The Playful is Political: A fishbowl conversation on Identity and diversity in game culture

DiGRA 2014

Superior A, 2:30pm

Please add your notes from the fishbowl discussion below!

Adrienne and Shira intro the fishbowl format, then first fish(es?) talk

Mia: gender and games has always been an issue

-I thought we were taking group notes?

TL: We’ve come a ways since 10 years ago. e.g. we have moved beyond an unarticulated imagined player to actually look at actual players, contexts, practices, we don’t conflate women and girls so much anymore. We’ve made some inroads but are just starting to talk about gender and masculinity and men, not just women. We now have more nuanced conversations. We spent a lot of time early on just getting basics on the table. Exciting that we can now talk about intersectionality at game (studies?) conferences.

Chris: we have a good critical mass now where we can present a unified voice in helping new scholars get caught up… supportive, rather than just dismissed

Mia: I can count in both hands the number of solid papers on race and video games

TL: I could of done more early on but there were so many battles to flight

Chris: There are countries represented in north america and europe

Florence: It’s hard to be “the diversity”, it’s important to be acknowledged for what you do. Make a leap to cite someone more marginal. Remember the impact keynote selection has.

Florence: Who gets invited to key notes and the politics of citation is very important. You can’t just think about the bodies of the people doing work, also have to look at the work being done. We have the chance to include older voices that were saying important things before.

Mia: Reconsider graduate education

Hanli: Those not in NA/Western Europe are often financially limited in their ability to attend a conference like DiGRA. It can cost a whole lot of money to come, which means the cost eliminates the ability to attend and present/share work.

Adrienne: What can we do to make things better?

Mia: Regional chapters can help make things more affordable and start a critical mass in a different area in a manner that saves money and time.

Jorge: Universities access is needed to get peer reviewed research, but authors can put their information up for free online.

Shira: Is access just about physical things or is it also about what we’re talking about?

Hanli: It’s not just about people inside and outside academia, it’s also about the questions that become important in the situations where you are doing your research and teaching. It’s hard to teach work that comes from an extreme central view to the margin. Learning and knowledge systems in different parts of the world grow differently. How can you teach to indigenous populations? How can you reach teach outside of the center?

Hanli: There are different knowledge systems that are not acknowledged in game studies

Jorge: Jargon in older psychology work limited the potential audience for work. Newer work is predicated on reaching a larger audience.

Zoya: There can be hostility toward jargon, but writing in an inviting way can draw people inn. There is a lot of interest in academic work, but it is important to be transparent and critically examine what specific terms mean. We’re lucky in game studies that so many resources are freely available online. A curious mind can step in.

Mia: we need to rethink grad education and the dissertation. A diss doesn’t teach you how to talk to people. Is it the best way of showing that you’ve mastered research?

Adrienne: How has feminist game studies influenced developers and games? Where’s the impact outside of academia?

Deirdra (Squinky): Comes from a people who makes stuff field and newer to the academic side of things. Feminist game studies influences my work in a personal/experiential kind of way. Some of the most interesting work being done in games is by people who aren’t of an academic background and who are speaking from a personal experience to explore systems. Twine is a fascinating way to do this.

Zoya: There was a moment in the keynote that sounded like zinester work wasn’t proceduralist. Could be overdetermined by previous knowledge, but queer feminist work is often the most proceduralist because it’s focused on systems.

Deirdra: Queer feminist work can make the system more visible to people because it is critiquing the system and focuses on how the system works.

Andrew: Large divide between industry and academia. Great conversations here, but those conversations do not occur outside of a group like this. What can we do to bridge this? What about when being published on Kotaku is a bad thing, rather than a positive signal boosting thing?

Emily: One of the important contributions of feminist work is informal learning, safe spaces where people can play around and learn how to make things. Without great mentoring and support by a feminist scholar early on the work couldn’t be taken to a new community in Wales.

Adrienne: Why do we see such tension between academics and game designers? less of an issue with indies, but there are always some people in industry that have similar questions until industrial logic takes over later and how can we better intervene in industrial logics to disturb that process. How can academics bridge the gap to the industry audience to help them do different work? How can we disrupt the capitalist norms that facilitate this?

