Creating Space for Play
Socially Responsible Game Design and the Gaming Reality Initiative

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Introduction: Games and Myths

In *The Soul of Money*, author Lynne Twist identifies three “toxic myths of scarcity” that control our understanding of the world with regards to money and resources – “there’s not enough,” “more is better,” and “that’s just the way it is.” While reading her words, it struck me that these myths of scarcity are transmitted constantly in our day to day lives, reinforced through all our interactions with media – including games. How many games center around amassing more and more resources, or “leveling up” just for the sake of feeling some sense of “progress”? In how many games is “collection” a core mechanic? As I reflected on these myths, and the role of games in reinforcing them, I became more and more aware of other myths that are preserved and transmitted through games, and more aware of games themselves as a system of communication. As game designer and artist Mary Flanagan asserts “Games also imprint our culture with the motives and values of their designers.” (Flanagan 2009) If these values are based on societal myths or cultural narratives – stories we as a culture tell ourselves about the way the world works – then those myths are also embedded in the games we play and are in turn imprinted on our culture, creating a cycle that cannot be broken so long as game makers do not consider the social ramifications of the work they put into the world.

Human cultures are constructed through stories that shape our sense of collective identity. The media we consume is ever in an unconscious dialog with these stories, often reinforcing and propagating them. Games are a particularly powerful tool for the purposes of re-authoring cultural mythologies. Games are not only participatory; they are governed by rules which call for repetition of actions by players. It is through the rules of the game that a game “means” and rules are something that the player enacts over and over again. Players take the same actions over and over again, rolling dice, moving pawns, shooting an on-screen enemy. However, the outcomes of these actions is not the same as the circumstances may be different and the results may be different. The dice may roll a different number this time, or the opponent may not respond in a predictable way. This not only keeps games interesting, but gives the feeling in players that they are tapping into something beyond themselves. I take an action and the world of the game responds. I can control the action of the universe, but not perfectly. Players not only practice game skills while taking actions, they practice the ideas that are encoded in the rules of the game while at the same time sharing in the construction of meaning. In a very real way, players are practicing the cultural narratives embedded in games by playing them.
Even though games are a powerful medium for transmitting these cultural narratives, many commercial games continually reinforce narratives that are harmful to society as a whole. I do not believe that this is a matter of maliciousness on the part of the game makers, but rather a simple case of social unconsciousness. The creators of games must be made aware of this power and reflect on what it is they are making and whether it is something they want to “imprint our culture” with. As the number of game education programs grow across the world and the number of trained game makers grow with it, intervention at the site of undergraduate education becomes a promising way to turn developing game makers away from social unconsciousness and towards embracing the social responsibility of all makers of culture. Meanwhile, it is critical to invite in those who have never considered making games to try their hand at game creation, in order to increase the general gaming literacy of society.

The mission of my project, the Gaming Reality Initiative, is to encourage socially responsible game making as a form of personal expression. So far, this project has manifested in two forms: a class in Experimental Game Design at UC Santa Cruz which examines the possibilities of game creation as a form of artistic expression, and the Game/Reality workshops which are a series of events that teach museum goers about game design principles while asking them to more closely examine their own relationships to games, societal and personal systems and each other.
Part 1: Socially Responsible Game Design

A running theme of game designer and artist Mary Flanagan’s scholarly work on games is that games, as products of human beings who live within systems of values, are inherently embedded with values.

Games are simultaneously systems of information, cultural products, and manifestations of cultural practice. On some level, systems such as games must, due to the conditions of their creation, represent cultural norms and biases in their realization. These results can go, and have gone, completely unacknowledged. (Flanagan 2009)

An important aspect of this work is that games create meaning not only through their framing stories or visual and aural aesthetics (as might non-interactive time-based media) but additionally through interacting with their sets of rules. “In organized play and games, rules have a mechanical rigor and are followed as procedures. These take on a kind of algorithmic specificity as players enact meaning through following rules sets.” (Flanagan 2009) In her book Critical Play, Flanagan pushes for an understanding of the medium of games as a fertile ground for social activism.

The term “Socially Responsible Games” has been used by some companies⁴, to describe a genre of games which have a social message that they wish to impart on their players. Ian Bogost terms these types of games “persuasive games” (2007), and a more general term for games which wish to have a positive impact on the world are called “social impact games”⁵, “activist games”⁶ or occasionally other names.

The way I am using the term “socially responsible game design” however, is more in line with how other industries use it. The business site BusinessDictionary.com defines social responsibility as: “The obligation of an organization’s management towards the welfare and interests of the society in which it operates.” This term refers to practices such as using environmentally friendly materials, paying workers a reasonable wage, and using

1 For example, Impact Games (www.impactgames.com)

2 From the Games for Change Website. (www.gamesforchange.org)

3 “Activist games can be characterized by their emphasis on social issues, education, and, occasionally, intervention”. (Flanagan 2009)
only fair trade goods. In other words, it is a business philosophy of coexisting well with the rest of the world and doing no harm.  

Anna Everett and S. Craig Watkins, in their article “The Power of Play: The Portrayal and Performance of Race in Video Games” discuss the game NBA Ballers Phenom. This game is marketed towards a young black audience, and perpetuates a nasty tangle of harmful narratives about blackness and the choices of lower classes in American society. The player takes on the character of a down and out urban black youth who has just hit bottom:

> You’ve got revenge on your mind for this week ... Not only did he take the money and the glory, but he also had the gumption to steal your girl along with everything else. The NBA-sponsored streetball tournaments during the Finals festivities are your chance to exact a little payback and earn a little glory and money of your own along the way. (Colayco 2006)

The only way out of this mess for our hero is by playing street basketball, winning more and more fabulous prizes -- including sexually available women -- which equates to success. “For many young black males the power and pervasiveness of these representations can often skew their values and thus profoundly influence the lifestyle choices and behaviors that impact their life chances.” (Everett et al 2008) Play basketball, gain financial stability and eventually wealth. This is the goal and the means of achievement being put forth by this game to its target audience. Down and out urban black youths did not design this game, however, and it is not necessarily reflective of their concerns. It does not show anything about their lives or potentially even their fantasies. Rather, it pushes forward an uninformed idea of what this audience does want or should want, and it does it in a way that requires practicing cultural narratives through gameplay.

