Take the Money and Run? An Ethical Approach to the Relation Between Game Research and Game Industry

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Abstract. This article tries to give some light to the ethical issues concerning the relationship of research and industry in the field of computer game research. No conclusive answers are reached. The ethical issues addressed here concerned basically the independence of academic institutions as a key feature for the quality of research. While the most common ethical approach, *consequentialism*, seems not to provide meaningful answers to this questions, a *deontological* approach seems to be a possible option. Nevertheless, much is yet to be done. Perhaps the most important conclusion of this paper is the relevance of *independence* for the well developing of the discipline.

1 Introduction

The field of Computer Game Research is now living its third year of existence [1]. In these years we have experienced a flourishing of games research centres, masters programs, and associations of researchers. This challenging panorama reveals the emergent interest on computer games from traditional academic institutions.

This paper will provide a basic introduction to different ethical positions that researchers and academia can assume concerning their relation with game industry, a topic not sufficiently well researched yet. This article will focus on some possible economic issues concerning these relations, and their ethical interpretations and consequences.

The theoretical framework of this article is grounded both on the philosophical tradition of ethics, and in its application to Internet Research. Due to its integration of the traditional ethical discourses and the specificities of the digital media, the Association of Internet Researchers' (AoIR) guidelines [5] are a source of inspiration for this paper.

This paper does not intend to give any conclusive answers to the problems that it examines. The ethical research, as far as this paper is concerned, consists on pointing out problematic issues and giving a possible framework for meaningful answers.

2 Game Research – Game Industry: Where Are the Problems?

Where do these ethical issues appear? Given the facts that academic disciplines usually require external funding for their development, not to say an object of study,

and that the computer game industry can actually provide both, it is in that relation where this paper finds its groundings for an ethically framed analysis.

If the role of academia is to develop knowledge independent from funding sources, valuable for the community, its relation with an industry so strongly based on revenues and profit makes questions arise: can computer game research establish interesting relations with computer game industry without loosing independence, and therefore loosing academic credibility? Is it possible for a researcher or an academic institution to receive economic and material support from the industry without compromising their results? Is the industry's need for social acceptance so important that can blur the academic approach to the products they develop, via direct or indirect influence? These are some of the questions that this paper intends to analyze.

3 In the Game for the Pay: Academic Institutions and Game Industry

Academic institutions with a special interest in computer games research face several problems when it comes to their relationships with industry. Among these issues, these seem to be some of the most relevant: The costs of the software are high, and the possibility of an alliance of an academic institution with a publisher might lower those costs. If the academic institution is interested in developing products with research interest, it will need to purchase expensive middleware. Thus, a similar alliance might be considered.

Given the need of social recognition that game industries have, a direct funding of a game research institution might be seen as a win-win situation for both the industry and academia. So far, some conclusions can be drawn: academia might be interested in cooperating with the industry for economic reasons, as the field requires some major expenses in order to achieve excellence in research. On the other hand, computer game industry is interested in this collaboration as it provides both a test bank and a social recognition of which they are very needed.

Applying a consequentialist perspective, it is possible to say that, as long as these relations are inside the boundaries of economic laws, there is no apparent risk of harming individuals, institutions or the research field by agreements between academia and industry. Both would achieve their expectations.

Nevertheless, for academia there are some problems that have to be taken into account. The need for funding might derive in a loss if independence of the field. Some of the possible negative outcomes of these relations are:

- Limitation of the scope of research.
- Becoming an underpaid R&D division of a major company.
- Abuse of the social recognition in publicity for the major funding company.

Given the risks that we have pointed out, a consequentialist approach, following the ethical basic concept of "do no harm", suggests not to relate with game industry unless further discussions clarify the negative outcomes. And even in that case, more negative or unforeseen consequences can tear apart any choice we have taken with an ethical perspective.

This means that, despite the interesting mapping of the future that consequentialism suggests, it is not a reasonable exclusive ethical framework for the developing of a new academic field in relation with industry. Even though it is useful, it cannot be let alone to answer all the ethical issues in this field. A broader, complementary perspective seems to be necessary.

This approach, though, has revealed one of the most relevant ethical issues concerning this relationship between game research and game industry: the independence of academic research. In order to create knowledge an academic institution shall (or should) be at least partially independent from the source of its research. If that independence is threatened, then the value and the prestige of the research may be damaged. It is not risky to say that independence is a key component of academic identity.

4 Deontology: The Need for Codes

So far, this article has focused on a consequentialist ethics approach to the relations between game research and game industry. The limitations of consequentialist ethics call for a new perspective. But first of all, it is needed to explain more clearly the main problem that this brief research on the ethics of game research has pointed out: the independence of academic milieus.

Academia is traditionally considered an independent source for knowledge. Despite their focus on industrial and economic items, academic research must preserve a certain kind of integrity to have their results validated as valuable knowledge. If an academic institution's independence is threatened by the possible collaboration with companies that seek for economic benefit, the usual responses are to moderate, or annul, that cooperation.

In the case of computer game research, the establishing of a relation with industry seems to offer great possibilities to develop the emerging field. The threat to independence, though, is still present. A positive ethical approach would try to deal with this issue in order to provide a framework in which both institutions and industry could benefit from the collaboration, without loosing identity.

The answer this paper suggests to this issue is derived from the application of deontological ethics to other fields of research, like medicine or Internet Research. Deontological ethics assumes that every person has a set of rights and duties to follow in order to justify ethically their decisions. If the individual sets his or her actions within this framework, then the choices taken have a substantial moral ground, despite the possible negative outcome they might have.

Therefore, a suggested ethical approach to solve the issues concerning game research relations with game industry is the elaboration of a deontological code including the ethical issues that are debated, and how the researchers can act upon them. In other words, game research as a discipline is in need of a deontological code, which may contribute to clearing and solving the problem concerning independence as threatened by possible collaboration with the industry.

What does this need tell us about computer game research as a discipline? To ensure the health and prosperity of the discipline, an ethical ground is needed. It is

time for game research to start developing and identity beyond the mere object of study, reflecting upon itself and the possible consequences in the academic panorama. Only then infancy will be over, and computer game research will become a mature, well-defined discipline.

5 Conclusions

This article has tried to give some light to the ethical issues concerning the relationship of research and industry in the field of computer game research. No conclusive answers were reached, but the outlines for the future can be relevant in future discussions on the topic.

The ethical issues addressed here concerned basically the independence of academic institutions as a key feature for the quality of research. While the most common ethical approach, consequentialism, seems not to provide meaningful answers to this questions, a deontological approach, imitating the relevance that the ethical guidelines have in other research fields, seems to be a possible option for the future.

Nevertheless, much is yet to be done in this young field of research. Perhaps the most important conclusion of this paper is the relevance of independence for the well developing of the discipline. Many mistakes were done in other research fields in the past. As game researchers, we have the unique possibility to foresee problems, and act before they become unsolvable. That is also a part of becoming a relevant, meaningful academic field.

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