Pluralist Game Studies: Practical Tools for the Crisis of (Inter)disciplinarity

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ABSTRACT

Game Studies, as an "interdisciplinary" field is and always has been in crisis. While the majority of thinkers, scholars, and pedagogues on games agree on a common goal of diversity, inclusivity and beneficial conflict, there is little agreement on how to get there. This piece reframes the history of interdisciplinarity as a crisis on two fronts: ideological and material (inter)disciplinarity. The text then argues for a particular solution to these sticky problems: *pluralist game studies*. Pluralist game studies is then explicated as having three practical approaches to enable the vision of game studies we all seem to want: anti-disciplinary, anti-qualification, and anti-exclusionary practices and spaces. The text concludes that these are not required of all game studies spaces, but in order for a healthy (inter)discipline, a certain percentage in pedagogy, conferences, and journals should exist. It concludes by highlighting spaces that already feature these techniques and ideology.

Keywords

Game studies, interdisciplinarity, pluralist game studies, Crisis

INTRODUCTION

Game studies is and always has been in crisis. How to support diversity in topics of research has been a core question since it was first born as an "interdisciplinary" topic of study (Mäyrä 2008) a description often used since then. Connecting game scholars from a variety of backgrounds and places on the globe has been a priority and growing practice, and one with serious hurdles such as translating across diverse languages and enabling more open-access publications (Liboriussen 2016). There are also harsh criticisms of "interdisciplinarity" as actually leading to more "epistemic foreclosure" if it becomes a tool to ignore rupture or beneficial conflict (Malazita, Rouse, & Smith 2024). This crisis is also far from historical and is contemporary and critical discussion to address in 2024.

The Digital Games Research Association recently had 280 academics sign a letter (DiGRA Diversity Collective 2024) from the Diversity Collective which stated they had "negative and harmful experiences" in the association. In addition to safety issues around enforcing the rules of conduct in the group, which while critical to an academic

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discourse are not the focus of this paper, this letter also makes several criticisms on how game studies handle diverse groups of scholars and research. In particular, it lays out three groups who need greater platforming for their work in game studies: early-stage researchers (point 4 and 5), scholars working in a diversity of topics including social justice as a research focus (point 5 and 7), and scholars from diverse regions around the world (point 2 and 9). These points speak to specific forms of diversity in career, cultural background, and topical focus of researchers.

Considering that there is an established history and contemporary movement of game studies seeking to promote diverse scholars in career-stage, discipline, and cultural background, it is time to move the conversation forward and discuss explicit ways these forms of diversity can be promoted. This article aims to do this by making explicit the tenets of a philosophy of diversity in game studies: pluralist game studies.

This text argues for pluralist game studies by giving an overview of the debates and criticisms of the field in terms of diversity, representation, and controlling powers of legitimacy in academia. It separates two core conflicts that are closely connected through the lens of (inter)disciplinarity: *ideological interdisciplinarity* and *material interdisciplinarity*. Pluralism then offers three practical techniques to move game studies closer to the field scholars have been generally agreed upon is the goal. Firstly, topic-oriented platforms for games and play research that denounce exclusion based on disciplinary history (anti-disciplinary). Second, the focus on making "gradient spaces" where the career stage of a scholar does not define the access they have to participate in the space (anti-qualification). Finally, proactive support of zero-barrier to entry use with an understanding of inevitable conflict between users which can be ameliorated but never ended completely (anti-exclusionary). After overviewing the needs and calls for anti-disciplinary, anti-qualification, and anti-exclusionary practices and spaces, several pluralist game studies spaces, as understood by the author's intent, will be discussed with its strengths, limitations, and recommended features for future scholars and for DiGRA.

BACKGROUND

What is interdisciplinarity and what is even the point of it? Game studies as a field is considered quite young, with Espen Aarseth famously claiming that 2001 was the "Year 1" of (computer) game studies (Aarseth 2001). This has been an important rhetorical feature to the identity of game studies which has defined itself as being unusually open to different methods, methodologies, and thus being described as multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary (Mäyrä 2008). In addition to being a claim of approvable types of methods publishable in the field, this also was present in how game studies scholars had diverse educations, zones of specialty, and even political orientations to games in general (Mäyrä et al. 2013). In this way, "game studies" promised to be more inclusive on several fronts, not just disciplinarity. This characteristic was described as quite promising in several ways, it held the promise of being flexible and adaptive to the needs of future study, however scholars have also fiercely criticized this idea. Scholars have criticized the rhetoric of interdisciplinarity in game studies as a pyrrhic victory (Deterding 2017), and as a tool that reduces discourse on diverse topics (Malazita, Rouse, & Smith, 2024).