It seems unlikely to me that the designers and writers of NBA Ballers Phenom consciously decided to make a game that was degrading to minorities and women. It seems much more likely that the developers simply lacked the awareness and attention needed to make sure that the game they were producing was in line with their own values. Perhaps they fell into the “anything is ok, as long as it’s for entertainment” trap that so much of our media seems unable to avoid.

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4 This is the difference, for example, between One Laptop per Child (www.laptop.org), which is a non-profit with a social mission, and TOMS shoes (www.toms.com), which is a for-profit company with a socially responsible emphasis.
Socially responsible game design is, then, game design which seeks to “do no harm” by not perpetuating harmful cultural narratives in its mechanics or content. In order for socially responsible game design to be possible, game makers must reflect on each of their design choices as a game is being made. The “Critical Play” game design model offered up by Mary Flanagan (2009) might be very useful in this regard, as it requires a verification of embedded values during each iteration of the game design process. Whatever process the game maker uses, they must ask themselves questions during design and production such as “what are the values that this feature/mechanic transmit?,” “what am I saying with this, and is it problematic?,” and “who would be most affected by this design decision and in what way?”

It may be helpful to offer an example. *Okami* (2006), originally by Clover Studios, is a mainstream industry game with high production values developed for major game consoles. It is also not explicitly a “persuasive” or “activist” game. The choices made by the design team, however, poise *Okami* as a game that, largely, “does no harm”:

- Rather than privileging a fighting mechanic and sub-mechanics that support it, *Okami* has three main mechanics; exploration, fighting and solving puzzles using sumi-e style brushstrokes to change the environment. The latter, which is a mechanic of restoration rather than destruction, is arguably the most important of these.
- While fighting is one of the main activities one does in *Okami*, it is made clear by the narrative of the game that the creatures being fought are demons that are invading the normal world, and that Amaterasu is not killing, but rather “exorcising” the demons back to where they belong.
- Many of the mechanics of the game support the game narrative of restoring a land that has been poisoned – such as clearing a portion of land of its bad influence, feeding hungry animals or causing barren trees to blossom

**A Scale of Social Responsibility**

Investigating the design choices in a game like *Okami*, however, makes it apparent that socially responsible game design is not a binary, and is somewhat subjective. What is a socially responsible presentation of combat in a game, for example? Is *Okami* socially responsible in this area because the enemies are not humans but rather monsters who are being exorcised back to the demon plane where they belong? Or is no level of violence as a method to solve problems acceptable? Should Amaterasu trick the demons in a non-violent way, for example, into leaving earth for their home plane? Further, while design choices might appear socially responsible in some aspects of a particular game, other aspects may be found wanting. For example, some of the female character designs might be considered problematic in *Okami*, and it is even possible (although I have not personally heard this argument) that there are cultural references in the game which bother certain individuals. If a game maker is
going to pay attention to the values inherent in their games, it is necessary to face the reality that different players are going to have different values, and what is acceptable to one person may be egregious to another.

The diagram below offers a way to more clearly understand social responsibility as a scale, rather than as an either/or proposition:

![Diagram of social responsibility scale]

On the left side of the diagram are games which are designed to be purposely offensive. They may, for example, be intentionally created as a form of hate speech. On the right side of the scale are activist games which are designed to be purposely transformative, to make a positive difference in the world. The middle ground is where my current work engages. To be “socially unconscious” (and most high budget commercial games fall into this category) is to not reflect on the cultural narratives that are being built into game experiences. *NBA Baller Phenom* would be strongly described as “socially unconscious”. “Socially conscious” on the other hand, shows awareness of values communicated through games and an effort to make games which promote values that are positive to society in the long run rather than destructive.

The point is not to make games that are inoffensive to every possible player. Certain players may, in fact, locate a particular game on a different place on the above scale than other players, based on their own life experiences and sets of values. And there are times we need controversy for our society to move forward. “Socially responsible game design” encourages reflection on the part of the game maker to recognize and evaluate the cultural narratives that they are weaving into their games and to make a conscious decision about what they wish to put forth into the world.
Part 2: Gaming Reality

It has been a long-standing frustration of mine that most undergraduate “game design” programs that I have encountered have so far been actually either game programming majors with a smattering of game design, or else “game arts” (i.e. animation and 3D modeling) programs with a light sprinkling of game design theory. The assumptions seem to be:

• Games are inherently digital, (or at least the kinds of games worth making are)
• In order to design games, you must first learn how to program them

I find both of these assumptions to be absurd, and contrary to my personal experience. Programming digital games is not how I learned game design. I learned game design by designing games.

I created my first board game for my 5th grade class. It was called Krakor’s Volcano. It had a large map/board I painted in watercolors on poster board, and was essentially a race game with a couple extra twists. Players could discover treasures and fight monsters on their way to stop an evil sorcerer, and there was also a mechanic that involved adding marbles to a plastic volcano. Eventually (in theory, although it may only have actually happened once in all the games that were played -- the volcano was a bit too deep) the marbles would pile up and spill over the volcano and any player figures knocked over would be “killed”.

