

Developing the Developers: Education, Creativity and the Gaming Habitus

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This abstract presents preliminary findings of a research project examining the contested meaning of creativity within digital games higher education. Using the concept of *habitus* as ‘*embodied history, internalized as a second nature and so forgotten as history*’ (Bourdieu, 1992:56), our research focused upon the recovery and remembering of the socialization processes which develop a potentially distinctive ‘*gaming habitus*’ in the form of the intellectual, cultural and experiential sources which both students and staff draw upon in pursuit of their educational goals. Empirical research has been conducted focusing on the case study of a University in Scotland, renowned for delivering world class digital games education. We conducted an online survey aimed at 1st and 4th year students on four games degrees. Ninety-one respondents completed the survey. The aim was to build a profile of games students at the University. The survey was followed-up with three focus groups which included members of the University Games Development Society, and two Independent Game Companies which employ current and former students of the University. The academic Leaders of each degree were also interviewed. Themes explored included: formative gaming experiences; concepts of creativity; teamwork; games curriculum; career and gender issues. Our research reveals a series of creative tensions in games education, of which students and staff show awareness, and employ novel and intelligent solutions to negotiate and resolve.

Tension 1: Art versus Commerce. A creative tension exists between a university subject area which prepares students to be ready for employment in the creative industries, and the concomitant imperative to facilitate creativity amongst students in artistic and explorative senses. Games students need to gain a high degree of technical knowledge

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through the learning process and be able to show that knowledge in a creative manner. At the heart of the learning process are opportunities to participate directly in game development projects. Projects may involve competitions with industry links, working with small development companies, students setting up their own companies, or progressing their final project. Just as if working in the games industry, students must constantly make decisions about the commercial viability of their projects, and negotiate trade-offs between creativity and market demands. As students move closer to their degree there is a pressure to narrow creative aspirations and showcase technical abilities in an instrumental manner. Students recognize and often resist these pressures, and develop strategies for maintaining their creative visions within commercial parameters.

Tension 2: Academia versus Training. Favouring the indie scene may also stem from the tension which revolves around the relative unsureness of the Games related subject area as an academic discipline. The establishment of Game Studies as an academic subject area has been widely debated within Digra (e.g. Aarseth's keynote at Nordic Digra 2012 or the panel by Mäyrä et al. at Digra 2015). From interviewing staff it became clear that because Games Studies is a young and practical field there is a perception that it has an academic status issue, something which all vocationally oriented disciplines suffer from. Older and established academic disciplines are perceived as 'purer' because of their distance from work, employment and the market. Favouring indie over corporate is perhaps a creative way for students and staff to assert their integrity and distance themselves from the perceived sullyng influence of the market. This is a wider issue for academia – are universities simply businesses that train students for the labour market. If so, what is the price to be paid in terms of intellectual credibility and legitimacy?

Tension 3: Gaming Habitus versus Games Development Practice. The vast majority of students are male 'hard core' gamers, i.e. playing more than 16hrs per week, with over 25% playing more than 24hrs per week. Games are their main cultural activity, and 80% of survey respondents pointed to games as their main source of inspiration for developing games. While it is natural to build on what has already been created this may be limiting and lead to derivation. Staff are aware of this and face the difficult task of trying to open students up to other sources of inspiration across the arts and humanities. The students have played games since childhood and just over 70% of respondents indicated that they spent most of their free time during formative years alone. Yet live game projects, and the creative industries generally, are collaborative environments that demand team work. Group learning activity is an issue across all disciplines but perhaps more so for the games students because of their particular type of habitus. This again poses pedagogic issues for teaching staff who must try to integrate students into working groups.

To conclude, this research contributes to the debate about the status of Game Studies. Rather than approaching this from the definition of the research object or research methods, it does so sociologically by investigating educational practices and discourses in the form of a gaming habitus which shows the existence of creative tensions in the field.

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