Final Teaching Sabbatical report
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Introduction:

My teaching sabbatical was hosted by the Technology, Culture and Society (TCS) department of the Polytechnic School of Engineering at New York University. My appointment as visiting faculty at NYU was from August 1-December 31 2014. I was based at the recently inaugurated Media and Games Network (MAGNET) facility in Brooklyn, which serves as the focus for NYU's activities in new media and game design, combining faculty and programs from the Tisch School of the Arts, the Polytechnic School of Engineering, and the Steinhardt School of Education.

1. Preparation and planning:

My host was the dean of the TCS department Kris Day, and my initial contact was with her. Kris' assistant Paulette Bancroft handled a number of the paperwork issues, including getting me an ID card and online access, as well as my appointment letter. Kris also directed me to others in the Integrated Digital Media (IDM) program who were more actively involved in planning my stay: Eric Maiello (Education Coordinator), and Luke duBois and DeAngela Duff (Directors of the IDM program). Kris remained available for higher-level questions, and proved invaluable in helping us work out difficulties that came up during our time at NYU.

I negotiated my teaching duties with Eric Maiello, and requested to co-teach a class. He recommended that I co-teach the elective undergraduate class *Intro to Game Development.* I also offered to teach masters level classes associated with the thesis project.

I visited NYU during early April 2014 to meet with my hosts and co-teacher Robert Yang, as well as Brian MacMillan, who was then responsible for the masters thesis project. We roughed in my teaching responsibilities, and I was also able to take a look at a potential apartment rental through AirBnB, and to discuss enrolling our children in the public school system at the New York City Public Schools enrollment office.

2. Tasks and responsibilities:

As negotiated with Eric, my duties were to co-teach *Intro to Game Development,* a 3 credit elective course in the IDM program, with instructor Robert Yang. Various other responsibilities were discussed during my planning visit, including helping to run a regular seminar for the masters students, supervising thesis projects, and contributing to a 3D class, but, for various reasons (including staffing changes), none of these opportunities materialized.

3. Activities during the semester:

Besides co-teaching my class, my activities during the semester included participating in TCS and IDM program activities, including the IDM faculty and student welcome events. I also participated in research activities, both at the NYU Game Center (a part of the NYU Tisch School of the Arts), as well as at other universities in the northeast.

1. I participated in a MAGNET game studies research seminar organized by Clara Fernandez-Vara, in which I served as respondent to a paper written by Ph.D. student Aaron Isaacsson,
2. I visited professor Tom Igoe at the NYU/Tisch ITP program, as well as researcher Kaho Abe at the NYU School of Engineering Innovation lab.
3. I gave talks on my research at Parsons/The New School for Design in NYC, as well as at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) Comparative Media Studies department and at Northeastern University in the Boston area.
4. I visited the Game Lab in the department of Cinema Studies at the University of Montréal.
5. I attended the *Practice* game design conference, hosted by the NYU/Tisch Game Center (Nov. 15-16).

4. Important lessons from my sabbatical at NYU:

One of the chief goals for my sabbatical was to reinvigorate my foundational game design teaching in the company of outstanding colleagues and students at NYU, and this objective was more than fulfilled. I have taught introduction to game design classes at Malmö University for 10 years, and felt that my course had become somewhat stale. Co-teaching with Robert Yang (who is less than half my age!) gave me the opportunity to get fresh input on my lectures, assignments, and teaching methods.

Despite our age differences, Robert and I have somewhat similar backgrounds: we both have undergraduate degrees in English literature, and both followed our literature studies with time at design school. This allowed us a certain shared vocabulary that made it very easy to work together. Otherwise, my background is much more traditional and academic than Robert's: besides teaching as an adjunct at several NYC design programs, he is also a practicing game designer who creates experimental LGBT-themed games at the cutting edge of social engagement. His most recent game is a digital SM-themed spanking game called *Hurt Me Plenty*, played through a gesture-sensitive interface.