This game -- although likely unbalanced and terribly flawed -- nonetheless was quite well received by my ten year old classmates and sparked an obsession with creating games. I would make games out of anything I could get my hands on. Found objects offered up possibilities for new explorations. A sponge shaped like a cat inspired a game where one player controlled a cat and tried to capture mice controlled by another player. A cardboard box filled with packing peanuts became a rather dangerous gold mining game, where some of the peanuts were colored gold and others black (for coal) and players “mined” by hacking at the peanuts with pick axes crafted from curved quilter’s needles and pick up sticks. A small notebook evolved into a rather misguided race game entitled The Long and Winding Road, with the track stretching across all the pages of the book. It was played with paper clips as playing pieces so each player could mark which page they had progressed to.

It was through these explorations that I learned to love, not only games themselves, but the craft of making games. Making games in physical space is, for me, satisfying in ways that programming digital games is not. Adding a layer of technology creates a distance between the designer and the ideas he/she wishes to put into practice. Add to this the inevitability of bugs in the code and programming also slows the entire game making process down. The
designer spends just as much time (or more) wrestling with bugs as they do designing the game, and bugs can also slow down the iterative process that is so vital to refining a game. With a physical game – a board game, a card game, a role-playing game, an outdoor game – the materials for a prototype can be quickly and easily created and manipulated for new iterations or experiments. The game maker is hands on in a very real way with their ideas and there is a relatively short loop between play-testing and iteration.

It should not be understood that the sole reason to create physical games is as a vehicle to generate ideas or “practice” that will later be applicable to digital games. Exploring games in physical space not only supports learning for creation of digital games, but also exposes game makers to the affective quality of board games, card games and outdoor games. My own inspiration for socially responsible games comes largely from physical game projects, which I feel have largely been more successful in this realm than digital games. In particular, Brenda Brathwaite’s *Train*, several of the Fluxus chess game “mods” and the New Games Tournaments have shaped my thinking around what is possible in the realm of games.

Brenda Brathwaite’s game *Train* (2009) is both sculpturally beautiful and experientially powerful. I encountered this game in person at IndieCade in 2009. When I came across it, no one was playing it. It stood on its own ready for an encounter. The train box cars were set up in their starting positions, the little people painted yellow were waiting nearby to be herded onboard like so much cattle. The thick cards with their stark black type in a somehow official yet unsettling font: “Terminus”. Broken glass everywhere, and nearby the Nazi typewriter with the sheets of rules lying nearby containing vague instructions like “Each token is worth 100,000.” and “Train is over when it ends.”

Looking at the game set up ready for play, reading the rules, holding the little tokens shaped like abstract yellow people, I felt like I was in the presence of something vitally important. I have often said games don’t actually exist until they are being played, that without players they are just dead artifacts. But if you are very familiar with games, you can look at a game set up like this and go through an act of playing it in your mind. The play session I imagined made me terribly uncomfortable, as I thought of shoving little people into train cars and sending them down the tracks. I knew if I played this game in the presence of other people, I would have been one of the ones in tears.

*Train* changed the way I viewed games and art. It confirmed and solidified a niggling notion I had maintained that games could be art in a completely profound and unarguable way.

5 “Some people approach the game and see it for what it is immediately, and their reaction is no less visceral than those who play the game. There are those who play all the way until the end and then realize where the trains were going - and it is such a steep drop. People become nauseated. Their faces flush. People have cried.” (Brophy-Warren 2009)
The Fluxus experiments with games, especially the chess “mods” created by Yoko Ono and Takako Saito also have inspired my desire to both experiment with game forms and to encourage others to do the same. In digital games, a “mod” is a modified experience created from and for a popular game franchise to be shared with others. Yoko Ono created a mod of chess entitled *Play it By Trust* (1997) in which the board consisted only of white pieces (Flanagan 2009). Chess, which originated as a game about war-time strategy, became a game that pointed out that we are, after all, all the same – there are no enemies, only more of “us”. Saito’s chess mods, such as *Spice Chess* (originally 1965) and *Liquid Chess* (1975) replaced standard chess pieces with pieces that had unique smells (Flanagan 2009). Unlike Yoko Ono’s clear anti-war message, Saito replaced a reliance on sight and touch with the importance of smell, bringing players’ attention to a sense that they typically take for granted. It invited a different way of experiencing something familiar, and forcing examination of something often overlooked.

The New Games Tournaments were giant community events to which anyone and everyone was invited. Interestingly, the tournaments began as an alternative type of protest of the Vietnam War (The Headlands Press, Inc. 1976). The tournaments offered an different worldview, one in which human beings were able to come play together as a community and release aggression without causing each other permanent harm. This view of play as bringing communities together and functioning as a form of activism in favor of the social good has been a vital influence on my own work. Community building is perhaps the most vital work we can do to create a more positive world.

I created the *Experimental Game Design* class and *Gaming/Reality Workshops* as a way to share my own experience of game making. Not through a programming-first method, but as an experiment/exploration-first method. In beginning game design classes at UC Santa Cruz, the established method of creating games is through the use of YoYo Games’ *Game Maker*. *Game Maker* is software that allows people to create simple digital games using a drag and drop interface, or else dive deeper and use the included scripting language to create more complicated experiences. *Game Maker* mediates what types of games are likely to be made, by what types of processes are easier for the software to handle. Beginning game design instruction by teaching a tool and requiring its use introduces a constraint that may not support the types of projects the game creator has in mind, and has the potential of setting up an adversarial relationship between author and tool where the author is fighting the affordances of the tool in order to make something they’d really like to make. It is much like hammering in a nail when all you have is a screwdriver – maybe you can make it work, but a hammer would be a far more efficient way to go. It makes far more sense for a game maker to decide what they wish to make and then select the tool or tools that are most appropriate. I am more interested in teaching game design principles in an experiential way, without devoting any time to learning the intricacies of any software package. I want to instill in my students and participants a love, not just of digital games, but of the large space of games which includes games played in the physical realm. Ultimately, I want people to see games like I see games – as a part of the world rather than an
escape alongside of it, an expansive medium capable of expressing any concept, of bringing people together, of seething with world-changing potential.

