The Guy Who Hated Running [1]

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Essay by Aaron Giddings

How a Gamer Turned Himself Into the Flash

It was the puking runner who really pushed me over the edge. I was 35, five laps into a six-lap, mile-and-a-half fitness test. One lap prior, I felt slightly better about my general lack of fitness when I passed the guy who needed to step off the track to empty his stomach. Then, on the next lap, he caught up and passed me, leaving me to finish dead last in the group of hopeful volunteers.

I knew I was out of shape, but I didn't realize how bad it had gotten. The characters in the video games I played ran all the time. I didn't. I would often joke, "If you see me running, you'd best keep up—because I'll be running away from something!" I was the out-of-shape friend who'd get eaten by the bear.

In real life, I'd made a fourteen-year career out of working in game development while also trying to support a family of seven on a single income in the greater Seattle area. I had a four-hour commute on workdays. I had to change jobs four times in a span of four years. This wasn't the life I wanted for myself and my family.

So, in September 2015, I found a new job, in a more stable industry, which meant packing up and heading east to start a new chapter in South Dakota.

When I was a teenager, I spent hours playing the classic games of the 1990s. Adventure games like *Sam & Max Hit the Road* and *The Curse of Monkey Island*; cutting-edge shooters like *Wolfenstein 3D* and *Duke Nukem 3D.* But for me, nothing compared with space-combat sims. I played *Wing Commander* until I could quote every line of dialogue and read everything I could get my hands on about how it was made and the people who made it. That was when I knew I didn't just want to be a gamer—I wanted to make games for others. Leaving all of that behind, even for the best of reasons, felt like losing part of myself.

But this major career change and move did come with unexpected benefits. While I'd certainly spent the past few years making video games, I hadn't spent nearly as much time actually playing them. Not spending four hours in weekday commutes gave me more time to dust off old hobbies. I dove back into my favorite MMORPG (Massively Multiplayer Online Roleplaying Game), briefly reliving the fun in the treadmill of fighting enemies, getting stronger, and fighting stronger enemies. But it didn't hold the satisfaction that it used to. My old friends from *Star Wars: Galaxies* and *World of Warcraft (WoW)* had moved on to other pursuits.

In the midst of it all, that failed physical test kept bothering me. I'd started a Couch-to-5K program that previous summer, but it had been derailed by the cross-country move. In Summer 2016, I finally started again. I don't like leaving things unfinished, and I needed to prove to myself I could complete the training program.

Some people say the most difficult part of any fitness program is the day you start. I disagree. It's the second day, when everything hurts and you have to decide whether or not to keep going anyway. The first week, I could barely run for two minutes at a time. My "reward" for completing that week was to run for two-and-a-half minutes the next week.

But I kept going and, in about the same amount of time it took me to take a new *WoW* character up to maximum level, I'd built up enough endurance for thirty minutes. That fall, I even finished my first 5K, a costume race where I dressed ironically as The Flash.

Afterward, I said I was done running. I'd proved my point. Besides, I hated running. Runners ran 10Ks or did daily five-mile jogs for fun.

Yet just like an expansion pack that combines new challenges with familiar settings to lure players back to a game, I found I wanted to go farther and faster. Running was slowly becoming part of my identity—a secret identity known only to my closest family—with me donning spandex tights to go for early morning jogs.

I started training for a 10K. In games, there's always another level, another castle, a faster time. I wanted to beat my previous high score, and for me that meant going farther. Running taps into the same parts of my brain that RPGs (Role Playing Games) do. The dopamine hit from that *ding!* in *World of Warcraft* is nothing compared with setting a new personal record for speed or distance.

Once again in my trusty Flash shirt, I ran my first 10K. This time, I knew I was done with running. I'd proven my point, twice over. After all, real runners run half-marathons and workout five days a week.

It's not that cold outside, I can get in a run after work. I told myself that winter, donning tights, gloves, and a sweatshirt for a mid-November run. I found myself thinking it was only practical to fit a treadmill into the house, but only real runners did things like that.

I was back outside as soon as the snow melted. When I finished my first half-marathon that fall, enjoying a celebratory post-race beer, I admitted to myself what everyone around me had known for a while: I was a runner. And I wanted to run marathons, even if it meant working out five days a week. After all, a five-mile jog *could* be relaxing.

There was no more quitting for the winter. Some people say they run half-marathons because they're "only half crazy." Others say that a half-marathon is just a full marathon left half-finished. For me, it was the same passion that drove me to explore every bit of space in *Wing Commander* years ago. I set my eyes on the Fargo-Morehead Marathon in May 2019.

Race day dawned cold and wet. *Final Fantasy* boss-battle music pumped through my headphones. This was it. My training hadn't gone as well as I would have liked, but no time for regrets now. The gun sounded, and I was off to face the longest distance I'd ever run.

Nineteen miles into the race, I lost sight of the five-hour pace group. Twenty miles in, my feet ached, my shins hurt, and my shoes squished with every step. There was a medical tent next to the water station, and I thought about quitting.

Around twenty-two miles, a spectator offered me a cold beer. If I hadn't been shivering from the wind blowing through my soggy Flash shirt, I might have taken him up on the offer. At the twenty-six-mile banner, I broke into a slow, lumbering trot to finish the last two-tenths of a mile.

I staggered across the line somewhere after the five-hour mark, twenty-two minutes slower than my target pace but infinitely faster than what I could have accomplished five years before.

I don't expect to ever be an elite runner. I'm too old, and I started too late. It's enough for me that the guy who would get eaten by a bear has finally leveled up.

Art information

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Aaron Giddings lives in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, with his wife, their five children, and the three cats who actually run the house. In 2020, he's run a lot of virtual races. He enjoys writing, video games, motorcycles, and aviation. Find him at his blog [5], where he mostly writes about aviation, video games, and whatever

is on his mind—or on Instagram (@amgiddings [6]), where he posts running selfies and cat pictures. He still isn't used to winter.

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