
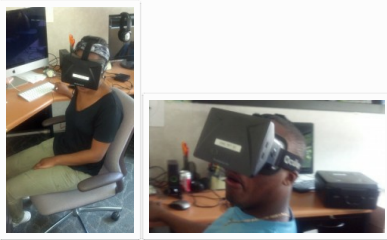
Edit

1

Sluggishness (Day 10 – 6/6)

Wow, I'm really tired lately. I was so exhausted (even though I got a good amount of sleep) that I ended up taking forever to get out of my apartment. I get on the Blue bus to get to Howe, and then at the first stop it's like "we are now a red bus" and so I get off at the next stop because I don't know where that one goes. Turns out it went right past Howe Hall and I walked for an extra like 15 minutes for nothing. It's just not my day today. On the bright side, we're done with the Computer Programming course now (no more little assignments for… a few days!) which means we're going to dive into the stuff I'm not as familiar with. Next week is Modeling!

Last night, Getch, Anton, Mitchell and myself got together and watched the first two episodes of Silicon Valley, that show that Eliot mentioned at lunch yesterday. It's *really* good. I'm gonna wait a bit to watch it since Orange is the New Black's second season is on Netflix, but… it's near the top of my to-do list. Today, we had Journal Club, but I don't know how much we actually talked about the article itself. Listening to the Colonel talk about stuff relevant to the Flight Team was cool.

We just had our meeting with Stacy, where we discussed some articles and started devising some vague directions for our impending user study. After that, we got to hang out with Vijay and play around with the Oculus Rift in a little demo environment. Janae did it first, and she seemed to have a lot of fun. We've each taken a few pictures of each other, and I think there might be some pictures of me also wearing Jesse's headphones to see how sound works alongside the Oculus. Pictures will find their way into future blog posts, I think. It was really cool, and I'm **really excited** to keep working with the C6 and Oculus Rift now that I've done things with both of them.

Luckily, the Literature Review is going pretty well, and everyone seems to appreciate the fact that I'm really gung-ho about it. It doesn't mean that reading all of these articles will be any less exhausting. If we keep this pace, I'd like to think we'll be done before the start of week 4.

Hopefully.

Please?

Edit

Computer Programming #4 – (Day 9 – 6/5)

Programming is still kind of boring because I already knew how to do some C++. Trouble seems like it's coming together pretty well, so I'm looking forward to that.

Farmer's Market this Saturday (cool), and E3, the Electronics Entertainment Expo, is next week from June 10-12. Apparently, Nintendo is arranging for copies of the WiiU version of the new Smash Bros to be playable for a while on Wednesday (4pm-9pm) and Saturday (noon-5PM) of next week, and I'm *incredibly excited*. The closest Best Buy that's offering the chance to play the demo is half an hour south, in Des Moines. If people want to go, we can hypothetically leave on Wednesday after the Intro to HCI course and probably get a fair amount of playtime in. Who's down for that adventure? 😃

Today, we got to have lunch with Eliot Winer, who is basically a wizard. He did like Mechanical Engineering and then he picked up some Computer Science and now he's doing Medical Imaging stuff in Virtual Reality. That's a really wild trajectory, so I'm kind of excited since that means I could end up working with something wildly different than anything I'm used to now. And that's cool.

Yesterday, I went to the gym for the first time in like forever, and that was fun. I think I managed to work out my neck muscles more than anything, because moving my neck around feels weird. But I survived half an hour on the treadmill and some amount of time doing some pretty intense stretchy ab-y workouts with Sam and Shamaria, and that was cool. I'm kind of pumped to do more exercising and see where I end up by the end of the summer.

Also, apparently my blog posts come up if you google search "Phillip Thompkins Iowa research," which I only know because my little sister found my blog posts and is now reading them. Hello there, little one! 😃

Today, I'm hoping to get through more of my Literature Review for Game Day. I have a good few sources lined up that I have to read and parse out, but I'm hoping that I can contribute substantial things to discussion tomorrow. Ideally, we'll get some more direction on what we want to do with the study through this, so that's exciting!