**Formal Properties**

*Experimental Game Design* is a course designed for and deployed in the art department at UC Santa Cruz. It is an interdisciplinary class, consisting of half art students and half computer science/game design students. The class assignments are divided up into five “experiments,” all but one of which is a group project. Most of the projects are explicitly non-digital. The last two are allowed to be digital/physical hybrids. From the class syllabus:

> The objective of this course is to provide a view of game design through an artistic lens, with an emphasis on experimentation with and exploration of game mechanics in non-digital formats. We will look at game design as an art practice, engaging with the works of the New Games movement, Fluxus artists, the Big Games movement and makers of socially conscious board and card games. We will make things, get our hands dirty and play outside, all the while interrogating the unique expressive power of games. Students are responsible for engaging in four small game “experiments” and one final “Big Game” project, an expansive outdoor game experience involving 20 – 100 players from the larger campus community. (Logas 2012)

The *Game/Reality Workshops* facet of the Gaming Reality initiative provides a platform for art gallery visitors to explore the affective aspects of games while inviting them to participate in the process of game making. First deployed at the Digital Arts and New Media MFA show “I’ve Got Something on Your Mind” (2012), the installation consisted of a large white box/table with a dry erase top, a white square pedestal holding a porcelain box of cards, a magnetic dry erase board hung on the wall displaying printed 8 1/2 x 11 photos of previously created games, and a magnetic dry-erase easel fitted with a glass container holding magnets with various words on them – words of the type one might find in a set of game rules. A white rectangular cart on wheels held the materials provided to create games – a selection of dry-erase markers in two different sizes and a variety of colors, small wooden cubes in various colors, colored wooden “pawns” as one might find in a commercial board game, and a large six-sided die with dry-erase faces.
During a pre-set time, I would come (wearing a lab coat) to run the workshops. One participant would either randomly draw or else choose a card, each bearing a typed prompt. The prompts were either adapted from Fluxus instruction pieces, or else written by myself after the style of a Fluxus instruction piece. For example one prompt adapted from *Proposition* (1962) by Alison Knowles⁶, read:

“Make a game about making a salad. Play it.”

While another – one designed by myself -- read:

“Make a game about sweeping cobwebs from hard to reach places, e.g. a chimney, the ceiling, your mind. Play it.”

**Philosophical Underpinnings**

Just as games contain values imprinted on them by their creators, so to do *Experimental Game Design* and the *Gaming/Reality Workshops* share certain core principles I imprinted on them. Although the two projects might seem quite different, these philosophical underpinnings guided the design of each and likewise are critical to the consideration of creating innovative socially responsible games:

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⁶ Friedman 1998
Experimentation

While researching the history of Fluxus, I encountered multiple texts that cited its beginnings in John Cage’s *Experimental Composition* class at the New School for Social Research in New York from 1956 – 1960 (eg Higgins 2002). Although this was far from Cage’s only teaching engagement, it was this class credited as being the launching point of Fluxus.

Cage felt that teachers had just as much to learn from students as vice versa. *Experimental Composition* was very loosely structured. Rather than lecture or attempt to pass on information in other more traditional manners, the class consisted of weekly presentations of pieces that students had produced (occasionally based on an assignment by Cage but just as often based on the students’ own whims) and the discussion that resulted. As recorded by Bruce Altshuler, Cage made this remark about his philosophy: “I didn’t want to transmit any body of information, I simply wanted to stimulate the people to do experimental work…That was my general plan of action, and I learned a great deal…” (Lauf et al 1991)

Fluxus artist Robert Watts likewise created an educational experience around experimentation. Watts began proposing a new kind of studio class at Rutgers University where he worked starting in 1957. Due to his persistence, he received a grant that allowed him to finally create the course in 1965 – *Art Seminar and Experimental Workshop*. The main thrust of the course, which was later repeated at UC Santa Cruz, was to pursue new discoveries in art by following similar experiment-based practices to those in the sciences. His classes worked as a whole unit, experimenting and creating works together. His method of teaching has been described as challenging “students to both find and then answer their own questions...he regarded the acquisition of technical skills as important, but as an artist he regarded that as ancillary to the functional ends of articulating one’s personal take on human experience.” (Hendricks 2003)

The course design of both of these artists were very influential in the design of *Experimental Game Design* class. Cage’s loose structure inspired my own class, although mine was unified and structured a bit more through a very Watts-inspired series of “experiments”. These experiments, however, had very broad guidelines. I strove to give just enough constraints that students could wrap their heads around an assignment, while still allowing for a vast
range of possible projects – with the idea that students would be able to first “find and then answer their own questions”. Watts' emphasis on experimentation in arts after a scientific mode not only led to the structure of my class around game “experiments,” but also my inclusion of “lab books” for recording “observations” on each experiment throughout the quarter.

The class experiments were either two-week or one-week assignments. The emphasis was on working with new ideas, rather than producing aesthetically polished games. Most of the learning was experiential, occurring through the process of making games. However, students were taught brainstorming and ideation techniques as well as some skills for working in teams and very basic game design philosophy. Instruction covered the minimum skills needed to produce the work. The rest was up to the students.