Our collaboration was tight, and we quickly fell into a very productive teaching rhythm: I would rewrite my lectures and submit them to Robert the week before presenting them in class, in order to get his feedback and to make sure that we could coordinate our activities. We were both present at every class session with our students, and developed an improvisational rapport in which we could each feel free to make contributions to the others' lectures and presentations. In fact, student course evaluations remarked on the complementary teaching personas that we adopted in the classroom (one student remarked appreciatively on the

"good cop/bad cop" dynamic that enlivened the teaching environment. I would like to clarify that I was the good cop!).

Robert was instrumental in helping me to develop better methods of communicating with the students. He was politely critical of my somewhat wordy and bullet-point-laden powerpoints, suggesting that I find less academic ways of conveying lecture content to the students. This really helped me to "meet the students where they are." Robert was an incredibly gracious and welcoming colleague, and co-teaching with him was one of the greatest contributors to the success of my sabbatical.

My co-teacher Robert Yang

5. Comparison between the foreign and the home institutions (in Sweden):

New York University is one of the largest private research universities in the USA. Founded in 1831, the university has clearly benefited from its location in an incredibly dynamic metropolitan area. The university has grown to a current enrollment of over 40,000 students (drawn from across the USA and 133 foreign countries), and employs over 3,100 fulltime faculty. The university maintains five major centers of learning in Manhattan, as well as a campus in Brooklyn and a new presence in Abu Dhabi. According to the university website, the student/faculty ratio is a very low 10:1, and the university's finances are supported by an endowment of 3.2 billion USD (it should be noted that this is a relatively small endowment for an institution of its size, making NYU fairly dependent upon tuition for operating costs). The Times Higher Education rankings place NYU at #27 worldwide.

The Polytechnic School of Engineering is one of the 18 individual schools and colleges that comprise NYU. Founded as in independent institution in 1852, Poly is the second oldest school of engineering in the USA, and it only became fully merged with NYU earlier this year (it should be noted that the merger has been

accompanied by a certain degree of uncertainty for faculty and staff, including layoffs). The School of Engineering employs over 160 full time faculty for an undergraduate body of 2,155 students, spread among 10 academic departments. On some measures Poly's profile mirrors that of the university as a whole: its student/faculty ratio is a healthy 15:1, and average class size is 22. Poly students pay roughly 42,000USD in tuition per academic year, though the university points out that the school ranks 3rd among all U.S. engineering schools in terms of Return on Investment (that is, tuition paid as a fraction of future earnings).

My home program is the *Integrated Digital Media* program in Poly's department of *Technology, Culture and Society*. IDM offers project-based education and studio-based learning, and aims at a "blend of theory and practice" that makes it a close fit for Malmö University/K3. Here is how the IDM program is described:

> "The Bachelor of Science degree in Integrated Digital Media at NYU Polytechnic School of Engineering explores the field of digital media in a holistic way, as a spectrum of practices that range from computer programming for app development, software design, game development and interaction design to digital, 2D and 3D graphics for human-computer interfaces, augmented reality and game design to photography, film, and audio for media installations, performing arts research, and integration with various mediums. Our students are artists, designers, engineers and entrepreneurs working in highly fluid industries that reward the creative, the thoughtful, the technical, and the innovative."

Malmö University/K3's mission statement likewise values combining "traditional scholarship and academic knowledge with artistic methods and practical skills. In our teaching and research, art, technology, design and communication converge in new and innovative ways." These similarities are important to my teaching sabbatical this term, because NYU is fertile ground for internationalization activities. According to the 2008-09 *Open Doors* report of the Institute of International Education, NYU is one of the top American universities when it comes to sending students abroad, as well as attracting foreign students.

Otherwise, my host institution at NYU was perhaps a bit more like a Swedish Konsthögskola than my home university. Most of my colleagues at NYU were practicing artists and designers, and, though their work could be considered "practice-based research," they never went out of their way to make that connection, being largely content to make and exhibit their work in top venues. There are few faculty with Ph.Ds teaching in the IDM program.

