

## Master's and Doctoral Applicants Goals Statement

I've been interested in educational media/ instructional technology for as long as I remember. Growing up in a home where English was our second language, educational televisions shows helped me become fluent in English. They also helped me answer questions about the world that my parents, with their limited education, could not answer.

When I began undergraduate studies in 1994, there was no clear path to a career in educational media. I studied to become a high school science teacher. I used my undergraduate thesis as an opportunity to learn how to write chemistry laboratory activities. When I worked as a teacher from 1999-2003, I was an avid consumer and critic of educational media.

That span of four years saw an explosion in the potential for consumer-created media. I quickly went from watching computer animations on laser disk to making my own, through animation classes at a local art school. I took those animation courses in addition to completing a Master's degree in educational policy, all while teaching full time.

Even though I had only been teaching for a few years, I was already rising to the ranks of leadership positions within committees in the school, and I was chosen by the state of Wisconsin to represent high school teachers during the rewriting of the state tests. However, despite the success I was experiencing in my career, I decided to take some time off and pursue studies full-time at UW-Madison's School of Education.

While at Madison, I was able to obtain a variety of professional and scholarly experiences that helped me develop an expertise in educational media. One of my most powerful experiences was with the Games, Learning, and Society (GLS) organization of scholars and practitioners in the emerging area of educational video games. I was the press and public relations manager for GLS during its first annual conference in 2005. My work led to a sold-out conference which received coverage on local radio and television outlets in addition to national and international press. The following year, I was the co-chair of the conference. The strong foundation upon which the conference was built has made it the leading conference on the topic of video games and education, and in 2009, it will need to relocate and add an extra day in order to keep pace with the interest. My own research with the group has led to a number of conference presentations and publications. One of these publications was even cited in a recent issue of the journal *Science*. My academic achievements were recognized by my admission to the prestigious Spencer Doctoral Fellowship program, which admits a select few students in education PhD programs.

I also enjoyed an opportunity to work as an adjunct instructor at Marquette University where I taught pre-service and in-service educators at the graduate and undergraduate levels. I taught online, face-to-face, and hybrid the courses. Through these courses, I was able to teach teachers about science education in ways that pushed the envelope in terms of incorporating learning technologies. In a performance review, one of my students commented that my course was like a fantastic book he simply did not want to put down. That comment was a thrill to me, as this was precisely what I hoped to craft as an educator and as a person who understands that education only grows more powerful through thoughtful use of media.

In 2006, I took a job with Public Broadcasting Services (PBS) to work in their TeacherLine division as the associate director of instructional design. While there, I had the amazing opportunity to oversee an educational technology capstone program for educators in cooperation with the International Society for Technology Education. This program grew over 500% during my time managing it, and saw a much greater retention rate for teachers entering the rigorous program. While at PBS, I also lead a project in cooperation with the Department of Education and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting to create online courses for early childhood educators as part of the Ready to Learn Grant. This program integrated a variety of media from Sesame Street, Word World, The Electric Company 2.0 and a variety of other properties to show early childhood care providers how public media can help develop young children's language skills. The program was the first of its kind to target childcare providers who, themselves, came from a low-literacy background with little to no post-secondary education. For this work, I was awarded a PBS Bravo award, which recognizes excellence and dedication.

In 2008, I was hired as the Director of Digital Media for National Geographic's The JASON Project. In this position, I have managed and produce educational science video games budgeted anywhere from \$25,000 to \$1,000,000. In this position I work as a game designer, project manager, usability officer, and content expert in science video games that have explored topics such as endangered animals, energy calculations in roller coasters,

tsunamis, trophic models, alternative energy sources, and more. In a recent performance review, my management commented on my effectiveness at creating and implementing a radical new direction for educational science video games.

In doing this work, I look eagerly to George Mason University's Instructional Technology program and Education PhD. The faculty in the Instructional Technology department are conducting research that I feel is critical to vitalize and complete my understanding of this field. I love GMU's cohort model and know that I will gain great understanding by studying alongside other professionals attending GMU from a diversity of backgrounds. GMU offers a superior Education PhD program, especially for working professionals, with its careful structure and transparent criteria. I would really like the work I do at The JASON Project to contribute to the overall field of educational media and instructional technology, and I would also like to continue to be a student of this craft. GMU will teach me to be a rigorous and fruitful scholar while immersing me in fascinating new ideas and research from the field.

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### **Doctoral Applicants Additional Goals Statement**

I am applying for the Ph.D. program in Education because I want a career in leadership, researching, and teaching Instructional Technology. I am particularly interested in unpacking the historical challenges average classrooms have faced in meaningfully incorporating technology literacy and video game based education into its both explicit and "hidden" curriculum. In order to achieve my goals, I need to strengthen my grounding in educational research methods and analysis.

