

A reflection on lessons learnt with tackling grade inflation.

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ENHANCING FOR IMPACT

RGU'S ANNUAL LEARNING AND TEACHING CONFERENCE

A Reflection on Lessons Learnt with Tackling Grade Inflation

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School of Computing

INTRODUCTION

A common issue with the Academic process is that of **grade inflation**, or the over-abundance of good grades, which directly leads to a perceived **loss of grade value** by employers [1] .

Over the past several years during Assessment Boards within the **School of Computing** – there have often been issues flagged surrounding the subject of **grade inflation**, especially within **BSc Digital Media**.

During the early stages of the pandemic – there was a shift towards **remote teaching**, and with this transition – an opportunity to analyze & overhaul Assessment methods on several modules within **BSc Digital Media** presented itself.

This presentation will reflect upon the past issues that led to this analysis and, the development of a successful solution.

[1] Ehlers, T. and Schwager, R., 2016. Honest grading, grade inflation, and reputation. CESifo Economic Studies, 62(3), pp.506-521.

BACKGROUND

ASSESSMENT APPROACHES

Typically – within the School of Computing, and more specifically/historically – on the **BSc Digital Media** course, one of the main Assessment approaches includes that of a practical coursework. (CW)

Often, this takes the form of a project, where there is a mix of **design & implementation** – broken down into varying sets of **deliverables**.

This ultimately results in a **practical artefact/submission** which demonstrates appropriate Learning Outcomes. (LO)

REFLECTION

PRACTICAL COURSEWORKS

With those points in mind, during the 2020/2021 Academic year, and the transition into remote teaching – one of the selected modules for further analysis included 3D Character Animation. (right)

Part 1 – Design (Worth 40%)

You are required to deliver a ZIP file containing the following components that will prepare you for the second part:

- A PDF document including;
 - Research & development (Mood boards, character/animation development sketches, modelling research etc.)
 - Storyboard (Minimum of 6 panels – what will happen in your animation? Poses/shots etc.)
 - Modelling sheet (Your character in front, back & side view in 45-degrees ‘relaxed’ or T pose)
- A 3DS Max file including your character model in 45-degrees ‘relaxed’ or T pose (Maximum of 10,000 polygons);
 - Should have materials applied appropriately
 - Should demonstrate an understanding of organic modelling/form in topology flow & design
 - Should be an appropriate scale – true to world (use metres as a measuring unit)
 - *(Optional) UV Unwrapped & textured with diffuse map (PNG)*

Part 2 – Implementation (Worth 60%)

You are required to deliver a ZIP file containing the following components that will finalise this coursework:

- 3DS Max file including your character model – rigged & skinned;
 - Rigging method is your choice, we recommend Biped & CAT systems
 - Hierarchy should be clear & named properly
 - The skin must smoothly deform the mesh, it is highly recommended to test animation before finalising
 - Skinning is important and takes time – ensure you prepare your time accordingly for this component
- An exported video file that presents your final 3D animation;
 - Should be at least 20 seconds in length
 - Animation should use one of the supplied scenes with pre-set lights
 - Animation should demonstrate a selection of techniques which could include key frame, pose to pose & mocap
 - Any editing, music & VFX are optional – Premier, After Effects etc.
 - There should be thought put into frame composition, use the camera well
 - AVI, MOV, MPEG4 formats are all acceptable – if there are render issues, a preview animation will also be fine
- A report explaining & evaluating your methods throughout the coursework – 3 to 4 pages including images;
 - You should include 3 still renders of your animation in the report demonstrating the strongest aspects
 - You should ensure you talk about what went well, what challenges you faced and what you would change on reflection
 - Include links to any resources you may have used for music, dialogue etc. (Music/SFX should be royalty free)

Fig.1 – CM3129 3D Character Animation [2019/2020] Assessment Requirements

REFLECTION

PRACTICAL COURSEWORKS

Not only was this module one of the main problematic modules regarding grade inflation, flagged at Assessment Boards – it was also a module that took a notoriously long time to mark.

In addition, it was also a module that many students felt needed more deliverable clarification at times.

