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Glowing Rhinos Out in the Wilds: Jumping into Digital Games Studies

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I stood in front of a see-through glowing neon green rhino with a group of interesting people deep in conversation. Suzanne de Castell described reasons the Digital Games Research Association’s (DiGRA) [1] chose a rhino as the mascot for the 2005 International DiGRA Conference in Vancouver, B.C. It’s an animal that playfully hides in the wilds, but when placed in a zoo, sticks out despite the scenery. By analogy, when digital games studies try to hide under the guise of different departments, they stand out in a playful but awkward way.

As the variety of presenters at the 2005 International DiGRA Conference proved, digital games studies naturally lends itself to interdisciplinary perspectives about the processes and outcomes of studying digital games. As research labs and programs dedicated specifically to the field of game studies increase in numbers, so do the rapidly rising opportunities for focused research. Whether you look at digital games through the eyes of narrative analysis or simulation analysis, academics should recognize that the two are converging as studies evolve. Courses and projects are housed in a variety of departments, including Anthropology, Art History, Cinema Studies, Communication, Comparative Media Studies, Computer Science, Consumer Science, Creative Industries, Education, History, Interactive Studies, Interdisciplinary Studies, Literature, Physics, Psychology, Sociology, and Telecommunications. No wonder the future seems schizophrenic.

Also consider the uncountable number of universities with an interest in courses and projects related to digital games across the globe. Included are Caledonian University, Carnegie Mellon, Concordia University, Delft University, Erasmus University of Rotterdam, Gotland University, Liverpool John Moores University, Malmo University, National Taiwan University, Ohio University, Royal Institute of Technology, University of British Columbia, University of Buenos Aires, University of Calgary, University of Iowa, University of Manchester, University of Minnesota, University of Oulu, University of Sunderland, University of Texas Austin, University of Washington, University of West of England, University of Western Ontario, University of Wisconsin, University of Waikato, Utrecht University, and York University. And that’s just naming a few, folks.
A major sponsor for the 2005 International DiGRA Conference, Simon Fraser University in Vancouver B.C., Canada, offers Bachelors, Masters, and Doctorates in Communication. The degrees emphasize mass communication and publishing as starting points to jump into aspects of gaming. Similar openness takes place at the University of Amsterdam’s Department of Communication, which emphasizes social and behavioral sciences.

In a completely different spectrum of the digital games field, the University of Manchester’s ESRC Centre for Research on Innovation & Competition, in conjunction with the Graduate School of Legal Economic and Social Studies, provides opportunities for research themes of consumption, innovation processes, and competition in games. Nearby, Sheffield Hallam University holds events to support academics, such as the seminar in September 2005, “DigiPlay 6: Moving Forwards in Digital Leisure Research,” which featured presentations about games as leisure and games as education. Similarly, the University of Southern California has events for students to create community and explore games studies through on-campus experiences.

Programs that are more explicit about digital games studies include Simon Fraser University’s degrees in Interactive Arts & Technology, Massachusetts Institute of Technology’s Masters of Science in Comparative Media Studies, and Georgia Institute of Technology’s Doctorate in Digital Media. The degrees combine research elements such as transmedia studies, artificial intelligence, and cultural studies.

Not only do digital games studies have programs showing off new research, but the field also has established and emerging centers and labs. The Center for Computer Games Research [2] at IT University of Copenhagen researches game aesthetics, game design, game spaces, game worlds, gaming cultures, and learning in games. The University of Tampere in Finland hosts a GameLab [3] as an extension of the Hypermedia Laboratory. University of Montreal’s Research Center for Intermediality Studies provides a community of research based in membership. The Centre for Learning Games [4], hosted in Denmark’s Learning Lab, explores concepts of education through games. Narrative perspectives of interactive games are studied through The Game Farm at Griffith University.