Edit

Computer Programming #3 – (Day 8 – 6/4)

We learned about inheritance today. I was familiar with it from things like Java, so my mind wasn't, like, blown. We did presentations on our C++ projects, and that was fun. Between then and now, I'm already contemplating alternate approaches to the game Board in Trouble. At first I was like "we'll use a Linked List" but now I'm like "maybe we'll use the std list" or "maybe we'll just use an array," so it'll be fun to actually figure that out. Jesse powered through the Player class in like an hour last night, so we're already moving along quickly. Hopefully that momentum keeps and we don't have to fret over it through the weekend.

Yesterday, we had another research meeting with Vijay and Stacy. They seemed pretty impressed by the progress we'd made so far, so I hope we can keep impressing them by just keeping pace. We also got to see the Jack Trice sim in the C6, so that was really interesting. We'll have a lot of work to do, once the ball gets rolling. Last night, despite the gross weather, we went to an awesome food place, Hickory Park. Great food, crayons and childish activities, loads of jokes and laughs, and really cheap desserts. I got a milkshake that was like almost as big as my arm for like five dollars. I wanna make it a thing where we go there like once a week or something.

I also called home for the first time since move-in last night, that was nice. It seems like "get video games shipped here" is becoming more and more viable, I just have to figure out an itemized list of what I want. And later today, I'm participating in a grad student's

Mobile User Emotion Study, and that just makes me *really excited,* because I think that affect and emotion relative to technology use is a *really cool area of research.*

Rest of today isn't that busy with scheduled classes or activities, so I'm looking forward to more of a free-form day. If I can make some good progress on the Board class for Trouble, I'm hoping to dive into a few of the sources I have stockpiled for my team's lit review. If I don't feel like doing that, I can always just start work on a paper from the spring semester that I still have in my backlog… =P

Computer Programming #2 – (Day 7 – 6/3)

So, my computer at my pod wasn't working, except then it was once I started programming on another computer. Clearly, I can't win. Team Game Day has decided that we're doing Trouble, the old board game, as our project for the C++ class. I don't think it'll be TOO bad.

Downsides to life right now: the closest Bank of America (my bank…) is about an hour away, in either Des Moines or in Marshalltown. Depositing that paycheck is going to be a pain. Another irritating thing is that despite my best efforts, it's apparently impossible for me to drag myself through the articles that Stacy sent us. I've read one, skimmed two, and have a fourth one to go still, but I wanted to make sure I had a deep understanding of all of them. Oh well, such is life. :/

On the bright side, yesterday Getch and I went on an adventure into Ames to hit up the tiny video game and tabletop game stores. I managed to find Shadow Hearts, a rare PS2 game, and the first Silent Hill, and even *rarer* PS1 game, for about $70 in total. For reference, PS2 games used to go for like $40-$50, and these games would've been even *more* expensive because they're so hard to find. I almost bought a WiiU then and there, but I restrained myself… for now. Give me a week and I'll cave. In the tabletop game store, I bought a pile of dice for about $25, including a little pouch to hold everything.

I've decided that I might end up getting my Wii (with Brawl) and my PS2 (with a few games) shipped out to ISU. That means that I'll almost definitely have to get my TV shipped out, which I'm a lot less excited about. My TV is pretty big, and it'd be a lot more money than just shipping out a singular box with two consoles and some games and stuff.

In a bit, we have our first progress-oriented research meeting; I'm excited to see ideas coming to the table and things start coming together. 🙂

Computer Programming #1 – (Day 6 – 6/2)

So we had our first day of the Computer Programming class, and we got our pre-tests back. I did horrendously because my reading comprehension decided to tank (oops, I read loops wrong and misread boolean operators and all that) and because I forgot or just didn't know a lot of the class-y and pointer-y minutia of C++. It was kind of humbling to see that even though I've been taking programming classes for almost ten years (wow, I'm old…) I'm still capable of making facepalm-inducing mistakes. No matter what my surface appraisals of a situation may be, I need to stay on my toes and keep a level head and a careful eye. If I'm not on top of my game I could miss something important and, in worse cases, do some major damage to something. And that's not okay.

