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As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2442 words.

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Terrifying Jellyfish on making games out of food

You've been making games since you were 13. Was it just sort of a natural progression for you, going from loving games to making them?

It did feel like a pretty natural progression. I've always had an interest in games. The first console I ever had was a Sega Genesis and *Sonic the Hedgehog 2* was the first game I played that had such a huge influence on me. To this day that game inspires the colors that I use and the vibe and enthusiasm I try to put into my work. That game was just really formative for me and I loved it so much.

After playing the game for a while we discovered the debug mode cheat, which allowed you to go around the map and place things in the game. It was pretty much just a testing tool for the developers, but that really inspired me. It revealed to me an extra layer that goes on beneath the surface of the game that the average player doesn't even know about. I think that's what subconsciously inspired me to pursue this, even before I knew what went into games or that it was something that I could do. Because of that I was telling people, "Oh yeah, I want to be a game designer when I grow up"... but never did I think I would actually accomplish that.

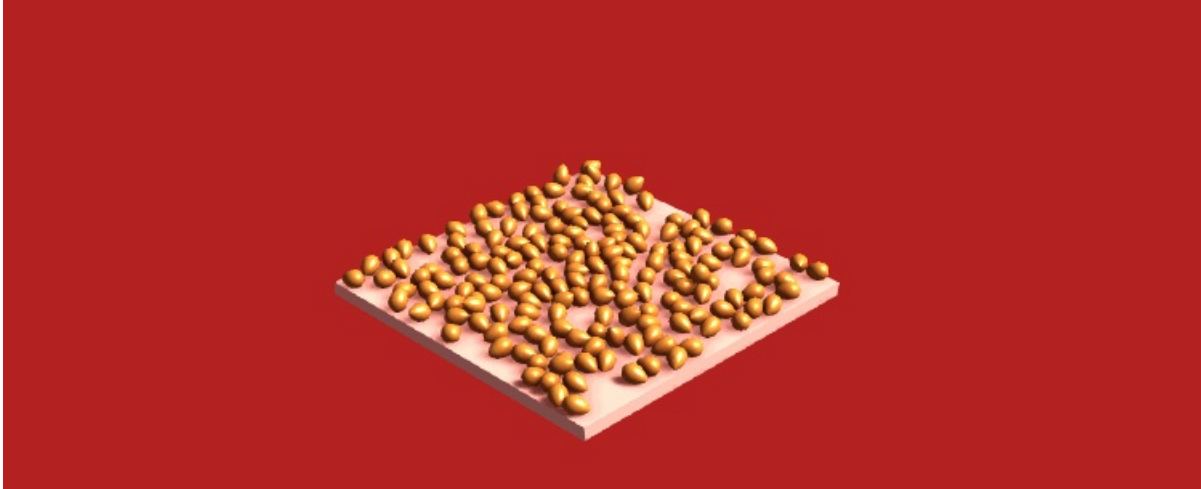


Do you remember the first thing that you made where you're like, "Oh, this is actually a real thing. This is more than just a hobby or something I do for fun. This feels real."

The second I got my first script working, and even more so the second I made something move on the screen—that was such a huge moment for me. To this day it still doesn't get old. The first time you see something on the screen move because of code you've written is just like, "Wow." You feel like it's way more in your grasp than you'd ever thought possible. I remember jumping up and almost being teary I was so happy. I was just like, "Yo, I bet I can make a full game."

Looking at your website, it seems like your entire identity as a creator/designer is already so fully realized. Your games are all visible, you link out to your collaborators, and you have merch for sale. How did you develop your identity? Was it something you had in mind from the beginning?

Yeah. I've always had this visual aesthetic. I always loved designing logos for things. I love picking out color schemes. I loved graphic design even before I knew what "graphic design" was. Even back in the days when all I had was MS Paint I would sometimes draw out website layouts and stuff just because it was fun. Later on when it was time to actually create an identity for Terrifying Jellyfish I was like, "Okay, I'll just make it as neat as possible and I'll make it as colorful as I see it in my head. I'm just gonna make it super me." That's how it started. When I started the company in 2014, I was 18. I already knew what kind of stuff I liked and what I wanted it to be and what direction I wanted the brand to go in simply because I knew I wanted something that appealed perfectly to my own interests. I only worried about pleasing myself. It evolved from there.



What drew you specifically towards creating games as opposed to being a graphic designer or a video artist? What is it about games that appeals to you?