Reputable academic journals include Game Studies: International Journal of Computer Game Research [5] and Simulation & Gaming: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Theory, Practice, and Research [6]. Newer journals include Games and Culture [7], interactive media through SAGE Publications, which releases its first issue in January 2006, and the Journal of Game Education and Research [8], an international journal published by the International Association for Game Education and Research debuting in spring. Both are peer-reviewed and accepting submissions. Researchers can also find resources through sites such as Ludology.org: Videogame Theory [9]. While Game Studies emphasizes cross-disciplinary strategies to approaching the cultural, communicative, and aesthetic aspects of digital games and provides an opportunity for peer-reviewed academic publication, Simulation & Gaming serves as an academic scientific review to discuss issues relating to computerized simulation, gaming, and experiential learning. Games and Culture, as the name suggests, looks at games and culture within the context of interactive
media. The Journal of Game Education and Research covers game education, curriculum, and game education related research. Ludology.org focuses on open resources and connections between the various methods of publication and representation at conferences in game studies.

Although game studies is rapidly increasing its academic reputation and sources for publication, relevant discourse occurs in blogs and discussion forums, such as Grand Text Auto [10], Terra Nova [11], Academic Gamers [12], and Games * Design * Art * Culture [13]. These sites appeal to academics and researchers who want to discuss interdisciplinary approaches to game studies and to share resources.

The current buzz in game studies targets the cross-over between academic and industry research. DiGRA is at the forefront of the trend, partnering with the International Game Developers Association [14] at the 2005 International DiGRA Conference.

At the same time, specific communities are evolving in the diversified clusters of researchers and faculty in game studies. The International Game Journalists Association [15] serves specifically as the resource for journalists. The International Association for Game Education and Research (IAGER) [16] improves games education through curriculum development and educational research. IAGER’s first large scale conference on games education and research will occur in June 2006. The Serious Games Initiative [17] recently put on “Social Change through Digital Games,” the Second Annual Serious Games Summit. Now is the time to create new, unique communities that are bound to draw attention and membership.

Overall, academics striving to find a way to teach courses on digital games have a wide range of options. Although departments are frequently unaware of where to place digital games related courses, communities such as DiGRA and Academic Gamers encourage diverse faculty in a variety of departments to network and prove that digital games studies is a viable, important segment of academia. Only by joining together at conferences and over digital communication will the future of game studies develop coherently. The rhino trampling over the zoo walls wants to play.


The Digital Games Research Association is for academics and professionals who research digital games and associated phenomena. It encourages high-quality research on games, and promotes collaboration and dissemination of work by its members


The Center for Computer Games Research researches game aesthetics, game design, game spaces, game worlds, gaming cultures, and learning in games.

The Game Research Laboratory (GameLab) in the University of Tampere is a top facility for culturally and qualitatively oriented games research. It provides both traditional and experimental means for examining games and players, together with the various cultural, social, and psychological aspects that are important in wider contexts of gaming.


The Centre for Learning Games is a new research initiative that consists of DPU and Learning Lab Denmark’s game research and development projects. Through research and development, they examine the potential for using games in learning situations. The aim with the projects is to determine how games may support specific types of learning.


*Game Studies* is a cross-disciplinary journal dedicated to games research and focuses on aesthetic, cultural and communicative aspects of computer games.


*Simulation & Gaming: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Theory, Practice and Research* is the world’s foremost scientific review devoted to academic and applied issues in the increasingly popular methodology of simulation/gaming as used in education, training, consultation and research round the world.


*Games and Culture: A Journal of Interactive Media* aims to publish innovative theoretical and empirical research about games and culture within the context of interactive media. The journal serves as a premiere outlet for ground-breaking and germinal work in the field of game studies.


The *Journal of Game Education and Research* is a peer-reviewed international journal published by the International Association for Game Education and Research. It publishes the highest quality of writing on the topics of game education, curriculum, and game education related research.


*Ludology.org* is an online resource for video game researchers.


Grand Text Auto is a group blog about machine narrative, games, poetry, and art.
Terra Nova is a group blog exploring virtual worlds.

Academic Gamers is a group blog hosting semi-serious discussion of video games and video game criticism.

Games * Design * Art * Culture is a blog with community support for games and digital media.

The International Game Developers Association is a non-profit professional membership organization that advocates globally on issues related to digital game creation.

The International Game Journalists Association provides resource, community and education to an international group of journalists covering video games.

The International Association for Game Education and Research is a nonprofit member association dedication to promoting and improving games education through curriculum development, educational research, and shared resources.

The Serious Games Initiative is focused on uses for games in exploring management and leadership challenges facing the public sector. Part of its overall charter is to help forge productive links between the electronic game industry and projects involving the use of games in education, training, health, and public policy.

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