The rhetorical call for interdisciplinarity demands us to understand its contrast-disciplinarity: what it is and what it is for. Disciplinarity has numerous defining approaches, but is generally seen as a "formalized method of knowing and expressing the knowledge of a given subject-matter." (Pearce 1957, p. 181). In a sense, it is the set of regulatory tools of what counts as an academic idea in a community of scholars. What ideas are considered legitimate both in their method, their ideology, and their practical background. As put in one recent overview "Disciplinary practices produce epistemic subjects — knowledge workers with particular techniques for making sense of the world — and epistemic objects — the 'analytic cuts'" (Malazita Rouse & Smith 2024).

The *epistemic subject* in a practical way refers to the legitimate ways of crafting understandings, or *methods* such as statistical methods or qualitative interviews or theoretical analysis. In some disciplines some of these methods are not considered valid statements, whereas in others they are. *Epistemic objects* refer to the results from these particular methods which usually define things as worth viewing as *relevant* and *not* worth viewing as relevant for those in the community. Disciplines regulate their views on "what is part of a phenomenon and what is not." (Tobias-Renstrøm & Køppe 2020, p. 645) and "hence the conditions for objective description" (Barad 2007, p. 348). This is practically seen in conflicts of statements from positivist vs. interpretivist worldviews (Alharahsheh & Pius 2020). For example, some readers may have learned to immediately criticize any claim of "objectivity" in an academic text, whereas other disciplines would ignore anything that does *not* make that claim. These two ideological-regulatory forces then become economic career-regulatory forces as "Disciplinarity involves the education, certification, hiring, and promotion of university professors" (Post 2009, p. 752). The regulation of career placement has larger economic effects as participation in academic discourse, whether conferences or journals usually cost money from the participant themselves unless their university disciplinary structure pays for them. This explication of disciplinarity helps clarify a clearer vocabulary for two sticky problems that a "interdisciplinary" game studies would face: *ideological disciplinarity* and *material disciplinarity*.

Ideological disciplinarity is the framework of which ideas get included in the space, not due to a criticism of their use, value, or quality, but rather of relevance. Whereas *material disciplinarity* refers to early-stage scholars, and accessibility of spaces and platforms when facing geographic and monetary barriers to entry. As will be discussed in the following sections, historically virtually every participant of this discussion has stated that their desired vision is a diverse, open-access, open-discourse version of game studies. In this way, it seems clear that the conversation should move forward beyond what the goal is and instead how to do it.

This paper offers a *pluralist solution* to these sticky problems in game studies. This concept comes from political philosophy where "pluralism affirms the belief that diversity and dissent are values that enrich individuals as well as their polities and societies." (Sartori 1997, p. 58). In this sense, we posit game studies as an academic field to be metaphorically like a political context with a mixture of different cultural backgrounds. We argue for a presumption of diversity in academic education, investment in practical tools and infrastructure that can be used in multiple ways, by different groups, with different purposes all related to games and game-like topics, and a support for dissent-based conflicts. This text will then specifically address practical techniques required to achieve the goals listed by most authors within these

conflicts. Three techniques will be emphasized: Topic-oriented, career-gradient, and open-access spaces. Several venues that already embody parts of these goals and use these techniques will be highlighted. In a final discussion, specific recommendations to DiGRA will be made.

THE CONFLICT OF IDEOLOGICAL (INTER) DISCIPLINARITY

No one discipline or field should (or can) have control over game research or theorization, and the study of games is enriched by multiple paths of inquiry. (Consalvo 2012, p. 8)

Disciplinarity enforces a set of academic norms by which a method is accepted to produce meaningful statements in a discourse (Shumway & Messer-Davidow 1991). Epistemic subjects and objects are representations of shared values and ideologies of a community (Fanghanel 2009). Notably, this is different from a shared object of study as they "should not therefore be confused with topics, discourses, subjects or interests; rather they should be understood as knowledge institutions or knowledge systems." (Hammarfelt 2019, p. 4). A discipline as a knowledge system in this way emphasizes the role of being a controller over knowledge production that is considered legitimate (i.e., Foucault 2013). In a practical sense in game studies, this disciplinary-controlling force is felt frequently, in the form of acceptances and rejections from journal editors, reviewers, and funding institutions. In the direct context of game studies, two critical legitimizing rhetorics will be separated and discussed: methods and values.

A methodological interdisciplinarity is what game studies as a field has generally discussed and promoted. Certain foundational texts overview the diverse methodological options for game Studies. For example, *Game Research Methods* (Lankoski & Björk 2015) unpacks a variety of ways game research is conducted, splitting into qualitative approaches to games, play and players, quantitative approaches, mixed methods, and game development for research. There have also been overviews of specific methods such as game analysis (Aarseth 2003; Fernández-Vara 2019), psychophysiological methods (Kivikangas et al. 2011), and a methods overview that concluded games researchers most often use "surveys", "interviews", and "case studies" (De Angeli 2020, p. 16). These texts in many ways take the promised inter-disciplinary open stance. They describe a set of options, usually while avoiding claims of some being "better" than others or some as legitimate or less legitimate. A primary reason these texts are insufficient to establish the success of an open-disciplinary game studies is that a deeper issue is at play that they don't solve: differing ideologies of science. Factual overviews of how certain methods would work does not solve ideological differences, such as the positivist vs. interpretivist conflict discussed before.

