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The Indie Academy: Promoting Gaming Communities through University Collaboration

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Universities face significant pressures to commercialize and license intellectual property (IP). With declining or stagnant government funding, research offices and education ministries have looked to software licensing and technology transfer as possible avenues to make up these shortfalls. Governments also look to universities to be engines of innovation that create new IP and spin off companies. Such is the case with computer gaming research. There is a perception that there is tremendous potential to commercialize such research, particularly given the remarkable increase in gaming production budgets. This is a mistake. Universities need to be flexible and relinquish IP rights in order to engage the Indie development community in ways that benefit both universities and developers more directly. Aside from the fact that most university gaming IP is generally unsuitable for commercial gaming, the perception of potential misses the mark.

Instead, the most important technology transfer produced at universities in gaming related fields are the students who graduate from the programs. Promoting and fostering a vibrant Indie gaming community is one path universities may take to improve the learning outcomes of these students, resulting in significant secondary benefits. As described in the SSHRC report entitled, "Computer Games and Canada's Digital Economy: The Role of Universities in Promoting Innovation," there are three particular barriers to university-industry collaboration: intellectual property, research and teaching mismatch, and different timelines and pace (2010)[1]. Continuing with IP, even if significant goodwill exists between game developers at big studios and a local university, the developers rarely have the decision making power to work more intimately with students and professors. As the approval for IP agreements goes up the chain of command, through studio managers and the legal department, the vision for building a long-term relationship gets lost in the need for shorter-term commercialization. In the game industry, this varies somewhere between one-and-a-half to three years. While many may see the need and the vision, the mismatch in timelines and pace between industry and universities sees such efforts languish, or more likely, never get off the ground.

Differences in pace and approvals still remain when universities engage the independent game development community, although the scope of these tensions changes. Engaging with the Indie community when still bound by the traditional IP and partnership restrictions, for example, will fail – miserably. Rather than securing formal IP memoranda, universities need to foster an Indie community on campus that requires flexibility and openness. Let's be blunt: the chance that a game produced in conjunction with a university-sponsored event will become the next *Angry Birds* is vanishingly small. If lucky, such a game may sell a few thousand copies, perhaps even a few tens of thousands. Neither result will generate significant revenue for the university; strict IP partnerships throttle the potential for grass roots innovation. In the language of game studies,

universities need to be open to emergent gameplay in such a relationship, rather than prescriptive contracts and denoted agreements.

Perhaps counter-intuitively, Indie developer communities may be better positioned (or at least differently positioned) to promote university-produced IP in areas not addressed by larger game companies. As intimated to me by a senior game designer at a large studio in Montreal, few would have predicted the market viability of retro gaming—"could we identify a business opportunity predicting that people miss dorky 8 bit games? Unlikely because it doesn't really utilize the image the big companies have built, but we might see more of this kind of thing." Certainly, big game companies have attempted to capitalize on the Indie movement through the creation of pseudo-indie divisions to create retro games that will not affect the brand of their AAA titles. Our point is that Indie studios and developers may be much more willing to risk developing IP produced at a university. In exchange, university IP gets distributed and tested in a complete working game, which is essential to broader adoption. When universities are open and flexible, they are more likely to see their IP extended, transformed, tested, credited, and reported.

Furthermore, industry seems to be pulling back from formal sponsorship of university-level gaming curriculum, despite the need for students with such skills. Experiments like the Ubisoft campus in Montreal, for example, met with limited success, with the venture closing in 2010. As a senior game developer stated about that experience, "with the economy the way it is, I cannot see a time in the near future when a private company will be investing in building a school to teach students who will benefit their competitors." That same developer highlighted the tension in such a position, noting that "we want universities to be training the students but we also want them to stay on the same track as industry to make sure that the students are being trained in a way that is relevant to the industry now." So, if doors to university collaboration with industry are closing with larger partners, at least temporarily, opportunities exist to build relationships with partners who may benefit significantly from what universities have to offer.

