

GAMES & ACADEMIA: A RANT

DIGITAL INTERACTIVE SYMPOSIUM: EDINBURGH

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INTRODUCTION

- SO, I'M GOING TO START WITH A **QUESTION**
- WHICH UK UNIVERSITIES HAVE THE **BEST** UNDERGRADUATE **COMPUTER GAME** DEGREES?
- FEEL FREE TO **SHOUT** SOME OUT...

- OK, SO THERE'S NO ACTUAL **DATA SET** AVAILABLE FOR THIS, BUT **ANECDOTALLY:**

THE ANSWERS ARE

- ABERTAY
- COVENTRY
- DERBY
- NOTTINGHAM TRENT
- **PORTSMOUTH**
- SHEFFIELD HALLAM
- STAFFORDSHIRE
- TEESSIDE
 - BOLTON, BOURNEMOUTH, EAST LONDON, LINCOLN, ...
- NOTICE ANYTHING **UNUSUAL** ABOUT THESE?

MODERN

- **ALL** THE TOP COMPUTER GAME COURSES ARE RUN AT "**MODERN** UNIVERSITIES"
 - I.E. FORMER POLYTECHNICS AND INSTITUTES
- UCAS LISTS **72** UK UNIVERSITIES OFFERING GAMES COURSES IN 2008
- OF THESE, ONLY **8** WERE UNIVERSITIES IN 1992
 - ABERYSTWYTH, BRADFORD, CITY, **ESSEX**, HULL, NEWCASTLE, QUEENS UNIVERSITY BELFAST, ULSTER
 - AND ULSTER WAS FORMED BY THE 1984 MERGER OF THE NEW UNIVERSITY OF ULSTER AND ULSTER POLYTECHNIC

FIRES WERE STARTED



WISHY WASHY

- IF YOU LOOK AT THE **SUBJECTS** THESE 8 “OLD” UNIVERSITIES OFFER, THEY’RE NOT EXACTLY **WHOLE-HEARTEDLY** BEHIND GAMES:
 - “COMPUTER GRAPHICS, VISION AND GAMES”
 - “INTERACTIVE SYSTEMS AND VIDEO GAMES DESIGN”
 - “COMPUTER SCIENCE WITH GAMES TECHNOLOGY”
 - “COMPUTER SCIENCE WITH GAMES DEVELOPMENT”
 - “COMPUTER SCIENCE (GAMES AND VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENTS)”
 - ONLY ESSEX, QUEENS UNIVERSITY BELFAST AND ULSTER HAVE **STRAIGHT** COMPUTER GAME DEGREES

EXPLANATION

- SO WHY **IS** THIS?
 - WHY DO POST-1992 UNIVERSITIES **DOMINATE** THIS AREA?
- WELL, THE REASONS FALL INTO **TWO** BROAD CATEGORIES:
 - THINGS **MODERN** UNIVERSITIES DO THAT **HELP** THEIR CAUSE
 - THINGS **OLDER** UNIVERSITIES DO THAT **DON'T** HELP **THEIR** CAUSE
- LET'S LOOK AT EACH OF THESE MORE CLOSELY...

MODERN PLUSES

- MODERN UNIVERSITIES:
 - ARE WILLING TO TAKE **RISKS**
 - THE EARLY ADOPTERS **BET THE FARM** ON COMPUTER GAMES AND WOULD HAVE HAD **DEEP** PROBLEMS IF THE AREA HADN'T RECRUITED UNDERGRADUATES
 - HAVE **MODULAR** COURSE STRUCTURES
 - NEW AWARDS CAN BE COOKED UP FROM EXISTING MODULES FAIRLY **EASILY**
 - HAVE FEW **ADMINISTRATIVE** HURDLES
 - NOT MULTIPLE TIERS OF COMMITTEES THAT MEET 2 OR 3 TIMES A YEAR AND PASS THEIR DECISIONS UP TO HIGHER-TIER COMMITTEES THAT MET **JUST LAST WEEK**