Ideological conflict, without the same open tolerance as seen in methods discourses, is a major component of game studies history. One of the foundational moments in game studies is an ideological conflict of "Ludology vs. Narratology" essentially an argument of whether analyzing games should focus on narrative-analysis tools or instead primarily at the non-narrative mechanics often argued as more essential to games. This ideological conflict is often discussed in the history of game studies as a fake conflict (Kokkonen 2014) with an inception heavily based on misunderstandings (Frasca 2003). Yet, despite this claimed artificial beginning, books still use the ideological concepts describing themselves as "ludologists, who argue that games are

a unique category and should be studied as such" (Nguyen 2019, p. 3). A larger implied question of this possibly fictional debate is whether games should be a unique category or subsumed and separated into older disciplines. This argument of ludology vs. disciplinarity is an active debate with no resolution.

There are claims in game studies that it should be treated as a form of media studies (Chess & Consalvo 2022), or that it mixes media studies and other social sciences (Wesp 2014). One ideological view is that researchers should be trained in a "home discipline" before they then contribute into the interdisciplinary game studies space (Consalvo 2012). I would term this the *factionalist disciplinary* style of game studies, where each scholar is discussed as being a part of a non-game discipline that they then apply to games.

In contrast, Games Studies has numerous voices attempting to unite those who discuss games into a unique discourse group. Those who believe in this approach often attempt to bring together the diverse communities who study games and may not engage with each other's works at all, such as simulation and game studies, board game studies, sports philosophy, human-computer interaction and diverse conferences such as CHI play, or The Association for the Study of Play (Stenros & Kultima 2018). There are several attempts by scholars to try and unite those who study games together methodologically and ideologically on all levels of academia (Klabbers 2018). This is similar to criticisms that game studies is ideologically too narrow and should reframe to a more inclusive discipline of games studies (Malazita, Rouse, & Smith 2024) or "play studies" (Gekker 2021, p. 79) or "game design studies" (Deterding 2017 p. 534). I would characterize this view as the *unified disciplinary* ideal for game studies.

The difference between these two ideas speaks to what Wenger would call a *community of practice* (Li et al. 2009), an essential component of developing researcher skills and informal research networks. In the *factionalist disciplinary* style, scholars first and foremost have a disciplinary non-game community of practice, such as media studies, literature studies, or sociology. Each of the factions can then come together later to share their ideas from their own perspectives. Students are then trained as to how to make meaningful contributions to separate disciplinary discourses. After a student has been trained in a disciplinary manner, they may contribute to the cross-disciplinary space, in essence speaking to other disciplinary trained individuals using their own, separate, tools of discourse. In a *unified disciplinary* way, the primary community of practice is those who study games as a topic. Some scholars seek full disciplinarity, just reframed towards games. In this model, game studies would establish "legitimate" and "non-legitimate" techniques. Scholars who use new techniques or contrasting techniques or ideologies are a rupture in need of resolution through negotiation and agreement between all entities in game studies. As one recent proponent described it, an "agonistic negotiation that embraces friction as generative, one that seeks to surface differences so they might be made visible and open to shared inquiry" (Malazita, Rouse, & Smith 2024, online). In this image, students are trained on the agreed upon game studies techniques and then allowed entrance into discursive spaces upon receiving qualification in those techniques.

The ideological underpinnings of these movements have major issues through the lens of promoting diverse ideas and discussions. Factionalist game studies has the following problem: If scholars are ideologically trained within separate traditions based in media studies, social sciences, or literature studies to view certain types of ideas as "relevant" and "irrelevant" to them[1] are these scholars in danger of talking past each other (Williams 2005)? If, for example, you have a humanities-oriented scholar who studies narrative storytelling in games, and a social psychologist studying how communities remember their game-play experiences in the same game, their topics of interest align partially, but do they have an overlapping framework of truth? Even more importantly, have they been taught the skills to feel open to a new framework of truth when it is presented to them or have they been taught to view techniques they don't recognize as "off topic" to their interests? In practice the second result appears to be true: Based upon quantitative analyses, it appears that scholars trained in disciplinary practices fundamentally create and participate in disciplinary spaces (Deterding 2017).