Well, I love expressing myself in different mediums. I also do video work every now and then or I'll do something 2D just to try something different. There's a lot of platforms that I want to express myself in. I can never have enough creative outlets, but I always come back to games because they feel so exciting to me. I think that's in part because of what a relatively new genre it is. With video games, I feel like there's so many permutations of what you can do with that platform and still so little that's been explored. So many games are just derivative of each other, so there's still space to create something completely new and that hasn't been seen before. A lot of indie games are going in that direction. It's uncharted territory.

You'll soon be releasing NOUR, a game you funded on Kickstarter. What was the impetus to make a game all about food?

It literally started with a bowl of ramen and a cup of bubble tea. I knew that there was already a culture around those kind of food items because when I'd scroll through Tumblr or Twitter I'd see endless pictures of ramen or bubble tea, these really beautiful, stylized photos. I'd see lots of food pics on all of these artsy looking blogs with these amazing colors and well-composed pictures of food. I was interested in that. I was like, "Okay, there really is a whole aesthetic surrounding food, especially ones using soft colors that kind of match and convey the flavor through the way they look." I became interested in that concept so I first made the bubble tea just as a test to see if that was something I could do in 3D. It was literally just an art test to see if I could create a shader that simulates bubble tea.



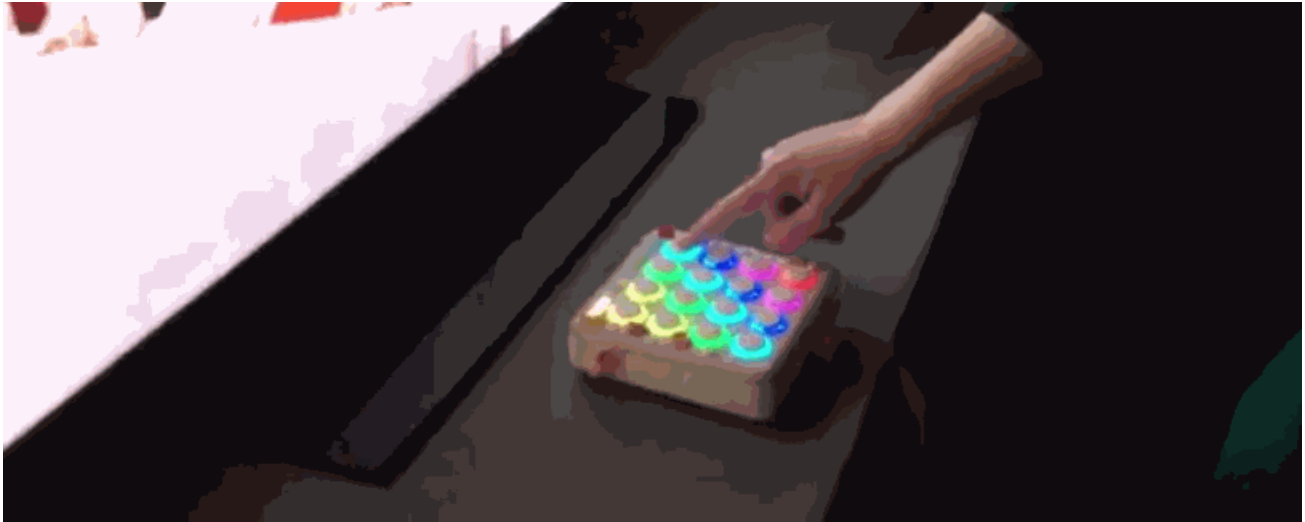
So I did that and uploaded it to Twitter and the response was great. People were like, "Oh my gosh, as soon as I saw that the flavor appeared into my mouth." I thought that was interesting, so I did the same with my ramen scene and once again the response was the same. The original tweet I made about it blew up. It was a little video I recorded of noodles falling into a bowl and then meat following it. People's responses inspired me to make more of it.

After I showed those off, a friend of mine was throwing an event and wanted me to show something at it. He was wondering if I could show my food art in some way. And I was like, "Well, I make games so what better way to do this than to try to make a game out of it." Since it was an art show and not really a games show, I just made it to where you could press buttons to interact with the food-like buttons that popped the popcorn or whatever. That was the first iteration of the game, before I even knew it was gonna be a game. It was just playing with your food. People loved it. I found it interesting that it was a game that could fit within this art space. It was engaging enough while also not having any scores or objectives or the rules of any other traditional game.

It's described online as a game with no goals or objectives. What is it about that particularly that appeals to you?

