

Essays

Why Us:

Before even applying, I've contributed to USC's creative landscape as a team member of Sherry Xie's MFA thesis, *I Chew Therefore I am*, as a usability member. Every time we worked together, I learned more about game design. The game's themes of rumination and mindfulness actually led me to practice mindfulness myself, showing how games can affect people personally. I've also immersed myself in the Trojan community during my visit to Robert Nashak's CTIN 488 course, where I actively participated in class playtesting sessions and took notes. I offered feedback to help improve others' games. I also learned a lot about the process of playtesting and iteration: essential knowledge for my career goals as a professional game designer. During class, I didn't just feel like a better designer; I felt like I was part of a community of likeminded people who all wanted to work towards the same passion! If I learned this much in the span of two hours, I can only imagine how much I'd grow as an actual IMGD student!

To grow even more, I'd need USC's world-class faculty, specifically Tracy Fullerton, whose book, *Game Design Workshop*, revolutionized how I design games. If admitted, I'd be thrilled to exchange ideas with her, discussing how our design philosophies intersect and diverge during office hours.

Interactive media has changed my life tremendously. At USC, I'm determined to lead the next generation of this medium, bringing smiles, forging connections, and life-altering revelations to players, one game at a time.

Cinematic Arts Personal Statement:

My eyes lit up, and I passionately exclaimed "When I grow up, I'm gonna be an astronaut- and video game maker- and a paleontologist- and a monster truck driver- and a youtuber!"

When I was seven years old, that was my typical response when I was asked the question, "What do you want to be when you grow up?"

I would then go on to incessantly ramble about how I would become the best in the world at every single one of these jobs, blissfully unaware of the fact that you had stopped listening to me after the second sentence. I didn't see your question as a bit of small talk, just as an excuse to open up the floodgates of my boundless imagination. I've always been a creative person. I have early memories of drawing game covers for my own hypothetical video games, and building my own personal utopias in Minecraft on my Xbox 360. One of the few times I remember getting in trouble at school was when I was working on an elementary school project which would be put on display, which I ruined because I got lost doodling my own characters on the back with markers. They bled through the paper, spoiling the project. My imagination was always a big part of me, but for the first few years of my life it was simply just another childlike tendency I had. My imagination would not become the core of my being until one fateful day in second grade.

At 7 years old, I learned how to make my own games using the children's programming website, Scratch. I created Five Nights at Mooshy's, an offshoot of the popular game Five Nights at Freddy's. Excited, I shared the game with my teacher, who was so impressed that she shared it with all of my classmates during indoor recess. It was on that day that my passion for game design seized control over my entire life.

I looked in awe as I saw my classmates open their chromebooks nearly every chance they got in order to play my game. **My game!** Before this, my parents had encouraged my creative endeavors, but even as a kid I knew they only encouraged me because it was a parent's job. But this- this was different. For the first time ever, I watched as people interacted with a world I **created**, and they were in love with it! All of the time I had spent getting distracted in my own imagination, daydreaming about stories and games had finally paid off (although I have that habit under control now). The sight of people being genuinely engaged with a world I put together changed my life forever. I grew up struggling to connect with people at times because I was neurodivergent and did not always understand how to "properly" express myself to others, but this game taught me that I could connect with people in my own unique ways. I no longer felt like I couldn't communicate my ideas properly. People didn't just have to *hear* what I was thinking; they could *play* with my thoughts! I remember happy tears swelling in my eyes as I realized that despite my differences, I could be understood. I had spent so long struggling to express myself in a "normal" way, but now I found a creative outlet to express myself to others in a way that brought *them* joy as well. It was on that day I decided: **This was what I wanted to do. This is my greatest passion.**

From that day onward, if you asked me, "What do you want to be when you grow up?", all the immense passion from my previous dream jobs centralized into these few words.

"I want to be a game designer".