6. Divergent conceptions of educational quality in Swedish and American academic culture:

The Teaching Sabbatical was not my first exposure to higher education systems outside of Sweden; on the contrary, I have 10 years of experience of university teaching in the USA, plus another year in Canada. This was, however, my first extensive visit back to an American university in 13 years, and I was reminded of

the many differences in academic cultures. These differences are important, as they inform and limit the transferability of educational features from one system to another.

Maintaining educational quality is an important aim in the Swedish university system, and we spend a lot of time at my home institution seeking ways to guarantee it. In the Swedish system, educational quality is sought largely through organizational structures and evaluative processes. This emphasis is made quite evident in the presentation on educational quality on the Malmö University website: http://www.mah.se/educationquality. Educational quality is maintained by through quality processes that evaluate how well learning objectives are actually attained in specific programs.

In the USA, on the other hand, the focus is on creating good conditions for learning. The NYU website—reflecting differences in academic culture—prominently features the university's student/teacher ratio (10:1), a sign that students can expect greater access to professors and more weekly contact hours. In fact, the students in my course at NYU had roughly 20 teaching contact hours per week. Students in the Swedish system can be considered lucky if they have half as many hours.

The difference here of course reflects the very different funding schemes. NYU/Poly students pay 42000USD in tuition per year, and that doesn't include NYC living expenses. The funds afforded a Swedish university per student are clearly far below that. Still, my experience at NYU suggested that resources are not the only story. From what I experienced teaching my class, we are using similar teaching methods, and have similar pedagogical aims. In other words, we provide Malmö University students with an education that is analogous to the NYU experience, without saddling students with crippling levels of debt.

There are improvements that can be made within the Swedish system, though they would require confronting deeply ingrained assumptions within our academic culture:

Equating quality with evaluative processes tends to increase the administrative workload on Swedish faculty. Routines around maintaining course documents, as well as doing grading (and re-grading) and course evaluations, are apparently taking teachers' time from the classroom at every level of Swedish education. One alternative to this from the American system is to refocus attention instead on hiring and HR processes such as tenure. In other words, hire the best people, and let them do their thing. My experience of the system at NYU is that faculty spent less time generating and updating course documents, and the grading process was much more streamlined, if somewhat freewheeling.

7. The students at NYU/Poly:

The students in my class were a pleasure to teach. There were 15 students in *Intro to Game Development*, 11 men and 4 women. This gender distribution is in keeping with my experience of teaching game design. The student group was

ethnically diverse, and, though the tuition for the program is very high, one student confided in me that his father was underemployed due to the recent economic downturn. In general the students were hard-working, personable, and almost never missed class (the high tuition is probably partly responsible for this). I was also struck by the fact that American students seek mentoring from faculty in a way that is different from my experience in Sweden. The rapport that Robert and I established with the students was very good.
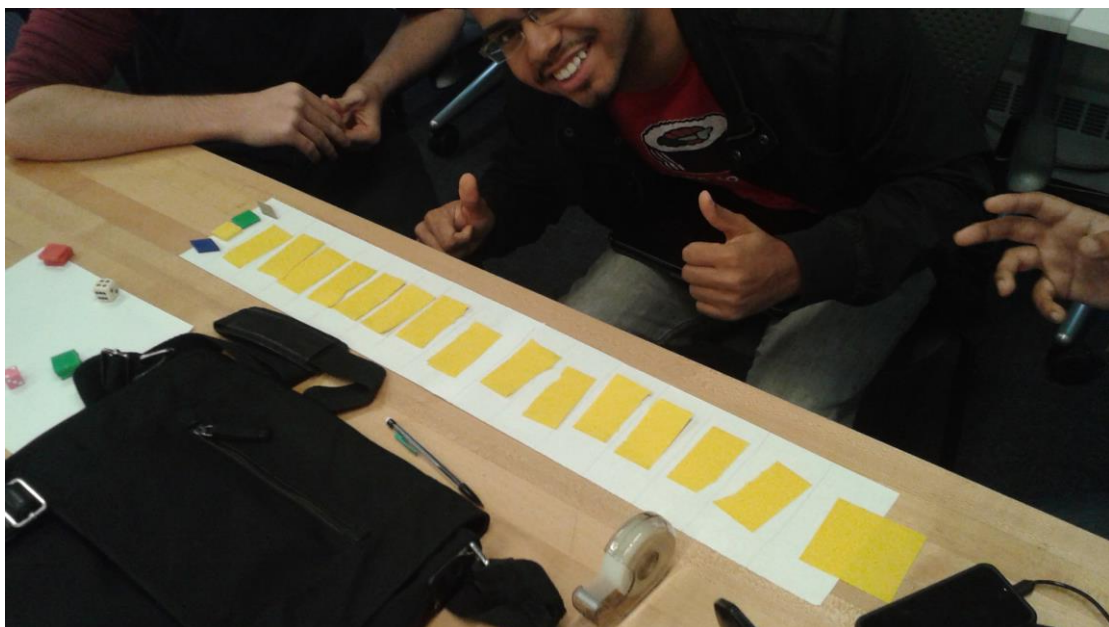
Intro to Game Development students playtesting a paper prototype.

