

The Third Dimension

(or 'too many metaphors')

by Kevin Fox

Each week, writing my reflections of the previous seminar, I've sought to explore the meaning of the term "Interaction Designer", as well as the rationale for necessitating a meaning at all. After Don's very personal seminar though, I'm taking a bit of a detour, and want to reflect a bit on my own personal *why*, in the hopes that it might provide a useful contrast in exploring the greater *what*.

Four weeks ago, Jodi's talk gave a great vertical look at what interaction design is across several disciplines. Three weeks ago, Chris's talk about his own experiences at BodyMedia gave a great horizontal perspective, reminding us that interaction design doesn't live in a vacuum, and that a diverse skill set can be vital to a successful organization, especially a small one.

Don's talk last week surprised me by making me look at the third dimension, the Z-axis that is the path of our lives through time. His autobiography (autobioloquy?) was filled with abrupt shifts that drastically affected his eventual destination (perhaps 'current path' is more appropriate), and the journey along the way.

When Don asked me what I wanted to do with my education, I said "Everything." It was a spur of the moment quip, but I was already thinking more about it when Kerry asked me to elaborate on my answer the next day at lunch. Perhaps "anything" would have been a more accurate answer, but in my head that sounded too frivolous and noncommittal. On the contrary, I want to *be able* to do anything, because I believe that the life-changing events are opportunities that you can jump on, or let go by, and getting a broader education enables me to catch a wider selection of these life-changers as they go by.

Diversity of Skills as Self Determinism

Switching back to the metaphoric part of my brain, I see skills as keys, and I'm exploring a huge castle. Every once in a while I'll try all my keys in a wing, to find that they've taken me as far as I can go, and so I explore another wing, find a few more keys, use them to explore deeper where I am, and then occasionally revisit the places where I was stymied, to find (often unexpectedly) that the new skills (ahem, 'keys') let me go further in those areas than I was able to before.

I feel that there is a cosmic 'S'-curve, where the combined value of a few disparate skills, such as acting and programming, is not much greater than their separate parts, but that as more skills are added into the mix, there are emergent skills that automatically arise from the combinations. Learning how to manage people or projects can make an actor/programmer into a charismatic director, interfacing product design with external clients or investors. Adding in a knowledge of writing and narrative can turn the actor/programmer into an inspirational game designer; one who is far more effective than one who was expert in storytelling and tried to plough through code, or vice-versa. In the middle of the S-curve, every additional skill can make each existing skill significantly more powerful. Each skill provides a key that can unlock more doors than before, because the explored space is so much larger, with so many more doors within reach.

I believe that the far end of this 'S'-curve may offer diminishing returns, though I wouldn't mind finding out. Perhaps when you have a diverse enough skill set, so many new opportunities and accessible challenges surround you that there's less of a need to learn more skills, because there are already more enticing opportunities available than you could reasonably pursue anyhow. On the other hand, perhaps the curve keeps going up.

But back to the point: I came back to school to learn new skills, not because I know where I want to go with them, but because I want to be able to go farther. I feel like the tourist who takes the first available train instead of the one that brings him closest to his destination, because it's not that I want to get to a predetermined place, I just want to go as far as possible, and diversity of interests and skills helps ensure that I can climb on to the trains that aren't on the printed schedule when they happen to show up.