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Fig.1 – CM3129 3D Character Animation [2019/2020] Assessment Requirements

REFLECTION

Fig.2 – CM3129 3D Character Animation Grading Scheme [2019/2020]

Student Name							Final Module Grade	
Grade		A	B	C	D	E	F	NS
Part 1 – Design (Weighting 40%)	Assessed LO	Feedback Comments:					Part 1 - Design Grade	
Research & Visual Development	1	Research is extensive & documented to a very high standard. Development of ideas into the animation is also extensive.	Research is solid & documented to a high standard. Development of ideas into the animation is strong, well-presented.	Research is good and documented to a reasonable standard. Development of ideas into the animation are good and presented well.	Research is minimal and documented to a satisfactory standard. Development of ideas into the animation is of a satisfactory standard.	Research is lacking and poorly documented. Development of ideas into the animation are also of a poor standard.	Research is sparse or missing. Development of ideas into the animation is barely present or missing.	No submission of the deliverable.
Storyboard	1	Excellent use of different shots. Visual storytelling approaching professional levels.	Very good use of different shots. Visual storytelling is strong.	Good use of different shots. Visual storytelling is clear with some room for improvement.	Satisfactory use of different shots. Visual storytelling is acceptable with room for improvement.	Poor use of different shots Visual storytelling is weak.	No use of different shots. Lacking presence of visual storytelling.	No submission of the deliverable.
Character Model Sheet	1, 2	Model sheet contains all views; front, back & side. Character is correctly lined up for modelling in all views. Minor issues may be present.	Model sheet contains all views; front, back & side. Character is mostly correct in the line-up for modelling in all views. Some minor issues are present.	Model sheet contains most views. Character is mostly correct in the line-up for modelling in most views. Several minor issues are present.	Model sheet contains some views. Character is satisfactory in the line-up for modelling. There are several issues present but modelling can still be completed.	Model sheet is missing several views. Character is poorly lined up for modelling. There are several major issues present that will cause problems when modelling.	Fails as an example of a model sheet. Character is very poorly lined up for modelling which will be destructive in the modelling stage.	No submission of the deliverable.
3D Character Model (10,000 Limit)	2	Character model topology demonstrates an excellent level of ability & confidence. Minor issues may be present but non-destructive. Polygons are used effectively.	Character model topology demonstrates a very good level of ability & confidence. Some minor issues are present but non-destructive. Polygon use is mostly effective.	Character model topology demonstrates a good level of ability & confidence; loops are mostly correct in joint areas to aid deformation. Several issues are present but non-destructive. Polygon use is reasonably effective.	Character model topology demonstrates a satisfactory level of ability but lacking in confidence; loops are placed in joint areas to aid deformation but with several issues that may cause minor deformation issues. Polygons use is somewhat effective.	Character model topology demonstrates a poor level of ability; loops are messily placed in joint areas, which will cause major deformation issues. Polygon use is weak.	Character model topology demonstrates a very poor level of ability; loops are badly handled which will cause massive deformation issues. Polygon use is very weak.	No submission of the deliverable.
Part 2 – Implementation (Weighting 60%)	Assessed LO	Feedback Comments:					Part 2 – Implementation Grade	
Rigging	2, 3	Excellent rig of choice that functions to a high standard. Bone placement is appropriate, posing no issues.	Very good rig of choice that functions to a mostly appropriate standard. Some minor issues may be present. Bone placement is appropriate, some minor issues may be present.	Good rig of choice that functions to a working level. Some minor issues are present. Bone placement is suitable, some minor issues are present.	Satisfactory rig of choice that functions mostly to a working level but displays several minor issues requiring solutions. Bone placement is reasonable, several issues may require attention.	Poorly built rig of choice that struggles to function, displaying multiple issues requiring solutions. Bone placement is weak, multiple issues present and requiring attention.	Very poor rig of choice that is broken and requiring several major solutions to fix. Bone placement is unsuitable and needs further work.	No submission of the deliverable.
Skinning & Deformation	2, 3	Skinning is applied and is of an excellent level, demonstrating a solid understanding of mesh influence. Problem joint areas smoothly deform to an excellent standard.	Skinning is applied and is of a very good level, demonstrating a highly competent understanding of mesh influence. Problem joint areas smoothly deform to a very good standard. Minor issues may be present.	Skinning is applied and is of a good level, demonstrating a competent understanding of mesh influence. Problem joint areas deform to a good standard.	Skinning is applied and is of a satisfactory level, demonstrating a fair understanding of mesh influence. Problem joint areas deform to a satisfactory standard. Several issues may be present.	Skinning is applied but is of poor level, demonstrating a lack of understanding in mesh influence. Problem joint areas deform poorly. Multiple issues are present.	Skinning is not applied or is of very poor level, demonstrating a lack of understanding in mesh influence. Problem joint areas deform very poorly, resulting in a broken mesh. Several major issues needing solutions.	No submission of the deliverable.
Animation & Composition	3	Animation is of an excellent standard, demonstrating solid use of appropriate animation principles & techniques to create smooth animation. Solid framing ability and/or smooth camera animation.	Animation is of a very good standard, demonstrating a highly competent use of appropriate animation principles & techniques to create smooth animation, with some minor issues. Highly competent framing ability and/or mostly smooth camera animation. Some minor issues may be present.	Animation is of a good standard, demonstrating a competent use of appropriate animation principles & techniques to create mostly smooth animation with several minor issues. Competent framing ability and/or mostly smooth camera animation. Some minor issues are present.	Animation is of a satisfactory standard, demonstrating a mostly competent use of appropriate animation principles & techniques to create an animation with several issues present. Framing ability and/or camera animation is of a capable level. Several minor issues are present.	Animation is of a poor standard, demonstrating very little in animation principles & techniques which result in a poor overall animation. Framing ability and/or camera animation is of a poor level. Several major issues are present.	Animation is thin and of a very poor standard, demonstrating barely any animation principles & techniques – resulting in a very poor overall animation. Framing ability and/or camera animation is of a very poor level. Several major issues are present that are destructive.	No submission of the deliverable.
Report	4	The report is reflective and gives an excellent commentary on the process followed. Still are all present & demonstrate excellent composition & character posing.	The report is somewhat reflective and gives a very good commentary on the process followed. Still are mostly present and demonstrate very good composition & character posing.	The report is reasonably reflective and gives a good commentary on the process followed. Still are mostly present and demonstrate good composition & character posing.	The report has some reflection and gives a satisfactory commentary on the process followed. Still are somewhat present and demonstrate satisfactory composition & some character posing.	The report has little to no reflection and gives a little or no commentary on the process followed. Still are lacking, demonstrating poor composition & minimal character posing.	The report lacks any reflection into processes followed. Still are not present and/or demonstrate very poor composition with very little or no effort with character posing.	No submission of the deliverable.