Unified disciplinarity faces a slightly different but connected question for promoting diverse ideas. Scholars in this camp say a discipline on games would promote diverse discussion as generative (Malazita, Rouse, & Smith 2024). However, they fail to make a coherent argument on how the system of a new discipline called "game studies" would be better at adapting to *new* ideologies or methods that emerge after the disciplinary establishment of game studies. Why would disciplinarians in game studies be better equipped to listen to new ideas than any other discipline[2]? Secondly, it does not present a compelling answer to what happens when we persistently disagree with colleagues. We, as scholars, do not always agree *epistemic objects*: what makes a valid contribution to the discourse, especially when it comes to new and diverse ideas. While they say that this would create a "rupture" that resolves in promoting new ideas and sharing inquiry, what tools are enabling that? The easiest answer for scholars would seem to be, as discussed above, simply ignore the colleagues we do not agree with and talk past each other (Williams 2005). In essence, the DiGRA Diversity Collective Statement says that this is exactly what is happening in the field when they write DiGRA has "long sidelined and dismissed game studies work focusing on race, gender, sexuality, disability, class, caste, and other intersecting identities and systems of power" (2024, online). In this way, it seems a stronger and specific tool would be needed to support diverse ideologies on games entering discourse with each other.

These two ideological visions of the inter-discipline of game studies have similar goals. All these pieces conclude with a discussion of their desire to increase diversity in ways of thinking promoted in scholarship of games. For example, conclusions focus on games research "widening the scope of analyses" (Consalvo 2012, p. 28) or creating generative friction (Malazita, Rouse, & Smith 2024) or "bringing together experts from different fields" (Klabbers 2018, p. 243). These different texts just theoretically disagree on how to do it. It is clearly time to move beyond a purely theoretical conclusion to this topic and move into practical methods of achieving this above goal.

This text supports the goal of generative friction, which brings diverse scholars together to present wide scopes of analysis in game studies. In order to do this, pluralist game studies offers the following tool: *Anti-disciplinary* spaces and education. Anti-disciplinary spaces are academic venues and research pipelines that intentionally remove an assumption of specific disciplinary backgrounds of contributors including whatever "game studies" may historically become. These spaces specifically promote game studies as a topic and not an ideological or a

methodologically defined entity. These spaces would denounce the approach of seeing other scholars as fundamentally irrelevant because of their "discipline". In terms of rigor, scholars who are engaged in peer review should be taught to look at contributions based upon the merits presented, rather than a previously established disciplinary rulebook of what "counts" as game studies.

For students, anti-disciplinarity requires a sufficient education and competence in multiple methods and ideologies, and training on how to assess new ideas on their own merits. Rather than training our community to only listen to specific forms of contribution, we should train the analysis and criticism of ideological and methodological underpinnings of contributions. This implies not just anti-disciplinarity in games research, but also games pedagogy. Perhaps it is time for game studies to openly bias towards master's or PhD students who have studied multiple ideological backgrounds, intentionally select diverse study-backgrounds for students at all levels and even require supplementing any past education with additional qualitative, quantitative, social-scientific or humanities pedagogy. Importantly these supplemental ideas should be taught to students by diverse scholars who believe in the things they teach. Students and thus later scholars would benefit from an insider view of diverse ideologies of games research they would be asked to assess later in their career. This does not end interpersonal dissent over methods or ideologies; it rather teaches future scholars to have well-articulated explicit dissent about methods and ideas.

While not every space needs to be anti-disciplinary, a certain percentage should be in order to build a game studies that does not recreate either full disciplinary exclusion to new ideas, nor disciplinary factions that ignore each other. These anti-disciplinary ways of thinking have major value. Useful information jumps between disciplines such as in many definitional histories (Masek & Stenros 2021), teams of researchers collaborating from different disciplines are more academically productive (Parish et al. 2018), and also entirely new ideas and sub-fields do appear outside of a pre-established disciplinary techniques (e.g. Ruberg & Shaw 2017). Anti-disciplinary space and education creates a systematic method by which newer methods of inquiry, like queer game studies that are "neither sufficiently rigid nor ensconced in the academy enough to be called a discipline" (Ruberg & Shaw 2017, p. xvii) can integrate as equally valid contributions to all members of the community of practice that is game studies. Furthermore, fertile terrains of knowledge that are not academic, such as knowledge created by player groups, fan groups, designers and professionals have entrance points for serious consideration.

In summation, disciplinary thinking cannot be our only priority or we, as a community, will always be prone to denouncing non-disciplinary thinking[3]. In order to cultivate a pluralist situation where different ideologies of games can best be supported as a meaningful community of practice; the first tenet is crafted.

The first tenet of pluralist game studies: Anti-disciplinary spaces and practices.

