
On Chairing a Games Research Conference

Jose P. Zagal

INTRODUCTION

Chairing an academic conference, especially one like DiGRA, is a great honor and a great responsibility: it grants you a fair amount of power, at least for a short amount of time. I thought I would take advantage of that power and this platform to share my personal thoughts and opinions on what it means to run an academic conference in this field. In doing so I hope to clarify some of the things that, to me at least, were opaque about the process of chairing a conference. While I knew that chairing was a lot of work, understanding what that work was, how things should be done, and why they should be done a certain way was not clear to me until I was in the middle of it all. I hope that what follows serves two purposes: (1) clarify some of what is involved in chairing a conference in hopes that others (including students and new members to the field) can better understand some of the practices of this academic community and (2) encourage reflection and discussions on our practices and how they could be improved.

I am under no illusion that my opinions (and actions) are the “best” or “only” way to do things. However, I think that we, as a community, should allow ourselves more opportunities to reflect on our practices. We have gathered, under this “tent” we call games research, a wide variety of scholars who come from an equally diverse set of scholarly traditions. Different communities do things differently for a variety of reasons. We find ourselves (in games research) in a position where we can pick and choose to do what we feel is best for our community.

The challenge is that we have to pick and choose things that make sense for everyone involved as well as the field in general.

But more on that later.

For now, allow me to briefly describe my history with games research and its academic community in order to provide some context for what will follow.

I have been participating in games research since the late 1990s but only became aware of the game studies academic community in the 2000s while pursuing my PhD degree. I have attended all the primary DiGRA conferences since Vancouver in 2005. I have been a volunteer for the organization since about that time as well. Initially I served as “Coordinator” (updating the website with news items, something I continue to do) and from 2006 onwards I have worked as a member of DiGRA’s executive board. In addition to serving as conference chair for DiGRA 2014 (with Roger Altizer), I served as conference chair for the 2015 edition of the Foundations of Digital Games Conference (FDG) – a sister conference and allied community to DiGRA. DiGRA’s 2016 conference will be jointly held with FDG). Again, I only bring this up to establish that I’ve been around DiGRA for a while now in a variety of roles and capacities.

HOW DIGRA ORGANIZES ITS CONFERENCE

One of DiGRA’s primary activities is the organization of a yearly conference. The decision that a conference should be held is made by DiGRA’s board who then distribute a “Call for Hosts”. This call allows people who would like to host a DiGRA conference identify themselves (to the board) and make a case for why they should be the ones to organize it. While the call is open, it is often the case that members of the board will contact people they think might be interested in hosting as well. In my experience, while there may be a handful of interested parties, you usually end up with only one or two complete applications. The board then reviews the applications, talks to the potential hosts to suggest changes or clarify things, makes

a decision, and then signs a contract with the hosts to clarify each party's responsibilities. The hosts are also referred to as the local organizers and the *Conference Chair* (or general chair in other fields) is one of them.

The final decision on who the conference host will be is based on a combination of factors. I would say the primary ones include: how well-known, respected, and trusted the local organizers are; how much support the local team can count on; where the last conference was held; ease of access to the venue/location; and the expected expense of the conference to attendees. Some guiding principles include:

- Ideally, the conference should move around (different continents) to allow a broader diversity of attendees.
- The conference is not conceived as a significant revenue stream for the organization. Thus, registration should be kept as low as possible (while covering all the expenses). Cheaper registration for students is also expected.
- The conference is an opportunity to encourage local interest and scholarship in game studies.

The host selection process for DiGRA 2014 was different than usual. As early as 2008, DiGRA's board (I was on the board at this time) had been trying to transition to a yearly conference schedule. The plan was for DiGRA's yearly schedule to begin in 2010 following the 2009 conference hosted by Brunel University in West London, UK. Unfortunately this was not possible, but the biennial calendar was maintained with DiGRA 2011 (Hilversum, The Netherlands). We (DiGRA's board) were unsuccessful in going yearly again (for 2012), but fortunately Georgia Institute of Technology was able to host DiGRA 2013 (Atlanta, Georgia, USA). Having failed twice to establish a yearly schedule, the board decided to forgo the public call for hosts and instead entertained two board-member suggested alternatives for hosting DiGRA 2014. After internal discussion, the

2014 DiGRA bid went to Snowbird, Utah (hosted by the University of Utah's Entertainment Arts and Engineering Program). Now that the yearly calendar has been established the usual open calls for hosts have resumed with DiGRA 2015 hosted by Leuphana University in Lüneburg, Germany and the next host (2016) will be Abertay University in Dundee Scotland.