PROBLEMS

With the focus on grade inflation initially, two associated questions were asked at the time of analysis, those being from a student & Academic perspective.

Student – ‘*How* do I get an A?’

Academic – ‘How do we *measure* an A?’

PROBLEMS

From the student perspective, it was clear that **clarity was key** – moreover, that there where **transparent boundaries** a student would align with a simplified grading scheme & that in response, they would **aim for**.

This – at the time of analysis, was a problematic area in the coursework for 3D Character Animation – as much of the wording relied on **vague language** & in part, **Academic judgement**.

PROBLEMS

From the Academic perspective, it quickly became evident that *without* clear boundaries at deliverable/requirement level – there is no expectation set and this leads to blurred grade barriers, resulting in a heavier reliance on Academic judgement & vague commentary.

How can a student understand grade expectations if these have not been *clearly* laid out?

How can an Academic justify grade expectations if these have not been *clearly* laid out?

The questions raised gave weight to an overhaul of the current framework – since the general answer for both was ‘they cannot’.

RESPONSE

So, to mediate problems faced & challenges with grade inflation & by extension, expectation, a set of requirements – based on the original coursework, where split into three areas.

These three areas were inspired by AGILE approaches & MoSCoW methodology – which refers to prioritization of workloads.

It was felt that this approach could be tailored to specific grade boundaries & be flexible enough to challenge students, offering more value to the higher grades.

RESPONSE

In addition, looking at cross-disciplinary examples **within** the School of Computing, it was evident that a more **rigid** framework for requirements may further help strengthen **clarity** of both *what* is being asked of the student and *how* the student can achieve a **specific grade**.

THE SOLUTION

It was important that a MoSCoW approach to Assessment did not become just a tick box exercise, so clear & careful wording was used as part of this new framework to ensure students respected & understood that specific grades within the Assessment method were not guaranteed if the work completed was lacking in fullness and/or effort.

MUST

To receive a passing grade [D] – you should ensure the following ‘MUST’ requirements are suitably met.