Projects were kept strictly non-digital for most of the quarter. Because of this, students were allowed to focus their attention on making games, rather than building code. Equipment was provided that supported making non-digital games: various craft materials, access to the school’s wood shop (along with basic training for those who were not familiar with wood working), and a variety of sports equipment. Students are encouraged to try out different ideas and to try out different variants and iterations on it. In this way, students had the opportunity to try out many different game mechanics and evaluate how different mechanics work together to create certain affect through game play. One computer science/game design student told me that he liked the class because he had a chance to “make games.” He was referencing the fact that, with these small experiments, he had a chance to try out many types of gameplay. He described his programming classes, by way of contrast, as emphasizing technical challenges to be solved by creating something game-like.

Much like the projects assigned in Experimental Game Design, the prompts given in the Game/Reality Workshops allowed for just enough constraint to offer a starting point for game design, but were wide enough to allow for a myriad of possibilities. The prompts, inspired by Fluxus instruction pieces, were additionally designed to offer a challenge for game design -- one for which leaning on familiar design tropes would not suffice. As in my class, the emphasis for these games is experimenting with new and different combinations of game mechanics.

In the workshops, I would generally begin by leading the participants through a group brainstorm, drawing a mind map for everyone’s use on the dry erase table. Most often I began the brainstorm with a simple question: What does this prompt make you think of? I would then tease out more and more information from the participants until a game, or the beginnings of one, started forming in my mind. (Rarely would a participant initiate the jump

7 Reactions to this approach by the students was mixed. One teaching evaluation mentioned that this was a strong point of the class, while another cited the structure as being disorganized and the projects too open.
from brainstorming to game making). At this point I would suggest the starting mechanics that occurred to me and inquired if the participants thought of anything else or if they liked the mechanics.

The next step was usually to erase the mind map and begin drawing the playing space of the game; the “board”. (A few games did not require a board, and so we wrote the rules up on the easel instead). Often the workshop participants helped draw out the board and place playing pieces. During the drawing of the board, other mechanics might be suggested. Often, once a space to play was drawn on the table, the rest of the game design would flow freely from drawing in details on the board and placing game pieces on it. Very quickly, we would find ourselves with a “complete” game to play test.

Finally, we would play the game. This invariably revealed holes in the mechanics or game balance, which we would either fill as we went, or else resolved as a group that they should be fixed for “the next iteration”.

Occasionally, we would draw the board and still be rather stuck on how to go from a core mechanic to a complete game. In this case, I would suggest thinking about how real life might inspire further game rules. One example of this was a game about washing a child’s hair, where we decided to include a mechanic related to having a limited amount of time in which to complete the hair washing in order to add a level of challenge to the game.

Using the dry-erase table itself added a particular parameter that allowed for experiments in game design that could not have been produced with out it. Several games took full advantage of the affordances of the dry erase table. *Heavy Metal Pig Magic* began with a standard race type board, but players could write any type of board effect in any square their playing pieces landed in. In this way they created traps or opportunities for the players who followed behind them. Our kid/adult *Pictionary* variant allowed for each team around the table to not only draw their creations on the table and easily erase for the next round, but due to the square nature of the space also look across and join in the guessing for the inscrutable glyphs of the other players. This dynamic soon became part of the game.

**Cooperation/Collaboration/Coliberation**

A key aspect of the New Games Movement in general (and Bernie DeKoven’s work in particular) is the importance placed on community and playing together. The New Games tournaments placed emphasis on playing together as a way to build community, which is the first step of bringing people together to solve larger conflicts and create a

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8 Although it was understood that the “next iteration” was more a conceptual step than something that would actually happen during the workshops.

9 Hasbro 1994
general world understanding. Bernie DeKoven, in his book *The Well Played Game* takes this idea further. Play becomes a platform for what he terms “coliberation”, which occurs when people play so beautifully together that each is lifted, at least momentarily, to new heights (DeKoven, 2002). Coliberation brings people closer together, which again is the first step towards the kind of communication that fosters real understanding and encourages peaceful relations.

No amount of policy or awareness of social issues alone can change the world. The world will not change unless people's values and viewpoints change – unless they are able to become more socially conscious. Encouraging compassion and empathy is more important to stopping societal violence than informing people about atrocities happening a world away. Building community is one important way to increase the social awareness of society. The more people work and play together, the more connections are formed between them, the more likely they are to be patient and understanding with those who have differing world views and in turn find collaborative solutions to problems.

Interdisciplinary collaboration and collaboration in general, is vital to the vision of *Experimental Game Design*. It was my goal, not only to build a “play community” (DeKoven 2002) but also a creation community. Through group projects, students practiced not only the art of game making, but the art of living and working together as well. The roster was comprised of half computer science (with an emphasis in game design) students and half art students. Both disciplines brought their own specialties to the table. The computer science students understood how to make games playable through game design principles and how to design for an audience. They had a large gaming vocabulary and familiarity with a vast number of gaming references. As well as a lot of practice working in groups within their game design classes. (Although their game design classes privilege a hierarchical group as opposed to the freeform, “flat” groups in our course.) The art students excelled at creative problem solving and thinking outside the box. They were more familiar with the critical aspects of creative work, and looking deeply at things that are being created. They also had very useful technical skills for building things out of physical materials.

John Cage was a proponent of McLuhan’s idea of “brushing of information”. One example of this he gave was “…we would subject the entire University Library to chance operations, to the *I Ching*, and each person in the class would read, say five books...And in that way we would have...something to talk about, something to give one another” (Kostelanetz 2003). It was this “brushing of information” that interested me when I designed my class to be interdisciplinary. Group projects were further orchestrated such that each group for each project is roughly half computer scientists and half artists. These groups brought together not only differences in knowledge, but also cultures and working styles. Through this commingling of disciplines, more interesting game projects occurred.
than might have otherwise been possible and the students learned some of the intricacies of how different groups of creators operate.