I currently work for a subsidiary of the National Geographic Society called The JASON Project, where I am the Director of Digital Media. The JASON Project was founded by Titanic discoverer Bob Ballard and aims to "light the spark" of curiosity and learning by using leading-edge science education theory and media rich learning materials. In this position, I have recently completed my first major project, a learning video game about ecology called, "Operation: Resilient Planet." This \$1million game funded by the Kauffman foundation lets students explore the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands and the Gulf of Mexico using research techniques and methods based on those used by practicing ecologists. The game addresses core middle school science curriculum and is aligned to all the individual state standards (as well as the District of Columbia). In addition to this game, I have directed over a half-dozen browser based games. The games I direct have been received by teachers with incredible enthusiasm, and students cannot get enough of them. My games are the top draw of the Jason.org website, logging a hundred times more visitors than any of the other content on the JASON's CODIE winning website.

I am proud, but remain humbled by this accomplishment. Video games and learning simulations have a long way to go in order to reach their full potential in the classroom. Between 2003-2006 I was working on a doctorate in Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. I was studying and working with several well known scholars in the area of video games and education, among them Jim Gee, who has served as one of the leaders in the rebirth of interest in this field. I co-chaired the 2006 Games, Learning, and Society Conference, which has now grown into one of the leading conferences on the topic of new media and learning. Much of the work coming out of UW was very theoretical, exploring cognitive arguments regarding what it was about video games that made them potent instructional tools. While this work is incredibly valuable and has helped shape my thinking, I find the greatest and most interesting challenges in classroom implementation. These are the challenges I wrestle with on a daily basis with The

JASON Projects, and these are the challenges I know George Mason University can help me overcome.

Many of today's video games are graphically stunning and require costly hardware to run. Computer games, especially, demand a certain level of technological comfort and sophistication. Many of today's video games take 20+ hours of playtime to master. Many educational or so-called "serious" video games created in the past five years have dealt with topics that have skirted the core standards teachers must use in their curriculum, and they require a great deal of professional development prior to implementation. All of these components, when examined for their cognitive value, do not take away from games as learning tools. But they make them all but unusable in the average public school classroom. As a result, skeptics in related fields (and certainly many funding agencies) have begun to back away from the promise of video games and the classroom. I've heard many of my former colleagues say that schools will simply never allow video games to be used to their greatest potential.

I reject this notion with full confidence because in my short time as the Director of Digital Media, I have seen our video games begin to fall comfortably into classrooms around the country. I wager that part of this success comes from the fact that my own background is that of a high school science teacher and an individual with a Master's degree in policy studies. By uniting my understanding of practical day-to-day matters of how classrooms, teachers, and schools currently function with a sophisticated understanding of the learning science behind video games I acquired during my doctoral studies at UW, I believe we are achieving great strides. During my user-testing of these games, I have seen quiet, disengaged students light up and enthusiastically discuss math problems with their classmates. I have heard from students who went home and spent the weekend on the Internet learning more about tiger sharks in the Hawaiian Islands. I have heard shy middle school girls shout, "no, you need more potential energy!" at their classmate when they thought no one was watching or listening. I have spoken with groups of teachers who have been amazed at how happy and willing their students are to pick up and fill-out an accompanying worksheet when it is part of a video game-based lesson. Few of these teachers play video games themselves, but they all comment on how much their students light up and walk away being able to "get" content they had previously struggled with.

In short, I have the opportunity to contribute a great deal to the knowledge pool of Instructional Technology. By virtue of my current position and the sum of my professional experiences, I am confident that I can provide valuable insight into how video games can bring a whole new level of engagement with sophisticated content to a diverse array of young learners. I look eagerly to George Mason University to give me the knowledge and understanding I need in social science research methodology and analysis so that I be a viable contributor to the field of Instructional Technology and so that I can continue to grow as a leader, teachers, and research in the field.

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**Sought graduate admission to George Mason University previously?**

**Ever been convicted of a felony?**

no

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**Ever been under suspension or dismissal for academic or disciplinary reasons from any college, university, or other formal postsecondary educational program?**

no

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**Scholarships, fellowships, academic awards, honors, publications or special recognition**

Marquette University 4-year academic scholarship;  
Spencer Doctoral Research Fellow- UW-Madison (2003-2006)  
PBS Employee Bravo award for excellence

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**Current certifications or licenses held and in which state**

WI State teaching license 6-12 in physics, chemistry, and broad field science

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**Professional Experience**

Submitted to: gseadmit@gmu.edu.