1. One [1] table highlighting each requirement achieved in this part – *with a reference to where it can be found.*
2. Two [2] mood boards – *exploring character inspiration/research.*
3. One [1] design sketch for your character idea – *general look etc.*
4. A character model sheet containing a front & side view of your character.
5. Low poly character model – *recommended to aim for a 15k polygon count limit, basic forms there.*
6. Built in (Rigify add on) or simple character rig, created/adjusted & positioned appropriately within the character model – *bones should be properly organised & named.*
7. Simple character skin, binding the character model to the rig – *auto skinning with minimal adjustments.*

SHOULD

Note that suitable completion of these ‘SHOULD’ requirements will award you a maximum grade B.

1. One – two [1 – 2] more additional mood boards covering research into character modelling workflows – *topology examples, research into ‘flow’ & animation etc.*
2. A further two – three [2 – 3] design sketches exploring your character’s design – *gestures, poses etc.*
3. Additional back & ¾ view on your character model sheet.
4. Character model’s basic forms are polished – *topology flows well, problem joints are dealt with appropriately.*
5. Some simple sculpted detail – *utilised as a modifier on the base mesh to enhance some additional detail, such as clothing/hair/additional features etc.*
6. Simple materials applied on the character model – *flat base colours etc.*
7. Evidence of some simple IK in the rig and/or simple rig controllers for animation.
8. Skin is polished beyond auto level – *the mesh deforms smoothly with the movement of bones.*

COULD

Finally – To be in a chance of receiving a grade A, you should extend your project as well as completing at least two [2] of the listed ‘COULD’ requirements. The following are examples of what you may choose to do – and are not a guarantee of a grade A, especially if the basic requirements are not well executed. It is recommended that you spend time polishing your submission *before* attempting these steps.

1. Character model is UV unwrapped.
2. Character model is textured with basic diffuse maps/texture painting – *maximum of six [6] maps, 4k each.*
3. Evidence of shape keys being utilised – *blinking, face gesture etc.*
4. Character rig is custom built using bones – *including additional bones for hair/clothing etc. where needed.*
5. Evidence of a custom-built eye rig & controllers.

Iteration led to a simple MoSCoW approach

Fig.3 – CM3129 3D Character Animation [2020/2021] Revised Requirements

THE SOLUTION

This further ensured that grades achieved are of a higher merit/value & that effort is better measured & rewarded.

Requirements were refined into clear statements, in line with the module's appropriate level & difficulty.

MUST

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6. Built in (Rigify add on) or simple character rig, created/adjusted & positioned appropriately within the character model – *bones should be properly organised & named.*
7. Simple character skin, binding the character model to the rig – *auto skinning with minimal adjustments.*

SHOULD

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COULD

Finally – To be in a chance of receiving a grade A, you should extend your project as well as completing at least two [2] of the listed 'COULD' requirements. The following are examples of what you may choose to do - and are not a guarantee of a grade A, especially if the basic requirements are not well executed. It is recommended that you spend time polishing your submission *before* attempting these steps.

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Requirements prioritized grade categories

Fig.3 – CM3129 3D Character Animation [2020/2021] Revised Requirements

THE SOLUTION

Fig.4 – CM3129 3D Character Animation Revised Grading Scheme
[2020/2021]

ROBERT GORDON UNIVERSITY - SCHOOL OF COMPUTING CM3129 – 3D CHARACTER ANIMATION COURSEWORK							
GRADE	A	B	C	D	E	F	NS
DEFINITION	EXCELLENT Outstanding Performance	COMMENDABLE Meritorious Performance	GOOD Highly Competent Performance	SATISFACTORY Competent Performance	BORDERLINE FAIL Open to Compensation	FAIL Unsatisfactory	NON-SUBMISSION
SOURCES OF ASSESSMENT CRITERIA							
PART 1: CHARACTER DESIGN & DEVELOPMENT [5 GRADES]	Suitable & sufficient progress made towards COULD requirements. All MUST requirements achieved. All SHOULD requirements achieved. Completion & overall level of adherence to the submission requirements is exceptional.	Little/some progress made towards COULD requirement(s). All MUST requirements achieved. All SHOULD requirements achieved. Completion & overall level of adherence to the submission requirements are strong.	Little/some progress made towards SHOULD requirements. All MUST requirements achieved. Completion & overall level of adherence to the submission requirements is reasonable.	MUST requirements achieved. Completion & overall level of adherence to the submission requirements is satisfactory	Minimal progress made towards requirements on the whole. Completion & overall level of adherence to the submission requirements is poor.	Progress made towards requirements is missing or severely lacking on the whole.	No Submission
PART 2: CHARACTER ANIMATION FUNDAMENTALS [5 GRADES]	Suitable & sufficient progress made towards COULD requirements. All MUST requirements achieved. All SHOULD requirements achieved. Completion & overall level of adherence to the submission requirements is exceptional.	Little/some progress made towards COULD requirement(s). All MUST requirements achieved. All SHOULD requirements achieved. Completion & overall level of adherence to the submission requirements are strong.	Little/some progress made towards SHOULD requirements. All MUST requirements achieved. Completion & overall level of adherence to the submission requirements is reasonable.	MUST requirements achieved. Completion & overall level of adherence to the submission requirements is satisfactory	Minimal progress made towards requirements on the whole. Completion & overall level of adherence to the submission requirements is poor.	Progress made towards requirements is missing or severely lacking on the whole.	No Submission
STUDENT:						PART 1:	
FEEDBACK COMMENTS:						PART 2:	
						FINAL GRADE:	