THE CONFLICT OF PRACTICAL OF MATERIAL (INTER) DISCIPLINARITY

Academia is not fair. The distribution of scientific funding, publications in high-impact journals, and the concentration of resources at high-prestige institutions show

evidence of the 'Matthew effect,' a system where the rich get richer (Bolet al., 2018; Huber et al., 2022)." (Urai & Kelly 2023, p. 8)

In addition to being members of an academic discourse, the vast majority of game scholars are also workers receiving or seeking money for paid labor. In this way, we are not just creating contributions to an academic discourse, we are making careers in a neoliberal system which aims to provide exclusionary rewards to those who have already succeeded according to quantifiable metrics. This system in general has been criticized as unsustainable and yet it is the system we all operate within (Urai & Kelly 2023). In this way, it is important to address this question of organizing game studies not just as a community of practice, but as an economic ecosystem. If our goal is game scholars with thriving careers, we need to support techniques that enable financial stability. In this way, the question of disciplinarity is also a de facto issue of qualifications, money, administrative power, and career legitimacy.

Factionalist game studies holds a profound economic advantage in the current material reality of academic research. Funding applications will often not have reviewers whose primary focus is "games" but are experts in larger "media" or another disciplinary field. These reviewers come from a disciplinary background and thus are likely to reward ideas that align with what they have been trained to understand, not necessarily out of bias, but because they are more *fluent* in their discipline's ideas and techniques. Disciplinary epistemic fluency is a metaphor often used to discuss how teaching undergraduates in an interdisciplinary mindset requires extra labor to ensure they are functional in multiple paradigms of thought (Airey & Linder 2009). It has also been applied to students in postgraduate studies as well, showing that training in one epistemic technique helps with understanding others, but is not necessarily sufficient (Hill et al. 2014). In the context of reviewers, if interdisciplinary epistemic fluency is not a widely agreed upon goal of the space, it would make sense if some of those reviewers simply conserve their energy and ignore them, in essence a monetary version of talking past other scholars (Williams 2005). This is probably at least partly why evidence shows that disciplinary publications see greater career benefits to interdisciplinary publications (Deterding 2017).

In addition to funding applications, many universities do not host "game studies" departments. In this way, career steps such as promotion, lecture positions, tenure track positions are also likely to be decided by individuals who are not "game scholars" but some other disciplinary scholars. Disciplinarity has a clear and easeful method to structure career qualifications. In a disciplinary setting, one can pre-determine career steps based upon historically normalized skills and techniques of verifying them. Different disciplines use varying measures of success, some focusing on articles and other books (Qian 2015), conferences may be explicitly article-oriented or use abstract submission, and authors may be allowed to publish in different sizes of groups (Parish et al. 2018). Disciplinary fluency makes the identification of relevant research skills simpler, as there is a disciplinary list of skills that are sought after. Informal research networks are easier to form as disciplinary spaces self-select potential colleagues with similar ideological frameworks using similar vocabularies and interested in similar questions.

Upon receiving disciplinary legitimacy in this way, disciplines can then operate as institutional bodies of power within the university (Malazita, Rouse, & Smith 2024) advocating for their interests. Proponents of disciplinarity see these administrative bodies as a key feature supporting us as professionals in resisting neoliberal

exploitation (Malazita, Rouse, & Smith 2024). There are also views, especially by younger or interdisciplinary scholars, where disciplinary administrative techniques are a key component of academic exploitation (Morish 2020). This speaks to the downside of disciplinary career trajectories: in practice, this means that those games researchers who are not trained in the predetermined disciplinary ideology can systematically be considered irrelevant materially. Once again, disciplinary training is a powerful ideological tool for exclusion, not based upon merit, but based upon prioritizing previously established norms. As discussed before, every writer in game studies, as far as I am aware, has argued for a discursive game studies where new ideas thrive and are materially supported. The real question is how would inter-disciplinary and non-disciplinary ideas be economically, materially supported in practice.

The pluralist solution offers two solutions to the practical/material consequences of disciplinarity: anti-qualification and anti-barrier to entry spaces.

Anti-Qualification Spaces

Career paths in academia have many legitimizing steps, with a high degree of diversity across cultures. There is a gradient of transition from bachelor's students, master's students, doctoral, post-doctoral, and tenured professorial career positions. In addition, different cultures both national and disciplinary may have teaching positions and other kinds of qualifications that do not exist or are incomprehensible to other groups. In this way disciplinarity and career trajectory run intertwined and deep. For example, a bachelor's in psychology is the legitimizing step for a master's which leads to a PhD, to funded positions, and tenure. These requirements are explicit and exclusionary. A promising scholar who aims to innovate in, for example, "queer game studies", is going to face structural barriers not just to academic discourse by subsequent employment. In this way this question is especially pertinent to those wanting to set up game research labs and thriving ecosystems for early-stage game researchers. As new and exciting ideas will systematically be less successful than familiar disciplinary ideas, we need times and spaces where we enable scholars with less demonstrable success equal access to the discursive platforms.

