



**Department of Culture Media and Sport (DCMS) Creative
Economy Programme: Education and Skills Working Group**

**A response from Dare to be Digital® – the premier UK
competition for young talent in the computer games industry**

September 2006

What is Dare to be Digital?

Dare to be Digital (www.daretobedigital.com) supports the creation of video game prototypes by talented, young developers in order to showcase their talent and prepare them for working in industry.

Teams of art and science students / recent graduates are filtered through a rigorous industry selection process to work together for ten weeks from June to August in a near to real world development environment.

They are supported with hardware, software, mentoring and training from industry professionals and also with studio space and living accommodation.

At the end of the 10 weeks they compete for cash prizes by pitching the demonstrator they have created to a high profile panel of judges from the video games business.

Dare to be Digital has already generated five companies, two product deals and 80% of the participants get hired by high profile employers in the video games industry. It has received many accolades from all key stakeholders.

Thus Dare to be Digital is particularly relevant to the present consultation in that:

- It involves very close working with a key sector of the creative industry
- It is an existing model of best practice in industry / HE engagement that is expanding to ensure full UK coverage and has potential to be replicated in other creative industry sectors
- Business and entrepreneurial skills are developed in the context of a specific creative industry sector.

Background

Dare to be Digital was created by the University of Abertay Dundee who were the first University to offer degree programmes in games technology in the mid 1990s. Skillset has since accredited two of Abertay's games-related academic programmes.

Dare to be Digital has been run by Abertay since 1999 with incremental growth in the UK and internationally and now represents a unique model for showcasing young talent to the UK games industry. The University of Abertay Dundee, Dundee City Council and Scottish Enterprise support the core cost of the project. Primary sponsors have included the Bank of Scotland, NCR, BBC Scotland, Microsoft, Electronic Arts and other games companies, NESTA and other public sector bodies. Secondary support has also been received from a range of companies providing software, staff time and other in-kind contributions.

Various methods of involving international participation have been tested including running Dare overseas, bringing full teams to Dare and also recruiting individual international members to join UK and Irish teams.

Dare to be Digital was externally evaluated by EKOS Consultants in 2005/6 with a highly positive outcome, recommending expansion and reinforcing an ambition ***“to become an internationally recognised model for the development and showcasing of innovation and young talent in computer games production.”***

Responding to the EKOS evaluation, Dare to be Digital is expanding in 2007 to cover the UK with additional international dimensions and discussions are underway with universities and RDAs in a number of potential partner centres.

Context for this response

Dare to be Digital supports the CEP initiative and welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Education and Skills Working Group. This response is made by reference to the questions that respondents have been asked to address (which are noted below¹) and within the context of the experience of running a flagship programme for promoting talent, skills development and new IP generation in the computer games industry.

In particular, this response relates to certain specific recommendations made by the working group. It is recognised that the report contains many other valuable comments and recommendations and the silence of this response to those other issues is not intended to reflect any degree of priority but merely an intention to respond on those areas that are relevant to Dare to be Digital.

¹ *Could these recommendations be a key driver to generate more productivity in the Creative Industries?*

- *If implemented what impact would any of these recommendations have on you or your business, or businesses in the sector you represent? Could they be altered in any way to improve impact?*
- *Do you have any evidence which reinforces any of the recommendations?*
- *Do you have any comments on the feasibility of the recommended projects?*
- *Are there any others issues which need investigating?*

Commentary

The specific recommendations addressed by this response are those that relate to

1. Careers information advice and guidance in the context of the games industry
2. Education and skills for the games industry workforce
3. Support for business and business skills

Taking the second of those recommendations first, it is noted that the working group recommend building on existing good practice in industry / HE engagement citing particularly those mechanisms that relate to research and “conventional” knowledge transfer and also CPD. Whilst existing good practice in these areas exists it should be noted that other types of engagement also exist. Dare to be Digital aims to create real world environments allowing interdisciplinary participants to “learn by doing” alongside industry mentors and create new IP to industry deadlines and QA levels, all in the context of enterprise and market relevance. For this reason it provides an excellent example of best practice with potential for transfer into other sectors of the creative economy.

Here are some of the key features that characterise Dare to be Digital:

- Self-selecting interdisciplinary teams with shared goal (but not always shared vision).
- Project design within predetermined criteria and absolute deadline to have a working prototype.
- Pre screening with third party involvement to select the teams most likely to succeed (and if there was no entry filter there would be some spectacular failures).
- Automatic individual kudos if accepted to participate.
- Culture, atmosphere, myths and legends regarding previous Dare participants.
- Competitive atmosphere and cash prizes.
- Success and failure both highly visible.
- Individual assessment of best artist, best programmer, best team leader etc so still an individual game to play.
- Need to be enterprising and market focused.
- Payment of stipend creates a contractual “employer/employee” style relationship that acts as an incentive and can also be used to require compliance with the rules.
- Provision of industry standard specifications and software licences with dedicated workspace.

- Participants forced to very quickly “learn by doing” with regard to unfamiliar software and hardware.
- Mentors have industry / practitioner experience.
- Low mentor-to-participant ratio allows maximum contact.
- Weekly visits from industry practitioners including one-to-one contact, with the potential to build relationships leading to employment.
- High level of interest in progress on a daily basis provides feeling of importance and enhancement of self-confidence.
- Reflective aspects of video diaries.
- New and innovative IP created

Perhaps the key aspects that could potentially be transferable (in the context of generating more productivity) are:

- High entry bar
- Challenging project design criteria.
- Enhancement of competitive element.
- High focus on learning-by-doing in a real world environment.
- Consistent, context-specific and highly relevant project definition.
- High level of industry engagement.
- Interdisciplinary teamwork to produce tangible, relevant output.
- Recognition of outstanding individual performances in teams.
- Enhancement of positive thinking, self-confidence and reflection.
- Inspiration of enterprising and market focused thinking directed towards new IP creation.

Returning to the first of the recommendations regarding careers advice and guidance, Dare to be Digital also provides an excellent opportunity for aspiring computer programmers, artists, designers and producers to learn how the industry works. Each year Dare to be Digital showcases the project work to local school pupils and this will have a UK reach as the competition expands.

Projects such as this can be far more effective in demonstrating the structure of an industry than portals, careers fairs and the like. The only real substitute would be industry placements prior to university study, which would be highly challenging to develop. The key message is that real world interdisciplinary product development competitions can be used as effective careers information sources and these ideas are transferable into other sectors of the creative economy.

Finally, the working group correctly highlight some of the issues surrounding support for business and business skills. Dare to be Digital has been instrumental in providing follow on business incubation support through Abertay University's embreonix® business incubator. Again, the opportunity for mentoring, the provision of a CEO in Residence and networking with industry are all exploited to maximum effect. The key thing here is that all such support is given in the business context and with specialist practitioners – so the comments of the working group in this regard are highly welcome.

IP is at the heart of the creative economy and it is crucial to build business support projects around the real world creation of new IP with freedom for participants to develop and deploy enterprise skills in the exploitation of that IP and “learn by doing”.

Concluding comments

It is worth looking beyond some of the conventional industry / HE interactions to seek ways to build the creative economy, and Dare to be Digital is an example of such a project.

The Dare to be Digital team would be pleased to share their experiences and would welcome an opportunity to participate in any relevant initiative that arises through the Creative Economy Programme.

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