IMPACT

The impact of the analysis performed & changes adopted in both **3D Character Animation** & several other related modules has been profoundly positive on multiple levels.

- **Immediate student feedback** (right) evidences **high levels of satisfaction** with the revised MoSCoW structure, noting that statements & boundaries have helped with clarity & highlighting grade ‘goals’.
- SEQ Data resulted in a **sharp rise** concerning ‘**Course Based Assessment Expectations**’ during the **2020/2021** session, which these measures implemented will have impacted.



Yeah I've found it really cool I like how you know very clearly what's expected and what you need to do to reach the goals. For me anyways I've found it a lot easier to understand than interpreting a large body of text like a traditional brief and trying to pick from that would you need to do



Yeah this is a big coursework so really useful to see it broken down into steps. I have worked through in the order given.



I like it. Useful to see the must, should and could. I had a couple of things I wasn't sure about but asked you and now understand

Fig.5 – Student Feedback on Assessment

IMPACT

Marking times have also seen a positive impact – with Assessments taking roughly **half of their previous time**, and without losing any of the quality.

And in addition, grade inflation for the 2020/2021 year was **successfully addressed**, resulting in a significant re-distribution of grades, with more students achieving on average – B/C grades but importantly..

..also being satisfied with this outcome due to requirement clarity.



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Yeah this is a big coursework so really useful to see it broken down into steps. I have worked through in the order given.



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Fig.5 – Student Feedback on Assessment

FUTURE

Looking ahead – this framework clearly works in tandem with coursework-based Assessments and is flexible enough to be adopted on PASS/FAIL modules – as it has recently been during the 2021/2022 session.

In addition, with the revised Teaching & Learning Assessment template provided by DELTA, the framework discussed in this presentation again – adapts well to the structure. (right)

SHOWREEL & DIRECTOR'S COMMENTARY – 3 SUB GRADES

MUST

To receive a passing grade [D] – you should ensure the following 'MUST' requirements are suitably met.

1. The Scene
 - a. There should be some evidence of Staging.
 - b. There should be some evidence of Solid Drawing.
2. The Ball
 - a. There should be some evidence of Timing.
 - b. There should be some evidence of Ease In/Out.
3. The Walk Cycle
 - a. There should be some evidence of Straight Ahead/Pose to Pose.
 - b. There should be some evidence of Arcs.
4. A **two [2] minute [maximum, penalty applies] showreel** that demonstrates a compilation of the animation principal exercises attempted – *this should be clearly signposted, highlighting the exercises attempted as per the requirements, and may include properly referenced royalty free music.* **[Any text labelling in the showreel is exempt from penalties]**

SHOULD

Note that suitable completion of these 'SHOULD' requirements will award you a maximum grade B.

1. The Sack
 - a. There should be some evidence of Squash & Stretch.
 - b. There should be some evidence of Anticipation.
2. The Head Turn
 - a. There should be some evidence of Follow Through & Overlap.
 - b. There should be some evidence of Exaggeration.
3. The Lift
 - a. There should be some evidence of Secondary Action.
 - b. There should be some evidence of Appeal.
4. An additional **two [2] minute [maximum, penalty applies] director's commentary** version of the **showreel** that provides a **verbal** reflective review of each animation exercise attempted. **Text** may be used if preferred *rather* than verbal commentary.

Fig.6 – Adapted MoSCoW Framework to TL Template

The background of the slide features a series of concentric circles in a dark gray color, centered on the left side of the frame. The circles vary in opacity, creating a subtle, hypnotic effect. The rest of the background is a solid dark gray.

QUESTIONS?