Making Videogames Available in Higher Education

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INTRODUCTION

Despite videogames being one of the biggest media industries in the world, worth over $240 billion in 2020 (Business Envoy 2022) and over 80% of all Australians regularly playing videogames (IGEA 2023), their integration into subjects and learning opportunities at the University of Melbourne has been limited and scattered across disciplines. A potential reason for this is the challenges posed in making videogames available as texts to students compared to other media like literature and cinema. These challenges include, but are not limited to, requiring specific platforms to access specific games (Castro & Sant'Anna 2023; Courts & Lederman 2009), the prohibitive cost and time games require to play, barriers that women, girls and other minorities experience regarding cultural accessibility (Richard 2024), and ongoing issues with accessing older games trapped on obsolete hardware (Dym et al. 2023; Sköld 2018). These challenges and more require meaningful effort to overcome, but doing so is necessary to help facilitate the expansion of games analysis and integration of game studies in higher education in line with the growth of the local videogame industry and field.

This paper will present in-progress research at the University of Melbourne into how best to overcome these challenges to student availability and allow greater integration of videogames into student learning both at the University and beyond. I am in the process of developing a white paper report for key stakeholders such as librarians and subject coordinators that will synthesise the expertise and experiences of academic and professional staff to provide both short-term and long-term solutions to help integrate games as study texts into subjects. This research's intention is to help develop a foundation for games curatorship, librarianship and availability at higher education institutions in Australia going forward. While the full report will focus on all types of games, including VR and analogue games, to narrow my focus I will be solely discussing videogames in this presentation.

While this research is ongoing, I will discuss a few initial recommendations. Regarding short-term recommendations, I propose that coordinators prioritise videogames with the following characteristics: highly accessible, cheap or free, available on PC and mobile and can be played in a classroom setting. These parameters may be limiting in some cases, but they can also be beneficial in exposing students to a breadth of games and challenging a theoretical 'game studies canon' (Frome & Martin 2019; Zagal 2019), thus allowing for alternate avenues of analysis that prioritise less hegemonic forms of games and play. As Zagal (2012, 670) argues, "working [with a games canon list] presupposes many things about students, what they know, what they do not know, and what their knowledge and abilities are". Challenging these base assumptions

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through foregrounding more available and affordable game experiences allows for both greater accessibility and new avenues of analysis. This also aligns with the approaches and goals of research into accessibility and inclusivity more broadly in game studies (Dumont & Bonefant 2023; Harrison, Rowlings & Aivaliotis-Martienz 2024). A key outcome of this report will be a living document to track games that are available for free and cheap online and on mobile devices, to give educators the tools to provide a breadth of games to students. Relatedly, I also recommend a focus on considering and developing games literacy for both students and educators. As Buckingham and Burns (2007, 5) describe, being games 'literate' involves being conscious of videogames across cultural, critical and creative dimensions, ensuring that both students and educators are given the tools to close analyse, situate and potentially even make games (see also Apperley & Beavis 2013; Zagal 2008).

Long-term implementation, however, requires meaningful institutional and infrastructural support. This would involve advocating for dedicated spaces to play videogames, as well as arguing for their inclusion in traditional library services (see Buchanan & Vanden Elzen 2017; Wood & Carter 2017). University funds able to provide access to subscription services like PS+, Switch Online and Game Pass can also provide a meaningfully large library easily, albeit a volatile one given how quickly the titles available can change. This research, while preliminary, also intends to investigate the capacity for universities to acquire educational licenses to teach with specific videogames, that would make them available to students like software. Advocating for these implementations, overall, is worthwhile in ensuring a variety of videogames and experiences be made easily available to a diverse student cohort.

BIO

Cassandra Barkman is a lecturer in Media & Communications at the University of Melbourne. Her research regards the close textual analysis of videogames, narratology, fandoms, pedagogy, interactive movies and complex storytelling. She is also a board member for DiGRA Australia, co-vice editor of journal Press Start and deputy director of new University of Melbourne research initiative MAGPIE (Melbourne Academic Games, Play and Interactive Entertainment).

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