

NDF Report

About a year ago I was in Bolivia visiting my parents for Christmas, writing applications for internships that I would not get when I stumbled upon the Norman Design Fund (NDF) application through a Facebook ad. This was not the place that I would have expected to find such an opportunity, normally I have to search high and low for funding opportunities on campus. For graduate music students seeking to develop technology, the opportunities are somewhat limited. We often have to join undergraduate organizations to acquire any sort of funding which can be humbling and a bit awkward. I was very happy that the NDF was there to support me with this project which I have been working on for several years now.

I sincerely do not believe that the money that I got was the most important part of the experience, but rather the opportunity to learn about Don, who I think is magnificently brilliant and perhaps misunderstood - even by those closest to him. One of the big criticism of people who engage in design, and perhaps with good reason, is that they prioritize flashy user interfaces over the complexity of their solution. Reading about Don reminded me that behind the facade there must be substantive work and that beautifying a project should come last. In an age where it seems Instagram influence is more important than academic impact, it is easy to fall into this trap - opting to put the look of a product/solution before its actual utilitarian value.

People don't like using ugly things. My inspiration in the music department, Miller Puckette, has been writing Pure Data (Pd), an open-source computer music software, for over twenty years. In the beginning, the project was a two-man effort, but eventually, the project became commercial and Miller split to create Pd, to retain the "open-sourceness" of the project. The commercial version of Pd is called MAX/MSP, and it is a very popular product for artists and musicians worldwide. Pd is not beautiful on the surface, but when you peel the layers you realize what makes something beautiful is sometimes hard to see.

Why is Pd so beautiful? It is free. It is an open-source. It is designed to run on a micro-computer, which ties into the concept of socio-economic accessibility and fairness. It is a no-BS kind of music software. It is incredibly freeing, in that you can code your objects to add to the system. And so on, and so on. The commercial version of Pd is also beautiful, but in a different way, which to me feels less important. So, when I think of Don, and Miller, who I think are very much alike, and human-centered design, this is what I think about. Designing for humanity! Not just for you, not just for me, but for everyone. Designing ethically and responsibly, emphasizing sustainability, and community. Sometimes I forget that and I start chasing after the wrong things. But then I see the faces of children in Bolivia, my home country, especially those who have less than me, and I remember what my purpose is.

Sometimes I begin to cry when I think of this - just how powerless I feel in the universe, wanting to change something which seems set in stone. Those children will not care about ambisonics or Pd, because they need better education and healthcare. But this is what I have to offer, and that's what I am duty-bound to do. Create musical instruments and tools which inspire young people to compose and share all my knowledge and passion with those children. I believe without a large objective, and one that grounds us to humanity, we are destined to self-destruct. I am glad I got to share this vision with the Design Lab - I hope someone reading this will be inspired to design for humanity.