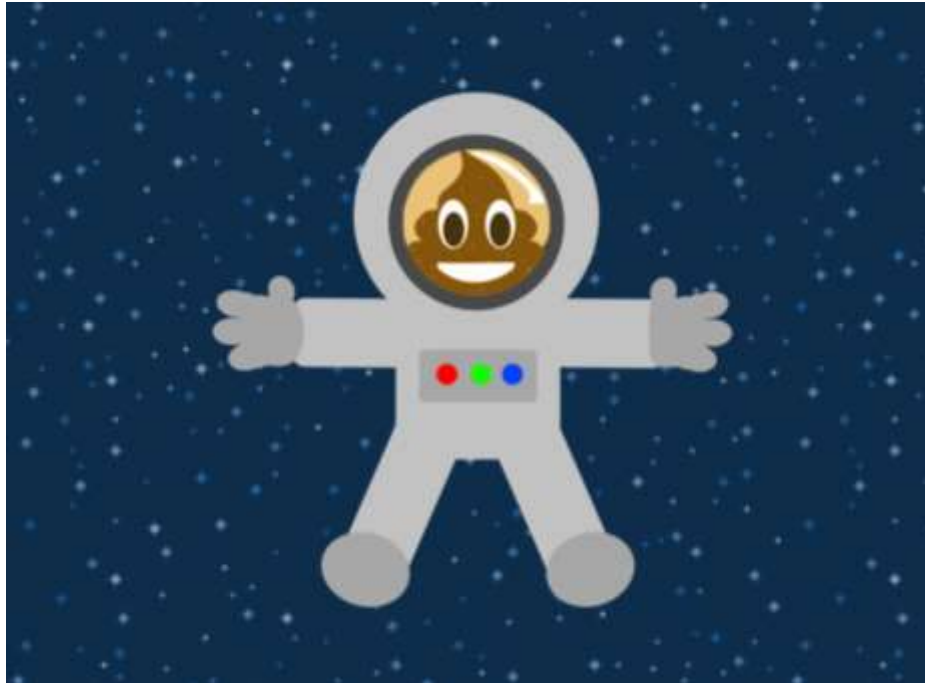


A Pooper's Quest to be a Hero



I have always loved poop - not the stinky abomination, but just the cute four-letter word. I love saying it so much that my game buddies call me poop. I prefer the name 'pooper' though; it sounds much better.

So when I read an article about NASA's Space Poop Challenge, I thought that maybe it's for me. OK, that may be a bit of a stretch from being a pooper, but I actually love science and everything it encompasses. It's the frontier of human progress, the foundation of our modern lifestyle and the future of what is to come; and I want to be a part of it – a hero of science.

Sadly, though, I don't have a relevant degree. I'm just a writer who can't even write properly. Thanks to the competition, however, I may just have an opportunity to be a part of something I wouldn't be able to be otherwise. It's the shortcut that I have been waiting for. So, there! I accepted the challenge.

“Competition to source a system that routes and collects human waste away from the body, hands-free, for fully suited astronauts,” the challenge says. Sounds easy enough, I thought to myself. Time to brainstorm!

I wanted my solution to be simple and straightforward. I wanted it to be as basic as it can get, and it became so. It wasn't any sophisticated solution, just an amalgamation of the things that I learned. Funny enough, there weren't any paper for me to write on when the inspiration came upon me. The only paper for me to write on is a tissue paper. Ironic, isn't it? A pooper is writing his idea about poop on a tissue paper. Tissue and poop. It's a sign that I will win for sure, right?



Except that it's really not – just a mere coincidence of insignificant meaning. Reality soon dawned upon me the weight of the issues that I have to tackle – the physics, engineering and design behind the system that I need to create out of thin air. I have little knowledge about these, and although I was able to learn a few things related to the challenge here and there in high school and college, it's nowhere near what's needed.

Fine, I'll just study about these, I thought to myself again. What do I need to learn? Pressure, air flow, electric current, previous waste management systems and possible usable materials... and oh, AutoCAD. I need to draw my system in 3D. I still have over 20 days so I can do this!

AND WRONG, WRONG, WRONG AGAIN. I live in an underdeveloped rural area where internet connection is slow at best, and my laptop is also outdated and sluggish. Combine that with my short attention span and the outcome was little work done. The deadline was inching closer, and my project was nowhere near completion.

What a waste, but I have nobody to blame but myself. Of course, I was at a disadvantage, but it's mostly my inability to dedicate long hours that resulted in me achieving almost nothing. I looked back at those first few days that I would think relentlessly about my solution. I was so deep in it, that I can almost feel I was in space. Heck, I really was in space! I was floating and wearing the solution that I designed.

I was even recognized by NASA for my innovation. I helped them develop a system that future astronauts would use in their space travels. And my dream came true: my name has been certified as a contributor to science. Lastly and most enjoyably, I was busy spending the prize I won: \$10,000 cold cash. I did, I really did. Minus that I wasn't and I didn't.

There were only a few days left before the deadline, and I haven't even documented a single thing about my solution. Sure, I had already drafted the main concept, but I lacked in providing details. I reminisced once again the past few days when I was laughing at my competitors.

You see, in these challenges, there are forums. And in these forums, challengers are encouraged to communicate with each other to collaborate and share information. And I was laughing at some of them because of the thoughtlessness of their ideas. One was proposing something about plugging something into something. Ha! As if such absurdity has a chance of winning. I relished in the thought that my solution is so much better than theirs.

Yeah, except that it wasn't. Or maybe it was, but I was just as clueless as some of they were: treading a path I don't really know. The people of NASA, some of the brightest and smartest in the planet, weren't able to come up with a solution, and I thought I could? Someone who doesn't even have a science degree? Arrogance is indeed ignorance.

As I was sighing because of the time I wasted (referring to both invested and didn't), I realized that there really isn't a shortcut to winning in life, or just winning in a specific challenge of any kind. We have to build ourselves steadily and slowly: quite clichéd, but nonetheless the truth.

So there I am, staring at the dusty screen of my laptop, contemplating on what I should do next. Should I still press on, or should I call it quits? I know that I'm not going to win, not by a long shot, but I also know I would lose something if I didn't persist. I'm not really sure what it is, but I truly feel that I should carry on. Heroes don't give up after all, you know? So I didn't.

With my half-assed solution, I filled up all the forms that I need to fill. There were neither calculation on pressure, nor on air flow, nor on electric current, nor are there measurements... BUT... but, I was able to draw my system... not on AutoCAD but on Photoshop. Ha! At least I tried. And I was actually proud that I did. It's the innovation I came up with, after all – my own masterpiece.

Come to think of it, I should really be proud. A writer, a mere pooper, dare submitted a solution to a challenge for scientists and engineers? Unthinkable, but it happened, and because I made it so. And I also just realized that this is not the end, my career in science, I mean. Who knows, life may just surprise me someday. The future suddenly looks bright, and it's now my quest to make sure it becomes brighter.

So with an optimistic mind and a fluttering heart, I pressed the submit button, and I did so with a smile; because I know that I may not become a hero by not winning, but I'm sure that I'm now ready to be one.

