

Michael Lange COVID-19 Oral History Interview

Interviewer: Meagan Ginnaty-Moore

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Meagan Ginnaty-Moore: All right. All right, so my first question. When do you first remember hearing about COVID-19 and what did you think about how it might affect you?

Michael Lange: I would say I remember started hearing it the end of January/beginning of February when it started in China. And I was concerned that it could possibly affect everything but since it was still contained to one country, I wasn't initially worried about it. [Unclear] Started to spread, there was things that I had planned for future months for school, such as going to San Francisco GDC [Game Developers Conference], which is Game Developers Conference. Once it started spreading, I started getting worried that things were going to get canceled and a lot of friends had money tied into a lot of things like hotel expenses, travel expenses, things like that. We started getting worried kind of early on that things would get canceled and they started to.

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MG: Yeah, definitely. A lot of people had travel plans and money deposited for a lot of different things and it sucks that it was canceled. But based on this experience, what might you say to your past self?

ML: What would I say to my past self?

MG: Mmhm.

ML: I think I would say to my past self maybe look for different opportunities I guess since things are being canceled. Yeah, it was - it's difficult because we missed out on a lot of opportunities, but I think that going back I would tell myself to refocus more and try to, maybe, create alternate experiences if possible. I know one thing I wanted to try to do was maybe host a virtual GDC watch party with other Game Design students. I think maybe, not only considering like things have been canceled and trying to stay safe but also expanding or exploring different ways to, maybe not so much miss those opportunities, but try to handle them differently.

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MG: Yeah, absolutely. What have been the biggest changes that you've had to deal with?

ML: The biggest change is definitely - was probably spending time away from people, just in terms of the schoolwork. I'm in the - I was in the Game Design program so we have a large senior project that we work on making a game for an entire year. And we spent the first semester, the fall semester, working together as a team and then all of sudden, we lost that, you know,

face-to-face time. I think the team did a great job changing over to a digital format where we just met virtually all the time. But yeah, it was kind of a different transition, just all of sudden losing that face-to-face.

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MG: Yeah, absolutely, especially with a big project like that where the dynamic of the group then changes when you're only on Teams or Zoom or whatever you're using. Are you surprised by anything about how people have responded or about how life has changed?

ML: I'm most surprised of how people initially, you know, they went into lockdown, they were following the orders they needed to stay safe, but I'm really surprised by the number of people who just don't care. That was the most surprising to me because it seems like there's a lot of things that people can do to, you know, cover their face, just simple things to try to protect each other. And a lot of people just don't care to even make that small effort to protect one another.

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MG: Yeah, absolutely. It's kind of turned into a political issue to most, which is kind of crazy since it's a health issue.

ML: Yeah.

MG: What are you doing to remain connected to friends and loved ones?

ML: I spend a lot of time making sure that we have weekly - well I do have one weekly with a group of friends every Friday to stay connected and chat because there's some people - I know me, like I live alone, so we just try to get a hold of everybody to talk, make sure that everybody's okay. I do have another group of friends where we meet randomly where we just say everybody's free at this time, you want to have a virtual meeting? So, we've been doing that. I think it's been helping a lot of people; I know it's helped me, just be able to stay connected. I feel like I'm connecting more almost with certain groups of people. A large group of friends in Seattle, which it's sometimes hard to keep in touch with them, but because of this format - the digital format - we've been seeing each other more which has been really great think for everybody.

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MG: Yeah, absolutely because we're now forced to schedule our social time so it's easier to be like "all right, this time is for this group, or this group, or whatever." What kinds of things have you done to stay healthy or to protect your mental health?