Deirdra: This is a hard, personal issue. Getting attacked or having friends getting attacked hurts. It’s hard not to feel personally attacked and to get to an academic spot where you take the personal out of it.

Andrew: Feels quite viscerally injured when someone like Samantha Allen is lost to the industry because the reaction to her by some gamers was so violent that it didn’t make sense to stay. Academia needs to push for more radical positions within the industry to help make things better.

Emily: Part of it is about education. Can we help make more informed consumers?

Casey: The people pushing for these dialogues are faculty or industry folks that are asking people to talk about things in different ways. How can we invite industry folks into classes to help encourage people to think in different ways? Can we help both students and industry get better? Learn and run or learn and stay? Staying helps us change things more. Gamasutra will shut down negative conversation at least in part because they’ve had their awareness raised by academics.

Chris: We have to think about our obligation and the structures of our production and how we limit what counts and how quickly things can be done.

Kelly: We need to get our house in order first within game studies, stop writing nasty reviews,

Meghan: You can’t do one thing first, there is much work to be done into many fronts. And, you kind of have to do all the things at the same time.

Aaron: Peer review and publishing models. The corruption of the peer review system is problematic. The reliance of peer review to get tenure and a job impacts us and slows us down.

TL: One good thing peer review can do is that it can push people to historicize and put things into context and address to the politics of citation. In the best sense, there’s a collectiveness to the mode of review that we can lean on.

Mia: One benefit of peer review is that work can be critiqued in a way that we might not do to a person’s face in a manner that drives our work to be better. The way the system values peer review is bullshit, as the money accrues in the hands of private corporations. How can we do the work and have it benefit us?

Aaron: Background in scholarly blogging, which can work as a good model for scholarly practice as long as it’s well curated and executed. The ton of work that isn’t legitimized through the current system.

Shira: Publishing online sounds fantastic until you have to put together your CV and show value.

Meghan: FPS as a middle-state publishing venture to curate and review articles to highlight good work without peer review and run on a volunteer basis. People are especially vulnerable when they are new or a grad student. It’s a bad question to put someone in a place between volunteering time for an important project or doing something that helps advance your career. Share the things that aren’t showing up in journals.

Adrienne: Not all of us are in stable employment systems, we’re not all in a position to turn down traditional peer review. However, those in positions of publishing can find ways of doing publication that are peer reviewed. Anthologies and special issues can help work around some of these issues and adding the review process helps add new voices and get the value out of the academic work.

Zoya: Memory Insufficient publishing histories of games from various positions and marginalized positions to address ideas that aren’t always explored. The labor politics of peer reviewed journals are typically unseen. Online efforts are sharing the process of labor together with pay what you want and then share funds for all of the writers. Pursuing an academic career is an exceptionally high risk endeavor...is pushing grad student writing to it the best decision? Should we be promoting other modes of writing?

Deirdra: What about peer reviewing games? Often find that instead of writing about something I’m more driven to write a game and can make the point more powerfully through a game. How do they do it in film and other media studies? Some tension between working on a paper to be read by a few or on a game that may be played by more people. When you make a game you are forced within the genre conventions of game reviews and game scoring. Feedback from IGF and Indiecade can be lacking and only focus on the surface elements. What about a scholarly, in-depth review of the messages within a game?

Hanli: Do you have research protocols for what counts?

Shira: Where do we go from here?

Andrew: Flabbergasted that there’s not more desperation in the room. Everyone in the room should be scared, as everyone in the industry is scared. Doing the right thing is going to hurt, but that’s the only way to make progress. If you’re willing to take it on push harder and do more. Academics can still interface with the industry and talk with people to say things.

Deirdra: Part of the reason to be scared is a perception of a lack of power, but we have more power than we think.

Lindsay: Fear is actually part of the problem. Figure out what you have an how to best use it.

How can you exploit the system and use it to your best advantage? Determine the rules and the rules you want and try to bring them together. As you mature you become more confident, as you become more confident, you’re not as afraid of difference.

Deirdra: Millennial angst and lack of jobs.

Carolyn: We need explicit networks of support to help people with the struggles in their life in both academia and the industry. More links means more support and a better system.

Casey: These are systems. Who better to work out systems than game scholars? Do special issues, mention people’s names, cite good work. When you can organize a conference invite the folks people need to hear.

