

4-25-2015

Interview with Dana Wade Hutchins

Dana Wade Hutchins

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Recommended Citation

Catherine Fisher, "Interview with Dana Wade Hutchins" (2015). *Makers@PPL: Stories in the Making audio interviews*. 11.
http://digitalcommons.portlandlibrary.com/pplhistory_makers_audio_interviews/11

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Interviewer: Catherine Fisher
Interviewee: Dana Wade Hutchins
Makers@PPL, Portland, Maine
4.25.2015

CF: We're here at the Portland Public Library for Makers@PPL. This is Catherine Fisher. It's April 25th, year 2015. I'm here with Dana Hutchins. Dana, you are going to share with us your vast world of creativity, what you make. How would you characterize what you make currently? Do you want to talk about your business?

DH: Yes. I make a range of things, but they're all software-based technology experiences. I'll give you a little personal history as a background to that, too. I was a child of the '50s and '60s, and I remember camping out in the woods one time with my father and my grandfather, way up north toward Wyman Dam. This was probably 1959 and I was five or something like that. My grandfather said, "OK, well, the Sputnik is going to be going overhead, and we'll be able to see it here, out in the woods in Maine, in the middle of nowhere."

My grandfather was this very inspiring guy who made home movies. He had a Bell and Howell 8 millimeter camera. He would do the whole thing. He had this coop that was like his radio and maker coop. It was little, tiny, like a big outhouse-sized building behind his house just off Main Street in Springvale, Maine. That place was magic. It had Bakelite plastic radio control panels with all the dials and meters, and shortwave radios. He had a lathe in there and he had an old wood stove and he had all kinds of stuff. He was one of those guys who was one of the original makers. This was totally a hobby thing for him. It was fantastic. It was so exciting. I remember the first time he showed me what an integrated circuit chip looked like, a little tiny thing. Unfortunately, he died when I was probably in the seventh grade. But before that, I really got inspired by him to be interested in technology, computer technology, media, film, all that kind of stuff, and to get involved. That's what really got me started in the business that I'm in.

I've always been very much involved and interested in designing the visual aspect of stuff. I went from working on films and Super 8 in the '70s when we first started our business, Image Works, in 1977. And then going into video, the very earliest color video, when it was first available. That's how my own creative process has evolved with the media technology and then with interactive computer technology and software. I had one of the first Apple computers, an Apple II Plus in like 1979 or '80. I just started working with that stuff and that's really the foundation for everything that we do now. One of the projects we're most excited about having been involved in is the Gulf of Maine Research Institute's educational facility. We designed the whole LabVenture! experience at the Cohen Center here in Portland, as well as all of their web projects and other aspects of their citizen science outreach. One of the biggest things about our process and what we do is to empower other people to do stuff, very much like the maker stuff. We really started doing that early on, when the maker movement was really just happening. So citizen science and the focus on the maker experience are very much aligned. We try to create experiences for young people as well as for adults to get involved in exploring, experimenting, creating, and working within the environment here in Maine.

CF: And that usually involves video and sound and structures and building kiosks?

DH: Exactly. It involves, yes, interactive kiosks, very large screens, a lot of multimedia recording. When we started the design of Gulf of Maine Research Institute's educational facility, we really started with a blank slate. There were a couple of basic ideas that we had. There was this notion, "Oh yeah, we're going to use technology, we're going to do this and that..." But one of the things that we do at Image Works is to involve the audience from the very earliest design stage and conceptual stage. As we started to design LabVenture!, the kids would go, "OK, that's all great, but it's a fish, stupid! We want to handle the fish. We want to play with the fish. We want to learn about the fish. We want to actually hang on to organisms, and we don't get to do that." So that became a foundational element, to get in there, and get your hands dirty, and actually get to handle organisms from the Gulf of Maine that are native organisms. And learn about their relationships to each other, and their relationships to the economy and the local communities and how they all support each other. That's the foundational stuff behind the technology. The technology is not the first thing. The first thing, really, is the audience engagement with actual living organisms and their direct experience of ecosystem relationships across those organisms' food web.

We started testing and prototyping the whole Gulf of Maine Research Institute project in June of 2002 and the result is twelve networked interactive kiosks that are all tied together. The Gulf of Maine raises the money to bring students from all over the state of Maine on buses, and teachers and chaperones come along with them. Each activity is about seventeen minutes long. What we learned very quickly in our early testing, and I'd seen this when watching kids playing video games, was that, if you pull the adults aside and let the kids have autonomy and do it on their own...oh my god. It's like a whole different thing. If the teachers and the parents and the chaperones are not looking over the kids' shoulders, which is not easy for adults to do, the kids become so phenomenally engaged, so much more empowered. That is a foundational concept behind it all.

The thing we all learned, of course, is that the students are so much better with all the technology. Anyway, they are just phenomenally engaged and invested when they get to do that.

We've done similar educational projects for the Harvard Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics. We created a travelling exhibit on their black hole research that's gone all over the country, and that uses a lot of the same approaches and technology as at the Gulf of Maine Research Institute.

CF: In managing these projects from the beginning, you have to get in there and learn a vast amount about that particular area of science.

DH: Yes. We learn enough to get started. But then we learn along with the audience and the students, and it's pretty exciting. It's pretty cool. Sometimes, it's adults as well as students. Sometimes, it's a more ... they call it informal learning, but what Gulf of Maine does, actually, is more formal learning, because they bring kids there on field trips. It's kind of an artificial distinction. Because it doesn't look very formal, but it is tremendously engaged.

CF: And it must be very collaborative for you because there's writing involved, and there's design involved, and there's actual construction, right? Architecture.

DH: Yes. All kinds of design of hardware and stations and technology. Taking the best off-the-shelf technology and integrating it with custom software and that kind of thing. Yes.

CF: Would you say that this work feeds you, Dana?

DH: Yes. It certainly does, Catherine. Yes, it does. It does! Yes.

CF: From where do you draw inspiration for your work? Besides, perhaps, the subject matter that you're working with, which sounds like it's, in itself, intrinsically inspiring. But how does Dana feed himself otherwise in order to be able to do all this?

DH: Two kind of disparate poles. One is nature and the environment. Our house is out on the Presumpscot River in Falmouth. That environment ... I've been out in the woods and out on the river the past few days. Spending a lot of time out there just feels so good, to be out there when it's not zero degrees with six or more feet of snow. So that's one place. Oddly enough, the other pole is popular culture. All pop culture. Comic books...you know, the imaginative storytelling in pop culture, science fiction, and so forth. Those are the poles that I draw from. That goes back to the Sputnik thing in the woods of Maine. When you get the space program and the woods of Maine in that five-year-old experience, it's like, "Woah." Those things are fused together for a lifetime. I never realized that. I had never really thought about it that way, but it's true. It is true.

CF: That's perfect. Anything else you'd like to add?

DH: No, that's good. Thank you so much.

CF: Wonderful. Thank you.