Editorial: the need to develop and play video games in order to understand them

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I once attended a meeting between academics and games industry developers where one of the academics asked, "Do you think I have to play video games in order to be able to usefully research them?" At the time I felt quite annoyed because the question seemed to suggest that playing games wasn't worth the researcher's time. Could you imagine the same kind of question being asked at a meeting between academics and writers? "Do I have to have read a book in order to be able to research this kind of literature?" The sad truth is that you can research any subject without necessarily being embedded in the culture of the area. However, you will lack the perspective of having experienced some of the issues involved in the area first hand.

I'm sure many of you who are reading this editorial will have experienced the feeling that video games simply aren't taken seriously as a valid research subject. Yet from my own personal experiences of the past decade as both a game developer and academic, I can attest to the overwhelming number of questions I am constantly struggling to answer. We know so little about this medium, about its psychological impact, its technological problems and its aesthetic challenges. Perhaps it is merely academic inertia that is slowing down the study of this field. It has been perceived by some that the games industry itself doesn't help by producing a very narrow type of experience, although I suspect that such a view is being challenged when there are several new gaming platforms and new players emerging at a healthy rate.

But I urge you to take heart and consider the long term situation. There is no denying the fact that in recent years interactivity in all its forms has become more pervasive. Mobile phones, tablets with touch screen interfaces, and emerging trends in wearable computers all suggest that the world is becoming both more connected and more interactive. Video games are already an important part of many people's daily lives. I suspect that it is inevitable that interactive media such as video games will become more ubiquitous, perhaps becoming the main media with which people entertain themselves. It is also, I believe, an inevitability that academia will have to accept that this same media is worthy of study because it offers so many interesting challenges.

My own research lies in the study of an area known by a number of names, including 'Interactive Digital Storytelling' and 'Believable Agents'. I am fascinated by the questions arising from the simulation of virtual beings. I call them 'Digital Actors' because ultimately the real questions arise from the player's experience of the agents' behaviour, rather than specifically what the agent is doing. Even this single field of research raises some really difficult questions: What affects the player's perception of the actors' behaviour? How do we optimally configure actors so that they exhibit the behaviours intended by designers? What form of interface should be used by designers, to allow them to specify the actors' behavior? How do we verify that actor behaviour is actually as intended?

That video games contain challenges from different perspectives is perhaps the reason why we are drawn to them. Technologists can study aspects of rendering, optimisation, and software engineering practice; whilst artists can study the aesthetics, animation and cinematography. Then there are design issues, interactivity issues, process control and business issues to consider. The problem of how to approach such a complex and multifaceted field is a challenging one. Do we create video game artefacts in a design/action research manner? Do we seek some fundamental principle that underpins our understanding of 'play'? How do we critique those experiences already available in a manner that is robust?

I am sure as you read the papers submitted to this journal, you will begin to understand the problems of researching a medium that relies so much on a combination of art, design and technology. It is often hard for a scientist who is used to quantitative methods to accept that they might not explain the whole picture. The analyst must also handle the subjective viewpoints of different players, and accept that video games have their own culture. A great deal of academic thinking has so far been aimed at the product of video games, typified by the ludology/narratology debate, or by the emphasis on the cultural effects of playing games. Yet so much is left to explore in the production of video game experiences. I would advocate that more academics need to produce their own video games, so that they can learn from that act of creation. Abstraction is useful and necessary, but when faced with difficult decisions during video game production, you often experience the fundamental issues which would be beneficial to an academic study.

We can draw encouragement from the fact that there are journals and conferences aimed at the academic study of video games. The diverse nature of the submissions to this journal shows that a wide variety of academic disciplines and approaches can usefully co-exist. What we need to do as academics is to work at establishing a base of knowledge that is both rigorous and informed. We need to engage with the video game industry and seek to understand their needs. There still exists a noticeable divide between academics and game developers. If we can bridge that gap and begin embedding academic thinking within game development, I believe we will gain some valuable understanding of the nature of video games.

My personal goal as a researcher is to gain a better understanding of the role of characters in video games, and how they can contribute to the player's perception of the game with their behaviour. I have long held onto the view that video game characters could be the most compelling ones of any media due to their interactive nature (although I must admit that despite the highly realistic graphics in some games, such characters still seem slightly unconvincing). I do take heart however, after reading Thomas and Johnson's *The Illusion of Life*, which provides a historic account of the development of animation techniques during the early years of the Walt Disney corporation. This book provides a very interesting insight into the series of developments of the animated cartoon, from early artifacts such as *Steam Boat Willy* (with its crude line-work and animation), to the more complex and accomplished animations such as *Fantasia* and *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*.

I suspect that it may take many more years for us to develop the techniques applicable to video games before we truly understand their potential. Certainly I would suggest to anyone looking at current video games that they should think beyond the current media. Ultimately we may see video games on vastly different platforms with vastly different forms of interaction, and it may be certain interaction methods which unlock the true potential of the medium. Perhaps our collective goal should be to understand the fundamentals of play and how it affects video game players. I think conducting a further wide range of academic work is one of the keys to achieving that goal. My hope is that by undertaking such research (including developing and playing our own video games), we will add to the collective knowledge that will ultimately lead to better game experiences for us all.