HOW THE CHAIR SHAPES THE CONFERENCE

The academic program is the heart of an academic conference. It is where we learn about each other's work and where we establish our academic reputations and careers. The conference's academic program consists of all the papers and presentations at the conference that went through a formal submission process, were peer-reviewed anonymously, and were discussed and accepted by the conference *program committee*. The people in charge of the call, review, and selection processes are the *Program Chairs*. DiGRA usually has two program chairs one of whom served as program chair for the previous conference. This allows for institutional knowledge to be informally preserved and passed on. The Program Chair's job is to make sure that the academic program is of the highest quality, that all the papers go through a rigorous and fair blind peer review process (by assigning and recruiting reviewers), and that the resulting selection of papers and presentations represents the best work being done in the community. Despite the importance of the academic program, it is important to keep in mind that:

The Conference Chair has nothing to do with the Academic Program

My job, as *Conference Chair*, was to ensure that (1) the conference was great, (2) lots of people came to the conference, and (3) we didn't lose any money. The financial side of things is the main reason why the conference chair is not involved in the academic program (not even as a reviewer): there's a conflict of interest. Bluntly put, the conference chair wants high acceptance rates (presumably so more people will attend the conference) while the program chair wants low acceptance rates (presumably for a higher quality program). While

some academic communities are large enough that they can enjoy both really low acceptance rates and large attendance conferences, this is not currently the case in games research. So, the conference chair needs to coordinate closely with the program chairs because the financial viability of the conference is significantly in their hands – not only in terms of how many people will attend, but also because the program will determine many of the conferences’ significant expenses (e.g. need to rent space and A/V equipment).

As a side note, being chair of the conference also introduces an additional issue: is it ethical for a conference chair to submit their own research to the conference they are running? The academic integrity issue (e.g. was a paper accepted because the author was the conference chair?) can be handled appropriately via the anonymous review process. However, because the conference chair determines the schedule, there are other opportunities for abuse (e.g. cherry-picking the best time slots for his/her own presentations). However, even when managed correctly, it is still possible for people to get the wrong impression. Thus, I think it is best for the conference chairs to not submit their work to the conference they are chairing when they are the primary author. I recognize that the cost of doing so can be significant in terms of their own research productivity. It is also a thorny issue when considering co-author situations, a conference chair who does not submit their co-authored work to a conference is also denying the opportunity of doing so to their students, advisees, and collaborators.

Even if a conference chair has not submitted anything to the academic program, he/she still has other means for shaping the overall “feel” of the conference. For example,

The Conference Chair Decides the Theme of the Conference

While the board needs to approve it, in practice the local organizers have a lot of freedom in deciding on the theme of the conference. An attractive (interesting, topical, etc.) theme can draw people to the conference who might not otherwise attend and it serves as a way of

setting a research agenda for the community. Conference themes are generally broad and inclusive.

I am not sure how much theme matters in the end. DiGRA 2013's theme was "Defragging Game Studies" and I do not know how many people registered because of the theme, or how many people wrote papers addressing or inspired by the theme. I'll admit that for 2014, I was surprised by the number of submissions that reflected, in their titles at least, the theme of the conference "<Active Noun> the <Verb> of game <Plural Noun>". Roger Altizer, myself, and some of our local staff/volunteers decided that our theme should be playfully generic so as to offer light commentary (a quip, if you will) on conference themes. In hindsight this was a bad idea because the use of "<" and ">" caused some technical issues later on. On the other hand, Ian Bogost created a Twitter bot (@DiGRAThemes) that is still actively creating new conference themes so I guess that was a win.

