



“ I would rather have ten years of awesome impact than twenty years of great financial gain. ”

Focus on Education, Hands on Games

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Success Magazine: What does success mean to you?

TS: When growing up, success meant having enough money each month to cover basics like utilities and food. So, at that time, success had a very basic meaning, and when I graduated my first priority was being sure to live within my income. Later, after surviving some serious health issues, my idea of success evolved. I now see it as being able to get up each day and make a difference—acting to support and improve the community you are in.

SM: How did you choose your field, and why did you opt for education before business?

TS: My father was a second generation immigrant from Norway and his parents had been impoverished when they immigrated to the United States, so this certainly put a premium on education. My going to college was never a question—my parents made sure that all of my sisters and I focused on our education. It was a part of our culture, so I think for a while I felt that it was forced on me. There was a point in college, when I rebelled against the education system, and barely squeaked through. Then, when I got a job in the GE Research Center and was surrounded by learned and brilliant people, my views of education changed. So, I went back to graduate school with a much clearer sense of purpose than I had before. It was no longer something I felt I had to do, but was my active choice. Fortunately, I was ultimately able to go back to school because I had a support system of people who believed in me, and were willing to give me another chance. I worked full-time at GE Research and on my graduate classes on evenings and weekends—driving back and forth between Troy and Schenectady. Five years into it

my daughter was born, adding an entirely different element to my challenges with education.

SM: How were you able to achieve balance in life?

TS: I don't know if I would describe it as balance, nor would I say I have ever seen balance as a specific goal. My mother went back to school when I was young, so I knew that it could be done. My husband was very supportive, contributing a great deal during this time. We really shared the responsibility. He is a professor at RPI, so he had some flexibility in his schedule and we just found ways to make it work. Plus, we have different personality types, so that contributes to the overall balance in our lives.

SM: What is your personality type?

TS: I don't mind taking risks. I am an engineer at heart, and there is nothing I enjoy more than trying to solve problems. I really learned how to do this during my work

at the GE Research Center. My job was to find out what the issue was, learn as much as I could about it, and try to help solve it—not much different from creating a video game. I have never felt that I knew enough up front for anything I have done, which is intimidating at first, but actually keeps me open to possibility.

SM: What kind of community service are you involved in and why?

TS: In college I was an active member of Alpha Phi Omega, a community service fraternity, and other service groups. Later, I became involved in my daughter's Montessori school in many facets—from being a one person computer committee to being the Treasurer and eventually President, which taught me a great deal about small business. This really taught me how important volunteers are in our community. Unpaid volunteers are crucial to community institutions which we all depend on. This inspired me more recently to run for the board of the International Game Developers Association, of which I am currently the Treasurer. I also recently joined the board of the Schenectady Museum. I feel as stretched for time as anyone, but community involvement is so important, and I need to be willing to step up and contribute however I can.

SM: What are the keys to leadership?

TS: Improvisation, a sense of direction, drive, and the ability to learn from your mistakes. And, you need to love working with others. In order to accomplish anything, you must enjoy the give and take of what excites other people, rather than just what you are interested in.

SM: How did you choose your path?

TS: I have a history of taking the difficult path, which I can't explain. However, the benefit is you begin to understand that seemingly impossible things can be done. I never thought I would get a PhD—I didn't think I was smart enough. But I took a challenging path, and because I learned a lot whether I succeeded or failed, I gained the confidence needed to succeed in other areas.

SM: What characteristic has made you go to the next level and move forward?

TS: My frame of perspective is such that I can always imagine something worse than what I'm dealing with. I make a very quick link between the bad situation I am in, to a positive perspective. The ability to mentally rise above a negative situation and turn it into something hopeful was something I finally learned in my 20's and has been my key to moving forward down the path toward success. I encountered a lot of early hardships and challenges, so if I was going to accomplish anything I was forced to stand up, brush myself off, and say it's OK.

Being forced to cope with adversity allows you more chances to deal with situations throughout your life, making you a stronger, more well-rounded person. This is a hard paradox to figure out as parents—we want our kids to be safe, protected, and have it easier than we did.

SM: Why did you choose to leave GE?

TS: I left GE because I thought that I could have a greater impact in a smaller business, which was inspired by my work for the Montessori school. I decided to take what I learned at GE and use it to do something that would have a greater effect on the community, where I felt that I had contributed more, and where I could see how my work had made a difference. I took a job in the video game industry at Vicarious Visions, which combined all the technical aspects of engineering with the artistic element that I loved.



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SM: Why did you decide to go out on your own?

TS: I recognized that with another video game company in the area, we could support more jobs for people who are needed for their work with community groups here. If we want these types of things in our community, we have to create jobs for them. I also saw it as a way to use my interest in education to benefit the game industry. I had learned that many developers didn't want to do games for young kids, and it just so happened that this



is something I love. So, I realized that the industry could really use a developer creating high quality children's games.

SM: How did you create the company? Where did you get your people?

TS: Working in the industry for five years, I knew what the market needed, and could identify what was required to win projects. But my initial attempt at this business was not very well thought out. When I actu-

ally started the company on April fools day in 2005, I only had a very sketchy plan worked out. Once I got some feedback from people and I realized that my plan was not viable and by the end of April, I completely changed my approach. That first summer we ramped up to 12 people to create a prototype based on a Disney property that had many characteristics you need to solve to make a high quality children's game. We aimed to have something at the end of the summer that you could actually play (a first playable). We made a beautiful high quality prototype, which we used to show people what we could do, and had worked out most of the initial kinks to be prepared when the right thing came up. Then, when we got our first project we were ready, and worked really hard to do a great job.

SM: Are you having fun?

TS: Definitely, but there is more that we want to do. There are many challenging obstacles in the way.

SM: Challenging in what way?

TS: Balancing community service objectives with customer needs is a big challenge with social entrepreneurship. Learning how to utilize the time and resources of the company and the people here, and split it between the things we're doing and the games were making. For instance, we host the free Games in Education Symposium for area teachers. We pay for speakers to come in from across the country and discuss how to use new media and technology to help teachers, rather than compete with them. We spend a lot of money on this, because we think it's so important. We have a definite media gap, where kids are using all this technology at home, playing games etc... and then "power down" when they have to learn with pencils and books in the classroom. This was created to bridge that gap. The specific logistical challenge that happens, though, is that the best time for teachers to have this Symposium is also our busiest time of year for completing games. We can't change that—so we accept it and try our best to do both.

SM: What is the most important aspect of owning your own company?

TS: In my view, success is not measured by profits or dollars, and I began this company trying to live up to this ideal. Since inception, the community service aspect has been integrated throughout the company. It's been interesting to try to measure a non-traditional definition for success. I had to come to the realization that if the lifespan of the company is shorter because we are trying to blend these two elements, that has to be OK with me because otherwise it won't have truly succeeded. I would rather have ten years of awesome impact than twenty years of great financial gain.

SM: What word best describes you?

TS: Irrepressible.