

Here is my general advice for all prospective PhD students.

First, understand that there is a lot of randomness in the process. There are many factors that are out of your control, which means that you may have a dream school in mind but you might not get into it even if you are qualified. Some years they aren't taking certain kinds of students. Sometimes a faculty member who is a good fit has just left, or doesn't want students that cycle, or has just changed their research focus. Knowing that, the smartest course of action is to apply to a few places and not to pin your hopes on any one.

Second, and something you've already done, find potential faculty members who may be a good mutual fit. You need to want to be there doing a certain kind of research and they need to want you there doing it. Both sides should be interested in the same general things (not exactly the same). Sometimes students want to work with me on an area and I'm no longer doing it. That's not a flaw of the student, but it can mean that it wouldn't make sense for me—and thus it wouldn't be great for the student either.

Also, see if they want a student in the next cycle. They may not, or they may have too many, etc. If they agree to answer questions or take a meeting, great, but they're also busy with the students they currently have so don't take it personally. Your goal is to get on their radar so that if they are asked during the admissions process they remember you. But, at many schools faculty are surprisingly not asked for input, so it may be moot (see "randomness," above). Also, note that not all schools actually ask the faculty who they want. At USC, I've had students I wanted not be accepted, and other times been given a student I've never heard of. So, the faculty aren't always in charge of the decision.

Third, is this the career path you want? Most R1 universities are set up to teach you how to be a researcher in their area. Some will allow flexibility and you can do interdisciplinary work, e.g. communication and computer science. Or maybe you are thinking of going into industry. If so, are they supportive of that, and have they had a track record of students doing it successfully? Some places will be offended, and that's a sign in itself, while others are thinking more about those alternate career paths knowing that the professoriate is slightly shrinking over time. FWIW, about $\frac{1}{3}$ of my students go into industry, and I consult actively myself so this is a supported path.

Fourth, how qualified are you? These are often super-competitive programs with 200+ people applying for 12 or fewer spots. Last year we had 300 for 10 spots, which is crazy. Do you have good grades, test scores and recommendation letters? Sidenote: Most programs—including ours—don't require scores right now, but I like to see them and I care, though as I noted my input sometimes doesn't matter. How focused are you? Do you have a track record? How focused are your research interests vs. how broad? Although some students are able to move directly from undergraduate work with a compelling case, many or maybe most have had either some after-school life experience and/or a master's degree. The latter group are also more likely to have given conference presentations or possibly even published a paper or more.

Last, think about the quality of life where you're applying. Do you like or dislike big or small cities? Do you like or dislike seasons? How much culture shock (or adventure) can you handle? Is it close or far from your current support system? Can you see yourself in this place for 4-6 years?

I'm still doing some work on games, though I've started working more on Social Value. If you don't know what that is, but you want to work with me, you should go dive in and see if it resonates or not. These programs need to be good mutual fits, so don't think about it only as "convince them to like me." You need to find what you want as well.

That said, since many students are interested in game research and I still do some, I think it's helpful to know of some of the many, many good people out there doing work on games:

Jesse Fox, Ohio State

Teresa Lynch, Ohio State

Florence Chee, Loyola Chicago

Cuihua Shen*, UC Davis

Rabindra Ratan*, Casey O'Donnell & Amanda Cote, Michigan State

Mia Consalvo, Concordia (Canada)

Nick Bowman, Jaime Banks, Syracuse

Max Foxman, Oregon

Grace Ahn, Georgia (for VR)

Vivien Chen, Nanyang Tech (Singapore)

TL Taylor, MIT

Sukyoung Choi*, Yonsei (Korea)

Mingxuan Liu*, Macau

Do Own Kim*, Chicago

Jih-Hsuan Tammy Lin, NCCU (Taiwan)

Amanda Cote, MSU

There is also a cluster of great folks at UC Irvine worth checking out, especially if you are more culturally oriented: see Nardi, Trammel, Squire and Steinkheuler

*Former PhD students of mine

Programs that may be of interest:

ITU Copenhagen's Center for Digital Play

The Oxford Internet Institute

For social science in particular:

Michigan

Michigan State

Stanford

Penn

Penn St.

Ohio St.

Illinois

Wisconsin (3 comm programs)

UCSB

Syracuse