Getting serious about global gaming

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A gamer plays along with the pattern of Jubeat, an electronic rhythm game, at an arcade in Nagoya, Japan. Photo: Geoffrey Rockwell

(Phys.org)—Researchers at the University of Alberta have teamed up with colleagues in one of the world's leading centres on electronic gaming to form a network that will help close the gap between academia and the gaming industry.

Researchers at Ritsumeikan University's College of Image Arts and Sciences and at the U of A are addressing a broad scope of questions about how electronic games can be used for education, defining the line between literature and gaming, and finding ways to preserve electronic games.

The effort strengthens the U of A's position on this research—which is essential, says Geoffrey Rockwell, a researcher with the Humanities Computing Program and Department of Philosophy, who recently won a Japan Foundation grant and worked with colleagues at Ritsumeikan University.

"It's very important for Canada [because] Canadians are developing games not just for Canadians. Canada is now, by some calculations, the third-largest producer of games, even though we have a fairly small population. The actual Canadian market is very small. But we have game studios in Vancouver, Edmonton, Toronto and Montreal that are developing games for the world.

Global gaming: A cross-cultural phenomenon

"Japan in the Asian market is an enormous part of that, and our students need an understanding of the Asian market and the way they perceive games, the culture of playing games," Rockwell notes. "And we as faculty need to make sure that we're looking at this global phenomenon. The games studies community has been more isolated."

Akinori Nakamura, professor and vice-dean of the College of Image Arts and Sciences, says his institution recognized the status of the U of A in establishing the collaboration.

"We are focused quite a bit on a global learning sphere. This is the age of globalization and so, when Dr. Rockwell made the proposal, we thought it would be a perfect opportunity for our centre to establish this network," he says. "Of course, the U of A is quite prestigious in Canada; we knew all about that and that was important in our decision to form this network, which would lead us to faculty and research exchanges."

The Prince Takamado Japan Centre for Teaching and Research, one of

the university's arms in reaching out to create international partnerships, also played a significant role in establishing the network, says Rockwell.

During a symposium held Aug. 22 at the U of A, researchers from Japan, from the U of A and from across Canada settled down to begin building the bridge that will bring games studies out of isolation. Rockwell says the gap between the games industry and the games studies community has resulted partly because of cultural differences and how computer games are studied.

With a North American university teaming up with Asia's leading producer and consumer of console games, that divide may soon close. "The idea of the symposium was to bring perspectives from both Canada and Japan on these issues of games, industry, cross-cultural issues and education," says Rockwell.

"For us this is perfect because we're based in Kyoto, where a major game producer is," says Nakamura.

Preserving the past, anticipating the future

Apart from producing games, one of the main quandaries for both academia and industry is preserving them. That was the focus for one participating team from Ritsumeikan University, Koichi Hosoi and Kazufumi Fukuda, who presented on "Critical issues of digital game preservation: For the global collaboration of game archive activities."

"This is very important for the academy. We have to provide an answer to the question of the preservation of interactive media," Rockwell says. "Much of the important art of the last 50 years—and by that I don't mean fine art but human art—has been interactive media. And the academy has a responsibility to preserve the works of art of its citizens. Now is the time that we ought to be developing strategies for

preservation; otherwise, we'll have nothing to study 50 years from now."

As researchers work to preserve the games industry's past, the present is also a source of concern. Gone, for example, are perceptions of game enthusiasts as teens locked up in basements, staring at glittering screens. Nakamura notes that games are being integrated into every aspect of society. And emerging games are changing ideas not only about who gamers are, but also about what constitutes a game.

Take so-called locative games, played on smartphones to find specific places. In Japan, these games are targeted at tourists, says Nakamura, and Rockwell notes that the U of A has developed some, one of which is used at Fort Edmonton Park. Next year, he says, the U of A is developing a game that aims to promote healthy living with the idea that zombies are coming from Calgary and students need to get prepared.

The landscape of gaming may be changing, but Rockwell says the fundamental experience of electronic gaming has non-digital analogues.

"My mother was a bridge fanatic. She was part of a whole circle of bridge players. She'd go off in the evenings with her bridge partner for hours and play bridge and drink wine; nobody ever accused her of been a nerd," he says. "But all of a sudden I woke up one day and realized my mom was a gaming nerd, long before I was. Bridge is a strategic game—not unlike StarCraft."

Provided by University of Alberta