Although working together was extremely important to my vision of this class, I was not prepared for how challenging it would be for these students. Art students at UC Santa Cruz in particular apparently do not undertake much creative collaborative work in their undergraduate careers. The game design students, while many of their projects in other classes are collaborative, seem to organize these projects in a hierarchical manner to mimic the working styles of the game industry. As a result, neither group of students was particularly adept at effectively working with others in a non-hierarchical way. Add to this the differences between acceptable modes of communication in each culture of students and general misunderstanding of expectations, and real problems occasionally developed. One project, *Life on the Rocks* turned out to be an interesting and successful game, but the creative process was even rockier than the product itself. The group was comprised of two very outgoing art students who loved the process of fabrication of art, one outgoing computer science student who was very entrenched in computer science culture, and one quieter computer science student. In the first brainstorming session, the group managed to completely alienate the quieter student by disregarding his suggestions and then spending a good deal of time half-seriously entertaining ideas involving sexually explicit materials. The quiet student withdrew, and did not further contribute to the project except as directed by the others, and then did so half-heartedly. The art students in the meantime grew impatient with the planning process and decided they wanted to just “make something”, leading them to create a rope harness to which rocks could be attached -- without conferring with the rest of the group. Fortunately the more outgoing game designer liked what they had created and helped them come up with mechanics for a game that utilized what they had built. At the next class session however, one of the art students pulled me aside to report that the computer scientists were “not participating” by which he meant they were not assisting in the fabrication of the materials needed for the game. I was not aware at the time that one of the game designers had emotionally withdrawn from the project, although he did not seem overly invested. I was confused about the claimed non-participation of the other game designer, however, who seemed to be interested in the project and working with the artists. Although I never confirmed it, I now suspect that the reason for his “non-participation” was that he was more accustomed to working in a setting with a strong division of labor – for their computer science game projects, an artist was in charge of the art: the game designer/programmer did not assist with it.  

10 In my one on one talk with the artist who was having problems with the game designers, he said he had offered to collaborate on the fabrication but as they did not seem enthusiastic, did not want to push the issue. It seems just as possible to me that the game designers weren’t sure how to help as didn’t want to.
In another instance, I had to pull one art student aside after he said of a different group’s project that he did not want to spend an hour critiquing something that had taken them twenty minutes to produce. However, he was referring to the production of the game pieces. The game itself was obviously well thought out, and I knew it had gone through an extensive creative process, including several rounds of iteration. The art student was judging the piece based on the presentation of it, rather than the actual game design. Once I spoke privately with him, he clearly understood what I was talking about and apologized, but this interaction made more clear to me some of the issues around teaching game design in this context.\footnote{Robert Watts’ classes were populated by students chosen by Watts after an interview process (Hendricks 2003), which may have aided the success of those efforts. I was not given a similar opportunity to hand pick students and, in any event am not sure I would want to limit access in this way. However, a future revision of this class will dedicate a week solely to practicing collaboration techniques.}

While there were culture clashes, there were also wonderful moments when students were intrigued by each other’s differences in working styles and creative processes. One computer science student, working with artists on a project, commented how he was fascinated by how they came up with ideas and resolved to use some of their techniques in his own future work. The projects the groups came up with were quite often intriguing explorations at the crossroads of art and games. Life on the Rocks, mentioned above, involved a player wearing a harness and

\begin{center}
\textbf{Player navigating the field looking to uncover more water in Life on the Rocks}
\end{center}
exploring different closed bags in a field on a time limit indicated by a sort of water-filled hourglass. If a bag contained a jar of water, the player could take it back to base and add the water to the hourglass, increasing the amount of time they had for exploration. If the player found a rock however, (fist sized or ostrich egg sized and all specially converted with wire and rope) then the player was required to attach the rock to his harness before opening more bags. The result: the player dragging rocks behind him as he tried to navigate a field of potential treasures. This game was not only a great example of art aesthetics and game design principles coming together, but it was also a fantastic launching point for a discussion about values inherent in game mechanics (Does Life on the Rocks present an optimistic or pessimistic world view? What is the game about?) as well as the nature of games themselves (Is this even a game?). I do not believe this game would have come about in a group of either exclusively game design students or exclusively art students.

Cage/McLuhan’s “brushing of information” was vital to the success of the Game/Reality Workshops as well. In general, those who came together at the table for creation were gentle and respectful. The more people collaborating actively on a game therefore, the greater the variety of experience and creative sensibilities were present, and the more interesting the game became.

Participants reported this workshop brought a new understanding to them, not just about how to make games, but also about certain processes in the world and about the people gathered around the table with them. One group created an imaginative and whimsical game which prompted a wife to say to her husband of fifty years: “I never knew you were so creative!” The husband, someone who doesn’t usually play games despite his wife’s attempts to entice him, offered: “maybe we should play more games at home”. One group, consisting of other artists presenting work at the show, used game creation as a vehicle of catharsis by making a game about converting “haters” to “non-haters”. Another group pulled the prompt “Make a game for a dear friend. Play it.” and created a game for a group-member’s friend who had recently lost her grandfather and which employed discussion of coping mechanisms as part of the game play mechanics. These three experiences of collaborative creation and play embodied Bernie DeKoven’s coliberation. The creators were all very much together, on the same plane, creating this game, and then playing it together. Creating the game led to an intense investment in them playing the game and seeing where it would go, making adjustments along the way for a better experience for all.
I would not allow myself pre-consideration of the prompts. It was important to me that I would be involved in the sense of discovery along with the participants, rather than implementing with them a game I had already partially designed. Preparing for each prompt beforehand would not only have robbed the participants of creating a game that was authentically “theirs” (a product of the mass consciousness of everyone involved), but would also have robbed me of the experience of coming closer to the participants and allowing for learning through examination of their lives and values.
I was also pleased to note that the project worked well with children and with child-parent groups, creating mini-cross-generational play communities. One game-making process identified what one nine-year-old boy and one four-year-old girl had in common -- they both loved sleepovers. Working together, we were able to create a custom game just for them that they both enjoyed. One very successful game, created for adults and children to play together was a version of the popular party game *Pictionary* (1994). It placed one adult and one child on each team. The parents would take a turn drawing something that came to their heads, and their child partner would attempt to guess what was being rendered. Then the children would take a turn drawing something they thought of and the parents would try to guess. As many of the children participating were between the ages of four to five, the results were often hilarious. The kids drew make-believe things that parents had no way of guessing (“no, it’s not a butterfly, it’s an ALIEN butterfly!”) or drew indecipherable renditions of common things. Parents and children all enjoyed themselves, and insights into the children’s thought processes and creativity were offered up to their parents while at the same time parents and children bonded through teamwork.

