Visual Arts Alumni

COLLABORATE ON MOBILE GAME SELECTED FOR 2017 PAX EAST INDIE SHOWCASE

In 2014, Frank DiCola was finishing up his bachelor’s degree at Stevens Institute of Technology and, like many of his peers, had a burning entrepreneurial spirit he had to follow.

His idea? Starting his very own game studio.

DiCola was completing his B.A. in visual arts and technology and moving right into his M.S. in software engineering when he and a few classmates created a board game called Mr. Game!. They raised close to $17,000 on Kickstarter to fund the project and spent an entire summer filling order after order.

After Mr. Game!’s success (which continues to be sold today), DiCola launched Game Revenant, his dream game studio he runs independently here in Hoboken.

“There aren’t too many game development studios in this area,” DiCola remarked of the challenges. “I want to be one of the few that succeed in NYC’s Silicon Alley.”

Joined by fellow alumni Jack Kelly ’13 and Caroline Amaba ’12, the idea to develop a mobile app game came to the table and the Ducks went to work. Kelly graduated Stevens with a B.S. in math and a M.S. in computer science and now holds a position at Datavore Labs as a Developer. Amaba earned two bachelor’s degrees in computer science and visual art and technology and currently works as a Senior Web Developer with VaynerMedia.

Through creative inspiration from Kelly, the trio created Where Shadows Slumber, an adventure puzzle game that takes place in a shadowy, abandoned world where moving shadows guide the main character through his journey across multiple levels. The stunning artistic style of the design combined with the mind-bending mechanics of the game itself have made people take notice: Where Shadows Slumber has over 120,000 downloads from the Apple and Android stores, and the game is still only in a demo stage.

The demo attracted so much attention that it was selected to be a part of PAX East, one of a series of gaming festivals that have been hailed as a celebration of gamer culture and have grown to be a prestigious exposition in the industry. Hosted in Boston in early March, the PAX East Indie Showcase, where Game Revenant’s game was featured, promised to “showcase a collection of the best indie games you’ve never heard of available on mobile platforms.”

DiCola attributes the game’s early successes to the solid digital arts foundation he built during his academic career at Stevens.

“Everything I learned—the animation, video editing, photography, coding languages—it all helped me teach myself other things, other programs… The way I was taught at Stevens was immensely helpful in transferring skills over in a variety of ways,” he said.

DiCola’s advice to other students is simple: Make connections with other Stevens students.

“Don’t give up if you find programming to be tough, as an example. I’m barely programming in my everyday life because I had to switch over to a business mindset. Just meet up with other smart people and you can realize goals you never thought possible.”
MUSIC & TECHNOLOGY PROFESSOR ROB HARARI
ELECTED TO BOARD OF DIRECTORS FOR THE UNITED JAZZ FOUNDATION

In February 2017, industry associate professor Rob Harari was elected to serve on the Board of Directors for the United Jazz Foundation. Founded by Grammy award-winning jazz drummer Dion Parson and his wife Nicole, the UJF is a not-for-profit organization dedicated to mentoring youth on the United States Virgin Islands through jazz music education. The organization helps to positively impact the critical problem of gang violence and downward socioeconomic trends in the USVI.

Harari said he is very much looking forward to serving on the board.

“I believe there are beneficial opportunities for Stevens to get involved through different avenues of intersection in STEM education, general humanities and the arts.”
STUDENT’S MUSICAL JOURNEY LEADS TO STEVENS AND BEYOND  
JACK SKULLER ’18 BALANCES MUSIC TECH STUDIES WITH TOURING AND RECORDING

It’s not unusual for Stevens Institute of Technology students to head into Manhattan for a show at one of the city’s famous live music venues.

But some might be surprised to find one of their own classmates headlining the rock bill at a club like The Bowery Electric when they get there.

“It’s fun,” says junior Jack Skuller ’18, who regularly performs both in the city and locally — all while balancing studies in music & technology and electrical engineering and a recording and touring schedule with a brand new band. “I do what I love, and I am also in the right place to educate myself about the music business.”

Skuller’s musical inspiration, he says, began with his father Eddie, who performed in Hoboken and New York City (and still occasionally does) and recorded several albums.

“I learned there’s a certain power that you have when you are on a stage and you can convey a message,” he recalls.

Skuller began singing to his father’s music and learning to play guitar at the age of eight; cut a single at age 13 on legendary Hoboken indie-music label Bar/None Records with former Ramones producer Daniel Rey; and was selected to tour the U.S. regularly with a Radio Disney ensemble of up-and-coming musicians. “I quickly learned how to be professional, how to carry myself; it really sped up my development,” he says.

Then came Stevens.

After just one day in the university’s summer pre-college program in multimedia production, the high-school sophomore was hooked on the campus, its music-program facilities and the quality of the instruction.

“I already knew I loved Hoboken,” he recalls. “But sitting there listening to Professor [Rob] Harari’s lecture made me realize instantly what I wanted to study for four years when the time came. On day one here, I already knew that.”

He has enjoyed workshops and lectures in sound recording from Harari and working closely with Artist-in-Residence Carlos Alomar, who refined Skuller’s guitar technique for two full years.

“It’s amazing to stop and realize sometimes that you’re working one-on-one with one of the biggest legends in rock and roll,” marvels Skuller. “He figures out where you are and makes you better. He’s kind of brilliant that way.”

“You expect a wall to exist between student and famous professor, and then you come here and find he’s intimate, he cares about you, cares what your style is.”

More recently, Skuller has cut singles with Grammy-nominated producer Joel Hamilton; recorded in Memphis’ legendary Sun Studios; and formed his first band, The Skullers, with drummer Gabriel Scholis-Fernandez and bass player Luigi Sardi.