So, how can we *practically* promote innovative ideas in the academic discourse, educate students in a way that rewards those ideas, and support career trajectories outside of disciplinary frameworks on the topic of games? The answer is investment into spaces that are explicitly *anti-qualification* and are rather *gradient spaces*. Anti-qualification does not refer to removing systems of qualifying individuals based on skill. It rather refers to intentionally supporting individuals who have reached *differing* qualifications or even *fewer* qualifications into the *same* discourse with *equal* styles of participation. This kind of space is what I term a *gradient space* which intentionally creates a gradient of qualification. For example, we can imagine a panel featuring a scholar with 30 years' experience, a PhD project, and a game designer who all work on shared topics. These spaces can then support informal research networks, collaborations, and evidence of scholarly legitimacy for those who may be systemically excluded from more disciplinary spaces. In this way we can create a material method of supporting an interdisciplinary community of practice. Once again, this does not need to be all spaces, but a certain number of these spaces will enable us to push back on the systemic pressure of the generally disciplinary qualification systems we face.

This composes the second tenet of pluralist game studies: anti-qualification practices.

Anti-Exclusionary Spaces

Finally, one of the most important questions for implementing a pluralist diversity practice is understanding the systems at play that keep diverse audiences out of spaces and discourses. Often these structures are not a particular ban on any group, but rather a requirement that will de facto keep certain categories of people out. As discussed above, since ideology leads to career advancement and career advancement is tied to economic capacity, the first and foremost barrier is going to be *monetary* price of entry. The cost of academic study and research has been increasing steadily over time (Ehrenberg et al. 2003), these costs are often borne by researchers themselves (Bleasdale 2019). In practical terms this is once again obvious to anyone who has attempted to publish in conferences or journals without institutional payment-coverage. If researchers must either be fortunate enough to have economic security or pay large sums of money to participate in the discourse, this will limit access to those with such economic conditions. The resulting community will be biased towards established disciplinary participants and ideas. Geographically there is a similar issue with any conference or academic venue that requires embodied participation, as traveling to destination locations to promote one's research costs money, either paid by a home university or the researcher themselves.

Finally linguistic barriers to entry form a final uniquely sticky problem. Certain researchers are trained more in a widely read research language, and others do not have the same systematic support in their background. An even deeper linguistic problem is that "Standard English" is often a de facto racial check, where the criticism has nothing to do with the quality of ideas communicated but fundamentally irrelevant components of the grammatical framing of the ideas (Chaka 2021). This issue is even more obvious when you are assessing researchers who have English as a second language. In this kind of social context linguistic skills are pragmatic ways of undermining certain forms of diversity of thought that we should instead be promoting. Pluralist game studies offers at least a partial solution to these three daunting challenges: anti-exclusive spaces.

Anti-exclusionary spaces are defined by being free entry, online, with an understanding that language skill may be varied. Not every space needs to be all of these things all of the time as certainly there are reasons why there are embodied networking opportunities for example. However, we should acknowledge that if we only listen to individuals who fly to Malta in person, pay 600 euros and reject them based on their English grammar instead of their ideas, then we will only hear the ideas of those who have the material capacity to pay 600 euros, a flight and stay in Malta, and with a long history with white-English grammar. These material barriers will obviously select for wealthy and white researchers.

The third tenet of pluralist game studies: anti-exclusionary practices.

DISCUSSION

In practical terms, *pluralist game studies* offers a concrete roadmap of techniques to enable an interdisciplinary discipline of game studies. This road map seeks active

conversation amongst diverse ideas and scholars, and creates possibilities for a career in game research while avoiding the exclusionary issues in contemporary disciplinary academic practices. Firstly these explicit recommendations will be made clear. Finally, specific conferences that already embody many of these principles will be highlighted. Three conferences will be highlighted specifically for how they embody these techniques: The Spring Seminar at Tampere University, the Northern Star Symposium at the University of Nordland, and Generation Analogue hosted online, though there are undoubtedly many more. In addition, the *International Journal of Role-Playing*, *Eludamos*, and the journal *Game Studies* will be discussed as publication venues aligning with parts of this ideology.

Anti-Disciplinary Spaces

To best support different ideologies and methodologies entering into conversations with each other, academic conferences and publication venues can have topic rather than methods-oriented calls. For example, in DiGRA, a track on "player studies" appears to be a methodological division that is likely going to sort in disciplinarily similar views on a topic. While this makes sense, it does not help scholars view connections across disciplines on the topic very well. Compare this with a track on "online games" for example, where one scholar could present a study of players of an online game, another scholar presented a humanistic close reading of the same game, and finally a critical theorist challenged normative rhetorical narratives about these games. Academic publications could similarly prioritize the adjacent publication of different ideological takes on the same topic, such as occurs during the publication of certain special issues.