As a young child, I might not have had the words to describe the magic I felt in gaming, but I do now. I want to become an architect of worlds, someone who can channel their passion and creativity to make incredible experiences that alter the course of lives. Gaming is a beautiful combination of all art forms, and gaming's interactive nature allows for learning opportunities and the ability to be deeply immersed in a fictional world.

USC is the perfect place for me to study game design precisely because the designers here focus on these aspects of gaming so much. This school has a heavy emphasis on interdisciplinary learning, making it full of talented artists, animators, musicians, programmers, and writers. And since gaming is a combination of all of these art forms, I will have a wide assortment of people to collaborate with and be inspired by. One opportunity I have to collaborate across programs is the Advanced Games Project course, where I can work with Viterbi programmers, Roski illustrators, Hench animators, and Thornton musicians. If I want to become someone who can create world-class games, I'll need to work with world-class creatives! Together, we could create groundbreaking experiences that capitalize on the best parts of every medium.

USC also has a proven track record of housing designers who understand the power of interactivity in games to tell stories impossible to tell through any other medium. For example, the MFA thesis that I am a team member for, "Cemented Dreams" explores moral dilemmas through the player's actions, making them actually think about the choices they make and how they will affect the game world. Another great example is "Free Will", where players need to actually go into the game files and manipulate them to move the story forward. Even more

lighthearted experiences are made here: “DuoQ” is a prime example. The idea that someone went up to the professors and wholeheartedly pitched a game where you use your *real life voice* to flirt with a machine-learning powered E-girl, and got it accepted is crazy (in a good way)! Most institutions would hear the first few words of the idea and dismiss it, but not USC. USC’s mindset is always focused on pushing boundaries and creating something truly unique; a perfect environment for someone with as many odd and kooky ideas as me! The Game Innovation Lab is yet another piece of proof that innovation is encouraged at USC, and I’d love to learn more about experimental game design so that I can help shape the future of the medium. Games like “Free Will”, “Cemented Dreams”, and “DuoQ” align with my dream of games being seen as a real form of art in the eyes of the public. Whether games are serious or silly, people need to recognize that they can make players think and act in unique ways, and are perfect tools for learning and exploring behavior. It’s cool to watch a great story in a book or movie, but to actually be part of the events that unfold is unforgettable and is the most special part of games.

I know what I want to be when I grow up, and USC is the best place for me to become who I’ve always wanted to be. I’ve been able to funnel all of my inspirations into one central passion: building worlds that help inspire other people to develop passions just like me. This university will transform me into someone who can help benefit the future of the gaming industry, change lives, and cement games as a legitimate art form in the eyes of the world.

Project Question

Describe a project that you worked on with multiple collaborators that let you feeling proud and fulfilled. Discuss your role in the project and explain why this collaboration was successful. Then, describe another collaborative project that left you unsatisfied. Discuss your role in the project and explain why this collaboration frustrated you. Finally, summarize what you learned from each of these experiences and describe the lessons you learned that inspire your future collaborations.

As of writing this, my most recent game, *Prism Weaver* is my most successful group effort yet. In *Prism Weaver*, I acted as the lead producer, meaning that I managed the games overall direction and made sure that the game ended fulfilling all of its purposes. I was also the sole programmer and designer. My friend Nasir primarily handled the artwork. Finally, our classmate Anthony was the musician of the group.

As producer, it was my role to make sure the game came together cohesively and matched the desired experience goal. After I had laid out a solid foundation for the gameplay, I needed to figure out a way to work with my team in a way that communicated what I wanted, while also allowing them to have an input and help cover my potential blind spots in the game’s production. I sat and thought hard about the best method to creatively enable and support them, while also making sure that their work contributed to the final experience I had in mind for *Prism Weaver*. Eventually I thought, “Why not speak to them in *their own* language?”. When it was time for Nasir to begin working on the artwork, I appealed to his art background by giving him various samples of art styles to study and take inspiration from. Every art style had the “retro sci fi” aesthetic that I felt would fit the game, yet they all were executed in various ways. Some were more heavy on expressiveness, while others featured meticulously detailed cyberpunk parts. I purposely picked vaguely similar yet radically different styles. Nasir should have guidance on