To me it's something that makes the game a lot more accessible. Sometimes when I'm at game events I see people approach a game, but they won't really play it themselves because they're afraid that they're going to do it wrong, or they're gonna lose, or they're gonna mess something up. They feel the need to perform, so they'll just watch someone else play because they're too scared to play it themselves. I've found that with a game with no goals or objective people will see that the experience is open. You get out of it exactly what you put into it. There's no wrong way to do it.

I've seen it at many game events. Someone will come up skittishly, press the button, and just see what happens. When they see that that something fun and rewarding happens, then they press another button. By the end of it, they're smiling and mashing buttons and it's an amazing experience. At the same time, anyone can enjoy it. You don't have to be a gamer at all. You can just experience it as an art piece. Anyone can just walk up to it and interact with it.



Competitive games reach into our inner instincts to compete and be the best and do something grandiose. Those kinds of games increase tension. They increasingly raise the stakes, which can be stressful. That's why some people like them. With something like *NOUR*, a game with no real objective or way to do it wrong, it's a completely different experience because you are simply pleasing yourself by making something satisfying happen on the screen. It's about satisfaction—here's your expectation and here's the immediate feedback from your input. It's something completely different from what people expect games to be.

When you're doing the kind of work that involves coding and hours spent staring at a computer screen, how do you keep from burning out and going crazy?

This is a problem I've run into recently. Something that I didn't realize about working for yourself was just that a lot of times you'll end up inside the house and you won't leave for days on end. You'll just notice, "Oh, hey, I just haven't seen another human in a day or two." I used to work in an office, so it's only recently that I became self-employed. Before, there was a place to go to every day. There was an environment that was changing and brand new every day. There were people.

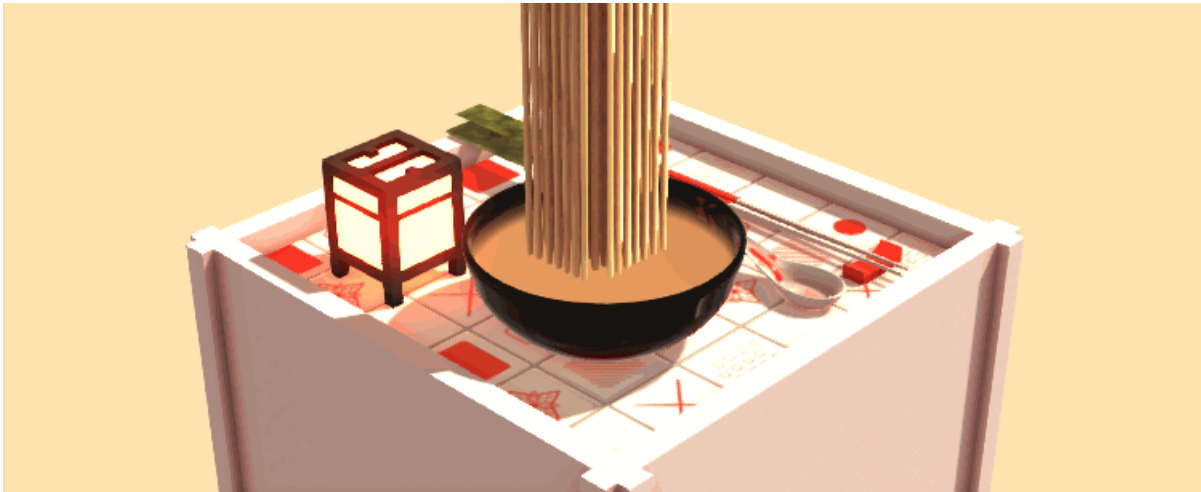


When you're working from home you don't really get that. You go stir crazy. You get cabin fever. If you work alone with a computer, something really important for your mental health and your productivity is to figure out how are you going to have interaction with other people. How are you going to satisfy your other human needs other than working? There's a lot of ways to manage that, whether it be taking walk breaks or hitting up your friends. I think it's important just to reach out to other people who are also

working freelance and be like, "Hey, want to work in the same space?" Just to have that kind of flow. It makes you a lot more cognizant of what you need to make yourself mentally happy. I would say that if you don't ignore those signs then that's a good way to prevent burn out. Your work will also improve if you remember to take breaks, clear your head, and not get lost in it.

How do you get feedback? Do you have a trusted network of people to share things with?

