

TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

There is something extremely energizing in teaching game design, animation, and digital arts within a school of art like ours: it's the productive tension between the pure, uncompromised, elitist contemporary art practice and the messy, troubling, reality of applied arts.

We have to embrace the structural absurdity of art schools. Most of our students will not become professional fine artists; there is simply not enough room (and money) in the art world made of galleries, museums, residencies, fairs and festivals. More and more of our applicants, growing up in the aftermath of the global financial crisis, seem to acknowledge this and they prematurely undermine their ambitions. They fantasize about disappearing into the bowels of Disney, Electronic Arts or some other monocultures of imagination.

How to value the work made in the highest levels of the contemporary art world, while providing an expansive view of art making? How to equip our students with the means for financial sustainability without becoming a training camp for the various cultural industries - or even worse, a playground for affluent fan artists?

My goal as educator is to help students negotiate these issues, to create well-rounded and critical cultural producers who can move comfortably between high-culture and pop-culture.

Digital artists often use the same tools, codes and processes of commercial producers, advertisers, startups; for this very reason they have to position themselves in dialectical relationship with them.

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Higher education should provide students the theoretical tools to understand and question the dominant discourses surrounding technology.

Coming from a social hacking background, I have learned to not consider technological artifacts as politically “neutral”. I always try to put emphasis on the deconstruction and transformation of those artifacts.

In my courses I strive to combine history, theory and practice in the most compelling way. We are interacting with a generation of over-stimulated, attention-deficient multitaskers: our primary challenge as teachers is to fight boredom in the classroom. The way a lesson is presented is as important as the content itself. I propose a mixture of frontal lectures, discussions, screenings, workshops, critiques, making sure that no activity takes more than an hour to keep the attention of the class. I've been experimenting with the pedagogical possibilities of play itself and with alternative forms of class critique.

Games and videogames can be seen through a multitude of lenses and throughout the years I learned that it's impossible to give a comprehensive overview of the medium; so every semester I propose a different focus: the social and relational aspects of games, storytelling through interaction, world-building, or the role of interfaces in play.

Since the recent introduction of the minor and the concentration in Game Design, I've been working with relatively more skillful students than before. CMU now provides a more structured path to game making and multiple entry points from various departments. However, due to the limitations of the university, the theoretical, historical and critical components are non-existing. I'm trying to integrate these aspects in my courses as much as I can. The game industry is always experiencing major tectonic

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shifts and the worst disservice we can do to our students is to train them to work in an environment that won't exist for long.

Alumni often lament the lack of teamwork in our school so I'm planning on implementing more collaborative activities to cultivate non-cognitive skills that are crucial in most workplaces. I'm also experimenting with tighter feedback loops during the creative process, that is: allowing more opportunities for dialog during the ideation and creation process as opposed to the traditional "post-partum" critiques.

With the proliferation of educational resources online teachers ought to reaffirm the value of face-to-face interaction. We should emphasize the importance of being in a real place together (luckily in our case it's an exciting, livable, booming city) and constantly look for ways to burst the campus "bubble".

Connecting with the local community and the surrounding urban context is not a sentimental civic duty, but a way to enrich our students' practice with a variety of experiences and perspectives. Way too often our undergraduate work reflects a homogeneous upper-middle class background mediated by commercial pop culture: how can we expect them to go beyond it if their entire existences are spent between a dorm and a studio?

As Pittsburgh gains prominence as a technological and cultural hub, we should try to give our students the means, the connections, and the reasons to stay in the area. Other departments have business incubators or direct pipelines to local employers. I've been thinking a lot about how to facilitate alternative forms of entrepreneurship, or independent business endeavors that can allow alumni to thrive after graduation.

In recent years, I've been prioritizing personal projects based on my courses' themes and trying to cover areas that are of special interest for students (e.g. this Fall's course will have a focus on Virtual Reality; my 2D animation class was meant to serve the many students working with the medium).

I found my teaching activity to be extremely beneficial to my artistic practice and I want to keep them informing each other. Working with some of the brightest minds of the next generation is not only extremely inspiring but also a constant challenge: it encourages me to stay in touch with the latest technologies and with the ongoing critical discourse; it forces me to a continuous self-reflection and meta-reflection.