what to do, while still adding his own artistic flare. I told him he shouldn't just pick a single art style and take inspiration from that exclusively, he should try and combine art styles. He ended up picking the best traits from many of the different given styles. Call me biased, but I think that his "combination" style really accentuated the best parts of each style, and formed an even better aesthetic than the ones I provided. Honestly, at first I was caught a bit off guard by his style, simply because it wasn't what I envisioned. But after playing the game with the newly created sprites, I realized that he actually exceeded my expectations. A good game designer should be able to push through this initial discomfort of seeing ideas that don't match their own. They must be able to say to themselves: "Ok, this isn't what I had in mind at first. But once I break it down, does it match or improve the experience goal that I set?"

Likewise, I attempted to speak in Anthony's own language. Given that he is a musician, I wanted to communicate my goals for the player experience through sound. I did this by creating a playlist of songs that I believed would match the feeling of the game, and bolster the "retro arcade sci fi"-esque mood. Just like with Nasir, I purposely gave him songs which executed my desired theme in different ways. And after a while of sending him the playlist, he came to me with excellent songs that evoked the desired mood in ways I hadn't even thought of.

These experiences taught me a valuable lesson:

The best way to handle creative direction is to get people to buy into your vision, and let them make a better version themselves! The end result of following this advice was something better than I initially envisioned. Because I trusted my teammates and built on their strengths, we achieved something better than I could create on my own.

When I was around third grade, I stayed at aftercare once the school day ended. Most kids see aftercare as just a boring place to stay while you wait for your parents to pick you up, but I saw aftercare as **my studio**. A few of my friends at aftercare found out about my game development passion, and thought it was really cool, and they wanted to help me out. I officially decided to "found" my very own "game development studio", Bit Bundle Games.

At the time, I was working on my game "Megamonsters". A open world multiplayer RPG game where you tamed hundreds of Pokemon-like creatures and trained them to battle and trade. I had a two-hundred page design document detailing the extensive lore, type matchups, and characters of the game (I'll let you figure out if I ever finished it or not). I was more than happy to receive help on this game. I "hired" a bunch of my friends to help me with the game. My enthusiasm quickly turned into frustration, though.

Here's what went through my seven year old mind at the time:

*"All of my "employees" want to just be "idea guys"! So frustrated. Megamonsters is **my baby**. If anyone was gonna help me make it, they were gonna focus on the boring parts like coding. But creative direction belongs to me and me only! I come to aftercare every day and demand that my friends help me with the game, and they have **the audacity** to think they deserve even a sliver of creative control over something they spent so much time and effort on? That's insane!"*

You can definitely see the problem. I got greedy creatively, and wasn't open to any feedback. I saw sharing creative control and taking criticism as an attack on my precious imagination. Not to mention, I also got way too ambitious. Ignoring the elephant in the room (the fact that I thought literal children could create a quality MMO-RPG), I didn't take the time to communicate my desired design to my friends clearly. I didn't give them much guidance on what I wanted

them to do. They had no specific guidance on what the game's final vision was. And as you would expect of elementary schoolers working on a massive project, we never finished the game. Megamonsters was doomed by my creative greed, poor communication, and unrealistic scope.

Lessons Learned from Both:

Despite these two projects being vastly different in almost every way, I can draw similar conclusions from them both. Understanding the strengths of your collaborators and capitalizing on them will always yield better results than micromanaging them. Creative control often goes bad when it is only in the hands of one person. Art pieces as complex as games need to be made by a group of people who understand each other and the vision they agreed to create. Focusing on actionable, realistic steps achieves results better and faster than striving after loft goals without a solid plan. In the case that I work on a game in a group setting as a USC student, I will make sure to remember this experience and apply the lessons I learned to make sure that my team produces a game that we can be proud of: A game that acts as another of the dozens of examples for why USC is the greatest game design school on the continent.