In addition to the theme, the conference chair also shapes the conference by deciding what happens when. In other words,

The Conference Chair Sets the Schedule

While the dates of the conference are discussed at length with DiGRA's board, the day-to-day schedule is entirely in the hands of the conference chair. I would describe the process of putting together the schedule as a logistical nightmare rather than a wonderful tool for "setting an agenda". In a nutshell you have to group papers/presentations into sessions using limited space (and time) in such a way that each session makes sense (or is coherent) and no laws of physics are violated (e.g. someone can't be in two places at the same time). On the surface this doesn't seem too difficult – the submission process requires that people submit their work to specific tracks, so grouping papers by tracks might be a good place to start. However I think that this can lead to missed opportunities for interaction. In larger conferences (i.e. those with multiple parallel sessions) with clearly delineated tracks/themes I've found that attendees will identify a track as "their track" and only attend those sessions. Doing

so can discourage some of the serendipity that I find so valuable when I hear a talk about work that was unexpected to me and even perhaps slightly outside of my comfort zone simply because it was related somehow to another talk I was interested in attending.

For DiGRA2014 (and also FDG2015) I implemented an “open card sorting” style method for organizing the sessions. I printed the title of each accepted submission on a slip of paper and then, together with a group of staff/volunteers we iteratively organized the slips of paper into piles or groups that “seemed to go together”. I didn’t provide any explicit instructions other than to try to get to groups that “made sense” (without explaining what that meant). Once that was done, I distributed the groups (now “sessions”) over the various days and times. My goal was to stay within the constraints I had and also try to “spread things out” such that there was a variety of topics, themes, etc. distributed over the entire duration of the conference. I wanted to avoid having, for example, all of the “games and education” papers on the first day. Surprisingly, for me at least, one of the greatest challenges in creating the schedule was dealing with all of the requests for changes as well as the people who withdrew their submissions from the program. This led to a lot of shuffling around to ensure “full” sessions while also maintaining the hard work in grouping presentations into sessions.

Based on feedback I received during and after the conference, it seems to have worked well in meeting these goals:

1. Session attendees should understand why presentations in a session are together (even if that “sense” is different for each attendee)
2. Highlight the diversity of game research by distributing presentations on similar themes, topics, etc. over the entire conference
3. Encourage opportunities for cross- and inter- disciplinary

interactions (i.e. serendipitously running into a presentation you weren't originally interested in)

In addition to deciding the schedule of the academic program sessions, there are other items on the schedule that a conference chair can leverage,

The Conference Chair is Responsible for Social Events

I am of the opinion that the more events there are (ideally something every evening), the better. The role of these events varies, but generally includes creating opportunities for attendees to meet and network with each other, providing an opportunity for a memorable experience (usually one that takes advantage of a local resource/attraction), and providing an opportunity for attendees to participate in a field-related activity they might not have the chance to engage in otherwise. Which events make the most sense for a particular DiGRA conference will vary depending on the location and opportunities available. Below are some events that I think have been successful in the past:

1. **Graduate Student Mixer** – this is usually held the night before the conference starts officially. It's usually organized by DiGRA's student representatives and generally consists of meeting at a bar (or similar venue) for drinks. Drink tickets are generally available for DiGRA students though non-students also participate.
2. **Boardgame Night** – play board games into the early hours. Attendees usually bring games they'd like to play, though it helps when there are some games available. Also, people often bring prototype games for playtesting and feedback.

3. **Conference Game Jam** – attendees, usually in groups, design and develop a game in a very short period of time. This is a great opportunity to engage with, and practice game design and development.

4. **Tour/Visit Local Venue of Interest** – normally this is something like a visit to a local museum or gallery, but it can also include visits to a local game studio or a historical venue.

While I have had plenty of wonderful experiences at “Conference Banquets” in the past, I have found that these events sometimes flounder when they require separate registration (and payment) because they can create a division between the conference attendees. On the other hand, providing catered social events with an open bar (even if limited to a short amount of time) can present a significant financial burden to the conference organizers. In that sense, I think it’s better to have a fewer events so long as they are open to all, rather than more events requiring additional payment/registration.