I'm excited to sit down with Jesse and Janae and iron out our group programming project. If we could do an individual project, I'd have probably made a basic text-based adventure RPG. But since it's a group project, we're tentatively planning on making Trouble, the old board game (here's an old commercial), except we're looking to implement it only as a one-player game for now to keep things simple. I'm thinking we do a LinkedList for the board itself and then roll a dice via a random number generator. Should be easy. I'm a little concerned with how we'll display the board, but we'll figure it out, we have time.

The UX lab was pretty cool, and I really liked how there was an eye tracker in there. I've never seen one of those at work, so it was a really neat thing to watch. My mind wandered to if we could somehow connect that with the Game Day project to track which parts of the C6 simulation are getting attention, but that might be a bit beyond the capabilities of the tech. Maybe we can connect the eye tracker up to the C6 and Oculus Rift and get some more data on which one works better for stuff.

Today's going to be nothing but plonking away on the keyboard, trying to either hash our Game Day's C++ project or scooping up *all the articles* for the Lit Review. If I get tired of that, I'll probably make my rounds through the lab and start snapping pictures of a bunch of the posters. I'm thinking that when the afternoon wraps up, I'm gonna head down into the Campus Town and hit up the game stores to reward myself for doing so much work yesterday. I'm not *actively* looking to buy anything, but I might pick up a set of dice (for the hypothetical Dungeons and Dragons game that's bouncing around a bit) or maybe a video game if I find something sufficiently rare.

And tomorrow, during our Research Team Meeting, we get to see the Jack Trice Stadium Sim within the C6. It'll be nice to see what we're working with on such a large scale; it might give me more ideas on top of what came to mind from the basic desktop version.

Ropes Course and Recuperation (Days 4 and 5, 5/31 – 6/1)

First of all, I just looked at the Google Calendar page for the program, and I felt my stomach drop at a fully packed month. It was daunting enough just looking at the first week, but June is gonna be… intense.

Yesterday, we went to the Ropes Course in Marshalltown. Notable landmarks on the drive included wind turbines and Daryl's Guns immediately next to a cemetery. We arrived at the place, covered ourselves in bug spray, and dove right into everything. Pendulum and Pinball were a lot of fun, the guys went pretty crazy with it and made it more entertaining than I thought it could be. The spider web thing was fun because we bulldozed right through it really quickly. The 30-foot swing was a blast, and I'm really sad I didn't have the foresight to get my incessant shrieking recorded. I'd been told that the pictures of me were worth a thousand screams, so I'm excited to get those.

When we started on the climbing tower, I knew that I wanted to make it to the top. I'd been to a ropes course back in Maryland, and it had a similar tower that beat me pretty quickly. I wasn't too keen on that happening a second time, even though I still had essentially zero climbing experience. The easy climb, with the straightforward wooden hand/foot holes, was really hot in the sun, to the point

belaying me and giving a lot of moral support throughout (thanks!). I found myself wanting to quit each time I got to a point where I could rest, and about halfway between each rest point, but I kept going, partially from the encouragement and partially because *I was going to make it to the top.*

And I did!

But I didn't take any pictures, because my phone was stuck in my pocket, which was sealed shut from the waist harness. I honestly could have gotten it out if I tried hard enough, but I was too busy freaking out over the wind and the height and the fear from gradually coming back to the ground. Caglar got a video of me up atop the tower from the ground, so I might put that in here when it finds its way to me. Honestly, it kind of taught me a lesson, albeit a real cheesy one.

People tend to give encouragement because they think you can actually do whatever they're encouraging. If Getch and others didn't think I could make it to the top, they wouldn't have encouraged me to keep going. If Andrea and Caglar and Vijay and Stacy and everyone else didn't think we could do these projects we've been assigned to, they wouldn't be working with us, they wouldn't be helping us set goals, and they wouldn't be teaching us how to connect the dots between where we are and where we can be. And most importantly, sometimes people *need* encouragement. It's easy to get caught up in the circumstances of a situation, in the long-term goals and the associated anxieties. But sometimes, you just need that little push to realize that reaching those long-term goals relies entirely on the ability to progress towards short-term goals, and those short-term goals are entirely within your reach.

I'm gonna have to try and keep that lesson close to me in the coming weeks.