My Designer Identity-

Games have been a big part of my life for as long as I can remember. I've played them my whole life, and ever since I watched my classmates fall in love with a video game I created on Scratch in second grade, game development has been my life's passion. In my life, games have helped nurture lifelong friendships, fostered talents and skills, and acted as a form of expression for me. For my professional goals, I simply want to be able to make a living expressing myself through gaming, while also allowing for gaming to be viewed as an equally "real" form of art as literature and cinema. I want to use the interactive nature of games to solidify their cultural/artistic legitimacy in the eyes of society.

I don't want to live in a world where saying that "video games changed my life" is funny or childish.

Miscellaneous-

"I Chew Therefore I Am" MFA Thesis Project-

- Role: External Usability Member
- I'm a usability tester for the USC Master's Thesis Project, "I Chew Therefore I am", which will be released in May 2026
- Of course, the game is still in early pre production, and I just joined and so there's nothing for me to test yet. But as of now, the plan is:
 - Every month, play a new build of the game

- Meet with the team and discuss usability issues, document them, and brainstorm their causes and solutions to them
- Address possible solutions with the team
- Once I start actually working, I'll update whatever I learn and contribute here.

Games Made Solo/With Friends-

Cryptid University (WIP)-

Role: Designer and Programmer

Cryptid University is in very early development as of now. It's still in the prototyping phases. I'm making it while leading a team that includes myself, an artist/animator, and a musician.

C.U is a social simulator game with a heavy focus on character customization.

The player experience goal is: **players should feel self-expression through customizing their own character and choosing how they affect other characters.**

Prism Weaver-



Role: Gameplay and System Design, Narrative, Programming

Link: <https://flamingo-bones.itch.io/prism-weaver>

Trailer: <https://share.google/rHaDtVj1r2aOdIRsQ>

Engine: Gamemaker Studio 2

Release Date: August 29, 2025

Genre: Strategy Platformer

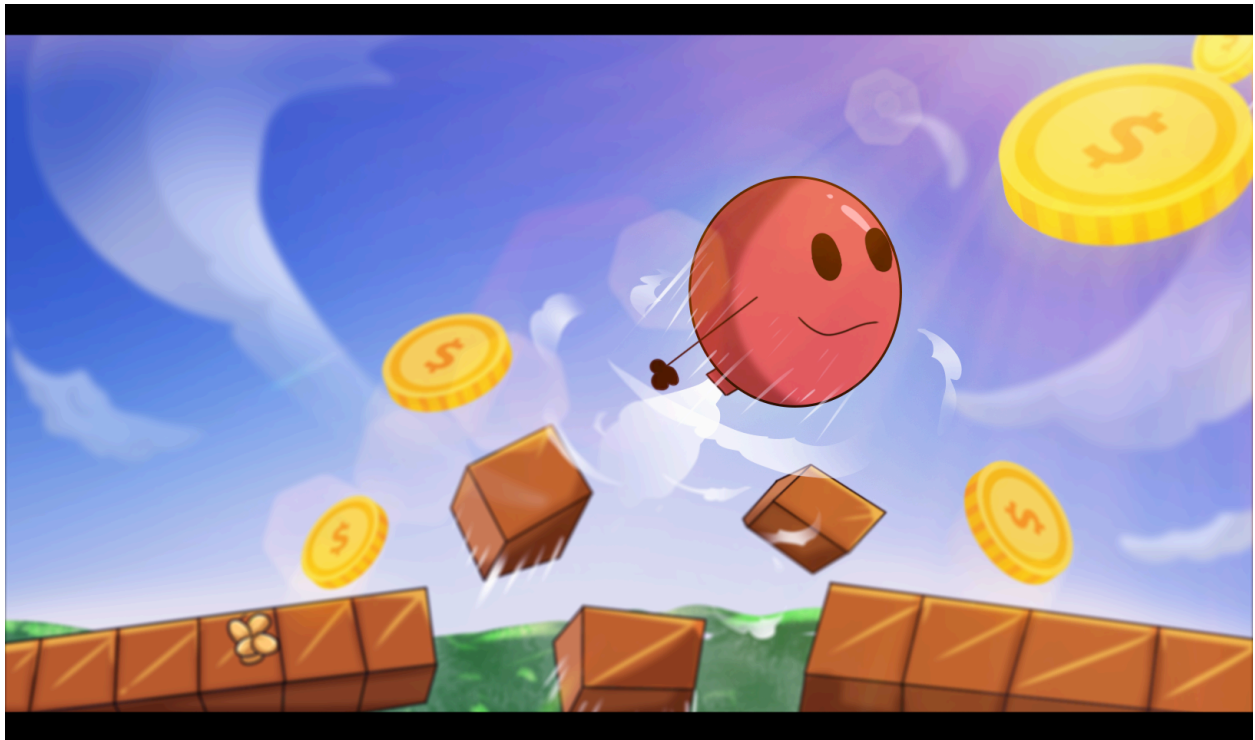
Key Game Design Takeaways:

- POLISH can completely change a game: When discussing prototypes, many people say “your prototype should be ugly. Focus only on the core functionality and not polish.”, which certainly has merit in certain genres. But in Prism Weaver, I’ve found that some games (like this one) really come together once polish is added. It can be more impactful

than you think. For example: in one iteration that I gave to playtesters, the game had little polish. The reception was good, but nothing special. Then, I made another iteration where I changed NOTHING in the gameplay, and only added polish. The reception was far better the second time.

- Use games as iterations: Prism Weaver has a similar player experience goal to Airheaded, my previous game. It's about the player having to move frequently, despite movement itself being dangerous. I built off of Airheaded's design when making this game. In Airheaded, the player loses health as they move. But in this game, I tried making that more interesting, by having the player create level hazards as they moved. This means the game's level is constantly changing based on the player's actions.

Airheaded -



Link (playable in browser): <https://gx.games/games/p6egoj/airheaded/>

Role: Everything except for cover art and sfx

Trailer: <https://youtu.be/Y4rJZexzSyQ>

Engine: Gamemaker Studio 2

Release Date- July 4, 2025

After the 2-year development of my last game I decided I wanted to produce another small game so I could focus fully on the design fundamentals.

Airheaded is a [foddian rage game](#) with a few levels that can be played in browser.

Key Game Design Takeaways:

- **I invented my own design framework when making this game: funnel design.** Funnel design is setting a feeling/sensation that the game is supposed to evoke in the player (similarly to a player experience goal), and then layering conditions and restrictions that help bring about that feeling. An example of funnel design when designing this game is:
 - I decided I want the fun in this game to be based on tension.
 - I would build tension through forcing the player to manage resources to prevent themselves from losing. I decided that the resource being managed would essentially be health.
 - I would force the player to expend health in moderation by making a common action cost health. I decided on movement being the health-depleting action.
 - I would also make movement have loose and slippery controls, causing the player to have to think extra hard to avoid moving too much
- Going forward, I plan to use funnel design as a way to brainstorm ideas so that I can begin prototyping games as soon as possible. Funnel design also ensures I can keep a game focused by choosing a specific feeling it is meant to invoke.
- **Testing early works wonders.** I had people test the game within the first few weeks of development, and this saved me so much time. For example, I figured out that at one point, the levels were designed in a way that detract from the player experience goal, but luckily I received this feedback before I made many levels. This made it easier for me to redesign the few levels that already existed, and taught me how to better design the ones that would come after.

