

Are videogames art school? Considering the role of tertiary game development programs in Australia

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ABSTRACT

This paper draws from interviews with game development students, educators, graduates, and practitioners in Australia to critically evaluate the perception and role of tertiary game development programs. It finds that tertiary game development programs are perceived as sitting on a three-point spectrum between training 1) employees to enter an industry, 2) entrepreneurs to start their own business, and 3) artists to develop their own cultural identity. Between these emphases are a number of tensions in pedagogical approach and graduate outcomes that allow us to better articulate the role and value of game development programs.

Keywords

Games industry, creative industries, careers, education, university, skills

INTRODUCTION

Since the 1990s, tertiary-level videogame development education has become an increasingly dominant avenue into the videogame industry. While games academics have produced significant and widely-referenced pedagogical handbooks for game development education (Romero and Schreiber 2008; Salen and Zimmerman 2003), little critical attention has been paid to the cultural roles and ideological values of tertiary game development programs themselves, with some exceptions (see Harvey 2018; Geysler 2018; Zagal 2008; Ashton 2009). Game developers, however, have long been vocally ambivalent towards the value of such programs. In industry publications, game development programs are often accused of not adequately preparing students for the realities of the industry (Warner 2018), perpetuating the most worrisome aspects of the industry (Anthropy 2012), focusing too heavily on either technical or creative skillsets, or for exploiting students' enthusiasm and enrolling more students than the industry requires (Wright 2018). Over the past decade, as videogame development has fragmented into a vast range of overlapping fields with different values and approaches (triple-a, indie, artistic, casual, serious, etc), tertiary game development programs no longer simply provide workers for a homogenous creative industry. Which in turn raises the question: what *is* a game development education for?

This is particularly pressing question in the Australian context, where the Game Developers Association of Australia (GDAA) estimates that approximately 5000 students

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are enrolling in programs at least partly focused on game development skillsets each year (*Game On* 2016, 13), despite the local industry currently employing approximately 900 people—primarily in small, grassroots teams not looking to substantially grow. It's debatable as to whether or not this is a problem. Whereas one might think it unwise to train to become an accountant or a software developer if there were ten times more accounting or software development graduates than jobs, the same is not necessarily true for creative fields such as writing, music, or acting. That is, despite the lack of poets making a living from their poetry, students still perceive some value in studying a poetry degree. Thus, this paper asks what is tertiary game development education for, if not for industry placement? What *are* game development skillsets, and where do they sit in a broader socioeconomic context? Is game development artistic practice or applied computer science, and what does that mean for tertiary education?

This paper draws from interviews with current game development students and educators as well as graduates and professional developers across five Australian cities to approach these questions and evaluate perceptions towards game development programs. The current range of tertiary videogame development programs in Australia, I find, are attempting to simultaneously train students to enter a technical industry and to develop students' own creative identity. However, these two goals are not necessarily pursued consistently, and are often in tension with one another. Further, many students interviewed for this paper had little sense about the shape of the local industry or just what skills were required to enter it. Other students, meanwhile, were very articulate about their own work *as artists* and how they fit within a local 'scene'. Some expected to get a job once they completed their degree; others expected to work in adjacent or unrelated fields while making games in their own time.

Across interviews, it became clear that both different game programs and different students approach videogame development education in drastically different ways with different objectives. These approaches, I argue, can be triangulated between three extreme points: as training employees, entrepreneurs, or artists. The employee approach focuses on preparing students with the 'hard' technical skills perceived to be most needed by the industry, such as programming and competency with industry-standard software environments. The entrepreneur approach emphasises to students the need to create their own jobs, and complements the employee approach with business skills and industry networking and collaboration. The artist approach focuses on softer and vaguer creative and critical skills for students to build a creative identity and use a range of tools that may or may not be industry standard to express their ideas that may or may not be consumer friendly.

While value is evident in each approach, students and graduates themselves seem to remain unclear as to which focus their own program is directed towards and, with exceptions, were generally unclear as to the possibilities of what could be done with their own skills once they finish their education. Among developers, while no one approach was unanimously favoured, many counterintuitively seemed to think the 'artist' approach created more valuable employees than the employee- or entrepreneur-focused approach, as they perceived their own work as creatively-focused, rather than technologically-focused. This raises important questions as to just what graduate attributes might determine 'job readiness' in a game development program—or indeed if job readiness is a viable metric for graduate success in a project-driven creative field like videogames at all.

To stress, few schools or students, if any, were solely dedicated to any one approach, but these three foci—training employees, entrepreneurs, artists—function as valuable extremities on a three-point spectrum on which the different values, goals, and pedagogical approaches of different game development courses can be mapped. Doing so, I argue, doesn't simply determine which approach is 'better', but can help us better comprehend and articulate different approaches to game development education and which aspects of the videogame field (commercial, artistic, serious, casual, etc.) are best served by which pedagogical approaches.

BIO

Dr Brendan Keogh is an ARC DECRA Fellow in the Digital Media Research Centre, where he researches videogame development skill transferability across informal, formal, and embedded sectors. His previous research has focused on the phenomenological and textual aspects of videogame play and culture. He is the author of *A Play of Bodies: How We Perceive Videogames* (MIT Press, 2018) and *Killing is Harmless: A Critical Reading of Spec Ops The Line* (Stolen Projects, 2012), and has written extensively about the cultures and development practices of videogames for outlets such as *Overland*, *The Conversation*, *Polygon*, *Edge*, and *Vice*.

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