The dry erase table used in the installation, a large white box that is three feet tall and the top of which is four foot square, unexpectedly enhanced this sense of coliberation. Working on the dry erase table not only allowed for the creation of an endless variety of flat game boards, it also, and perhaps more importantly, changed the relationship of co-participants at a white board. White boards are typically hung on a wall, and one person at a time can draw or write while other participants stand back and consider what is being written. The person doing the writing has the position of privilege, in that they have power over what is being recorded on the board. With this table-top dry-erase board however, not only is the power more evenly disbursed to everyone standing around the table, but due to the square shape of the table top, participants are in closer relation to each other through eye-contact. The emphasis on community and on working together becomes much stronger. It moves working with a whiteboard from a mode of presentation to a mode of collaboration.

**Reflection**

Reflection is an important component to both *Experimental Game Design* and the *Game/Reality Workshops*. It is through reflection -- on the process of creating the games, on what worked and what didn’t, on what their others have made, and on lessons learned about the nature of games -- that individuals are afforded possible longer-term lessons and more useful personal insights. It is also through reflection that one can be brought closer to an activity they have had an experience with. This attention is vital to the existence of art. I have therefore built in mechanisms to foster reflection in both sub-projects.
In *Experimental Game Design*, I required students to maintain a class lab/sketch book. At minimum, they were to record their experiences with the different game experiments and what worked or didn’t work when the class played their games. Students also used the books to record personal notes about lectures, brainstorming techniques, ideas for future projects, and even personal rants when their group work went awry. By reading the books late in the quarter, both the instructor and student could see how the student’s ideas about games and game making had evolved throughout the class.

This was another area of the class I purposefully left open to the students of how they wanted to use it. I considered the lab/sketch books to be a useful tool, and knew that some would make better use of it than others. Reading the lab books toward the end of the quarter, it was easy to see who had invested themselves in the journaling assignment and who had not. It seemed that those who took the journaling assignment seriously gained a richer understanding of both their own work and the work of others. This raises the question once again of how much structure to impose on students. If those who understood how to make best use of the journals had a better experience overall, then does it make sense to create more strict guidelines such that more students share this experience? Or is it a case where forcing this more fully on students would destroy the personal intrinsic value of the journaling? The next iteration of the class will probably experiment with a more rigid structure for the lab/sketch book component of the class.

As a semi-equivalent to the lab/sketch books in *Experimental Game Design*, included in the *Game/Reality Workshops* were small forms to be filed out by participants labelled “experience reports”. These were heavily inspired by Yoko Ono's *Questionnaire for Film No. 4* as appears in her book *Grapefruit* (Ono 1998). *Questionnaire for Film No. 4* asks questions about Yoko Ono’s *Film No. 4*, but the questions are humorous and somewhat tangential to the content of the film. Still, they are phrased in such a way that if an audience member took time to fill out one of the forms, they could not but help consider what they had just seen in a deeper way than by simply watching the film.

The experience reports of the Game/Reality Workshops asked the following questions:

- **On this Date:**
  - I Made/played (circle one) this game:
  - During this process, I learned more/less (circle one) about:
  - Overall, I believe this experience has made me a better/worse (circle one) human being.
One of the keys to this report is the quasi-officialness of it, which is simultaneously playful yet lends the process of creating a game a certain gravity, like stamping a passport. By filling out the report, it encourages the creator/players to own their experience: yes, I did that. The prompt “During this process, I learned more/less about:” is the question that calls for reflection. By even considering an answer to this question, the creator/player must articulate what they learned from their experience, whether it be insights into their fellow players, themselves, the creative process, more information about how a real-life system functions, or even the nature of games themselves.

The experience reports were given to creators/players at the completion of a workshop session to fill out, and most of them were then placed on the documentation whiteboard which hung prominently on the wall behind the game table. They were kept brief to encourage visitors to take the time to fill them out, pausing for just a brief moment of reflection before moving on to experience other works at the show.

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12 Text at the bottom of each experience report suggested participants recycle the report, post it prominently on a whiteboard, give it to a stranger, or “otherwise dispose of it as you see fit”.

Experience report for Heavy Metal Pig Magic
Examination

I am very concerned with the notion of values in game mechanics, and the use of game mechanics themselves to convey messages. It is this concern that leads me to the type of work I do, and that I would like to transmit to the participants that encounter my work. As such, it is an important part of both sub-projects mentioned in this paper.