After that, we did some Mean-Girls-esque trust falls and got lunch at a Mexican place. When we got back to campus, I tried to stay awake for a while, but then I ended up sleeping from about 6PM-9AM. I woke up at points in between, but I wasn't too enthused on

doing anything in the middle of the night or early morning, so I just went back to sleep.

Now, I have to try and get things done when I'm sunburnt and exhausted and want to do literally nothing. The things I want to get done tonight are…

1. ~~**Get through at least one Info Retrieval project before the weekend ends.** I have a few assignments from the spring to wrap up to get an Incomplete off my transcript, and the sooner I get them done, the sooner they're off my radar.~~ Halfway done with everything.
2. ~~**Create a basic How-To on Literature Reviews.** My group doesn't have much experience with this sort of thing, so I offered to write up a basic guide.~~ Pretty much done. Not going to be anything amazing, but it'll set people off with some baby steps, I hope.
3. **Figure out how to focus the literature review.** This refers both to figuring out factors of immersion and the VR experience, and teasing out facets of the sportsball arena environment that contribute to the excitement and immersion.
4. ~~**Install Unity3D and maybe other programs.** We'll be using things like Unity3D with the Game Day project, and the sooner I have it installed, the sooner I know whether my four-year-old laptop can handle it or not.~~ Installed but untested.
5. **Run around the VRAC and take pictures of all the posters that I find exciting.** I keep saying I'm going to do it, I might just do it on Monday or Tuesday when we have some downtime.

I'm also excited for the Odyssey of the Mind people to be gone and seeing the campus when it's a lot quieter. 🙂

Posted in Blog Posts | Tagged phillip | 3 Replies

Edit

Teamwork, Taskwork, Nerdwork, and Getting My Feet Wet (Day 3 – 5/30)
Posted on May 30, 2014 by Phillip Thompkins

The past like 30 hours have been really, *really* fun. I've found myself going really overboard with some of my blogging about this experience, and it's kind of exciting… until I realize that the things I write about for my friends end up taking about an hour or two.

Yesterday, after our first blogging experience, we got to take a tour of the VRAC. It was really neat! We got to see Augmented Reality and a combine simulator in the Haptics lab, and then we got to mess around in the C6 on a Star Wars Turret Sim made by Ken, one of the grad students. Since then, I've actually gotten to interact with Ken, and he showed us that he's created a way for people to fire the Millennium Falcon's turret by giving him a handshake. I pretty much had to restrain the whole "excitedly begin vibrating and shrieking" thing that people may or may not be hearing me mention, because my mind was so incredibly blown by that. Apparently, he knows a bunch of HCI guys that are in the know about the video games, so I'm looking forward to interacting with him and seeing if HCI-gaming is something I'm interested in beyond the initial shock factor. But the C6. Let me talk about that real quick and share a few pictures. It's a 10'x10'x10' box that requires a pair of glasses much cooler than 3D glasses to appreciate. There are a ton of projectors and screens and some really inventive approaches to make it an all-around immersive experience. The game we got to play was the aforementioned Star Wars Turret Sim made by Ken the awesome grad. Some pictures can be found at these links: one and two. I could have dove into the code to figure out how to align the images and maybe like resize them and give them captions, but I've got another like nine and a half weeks to be fancy. I was pretty okay at the game, but Mariama *killed it*. Kudos to her!

Once that wrapped up, we went on a tour of the Aerospace labs in the rest of the building. We got to see the equipment that Team Flight Simulator gets to work with, as well as an acoustic-less room and a tornado simulator. But a few minutes before the tour wrapped up, I got pulled off to work on a grad student's user study. I was the first of the interns to get to do one (I think the next ones are on Monday?) so that was kind of really cool I guess. It involved cognitive loads, a bunch of surveys, and it was really fun. 10/10, would approve of forcing the interns to participate. I won't say any more about it to keep the element of surprise for the other interns, but at least a few of them will probably enjoy it as much as I did.

