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The Troubled Transition to Game Study Projects

ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the experience of Students in HE level Game Courses making the transition from taught units to self-managed study projects – particularly the problem of choosing and refining a good study topic. This review draws on examples of 40+ student projects from 3 universities, and the experiences 6 supervisors in informal discussion with the author over a period of 4 years. The paper identifies common trends, mistakes and problems. Patterns emerge of students struggling with the multi-disciplinarity and newness of the field, the lack of authoritative canon, the difficulty of articulating a topic, and the tendency of game students to stray into domains beyond their experience. From these common problems the paper proposes a checklist of steps to guide the topic selection process.

Author Keywords

game studies, game research, game students.

INTRODUCTION

All games students face difficulties doing a study project, but study projects are hard to avoid - in most HE game-related programs there is a significant self-managed individual or group project - usually in the final year. In game studies, as in all academic domains, students are expected, through their study project to demonstrate conceptual innovation, methodical rigour, and rich substantive content.[1]

A previous study by Zagal and Bruckman[2] describes the challenges faced in the transition from gamers to game students and this paper describes the next logical transition from game student to independent researcher.

This paper is based on a review of 40+ student projects from 3 universities and the experiences of 6 project supervisors in informal discussion with the author.

In all cases it was not just the finished project that was reviewed but where possible the documentation of the early stages of the project, especially the process of choosing and refining the topic.

The experiences of the staff and students consulted consistently relate that the transition from taught units to self-managed study projects is extremely difficult. No matter how well students know the coursework, the development tools, no matter how proficient they are in programming, visualization skills, written and verbal expression, no matter how confident they are in their own abilities as a game analyst, critic or developer – for most students initiating a self-managed study project is a daunting task[3].

Key to this transition, and the focus of this paper is the problem of choosing and refining a good study topic. This paper describes patterns of the typical pitfalls that were found in this review and from these common problems the paper proposes a checklist of steps to guide the topic selection and refinement process.

THE REVIEW SAMPLE

The study projects reviewed are drawn from three HE programs;

1. A Bachelor of Multimedia program with a Games major, situated in a Computer Science School of an Australian University – supervisors Kirsty and Dave (note, supervisor names have been altered – for this paper).
2. A Bachelor of Science (Computer Game Technologies) program, situated in a School of Creative Technologies in a UK University – supervisors Pat and Ron.
3. A Bachelor of Game Architecture and Design program, situated in an Academy of Digital Entertainment in a Dutch University of Applied Science – supervisors Paul and Aneke.

Each supervisor was asked to contribute between 5 and 10 examples of student study projects from their records which they considered typical. The projects were reviewed by the author and then discussed informally with each supervisor to gain further insight into the process. Records were kept of these discussions and these fed both supervisor and student experiences into the themes of this review.

Breaking New Ground: Innovation in Games, Play, Practice and Theory. Proceedings of DiGRA 2009

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PROBLEMATIC TRENDS IN TOPIC SELECTION

All supervisors and most students found the problem of choosing and articulating a good topic to be one of the most difficult tasks of a study project.

A poor choice of topic can leave a project floundering; the final report can easily become pointless waffling and the whole process excruciating for the student, supervisor and examiner - Pat.

With limited time at your disposal there is a temptation to select a topic before the ground work has been done, but try to resist the temptation. – Aneke

If students believe they have a good topic it can be difficult for them to be convinced otherwise. - Ron

In all reviewed cases the students are asked to choose and refine their topic in consultation with their supervisor. In some cases students are given some guidelines in the previous teaching semester and asked to come up with one or two ideas about topics before start of the final year. In two of the institutions students are given taught units on research methods and statistics prior to the final project.

In the initial meetings with students supervisors found a wide range in both the quality of the project ideas and the level of critical awareness of their ideas.

The common problematic trends that emerge from these discussions are here articulated into the following groupings.

1. The relevance of the topic to the students own program, interests and expertise.
2. The degree to which the topic has been exhausted.
3. The clarity with which the topic is articulated.
4. The degree to which the topic is realistic for the project.
5. The degree to which the topic is worthy of the effort
6. The degree to which the topic proposal has an appropriately defined scope?
7. The degree to which the topic proposal demonstrates an appropriate level of awareness of relevant literature, theory, and principles?
8. The degree to which the topic proposal has an adequately and appropriately defined method?

