

## Tenure Review Statement: Dr Kurt Squire

### Reviewer: Dr Colin Lankshear

I have met Dr Squire, briefly, face to face on one occasion at an AERA conference after he had presented a session. We talked for maybe 10 minutes. Aside from that I have communicated with him briefly by email in relation to the journal *E-Learning*, to which I recruited him as an associate editor 4 years ago. I recommended him to the editorial team of the about-to-be-published *Handbook of Research on New Literacies* (Erlbaum, March 2008) as a potential author for a chapter on video games literacy. He was contracted to do the chapter and submitted an outstanding piece of work. Instead, I know Dr Squire through his work, at distance, having been pointed in his direction by my colleague James Gee at the time Dr Squire was first appointed to the University of Wisconsin-Madison. In short, I know Dr Squire as a producer and co-producer/collaborator of what I regard as the very best work currently being produced from a sociocultural perspective at the intersection of games, digital media, learning and literacy.

In order to contextualize and understand how it is that a relatively early career professor can already be looking as a major force in his field(s) it is helpful to consider the capacities that Dr Squire brings to his work. He is truly multifaceted. His insider knowledge of games and games design and development put him pretty much on a par with major forces in the games design industry, like Eric Zimmerman and Katie Salen. In conjunction with his general programming capacity with computing technologies, this puts Dr Squire at a huge advantage when it comes to more conventional research. He can create his own interventions with finesse and on the basis of deep knowledge and understanding. At the same time, his longstanding hands-on grounding in games design means that among the legions of sociocultural theorists invoking “design” right now Dr Squire is someone who can and does talk about it in non-trivial ways. He puts teeth into the concept of design. For him, design is not concerned with making minor decisions about word choices or grammatical placements, or minor semiotic tinkering. For Dr Squire, design involves systemic wholes, and these wholes extend to the design of coherent and efficacious situated learning contexts: the number one thing the educational world needs to address competently. Dr Squire also brings with him long and deep experience as an insider to a range of popular cultural and otherwise media-based social practices, in which participants have to learn long and deeply in order to achieve expertise. His insider status positions him acutely for being able to do the kind of ethnographic work that provides the basis for attempting innovations and creative interventions in behalf of learning. To the best of my knowledge Dr Squire was not to any extent an ethnographer prior to taking up his current appointment. But in short order he has developed the capacity to generate exquisite data to guide developmental work at the level of developing learning contexts and resources. He also brings a powerful understanding of theory from games studies and from learning to his work. Some of this he acquired as a natural accompaniment of his engagement in games culture. The rest, doubtless, has been acquired in the role of being an academic researcher. But with strong pegs already in place on which to hang new theoretical hats, Dr Squire has reached a point of broad-based theoretical sophistication across the fields of learning science, sociocultural literacy studies, and situated cognition that, in my view, is breathtaking. He is an extremely well-endowed researcher, and we are now seeing the results of that in his work.

A notable feature of Dr Squire's intellectual production is the large number of works currently in press and recently submitted. He has already published in highly prestigious mainstream education forums, like the *Journal of the Learning Sciences*, *Phi Delta Kappan*, *Educational Researcher* and *Educational Technology* (with a paper in the *Teacher's College Record* imminent) at an impressive rate since beginning his tenure at Wisconsin. In addition to work in these landmark journals he has published widely in a range of leading journals outside the field of education. He has been publishing around 6 or 7 cutting edge papers in high class journals each year with around 10 further articles and book chapters currently in press. This trend will continue and, if anything, expand, as he develops a larger research based and wider collaborations to sustain it. He has at least two high quality books immanent in his work, and I expect to see these within two or three years. His research and publishing track record is outstanding and enviable. The way he keeps conceptualization and theorizing to the foreground is impressive – he is already breaking substantial new theoretical ground around how learning occurs through performance in rule-based worlds of games, as well as extending the evolving concept of “self-organizing entities” (which has mutated in many interesting ways since its origins in the 1950s to its more recent appropriations in complexity theory) to understanding gaming communities. He is a clear and fruitful thinker, and a careful and innovative researcher who will go from strength to strength in the years immediately ahead. My best guess is that when in 2020 scholars are looking at research that impacted on changes in classrooms in the previous decade Kurt Squire's name will feature prominently.

To get a sense of where he stands in relation to peers on an international level, I would say that without question he is at the leading edge of games studies in relation to educational learning. I cannot think of anyone doing more influential research. His immediate colleague, David Shaffer, is a good benchmark here. I would not want to differentiate between them in terms of capacity and potential. These are “academics to die for” and will be in huge demand in the years ahead. James Gee is an obvious leading figure at the games and learning interface, but the contributions to his work of colleagues like Drs Squire, Shaffer and Halverson are palpable and acknowledged – such is the nature of healthy productive collaboration. I guess current leaders in the simulations design area like Clark Aldrich thus far remain in their own league. But Dr Squire has the capacity to make an equal contribution to our knowledge and understanding of the learning potential of games/simulations from the standpoint of his own (more complex) set of theoretical and research interfaces. At the interface of gaming and literacy Dr Squire is a leader. His account of video games literacy will provide the benchmark for some years, and if anyone is going to improve on his account it is likely to be Dr Squire himself.

Perhaps the best way I can give a sense of how I see Dr Squire's work is by comparison with a case from England that has been critiqued by James Gee (2008). This involved an attempt to develop an augmented reality game using hand held computers. The game in question involved young people learning about how lions live in their environment by moving across an open grassy space that, with the augmenting effect of handheld computers, was designed to evoke a sense of living as a lion in the savannah. Gee's critique went to the heart of a problem in the game conception that the designers themselves had wrestled with: namely, the distinction between experiencing “being a lion” and experiencing “being a lion ecologist”. Gee found many strengths and insights in the game, but he fastened strongly onto a crippling ambiguity at the

heart of the game. This is precisely the kind of ambiguity that Dr Squire's games involving learners role playing professionals investigating fictional but plausible dilemmas in their own communities avoids from the very outset. This puts Dr Squire considerably ahead of many well known colleagues working in the same broad field. In my estimation his work is cutting edge in terms of developing approaches to and theorizing about designing games for learning and supporting productive pedagogies by means of simulation gaming. This is a new field and he is at the head of it.

Finally, as I have already intimated, it is impossible to make a responsible judgment of Dr Squire's research contribution without considering his contribution as a collaborator and supporter of other people's research. Dr Squire's role in the life of the impressive Games + Learning + Society group at Madison has been crucial. Others have supported his work and he has supported the work of others. From what I have seen he has been absolutely dynamic and inspirational in this work. He has shown himself capable of working well with other people: of going along with them and taking them along with him. He is a natural co-leader and collaborator, and I expect the GPS focus to grow and thrive in the years ahead, and this will very much reflect the presence of Dr Squire and the research talents and commitments he brings to his context.

If you will excuse a colloquialism, in many ways the case of Dr Squire's tenure review looks to me like a "no brainer". The matter seems to me to be cut and dried: a young academic at the leading edge of an influential and growing field that will be of massive importance to the immediate future of education. If such a person is not an obvious candidate for tenure, my question would be "Then who is?" I have enormous respect for Dr Squire's work and, truth be known, would count the contributions he has already made to his field to be the superior of any I may have made to my own field after three decades of doing the best I can. This man is a serious talent and his best still lies before him.

## Reference

Gee, J. (2008). Being a lion and being a soldier. Chapter 34 in J. Coiro, M. Knobel, C. Lankshear and D, Leu (eds.). *Handbook of Research on New Literacies*. New York: Erlbaum/Taylor & Francis.



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