Mia: You are DiGRA. It’s a small organization, but we have passion. There’s no boot of DiGRA holding good ideas down. If there’s something you think we should be doing, make an effort. In response to the call for positions we have competition for 1 of 5 spots. Lead an initiative to do something.

Lindsay: Get nervous when people are scared by change, but that’s life and you have to learn to ride the current. Industry is going to change and keep changing. Academia is likely to change as well. You have to embrace the change and enjoy it.

Florence: Moving on from here offers a nice link to mentorship, which goes beyond games. Academia is a culture and people coming through academia have challenges in not necessarily knowing the rules of a culture.

Joaquim: There are many barriers to making things better. Education is not enough, as industry works within the logic of a sexist and racist society. Simply educating people in the industry may not be enough. Thinking about academia and who can become grad students or this conference is a privileged group. Cost of registration, planes, and other expenses means that you are going to lose certain voices.

Jose Z: Always hear the story that you guys should do this, but why don’t you do it? Never seen anyone shot down for an idea. Do it and run with it and it’ll be awesome. How can we help facilitate what you want to do? Do it long enough with enough conviction and do it well and it’ll gain it’s own momentum. If you’re not willing to put your money where your mouth is we won’t get anything done. DiGRA is all volunteer and doesn’t have a ton of money.

Gillian: Putting the work on individuals makes them choose how to divide their time and efforts. A person can point out that a problem exists without being required to solve it.

Jose Z: No one person can solve anything, but we need more hands to solve more problems.

Tracy: DiGRA isn’t you guys. DiGRA is us. So saying you guys do it is improbable, as it’s about us. Change has done by yourself, but you don’t have to do it alone. Bring other people together to do something really radical and good. Committing something can help make it happen. People at GDC also ask for change, but this year everyone came for IGF and many people left for the big game show and most nominated for the big game show were from IGF. Only half of the half that are left stood for Anita Sarkeesian. Some progress was made and progress is important. We’re in the middle of this

Mia: The outrage is good because it marks change. We’re getting things done now in a way that is more advanced and more questions are being asked.

Tracy: Backlash means we’re making a difference.

Meghan: Anyone that feels comfortable is a position of privilege and those folks should offer to help those who are in a more precarious position.

Adrienne: a big answer wrap up would be counterproductive, but many of the issues in academia and industry seem interconnected. Citation is important and there is a long history we need to acknowledge. This will require mentorship as well.

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The Playful is Political Fishbowl [Evan's Separately Recorded Notes]

• TL Taylor

• Florence Chee

• Chris Paul

• Mia Consalvo

\* In terms of talking about identities and representation, what has game studies done well thus far?

Consalvo: Gender in games is always in issue (in looking back over the years). Gender has always been a voiced aspect of the field.

Taylor: There's always been an ideal player we've conceived, as well as a stereotyped way of seeing women/girls as well as masculinity and men. The word "intersectionality" never came up earlier, now it does.

Paul: There are now new powerful voices in the field in game studies that are not the conventional voices. The audience has now become more robust about addressing controversial content

Chee: There's always been a sense of female mentorship at DiGRA.

Chess: Can't we complicate this a little bit? We've mostly talked about gender, but not about other aspects of identities

Chee: Remembers a time when there was a call for contribution to *Feminist Media Studies*, she did not feel like she was ready at that time to identify as a Feminist in academia. How to broach these controversial topics for a sense of equitable ownership over these spaces?

Consalvo: Not that many submissions of this other material have come in. There are not that many studies of race on video games.

Taylor: Early battles to get basic game studies into the field may have not been as inclusive.

Paul: Economic privilege is also important in terms of class. There are also a huge number of countries in the world blocked from the discussion.

Chee: Panels of all men at the tech conference along with claims that the population to draw from "isn't good enough." People don't like to just come in and be "the diversity." It would be nice for the actual work of marginalized people to be there.

Consalvo: Mary Ann Buckles and Marsha Kinder and all the early work by women in the field are often neglected.

Geyser: Invisible blocks of the world are partially there for structural-economic issues. Systems in which academia works financially prohibit these people from coming in.

Shaw: How do we achieve better representation at academic conferences by these other populations?