The discussion now describes and summarizes the common trends within each of these groupings.

Is this topic relevant to yo ur course of study, in terests and expertise?

A recurring trend that emerges from the review of projects seems to be that Game students themselves have a tendency

to stray into academic fields of which they have little knowledge. It is not unusual for a Game Student to propose a project which involves any one or any combination of the following; software engineering, artificial intelligence, animation, statistical analysis, sociology, criminology, anthropology, international studies, comparative literature studies, media law, psychology, economics, business management and finance. This seems to be a particular trait of game students, other disciplines do not typically assume they would be capable of building a computer game.

Some mixture of over-confidence and delusion causes the game students to stray casually into fields that are far from their expertise. - Kirsty

One explanation for this trait may be the multi-disciplinary nature of games. Since games can be studied from within so many different disciplines it is not surprising that game students similarly tend to adopt a chameleon-like cross-disciplinarity.

Secondly, game students, once they become aware of the field they are straying into, tend to fearlessly tackle the new body of knowledge with the same level of confidence with which they approach a new game, programming language or development tool. Perhaps it is the fast changing, multi-disciplinary nature of games and game development that makes the students ... *fearless (sometimes a bit deluded) when it comes to jumping in to the deep end of other fields of knowledge.* Dave.

Thirdly, and to be fair to students, sometimes they are fully aware of, and alarmed by, their own lack of domain expertise but they are trying to satisfy the requirements of a project brief for which they feel ill-prepared. Often students are told that their project has to have an 'original research' element to it.

Sometimes I wonder if our taught units on research methodology are actually just confusing the students. They feel the need for their project to have an element of original research and they go back to . – Paul.

Students may therefore suggest research topics, aware that they are straying alarmingly into unknown disciplines, but not knowing how else to satisfy what they perceive to be the requirements of 'original research'.

Has the topic been exhausted?

There are a number of perennial chestnuts that seem to just keep appearing, largely because they are perceived as being interesting topics. The trouble is these topics are exhausted. - Aneke

The top candidates for the exhausted topics list from the supervisors includes;

- Do games cause violence?
- Are games narratives?
- What is a game?

- The history of ... (some game genre).

Topics don't stay hot forever though. At the moment Facebook games are hot topics but at some point that will become exhausted. Aneke.

A chestnut topic can yield a good study project as long as there is the opportunity to find something new to say or do with it.

One advantage of choosing a topic that has already been well discussed is that the topic is, or at some point in time has been a hot topic. There will be lots of literature to review and probably some well established arguments that can be built upon.

Is the proposal clearly articulated?

A common problem with game proposals is that they are often expressed in the language of popular culture that either has a very esoteric (not commonly understood) meaning or does not actually have any precise meaning. By their nature games are situated in popular culture and tend to both absorb the language of popular culture and generate terminology.

Some examples of esoteric gaming verbs which appeared in early drafts of proposals without clarification include: to *frag* (kill), to be *ganked* (to be killed unfairly), to *grind* (mindlessly perform repetitive tasks), to *pwn* (pronounced and meaning "to own")[4]. Words evolve within closed cultures to express meaning that may be unique to the culture and in doing so serve to define who is, or is not, within a culture. There is a tendency in game students to use esoteric terms in a project proposal that unrealistically assumes prior knowledge. Terms that may not be commonly known should be given clear, unambiguous definitions. In many cases terms from popular culture, or anywhere else, that have no precise meaning should not be used.

A student will come with a proposal like "I want to study what makes a game character cool"- the way they word it is meaningless. You then have to try to make them see that they have made a naive assumption that 'cool' exists as a universally agreed and measurable state, which it obviously isn't. Kirsty

Supervisors found in many instances that there may be a good topic somewhere within a poorly articulated proposal but the topic needs to be much more precisely articulated before it is useful. In the example above the supervisor suggested studying game character construction methods, character representation, behavior and intelligence, player

responses to character and believability, or even a study of player perceptions of 'coolness' within a social/economic/cultural framework

Is the proposal realistic?