In addition to the social events,

The Conference Chair Decides who the Keynote Speakers Should Be

I think that DiGRA’s conferences generally work well with three keynote speakers where each fulfills different roles in the conference program:

1. **The Insider** speaker is someone who is well-known in the community and the field and whose work is valued and respected. This speaker’s keynote will hopefully inspire and speak to the field at large – perhaps outline future directions of inquiry, discuss current “big picture” issues, or reflect on

the past in a way that re-focuses the present and looks to the future.

2. **The Outsider** speaker is someone who isn't a member of the community but whose work might be of interest or significance to the community. They are often "senior" or important members of another field. This speaker's role is one of bridge-building: help establish connections between areas or communities that might not otherwise be aware of each other. Their work, while not necessarily about games, might be useful or interesting to game researchers.

3. **The Industry** speaker is also an outsider of sorts. This speaker can provide the academic community with insights from their professional practice. It is also a bridge-building keynote, but this time between industry and academia.

There are other concerns that need to be taken into account when selecting and inviting keynote speakers. For instance, there are financial considerations: the conference generally covers speakers' travel and accommodation expenses, and sometimes a modest honorarium. Past keynotes are also important: having "repeat" speakers from prior conferences is usually not good. Similarly, speaker diversity is important.

A third area of influence the conference chairs can use to affect the academic feel of the conference lies in events and sessions that lie outside of the regular academic program.

The Conference Chair can Organize, Invite, Include Things that are Outside of the Regular Academic Program

By inviting people to organize "special interest" sessions, the conference chair can complement the main academic program. It is

also a good way to boost registration numbers by drawing attendees who would not have otherwise attended.

DiGRA2014 hosted a *Well-Played Summit* that featured close readings and explorations of exceptional play created by a single game, an *RPG Summit* featuring research focused on role-playing games and opportunities to play indie tabletop RPGs, and a creative games showcase, *The Blank Arcade Exhibit*. These special-interest events were organized by Sean Duncan, David Simkins, and Lindsay Grace respectively. They each managed their own submission, peer-review, and selection process. In a sense, these were mini-academic programs that ran alongside the main conference program and as such they had their own proceedings.

These “special program” events and sessions serve an important role for the community. First, they provide a space for special-interest groups to gather and create community (e.g. the RPG Summit gathered RPG scholars). Second, they allow for the community to experiment with new and different presentation formats outside of the traditional papers and posters. Finally, they provide a way to increase diversity in terms of styles of scholarship and work. The Blank Arcade served this role by attracting artists and practitioners for whom the usual submission categories (paper or abstract) don’t make sense. Experimenting with additional conference submission formats is important. In fact, the call for papers for DiGRA 2014 included the following:

Conference Event Submission

DiGRA 2014 understands that no call can accommodate all types of research. We believe that there is excellent research and scholarship happening in the spaces between the formats we traditionally offer. We are happy to consider submissions not listed above, for example tutorials, performances, or an experimental session. Many participants in the past have asked, “why don’t they do a blank” at DiGRA. This is an invitation to fill in the blank.

One of the conference events from DiGRA 2014 serves as a nice example for why this matters. “The Playful is Political: A Fishbowl Conversation on Identity and Diversity in Game Culture” was a session organized and hosted by Shira Chess and Adrienne Shaw. It consisted of a facilitated discussion where seats were arranged in two concentric circles. In a fishbowl discussion, the people sitting in the inner circle of seats (the fishbowl) have a discussion while those on the outside listen and observe. During the session people on the outside can change positions with those in the center and thus join in the discussion. As a participant, your location in the room (outer/inner circle) signals your role in the discussion (listener/discussant). As a technique, fishbowl discussions are easier for moderators to manage. The topic of discussion in this session was, as the title suggests, identity and diversity in game culture (including game academia).

After the conference was over, this session came to the (mostly angry) attention of the online movement GamerGate. I think this was in due in part because of the format of the session: it was a space for discussion that afforded note-taking and, more importantly, a desire amongst attendees to share notes after the session. This led to it being a more “discoverable” event than what it might have been had it been say, a paper presentation or a panel.