OLDER MINUSES

- OLDER UNIVERSITIES:
 - **DON'T** REGARD COMPUTER GAMES AS ACADEMICALLY **RESPECTABLE**
 - MATHS > PHYSICS > ELECTRONICS > COMPUTER SCIENCE > ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE > COMPUTER GAMES
 - COMPUTER GAMES HAVE NO-ONE TO LOOK DOWN ON...
 - **CAN'T** INCLUDE COMPUTER GAMES STAFF IN THEIR **RESEARCH** ASSESSMENT SUBMISSIONS
 - NO FIRST CLASS GAMES-SPECIFIC **JOURNALS**
 - SEE **NO MONEY** IN COMPUTER GAME RESEARCH
 - BECAUSE THERE **IS** NONE!

CONSEQUENCES

- NONE OF THIS WOULD MATTER IF IT WERE WITHOUT **CONSEQUENCES**
 - HOWEVER, THERE **ARE** CONSEQUENCES
- MODERN UNIVERSITIES HAVE A TRADITION OF **TRAINING**
- OLDER UNIVERSITIES HAVE A TRADITION OF **RESEARCH AND EDUCATION**
- THIS DIFFERENCE IS **IMPORTANT**

MORE EGGS FROM YOUR HENS

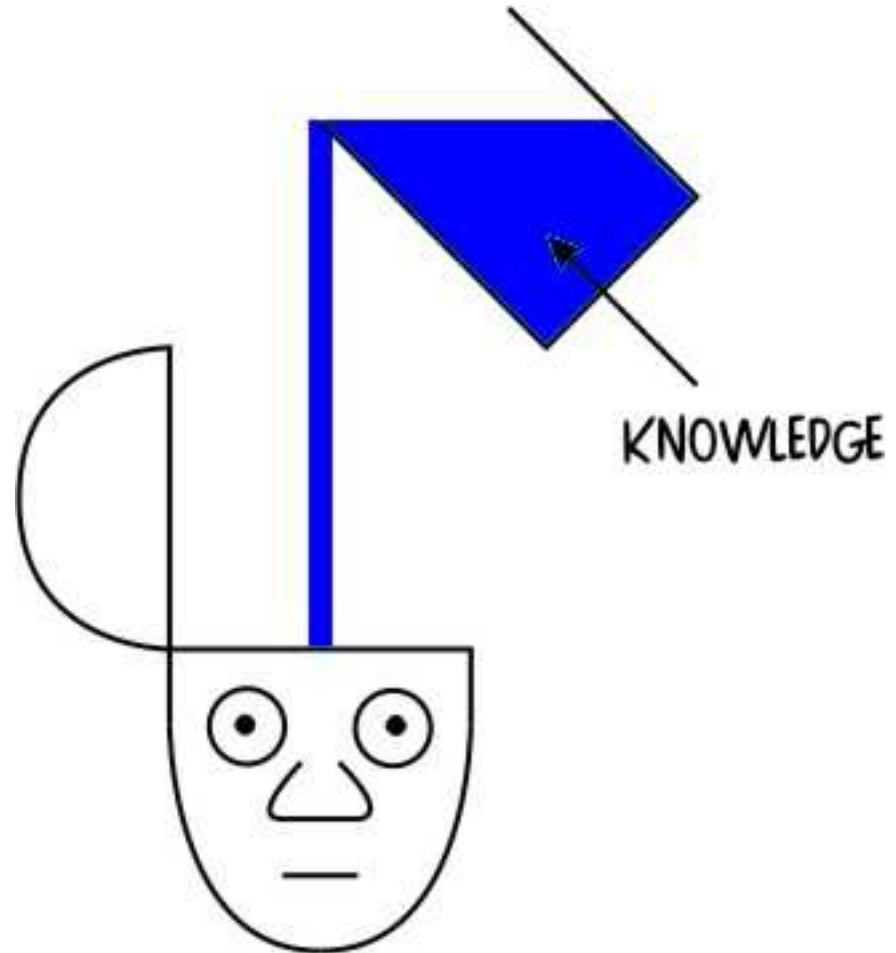


DIFFERENCE

