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Response to the Video Game Studies and the Academy Prompt

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At its heart, there is a fundamentally misleading implication in this question. While it is true that computer game oriented activities are "all the rage" in the academy, and even that game-related academic pursuits have been steadily increasing in number and complexity for four decades, it is not necessarily the case that all this work signifies genuine scholarly interest beyond the offices and labs of a relative few motivated researchers. Indeed, it seems to us that not only is there very little institutional interest--the signs of which might be the funding of graduate degrees, tenure-track faculty lines, and interdepartmental curricula--but there is also very little intellectual interest--the signs of which might include informal campus reading groups, student-driven extra-curricular research projects, and eager inquiry about game studies by local colleagues not in our field.

We suggest that the reason game studies has not become fully institutionalized--and consequently the reason it remains severely undersupported despite its clear cultural cachet--is precisely *because* it is "all the rage." Administrators are attracted to game studies because trendy topics always raise morale, attract media attention, and increase matriculation. But administrators often hold back from fully supporting this discipline of ours because investing in a craze, fad, or vogue that turns out to be as long-lived as zoot suits and dance marathons can change a provost from vaticinator to boondoggler overnight.

Similarly, our extra-disciplinary colleagues are often intrigued by our teaching tools (Nintendo Virtual Boy; Bandai WonderSwan) and research topics (avatar voyeurism; the politics of virtual hobo wars), but ultimately are skeptical about the pedagogical, philosophical, and practical merits of such activities, especially over the long term.

Even students--including the advanced ones who spend more time with Zelda than Žižek--demonstrate dubiousness about the prospect of studying games. Worse even than a department's resident "dead wood" is the department's idiosyncratic and perpetually playful game scholar because while the permanently pre-retired professor is a deadly bore, at least she or he has a certain gravitas. Besides, who can blame a student for avoiding game studies when the evidence proving local and genuine institutional commitment to the field is so fragile?

The prompt for this roundtable asks "What, if anything, are we to do?" To quote an old Joe Hill anthem, "There is power in a union." Working alone, or in small enclaves at our home institutions and in their surrounding communities, we will continue to achieve small and isolated victories: a graduate seminar here, an invited speaker there, perhaps the occasional symposium. Together, however, working across disciplinary, institutional, and international boundaries, game scholars can accrue credibility--and thus respect--quickly and deeply. This has been demonstrated many times in our field's brief history; transdisciplinary, multi-institutional, and international collaborations open doors, attract dollars, and catalyze innovation.

But even this isn't enough for game studies to become a vital part of the 21st-Century academy. In addition to our "One Big Union," we need to put in place a wide variety of readily accessible and shared resources--time, talent, and treasure--so that everyone in the field has both access to and an *obligation to use* the most rigorous research methods for their respective projects. To put it bluntly: an organized mass of half-assed scholars won't impress anyone for very long.

So yes, we should institutionalize game studies so long as we hold each other accountable for doing quality work and collaborate across institutional and geo-political borders at every opportunity. To do otherwise is to fulfill the institutional anxiety that game studies is all the rage but nothing of substance.