Editorial: games, Ghandi and wrecked trains

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By the time you read this, one of the best computer games degrees in the UK (at the University of Wales Newport) will be no more. (The institution itself will not exist much longer, due to Welsh Assembly-led, government-imposed restructuring and institutional mergers.) I say, with some conviction, that this degree course was one of the best, owing more to the achievements and commitment of the students, than those of the teaching staff. This was evidenced by a string of achievements, including BAFTA nominations; *Dare to be Digital* awards; international recognition of a number of graduate-seeded indie developers; and, an enviable employment rate in the UK Games industry. This should serve as a warning that being the best does not save a degree course from closure (although it is acknowledged that universities in the UK have an over-provision of games related awards, if direct employment in the industry is the main factor under consideration).

The BSc in Games Development and A.I. began in late 2004 and lasted just under a decade, during most of which I had the honour to be teaching some of the many specialist modules. Towards the end, I was the only lecturer and programme leader, due to redundancies and funding council cuts in what we now recognise is a retracting HE sector. When I arrived at Newport in 2005, I knew I had my work cut out for me. My mission was to raise the standard of the award so it would survive the inevitable deflation of vocational awards aimed at the creative industries, when promised graduate employment did not materialise for many. It was not that Newport's BSc degree (designed by a colleague and friend Dr. Shane Lee) was inappropriate; rather, it was (like many novice institutions) that we lacked recognition and industry support. This problem was made more difficult by not being geographically situated beside an existing cluster of game developers. Another factor was preparation for Skillset accreditation, but most of all, we needed to consider graduate employability in a fiercely competitive first jobs market.

People in the games industry have criticised some games courses as being nothing more than "bums on seats", under resourced, and out of date. Common complaints from industry have included (i) lack of real experience of the team-based nature of games development; and, (ii) the inability to specialise in the homogenous learning environment of a university – made worse in some institutions by the majority of modules being shared with other computing awards (due to economies of scale more than naked duplicity) – when careers in games development are strongly disciplined. Graduate recruitment – conservatively forecast by some spokespeople at 25% – was considered the gold standard for evaluating an institution's worth; not unreasonably, given that networking and "whom you know" are important determining factors for entering many creative industries.

After hard-won consultations with several prominent development studios, the need for direct experience of cross-disciplinary development practices in large groups was identified as essential for Newport graduates, along with exposure to standard industry practices. However, such heterogeneous experience was at odds with traditional, standardised individual HE assessment.

Collaboration over the last ten years with a variety of fellow lecturers involved with the BA Games Design degree (thankfully not yet under threat of closure) has proven that it is possible to provide

relevant experience despite the following obstacles: (i) the culture clash between students from disparate disciplines; (ii) the emphasis on process rather than product; (iii) the need for fair assessment of individual performance; and, (iv) the necessity of the importance of pipelines for production.

The first year of the “train wreck” module was a result of ESF KEF Innovation Strategy Funding, which oiled the machinery of inter-departmental politics. As we had received external resources, eyes were on us to achieve collaboration, when traditional animosities between disciplines might otherwise have prevented such a venture. It helped when the external evaluator for the KEF programme identified Newport’s part as an “example of best practice” in collaboration; and it must be said that friction between the lecturers delivering this shared teaching was non-existent (but was apparent in attitudes of colleagues and some managers).

Thus was born what Newport games lecturers proudly referred to as “the train wreck module”, where traditionally about twelve BSc and thirty BA Year 2 students were involved. Participants were assigned to four or five groups, usually consisting of two or three programming students, with seven to nine Arts students (reflecting a typical balance in the industry). The groups were allocated previously designed game proposals, most often coming from existing game designers in the Industry (some former graduates). Groups were then encouraged to allocate members to distinct roles: BA students were responsible for team management, interpretation of the design briefs and game assets development; while BSc students focussed upon tool development and game implementation. Lecturers acted in the role of producers, with responsibility for approving and signing off work on a weekly basis. This structure lasted until last year (2012), and it was being assessed by individual reflective accounts; portfolios of assets and game files; as well as formal group presentations. All students provided evidence for assessment via construction diaries and traditional meeting minutes. Cross marking was originally performed by the two lecturers, providing a further level of inter-school collaboration.

