



ENGINEERING INSIDE: GAMING

July 2012

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Simon Lui is an Assistant Professor of Information Systems Technology and Design (ISTD) at the Singapore University of Technology and Design (SUTD). In 2008, he founded EC2 Hong Kong to develop iPhone and iPad apps and sell them in the iPhone app store worldwide. Simon developed 7 apps, including #1 bestselling apps in several countries. Most of his apps are daily utilities and mini games that sell for US\$0.99-\$1.99.



Simon's apps reflect some of his interests.

For example, Simon has a great interest in music, and minored in music as part of his undergraduate degree. So, he developed "ec Shamisen" — a musical instrument app, so users can play the traditional Japanese instrument "Shamisen" on the iPhone. Also related to Simon's interest in music and sounds is "SoundMitate," a sound imitation game where players choose a sound and see how well they can imitate it. This app also lines up with some of his current research. Simon plans to develop this concept further into other useful apps such as a language learner. And, he also developed Tinha War, which is one of his bestselling games. The idea came from a traditional Hong Kong 1980s childhood paper game.

Q: How did you decide to study computer science? Was it a tough decision?

In 2000, I choose computer as my major because I have many dreams to achieve. For example, to invent an "intelligent music search engine," and to be one of the characters in a computer game, etc. I think the digital virtual world provide me the platform to do so.

It was not that tough to make the degree decision, since I believe the Chinese proverb. "Every profession produces its own leading authority." No matter which subject I take, if I enjoy it and work hard, I believe I can be successful.

Q: Did you play lots of electronic games as a child? What was your experience then?

Yes I did play a lot. I got a Nintendo in 1988. I remember the game I played most is the "Fire Emblem" released in 1990. I am still playing their latest release on the Wii and NDS platform. This game impressed me a lot; it is a strategy-demanding game with strong story background. On the other hand, I also love the "Pac Man", since I can just play it without thinking. I think both "simple" and "strategy- demanding" games have strong markets.

Q: How did you get interested in gaming as a career?

I hoped to work on something that I enjoyed. I loved playing games, so I wanted to develop my own creation. I need it, so I write it!



Screenshot from ec Shamisen. Image Credit: Simon Lui

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"Tinha War" App on iTunes

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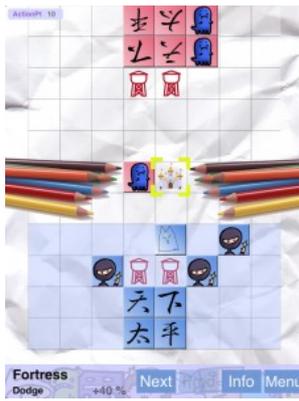
At the Singapore University of Technology and Design, Simon focuses on both teaching and research. As Assistant Professor in the Information Systems Technology and Design Pillar, he teaches different "information system" subjects in different semesters. For example, this semester he is teaching Mathematics and Physics. He'll be teaching other subjects such as computer programming and app design in future semesters. In terms of research, Simon works on audio engineering and mobile application design. His research attitude is practical and he publishes real application by using his research outcome. For example, the SoundMitate app is a combination of "Game" and "Audio Similarity Research."

EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND:

- Ph.D., Computer Science, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, 2010
- M.Phil., Computer Science, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, 2005
- B.Eng(hons), Information Engineering and minor in music, Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2003

Q: Where do you get your game ideas from? What is your inspiration?

Many ideas come from daily life. I remember once I said to my girlfriend: "I will rescue you when you are in danger." But she complained: "When?" So, I make it happen in a game! In "Tinha War" stage 24, the princess is trapped, the hero is going to save her. I am actually the hero and she is the little princess! Tinha is a Hong Kong traditional board game, which was very popular in 1980s-1990s. In this game, you will lead an army, aim to destroy the enemy bases. In the game you can draw your own soldier, or capture an image from a photo.



Screen shot from "Tinha War." Image credit: Simon Lui

Q: Did your formal educational training prepare you for your current gaming work? Why or why not?

Yes. I learned programming, algorithm, design pattern, and most importantly, I learned "how to learn." In the world of computer gaming, we need to catch up with the latest technology all the time.

Q: You started a company to help market your games...did starting and running your own business take away from your game development time? How do you balance the work?

Since I run a small-scale company, the business workload is not that heavy. Also, the good thing about selling products on the iPhone app store is that I can do business at any time online. For example, discuss with blogger via email, purchase Facebook advertisement on web, etc.

