

Vijay Lakshman

The Fantastical Realist

“Get out!” the Grand Master shouted as ten-year-old Vijay Lakshman walked into his first martial arts class. “No children allowed!”

Terrified, Vijay slammed the door shut and waited in the hallway until his father joined him. Dr. Lakshman was aware that this martial arts school only trained adults, but it was the most prestigious and rigorous program in the Washington D.C. area, and he knew his son was up for the challenge. What’s more, the Iran Hostage Crisis was playing out and causing turmoil and angst all over the United States, such that boys in the neighborhood had begun harassing and attacking him after school for his Indian descent. “Sometimes I’d be chased home from school, but I had a stubborn streak and would always stop to fight back, which inevitably ended in my getting beaten up,” he recalls. “My dad had noticed a couple of workers at his hospital that would practice karate forms on their lunch break, so he asked them how I could get involved.”

His father explained the situation to the Grand Master of the class, who allowed them to stay and watch the rest of practice. “After that class, he asked me if I really wanted to train with them, and I told him that yes, I did,” Vijay recalls. “So he told me he’d train me under three conditions: I had to pay for my \$50 monthly dues myself, I could never miss a single practice unless I called first and was excused, and I had to behave well at home and at school. If I failed any of those three conditions, I was automatically out.”

Vijay agreed to his Sensei’s conditions, and for the next 23 years, he did everything he could to uphold his end of the deal. He cut grass until he was old enough to work a formal job to pay his dues, and he made every single three-hour, six-day a week class. “That program demanded so much

discipline and dedication, and I think it really followed me throughout my entire career,” he says. “When I was little, I didn’t understand that it was all about leveraging your body weight and motion. I thought it was pure magic, so it gave me the attitude that anything was possible, and I grew up with a deep-rooted belief in myself.”

Today, Vijay is the Chief Product Officer of Naaya, LLC, a game-based social learning platform for elementary schools focusing on global and social studies. The company was founded several years ago by Amir Hudda and Noorali Sonawalla in an effort to reinvent the relationship between education and video games. “When I met Amir, I was really intrigued by his vision of allowing kids who don’t have much travel experience to gain some level of understanding of other countries, almost like a guided field trip,” Vijay explains. “The game itself is focused on teaching children through experiential learning,



rather than teaching towards a test. When you teach for a test, the kids will memorize something but the learning doesn’t stick. It’s in short-term memory, without context, which doesn’t prove most effective for long-term retention. But with this program, for example, kids can learn about a country’s flag by being given the task of coloring in that flag correctly, and are then rewarded with an animal native to that country to keep as a virtual pet. This way, the kids can choose their own reward, and they learn through the experience of that activity.”

Currently, the company is working on a game unit focused on Peru, and will launch their first pilot in classrooms as soon as the product meets the necessary high quality standards. They plan to add more countries to the series until it covers the entire globe. In the meantime, the company hopes not only to educate children on the

subject matter of their particular learning unit, but to also allow them to gain fluency in the digital community, as well as a cultural awareness through exposure to the planet's diverse people, myths, and traditions.

When Vijay crossed paths with Amir, he had spent the previous three and a half years at National Geographic developing their entry into the digital entertainment media space, which was exactly the kind of experience needed at the fledgling company, Naaya. "It was perfect timing for us both, so I could really come in and add value to this great vision he was trying to put in motion," Vijay says. He started as a consultant in August of 2012, and has since moved up to his present position, where he has the creative freedom to make the company a truly innovative asset for teachers, students, and classrooms.

Vijay's current role in raising global awareness seems to be a natural fit, given that he began his own world travels from the moment he was born. When his mother was eight months pregnant with him, she and his father decided to take a family vacation, which resulted in his being born in an emergency hospital in Ottawa, Canada. Shortly thereafter, they returned to Bangkok, where his father taught as a professor of medicine at the University of Thailand. His mother had a Masters in Library Science, but she worked as a Middle Eastern language specialist. But the family's love for travel took them all over Asia, so that Vijay's early years were spent in Thailand, India, and the South China Sea. When he was six years old, the family moved to Madison, Wisconsin, where he was placed in a class to learn English. They soon relocated to Washington, D.C., where his father ran research at the VA Hospital at the George Washington University, developing, amongst other things, a method to test subcutaneous fat to determine a genetic predisposition to alcoholism.

Vijay most enjoyed the summers of his childhood, when he and his neighborhood friends would play kick-the-can until the sun went down and then fall asleep to the sound of cicadas chirping. His school days were less pleasant with the shadow cast from his classmates' bullying, but karate soon began shifting the way Vijay was seen by those around him. "This was the late 70's and early 80's, so there was a lot of mystery and fear around the martial arts," he says. "When kids began hearing that I was training in karate, they

started worrying that I was *really* dangerous, and began treating me with more respect." His training became a priority in his life, such that he would come home from school, do homework, arrive at practice by 6 pm, train until 9:30 pm, and then finish whatever homework he had left before bed. "It was grueling, but I loved it. No one was telling me to be there but myself, and that earned me a lot of respect from my instructors," he says. "Karate kept me away from goofing off or getting in trouble as a kid, which also set me up for future success."

