

Reflections on the EURECA Conference and Creatopia day

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I've recently returned home from my fantastic visit to the American University in Cairo, and I got off the plane to find an email waiting from a recent AUC graduate. This graduate noted that he'd been particularly caught by the idea of merging a passion in games with a career, and he wanted to ask if I had any advice for how to get started. This is one of my favorite questions to answer: it's been an unexpected journey from growing up playing video games (often to all hours of the night, and without much regard for my actual homework) and reading novels to talking about the creativity games can embody for exploring ideas here at AUC.

During the EURECA conference, I was fortunate to be part of a panel on the question of research and creativity. One question that concerned us all was the problem of "teaching" creativity, which to me is rather akin to trying to "teach" passion. During that panel, I suggested that there are several stages to creativity: first, we have to understand the systems and ideas around us. Next, we have to use those systems and build our own knowledge within them. Finally, we can break out of the system and do something new.

The first stage of this path to creativity and research is building knowledge, and passion can make the tedious parts of gaining that understanding worth the investment. As a professor, I get to share the things I love all the time, from augmented and alternate reality experiences to esoteric novels, "Choose Your Own Adventure" books, and old-school games like Monkey Island and Day of the Tentacle. I hope that some of these will spark new passion for my students, but I also find that my most creative students are the ones who already come in with a strong love of something that they can merge with the system or learning at hand.

I actually started pulling games into my research as an undergraduate, and it started almost by accident, as I was writing papers about popular culture and avant-garde literature and I kept getting drawn towards the parallels between these topics and gaming. This brought me to the second stage of creativity: I was using the tools of different disciplines to enter into the space of traditional scholarship. Mastering and using systems is important no matter what major a student starts out in, and integrating digital tools, programming, and social media are all required components of a new fundamental literacy that can enable creativity through their expressive potential.

Finally, when we strive to be creative with our research or our work more broadly, we must build on these passions and new knowledge to break the systems we've grown accustomed to. I saw fantastic examples of this step on the creative ladder in action at the Creatopia showcase, with students from outside of game and web design taking their disciplines and interests and expressing them through these new mediums. For me, using creativity in research has meant taking the lens that games offer and turning it on education itself. Games offer ways of exploring ideas through action in spaces that are adaptive, responsive, and friendly to failure: why shouldn't education offer similar opportunities to build passion and find connections between the things a student already loves and the disciplines of the classroom? The cliché advice—"do what you love"—rings hollow in an international economy that is full of challenges. My advice instead, as I responded to the student's email, is to look for the connections between what you love and whatever you are doing, and see if you can find new opportunities to create better experiences for work and learning.

Thanks again to everyone who attended my talks and workshops at AUC. I look forward to hearing from you and seeing more of what you are creating next!