

## **The Calculus of Addiction: My Monstrous Obsession with Numbers**

I find meaning in numbers. As I scribble equations or write lines of code, challenging problems come alive around me like a swirling orchestra. Math is my music – literally and figuratively – allowing me at once to understand and tune out the rest of the world.

From a young age, I have attached significance to numbers and algorithms. Weeks after my first birthday, I startled my mother by neatly adorning our apartment hallway with dozens of stickers. At seated height, I had meticulously alternated all of the “6” and “9”s from a giant sticker book, followed by all of the “M” and “W”s in a second long line. As she stared bewildered at my project, I grunted and squealed with delight at my work, shrieking “same, same!” until she recognized that each row consisted of identical stickers turned upside-down. As I smiled triumphantly, I gave her the first glimpse into my love affair with math. Shortly after, long division became my favorite game. While strolling Tribeca in my preschool years, I would demand problems from my parents to solve in my head. And by third grade, I had become consumed with Rubix cubes and  $\pi$ . I swiftly conquered 9x9 cubes, and petitioned that March 14th should be a national holiday (which I commemorated by memorizing the first 50 digits of  $\pi$ ).

As I have matured, math and programming have remained foundational to who I am; in fact, they have provided me a bridge to connect with my hobbies. In soccer, each move I make is a calculus of taking the right angle of approach, probability-weighting my opponent’s next move, and estimating the trajectory of the ball. My twin passions of coding and piano also gorgeously collided two years ago, when I taught myself to programmatically synthesize music on my computer. And as my analytical skills have developed, I find no greater joy than cracking the logic in advanced engineering problems. Many nights – and often into the wee hours of the morning – I lock myself away in my room to bring a new world to life through my computer. My laptop becomes its own instrument, whether pouring out music or converting lines of code into a

functioning AI model. I am largely powerless to stop until I have completed a project that I am proud to showcase to others.

With an incurable scientific drive, I can relate to Victor Frankenstein, the protagonist in Mary Shelley's eponymous work. Like Frankenstein, I am intoxicated by technology, pushed relentlessly by the searing desire to create something powerful, complex, and timeless. In his quest for a scientific discovery, Frankenstein lacks guardrails. Unable to control how hard he toils on his monstrous project, he ultimately drives himself to the verge of madness. When he enters the scientific realm, his exploration becomes so ardent and eager that it soon supersedes his sleep. There have been countless occasions where I too have worked through the night, enthralled by the private world metamorphosed from my personal coding project. Notably, as Frankenstein transforms into a mad scientist consumed with his desire to conquer death, he turns his back on his remaining loved ones – a demonstration of his inability to be present. My obsession with my own work can also become a source of tension within my family. Though they support my interests, coding and math are not intuitive hobbies to my parents or sister, and they complain when I furrow myself away in my room for days on end.

Early one morning over winter break, I recall my mother sighing heavily when she entered my room to find the lights on and my new computer precariously dangling off the edge of the bed. My eyes stung with sleep deprivation, and I recalled that I had nodded off just as the sun was rising. As she briskly snapped the laptop shut and light switch off, my mom informed me she was leaving for work, and reminded me to dress nicely for the 7pm dinner we were hosting at our apartment. We had close friends visiting from out of town, and I was expected to partake in the festivities.

I fed my mom vague assurances as I ushered her out of my room. Once she was gone, I wasted no time in returning to my keyboard. For the next twelve hours, I worked furiously. The day was a blur of lines of code, punctuated only by a quick dash to the kitchen for cereal and milk, and maybe a single trip to the bathroom. I did not look up from my screen as afternoon shadows cast

against my walls. When I noticed the sun had set, I went into a deeper frenzy, typing maniacally to finish my project. Headphones blaring, door closed, I ignored the growing shuffle of dinner preparation and guests arriving outside my quarters. This episode was again reminiscent of Frankenstein's behavior in his lab, where he toiled for nearly two years to bring life to his creation, at the expense of his own health. Nothing mattered more to me in that moment than finishing my code.

I was suddenly jolted out of my trance when the door flung open. I met my mother's gaze; her eyes scanned me slowly before her lips curled. "You look handsome, thanks for getting dressed. Come join us outside." I looked down at my own body, shocked to find I had unconsciously thrown on some slacks and a button-down. I reflexively patted my hair down and mustered a smirk. I peered out of my tiny kingdom to take stock of the world waiting beyond my door. Boisterous laughter and the savory scent of rosemary pot roast floated in the air. I could see candles flickering softly in the hallway mirror. I felt myself being pulled away from the vortex of math equations that had tethered me inside my room all day. My hypnotism lifted fully when I walked into the warm embrace of our guests in the dining room. As I joined their happy banter, I had the sensation of being lifted off the ground and transported to another world. My neck tensions relaxed with every smile, and within fifteen minutes I was deeply engrossed in a conversation about generational abbreviations. (I was left flabbergasted that "y" stood for "yes" and not "why" for Gen X.) The haze of my quantitative fever had broken.

I am grateful that in contrast to Frankenstein, I have the capacity to exist in different realms. It is undeniable that math and coding are beautiful, lifelong addictions for me. And while I am often inflicted by serious fiending, I like to think that I keep enough Narcan pens handy as antidotes. My strongest lifeline is my family, who stubbornly refuse to leave me unmoored in my room for too long. Unlike Frankenstein, who cannot be reached by the love of his family, I enjoy taking periodic respites from my obsessive habit through quality time with my family and close friends. I am also saved from the depths of my addiction by the myriad of interests I pursue. While

math and coding are integrated into most of my activities, I am never chasing a singular ambition at the expense of all others. My interest in debate and philosophy also drive me to examine the benefits and morality in all of the research projects I undertake. This system of checks and balances distinguishes me from Frankenstein, whose addiction ultimately takes on a literal life of its own.

When our dinner guests left that evening, I helped out with the dishes before I retreated to my bedroom and opened my laptop. I decided to move on from the AI project I had been working on to start composing a new Latin tune. The orchestra of numbers had started up in my mind again, but it was playing a different song.