- **TRAINING:** ACQUISITION OF SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE AS A RESULT OF BEING **TAUGHT**
 - OFTEN FOCUSED FOR A PARTICULAR **VOCATION**
- **EDUCATION:** ACQUISITION OF SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE AS A RESULT OF **LEARNING**
 - AIMS FOR A MORE ROUNDED, **THINK-FOR-YOURSELF** IDEAL.
- DIFFERENCE BETWEEN EDUCATION AND TRAINING WAS BEST SUMMED UP BY **PLUTARCH**

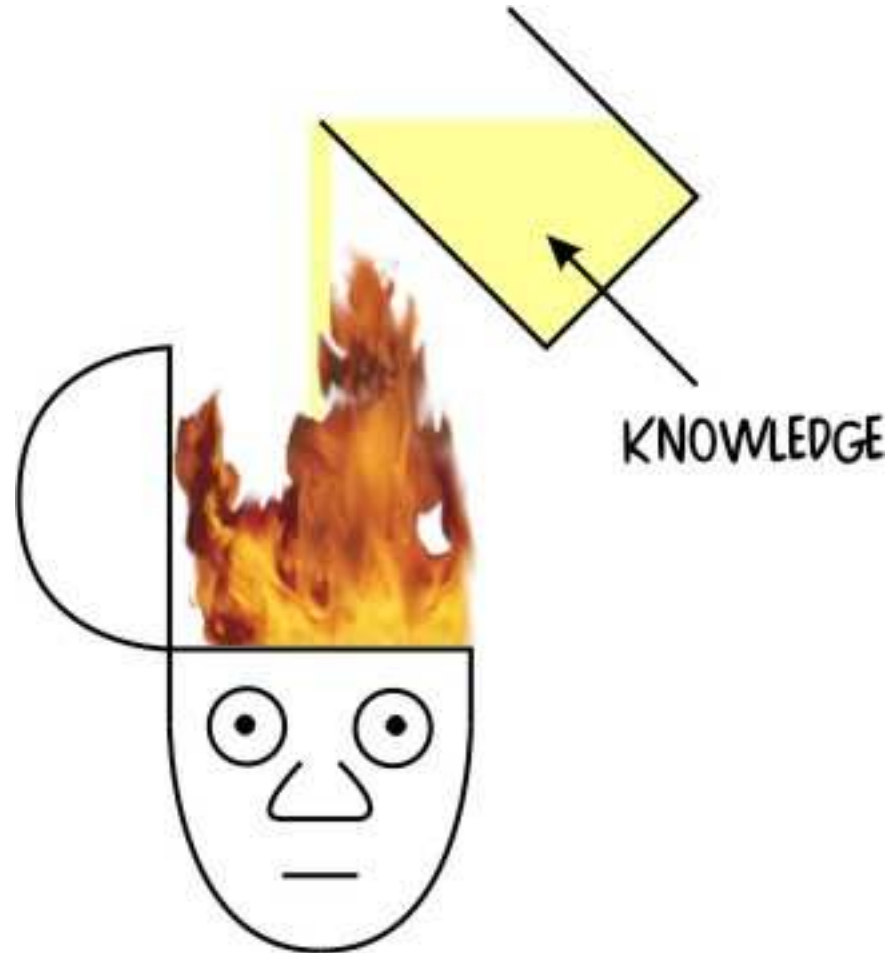
TRAINING

- VESSEL TO BE FILLED



EDUCATION

- FIRE TO BE KINDLED



PROBLEM

- BECAUSE THE MODERN UNIVERSITIES ARE **DOING THEIR JOB**, WE'RE GETTING PLENTY OF **TRAINED** PEOPLE FOR THE GAMES INDUSTRY
- BECAUSE THE OLDER UNIVERSITIES **AREN'T DOING THEIRS**, WE'RE GETTING TOO FEW **EDUCATED** PEOPLE
- **INDUSTRY** ISN'T HELPING, **EITHER**
 - IF YOU WANT **EDUCATED** APPLICANTS, DON'T CREATE AN ENTIRELY **SKILL**-ORIENTED KITEMARK LIKE THE **SKILLSET** ONE