8. Pedagogy:

My experience teaching *Intro to Game Development* suggests that the IDM pedagogy is fairly similar to ours at K3/Malmö University, with a few important

caveats. Outcome-based learning is loosely implemented in the IDM program. There are IDM program learning outcomes that must be addressed in every course, as well as course-specific learning objectives, though these were not coupled directly with evaluations. Rather, final grades in our class were calculated as the summed percentages of the key course assignments and projects, without reference to course learning objectives.

Otherwise, *Intro to Game Design* shared a project-based pedagogy with the equivalent course that I teach at Malmö University. Design reviews and critiques were an important feature of the learning process, and the students were given weekly written "game journal" assignments (something I have since integrated into my own game design course in Malmö this term), to which we provided extensive written feedback.

9. Curriculum structure of the IDM program:

According to the co-director of the IDM program, the program curriculum reflects a commitment to the "T-shaped" person, one combining broad basic competencies, with an area of deeper specialization. The four basic building blocks of the program are image, sound, narrative/storytelling and interaction.

10. Grading:

Final grades were given on a letter grade scale ranging from A-F, and exhibited considerable grade inflation (the lowest grade we gave was a B+). I was quite deferential to Robert in setting the final grades, as I had been out of the USA for quite some time, but I can say that this range of grades is in keeping with my experiences of the US university system in elite institutions.

11. Course evaluation:

Courses in the IDM program are, according to the IDM co-director, evaluated formally and informally at several levels. The School of Engineering requires online course evaluations, which are supplemented by teacher evaluations conducted by the TCS department and informal class visits by the co-director of the IDM program.

Practically speaking, our course was only evaluated by 3 students, who filled out written evaluations after our class. The attitude of my co-teacher was that course evaluations are not particularly useful.

12. Engagement of the local context (tredje uppgift):

There are two co-directors of the IDM program, one whose focus is internal on the program curriculum and teaching, the other more outwardly directed. The IDM program engages in substantial outreach to different local communities, both in research and teaching capacities. This includes supporting student groups that offer programming education to underserved groups, as well as research initiatives aimed at supporting the disabled.

NYC is obviously an incredibly dynamic setting for media organizations, and the

IDM program has built partnerships with local digital arts organizations that include Babycastles (http://babycastles.com/) and programs regular events with art and technology centers such as Eyebeam (http://eyebeam.org/).

13. Facilities:

The IDM program is based in the brand-new MAGNET facility in downtown Brooklyn, which combines faculty and programs from the Tisch School of the Arts, the Polytechnic School of Engineering, and the Steinhardt School of Education. MAGNET includes teaching facilities as well as special resources for music production, VR and motion capture. The space is relatively flexible, and includes a pervasive grid system that can be used to mount LCD projector almost anywhere.
There is also a very well equipped game library, which includes both digital and physical games.

