Fitchburg Review, Game Design Program
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Summary:
The Fitchburg Game Design program is a strong program in design and art that sees great popularity among students. Fitchburg State University's price point and the fact that they are a state institution positions this program well to serve the greater Massachusetts need for experience designers in games and interactive media writ large.

There are competing interests and challenges that face this program as it pivots from a newly established program into its next stage of development:

- High teaching load with faculty coupled with high advising load
- Challenges with diversity and support of diverse students among both faculty and students
- Lack of transparency concerning budgets, growth targets, and sustainable/sustaining work
- Underutilized space—Motion Capture room, downtown studio space
- Required internship opportunities for students and limited game studios in the area

Even with these challenges, the program has a number of excellent opportunities and resources that should be sustained:

- Studio capstone in a studio environment is excellent
- Student instructional and cultural spaces are well thought out and promote a culture of collaboration and community
- The faculty remain committed to the students and continue to experiment with curriculum and community opportunities
- Faculty have strong industry and academic experience, which they continuously engage with (and involve students with)
- Fitchburg has always been a MassDigi college (which can even be expanded)

Climate Survey of Students
I recommend a climate survey of students. Meetings with students and follow up emails from students indicated that there were a lot of concerns about the climate in the game design program. This was especially emphasized by female students; however, male students also echoed the sentiments. Already, data from this review indicates the following:

- Only one or two women in classes increase feelings of silence and isolation
- The program reflects some of the broader problems in the game industry
- Women report being uncomfortable with the hypersexualization of females in media creations
- GDSA (?) is about playing games and engages with toxic cultural norms, which drive women and BIPOC students away

A climate survey will ensure that students voices are represented, and followed up with actionable items that are linked with the survey and communicated with the students will help develop the culture in the program that the faculty want.

Curricular Opportunities

The curriculum is an excellent design curriculum with multiple pathways for students. Some input and ideas from meetings include:

- "The programmer's curse": This macabre description comes from the students meeting, which notes that there are not many opportunities for students who want to become game programmers to develop their skills. This links to what I observed in the faculty—the central weakness of the program is that there are no technical game developers. The problem seems to be exacerbated by a reported rift between CS and the game program (faculty and students both reported this with appalling narratives). Computer Scientists' central research questions are different from technical game developers, even though both use programming languages. Recommendation: Hire a technical game developer with expertise in game AI or Procedural Content Generation
- Sound Design: Currently, the game audio and sound design places more emphasis on music and need to connect to the platforms and pipeline/implementation. Recommendation: Collaboration with on campus music programs would help develop better sound designers in general, and the program can focus more on implementing sound design, responsive sound design, and pipeline management
- Game Design Studio: Currently, the program incorporates game design with specific learning goals. However, many programs have moved toward a game design studio experience, borrowing from other design degrees (art, architecture, writing, etc), which are about experimentation, peer feedback, and iteration. Recommendation: Introduce a game studio course, possibly at multiple levels or open to students to take multiple times, in which students can work on experimental games and develop design processes. These can include digital games but can expand to include gamic interactive media, escape rooms, ARGs, etc.
- Mandatory Game Jam integrated into curriculum: The faculty and students both talked about the mandatory game jam experiment that they did. The faculty talked about it being an excellent experiment, but some students were resistant. The students who were part of the open talk time may have been the high performing students. They emphatically endorsed this becoming part of the required curriculum. They said that some of the weaker students did not like this, but they found it invaluable. They also noted that it was important to their portfolio Recommendation: Require or incentivize the game jam. Requiring would benefit all students. Incentivizing might require a small budget of $200 for pizza and maybe extra credit in classes.
- Required Portfolio Course: I couldn't decide if this should go under curriculum or professionalization; however, I kept it here because there has already been an experiment in portfolio courses. The students who took this really appreciated it, and portfolios are necessary to entering the workforce. At WPI, we require part of the grade of each course to come from a portfolio update (whether or not a student is in the major). You can go this route or keep the portfolio course as separate and expand into a larger professionalization course (job search, networking, etc). The only critique that I received was that students thought that the course was about portfolios for artists and didn't think

through the other specializations as carefully. Recommendation: Require a portfolio course and develop it in close coordination with MassDigi to understand the current needs and trends across multiple stakeholders. Also invite MassDigi as guest speaker to this course.

- Collaborate with the library: The library is interested in developing a quick link landing page for the program to aid in research, reference art, support design faculty, etc. Further, they are eager to consider deeper collaborations that gamify their own spaces and collections, which could be an excellent applied learning opportunity for students in a design course. They were interested in collaborating on game exhibits and experimental design showcases. Longer strategic meetings with the library is recommended
- The program is also fairly insular. Opportunity also exists to explore collaborations with other units, including humanities (storytelling and experience design), computer science, music, psychology, and business. Further, there is opportunity to develop a major in art with current faculty. Also consider concentrations or certificates in the degree to help students understand the curriculum foci better.
- Opportunity to expand course caps exist if support in the form of student assistants, writing assistants, or student lab technicians were to be funded. Students assistants can help with in class project work, lab meetings, and some rudimentary feedback. The danger of increasing caps on classes, I recognize, is that it would also increase enrollment possibilities, yet advising will become untenable.

