

The Local, the Global, and the Intercultural: Strategies for Teaching Games Design in the Neoliberal University

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This abstract presents a recently started exploratory research programme which examines an introductory postgraduate level digital game design class within a Digital Media Production course at a higher education institution in the United Kingdom. This research programme is grounded on the following questions: what is at stake when a cohort comprised mostly of ‘international’ students, who happen to have English as a second language, and with different degrees of previous knowledge, affective attachment, and personal and professional interests in playing and making games, moves halfway across the world to develop their game design knowledge and practices? What do these students expect to learn, and what kind of assumptions (e.g. about games, about what ‘game design’ is, about what knowledges are relevant and what are not) are brought into the classroom, and what are their main takeaways? How can these intercultural encounters (between students, lecturers, texts and practices) help us reflect about the polysemy embedded in the term ‘digital game’? And, finally, how can these encounters be employed in a pedagogical approach to digital game design teaching that recognises and embraces the plurality of knowledges that are relevant to this field?

To reflect about these broader questions, the research programme explored here relies on two main bodies of research. Firstly, it engages with scholarship that recognises the importance of locality to understanding videogames (Nicoll 2019; Swallwell 2021): this relevance of local contexts is not only confined to the construction of ‘bigger’ narratives in gaming, or to understanding specific differences in local audiences, but it is also important in challenging the constantly invoked ‘global’ status of the gaming industry. By making the ‘local’ evident in the pedagogical approach adopted in the higher education experience outlined in this work, I argue that we – educators in this field – can promote a more granular account of gaming, including the connections and dissonances in, for instance, modes of game production across (and between) different cultures, communities and industries (Ozimek 2019; Keogh 2021; Sotamaa and Švelch 2021).

This research programme also borrows from previous scholarship on the mutually informing relationship between gaming culture, game development and game industries, and game education (Zagal and Bruckman 2008; Geyser 2018), especially in the context of neoliberalisation of Higher Education (Murray 2018), as is the case of

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the university where this experience takes place. Different authors have pointed out how game-related Higher Education courses are often seen as an auxiliary line to creative industries, providing a continuous flow of fresh graduates that will become gamesworkers already used to the issues (including, for instance, crunch time, sexism) often found in mainstream industry (Murray 2018; Bergstrom 2022) – as summarised by the well-known pipeline metaphor proposed by Harvey (2019; 2021). Besides an overemphasis on perceived ‘productive’ skills (e.g. technical training, in the case of games education), the neoliberalisation of Higher Education is also significantly influential in shaping the student body. In the particular case examined here, this neoliberal influence manifests itself, for example, in the high influx of so-called ‘international’ students, most of them self-identifying as non-Westerns, several of them interested in overtly technical elements beyond the remit of the degree they registered for, and often bringing into the classroom different gaming repertoires that unsettle Western conventions.

In this sense, the digital game design teaching experience discussed here presents itself as a rich intercultural microcosm – or a case study – to reflect about digital games as cultural objects, and digital game design as a cultural practice. As such, based on an autoethnographic reflexive approach around my teaching practice for my last 3 years of working with an average of 40 students per cohort, combined with materials collected from my teaching process and interviews with current and former students, here I will examine how a diverse confluence of factors within game education – from previous gaming experiences to professional aspirations; from the expectations related to Higher Education in a so-called international elite institution to subjectivities – might yield a significant opportunity to reflect about digital games as a cultural field within and beyond academia.

My main point of interest in this research programme is to examine how these intercultural encounters in game education (between students, lecturers, texts and practices) have generative potential to disarm all-encompassing narratives about games, players and nature of the work while making games. These encounters in game education can, for example, evidence the existence of different hierarchies of knowledges in all related game practices, and how these hierarchies might be context-specific, unsettling the homogenising and universalising narratives reinforced by the neoliberal approach to game education within current Higher Education spaces. In addition, I argue that this kind of research programme within the field of game education can also yield a more granular understanding of gaming as both a globally-interconnected and a localised phenomenon, moving beyond acritical and overly universalist ways of conceptualising game practices and of teaching about games in Higher Education settings.

Keywords

Cultural contexts, intercultural encounters, teaching games, game design, locality

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