Throughout his grade school years, Vijay always assumed he would follow in his father's footsteps to medical school. In his junior year of high school, he won the American Heart Association Award for Emphysema and Arteriosclerosis after scoring well on a rigorous exam, which granted him a summer internship at the Bethesda Naval Hospital. "That was my first clinical experience, and though I thought it was interesting, I found I didn't have a huge desire to do it," he explains. "I continued with that path, though, because I was under the impression that you had to be a doctor to be successful."

When he graduated from high school, he attended George Washington University. His father's research with the school granted him free tuition, and Vijay found it a good fit not just for the exceptional education it offered, but also for its close proximity to his martial arts school. By the time he graduated in 1991, he had earned a degree in Information Systems and Technology in the Business World, with minors in sociology, psychology, and creative writing—all of which he accomplished after fulfilling his medical school prerequisites. "When I was choosing my major, I decided to pick one based in technology and business because I knew that, if medical school didn't work out, I wouldn't want the type of career that a degree in biology would have granted me," he explains.

Vijay decided to take a year off before medical school to save enough money to cover his tuition, so he applied to Bethesda Softworks as a designer. When they called to offer him the job, they explained they needed a project manager, for which they would pay him a salary \$23,000. He told them he would work for \$3,000 less if he could instead have the title of *Executive Producer*, which they agreed to. A few months later, he created a game that won Best in Genre in its category,

immediately catapulting him up the ladder in the gaming industry. "I got all these offers from other companies, so it seemed pretty obvious that this was the career path I should stay on," he says. "I've never looked back, because with this business, I can be a race car driver one day, an astronaut the next, or a zombie hunter the next. It flexes every muscle in my brain, from the creative writing side to the mathematical and logical side. Product development follows a very strict discipline, but games have to be compelling and creative, so it's a constant challenge to straddle those fences."

Vijay stayed with Bethesda Softworks for several more years, during which he was granted complete creative control after creating a Game of the Year, this time in the roleplaying genre. Yet it was not until he joined Looking Glass in Boston that he truly began to test his limits and gain a more nuanced understanding of the business side of the work he was doing. "I had lived in D.C. my entire life, so when I moved to Boston I realized how repetitive my life had become," he says. "It had been very comfortable, so when I moved, I did a lot of growing up, and I learned what my real strengths and weaknesses are as a leader and a creative thinker. I certainly made a lot of mistakes, but I learned how to recover from them as well."

When he moved to Chicago to work, Vijay was lucky enough to be paired up with people who were masters at the art of location-based entertainment—the kind you find in arcade games. "You have to create a product that someone can walk up to, put a quarter in, and learn how to play in less than 60 seconds, so they keep putting more quarters in," he explains. "That takes a huge amount of creativity, because usually, the simpler a game is, the more thought you have to put into it. That was an interesting learning experience."

After several years in that capacity, Vijay moved to Austin, Texas, where the startup company he joined had been funded close to \$9 million to work on nextgen PS2 and XBOX360 titles. "We had the team ready to go and great products ready to begin development, when suddenly the investing company decided to downsize their external development studios and effectively cut us off. We lost everything," he explains. With nearly nothing in his pocket, he was recruited by Universal Studios in California to work as their Executive Producer. Two weeks after starting, however, he found out his wife, who

was still in Texas with their year-old son, was filing for divorce. "It was totally unexpected, and I was devastated," he says. "But my boss-to-be, Jim Wilson, sat down with me and told me to take the time I needed to go back to Texas and try and fix things with my family. I was so taken aback that the company was willing to give me that kind of freedom to do what I needed to do without losing my job. I was really moved to see that there are people with holistic views on life—people who really aren't just focused on the dollar."

Vijay took the time off, and while he was unable to fix things with his wife, he returned to Universal Studios completely dedicated to his job, with a singular determination to be successful and repay them for their generosity. "I really needed that break, and ultimately, it allowed me to be so successful that within nine months, I was named the Vice President of Production within the games vertical of Universal," he says. "There's a long list of things I have to thank Jim Wilson for, but that was a huge one. He has a real focus on business fundamentals without forgetting that business *is* people. I consider him an excellent executive and mentor."

During Vijay's seven years with Universal, the company sponsored him to attend Harvard Business School's Fast-Track Executive Management Program. He spent nine months carefully preparing his application for the highly competitive program, so both he and the company were thrilled when he was accepted. Because it would require him to be at the university full-time, Universal agreed to let him leave as long as he promised to return should the company hit a low point and need his help.