This is probably the first time that DiGRA, as an organization, has drawn significant attention from the general public. It is probably also the first time that significant portions of the collective research output of the games research community (in this case, the proceedings and contents of DiGRA’s digital library) have come under question, scrutiny, and comment. While it is unclear what, if any, the results of “Operation Digging DiGRA[1]” will be, the repercussions of that attention, both positive and negative, and both collectively and individually, will probably be felt and discussed for years. As Antonsen and colleagues noted, this experience is “a striking example of an interest group (gamers) engaging with academic work about their lives (game studies) to question the role of this research” (Antonsen, Ask, and Karlstrøm 2014).

While this unexpected attention to our academic community is leading to more scholarly work (e.g. Heron, Belford, and Goker 2014; Chess and Shaw 2015; Flöck et al. 2015; Kendall-Morwick 2015; Massanari 2015; Todd 2015; Richard 2015), it also provides us an excuse to reflect on how we interact and communicate our work with potential audiences who are not ourselves. These additional audiences might include game industry professionals, game fanatics, players of games in general, but could also be perceived more broadly, and widely. What happens when an audience, one you might not even have been addressing, speaks back? Bogost speaks of the challenges of being a “public intellectual” (Bogost 2010), but being an intellectual addressable and reachable by the public, perhaps a “public” you have no intention of engaging with, is a different matter entirely. Apologies to Nietzsche, but nowadays you need not stare into the abyss for it to stare back at you. What role, if any, should our conferences play in this?

WHAT HAPPENS AFTER THE CONFERENCE

Once the conference is over, it’s not yet time to rest. First of all, it’s necessary to settle all the accounts and see how things ended. For DiGRA 2014, it was good news, thanks in part to some last-minute sponsorship support, the conference did not incur a loss. In fact, we were able to spend more money (at the last minute) providing additional (and better) catering options to the attendees. While I don’t really know if these numbers are “normal” for DiGRA conferences, I thought I’d share them anyways:

- 49% of the registered participants were students.
- 70% of the expenses were venue-related. This includes AV, catering, and also the tram tickets provided on the last day of the conference.
- 20% of the venue expenses were for AV, pretty much everything else was food. From later experience (chairing

FDG2015), AV is the “line item” with the most variance across venues.

- Only 10% of the expenses were related to our keynote speakers. This is probably lower than usual because we were lucky to have a few local speakers who didn’t require airfare.
- We only spent 6% of the money on the registration materials: conference bag, USB stick, water bottle, etc.
- Income from registration was only 73% of our budget. Getting good sponsors can really make a difference.

As a final note,

The Conference Chair is Responsible for the Special Issue of ToDiGRA

While this last point is somewhat self-evident given that you’re reading this, I think that its implications are also worth mentioning. Conference websites come and go, and conference proceedings are de-emphasized in favor of the individual papers that were presented. I imagine that most people don’t remember who chaired a particular conference if it happened more than a few years ago. So, being in charge of a special issue of a journal such as the *Transactions of the Digital Games Research* (ToDiGRA) provides me with a chance to have “a last word” as it were: I can provide a record that will be archived and preserved. In doing so I can reflect upon the conference as a whole and perhaps argue for how I would like for it to be remembered and referred to.

I can do that via editorials such as this one or through invited pieces such as “We Are All Fishes Now: DiGRA, Feminism, and GamerGate” by Shira Chess and Adrienne Shaw.

So, how would I like for people to remember DiGRA 2014? DiGRA 2014 wasn’t a large conference, it was rather small by DiGRA

standards. Perhaps because it was in a somewhat secluded location, up in the Wasatch mountains, it was unusually cozy, friendly, and also productive. Great talks, great research, and great ideas and new collaborations for future work.

Thanks for reading.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I'd like to thank everyone who participated and helped in making DiGRA 2014 a success. Additionally, I feel that I owe a debt of gratitude to all those who have made earlier DiGRA conferences a success, a lot of what I have written about above comes from my experiences at these conferences. Thanks!

END NOTES

[1] “Operation Digging DiGRA” is/was a collective effort by the GamerGate members to download, distribute, read, and “peer-review” the entirety of the contents of DiGRA’s digital library.

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