



Broadening the Scope and Application for Computer Games Scholarship

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You will see before you a land that stretches beyond the horizon - Yashayahu ben Amotz, c750BCE

As I write, the winners of the British Academy (BAFTA) Games Awards have just been announced to an expectant audience at the Queen Elizabeth Hall in London, England. Many years have passed since I attended the first ceremony in London. The winners then included Grand Theft Auto, Legend of Zelda, Call of Duty, Eye Toy, FIFA Football and Tony Hawk's Pro Skater. Most of these would be as familiar to today's gamers as Come Dancing, Dr Who, Friends and the Big Bang Theory are to an ageing audience of television-watchers.

To retrogress further, in the early 1990's a call went out for proposals for a future forum hosted by the eminent Computer Science department at the University of Edinburgh, Scotland. The aim was to find a way forward for what was being perceived by many as a subject field, although founded just fifty years earlier, that was now showing signs of premature ageing. In particular the scope and depth of CS research was seen to be ossifying into purely code-related issues. Many academics submitted papers from across the United Kingdom, and I was fortunate to be one chosen to present. The topic was *Computing as a Social Science* and the gist was that there was a significant area of future scholarship in considering the societal effects of information technology. This was voted second at the close of proceedings. The best idea was from Portsmouth University, England for complete simulations of the sub-200-neuron brains of invertebrates in order to model completely the natural intelligence apparatus of an entire observable organism.

Looking around today at the core CS curricula, there is little evidence for purposeful diversity in teaching beyond the long-established central subject field. The Computing Science BSc of today is not dissimilar to undergraduate studies in the 1970's—except for the languages and platforms. This is clearly not bad *per se*, but the lack of relevance of much scholarly research in the field has proceeded much as was prophesied and feared by the twentieth-century organisers of the Edinburgh future forum. Almost all purposeful research and development in CS now takes

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place outwith the academy in commercial laboratories in a few countries globally, from the USA thru Israel to China.

As recorded elsewhere, Computer Games studies have been on offer at universities and colleges since the late 1990's. Much like the syllabi for Computer Science, the early offerings have quickly become the standard. Admittedly, every subject field has its need to stand on some sort of solid ground—what would Sociology be without Durkheim, or Philosophy without Aristotle?—but it is worth questioning why this should be and whether we are missing a trick. In theory, academics have a freer hand than those working in the commercial games sector. If you are a brilliant and inventive young artist with a potentially novel approach to optical affects, but your job is modelling wheel dynamics for a cartoon-esque game, then you are simply not paid to do this. If you are a similarly talented young associate professor who sees the need to consider how geo-political issues will affect games design into the middle-future, surely you can, even given the oppressive forces and regimes that often operate in the academy. Like minds, working together and across established disciplines are a long-established way to break new ground and escape from the *ennui* of teaching Computer Programming 101, again.

Academic walls are similar to those in traditional Japanese houses: thin, paper, easily moved, providing a small degree of privacy. Those of us who teach and study games must be, of course, gamers. We cannot afford to be like those BBC executives who once boasted they never watched television. However, we cannot play every game, any more than anyone working in any creative field can participate in more than a tiny corner of the active field. We are required to be broad in our experience yet narrow in our scholarship. Too much breadth becomes magazine-like and lack of depth risks academic embarrassment. If we are to push forward the academic study of computer games we must risk losing our street-cred with the enthusiastic undergraduate students in order to lead the push forward of knowledge in the field. Blunt knives cut no bread.

This a long-term project, not a one-term sprint. To move beyond the known horizon involves reconnoitre and planning. But, we can be assured that there is a huge area of virgin territory beyond the current scope of Computer Games scholarship. Looking slightly to our left we can see the firestorm affecting Social Media at the interface with Sociology. On our right we read about Apple delving into its deep buckets of gold to make a lasting mark on the global games market. Behind us are the Health Scientists—optometrists, physical therapists, psychologists—considering how hours of screen-staring affects developing humans. Ahead of us are the global forces of Geopolitics and petro-dollars eyeing up enviously our increasing grip on molding at least three generations in every country.

We at the Computer Games Journal would hope that we can offer a place where blue-sky thinking in computer games scholarship is allowed. Why not sit down and pen an open proposal. Academia has always welcomed the essay—a thinking space offering a starting point to airing—without the fear of rebuke—a metaphorically half-baked idea. After all, to be fully table-ready, every cake has to be *half-baked* at some time! Perhaps there may be enough interest for a special edition on future research opportunities in video games. This will involve some personal scoping which, imho, can be the most enjoyable part of a new project. A mapping of the

ground over, say, 6 months, and a plan for the next 5 years. If you are a new academic, there is opportunity to carve a new subfield during the springtime of career; as one professor put it, “What advice would I give to a young academic? Find a field with nobody in it and make it your own.” If you are in mid-career predictability or instability, a new direction for the next 5–10 years can create a freshness of mind. Or, if you are looking down the short exit tunnel towards the end of a career, this could take you beyond retirement and generate new zest into your fall years.

A final word: being an academic is a transferrable life-skill on which a knowledge field can be built. Few of the those who taught my generation had degrees or been taught Computer Science; most were Mathematicians first. Wherever you are in your studies, perhaps now would be a good time to create an opportunity to broaden our field by looking beyond the known horizons. We at the Computer Games Journal look forward to hearing from you, and we will keep space available to publish and air your ground-breaking views if anyone wants to discuss the opportunity for being involved in preparing a special issue on new horizons.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest The author states that there is no conflict of interest.