

Jay Lemke
Educational Studies



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Michael J. Streibel
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225 N. Mills Street
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Dear Prof. Streibel,

It is with pleasure that I respond to your request for an evaluation of the materials of Dr. Kurt Squire and his suitability for promotion and tenure in your department.

I have known Kurt Squire for several years, since just after he completed his dissertation, when he was in fact a candidate for a tenure-track position here. I found his work unusually creative and compelling at the time, though our committee preferred an internal candidate, and Kurt went, happily I think for you, to Wisconsin. Since that time, I have participated in two of the highly successful Games, Learning, and Society conferences which Kurt co-organized, and I have attended a number of presentations he has given at AERA and elsewhere, as well as followed his work and writing in print and through direct contacts once or twice a year.

Kurt's work was also commended to me by my old friend, Jim Gee, who worked with Kurt, as you know for a time in Madison. My own interests initially were in computer games as innovations in multimedia, testbeds for the extensions of discourse analysis methods via multimodal semiotics I was then working on in the analysis of NASA science websites. Both Jim's and Kurt's work convinced me there was far more potential in games as models for virtual learning environments than I had at first imagined. Kurt's work with Civilization, a world-history simulation game, in classroom contexts both demonstrated this potential and also confirmed to me that integrating the classroom learning paradigm and that of the web or virtual worlds was the real challenge for the future.

What Kurt and many others have since established, and his work has been leading and central to this, is that students can and do learn a great deal, both factually and critically, through participation in virtual worlds (especially multi-player worlds with significant social interaction as well as learning design), but that they do not always learn what it is we initially intended for them to learn. In his more recent work, I think Kurt has recognized and argued that it is the educational system that needs to learn a lesson here. That imposing the content, pacing, and direction of learning on students is counter-productive, and that we need to design more open learning environments in which much can and will be learned, but with the details more according to the choices made by students learning to guide and direct their own learning. This is a significant challenge, not only to straitjacket models of curriculum, but to our own ingenuity in designing new kinds of learning environments and new ways to assess the value of what is learned.

Kurt's efforts to understand both the nature of learning in designed virtual environments and the design process itself have been well-grounded both empirically and theoretically. He relies on sociocultural models of learning, and on learning and identity theory, both of which are particularly appropriate for the kind of learning he studies. He has created a large number of case studies, each focused on revealing a particular aspect of social learning in virtual environments. Most recently he has worked with well-known collaborators outside Wisconsin on the more complex case of social learning in so-called 'augmented reality' environments, in which layers of fictional context are added onto real-world environments, while new media technologies lend further support and scaffolding to social interaction and the development of joint problem-solving and logical argumentation skills.

Taken as a whole, his research comprises an unusually coherent program of inquiry, while also ranging more broadly over traditional curricular domains (history, literacy and media, science and environment) than more specialized early-career scholars usually attempt. I find it also significant and laudable that in many cases his work has sought to engage the participation, and work to the benefit of school-age students who are often under-served by our schools. In more narrowly academic terms, the significance and scholarly quality of his work is recognized by its publication in such top-tier journals as *TC Record*, *Educational Researcher*, *Journal of the Learning Sciences*, and *Cognition & Instruction*. His work in those venues is widely known and becoming significantly influential in our field. Attendance at sessions at AERA in which he presents consistently by far overflows the room.

In comparison to his peers, only Constance Steinkuehler would present a comparable body of work in terms of quantity and significance (luckily for you at Wisconsin!). Others with whom a comparison could be made, such as Yasmin Kafai at UCLA, are considerably more senior. It is in fact difficult to decide who Kurt's peer community ought to include. In terms of theoretically informed work on social learning and new media, I think of Kevin Leander at Vanderbilt, but Kevin does not work on computer games or centrally on technology designs and learning. Or Mimi Ito, for new technologies and social learning communities outside of schools, but she is primarily an ethnographer of new media communities. Similarly with Rebecca Black (another Wisconsin PhD). To be counted in this company, by any criteria, is high academic praise indeed. However, I would frame the peer group, Kurt would be among the top half-dozen early-career scholars in it in the nation. I can also say that his work is well-known and well-regarded internationally, particularly in the European Union, where academic game studies is a more mature and prestigious field than it is yet here in the US, and where new media and education is a central emphasis of policy and funding.

The support for Kurt's work from the MacArthur Foundation and the Department of Education should also be gratifying to his colleagues in Madison, as well as the prospect of further funding in this emerging field from MacArthur's major commitment and hopefully others as the lesson begins to sink in that radically new educational options based on solid research are urgently needed.

Having served on both the promotions and executive review committees School-wide here at Michigan, I can say with assurance that were he a candidate for promotion and tenure here, I would be strongly supporting his case based on the significance of his research program, his record of scholarly contributions since the dissertation, both for content and prestige, and his record of merit in funded research competitions. I would also be reminding my colleagues, from my personal knowledge and collegial networks, that Kurt Squire would be much in demand by many other peer institutions seeking to build up strong new programs in his emerging research area. I cannot comment on Kurt's teaching, though I know him to be an effective communicator with peers and to have good relationships with graduate students with whom he works and who admire him.

In sum, I highly recommend Kurt Squire to you as deserving your support for his promotion to Associate Professor with tenure in your department.

With best regards,

Jay L. Lemke [digital signature]

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