14. Action plan - topics to address and if possible introduce in Sweden:

Based on my previous experience of teaching in the USA, I suspected that many features of the education in the IDM program would not be transferrable to our Swedish context, so I decided early on that the most effective course of action would be to focus on internationalization activities with NYU. Accordingly, I held meetings with the co-directors of the IDM program and dean of the TCS department about establishing a student and teacher exchange with Malmö University/K3. They were initially positive to this idea, and are currently researching feasibility by querying undergrad and masters students to find out how receptive they would be to the prospect of studying in Malmö for a term.

15. Special advice for future TS stipend recipients hosted by NYU:

Finding lodging in NYC is a special challenge, and it was clear from the start that, as I was not an NYU employee, the faculty housing office at NYU was not prepared to help me, beyond sending me links to Craigslist and other websites. NYU's faculty housing units are a precious resource, which are guarded jealously.

The things that make housing in NYC such a challenge are:

1. The housing market is quite dynamic, with listings of apartments coming and going on a daily basis.
2. Rental rates are very high, and there is a lot at stake in the process. The average furnished, 2 bedroom apartment in Manhattan costs between 5-6000USD per month.
3. Because of this, there are a number of unreliable actors working this area, and one must be constantly vigilant for scam artists.

Adding to this complicated landscape, there are a number of features in a housing search that are unfamiliar to people from outside of NYC:

1. Application fees: it is common to have to pay a non-refundable fee of 100-800 dollars to apply for an apartment.

2. Brokers fees: Many apartments are leased by brokers who charge a half- or full month's rent for their services. Obviously, these fees are prohibitive for those seeking an apartment for only a few months.

3. Credit checks: it is common for applications to be accompanied by credit checks, which can be a problem for foreign renters, who often have no credit rating in the USA. In the absence of a credit rating, many rental services demand full payment for a multi-month lease up front in cash.

Because the housing market is so dynamic, it is often not possible to line up an apartment for the fall during one's spring scouting visit. Our solution was to book an apartment for the fall via AirBnB, which I visited during my April trip. This proved to be a major headache, as it turned out that our AirBnB host was subletting to us in violation of their lease (which we have since learned is estimated to be true of 65% of all NYC AirBnB hosts), and we were forced by the property manager to vacate the apartment on short notice in the middle of September. Fortunately, upon hearing of our plight, my host Kris Day and NYU Associate Dean Brad Penuel arranged an apartment for us in NYU's faculty housing at Washington Square Village. This proved to be an excellent outcome for us, as the neighborhood was superb and the rent a fraction of what we were paying to AirBnB.

Based our experience, I would make the following recommendations to STINT and future Teaching Sabbatical participants:

1. STINT leadership should discuss with NYU whether NYU faculty housing could be made available to TS participants. There is a precedent for this, as some institutions (such as Williams College) offer TS participants places in their faculty housing.

2. If that is not possible, TS participants are going to have to continue going it alone, and commit themselves to mastering the NYC housing market.

My personal recommendation, assuming that the TS participant does not already have personal connections in NYC, is that they arrange for housing through a reliable apartment broker such as Furnished Quarters: www.furnishedquarters.com/
Their rents are on the high side, but they are a reliable company and I would have no qualms about dealing with them from abroad.

Dealing with public schools:

TS participants who bring children with them will have to master the NYC public school system. As with the rest of the USA, the quality of public schools varies dramatically by neighborhood. Here are some useful resources:

www.insideschools.org/
http://www.zillow.com/manhattan-new-york-ny/schools/
http://schools.nyc.gov/default.htm

16. Thanks to STINT:

Spending a semester in New York City was an amazing opportunity for me and my family, and I am deeply grateful to STINT for giving me this chance!

Simon Niedenthal, Lund, 27/1/15