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Not all fun and games with AI

By Michelle Giglio
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Things are about to get serious in computer game land, with Australia's first academic summit on the fast-moving industry.

The summit will be held tomorrow as part of the yearly Australian Game Developers Conference in Melbourne, a meeting place for industry professionals – and now academics.

Several universities, including Charles Sturt University and the University of Queensland, offer bachelor degrees that allow students to major in computer game design and digital technology.

Ian Gibson, from the Academy of Interactive Entertainment, a key organiser of the conference, said the growth in higher education courses spurred the introduction of the summit – a common feature in international computer game conferences.

"We saw there was a need to get people together to define where we were in terms of what research was being done (now and) in the future," Mr Gibson said. He heads the education and training section of the academy, an Australian vocational trainer for game developers and designers.

Mr Gibson said setting benchmarks for computer games courses was also an objective, given the varying standards on offer.

"The industry is very young (in Australia)," he said. "The marketplace hasn't quite caught up with what is good practice."

Yusuf Pisan, a senior lecturer in the department of software engineering at the University of Technology, Sydney, will be giving a workshop at the summit on how game engines can be turned into training simulations.

Dr Pisan is researching how to adapt computer game characters – which in a game may shoot or fight – into virtual actors that address common situations, for example a manager trying to deal with the demands of several employees at once. The idea is for the person using the program to make a decision that is carried out by virtual actors.

Artificial intelligence has many applications, such as allowing movie directors to see their idea acted out by virtual characters before filming starts, Dr Pisan said. The problem is, it takes a lot of time and energy to program what each of the actors is going to do.

"We'd like the interaction to be a lot more like directing a play or a movie," he said.

"We are working on developing different planning languages to adjust these problems. The games become good test beds."

University of Queensland PhD student Penny Sweetser will present a session with fellow student Penny Drennan on getting a user perspective in game design.

"There's a pretty big difference between the people that make the games and those that research them," Ms Sweetser said. The summit would provide an opportunity to find out what problems developers had in game design.