Drunkard VS. Aliens



Link: <https://flamingo-bones.itch.io/drunkard-vs-aliens>

Trailer:  Drunkard VS. Aliens- Launch Trailer

Engine: Gamemaker Studio 2

Role: Everything except for sound and some music

Release Date: January 2, 2025

Drunkard VS. Aliens is a horde shooter game with a heavy focus on build-making and customization. It is probably the most content heavy of my games, with a full playthrough taking about 2-3 hours.

Key Design Takeaways

- **Understand your game's premise and make sure the game's design goes alongside it.** This game's "catch" is the weird plot premise, about an astronaut who gets stuck on an alien planet after drunk-driving his spaceship. The premise is how I would try and get people's interest in the game, but upon playing the game the premise is pretty inconsequential. The plot and gameplay have almost no correlation beyond just providing a setting. This isn't a complaint that any players had, but it is something I noticed myself.
- **Get outside feedback early.** Testers will find game-breaking glitches faster than a developer ever will, and you need to focus on fixing those before you make the game all pretty and polished. My first ever tester was in the last 2-3 months of development, and he found a gamebreaking exploit super fast.
- **Manage scope properly.** I thought this game would take about ~10 months, but it ended up taking 2 years, and that was after I cut the scope down to 1/3 of the original idea. I needed to be realistic with my abilities as a game dev and recognize that everything in game development takes longer than expected.
- **Understand the value of player experience goals, and stick to them.** I was first introduced to the idea of player experience goals (a concept from game design professor Tracy Fullerton) when I was about halfway through developing this game. Experience goals completely changed my design process for the better, but given the fact that the game wasn't originally designed with an experience goal in mind, the final product felt somewhat messy and unfocused. Certain enemies within the game have clear player experience goals, but as for the game as a whole, I had to improvise and make up a player experience goal halfway through development. The game could have been much more focused, had I known about experience goals from the start.

Sea Showdown-



Link: <https://flamingo-bones.itch.io/seashowdown>

Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VWKbiH1z64s&t=1s>

Engine: Gamemaker Studio 2

Release Date: September 22, 2022

Role: Everything except for music and sound

This is my first fully released game. A small arcade shooter game. I knew very little about game design when this was made. All I knew was that I should keep the scope small, which is a lesson I learned from spending the 7 years prior to this making half-baked projects and then giving up.

Design Lessons Learned:

- **Keep scope small.** Making a small arcade game was a good idea for my first fully released game. I just wanted to have something finished.
- **If your game is fun before you put any graphics in, you've got something good.** Pretty self-explanatory, but this game was pretty fun before I even put in any artwork, which was a good sign.

Game Design Writing

Spore Autopsy

Link: [Spore](#)

Spore is a 2008 game which I love. However, I (and many other players) have noticed flaws in its design, and the game's state on release alienated many players. In this document, I perform an "autopsy", or an analysis of design decisions which I think harmed the game and led what could have been a sprawling gaming franchise into an early grave.

Drunkard VS. Aliens Autopsy

Link: [3 Lessons I Learned from my Indie Game's Release \(16 year old game dev\)](#)

This is a video I made shortly after Drunkard VS. Aliens came out. It's basically me breaking down the design lessons that I learned throughout DvA's development.

The main points I make are:

1. Make sure that your game actually focuses on it's selling point. This game's main catch was the humorous and absurd plot, yet the characters and storyline are almost completely irrelevant once you actually play the game.
2. Test your game early and often.
3. Learn to market early on (especially if you're going to take literal YEARS of time making the game..)

"Game Design Workshop" Notes

Link: [Game Design Workshop](#)

I took notes on Tracy Fullerton's book, game design workshop. I read this in the middle of DvA's development, and it would be an understatement to say it **completely changed the way I view game design**. It wasn't until I read this book that I began to truly understand what games are at their core, and how to best design them. Whatever game design success I have in the future, I owe to this book.

"Level Up!" Notes

Link: [Level Up Notes](#)

Notes on "Level Up! The Guide to Great Game Design" by Scott Rogers. I've used quite a few of the lessons in this book in my own games. I especially like how it details many parts of not just game design, but game production in general.