RESEARCH

- EDUCATION HAS TO BE **RESEARCH-LED**
 - TRAINING HAS TO **FOLLOW** RESEARCH, BUT AT A MORE **LEISURELY** PACE
- SO, HOW MUCH **MONEY** IS THERE AVAILABLE **EACH** YEAR FROM THE HIGHER EDUCATION **FUNDING** AGENCIES FOR RESEARCHING **COMPUTER GAMES** IN THE UK?
- EXACT FIGURE: **£0**

GAMES AS...

- NOW THIS MAY COME AS A **SURPRISE** TO SOME PEOPLE
 - HASN'T THE GOVERNMENT BEEN SUPPORTING **SERIOUS GAMES** FOR A **DECADE**?
- YES, BUT THIS ISN'T **GAMES** RESEARCH, IT'S **GAMES AS EDUCATION** RESEARCH
- WE **ALSO** SEE GAMES AS: AI, ECONOMICS, PSYCHOLOGY, SOCIOLOGY, THERAPY, TRAINING, ...
- WE SEE THEM AS **EVERYTHING** EXCEPT **GAMES AS GAMES!**

REMEMBER THIS?

Online gamers play at swapping gender

Millions of internet users are using computer games to perform virtual sex changes, according to research. A study of online gamers by psychologists at Nottingham Trent University found that a majority of them had switched gender while playing. The research, in which 125 players of complex computer games were questioned, found that women were more likely to switch their gender. Up to 70% of female players said they chose to use male identities for internet games, in which they are able to design their own characters with any race, gender or appearance.

Bobbie Johnson

MARCH 2008

THIS LED TO...

- NEXT DAY



Sexual harassment is rife online. No wonder women swap gender

Female gamers are used to putting up with sexist claptrap – both from the companies that design games and other players. So a study by psychologists at Nottingham Trent University showing that 70% of them chose to construct male characters when given the option by online games, should come as no surprise.

Anyone who has played video games with any regularity will know that character design is one of those areas where gender stereotypes run riot. Most pre-packaged characters are white, male and buff. Female characters are few and far between, and when they do appear they are usually highly sexualised or passive, or both. Game architects just don't seem to be able to look beyond those pneumatic breasts.

But the study focused on role-playing games where you get to choose everything about your

avatar, including age, shape, ethnicity and gender. Given limitless possibilities, why would women choose to change their sex in far greater numbers than men opting to play women?

As the psychologists suggest, one reason could be the sexism and sexual harassment to which women are subjected online. A cursory glance at the comments under almost any YouTube video featuring a woman demonstrates that just being female is enough to draw a vicious response from a stream of misogynist and anonymous commenters. Technology blogger Kathy Sierra abandoned her website after the harassment directed towards her escalated to unbearable levels. When Second Life millionaire Ailin Graef appeared on a chat show in the virtual world to discuss her success on the platform – which is more 3D chatroom than game – her character was swarmed by flying pink penises (the attack was arranged by “griefers” –

users who spend all their time harassing others).

Then you have the “tits or GTFO” internet trend, whereby new posters on message boards who identify themselves as female are requested to post photos of their breasts or “get the fuck off”. When it comes to multiplayer games, such as World of Warcraft, women must also face down a whole set of assumptions about their ability to play. Or they could just sidestep all this and construct male characters and avatars.

But let's not forget that, just like TV or film, gaming is a form of escapism. What does it signify if I chose to play a male elf instead of a female elf? We live in a society that rigidly polices our gender expression – in some ways, what is interesting is not that so many gamers chose to play characters of another gender, but the surprised reaction such virtual experimentation produces.