Two cautions shape such an offer. First, each university's ability to deliver on these areas depends on the extent to which faculties and professors have invested in games research and wrapped their curriculum in a computer game envelope. There may not be a critical mass of games research to ensure the long-term stability of such collaborations, and half-measures and poor follow-through will destroy future working relationships. Second, researchers too often assume they know what communities need, rather than talking with said communities about their needs (see Harvey and Fisher in this issue). The following four university resources are offered as a starting point for engaging with the Independent developers. Each community of scholars and researchers would need to ensure a commonality of needs and resources.

- Meeting Space: Even a cursory scroll through discussion forums for independent game designers, such as TIGJam, makes apparent the desperate need for space for meetings, ideation, and development. Universities have space in droves, particularly after hours and on weekends. Hosting a game jam or technology lecture is a low risk event that can produce remarkable good will.

- Computing facilities: Universities have this in spades, particularly universities that have developed a gaming curriculum. Student demand for these labs is

significant, but it is also cyclical – heavily used in the last few months of term and remarkably under used during summer months and on most weekends.

- Training and mentorship: The last point depends most significantly on how much a particular university has wrapped its curriculum in a gaming envelope. Most offer courses, many offer certificates, a few offer full degrees (see SSHRC Report, Appendix B). The University of Alberta, for example, has a Certificate in Computer Game Development, where students build a portfolio of complete games in teams across eight courses. These students, most of whom are members of the university's various gaming clubs, are also aspiring indie developers.

- Professional and entrepreneurial advice: Business faculties, career advancement offices, and technology transfer offices can offer assistance and advice to members of the Indie community, especially if they happen to be students. This assistance could have a higher direct cost than the first three.

- Networking: Universities are large organizations that engage with many sectors. Universities therefore can bring people together with others. They don't just provide the space for meetings, but also the contacts with other professionals that Indie developers need.

The creation of such ludic development spaces on campus will help develop and promote a vibrant independent game community. This should be sufficient motivation for action – the learning outcome for hosting a game jam is the game jam itself. However, in providing such resources, universities will meet longer-term curriculum and enrollment goals, including the following:

- Relevant curriculum: A common criticism of game studies at universities is that it both the curriculum and the professors are out of date. Teaching in the game industry is often considered a "give up option" and that "There is a lot less you can take out for immediate use from teachers who have been out of the industry for a while." Keeping faculty in constant contact with the development community can help them stay current.

- Increased enrollment: Passionate young game designers (and many industry veterans) do not see universities as the most useful proving ground for learning the art and design of video games. Building ties with the Indie community may prompt young developers to pursue a university education.

- Learning outcomes: In juxtaposition to the above point, many existing students are aspiring game developers. Promoting a vibrant gaming community within the university can inspire such students and improve their learning experience.

- Industry outreach: Indie developers often work concurrently in larger game companies. Many move back and forth between larger companies and their own

> development projects, depending on where in the game development cycle they find themselves in their own work or in the larger company. Universities that engage with Indie developers thus engage with people who move through the industry and therefore are capable of representing a breadth of experience.

Such efforts are unlikely to produce the next BioWare, but such goals are likely to fail regardless of activities undertaken to protect IP. Instead, steps that engage Indies with a flexible IP policy may promote the development of small and medium enterprises. This is particularly true for universities in smaller cities that may have few if any large game developers. Edmonton, for example, has BioWare, which employs a significant number of University of Alberta graduates. No vibrant network of small developers and independent studios have sprung up around BioWare. Few acorns have dropped from the tree. The reasons for this are complicated and include factors such as the size of the city, provincial tax credits, and critical mass of gaming talent. The university could, however, help tend this garden, creating a vibrant creative and intellectual space for game design and entrepreneurship.

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[1] http://ra.tapor.ualberta.ca/%7Ecirca/wp-content/uploads/2010/03/ComputerGamesAndCanadasDigitalEconomy1.pdf