

Writing the Games-Based Dissertation

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Abstract

As games studies efforts continue to proliferate across the academy in a wide range of disciplines, there has been a substantial increase in the number of doctoral students writing games-based dissertations. A “fireside chat” panel discussion held at GLS 7.0 brought together a handful of recently minted PhDs from different programs to talk about the conditions that affect the process of writing a games-based dissertation in various American institutional contexts. From this discussion, the authors have compiled advice concerning four challenges that game studies scholars face: when to stop reading/writing/playing, choosing which game(s) to research, collecting data in/through games, and possessing expertise in the subject matter beyond that of the committee members.

Introduction

When a student enters graduate school, he/she has many thesis- and dissertation-writing resources available, including books, help groups, and time-management tools, not to mention many sites on the Internet. This paper is meant to supplement those resources and is aimed specifically at students (possibly you!) who are doing their graduate work about, around, or through digital games. Based on a lively “fireside chat” discussion at the seventh annual Games+Learning+Society Conference, we have compiled insights from our own experiences that focus on four specific challenges game studies scholars face:

- When to stop reading/writing/playing
- Choosing which game(s) to research
- Collecting data in/through games
- Being the subject-matter expert

When to Stop Reading/Writing/Playing

Reading

When you are doing your literature review, start with the foundational writings from your particular field and think about how games challenge or express those theories in new and interesting ways. Then explore games studies books, articles, and conference proceedings to look

for similar discoveries that could help push your thinking forward. Before you decide that no one has looked at games the way you are, try searching for games-related research in other disciplines—the benefit of an interdisciplinary area of research is that you can bounce your ideas off of research from many different perspectives. Ultimately there will likely be more material to read than you will have time for. Before committing to an in-depth analysis of any literature, make sure that it speaks directly to your research question. Just because a piece touches on both your discipline and games does not necessarily mean it will be essential in supporting your inquiry.

Writing

Your dissertation will not be the best or the last thing that you ever write. As with all dissertations, the goal is not to write the most brilliant prose of your life, but to write it in a way that is satisfactory to committee members, departments, mentors, and other scholars in your field. No one expects your dissertation to be perfect, but they do expect it to be completed within a reasonable amount of time.

It may be helpful to think of your scholarly work as contributing to an existing conversation. As such, you ought to focus on the arguments of that conversation you want to engage with—this helps you limit what and how much you read and what you write. Again, the multidisciplinary nature of games research can play in your favor, as you may be bringing new ideas to the conversation from seemingly disparate sources.

Playing

It pays to be familiar with different types of games from different genres. For instance, even if you have no personal interest in playing *Hello Kitty Online*, if you're looking at virtual worlds it may be important to understand how it relates to other games in terms of:

- Genre – massively multiplayer online game accessed through a web browser on the Internet
- Player base – aimed at tween and younger females
- Impact – has an active community of players including videos, blogs, wikis, etc.
- Pop culture – made fun of (indirectly) on a *South Park* episode, resulting in a “Hello Kitty Island Adventure” game mod for *World of Warcraft*; also connected to a *Doom 3* game mod that makes the flashlight shine a picture of Hello Kitty on the horrific monsters you battle.

Take every chance you have to learn more about games, be it design or culture, but at the same time, remember that your most important goal is to finish your thesis/dissertation. There will be times when you have to stop playing, stop exploring new ideas, and sit down to write about the ones you already have in your head.

Choosing Which Game(s) to Research

If you are engaged in design-based research or conducting evaluative work around a game designed within your institution, then the question of what game or games to focus on in your dissertation is likely moot. However, if you're doing work studying commercial games, then game selection becomes a necessary aspect of determining your topic of study.

When deciding which games to write about, one beneficial approach is to look at interesting games that others have not considered critically within your discipline. While certain popular games might be a lot of fun to write about, the dissertation and journal essay market is often more saturated with work around those titles, particularly in fields like media studies and communication where games research is better established. On the other hand, if you are working in a field that is less saturated with games research, it might be beneficial to form your study around a well-established game that has been looked at through other disciplinary lenses. Either way, it is often useful to play games that might be slightly off your (and others') radar but that might have some interesting implications for your research. Whether you ultimately choose to focus on a widely known game or a lesser-known title, exploring games at the margin will deepen your understanding of the medium.

Do not worry about perceptions that you “cherry picked” your game(s). It is your dissertation and it is ultimately your choice which games you want to write about and which ones you feel are particularly important. Be able to back up your choices with explanations, but do not feel you need to cover every game in a specific genre. (In fact, this would likely make for a worse and far more tedious dissertation.)

Remember that the beauty of “games” being such a broad category is that each game can offer different opportunities and insights. Games help you explore the elements of social science (or the humanities) that are of interest to your department. For example, a massively multiplayer online game offers opportunities to discuss communication, culture development, and group organization, while a designed game or simulation offers measurable interactions and the ability to tailor the playful environment to a specific topic or area of study. The game or games you select for research should ultimately offer an appropriate focus for your research question, afford access to types of data that complement your methodological choices, and have the potential to bring novel insights to non-games scholars in your field. Finally, you should know there is a high probability that by the time you are done with your dissertation, you will be completely burnt out on the title(s) you have chosen to study.