ML: For me, I've been trying to take time to go on walks. It's kind of hard to try to stay away from people, so I'm staying away from a gym, even though some places have opened up, I'm not going to go back to a gym for a while. So, I'll wear a mask and I'll walk out of my apartment building, and then I go walk on campus. I still live in Menomonie yet for a couple weeks. So, I've been walking around campus and campus is - there is not a lot of people there. So, it's a great place for me to get exercise there because there's relatively few people [unclear] easy to be able to do that and take off my mask and not have to worry about running into groups of people

where [?] it's - so I've been doing that. Trying to find places that are less populated and I'm able to just kind of walk around and enjoy the weather while it's getting nicer.

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MG: Yeah, absolutely.

ML: I think the mental part of that question - it's definitely been just trying to learn new things. You know, programming - there's a lot of things for programming that I could always learn and try to do that. And doing those group meetings with friends has been helping as well.

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MG: Yeah, definitely. It is a really good time to try to, you know, hone skills, or pick up new skills or whatever. So, what has been challenging about learning or keeping in touch online? What has worked well?

ML: What has worked well for learning?

MG: Yeah, what have been your experiences, the challenges, and things that have gone well?

ML: I think the things that have gone well for me is this past semester is the availability to rewatch lectures. I know previously, you know, just trying to take notes, especially during like a math class or my systems programming class. I'm able to go back and rewatch a section a couple times, which I think is really helpful and I wish that was always the case. You know, being able to rewatch those lectures and be able to pick on something that I was having trouble with. I just found that I could go back and review a subject that maybe was a little foggy, which was really, really nice. I know with - I struggled a little bit with my Calc [Calculus] Three class, but he posted all the videos, so I was able to review those multiple times to help me work through all the problems. So, I found that just having that availability to re-go over lectures multiple times really helped.

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MG: Yeah, absolutely. I think a lot of people found that helpful, I know I found that helpful. Have there been any silver lining for you in the crisis?

ML: I would say I think silver lining would be just being in touch more with people. I feel like sometimes it's hard to stay in touch with a lot of friends and just being able to reach out to them and them having more time has been great. It's not something I thought would happen but it's great. I love talking to all my friends and catching up with people and seeing how they're doing. And I feel like it was a lot harder before, but it's gotten much easier and I'm hoping that if we get a vaccine and things kind of go back to somewhat normal that we're able to keep that level of contact. So, I'm hoping that will stick with people. It's really easy to talk to each other, we just have to find the time.

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MG: Yeah, definitely. You know, maybe this will show people that a slower way of living or at least scheduling time to talk to people is a good thing. Because, especially before, I feel like we were always go, go, go and now we've all been forced to just stop [laughter].

ML: Yeah, absolutely.

MG: What have you done to stay busy? Have you taken up any new hobbies or gone back to things you haven't had time for?

ML: Currently, I'm still - since the year is over, we don't have to work on our senior project anymore but we got together as a team, a week or so ago, and we took a little time to take a little time just to take break from the game, see how people - where people were going to be moving, just to take time to get things straightened out. But we decided as a team to continue to work on our game for a little while just to really go back and put those things in the game that we never got a chance to do. We had to make cuts because of time. We just want to polish the game more and really add those things we could miss so we can really make a solid product to put on our portfolios. We feel that the game is already great, but we want to try to make it a little bit better just to improve, like I said, our game for our portfolios.

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MG: Yeah, definitely. What kind of game is it? Like, I know it's a video game but like can you tell me a little more about it?

ML: Sure. The name of the game is called "Pestilence." It's an action game where you play a deity of disease, and you lost your disease and it's escaped to Earth. And you are tasked with retrieving your disease in order to regain your godhood.

MG: Disease?

ML: Yeah.

MG: That is very timely [laughter].

ML: [Laughter] Yeah. We - it's - we've been trying to, you know, not make jokes or anything about it in our game because we had come up with this game back in August - August/September area. And once COVID started, we were just like "did we predict the future?"

MG: [Laughter].

ML: You know, we tried not to put anything just in our game or in our social media posts because it is such a serious thing and people are losing their lives. So, we tried to, you know, just keep it that way so it - so we weren't making any jokes. But yeah, it was - it was kind of crazy that that happened.

