Kyle Field, a student at UW-Stout in Menomonie, received the Randy Pausch Scholarship last fall. Field, who is a double major in entertainment design and game design and development, survived serious complications from cancer in 2007.

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UW-Stout student gets to pursue his dream

By UW-Stout News Bureau

MENOMONIE — Kyle Field looks forward to the day when he can add two designations in front of his name: college graduate and professional game designer.

Kyle, a UW-Stout sophomore from Roseville, Minn., decided years ago that he wanted to combine his love of drawing and video games to make a living. He is a double major in game design and development and entertainment design.

For now, Kyle happily answers to a pair of other descriptors: cancer survivor and Randy Pausch Scholarship winner.

Last fall Kyle was one of two students in the United States to win a Pausch scholarship, sponsored by the Academy of Interactive Arts & Sciences. The award, worth $2,500, is named after the late Carnegie Mellon University computer science professor who died of pancreatic cancer in 2008.

Kyle shares the same general career interest as did Pausch, who co-founded the Entertainment Technology Center at Carnegie Mellon. He also had cancer at almost exactly the same time.

In fall 2007, when Pausch, 47, had months to live and was making headlines with his lecture, Kyle too was expected to die. Kyle was 14.

Kyle had been diagnosed in spring 2007, when he was finishing eighth grade, with myelodysplastic syndrome. His bone marrow wasn't making enough healthy blood cells.

He underwent radiation and chemotherapy treatments in mid-July, then needed a bone marrow transplant later that month.

"It was an aggressive preleukemia that, if they didn't treat it, would develop into a very aggressive type of leukemia," Kyle said, adding it is a somewhat rare disease and even more uncommon in young people.

That autumn, complications developed. Kyle had virtually no immune system because of the transplant, and a fungus called aspergillus set in and began destroying his lungs. In late September, the bottom third of his right lung was removed.

Kyle continued to worsen. In early October, he was placed in a coma and on breathing machines at the University of Minnesota Children's Hospital.

A month later, he still showed no improvement. With no treatment options left, doctors approached his parents, Catharina and Terence Field, and asked them to sign do-not-resuscitate papers.

"They told my parents I had zero chance of surviving," said Kyle, who also received kidney dialysis because his kidneys had begun to fail.

His parents refused to sign.

"As long as there was a little bit of life, there was hope," Catharina said. "You're sitting there starting to plan your child's funeral. It was unbelievable to realize he was that close to death."

Kyle's best friend came to say goodbye, sitting at his bedside and talking to him although Kyle remained in a coma.
Several days after doctors had given up hope on Kyle, he miraculously began to improve. He was brought out of the coma a week before Christmas 2007. One of his parents' biggest fears was brain damage.

"There was no guarantee. I was just grateful he was alive. Even if he had brain damage, if he could recognize me and his dad, I'd have been OK with it," Catharina said.

Their fears subsided soon afterward when Kyle easily passed tests for cognitive function. Catharina did her own motherly assessment.

"I asked him what he wanted to be when he grew up, and he said a video game designer. I thought, 'OK, you didn't lose that thought,' " she said.

On Jan. 30, 2008, Kyle was discharged from the hospital. After 2 1/2 months in a coma, he couldn't sit up unassisted and needed months of physical therapy. During rehabilitation he read Nintendo magazine and played "Guitar Hero."

He returned to the hospital for surgery in March 2008 because of stomach issues related to being comatose for so long.

Although Kyle missed nearly all of his freshman year, he still graduated on time three years later from Roseville Area High School.

"He was determined. He pushed through it all," Catharina said. "I look at him now and he's just thriving. He's just loving every minute of it."

Kyle, who knows that other children with him in the pediatric transplant unit of the hospital did not survive, said the experience changed his outlook on life.

"It does wonders for your optimism and sense of humor," he said. "When you can live through something like that, it shows you have a fair amount of determination."

Kyle was a procrastinator before his brush with death, Catharina said, but he now approaches his life in a way that would have made Pausch proud.

"When he came out of the hospital, it changed his whole view. He says you never know what tomorrow will bring. He lives very much in the here and now. His motivation is to make the best of every day," she said.
Kyle, a member of the UW-Stout Honors College, was one of 15 freshmen to receive an Honors College scholarship.

"The Randy Pausch award is a great honor and could not have gone to anyone more deserving," said Lopa Basu, Honors College director and associate professor of English who taught Kyle in an honors English class.

"He's a very thoughtful young man. The experience of going through a major illness that nearly killed him has had a profound impact on him. He can empathize with many classical heroes who experienced epic battles and relate to them at a very personal level," Basu said.

Pausch reminded people to follow their childhood dreams in his lecture. Kyle, following his, said he looks forward to using his artistic ability to create video games or do work in entertainment design that "others can see and appreciate."

The Randy Pausch Scholarship was established in 2008, the year the Carnegie Mellon University computer science professor died.

It supports students pursuing careers in the development of interactive entertainment, with paths such as art, animation, programming, engineering, game design, sound design and music composition, according to the Academy of Interactive Arts & Sciences.