Two often opposing criteria in the refinement process are the need for a proposal to be realistic vs the need for a proposal to be worthy of the effort. First let's consider the ways in which a project should be realistic in terms of the time and resources available and the skills of the project team.

All supervisors recognized a trend, often from the best and most ambitious students to propose unrealistically ambitious projects. Projects could be unrealistic in terms of the time, resources or the sheer complexity of their topic.

Even with good project management, it is still essential to ask at the proposal stage whether the project is realistic. If it clearly isn't then it may be possible to break it down into some component part that becomes more realistic. Pat

If the topic is something a bit experimental it can be hard to judge how realistic it is. In that case the proposal needs some extra flexibility and fallback positions. Aneke

In any case great care must be taken in the project management and monitoring of milestones to confirm that what seemed realistic in the proposal is, in practice.

At the other end of the 'realistic' spectrum is the proposal which does not represent a sufficient level of time and effort for the project. Often a student will propose a topic which, when it is stripped of its rhetoric is essentially trivial.

We had a team propose a study project about how game art for the Monkey Island games has changed from version 1 to 4. I mean, come on, that's basically a weekend task, not a year-long project for six people. Ron

Supervisors identified the all too common problem of , projects of insufficient scope that often results in barely on-topic, *waffle* to pad the topic out so that it looks bigger than it actually is. Such topics are ...

... excruciating for the student, the supervisor and the examiner. Ron

The task of determining the correct level of realism in a project at the proposal stage is not a trivial one. The ideal project is challenging enough to make the project team or individual work hard for the project completion date, but not so challenging as to be unachievable.

Is the project worthy of the effort?

As mentioned before the project will ideally satisfy the formal project requirements for your particular course, give the student a valuable learning experience, be something

you are personally interested in and ultimately produce some inherently useful outcome.

A surprising number of students propose topics that are inherently pointless, of no interest to them personally, set out to prove the obvious or do not yield the right level of outcomes.

We get students proposing a year-long study to see if people who play some game genre, actually enjoy playing those games. I tell them they might as well do a study on people who like potato chips, and see if they enjoy eating a potato chip. Paul

Since a positive result is expected and there is no evidence to support a negative hypothesis, such a proposal is setting the students on a year-long journey to prove the obvious.

More subtly pointless proposals sometimes involve the development of game or artefact that might have some clever feature but is ultimately unplayable.

We had a student propose “to develop a second person shooter – to prove the concept could be a valid game device for commercial games”. The student was initially convinced he had spotted an overlooked possibility for gaming which would be the next big thing.

Eventually the student became convinced there were valid reasons why a second person shooter was never going to be a commercial success and instead began looking around for other reasons why he might want to make an unplayable game. To his credit, he came up with two interesting possibilities. The first possibility was to treat it as an art installation making some kind of statement about disorientation. The second possibility was to promote awareness of Dissociative Identity Disorders. The would be used to simulate an experience of the Fugue State – where a person begins to behave as though they were another person that they know personally. Both ideas had interesting potential, but in the end the student decided that despite the quirkiness of the proposal, the whole idea of spending such a vast amount of time and effort on developing an unplayable game was not worthwhile.

Ultimately deciding on whether your project is worthy of the effort will be a highly subjective one but it is worth remembering why you are doing this project and asking yourself whether it will satisfy the four broad criteria. Will the project satisfy the formal project requirements for your particular course; will it give you (the student) a valuable learning experience; is it something you are personally interested in; and ultimately will the project produce some inherently useful outcome.

Does the proposal have an appropriately defined scope?

The problem of scope is similar to the problem of realism, though realism has more to do with the size of the effort

involved whereas scope has more emphasis on the determining what is and isn't included in the study. How does one recognize an appropriate scope? In some cases the scope can become better defined when it is associated with the client's research agenda, which will help to set the study in a context. A client is not always the solution though, and some clients will have no clear idea about what they want or what they want it to do.

Scoping a project, like determining whether it is realistic or worthy, involves judgements often based on vague and subjective processes.