This is aligned with certain conferences focusing on single-track presentations on an intentionally ambiguous or open to interpretation theme. The Northern Star Symposium for example in 2024 had the theme "Mending" which opens several distinct ideological and methodological interpretations. Presentations included analyses of game designers attempting to mend a historical harm, topics within games that focused on mending and player behaviors writ large that could be seen as mending. The Spring Seminar similarly utilizes open to interpretation conference prompts such as the 2024 conference "Meta". Generation Analogue also uses topic inspirations such as the 2024 "Home" conference.

There is a major gap in utilizing this technique for publication venues which are rewarding to an academic career in game research. *Game Studies* in many ways presents itself as this kind of anti-disciplinary publication venue as they describe online:

> Our primary focus is aesthetic, cultural and communicative aspects of computer games, but any previously unpublished article focused on games and gaming is welcome. Proposed articles should be jargon-free, and should attempt to shed new light on games, rather than simply use games as metaphor or illustration of some other theory or phenomenon (Game Studies online Dec 16 2024).

This kind of framing seems promising; however, their publication results seem more narrowly disciplinary. It seems the variety they truly seek is a mix of philosophical theoretical inquiry discussing analytic terms connected to games such as "ludic habitus" (Jaćević, 2022) or analyzing games through the lens of Gadamer (Meakin et

al. 2023). The other set of contributions seem focused on a humanities-style theoretical analysis such as an analysis of lighting in games (El-Nasr et al. 2007) or close readings of specific games through specific theoretical lenses, such as looking at the game Anatomy through the lens of "Gothic access and bodily doubt" (Leblanc 2024, Abstract). While all of these are excellent pieces, they represent similar methods and ideology: they are a theoretical perspective by a writer on a specific game or genre of games. This embodies how anti-disciplinarity is an active priority, not an inevitable result of interdisciplinary claims. I was unable to find a recent *Game Studies* piece that took any social-scientific method of, for example, talking to a player of any of these games[4]. In contrast, *Eludamos*'s most recent publication includes studies that used surveys from players (Wiik & Alha 2023), theoretical analyses of specific games (Serada 2023), and a Marxist, Feminist, Anti-imperialist critique of the games industry (Hammar et al. 2023). This represents anti-disciplinary selection practices in a much stronger way.

Anti-Qualification Spaces

In addition to anti-disciplinary publications, anti-qualification spaces are an important component to a pluralist game studies. As discussed above, if disciplinary approaches provide career rewards and stronger communities of practice, then a truly interdisciplinary professional game research community needs techniques to bring a variety of career stages together in a way to create social networks, professional connections, and collaboration opportunities. This text offers the idea of a gradient space to define this goal.

In practice for DiGRA this would imply a step away from isolating tools such as a "doctoral consortium" and instead an attempt to integrate a variety of career stages into similar talks together. There are real admirable goals in the idea of a doctoral consortium that can and should be maintained. Placing a doctoral student in direct *competition* with a tenured professor in a pure neoliberal skill assessment is unlikely to support exciting new ideas, as they probably still lack certain skills or even confidence to participate. However, the pluralist philosophical stance is that the correct way to enable these younger scholars is not to silo them off into a lower status academic zone, but to actively seek to support them into conversation with scholars at other career stages. This kind of technique is mentioned in the DiGRA letter—having junior scholars give one of the keynote speeches.

The Northern Star Symposium is an excellent example of this kind of technique. They intentionally have an early-stage scholar present their PhD work, related to the topic, as one of their Keynotes. The Spring Seminar and Generation Analogue similarly have a mix of PhD students, extremely skilled master's students and practitioners present in a space that is mostly composed of experienced researcher presentations and listeners. These spaces have shown a real value in promoting early-career work in conversation with late-career work. While the scholarly skills of the individuals involved are at different stages, this puts young researchers as fundamentally valued as a part of the discourse and better enables their budding ideas and projects to be seen and supported by researchers in a later career stage.

Anti-Exclusion Spaces

There are two practical gates that take intentional labor to reduce: Monetary gates and location-based gates. Monetary gates are in practice dismantled by not

requesting academics who are doing labor to pay for their own labor to be done. This is a major issue in academia. The question is, Who pays? At the end of the day, this is a call to end the practice of academic journals as we know them. Taylor and Francis made 219 million British pounds *profit* in 2023 (Bookseller 2024) and they do so by charging the consumers of academic work *and* by charging the producers of academic work. Many of the readers of this text are lucky enough to have funding bodies pay for this burden, but many academics, especially from diverse (ie non-wealthy) backgrounds, are not. If we continue a system that requires money to be paid for doing the work of academia, we are silencing those who are not lucky or wealthy enough to pay for their voices to be heard. There are clear ideological representatives who have made serious, high-quality, influential spaces in game studies that are free to produce content with. Generation Analogue as a conference and publication venue is online and free for producers of content. The *International Journal of Role-Playing* and *Eludamos* are both free to submit and publish with. *Game Studies* is one the most established journals in the field and it is free to publish with.