Industry representatives acting as mentors to the teams (who usually provided the original live briefs for the teams) agreed that this approach to providing vocationally focussed experience for both Arts and Computing students was directly relevant and uniquely effective in addressing many concerns expressed by potential employers about games courses provided by HE institutions. Students did not always enjoy the team experience, but they also provided positive feedback on the process. Their ability to specialise within a heterogeneous team, along with the additional experience of large group work, was extremely valuable in producing rounded graduates who were better able to promote these skills in their search for employment. The approach required a large amount of good will, and it was difficult to timetable the projects, and to provide time and resources to students from two different schools. Nevertheless, the results more than outweighed the obstacles.

Participants have universally agreed after the module, and in some cases a long time afterwards, that the “train wreck” module was one of the most useful experiences of their academic careers. It prepared them for interviews and even the *Dare to be Digital* competition. The University of Wales Newport was the first, and possibly only institution outside of the organisers (Abertay University), to have two teams accepted in one year, and it has an impressive 75% success rate in being accepted into the competition, when only 16 teams are selected each year out of over 100 applications. It must be re-emphasised that these results were primarily a reflection of the student participants (but not without some resistance and occasional animosity).

As Freire pointed out in his work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, the most ardent advocates of the status quo are often those with the most to gain by constructive criticism of the ‘norm’. Our experience at Newport was that many, if not most, students actively resisted the ideas behind the “train wreck”

module: (i) working with the ‘other’ students (artists and programmers exhibited an unusual degree of antagonism towards each other); (ii) restricted creative freedom (working to implement the idea of another designer, which would likely be the norm in a typical development environment for a recent graduate); (iii) the group product rather than individual effort (measured by quality rather than quantity), and (iv) the importance of a work-inspired simulation over standard academic assessment (the idea of being ‘employed’ by the lecturer, rather than effectively employing them through the payment of student fees).

Occasionally, these creative differences ascended into confrontation with a few of the students. I am not proud to say that I threatened one or two students with instant Fail grades when the creative process was frustrated by obstruction of the simulated working environment. I wasn’t alone in losing my temper, although the handful of Arts-based lecturers with whom I shared the “train wreck” module over the years have entered into fewer incidents in total than my own. (It is clear that they would make better employers than me.) However, to their credit, all but one of my student opponents eventually agreed that situations arose through ‘prima donna’ attitudes, usually exacerbated by stress over grades, and an unjustified concern that working in a group was going to be detrimental to their degree classification. The one exception resulted in ‘an agreement to disagree’, which taught us both a valuable lesson in avoiding direct conflict. All of the lecturers involved over the years had to engage in “good cop, bad cop” behaviour at times, but we tried later on to engage predominantly in ‘Nonviolent Resistance’; hence the ‘Ghandi’ reference in the title.

The “train wreck” module was an interesting experiment in nonviolent resistance, both to the university power hierarchy and the student cohort, which elicited a number of personal revelations:

- 1) Placing responsibility for effective group work squarely on the shoulders of the students themselves (i.e. if there is a problem with a member of the team, it is a problem for the whole team, and not just the individual member).
- 2) Recognising that “breaking the silence” was necessary when problems arose (e.g. multidisciplinary culture shock and personality clashes, or concern over lack of contribution by doing too little or the control freakery of doing too much, all of which threatened the pipeline of production).
- 3) Mediation and moderation (avoiding the “automatic obedience” of being a tutor in what is increasingly a student dominated relationship; as well as team selection based around meritocracy, rather than random or ‘best with worst’ approaches).
- 4) Reconciliation rather than retribution (including the occasional ‘sit in’ to facilitate recognition that the experience of process is far more important than the product).

When I have presented at conferences or informally discussed the “train wreck” module in the past, I have received numerous explanations from academic colleagues (and even students) as to why it couldn’t work in such a such environment: (i) lecturers shouldn’t control who works with whom; (ii) the students wouldn’t put up with a module without lecturers actually teaching (or spoon-feeding information, to put it bluntly); (iii) the faculty could not approve it; (iv) inter-departmental collaboration had been tried in the past and failed; and so on. It sounds like the apocryphal bumblebee’s inability to fly, in that theoretically, it should not be able to.

That, I have always said, is the point. If a games graduate attended a job interview for a games company and said (s)he was an excellent team player and worked well with others, his/her answer would hardly be credible. If, on the other hand, (s)he looked the interviewer in the eye and exclaimed wearily that (s)he had first-hand experience, and knew at least a few of the ways in which large group projects can fail horribly, his/her answer might sound a bit more convincing.

Sadly, for me at least, the train has pulled out of the station for the final time.