Consalvo: Well, there have been regional chapters from other places in Australia, etc. The scholars can't get here, but at least the chapters are there to start conversations.

Jorge from IA State: Lots of students are putting up information online for free in

Geyser: How do you teach indigenous game studies in a field dominated by the center?

Jorge: Jargon as blockade for people to enter the debate.

Street: Jargon is considered with hostility, but at least there's a lot of promotion of curious people among free game studies journals.

Consalvo: Reconsider the dissertation and graduate education in general. Is the dissertation the best way to show that you've mastered the knowledge or research?

Shaw: What are the interventions that feminist game studies have made on this front?

Deirdra Squinky Kiai: A lot of the most interesting work in games right now are coming from women not from an academic background. People systematizing life experiences, such as the TWINE work in the past 2 years.

Street: Zinester work classification is tricky. It's very interesting that the queer feminist work is the most proceduralist work out there because it shows how systems have an effect on the individual.

Squinky Kiai: It exposes the procedure of that system. Procedural AI work suffers from tailspin effect, in that a complex system appears simple, but is actually complex behind the scenes.

Chess: How has mainstream game development responded to the work being done?

Wilson: This is a rare conversation, and there's a huge divide between this space and the culture at large. When marginalized voices speak up, there are ugly, disgusting backlashes. There are problems with signal-boosting into the mainstream.

Van Jones: Creation of safe spaces for marginalized voices to actually develop their talents as game designers. If I hadn't had great mentoring and access to a feminist games scholar, then I wouldn't have been able to start a program in Wales.

Shaw: There appears to be an us-vs.-them mentality between mainstream and academia. Actually, I've visited all these different companies and found people totally sympathetic. But then the industry logic takes over, and certain forums become a part of a community that doesn't reflect reality. Industrial logic should be challenged.

Squinky Kiai: I left the industry because I couldn't deal with all the attacks. Academia was a refuge from these attacks. It's not on an academic level, but visceral: these intelligent and awesome game designers are being attacked. And it's hard not to feel personally attacked by it all.

Wilson: I can't speak to the academia side of things, but I feel injured when people like Samantha Allen leave the industry they love because of these attacks. It's more of an urgent problem than we think. We are now talking about multidisciplinary input.

Van Jones: Aren't we creating a feminist audience for games by teaching students feminist game design?

O'Donnell: There's been a shift in the issue, especially with Brenda Romero and other designers talking about social responsibility. ... There's two stances Ursula K. LeGuin articulated "learn and run" or "learn and stay." ... Forum comments at Gamasutra that are hostile are shut down very quickly by moderators, and these moderators shut hostile comments down quickly.

Adams: Journalists are calling out problematic material, rather than academics. Academics ought to be making demands.

Paul: Academic production works differently – If you have a good idea, it takes a year for it to come out. It takes months and months in the academic system to get rewarded for putting their ideas out there.

Bergstrom: Academia can't really fix industry if it can't fix itself. Grad students are being crapped on all the time, and the quant programs and conferences are barring qualitative work of the kind that would work.

Adams: Activist organizations demand that you do everything all at the same time. Gender problems will resolve when capitalism goes away, but it's not so... And it sucks. There is work to be done on all fronts. I want to take this conversation back to my dept. in Western Ontario.

Trammell: Issues here really speak to the problematic issue of peer review. The fact that we must trust "peer review" to accredit articles, rather than intuitive judgment calls.

Taylor: Peer review can actually help people to historicize, contextualize and engage in politics of citation. How do you figure out the way to show lineages?

Consalvo: One benefit of peer review – My work can be critiqued, and you can still call my work bullshit. But people can't actually say that to my face. Peer review is bullshit when our institutions overvalue it. And we don't want to start another journal. But if we can get it so Wiley isn't getting obscenely rich on our stuff.

Trammell: I have a background on an academic blog *Sounding Out*, which Jonathan Sterne has called one of the best platforms in public scholarship. It takes a lot of work, and I want that to be recognized.

Chess: Publishing online is fantastic until you deal with the CV evaluated by the institution.

Adams: I am working on an online journal run on a volunteer basis, and it may disappear in a year. When you're trying to build your CV, I still made a dangerous choice to make this online journal. Tweet and share all this work that isn't being published in journals... to anyone who will listen.