While this seemed to be more of a precautionary agreement, it became a reality when Universal found it was having difficulties shipping a product and Vijay was forced to pull out of the program. And though the Dean assured him they would honor his initial acceptance and allow him to retake the courses when he was ready to, a new Dean had taken office by the time Vijay was ready to return—one who was obligated to uphold HBS's high standards for acceptance. Thus, without a current application and acceptance, Vijay suddenly found himself with only one week to prepare and resubmit a new application for review. "I was literally back at step one, up for forty hours straight to finish the application for one of eighty slots in a program that has thousands of

applicants, but it paid off, because I got in *again*," he says. "It was actually a really meaningful experience because it showed me that, at the end of the day, you don't really know what you're capable of until you try. I found out I had what it took to accomplish this huge goal if I really applied myself."

While he may have found success under a tight timeline with Harvard Business School's Executive Management Program, Vijay has learned the hard way that in most aspects of life, no deadline is as important as maintaining quality of work. Because his college thesis had focused on comparing J.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis, Universal decided to put him in charge of a game they were creating for the *Lord of the Rings* franchise. "It was actually a huge task to take on, because the franchise was saying we had six months to produce a game, or they were going to pull out, resulting in licensor penalties," he explains. "But most games take an average of fifteen months to complete. I knew that, with all the programming and testing we would have to do, we would be lucky to get a 65 percent score when it launched."

Despite the tall task, Vijay agreed to do it, so long as his supervisors agreed not to blame him if it was less than perfect. He was, in fact, able to create the game and make the deadline with a score of 73 percent—better than he expected, but far below the company's standards of 90 percent. "That was a huge learning experience for me, because the mistake was rushing it," he says. "At the end of the day, the franchise would have cared much less about a missed deadline than they would have about a mediocre product. Nowadays, I tell people to focus on quality first. You only get one chance to make a good impression."

As a leader, he tries to pass this message along to his entire team. "Trust your people. You need to know what your strengths and weakness are," he says. "We all take pride in thinking we are capable of doing anything we set our minds to. Yet just because that might be true, it never means you *should* do everything. I learned that the hard way. I think I'm a better leader for it because I know that, when I hire someone to work on my team, I have to trust them to perform and step away."

After he left Universal Studios, Vijay found he was at a point in his life where he wanted to apply the things he had learned in business and

in leadership, so he decided to start his own consulting company, Brilliant Entertainment, Inc. He based the endeavor in Virginia so that he could finally be near his son again. "Starting the business was a leap of faith, but I had made such a great network from the Harvard Program and through Universal that I got a lot of help in finding clients right away," he says. "I've met a lot of people professionally that are now trusted friends and advisors. I think everyone needs that ability to build and draw upon a network to really be successful."

While his consulting business immediately started doing very well, he soon realized it was not something he wanted to continue doing for the rest of his life, so he passed the reigns along and began working for the National Geographic Society. Three and a half years later, he was introduced to Amir Hudda, which led to his current work at Naaya. "I've had many roles throughout my career, but I feel very happy at Naaya," he says. "The gaming industry has always been the most engaging kind of challenge to me, and I find myself using just about every class I've ever taken, from calculus to creative writing. It's a career with an infinite possibility space, which I really appreciate."

Outside of his work at Naaya, Vijay dedicates himself first and foremost to his family. "I get to see my son every other weekend, and for the past fourteen years, even when he was in Virginia and I was in California, I flew across the United States to see him," he says. "He spends his summers with me, and we are very close, which I am eternally grateful for." In addition to his oldest son, Vijay has remarried and recently welcomed a second son into the world.

When he thinks forward to the future, he hopes to give more time to his creative writing, which has already begun to take off as a significant side project. "I've always been a writer, through college and beyond. Certainly a large portion of my work in games is writing, but I didn't do any creative writing just for myself until 2010. Then I took a trip to India and wrote 35,000 words of what has become two 100,000-word novels! Since then, I haven't been able to stop," he laughs. "I finished it in 2012, and immediately started getting offers to make it a trilogy, a movie, or a video game. All these doors just started flying open, and I was so impressed by how the world was so responsive to art and literature. It was wonderful

to again see that cash really isn't the bottom line all the time, and when there are new works of art or ideas out there, we all want to expose them to create a better human condition."

His book, *MythBorn*, is a dark fantasy in the style of *Game of Thrones*, and at the moment, Vijay and his team are working to build out the franchise plan so that, when it formally launches, it will have the best shot at becoming part of American fiction. "This book really represents the culmination of a lot of my life lessons," he affirms. "It has strategy and tactics, travel, and of course combat, which I feel I can portray quite well given my decades of experience in the martial arts. But what I really love most about the subject matter of this book is the layering of fantasy and realism with believable characters. People are what's interesting in life, whether in karate or in gaming: there's something magical and imaginative about great characters, something we relate to and interact with in our everyday lives. As a creative thinker, I feel that's what a good story is all about." Just as a sense of magic layered over his childhood experience of martial arts and actually transformed

the reality of his daily life, Vijay works every day to bring a transformative message to others: that focus, effort, and perseverance are the cornerstones to success in the real world, bringing life its own kind of magic.

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