After graduation, Skuller plans to remain in the area and continue his Stevens education, pursuing a master’s degree in management in order to broaden his knowledge of the music business. All while continuing to perform and record.

“It sounds cliché, but I really do want to try to do it all,” Skuller says of his ultimate goal. “Perform, tour, write songs, sound-engineer, produce, manage. I’d like to be a walking music industry, with all the tools, and that’s exactly what Stevens is giving me.

“A lot of people think New York City is the center of the world, but it’s very easy to make Stevens the center of your world. The faculty here become your first professional relationships and help you develop as a person, a student and a professional. The Stevens experience is incredibly valuable.”

Q&A  
WITH CAL DEAN  
KELLAND THOMAS

Dean Thomas appeared on a SXSW panel, “Every Little Thing is Gonna Be AI” in March ‘17 discussing music and artificial intelligence

Q: How will AI affect the way we experience music?
A: It already is. Recommendation engines such as that on Pandora seem to know just what we like, but really they’re just drawing a statistical picture of our own preferences, based on models developed via deep learning on a lot of data gathered about user behavior. These companies say they will give users what they want — but to what extent are they also driving that choice by exposing us to the [only available] options?

Q: You’re working on the question of AI-generated live jazz, played with real musicians. Can AI create meaningful music? Can it perform seamlessly with a group of human performers?
A: If you’re talking about great cocktail-lounge background music, that should be doable in three years. As far as great music, though, like the great jazz musicians in history make, I don’t really think that will be feasible. We look for certain things: for empathy, for the aura around an individual performance, and those won’t necessarily be there.

As for composition, there may be this one statistical path that generates a passage that surprises us and may even be beautiful and unexpected; you might not know it was written by AI. That’s pretty feasible. But the bigger question is, anything that produces that ‘right’ bit of music is not going to necessarily be able to evaluate itself as having produced something beautiful. It’s producing from a model, it doesn’t evaluate. How will it know it has come upon the perfect thing?  ■
SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH

The full-time faculty who make up the social sciences program at Stevens are laser-focused on developing robust research in their individual areas of psychology, sociology and political science. Professors Kristyn Karl, Yu Tao, Lindsey Cormack and Ashley Lytle share insight into the projects they are currently working on.

KRISTYN KARL, Assistant Professor

In a research collaboration with science and technology studies assistant professor Alex Wellerstein and ocean engineering associate professor Julie Pullen, Professor Karl is seeking a grant to run workshops at Stevens to understand millennials’ perception of nuclear risk. Karl is also pursuing research about smart cities to help incentivize people to be more energy efficient, specifically in Hoboken’s sixth ward.

YU TAO, Associate Professor

Professor Tao is currently working on a paper on gender disparities in patenting productivity among Chinese scientists and engineers. She is collaborating with two sociologists in China (Tsinghua University and Chinese Academy of Science and Technology for Development) and investigating the gender gap in patenting in China in the global context and explains the findings from cultural and institutional perspectives.

LINDSEY CORMACK, Assistant Professor

Professor Cormack is in the process of writing a book on congressional-executive relations entitled Congressional Communications in the Era of Presidential Contempt. In this book, she argues that this often-overlooked connection between members of Congress and constituents has far reaching implications for democracy within the U.S. The ways individual members of Congress discuss the political process, policy debates, and pivotal actors such as the President sets the tone for further coverage and, in turn, citizen perceptions.

ASHLEY LYTLE, Assistant Professor

Negative attitudes towards older persons (ageism) continues to be a widespread issue, with some researchers calling ageism the most prevalent form of prejudice. Professor Lytle is developing and testing ways to reduce ageism in a series of experiments. Preliminary evidence suggests that providing education about aging and promoting positive contact between younger and older adults reduces negative attitudes toward and stereotypes of older adults.

ARTS AND HUMANITIES AT THE STEVENS INNOVATION EXPO

This year’s Stevens Innovation Expo, an annual showcase for the groundbreaking student and faculty research taking place across campus, will be held on Wednesday, May 3. The exhibition displays the breadth of ideas and the wealth of innovation that students pour into Senior Design Projects, the capstone of the Stevens undergraduate experience. Here are a few of the exciting CAL student projects that will be featured:

• BOB KESSLER, Music & Technology
  “Innovative Microphone Design and Production Techniques”
  Bob has created two separate microphone techniques, repurposing common household items into unique designs to help create width and movement not typically found in regular recordings. A large part of his research dealt with sound wave frequency and propagation, in addition to writing and recording songs specifically to help showcase the techniques of the microphone displays he has built.

• JACQUELINE FARZAN & JOSHUA PHILLIPS, Computer Science and Visual Arts & Technology
  “Narrative Co-Op Game Building Tool: ‘Noor’”
  Jack and Josh are double majors in Computer Science and Visual Arts & Technology and, together with a few other CS students, will unveil their plug-in for the game engine application Unity, specifically for narrative co-op video games. This package will help shift the focus of narrative-driven games to be more of an organic experience where multiple players are driving the narrative by talking to people in different ways. The Visual Arts portion of their project comes in the form of the creation of an actual game for this package to showcase the technical features and how they’ve attempted to “gamify cooperation.”

• SCOTT SMULLEN, Science, Technology & Society
  “Technological Insulation and its Impact on the American Political Discourse”
  Scott will present his research on how social media has affected the way we interact with one another and how we view the world, specifically stemming from the past presidential election and the stark polarization of political views. Through research, surveys and interviews, Scott is exploring the relationship between recent polarized partisanship and filter bubbles created by social media algorithms.