

UCSC grad creates Rock Band-like video game for the blind

January 26 2012, By Scott Rappaport



UC Santa Cruz graduate Rupa Dhillon hopes to change the face of gaming with Rock Vibe—a Rock Band-style electronic musical video game for people who are both blind and sighted.

Designed to be accessible to people with severe visual impairments, it replaces all necessary visual cues with auditory and tactile cues. Instead of using a screen to deliver information, it uses vibrations.

“Games for the blind right now are largely audio games, and they tend to get boring really quickly,” Dhillon notes. “They also have very little appeal to sighted people.”

“But Rock Vibe creates a new mode of gaming because the players respond to vibrations. And combining that with popular music makes the

game much more exciting.”

“I’m going to release it next year,” she adds. “Get it into some people’s homes and donate to schools and centers for blind children. It’s something I’m really passionate about. “

The idea for the game was hatched at UC Santa Cruz in 2008.

Dhillon was taking a technology class in UCSC’s innovative Digital Arts and New Media graduate program (DANM) and working with fellow students Molly Landeau and Troy Allman.

“We were discussing my thesis--a sound environment project accessible to deaf people through vibrations,” Dhillon recalls. “ We were talking about it, and Rock Band was in the room...one thing led to another, and we created Rock Vibe.”

“I do all the design. I do all the programming. It’s just me working on it now.” says Dhillon.

She has nothing but praise for the DANM program at UCSC, observing that one of its greatest strengths is that it gives students the freedom to take a wide variety of different courses.

“I like building things,” says Dhillon. “But if I hadn’t taken that Human Interaction course, I never would have come up with the idea for Rock Vibe.”

She added that professors in the program are very supportive of her creative ideas.

“After I left UCSC, I got my first contract job because of DANM,” she says. “A man contacted the university looking for a programmer and

they recommended me. So I landed my first programming job which was really fun to work on.”

Dhillon is currently raising money to refine Rock Vibe on Kickstarter—the popular online grassroots funding platform for creative projects.

She also recently contacted the California School For the Blind about her project, and they have invited her to attend the school’s annual gaming tournament in the spring.

For Dhillon, the best part of developing Rock Vibe is that it allows her to combine her passions.

“I love being able to work with video games and electronics. I also love education and teaching kids about technology,” she adds.

But it also gives her a chance to introduce a revolutionary change in the way people play games.

“It shows gaming companies--and the people who create games--that you can really develop a game for both blind and sighted people to share,” says Dhillon.

“Rock Vibe works with touch and sound. This is a new mode of game playing—no one has an advantage.”

“It’s more inclusive and shines a light on the possibility that they can help bring the blind and sighted together with games,” she adds.

Provided by University of California - Santa Cruz

Citation: UCSC grad creates Rock Band-like video game for the blind (2012, January 26)
retrieved 20 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2012-01-ucsc-grad-band-like-video-game.html>

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