Increasing coherence in ‘impact’: crossing disciplines and framing

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ABSTRACT
In the past decade game design for “impact” has proliferated. Yet fragmentation is also growing between researchers, designers and funders in their ability to compare game proposals and communicate effectively about impact. Success in this endeavor may require new umbrella language to guide meaningful comparison and improve efficacy — especially across stakeholders. Fortunately, strategies for reducing friction and aligning design with research are surfacing.

In a report published last year by Games for Change and ETC Press (2015), we first revealed some of the hidden barriers in language and framing around “game impact.” Based on dozens of interviews with sector leaders (primarily in the United States), the report identified five areas of concern that increase confusion and undermine impact.

Findings to be discussed (and explored outside the United States) include:

- the gulf between research and practice is growing as silos begin to deepen; some types of impact are persistently marginalized by disciplinary divides;

- we need common language and new frames to compare impact across domains, especially with diverse stakeholders

- for research to affect practice, special care is needed to avoid framing research in opposition to creativity.

In response to the report, more than 30 individuals submitted formal suggestions, including some leading game studios and academics. The feedback opened new areas of inquiry. In the past several months, we identified several “risky assumptions” that may drive fragmentation. Diagnosing assumptions is more delicate and subjective than documenting fragmentation; yet it yields more actionable insights.
For example, the “risky assumptions” included: the dangers of assuming that quality game research should be entirely separate from design (i.e., not formative). Second, scarce funding can lead designers to assume they should defer research implementation and research design (i.e., no research planning). Third, designers of games for impact often assume that their logic model is obvious and does not need explicit articulation (i.e., discussing impact without models). The list goes on.

A particularly troubling example concerns designers who resist “research.” One interviewee said, “[I] don’t want to make games that can be assessed.” In response, we investigated frames that might sustain mutual respect. We found that one potentially successful approach is to legitimize the testing that all designers do before releasing their games; in this sense, all designers do some “research.” But are such frames actually useful -- and to which disciplines? Validating them requires careful listening to distinct disciplines (not lumping them together).

For Discussion
Along with the report, each of the “risky assumptions” is now being circulated for feedback online and at events. Validating at cross-disciplinary game conferences is especially important before extending the recommendations more broadly. This summer we will be testing several possible interventions (especially framing and policy recommendations), and would like to share in-process results at DiGRA/FDG.

It is tempting but dangerous for any one individual or group to propose “solutions” to the deep disciplinary faults that plague any field. For that reason, we emphasize an open conversation (based on iterative research), rather than too neatly and hastily publishing findings. Audience-specific frames may also be required to bridge to distinct stakeholders, given the variety – especially between: practicing designers, policymakers establishing federal funding guidelines for games, distributors of educational games who describe ‘impact’ to consumers, and NGO executive producers who are guiding joint teams of researchers and designers.

Today, our field is facing particular challenges as an intensely multi-disciplinary area. Practice will only improve if designers can hear and integrate findings into meaningful design choices, with language they know. Perhaps our greatest opportunity is to reduce the number of “blind assumptions” that are made when new design projects start, especially when they are led by one discipline – no matter how powerful.

BIBLIOGRAPHY