Jess McCabe

IN FACT...

- **40%** OF MEN SWAP GENDER WHILE PLAYING, BUT ONLY **5%** OF WOMEN DO
 - AND **GENDER STUDIES** RESEARCHERS LOOKING AT THIS IN THE **LATE 1990S** FIGURED OUT **WHY**, TOO
- BOTH GENDERS EXPLAIN THEIR ACTIONS IN TERMS THAT PROTECT THEIR **SEXUALITY**, BUT THEY **LIE**
 - WHICH WE **KNOW** BECAUSE THAT 40% FIGURE WAS TRUE WHEN MMORPGS WERE **TEXT-ONLY**
- WOMEN CONSISTENTLY **OVER-REPORT** HOW LONG THEY PLAY MMORPGS
- PLUS THE SIZE, SELECTION AND VERIFICATION OF THE SURVEY **SUCKS**

SAD

- THE MODERN UNIVERSITIES ARE **TRYING** TO STEP INTO THE BREACH HERE, BUT THEY'RE NOT **EQUIPPED**
- WE NEED **RESEARCH**-ORIENTED UNIVERSITIES TO STUDY GAMES
- AS A UNIVERSITY SYSTEM, WE'RE INVESTING MONEY IN TEACHING PEOPLE HOW TO **WRITE** GAMES, BUT NONE WHATSOEVER ON CONSIDERING WHAT GAMES **ACTUALLY ARE!**
- WHAT **MAKES** A GOOD GAME? WHAT MAKES A GOOD GAME **DESIGN**? WHAT **LINKS** THE TWO? **WHY** ARE THEY LINKED? WHAT **THEORIES** CAN WE CONSTRUCT THAT WILL IMPROVE **BOTH**?

LONDON CAN TAKE IT



MEANWHILE, IN THE 1940S

- DURING WORLD WAR 2, THE **CROWN FILM UNIT** CHURNED OUT OVER **300** FILMS
 - **ALL** OF THEM WERE DOCUMENTARIES
 - GENERALLY, PRETTY GOOD ONES!
- THE THING IS, THOUGH, THEY **WERE** DOCUMENTARIES
- ALTHOUGH **SOME** WERE ENTERTAINING, THEY WEREN'T **ABOUT** ENTERTAINMENT
 - THEY WERE ABOUT CONVEYING **INFORMATION**
- THE GOVERNMENT ONLY FUNDED **SERIOUS** FILMS
 - ENTERTAINMENT WAS TOO **LOW BROW** TO MERIT ANY PUBLIC FUNDING

65 YEARS LATER

- **GAMES** TODAY, LIKE **FILMS** 65 YEARS AGO, NEED TO BE "SERIOUS" TO ATTRACT FUNDING
- YET WHERE IS THE BRITISH FILM INDUSTRY AS A **RESULT** OF OUR 1940S SERIOUSNESS?
 - WELL, OUR TV DOCUMENTARIES ARE OFTEN **SUPERB...**
- HOLLYWOOD CAME AND **ATE OUR LUNCH**
- WHERE WILL THE **GAMES** INDUSTRY BE IF THE ONLY PUBLIC MONEY AVAILABLE IS FOR GAMES-**AS-ANYTHING-BUT-GAMES?**

RANT OVER

- **NONE** OF THIS IS OF **ANY** INTEREST TO FUNDING BODIES OR RESEARCH DEPARTMENTS
- IT WILL BE **20 YEARS** BEFORE TODAY'S GAME-PLAYING **STUDENTS** BECOME TOMORROW'S GAME-PLAYING **PROFESSORS**
 - BY THEN IT WILL BE TOO **LATE**
- UNLESS, JUST **MAYBE**, THE FUTURE REALITY OF THE **ECONOMICS** WILL **OUTWEIGH** INSTITUTIONAL **DISTASTE** FOR POPULAR FORMS OF ENTERTAINMENT?
- I CAN BUT **HOPE...!**