MG: Yeah. That is like a crazy coincidence. It's almost like a little like Simpsons moment.

ML: Right? Simpsons predicts everything.

MG: Yeah, basically. I mean this is off - I mean it's not off topic - but we're able to put like different kinds of artifacts or things in this project and if you'd be interested, we can definitely like put in like a link to your game and the project or even just like some design or art design or notes or whatever. So, if you'd want to do something like that, you can just email it to me and I can pass it along to the Archives.

ML: Okay, yeah. I can send you a link to our game. I can send you a copy of the design doc as well. And then, off that link the game can be downloaded if the Archives would actually want to download the game themselves, they certainly can. But yeah, there's the - we can have the link and everything for that, so I can definitely send that to you.

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MG: Yeah, that'd be great. All right. So, what are some of the things that you worry about how people are responding or what the effects might be?

ML: I'm sorry. Could you say that again?

MG: Yeah, what are some of the things that worry you about how people are responding or what the effects might be?

ML: I think what worries me the most is just how people don't seem to care about protecting themselves and others sometimes. I mean, it's still going on, it's not done but I know when I walk around with a mask, even just leaving my apartment, I never see anybody with a mask on. And that's pretty concerning. Like, yes, the county here has relatively low cases but at any point, there could be a jump in cases like somebody could come through who's asymptomatic and spread it to other people. And it just - that kind of worries that just people, especially over Memorial Day Weekend there were huge parties that people were going to. And that's just really concerning that people just kind of almost gave up. Like they did it for a couple months and just decided "I'm done; whatever happens, happens" which is really unfortunate that - to have that attitude and still - putting a mask on, there's like no effort to that. And just seeing that people aren't even willing to do that or just follow, you know, small gathering to help, you know, quell the diseases is pretty concerning.

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MG: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, I know Menomonie was at nine for two or three weeks and then it spiked, and I heard that that spike was because of people who lived in Menomonie but work in Eau Claire or something. So, it is really crazy. What do you think will change after the pandemic is over, if anything?

ML: I mean, I hope that, you know, after this pandemic is over, people will be more aware of when they're sick and staying home and you know, better washing of their hands. It's - I mean, there's a lot of people that, you know, die from the flu every year, and it's not zero, but, you know, I'm just hoping that people are maybe like "oh, I'm sick. Maybe I should stay home." Because they could potentially give it to somebody who they don't know that [?], you know, it

affects them more. Like for me, I'm at more of a risk. I had two transplants - bone marrow transplants in my life. I'm a cancer survivor, so I am at risk. And not a lot of people would know that and it's just them, you know, not taking simple precautions. And it's if you're sick, stay home. Unfortunately, how jobs are, if people are really sick, I'm just hoping that maybe businesses are more forgiving when people are actually sick and actually let them stay home and work from home. Because a lot of their employees work from home and they're finding that maybe it's not as bad as they thought that when people are sick that they can just work from home instead of maybe using that sick time, so they don't spread it around as much unless people get sick. So, I'm hoping that from all this, you know, maybe less people will get sick, not specifically COVID, but other viruses and things that float around.

MG: Yeah, absolutely. There's definitely been a shift in how people work and maybe that will continue on after. I know I saw that Twitter said that they were looking into just a "Work-From-Home" company like permanently.

ML: Yeah.

MG: Which was really interesting. And hopefully that will catch on a little bit more.

ML: Yeah.

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MG: So, what kinds of technology are you using to communicate with others and stay busy and entertained.

ML: I use quite a few programs to keep in touch with others. I've used Microsoft Teams, like we are now. I use Zoom with my friend group in Seattle. I use Discord for my team for my game. We also used Slack for a while, but I think we shifted mostly to Discord once we changed to virtually because we could video chat and we could have separate text channels for, you know, different things. So, we kind of switched over to one platform there. I've used - there's another program I've used, I can't remember the name of it. [Short pause] It's escaping me, but I've used another Zoom-like program to chat with people, so I've used a lot of things, surprisingly. I try to keep it to the one's I already have on my computer, but I will continue to add more if other groups use something different.