When the day wrapped up, I went back to the apartment, and ended up going to the apartment Community Center with Anton, Getch, and Mitchell, but there were just too many Odyssey-of-the-Mind-ers skittering about, so we decided to get our fun out of the way and hit up the arcade in the Student Union. It has bowling alleys, a ping-pong table, pool tables, air hockey, and a few neato arcade games. Of interest was this cool mecha-combat game whose control scheme was kind of like a tanky thing, with two joysticks that had to be manipulated to have any kind of coherent movement, except the mechas also have guns and swords and bombs. We joked about spending the rest of our food stipend on quarters for it, but it looks like it might be a recurring part of our recreational downtime. If I can get a few solid wins in that and air hockey, I'll be thrilled.

Fast-forward to today, and I learn that the frappucinos in the Hawthorn community center food place near our apartments are pretty lacking; trying to drink it just made me sad this morning. We got to see Calgar defend his Master's Thesis, and that was really cool! It reminds me of the presentations we had to do in my Experimental Psych classes, except the authority figures are a *lot* more critical. The Turkish food was really good, too, so I'm excited for when Turkish night happens later on. We also had a Meyers-Briggs session, where I reaffirmed my existence as an INFP (internet refers to them as Idealists), though I didn't doubt it at all. I looked at the Career Choices link from my results page, and it included things like Counseling and Psychotherapy and just general Psychology (definitely thought about those), Literature and Writing (if only I did more booksy stuff, I'd agree), and Education (yeah this thing has me pegged pretty well). The only point I recall disagreeing with from that session was that some of my personality aspects lend themselves to me not being very combative or vocal. Granted, I think that's more due to some of my experiences and how I try to portray myself to others, meaning I'm a bit of an outlier.

ARG training was fun and interesting, but the biggest thing I took from that was our research team meeting and the project goals that came from it. Ideally, we'll get published in the far-flung future, but in the shorter term, we want to…

- Make scenes more realistic, maybe by tweaking the marching band or adding cheerleaders. After we saw the current state of the project, I want to see something get added to the sky, like clouds, stars, and a moon, and I'd love to push the C6 a bit and try to see how realistically we can pack the stands. This doesn't mean I won't want to add in some easter eggs or something (our names carved into the underside of a bench, maybe? 😛), because Vijay already decided to put in a pirate just because. Said pirate looks pretty cool, also. If you don't look too close at her, you don't realize she shouldn't be there!
- Have a comprehensive and well-done Literature Review that goes with our (hopefully awesome) user study. I have no idea what the user study could even look like, since our lit review is literally at 0% completion, but I'm kind of hoping we can pull off an interesting design. At the minimum, it seems like we might be comparing our longer-term C6 environment to maybe the Oculus and the standard videos. Maybe. This is still pretty up in the air.

And of course, we started setting some personal goals, so we can start checking things off our lists as soon as possible. Since I'm unnaturally excited about the literature review and the user study (I'ma get all psychology up in this team), I got to be the "champion" of those aspects of the project. That in mind, my initial goals (y'know, not counting "download the Unity3D software" and all that…) are, in unranked order:

1. **Pinpoint factors of the experience that we want our literature review to focus on.** Current unrefined pseudo-leads include "immersion in them there sportsball games in the tangible meatspace," "aspects of graphics and displays that enhance immersion," "maintaining user presence with a busy surrounding atmosphere," "influence of storytelling and narratives on audience immersion," and other phrase-like things that I didn't just come up with as I was typing because they sounded cool.
2. **Study aspects of the sportsball environments to focus on.** Maybe it'll be a *necessity* to implement some cheerleaders doing some acrobatic pirouettes all over the place, because that's part of the normal script for an American Football game. Maybe we need to add in more huge, blinding fluorescent lights above the field. I know that at UMBC, I can tell when there's a sports game because I can see a white glow in the night sky from where some of the fields are. Or, maybe adding in a mascot that runs around pumping up the fans will work. Or vuvuzelas and potentially-drunken bros with school acronyms painted on their chests. I have literally never been to a football game in person, and I barely watch football as it is, so I might be a bit on the lost side with this one. As long as the literature has *something*, I think I'll be okay. If not, though, then uh…..
3. **Create a basic how-to on Literature Reviews.** It turns out that my teammates have never done any kind of Literature Review before, and they were really interested in some kind of document or tutorial so they would know what they were doing. Caglar mentioned to me in passing that it'll be covered in our Craft of Research classes, but the sooner we can get through our Lit Review, the sooner we beat Vijay's Week 4 deadline for it. And if we finish it sooner, we get more time to tweak and fine-tune it, and we can add even more to it as we go, so it could make the whole "hopefully get published" thing go smoother in the long run. If anyone from the other teams wants a copy of this, let me know; Stacy wants me to have it done before Monday. That said, I don't want to step on anyone's toes by doing this, so hopefully it's okay for me to write one of these. :c If Caglar, Andrea, or any of the faculty think I shouldn't be catapulting that at people or anything, just let me know I guess?