As a guide, I tell my students that a project is scoped too widely when it fails to be a single coherent question, but the trouble is, what question can't be further broken down into more specific parts? - Pat

In more established branches of science and engineering it is often the case that a topic's scope will be defined by the context within the field of study, but since the game study field tend to be less matured topic scope often cannot be defined in this way.

If there is no clear and obvious line to define the scope, I tell my students to think about borderline examples of what you would consider within or not within the scope of your proposal. Aneke

A second aspect of scoping a project is a tendency for students to 'sell themselves short' by not recognizing fully what they are actually doing.

We had a student making a series of educational games to demonstrate nanotechnology processes for one of the researchers in another department. Her proposal was initially just to animate the processes, but when she thought about it she found she was investigating questions about visually representing things - molecules. – so there's no colour at that size – so any use of colour in her models was purely a design decision. Also shape, and sound were useful only as devices to help understand the processes. So I told her to expand the scope of the proposal to include all of this. Dave

The scope of a project should give anyone reading the project proposal a clear idea of what is and what is not within the scope of a project.

Does the proposal demonstrate an appropriate level of awareness of relevant literature, theory, and technology?

To some degree this question is a continuation of the first question – is the proposal relevant to the student's skills. You should have at least some of the theoretical and technical knowledge before you even propose the topic, which is not to say you need to know everything.

We had an example of the team were vaguely aware that there was going to be some maths involved in generating an

isometric view, but they did not know what the formulas were. I told them to do some preliminary investigation and they found all the trig formulas they needed and wrote them into their method. It made their proposal sound really well-informed. -Paul

If the project involves a research client then ideally the theoretical underpinning of their client's research will all be well established, and the study can quickly become specific and focused.

In some courses students have the option to do a project which is entirely theoretical. The supervisors had a range of views of purely theoretical study projects at undergraduate level and some were dubious about the original contribution such projects could realistically achieve.

In a theoretical project the student has to know the existing literature very well, and it would be a foolish student indeed who thought this might be an easy way to avoid having to build something or conduct an experiment. – Ron

Does the proposal have an appropriately defined method?

At the most concrete end of the proposal students will describe how the project is going to be done. A thorough review of different types of game research and game study methods students have used is too big a topic for this paper but there are two reasons to briefly discuss methods at this point.

First, it is really the next logical step - the research method must be appropriate to the research question.. After the student's project question has been established propose a method by which to answer the question in a meaningful way. Sometimes the method will suggest itself, there may be a clear method built into the way the question is asked. Often, though this is not the case and the choices of method may be quite bewildering.

I always encourage students to do some initial experimentation especially if there's any development component. It helps them to be clear about the method they'll be using. Kirsty

Students may be able to draw on their previous coursework and existing skills to adequately define their methods or they may, even in the proposal stage, have to learn some completely new skills or software tools.

Secondly, there was a general agreement that a basic understanding of research methods is useful for students at the literature review stage. There was a range of views among the supervisors on the need for formally teaching research methods to students.

You don't have to know all about different approaches to research to do a good project but it can help – it also helps when you come to do a literature review as you can get

better insight into the studies you are reading about if you understand how their methods. Paul

SUMMARY

This paper has reviewed a range of game study projects and drawn on the experiences of students and supervisors to identify common problems experienced by game students making the transition from taught courses to independent study projects. From this review recurring problems have been grouped around a number of identifiable themes which has provided insight into the transition process. These themes are;

- How relevant is the topic to the student's course of study, interests and expertise?
- Has the topic been exhausted?
- Is the proposal clearly articulated?
- Is the proposal realistic?
- Is the project worthy of the effort?
- Does the proposal have an appropriately defined scope?
- Does the proposal demonstrate an appropriate level of awareness of relevant literature, theory, and principles?
- Does the proposal have an adequately and appropriately defined method?

It is hoped that this review and the themes articulated can provide a checklist and roadmap for helping students and supervisors to avoid some of the common problems experienced in choosing game study projects.

Further Studies

Apart from choosing and refining a topic, there are other problems to do with ongoing management of the study project – interpreting data and writing and presenting the thesis are not addressed in this paper. These aspects of study projects could also be examined by similar methods (review/interview), to identify recurring themes.

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