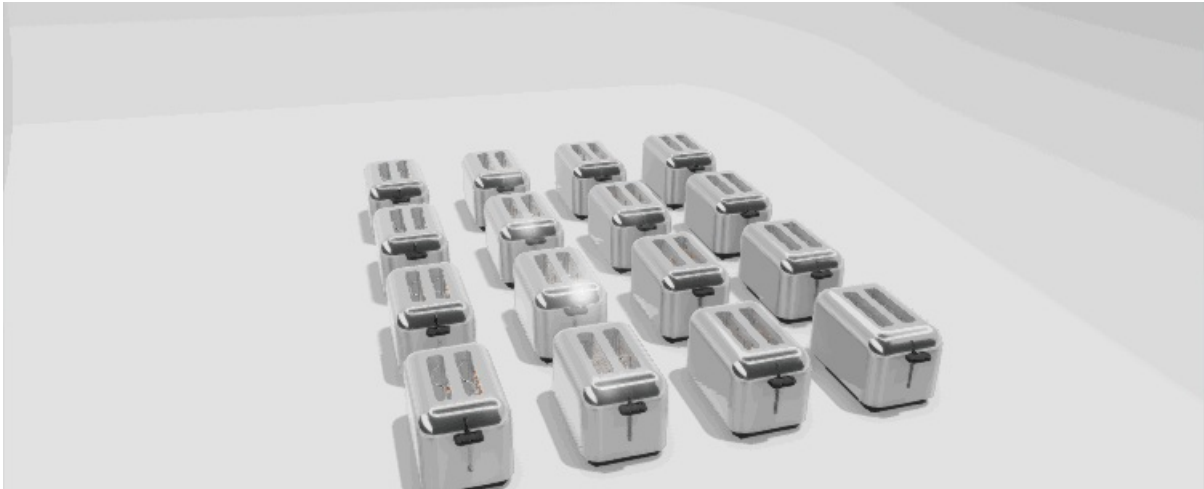
If it's something that would really require a designer's eye to test out, I do have a select channel of other developers from all over that I can talk to. It's definitely a good idea to create a network of other people that are doing what you're doing so that you can test out ideas, ask them what they think of things, etc. You often need honest, open criticism of what you're doing. I ask friends if I want an actual opinion from a player on what to do about things. Sometimes, especially if it's just a little art thing that's unfinished or whatever, I'll put it out to Tumblr or Twitter just to be like, "Hey, look at this neat little thing that I did. It's not finished, what do you think?" It's important to show what you're working on to different kinds of audiences.



Knowing now how much time and energy it takes to bring a game to fruition—including development and raising the money, etc—how do you decide which projects to pursue? Do you just go where the energy seems to be?

It can be difficult to figure that out because what you're excited about might not be what everyone else is excited about. I think a really important part of figuring out what project to tackle next is just getting feedback. It shows you that people around you are indeed interested in this and if you were to pursue it that it would be a really good endeavor, which is something that will motivate you more to work on it. Often with games you'll find that your drive to make something won't last as long as it will take to actually make it. By the time you're six months into development you're like, "All right. I'm over this idea. I want to work on something else."

If you get that active feedback from other players, other developers early on, and if you see that they really like what you're doing and they really like the idea, then that will motivate you to the finish line. Just show people, get a gauge of interest, but also listen to yourself and listen to see if your heart is saying that this is a project you truly want to work on.



You really have to feel it. For example, *NOUR* was a project I never intended to be a full game, but it was the response of people on Twitter and on Tumblr that drove me to make it. Thinking about it now, it almost felt like it was a gift, "Oh, people want more of this and I'm the only person who can give it to them? Here you go." It's a super good feeling when people like something that you love to work on and they want more of it.



Terrifying Jellyfish recommends:

My favorite video game of all time, *Oni*. I used to watch my dad play it all the time, and honestly, this 17 year old game holds up.

Shawn Wasabi. You'll see how he inspires me right away.

Mirror's Edge. This game has a killer visual style and has always been my benchmark for how cool games can look regardless of how advanced the engine is.

this music video. it's strange

Rina Sawayama. She's dope.

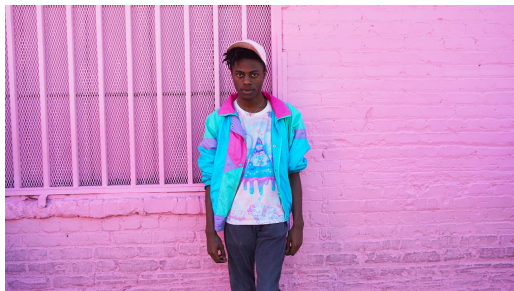
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Vocation

Game Designer, Digital Artist

Fact



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