Research on technology, education and games: disciplinary divisions and their discontents

*"Unlike some of the games research that I tend to come across, where researchers are really interested in 'does a game increase this, does a game lead to more motivation or better outcomes', what I'm more interested in (…) is really looking more closely at the role of interactions, social interactions that are happening around games" – quote from an interview with a researcher. **R13.***

Keywords: dialogue, institutional funding, knowledge sharing

Who will find this scenario particularly interesting? Developers, Educators, Researchers

Description

In our own research, we found that academic researchers and game developers rarely communicate with each other. However, it soon became clear that deep divisions also exist within the
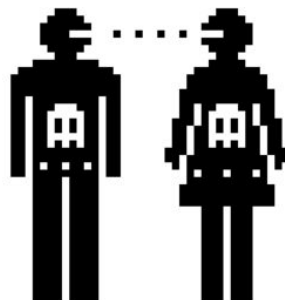
academic world itself, in particular between:

- a psychological or social scientific perspective still vigorously seeking to confirm or debunk the causation argument ('video games cause x'), focusing mainly on commercial, off-the-shelf games;
- an outcome-oriented, engineering and computer-science perspective working mainly with applied or serious games, often with an educational focus;
- An emerging, fluid 'game studies' perspective interested in a variety of issues, ranging from the technical aspects of game design to the cultural practices, identities and politics associated with games.

These distinctions are leading to bodies of knowledge that do not interact; the respective proponents often treat each other with suspicion due to ingrained theoretical and methodological differences. This problem runs deep in the entire academic world and is compounded by the fact that small and large scholarly communities tend to gravitate around highly selective journals and specialised conferences. In a field so practically (and commercially) oriented like game development, this is particularly confusing and unhelpful. How are developers – established or aspiring – hungry for knowledge and advice about the cultural and educational ramifications of this medium supposed to engage with such a fractured landscape?

Meet Jane and Deka, two researchers

Jane is an internationally established psychologist and computer scientist who published extensively about video games and human behaviour. She is an affirmed university professor and the editor in chief of a top-ranking scientific journal that often features research involving video games. Recently, Jane's university launched a new, experimental undergraduate course in video game design. The course was designed through consultations with industry veterans and most of the staff have little academic experience, but plenty in game development. One faculty member is Deka, who shifted to academia after several years working as level designer for a successful game studio. She is now trying to develop her own original research agenda, drawing on her professional experience and her personal views as a woman of African descent. During the time spent in the industry, she came to realise that game development is influenced by a multitude of cultural factors. In particular, she grew increasingly dissatisfied with the high-powered, 'macho' culture that dominates the sector and with the unhealthy

working practices (the so-called 'crunch') that burn out many talented developers. She is finding it very difficult to secure funding to do some research. So far, she has only managed to publish a conceptual article in a cultural studies journal that examines how her personal trajectory in the industry, and her personal heritage, influenced her professional output as a level designer.

One day, Deka and Jane meet at an internal networking event, which is part of a mentoring scheme that connects early career academics with more senior colleagues. Although they have been paired as 'video game researchers' at different career stages, it quickly becomes apparent that Deka and Jane have rather different views on this medium, the type of research needed, and who should be the audience for such research. From Jane's perspective as a psychologist, research on effects, influences and risk factors is relevant and highly valued in the scholarly community. From Deka's industry-centric perspective, research should focus on how to make gaming a better medium: more responsible, accepting, diverse, deep, complex, culturally relevant and so on. Jane and Deka meet several times after their first meeting and, gradually, what began as a traditional mentor-mentee relationship evolves into a mutual learning experience. Thanks to Jane's guidance, Deka becomes more familiar with the complexities of funding applications and peer review. Jane, on the other hand, gains a valuable insight into the changing cultures and values of video games and game development, beyond the confines of her academic community. After some time, they decide to write an article together, focused on the need for more interdisciplinary research that reflects the changing nature of video games and their growing cultural relevance.

In a nutshell

The tendency of academic research to operate in 'silos' has been accused many times before of being counterproductive and not conducive to the sort of social impacts funders increasingly seek. The situation is unlikely to change

until the current system of specialised journals and conferences is challenged. This state of affairs is particularly unhelpful in emerging multidisciplinary fields such as 'gaming research'.

Universities, journal editors and conference organising committees in the area of gaming research should focus more on establishing mechanisms and platforms for researchers from different backgrounds and with different research interests to collaborate.

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