For game development, I keep the creative and high-level jobs for myself, such as game design and code architecture. I leave the time consuming jobs such as programming and data input to freelancers.

Actually, other than this app company, I also have another business on going, but I didn't find much pressure in time management. Nowadays doing business online is really efficient.

Q: What challenges did you face when trying to market your games?

It is difficult to get my product in front of target customers. There is too much information on the web, so I have to work to attract the potential customers and stand out from my competitors online. In Hong Kong, we can make use of newsgroup; in the U.S., perhaps it is better to do it via technical blogs. In Japan, better to use a lovely girl as advertisement thumbnail...so marketing strategy can be different in different countries.

Q: Do you often have to redesign a game or app? How many versions do you create before a new game is ready for launch?

Usually, I develop an alpha version for my friends to try it out. Then follow up with a beta version for a focus group to test — and then I will release the game.

Developers can update their app on the iPhone app store at any time. Usually it takes 7 days for Apple to review your update. Then the latest version will be automatically downloaded to all your customers' iPhone. I revise my game frequently by considering customer's feedback. One of my apps has had 17 minor updates after it is released, and my customers are happy about that — they love to be listened to!

Q: You have many degrees....why did you decide to go for PhD?

It requires a Ph.D. degree in order to be a professor. Ph.D. is my final degree.

Q: How long have you been a member of IEEE? What prompted you to join?

I have been an IEEE member for 5 years. I had my first academic publication in IEEE Transactions on Multimedia in 2006. IEEE membership is essential for my academic career.

Q: What is the most rewarding thing about the work you do?

Once I saw a stranger on train, he was playing my game happily with his friend. I am delighted to find my game did entertain people in real life!

Q: Can you share a story about how the work you do has impacted the world of



Screenshot from SoundMitate. Image Credit: Simon Lui

gaming?

To be frank it is not me who has impacted the world of gaming, but rather all those developers who write apps on the mobile platform that did the job. For example, I was one of the first developers who released games on the iPad. Before that, no one carried such a big console and played game on the go. Thanks to iPad's processing power and mobility, many people are now holding their tablet computer and playing games on trains and buses and in cafés. Also, with its big screen, more types of game start to appear. It enriches our lives.

Q: What advice would you give a pre-university student who was interested in working in the gaming industry?

The industry will keep on expanding, but the focus can be changed frequently. For example, customers' primary interests are switching from household game consoles, to desktop Internet games, and then to mobile consoles, and then to mobile games with Internet access...

For a pre-university student, make sure you are equipped with fundamental technical knowledge during school days, and "learn how to learn": be able to search for answers on your own, and discover interesting topics and ideas. Then, you will be able to catch up with the ever-changing but exciting world of gaming!

Topics: [careers](#), [interview](#), [video games](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#).

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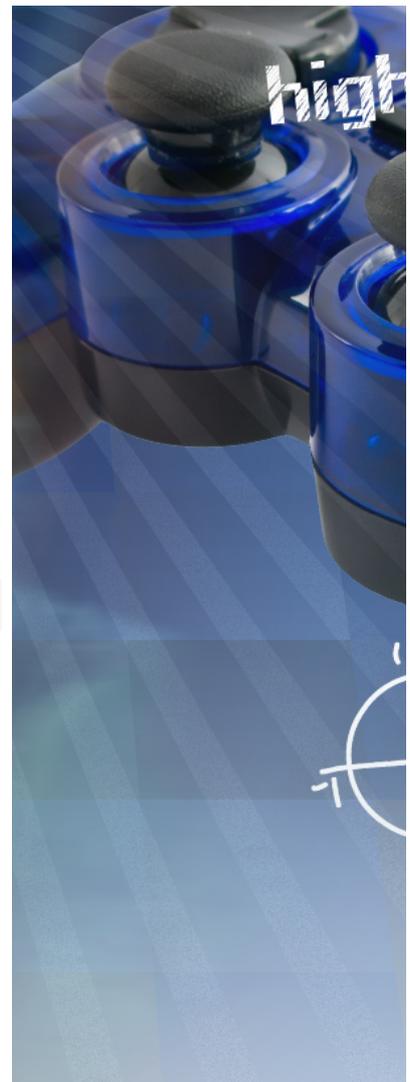
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