In practice, if DiGRA wants to be supporting diversity, they need a free option for participation in creating academically and career-level relevant work. DiGRA does enable online participation, which is an excellent option for reducing geographic barriers to entry. However, an online option that costs hundreds of euros is still a major barrier to diverse participants. Importantly, stipends, while often well-intentioned, do not remove barriers to entry: they create a new neoliberal competition that is likely to bias the same group of people as any other.

CONCLUSION

There is a major component of this discussion that has not been highlighted so far. In addition to the labor of participating in academic discourse, there is the labor of setting up and maintaining platforms of discourse. Teaching, running a conference, editing a journal, or conflict-mediation is skill-intensive, time-costly and often completely unpaid[5]. Pluralism and diversity are inevitably going to face conflict between values. This demands greater need for effective conflict-mediation. Pluralist game studies as an ideology does not fundamentally solve the ever-increasing unsupported labor demands of participating in academia. However, many disciplinary spaces do not handle this equitably either. In practice, editors, reviewers, organizers of highly expensive conferences do not receive monetary compensation for this critical work; the venues do. The current system of unpaid organizers whose time and attention is forcibly split towards paid labor, that *the same* profit-making universities demand of them, seems like a recipe for overwork and poorly handled situations. This seems like a structural barrier for any group of organizers to hold or learn the effective skills needed to resolve key components of the 2024 crisis in DiGRA. The DiGRA diversity collective letter even seemed to be aware of this kind of barrier when they said DiGRA should “consider paying professional ombuds for their time and expertise *if possible*.” (online, emphasis added). The “if possible” begs the underlying question of possible for *who* to pay. There are two groups most likely—the volunteer organizers or the profit-making universities who host.

This frames the final call or a plea to reframe a primary member of our community of practice: the university. The neoliberal model of universities as businesses who sell a service to students, make profit, and hire academic researchers as the labor for this service has made each of the generally agreed upon goals of game studies

exponentially harder. Neoliberal universities are poor community members. The goal of profitability is fundamentally at odds with the values of promoting new ideas and especially expanding diversity. We should acknowledge that the most diverse exciting ideas are simply not the same as the most profitable ideas. If profit-making universities as an ideological norm continue to expand, then they will fundamentally undermine the values discussed in this paper. The values that we as a community of practice generally share as goals. The solution for this institutional-level problem is too large to solve now; as discussed above, material conditions and economic rewards for research are often key components for many of us surviving long enough to participate in our discourse. On the other hand, there are examples of institutions not demanding money for hosting academic conferences, journals that are free to publish in, so the alternatives are in many ways at least partly existing. Should we not morally demand and support this kind of non-extractive venue of academia and undermine those that demand exclusionary barriers to exist simply for the venues' own gain? Do we actually want an academia where academic publishers make hundreds of millions, charge us for our work, and then refuse to let others read it?

At the very end of it all, we have our values and the things that we wish to promote in this world. Our ideologies, our material conditions greatly affect our ability to participate in a discourse. I stand as a proponent of pluralist game studies. The institutions I run are free, online-available, topic-oriented, and seek diverse career stages and varied qualifications for its voices. The downsides are clear—it takes labor and I lose money doing it. So, I understand that there is a horrible precarity in creating spaces of ideology without personal reward. I also pay for things with personal money I receive from a university which recently became run by a profit-oriented "board" which, while not a company, felt the need to sell university buildings to increase the profit margin of *someone*[6]. It will take real time for us to build the repertoire of tools we need to enact the world we want or figure out how to invest our resources sustainably for values other than profit. There are many choices, individuals, and moments that should be criticized along the way, but also we need to positively identify and invest in the world we want. I think it is time for us to address the ground we stand on and stand up for those institutions and community members who are enacting the process of change that is aligned with our collective values.

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ENDNOTES

[1] See the above example of "objective" claims in research.

[2] Other disciplines have similar conflicts on how peer-review often acts as a way of enforcing "disciplinary orthodoxy" (Brewis 2018, p. 25) with the potential result of suppressing new ideas.

[3] Whichever version we may have.

[4] This is not meant to be a harsh critique of *Game Studies* as a journal. This is mostly meant to provide a contrast to an anti-disciplinary publication approach.

[5] This form of unpaid labor has numerous intersectional components-gender, race, legal status etc. This is such a complicated topic on its own it could, and probably should, fill an entire text unpacking it.

[6] Though whose profit exactly is quite obfuscated and unclear.