There is a lot to be said about a larger curriculum review and revision, but such a process needs to intimately involve the faculty, affording them both time and resources to do this. What often happens is that courses are developed ad hoc to fill a pressing need at the time, and at a certain point, it is hard to imagine what the program might look like differently.

Professional Development for Students

The strength of the game program is that it requires an internship; however, because of resources and the unit that the game program finds itself in, these internships have been historically hard to find. If the goal is professional work experience and networking, I would like to propose the following:

- Collaborate with the career development center to offer workshops on planning, documentation, and process starting in the first year. Students often said that their internship came late (senior year), so they felt like it was high stakes, low reward. Students also reported that they needed help understanding the process and how to prepare for an interview. The career development folx can help with that.
- Revisit the matching system to reflect the interactive media and game development industries. Game development does not want generalists, even as interns. However, the process is pushing students to represent themselves as generalists
- Host a “game studio in residence” in the downtown studio location. This should be non-Fitchburg related (although alumni can be invited). Space and utilities can be provided for early launch game studios with a certain percentage of the profits gifted back and a requirement to host interns from the program. This studio can also act as a mentor for senior capstone students
- Collaborate with MassDigi to identify internship opportunities

- Start an entrepreneurship program—a group of students can start a studio under the mentorship of your entrepreneurship programs at Fitchburg and in coordination with MassDigi. Within the internship time, the studio would get licensed, create and launch a game, and develop a sustaining business plan
- Talk with students about diverse internship planning to develop skills (not work in industries). While there are very few game studios in the area, there are a lot of homologous industries, such as graphic design, media design, interactive museum design, simulation design, etc. Have students brainstorm what skills they want to develop and look for internships that help to develop those skills. This will have the added benefit of helping students see their jobs as highly applicable

In addition to the above, WPI and other institutions have had great success creating work for hire studios, which train and pay students to work with other units on campus and external clients. If interested, a larger study could be done to see how this might integrate into Fitchburg.

Administrative and Programmatic Goals

Faculty at Fitchburg are facing many of the same challenges that are making work in higher education increasingly difficult. With a high teaching load, faculty are meeting with advisees one-on-one before course enrollments and when needed. Email, furthermore, has become a monster, exacerbated by the pandemic. Action items from this list are indeed only suggestions, made with full knowledge that some of the options might increase workloads without equity adjustments.

Within this, the faculty have indicated some larger goals:

- Diversity of students. Faculty indicated that they would be interested in moving toward gender-based parity, and would indeed like to attract and support BIPOC. This one is really tricky because it requires real resources. Future hiring needs to focus on hiring women and BIPOC faculty and then mentoring and supporting them once they arrive. BIPOC faculty especially have difficulty thriving in university settings because they report not understanding the unwritten rules. Targeted scholarships might be another opportunity. At WPI, we do an annual climate survey and financially support a Diversity in Games club and a Women in CS club.
- Grow the program. The faculty understand that resources follow student enrollment growth. Fitchburg has half of the faculty that WPI has with approximately the same number of students, so from my perspective, the program is already understaffed. I recommend meeting the financial decision makers such as the dean, the CFO, and/or the provost to understand the underlying logic of the proforma and agree upon resources at certain enrollment targets
- Recruitment support. Currently, the recruitment is sent to the director of the program, who works from lists to contact students. This is not a great use of this resource. I recommend having the director write three template letters to admitted and prospective students, fun and punchy, that admissions uses to send out to admitted students. Admissions, further, can reach out to HS art and graphic design programs, as well as programming programs, to send information, maybe in the form of a video. Student recruiters (either paid for through admissions or volunteers) can be trained to answer questions from their perspective

- Summer game design programs. This would be an excellent opportunity to raise money for the unit, create a HS→ college pipeline into the program, professionalize students who can work in the program, and offer additional pay to the faculty. These are hugely popular, and can be about myriad topics
- There is untapped potential to generate resources for the program, as mentioned above, through a Studio for Hire model. Look at MAGIC at RIT, ID Studio at WPI, Schell Games at Carnegie Mellon, etc. Fairly cheap to start, these start to generate money and student resume lines fairly quickly. However, it needs a studio manager, and this manager would need to do this work in load.
- Reimagine underutilized space. I have already talked about the downtown space. There is one room that was a motion capture room that can be reimagined into a flex space for experimental design, supporting projecting interactive art/games, escape room design, etc. I recommend pulling the mo cap equipment and using this space to support an Experimental Design Hub. Such a hub would also act as a pull for people in other units who might be put off of games but actually want to do funky, expressive, experimental stuff as well

There is so much more that I can write that is excellent and stand out about this program. The Japan study program, the applied AR for cultural sustainability, the motivation and good will of the faculty and students. I was really impressed.

This report synthesizes a lot of information and includes numerous suggestions. If I had to recommend the top five, these would be:

1. Hire a technical game developer, prioritizing a woman or BIPOC
2. Communicate with MassDigi early and integrate their opportunities into the program
3. Introduce an experimental design course
4. Understand the growth goals and proforma for resources
5. Invite a studio in residence and integrate the studio as a resource into the program

These five would be high impact, low time cost, adhering to the strategic goals of your university as an economic driver for the region.

I am happy to have follow up conversations about any of the points that I raise. I have also talked extensively with MassDigi, and they are ready to help as well.