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## New rules for the game

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A few years ago, video games were looked at as the reason kids flunked out of college.

Now, they're the reason many of them go there in the first place.

From USC to MIT, video game design has become a legitimate field of study at schools across the country and around the world. It hopes to do for wannabe Shigeru Miyamotos what film schools have done for the likes of Lucas and Spielberg while facing perceptions that have dogged gamers for years.

"When we started our program in fall of 2001, we had 21 students," said Eric Elder, academic director of The Art Institute of California's Game Art and Design program. "Now, we have 305."

Henry Jenkins, head of the Comparative Media Studies program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, said, "We're seeing the industry clearly has legs, and everyone wants to ride that digital revolution. And the one clear pathway has been through game companies."

That path weaves through SoCal, stopping at various points like the red-lined map in an Indiana Jones movie.

In the Inland Empire, there's the Westwood College of Technology's Upland campus. DeVry University, with a campus in Pomona, announced its new bachelor's degree in game and simulation programming in August. And the Art Institute of California has campuses in Santa Monica, Santa Ana and San Diego.

Then there's USC featuring a minor in game production, a master of fine arts program in interactive media, and a lucrative professional marriage with juggernaut game maker Electronic Arts, which donated \$8 million to the university's School of Cinema and Television in 2004. The Trojans even have video game production summer camps for high school kids.

"EA paid for three girls to come here," said Honey Hamilton, 22, a June USC graduate who was a teaching assistant at the camp. "They were in class from around 8 to 5 every day for a month, and they got college credit for it."

## STILL A YOUNG FIELD

The concept of going to school to learn about the inner workings of interactive entertainment can be traced to the Redmond, Wash.-based DigiPen Institute of

Technology, that was established in 1988 in Vancouver as the DigiPen Applied Computer Graphics School.

But the reality of a game design degree is barely a decade old, and educators and students said gaming's evolution into an \$11 billion industry has fostered the need for more formal education on the subject.

Larry Pranausk, who teaches Game Analysis and Playability at Westwood College, said that status factors into who companies look at when job opportunities arise.

"Companies have so much riding on each release today. They want to make sure you have those specialized skills to work with a design team," he said. "That's what these guys have to learn."

Jeremy Hasse, 23, of Norco and a student at Westwood College, said a degree could help set students apart from a swelling pool of candidates.

"If you have experience in the field, that's good. But if you don't, you'll probably need that degree," he said. "Good and talented people are more commonplace in the industry, and a degree shows them that you can complete something."

## HELD BACK

Hamilton said the industry's current state is a far cry from the days when being an ace programmer was enough.

"Back then, you were the director and the producer and the programmer. That's not how it works now," she said.

However, educators quickly point out that while strides have been made in game design education, it still has its share of inherent problems. One of them is the relative youth of the programs in comparison with more established disciplines, such as cinema.

"People saw what film school meant to Steven Spielberg and George Lucas. Most film schools can point to at least one director who's gone through their program, done work people recognize and possibly teaches there," said Jenkins of MIT. "Game design in college is still in a transitional period. Many of the people building games are in their mid-30s, and they're in no hurry to stop what they're doing to teach full-time."

There's also the issue of location. California is a digital Mount Olympus for game students. Electronic Arts, Activision, Pandemic Studios, Blizzard Entertainment and Namco are just a handful of game companies within a stone's throw of many design programs.

"We've been very fortunate to be in Southern California. We've brought in Nick Marks (of Activision) to help our students, and he's been great for us, helping them find full-

time jobs there, as well as internships," said Elder of The Art Institute. "But if you're a school in the Midwest, it's much harder to get those people to come in."

Another potential hurdle comes with the creation of a good program. While schools such as USC and The Art Institute enjoy solid professional relationships with game companies, many schools still struggle with putting a program together.

Elder saw this firsthand at an International Game Developers Association conference he attended three years ago.

"What I noticed was that we were way ahead of other schools. Many of them had just taken existing classes, cobbled them together and called it game design," he said.

Dan Wright, dean of academic affairs for DeVry in Southern California, stressed that his university took a much more cautious approach in building their curriculum.

"We invited lots of industry professionals and representatives to give us their feedback and tell us what the needs of the industry are, and that feedback was used to help create the program," he said.

## RESPECT FACTOR

No matter how the program is built, it still must deal with the ancient games-are-toys image. In the field of game design, there is the potential for dueling viewpoints on both the professional and academic fronts.

"Many academics still don't understand how far games have come, so they have a hard time taking it seriously," Jenkins said.

Mike Van Lent, a research scientist at USC's Institute of Creative Technologies, said there are even some game educators who don't quite get it.

"The most frustrating thing I run into when I travel is that I'll be talking to professors who say they teach about computer games, and I'll ask them what they're favorite games are and they tell me, "Oh, I don't have time to play games, I do serious stuff," he said. "It's pretty shocking how often that happens."

Hamilton said she ran into some of that during the video game summer camp when students asked for help.

"Even the other counselors from other summer seminars would ask, "What do they need tutoring for? It's video games," she said. "I spent eight hours on an assignment that was like the first level of "Pac-Man." This is not easy."

Westwood student Mario Silverio Jr., 18, faced resistance from a time-tested source his mom.

"I got support from my dad, but from my mom, not so much. She thinks games are a waste of time," he said. "I'll prove her wrong."

#### DEGREE NOT ESSENTIAL?

On the flip side, there are still lingering questions about the value of a game design degree.

Raymond Yan, vice president of operations for DigiPen, can't help but carry a hint of skepticism about the trend.

"I'm not saying they're bad programs, but for some of them, I think you need to ask how much do you understand the process of building a game?" he said. "For me, if you don't have a degree, but your portfolio is outstanding, I'll talk to you."

Jenkins points out that many of the industry professionals didn't have game design classes in their youth, so they may be more interested in what a prospective hire or intern can do.

"The question will be, 'Have you built a game?' or 'What do you know how to do?'" he said. "You're only as good as the work you produce."

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