

High school programming prodigy keeps engaged in retirement with bridge, tennis and little spaceships

Description

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Bill Char was a tech bro before it was cool to be a tech bro.

He learned to program a minicomputer when he was still in high school â?? back in the late â??60s, and early â??70s. He was so devoted to Star Trek that he conceived and helped develop a first-generation computer game called Trek73, taking it to multiple fan conventions.

When he wasnâ??t programming or following the adventures of Captain Kirk, he played competitive bridge, a game he learned in sixth grade. Now, the retired software engineer teaches seniors to play that cerebral card game.



Bill Char learned bridge from his mom when he was in sixth grade. Now he teaches other seniors to play. (Photo by Mary Anne Lewis)

He learned from his mother, who raised him on her own. He played bridge with older schoolmates and adults, but other than his mother, he didnâ??t have any friends who were into programming. She wasnâ??t a Star Trek fan but did know something about computer languages. She was a COBOL programmer and later in her career a systems analyst for the U.S. Navy.

Perfect career match

From high school on, Char worked continuously as a programmer, systems analyst, or database engineer. He has an associate degree in computer science from City College of San Francisco, a bachelorâ??s degree in systems analysis, and a masterâ??s degree in marketing from California State University-East Bay.

He became a programmer, he said, â??because it was very easy for me to learn and fun to do. The income was outstanding, and I could not imagine myself in any other career.â?•

For many years, he worked at a series of computer start-ups. Later in his career, he was a database administrator in the healthcare industry.

He abandoned Trek73 when school, work, and family took up his time â?? and his computer lacked the graphic capabilities needed to develop the game further. For the same reasons, he also fell off bridge.

In his 50s, he took up tennis, along with his wife, Teruko. At 69, he said, he has a 3.5 ranking from the United States Tennis Association and is fit enough to â??beat an average high school player.â?• But he didnâ??t return to bridge until last year, when his wife wanted to learn.



With a 3.5 rating from the U.S. Tennis Association, Char says he can beat the average high school player. (Photo courtesy of Bill Char)

On a recent Thursday morning, Char launched into his duties as an unofficial bridge instructor at the YMCA senior bridge program at Park Merced apartments. He lives in the Outer Richmond district. Unpacking his backpack, he distributed playing cards, pens, and paper, plastic duplicate bridge containers, and opened a binder full of bridge instructions for a group of about eight people.

Char says the conventions, or bidding rules, of bridge have changed considerably since his high school days, making it a challenge to teach older people. It is one of the most complicated games, and it takes a good deal of memorization, something many seniors are reluctant to do, he said.

San Franciscan Anne Grady, who was sitting in on Charâ??s class, just started playing again after stopping in her teens. â??I never really learned as a teenager,â?• she said, adding that Char is really patient, and hoping â??he doesnâ??t get frustrated with all of us.â?•

Washing the cards

At times, Char has gone to great lengths to feed his bridge habit. When he was 16, he and his family moved to San Francisco from Honolulu after a brief sojourn in Japan. He began playing bridge at the now-defunct Stonestown Bridge Club.

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Char, for whom programming and bridge came easy, said he once won the downpayment for a condominium playing blackjack â??before the casinos knew anything about counting cards.â• (Photo by Mary Anne Lewis)

But he couldnâ??t afford the fees. So, the management let him and a partner play two or three times a week if they agreed to wash the playing cards by hand. They would warp if thrown into a washing machine or dunked in water.

â??Back then the cards would get very soiled and covered with cigarette smoke,â• he said, â??so the bridge cards would get pretty sticky and pretty smelly.â•

Char and a partner played in bridge tournaments at the St. Francis Hotel, now the Westin in Union Square. He was ranked as a junior master, among players younger than 25.

He still loves the game, though he no longer needs to scrub piles of cards. Still, it took up a good deal of his attention when he wasnâ??t programming or indulging in science fiction.

Char never gambled on bridge but recalls that he won the down payment on his first condominium playing blackjack at casinos in Reno and Lake Tahoe. He won about $1,500 in 10 sessions or so in the â??70s. â??This was before the casinos knew anything about counting cards,â?• he said.

Before Xbox

He got the idea for Trek73 while looking over the shoulder of someone playing a space game at the old Exploratorium at the Palace of Fine Arts. â??I thought, I can write a computer program as well,â?• he said. â??I could probably do a better coded one in my spare time at Woodrow Wilson High School.â?•

Though enrolled at Lowell High School, he commuted to Wilson High after school because it had the lone, time-shared computer in the district. It was a Hewlett Packard 2000 Model C, and kids from all over the city were allowed to use it. Char took full advantage and with two others helped develop Trek73 as a senior in high school.

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The game simulates Star Trek spaceship battles. Players navigate their ships through text commands. Predating the widespread use of computer monitors, it was played on teletype machines, once prevalent in newsrooms and brokerage offices.


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Char with his miniature spaceships. (Photo courtesy of Bill Char)

â??Maybe youâ??ve seen them in old movies,â?• said Char. â??They were fast-typing typewriters connected to a computer. So, it wasnâ??t computer graphics. If I wanted to draw a picture, I had to draw Xâ??s and zeroes and dots and plus signs to represent spaceships on a map.â?•

At Star Trek fan conventions, he would charge money for people to play his game. Heâ??d bring his teletypes to the convention and charge the curious a few dollars for 15 minutes of playtime.

Char is still devoted to Star Trek, but would rather not be called a Trekkie, who he thinks spend too much time on trivia, â??like the combination to Captain Kirkâ??s safe,â?• he said. Instead, he marveled at the futuristic design of the Enterprise.

â??I fell in love with the shape of the Starship Enterprise and its high-tech bridge layout. It was the dawn of the American space age,â?• he said. â??This was futuristic warfare.â?•

Now, he has actual spaceships, though small. In 1999, he bought the rights to miniature models used in a tabletop game, and sells them through Monday Knight Productions. â??I have one of the largest collections in the world. My sons, neighbors, relatives, and I have fun battling each otherâ??s fleets.â?•

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