Shaw: In terms of coalition-building, not all of us are in stable positions. People get jobs through peer review. I'm going to shout out ADA as one of the better journals in collective peer review. But peer review processes could be worked in.

Street: I would like to publish the history of games from various perspectives. Memory Insufficient is one example What I'd like to talk about are alternative publication-revenue models. But academia is risky. Should scholars be discouraged from seeking other revenue sources online?

Shiai: Could I make a peer-reviewed game? How do they do it in other fields? Do I make a game and get my point across with a wider audience? The criticism I get already are the "scores" I get from standard game-review publications, but then the only other avenues to submit your games are festivals (Indiecade, IGF). The feedback I get from those organizations is lacking and tends to only focus on surface elements.

Geyser: Don't you have practice-as-research protocols? We just got those finally instituted.

Chess: Before we wrap, I'd like to pull it back to where we started. Where should we take the field from here?

Wilson: I'm flabbergasted that there isn't more desperation in the room. Everyone in this room should be scared, because the industry is scared. I get that going through tenure is crazy and nobody has any financial tenable position. BUT if doing the right thing is going to hurt, then you should still push harder and say things.

Kiai: We don't actually believe we have power. But we have more power than we think.

Grace: Fear is actually the problem. People have to accept what they have and see how to use the system to their full advantage. Here are the rules; here are the rules I want. And we can just re-negotiate the rules. As you mature, you become more confident, and you are less intimidated by difference.

Kiai: Millennial angst – the grand narrative is that we were sheltered and now we can't get jobs. I like this sort of "game designer" perspective, in which we learn the system.

John: We need to interconnect more and support each other. And we need to use whatever resources we have to help each other.

O'Donnell: These are systems. Who better to play with them than scholars who do game studies? Cite the people you want to include in the conversation. Point to the people whom you want invited.

Consalvo: You are DiGRA. It's a small organization. We don't have the heft of ICA, and not their budget either. But we're more passionate. There's no "boot of DiGRA" holding you down when you want to do something. There are election calls that have gone out, and there's competition for only 1 of 5 positions. This is an organization. If there's other things we can be doing, please lead an initiative to make the change.

Grace: I get nervous when people are worried about change. That's life. If you learn to ride the current, then it will be a lot more pleasant. Yes, the industry will change. And yes academia will change.

Chee: Mentorship goes beyond games itself. Academia is a culture. People coming up the ranks get mentorship. Getting into academia has its own challenges. Populations don't know what the conversation and currency is. That's why mentorship is important.

Chess: If there's anything been left out, please chime in.

Joaquim: There financial and other considerations that prevent us from action. Education is not enough. The industry operates in a sexist/racist constellation, and having educated people in the industry is not a solution. There are financial barriers to DiGRA.

Zagal: At DiGRA, people are always telling us "People should do this!" And we don't ever shoot them down. Just do it. If you do it long enough and with conviction and well, then it will acquire its own momentum. Put your money where your mouth is.

Grace: If you don't like the way things work, create something else.

Smith: My visceral reaction to what you just said is similar to people saying things in computer science like "Why aren't there more women? How are YOU going to solve it?" I can point out that a problem exists, but without being the person who has to then solve it.

Zagal: We really need people to step up though.

Smith: I've been told a lot "Go fix that problem you raised."

Fullerton: DiGRA is not "you." It is "us." I've been trying to make change for a long time, and I've discovered that you have to do it yourself, but you don't have to do it by yourself. When we were 10 people in a room being like "Fuck the IGF" – we made it happen. Now we're a thing, and people can rebel against it. ... But the bad thing was: Anita Sarkeesian was recognized, but only half the people stood. We've got progress, but it's never going to be solved.

Consalvo: When I started working on gender in games, there were no internal advocates. The backlash that's happening means that there are more people speaking out. Male game designers now openly talk about representations of women in games without my prompting. That's amazing. But academia is slow, and so we're crawling forward.

Adams: Anyone who feels comfortable because of whiteness, privilege, tenure, etc. – if you have that privileged ledge to hang off of, help those who don't have that privilege. If you have privilege, give a hand.

Shaw: Being an ally is important. Citations practices are important. None of this "new" at all. Gender and women studies have been around for 20 years.