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MG: Yeah, definitely. So, what items have you had a harder time purchasing or obtaining?

ML: Right now, I don't think I've any that were hard to obtain. Things I already knew about or had access to, so really, I didn't have any problems getting any of the services.

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MG: Cool, that's great. So how does news coverage you see differ from what you've seen or personally experienced?

ML: Oh, like the [unclear]. I'm sorry, could you repeat that one more time?

MG: Yeah, sorry. I think we kind of had a disconnect for a second. How does news coverage you see differ from what you've seen or personally experienced?

ML: In terms of COVID-19?

MG: Yes.

ML: I think with that, you know, in the beginning it was just such a heavy amount of information that came out with COVID-19, is - they would put it out there. It would be reported as something popped up and then it would change if they found "okay, this drug is good [?]." It literally was just anything that was COVID-19 related that would pop up, it seemed like they would report on, especially in the beginning. What I've noticed now, it's more they report on numbers and infections, but I feel like now I only ever hear reports on, like I said, the numbers or the number of infections or if there's a spike in the number of cases. And then I do see more information now about possibly when a new vaccine would be out and how many doses we want by certain times. I think it was Anthony Fauci - Dr. Anthony Fauci - said by the end of the year they wanted a hundred thousand doses or a million, I can't remember what it was but basically by the end of the year, they wanted a certain amount and then I think it was halfway through the year, the beginning of twenty twenty-one, they wanted like double that or something - I didn't see the exact numbers. But it's been more of that, just reporting on when a vaccine would come. I feel like now it's gotten to the point where they've reported everything about the disease that is going around and it's more just how it's being maintained and how we're going to cure it.

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MG: Yeah, definitely. [Short pause] So, what are the things you miss most about campus and the Menomonie community?

ML: Probably - I mean definitely the people. It was - is being able to go out and, you know, actually see my fellow students in class. It was getting together afterwards to celebrate. I know the group for my game, they wanted to celebrate, you know, a year's worth of hard work working on this game and because of this, we really couldn't. We talked in a group chat together, but it wasn't really the same. We wanted to like actually get together and relax and party and just, you know, eat food and just have fun. And, you know, unfortunately, a lot of those things have gone away. Especially with graduation too, you know, it's that whole - that whole week where it was going to be filled with just - I mean we have the SGX [Stout Game Expo], which is the Stout Game Expo. You know, I've been looking forward to that for a really long time to be able to like show off the senior project, to see what the other senior games have done, and kind of to look at a lot of the younger students projects and just see what potentially the future could look like for the games here. And not being able to see those in person and experience that has been, you know, a bummer. Just also there was a senior showcase we would have done. Just that whole week, there was an award ceremony that I couldn't go to. I won the Samuel E. Wood Medallion Award, so I couldn't go to that. It's just that whole week would've been busy with different events and that Saturday would have been graduation and just like being able - not being able to see the my teammates and my fellow students has been unfortunate. That's, you

know, kind of a milestone that you look forward to for a long time and then to have that kind of diminished is unfortunate.

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MG: Yeah, absolutely. I used to be a game design major and when I was they would always hype up that entire week senior year. So, I can only imagine how disheartening it is to have it taken away.

ML: Yeah.

MG: But it doesn't take away from your accomplishment. You did a really amazing thing.

ML: Absolutely.

MG: And you did it well. So, if you were granted a wish for twenty-four hours, with no chance for infection, how would you spend it?

ML: I would probably my time seeing family and friends. It is really just being with people, you know, who I care about. You know, right now it's - like I said, I live alone, by myself yet for a couple weeks until I move back home. But it's just, you know, spending a lot of time away from people and it would be nice to have that connection again and not worry about getting sick. You know, it's going out and doing things like, you know, being a part of the protests for George Floyd. And, you know, not worrying about being such a high risk, you know, I can only do so much.

