

Majoring in Video Game Design

Off to college to major in ... video games?

'Video game studies' may sound oxymoronic, but academia is beginning to take it seriously.

By Mark Clayton

Always pressing forward to new intellectual frontiers, American higher education is now **probing** an academic **realm** sure to produce the words that will thrill parents: "Mom, Dad, I've decided to major in video games!"

That's right. Mario, Luigi, and their **compatriots** from the world of PlayStation and Xbox - who for years have been familiar faces of student dorm life - are jumping to the next level in higher education: the classroom.

Long the **bane** of professors who'd rather students do less game-console thumb-clicking and more schoolwork, video games are entering the curriculum and the realm of academic research - to the cheers of some and the boos of others.

Indeed, "**video game studies**" is an **oxymoron** to many faculty. As a result, the **study of video games** - in computer science, art, and sociology - is often cloaked in **euphemisms** such as "**interactive media**" or "**digital arts**".

"I call it 'the medium that dare not speak its name,' " says Celia Pearce of the Game Culture & Tech Lab at the University of California at Irvine. "Nobody wants to call it 'games,' so they call it something ... acceptable for the academic palate.

"Recently, though, video games seem to be gaining academic stature - perhaps enough to dispense with the euphemisms.

This fall, Southern Methodist University in Dallas will enroll 32 students in its new 18-month master's level **certificate program in video-game design**. Shawnee State University in Portsmouth, Ohio, is offering for the first time a full-blown **undergraduate major in "game and simulation arts"** as part of its bachelor of fine arts degree program.

A few big-name universities are toying with the serious side of **video games**. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the Georgia Institute of Technology, and Carnegie Mellon University offer curricula on video-game criticism, games as educational tools, and **game design**.

Georgia Institute of Technology started a PhD **program in digital media** and a master's in information design and technology, in which many students are **pursuing video-game design**.

Not everyone buys the idea. Adding video games to the curriculum is merely **pandering** to students and will lead to an "intellectual devolution," says Edward Smith, director of American Studies at American University.

"It's just another concession to the customer," he says. "Kids have grown up playing Nintendo. They don't read because they don't know how to read - they don't cultivate the imagination.... They need to be put through the intellectual rigors of a traditional format for education. Video games are just an easy way to avoid it."

People who teach **video-game studies** know it'll be a challenge to prove the validity of their field.

"There's a generational divide," says James Paul Gee, an education professor and author of "What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy." "Students ... see [games] as connected to society. But baby-boom faculty ... tend to be opposed or see them as **trivial**. They don't realize how closely tied [games] are to computer simulations used to model environments of all kinds."

At a **video-game study** room not far from Dr. Gee's office, students play and analyze the appeal and design of games such as "Grand Theft Auto" and "Everquest." "I'm interested in how games use learning principles," Gee says. "Think about it. Your standard computer game can take 50 hours to play. Imagine if a student loved spending 50 hours learning a language. We have a lot to learn from video games."

He predicts that video-game research will grow as colleges hire a new generation of professors who grew up playing video games.

The games seem to be catching the attention of serious academic researchers. Online academic journals like **Game Studies** solicit erudite-sounding treatises such as "Interaction Forms and Communicative Actions in Multi Player Games." or "Computer Games as a Part of Children's Culture." The Chronicle of Higher Education this week hosted an online debate over the merits of video games as teaching tools.

More such research will boom, says Janet Murray at Georgia Tech's School of Literature, Communication, and Culture. "There is this critical need for the **game designers** of the future to be **broadly** educated in the liberal arts," she says. "It's not surprising that several people working in **game design** at higher levels hold degrees in film."

The video-game industry is eager for higher education to respond, foreseeing huge demand for talented workers. " 'Mario' has made twice the revenue of all the 'Star Wars' movies combined, so it would seem to me that academia should absolutely be engaged in this area," says UC Irvine's Dr. Pearce.

The "image problem" for academia has **abated**, even in the past five years, says Jason Della Rocca of the International Game Developers Association. More than 200 people came to an academic conference IGDA hosted last year.

For Todd Booth, though, it's all about the game. A fine-arts graduate of Oregon State University, he is newly enrolled in SMU's **video-game design program**. Bored in high school, he says he wants to create educational software as entertaining and compelling as the multiplayer online games he played in college.

"We'd be playing 'Starcraft,' you know, and you'd have your dorm-room door open, and someone would yell, 'Ah, you just smashed my station,' " he says. "We'd be battling into the wee hours of the morning. Well, I really think education software could be that much fun. It just hasn't been very successful yet."

Please complete the following after you have read the above article:

- 1) Define the words that are underlined and shaded.

- 2) What side of the fence do you sit on? Do you believe that these are legitimate fields to study? Or do you think it is a waste of time and just a cash grab by the schools that offer it?