

Curiosity

A Brief Autobiography

Christopher Dellin

How could I be so lucky? The entire path has been one giant positive-feedback loop; engineering causes fun, fun piques curiosity, curiosity begets more engineering. When asked what they wanted to be when they grew up, most of my friends didn't have a consistent answer, but I always did. If tasked to imagine a fairy tale story building to an engineer, one couldn't invent a simpler case than mine.

Kiddie Toys

My parents met in the heyday of the AT&T / Bell Laboratories juggernaut in New Jersey during the 1980's. Both had graduate degrees; Dad, from Stanford in Electrical Engineering, and Mom, from the University of Connecticut in Computer Science. As far back as I can remember, our den was always home to at least one terminal or computer, and I have fond memories being told to quit playing Solitaire and come to dinner. The stage was set; the first-born child was hooked.

In the mechanical realm, wood, plastic, and metal toys abounded. As my parents later related to me from my beloved Brio wooden train set,¹ I always wanted to figure out how things worked and how I could connect parts together to get things done. By all accounts, I was spoiled; our basement was continually littered with Legos, k'Nex pieces, and the more advanced Erector Set. Also interspersed into the mess were piles of bits from taken-apart electronic devices. No matter what, I was in one of two modes: take it apart to pieces to figure it out, or build it up from pieces to make it do something cool. As I got older, the toys began to include magnets and an electric toy bench, but the effect was the same.

School Days

I was usually ahead with math in grade school, but I had the most fun playing with anything spacial or computer-related. I found I could make complex 3d shapes with paper and tape, and this would sometimes keep me at school. Of course, there was always Number Munchers.² Once I got to middle school, I had moved up in the world – namely, from the basement to the crawlspace – as my small size and interest had made me the guy to go to for tracing wires in my house. In one case, I remember placing a speaker in our family room and running wires through the floor into the crawlspace and basement so I could talk to people upstairs. Yep, I was always *that* kid.

Throughout this process, I always just did what I enjoyed. While the word *engineer* might have carried some diminished meaning due to my parents, it didn't mean anything to me. It was not until I visited a county high school in 8th grade – High Technology High School, focused on science and engineering – that I was able to attach a discipline to all these cool things I enjoyed. After the visit, the school was all I could talk about. It was just so *cool*.

HTHS, as it was called, is a small place; approximately 65 students in each of the four grades left its student body slightly smaller than Olin. I kept up my fun at home, moving to programming, Linux, and web development. In school, FIRST robotics kept me busy. Many of my friends decided

1 <http://www.auboisjoli.com/images/produits/237.jpg>

2 http://www.ebergen.net/images/number_munchers.gif

after HTHS that engineering was not for them ... but I only liked things better the more I discovered. I loved the project-based schoolwork and the small community. Not surprisingly, my favorite classes were Calculus and Physics. While looking for colleges, Olin stuck out as a fantastic place for engineering. Like my HTHS experience, one visit was all I needed – I was psyched.

Chris the Engineer

I was always curious, and science and engineering were always fun. Throughout my “formative years,” I was lucky enough to live in a supportive environment with plenty of toys to keep me curious. Throughout my formal education, I found project-based learning to be a really exciting way to keep me interested, and I found that in high school and college. Many of my friends have had tough times figuring out what they want to do, but I was always the special case. I'm just lucky, I guess.

Sources

Feynman, Richard P. Surely You're Joking, Mr. Feynman! (Adventures of a Curious Character).
W. W. Norton & Company, April 1997.

Wilkins, Maurice. The Third Man of the Double Helix.
Oxford Univ. Press, NY 2003.

Tuchman, Arleen Marcia. Science Has No Sex: The Life of Marie Zakrzewska.
Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2006.