MG: Yeah.

ML: To be a part of that but I think those things too, being a part of that movement, a little bit more and not worrying about getting sick.

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MG: Yeah, definitely. I mean, you can only do so much. You do what you can but - and that's all you can be asked to do. So, what else would you like to share about your experiences during this pandemic?

ML: I think maybe a little bit about the org [organization] I was a part of. I was co-president of Colleges Against Cancer. We run the Menomonie Area Relay. We - I mean, campus was closed I think three weeks, three weeks before our event? Maybe a little bit more time, but it was about three weeks I think, which is quite a big shift. You know, we do a lot of planning. We plan basically this event all year long. There's a lot of things that go into it: you know, making decorations, and getting locations, and recruitment, funding, and just a lot of things that go into the background that we take a lot of time to do to try to create this event for Relay For Life. And having to shift to a virtual - we shifted to a virtual event - and I think the team did a great job with the time that we had. You know, we scrambled to try to make it an event where people would want to take time and experience it in a virtual setting and normally our relay would start at six PM and go until three or four in the morning. Some Relay For Lives' are a lot longer, they



are twenty-four - you know, twenty-four hours. But yeah, it's something that we had to shift to make sure that people would want to stick around for. So, the team took a lot of time, and we thought what - how we can make this something people would want to experience. So, we turned it into basically a three-day event over the weekend, instead of like a six- or eight-hour constant live stream. Where basically where what we would do is we post - we made videos, one for each day, - and try to hold contests where it was just people could come to our Facebook page, they could watch our video, and then there was a digital contest that people could participate in. So, it's not something that they were required to sit there for hours on end, you know, we're just trying to make it so people didn't feel like they were stuck sitting and staring at their computer screen the whole time. We wanted it to be available so people could just come in, experience it, you know, just kind of think about it over the weekend. You know, think about maybe of loved one they lost or, you know, people who have survived - or survivors. So, we just try to make it a little bit better instead of, like I said, a solid chunk of sitting there we try to make it spread out over the weekend so people could take a little bit of time everyday for a couple days and just think about the Relay.

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MG: Yeah, absolutely. That sound's awesome. Also if you had any of those videos that you would like to give us, that would be really great.

ML: Okay.

MG: So, last question. Can you recommend anybody else from the Stout community who we should approach for an interview?

ML: Let's see [short pause]. I can maybe ask any of the members, who are non-board members a part of CAC [Colleges Against Cancer], what their experience was, just as a member of an org. You know, instead of being on the board and we did a lot of the decision stuff, but we tried to, you know, delegate some of the things to the board - or to the other members to make them feel more engaged with the group. I mean, I could reach out to them. I mean, nobody specific is coming to mind but, you know, I could definitely reach out to my game design group and see if anybody there - any of them - were willing. Especially like maybe the artists on the team to see how their experience was because I know for some of them, it was hard to do the work because of the software we used, you know, having access to some of that stuff is really expensive. And if we don't have maybe the lab computers or the school laptops to do it on, you know, buying those licenses is really expensive. So maybe some of the artists from the team would be interested.

MG: Yeah, definitely. That'd be great. So, thank you so much for this interview. It was super helpful and thank you so much. I look forward to seeing the videos and looking at your game.

ML: I'm glad I could be a part of it. I will send you the links and the doc for our game, Pestilence, and I will send you some relay videos. I know we have them up on our Facebook page, but I'll see if we can get the edited video files directly to you. It might be easier instead of trying to page through everything, so I'll try to see if I can get those sent to you as well.

MG: Yeah, that'd be super helpful. Thank you so much, Michael.

ML: Yeah, thank you.

MG: Thanks. Stay safe.

ML: Yeah, you too.

MG: Bye.

ML: Bye-bye.

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END