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Reproducing the machine
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In 2002 I became part of the working group that would eventually create the Digital Games Research Association, an international organization dedicated to advancing the study of digital games across multiple disciplines. We talked about our focus and goals, we created bylaws and an organizational structure, and we started a mailing list to facilitate communication among the growing number of scholars interested in taking games seriously as an object of study. Our first conference was held a year later, in Utrecht, the Netherlands, and was a great success. The organization has continued to hold conferences every other year, which have become one of the key places to hear the latest in digital games research.

Shortly before we began our work, Espen Aarseth declared 2001 "year one" for computer game studies, with the launch of the online journal *Game Studies.* It also insisted on a cross-disciplinary approach, and aimed to focus on the "aesthetic, cultural and communicative aspects of computer games." The journal was also (and remains) open source, encouraging the free exchange of ideas and debate in this growing field.

Over the next few years, more game-related conferences sprang up, including the State of Play series, Foundations of Digital Games, Jason Rutter's early ESRC-funded conferences in Manchester, and cross-collaborations with industry such as FuturePlay and the academic summits at the Game Developers Conference. Likewise we saw the emergence of more journals, both print and online. Sage began publishing *Games and Culture,* and presses such as MIT Press, Routledge and Sage started publishing in the area, developing impressive lineups of books dedicated to structuralist, ethnographic, humanities and other approaches to studying games and game culture. Colleges and universities such as the IT University of Copenhagen and the Georgia Institute of Technology began offering degrees in game studies and game design, both at the graduate and undergraduate level. Specialized academic jobs in our field began to emerge, and we have begun to discuss curricular matters, industry relations, and the emergence of a canon for our work.

Over the past decade, the growth and establishment of the field of game studies has been phenomenal. And just as amazing has been the re-establishment of an apparatus that disciplines and controls that growth. As we've been growing and developing, a few ideas have guided that formation. We've been determined to establish systems that ensure quality, and we've striven to establish credibility for the field, as an area of inquiry worthy of continued study. Yet we need to continue that questioning, and ask ourselves, is this what we really want game studies to be?

Game studies has much to be proud of, in its short tenure as a field. In the arena of publishing there are a number of venues available, most of which accept a wide variety of work. Of particular note are the open source journals, including those both devoted exclusively to game studies as well as those welcoming to several related

areas. They include *Eludamos,* the *Journal of Virtual Worlds Research, First Monday,* the *International Journal of Role-Playing,* and of course *Game Studies.*

Likewise, book publishers have been welcoming of this new scholarly area, helping to further define and expand its reach through their publishing agendas, giving the field added credibility for its efforts.

Beyond DiGRA, the field has seen the formation of the Canadian Game Studies Association, as well as ad hoc groups of researchers interested in topical areas coming together. Likewise, major disciplinary associations have established divisions, interest groups, and seen a general rise in game-studies related papers in their conferences and journals, including the International Communication Association, Association of Internet Researchers, the Society for the Social Study of Science, and the American Educational Research Association, among many others.

Based on that proliferation there's been a concomitant drive to specialize, already well under way. We can already see the emergence of separate venues, literature reviews, and research agendas forming for seemingly disparate areas such as the study of virtual worlds, MMOGs, serious games, industry studies, and the like. Even areas that once started as seemingly narrow, such as serious games, have refined themselves further, as we see separate conferences, journals and literatures emerge for 'games for health,' 'games for change' and educational games. As evidence of our dynamic history we even have a debate that 'never took place,' between narratology and ludology (I'll go on record that I thought it did).

All of this activity has served several purposes, in addition to establishing a field. First, it has worked to legitimate us, our work, and our interests. We might still be the "odd one" in the department who plays videogames but at least we can point to peer-reviewed journals and international conferences as indicators that our work meets rigorous standards of quality.

Our actions have also arisen, in part, to expand what early researchers saw as an overly narrow focus on effects, and go beyond social scientific approaches drawn mainly from psychology to determine how games affect young players. Researchers wanted to widen the field of inquiry, asking new questions, trying new methods. Of course this ignited further debates—was the study of games something unique? Could the use of old(er) theories and methods—those drawn from other disciplines, be helpful? Like it or not, they have been used, adapted, and expanded. Some are very useful, others needed modification. The need to 'break free' was not universally heeded, and game studies is probably stronger for that, existing as it does in many spaces, across disciplines and departments, fields and modes of inquiry.

Another important claim game studies made, which seems antiquated now, was the belief that researchers should play the games they studied, or at least play games generally. Although it sounds simplistic, many early researchers didn't play the games they used in studies, and this led to research that missed the mark. Would we accept a film studies scholar that doesn't watch movies? Why would a game studies researcher that couldn't find time to play be any more excusable?

But, in all of our success and advancement, we've also managed to create hierarchies, apparatuses, machines of control. Some of it is perhaps necessary, but

we need to ask—what is it that we want to be? Is this it? If so, we're already there. But I'd urge us to look deeper at what we have and ask if that's all we really aspire to.

We have our conferences, just like any academic field or discipline. Sometimes people read their papers, mostly they don't. Yet we can often access the papers ahead of time, or shortly after the conference, online or via a CD. We present those papers in sessions, or as part of panels. Sometimes we go crazy and have a roundtable—how revolutionary. Is that really all there is to an academic conference? We may need some sort of presentation to justify funding from our academic institutions, but perhaps those ideas and research activities could serve as the beginning point for conference activities, rather than as sterile displays of knowledge or fact finding. It's up to us to try new approaches, and reconsider our models for what counts as a successful gathering of game studies researchers.

Some of us have tried to shake things up—Ted Castronova's Ludium gatherings always begin with a game as the central activity, which are then tied to some policy making or scholarly initiative. The Games, Learning and Society conferences in Madison, Wisconsin have tried alternative formats including Fireside Chats and Chat 'n' Frag sessions, attempting to break out of the PowerPoint monotony. Yet those efforts remain isolated, the exception rather than the rule. Is the model of a person reading or presenting the highlights of their paper in 15 minutes, person after person, the best use of our time? Don't we always have the best conversations in the spaces in between sessions anyway? We're smart people- can't we think of another way to do this? Our conferences aren't that old—it wouldn't be that painful to change them.

Likewise, our journals are quite similar to the journals you'd find in any other emerging discipline. Can we think beyond peer-reviewed articles in a linear format, and perhaps the occasional book review, think piece or interview? Are we serious about attempting more collaborations with the industry –when it's appropriate—and what might that look like? How might that fit into our publishing or research agenda? We've been careful to argue for 'quality' in our research, but what does that mean, beyond an insistence that researchers must be familiar with games (i.e. play them)? And beyond that, are we all defining quality research in the same way? Is quality research in game studies the same as quality research elsewhere? Perhaps we should be using our journals, our blogs, our conferences, to have more of these meta-level discussions. Being explicit in our goals now allows us to consciously set the agenda for the future, rather than seeing it emerge passively, as an accretion of practices.

Now is the time to think through our routines, to question if we want those to *be* our routines, before we forget that they could be something else. Even our newly formed academic units, at our home institutions, are ripe for analysis, as the global economy forces colleges and universities to reorganize and perhaps rethink our central mission. What do we want game studies to be? We've been very good at creating an apparatus that legitimates our work and allows for the exchange of ideas, but we need to question how we can make that system better. We are the ones who have shaped the field, and we must ask, what else must we be doing to push it forward, into our imagined future.