Collecting Data In and Through Games

Even though your research involves a digital space, dealing with data from games can be challenging. Whether your research involves players, player culture, game content, or game design, you and your committee need to have a clear understanding of how you will select, record, and analyze data. Test and re-test your data-collection methods. Be prepared to hit technical limitations like file size limits on collecting in-game chat, file names that automatically overwrite themselves, slow or non-responsive networks (especially if you are collecting data in a school), difficulties accessing data after it has been collected due to how it is stored, or the unwillingness of commercial game companies to share their data. It is usually a good idea to practice or run through the entire data collection process, preferably at the same scale and on the same networks and computers as your “real” data will come from. This will allow you to see problems that may not have been visible to you before.

In addition, when your research topic includes videogames, be prepared to struggle with technology. Ideally, everything works the way you expect all of the time and “reading” a game is as easy as reading a book. In reality, you will run into technical difficulties: design limitations, connectivity issues, headsets or mice or controllers that do not work the way they are supposed to. Remember to think things through in advance if possible and to be flexible when things do

not turn out the way you anticipated they would. The technical problems may not be within the scope of your project, but they may still offer opportunities to collect data about people's expectations and interactions with technology.

Another issue is Institutional Review Board (IRB) and Human Subjects concerns designed to protect participants' privacy. While the specific constraints around your research will vary, there seem to be certain persistent issues for games researchers. For instance, when studying gaming culture *in situ*, researchers need to identify themselves as a researcher, either through their name or by announcing to the group who they are and why they are participating. (For comprehensive guidelines on ethical issues surrounding research in online venues, see <http://aoir.org/documents/ethics-guide/>.) On the institutional side some review boards might not have a great deal of familiarity with videogames. To prepare for this contingency, be ready to describe your research activities at depth to assure your IRB that you are taking human subjects protection seriously. Many IRBs are willing to work with researchers who are collecting lots of data and can automatically make it anonymous. But of course, you may not want anonymous data if you need to match player data from the game to an out-of-game measure. These sorts of issues are easier to sort out and plan for earlier in the dissertation process rather than later and, of course, through discussions with your adviser, your committee, and your institution's review board.

Being the Subject-Matter Expert

Remember that you are working toward a degree in your specific department and the dissertation is, in part, meant to show off your expertise in the methods and canons of your field. Games are simply the conduit through which you apply, explore, and make sense of key discussions going on in your field.

While many students worry about not having advisers or other departmental "expertise" on videogames, this is not necessarily a bad thing. What is most important is to find an adviser and a committee that is *open* to researching videogames. Having advisers and committee members that are not "videogame" people gives you the possibility of adding a fantastic degree of depth to your topic. All of these people have their own area of research and interests, and their non-videogame knowledge can add a great deal of richness to your subject matter. Do not limit yourself to just researching games and gaming culture in disciplinary ways that have been done before—find new approaches and ideas by picking the brains of your non-gamer committee. At the same time, having non-gamers on your committee will force you to *explain* gaming concepts which might (now) seem obvious or commonplace to you. This will help you clarify ideas in your head and make your work accessible to a larger audience in the long run. Ultimately, no matter what your dissertation is about, you will emerge with more expertise on that specific topic than any member of your committee.

There is a corollary problem with having a committee who is unfamiliar with the game(s) or cultures you are writing about, however. Sometimes you need to talk to someone who *is* an expert. Luckily, games researchers tend to also be technically inclined, easily reachable through the Internet, and, as it turns out, almost all of us are friendly! Before contacting someone from a different institution, do a bit of homework: read their stuff, and, when you contact them, introduce your topic in a way that relates to their work and ask specific questions that you think they are particularly capable of answering or thinking about.

Notes on Writing and Conclusion

Many people say to write every day; however, you need to be flexible and adaptive about how and when this happens. Also be flexible about what constitutes “writing” since writing a dissertation can involve quite a bit of looking things up, citations, formatting in APA style, etc. It can help to iterate on an outline a few times, and get feedback on it before diving into serious composition. A good outline can serve as a focus for brainstorming what content needs to go into which parts. If you have a sense of the content but find yourself struggling with sequence, you may want to try starting with a list of content, and then sort various elements into categories that can eventually become an outline. For something as huge as a dissertation, it helps to get your ideas down and organize them before just unleashing your fountain of text or, even worse, staring at the blank page not knowing where to start.

If we have any one piece of advice, it is to have others read your drafts. Enlist volunteers from all over—not just your home discipline and not just academics. Gamers themselves are a great resource for making sure that you have captured the essence of the game in your discussion. Alternately, non-gamer readers can help identify concepts that just did not come across clearly.

Ultimately, writing a thesis/dissertation is difficult and time-consuming regardless of your topic. Luckily, studying games makes your data collection a little more enjoyable, your subjects a little more eager, and the entire process a little more fun. Plus, when people ask what your dissertation was about, you can say, “I studied videogames,” and watch people look at you in puzzlement. It can be a great icebreaker for starting conversations, almost as good as, “Trust me, I’m a doctor.”