Now that things are starting to take form, I'm getting even more excited. Tomorrow is the ropes course, and that's exciting, because *big swing that goes high in the air*. **We should record the swing, does anyone have like a GoPro or something similar?** I did one of those swings at the ropes course I did for my Resident Assistant training last fall, and it was *the funnest experience in all of that week and a half of training*. I just hope my scrawny, anti-physical self can keep up with things. Even though it's challenge by choice, I'm just stubborn enough to dislike saying "nope can't do that because I am not athletic" or whatever.

Another thing I need to do: run around the lab and take pictures of all of the research posters that give me The Feelings. Worst case, I just take pictures of all of them and then show everyone on Facebook and whatever and be like "this is what I am surrounded by this is why I am eternally excited". Also, I need to figure out how to properly embed the pictures I uploaded of the C6.

It's after 7PM and I still… haven't… left… the… lab. Oops! Should probably fix that before it gets dark.

First Post! :D (Day 2 – 5/29)

Now we get to start daily blogging. I've been recording some of my experiences already, so my pals back home can follow some of my experiences. I'm not sure if I'm going to just copy/paste things over from one to the other or if I'll just write two separate blogs; I guess I'll have to figure that out sooner rather than later.

So far, this has been a really fun experience! All the other interns seem really cool so far, and I'm lookin' forward to all of the awesome things we're going to get into. There have been talks about gym adventures, which is great because I've been wanting to get more physically active for a few years, and this is the perfect way to force myself to do it. Some of us have talked about seeing movies or having gaming marathons. I think it was Samantha who has the big TV and Super Smash Bros? I mentioned it to some of the guys and they got *really* excited. On the walk over today, Getch and I connected over RPGs, so I might have my PS2 shipped out with some of my games, and laugh as he reacts to stuff. Anton and I have discussed the possibility of maybe starting up a tabletop RPG (giga-nerding it up with Dungeons and Dragons or an equivalent) which I think would be pretty cool. It's nice to see that I have a good amount of common interests with other interns! I almost expected everyone to be hardcore researchers or super-studious wet blankets, but it looks like everyone's pretty fun people. Also, the apartments up in Freddy Court are really great, much better than anything that's at UMBC. My bedroom is the decades-old West Hill Apartments back home was about as big as my room in Freddy, but it was also a lot darker and older, so Freddy is a really welcome change. The living room furniture is great too. And the bathroom is big. And we have a reasonably large kitchen. The apartment has just kind of exceeded literally all of my expectations and I'm so glad we get to live there.

The *only* downside so far is that when I googled game stores in and around Ames (because I like my video games and my birthday is in June) it took an extra hour of accidental browsing before I found out that a tiny video game store on Lincoln closed *literally the day before we moved in*. I was really bummed. Well, there's also the fact that I have a small truckload of assignments to wrap up from the spring (oops) that I really should try to get through before the week is over. I haven't started them though, so we'll see if my motivation holds. Surprisingly, I'm actually managing kind of well with this whole "consistently wake up pretty early in the morning" ordeal, even though I crashed real early (like 8pm) last night. I forgot how much stuff I got done when I woke up real early, I might have to start doing it more often.

I'm looking forward to the research meetings later today, I really wanna start interacting more with Eliot, Vijay, and Stacy. I'm a little daunted by the scale of the Game Day project, but some conversations during arrival dinner with Stacy kind of assuaged them a bit; we'll have to see if that changes once we start getting our feet wet.