

Prolegomenon for an Undergraduate Game Studies Curriculum

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The lack of serious institutional investment in game studies has been and will likely continue to be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, game studies is an underfunded enterprise in which theorists, critics, and practitioners work in isolation from like-minded colleagues; a clear impediment to the sustained conversations so integral to the construction and sedimentation of a discipline. On the other hand, it would be difficult to deny that this very marginalization has pushed games scholars to contribute so productively to a wide range of critical, humanistic inquiries by generating and sustaining scholarly conversations that explore the gaps in traditional media theory and highlight the intersections of various fields of disciplinary knowledge; a contribution to the vibrancy, diversity, and increasing relevance of game studies.

However, investment and institutionalization is beginning to occur. High Point University, a private liberal arts university in North Carolina's Piedmont Triad, has charged me with developing an undergraduate program in Games and Interactive Media Design. This position paper works from the presumption – and I would be happy to support, defend, or even rethink this presumption – that the germination and flourishing of undergraduate game studies programs is one possible route to game studies becoming a more respected and institutionalized discipline.

More concretely, I outline the pedagogical, practical, and philosophical concerns underwriting the curricula and course sequences options that High Point University is currently considering for implementation. I aim to highlight three architectural principles for an undergraduate Games and Interactive Media Design major that would contribute to ongoing efforts to enhance the institutional legitimacy and more firmly establish the academic field of game studies.

One. Students should design and create games. Every student should know how to engineer a compelling interactive experience using little more than pen and paper, dice, or cards. Many students will do the same with computer games using the in-game toolsets of contemporary first-person shooter, real-time strategy, and computer role-playing games to design levels, scenarios, and campaigns. Fewer students will want to learn scripting languages in order to mod, but they should be supported as well.

Two. Students should understand the nature and organization of the game industry. Many students will want jobs in the game industry and they should be prepared to make better games than their peers by making games better for society. But first, they need to know what an entry level job is like, have a clear picture of the overall development process, and understand the relationships between different organizations constituting the game industry.

Three. Students should understand the relationship between games and the cultural, political, and economic contexts of their production, circulation, and use. This is the defining feature of this program's liberal arts character and should include critical/cultural studies of games and game cultures. Many students, after all, will not enter the game industry but rather will pursue game-related professions in public relations, teaching, higher education, journalism, and other fields

where knowledge of industry norms, design and development processes, and the socio-cultural impact of the medium can provide unique perspective and insight.

As Matthew Sakay's report on the Curriculum Workshop at the 2006 Game Developers Conference makes clear, it is in the mutual interest of academic institutions, the game industry, students, and society that digital game degrees/programs be more than vocational training. Because the critical study of games as cultural artifacts and development as an aesthetic enterprise can compliment and push technical knowledge of game design toward the production of better games, and because most all entry level game industry jobs are in "quality assurance," I maintain that an undergraduate major in Games and Interactive Media Design should play to the strengths of the liberal arts mission of the university. Thus, students should be free to take technical courses, learn to program, and master high-end software, but they must first and foremost be encouraged to consider why games are the way they are and how they can be something different.

I suggest that an undergraduate program built upon this foundation can prepare students to be good citizens and responsible professionals. Students who enter the commercial game industry will still find themselves starting as play testers (until the success of this and similar programs is recognized) but they will also be equipped with knowledge and skills that facilitate advancement to creative positions. And with a broad liberal arts education that encourages critical, self-reflexive engagement with the rhetorical practice of game design, they will be well positioned to become innovators and change agents. The ultimate goal of such a program would be to nurture students' ability to practice citizenship through game design.

I conclude by inviting scrutiny and conversation concerning the presumption underwriting this effort: the notion that a strong undergraduate game program is one route to game studies becoming a more respected and institutionalized discipline. More immediately, I welcome critical interrogation of the philosophical, practical, and pedagogical architecture proposed in this short paper.