Examination of the values inherent in games is a strong underpinning of Experimental Game Design. In the third week, the class begins a discussion of values in games with a viewing and follow up conversation of the 2011 DiGRA keynote by Mary Flanagan (DiGRA 2011). Students are then asked to evaluate three games they are familiar with in terms of the values inherent in the gameplay. The following week, when the class begins a segment on finding and developing ideas, we discuss these evaluations and how one can produce the affective qualities of games. From then on in the quarter, I encourage them to design their projects from the “affect out.” Throughout our critiques for each project, I ask them to describe the values inherent in their classmates’ games. Two projects towards the end of the quarter are explicitly about values -- the New Games inspired game project and the socially conscious game project. I believe that, by keeping values an important part of the conversation during the course, students are encouraged to keep them forefront in their minds while designing games -- both in and outside of our class.

One conversation with a group attempting to orient themselves around their socially conscious game project stuck me as particularly productive. The group wasn’t sure what “counted” as socially conscious, as the first thing that came to mind for them was to make a game around consciousness-raising for a particular issue. They were stuck, however, because none of them were particularly passionate about any particular issues. I asked one of them what they could change about the world if they could, and he responded that he wished people were just more social when you met strangers in the street. I suggested they make a game about that, which seemed eye-opening to them. They went on to produce a very clever game intended for ice-breaker situations, but that was very respectful of each individual participating and played heavily on the personal strengths of each player.

Due to the set up as an installation/participation piece, Game/Reality Workshops uses different techniques to encourage participants to consider values in play. The prompts provided and the act of making games with them are the main vehicles for this. The prompts are designed carefully with the following criteria:

13 Flanagan’s Values at Play research project “investigates how designers can be more intentional about the ways in which they integrate human values into their game-based systems...” (Values at Play) The research project, headed by Mary Flanagan and Helen Niesenbaum has produced a set of cards that can be used to inspire values-based game projects, and a curriculum for use in higher education which introduces designers to “to a systematic method for discovering, analyzing, and integrating values and meaningful, critical play into their design work.”
• They do not obviously lend themselves to creating a game with common game mechanics/tropes
• They encourage introspection or examination of mundane aspects of life
• They call on (nearly) universal experiences, or at least universal to the expected audience members of the piece.

I have often reflected on how well one must know a subject in order to make a game about it. During life as a professional game designer, I have had to turn my mind to researching and understanding such diverse topics as bee physiology to phonics. By asking game makers to create games about, say, grinding coffee, we are offered an opportunity for the designers to closely examine their own relationship with coffee and the mechanisms that bring coffee from its origin point to their homes. This gives them a chance to not only gain a deeper understanding of coffee, but also offers up the realization that games have the power to bring values into focus.

In addition to exhibiting a Fluxus concern with bringing attention to participants' relationship with the mundane in a playful way, Game/Reality Workshops also draws inspiration in part from Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* techniques. For example, in *Theatre of the Oppressed*, groups of people come together and construct meaning for themselves through creative work. Where Boal uses theater and performance as vehicles for group insight, Game/Reality Workshops uses game creation.

Indeed, there are two passages in Boal’s book *Rainbow of Desire* which, when taken together, describes quite well the mechanisms by which Game/Reality Workshops operate:

…when the spectator herself comes on stage and carries out the action she has in mind, she does it in a manner which is personal, unique and non-transferable, as she alone can do it, and as no artist can do it in her place. (Boal 1995)

The smallest cells of social organization…and equally the smallest incidents of our social life…contain all the moral and political values of society, all its structures of domination and power, all its mechanisms of oppression. (Boal 1995)

We can apply these premises to Game/Reality Workshops. When a person is enabled to create a game describing his/her own life experience, it contains personal meaning to them which an artist or game designer would not be able to otherwise ascribe. Further, that personal story told through game mechanics reflects back on society at large – so that the game creator is not only describing their own lives, but describing forces in action within their world that apply to anyone else gathered at the table as co-creators or players.
The games created during the *Game/Reality Workshops* attest to the effectiveness of conveying values through game creation and play. One group created a game about the life of coffee growers, while another created a game that taught coping mechanisms for tragedy and still another humorously explored the frustrations of parenting. I believe that participants walked away changed, having learned something not only about the subject that they created a game around, but also the affective possibilities of games themselves.
Conclusion
Games are a medium seething with the potential to make a positive impact on the world. In order for this to happen however, it is necessary to more closely examine both how we are teaching game design principles and to whom. The Gaming Reality art initiative examines the effects of teaching game making as an art practice and experiments with ways to make game creation literacy available to those who would not otherwise consider game making as a vehicle for creative expression.

While there are some changes I would make to both Experimental Game Design and the Gaming/Reality Workshops, I am satisfied that much good has so far been done with this project. The next iteration of Experimental Game Design would take a further departure from Cage and Watts and introduce a bit more consistent structure in terms of the overall course design and the lab/sketch book assignment. Setting clearer expectations at the beginning of the course would help to head off complaints by art students that the class was not adequate as a “studio class.” Some art students expected to be taught technical skills around certain materials and then to use those materials to create games in a sculptural sense. More time could have been used discussing with the students that game mechanics are the material they are working with. As game mechanics are concepts and not physical objects, this was a point of confusion to some. My vision for the course was to let the students create work and then use the work itself as a launching point for discussion, but given the inexperience of art students making games and game students making art, a bit more support is likely necessary. Finally, I would like to spend a week of the class focusing just on methods of collaboration and community building within the class. It is my hope this would help ease some of the frustrations around group work.

The changes I would make to Game/Reality Workshops are less drastic and more physical. For the next showing of this participatory installation, I intend to simplify the installation itself. The easel for rules was unnecessary; the purpose of recording rules did not tend to serve those making the game. It may have been useful if others attempted to play it, but this is something I do not believe ever happened. The documentation whiteboard likewise can be eliminated. While it was interesting for me to see a record of what had been created, the documentation was trapped behind the whiteboard table. It was hard to see from far away, and uninviting to move behind the table to view it. The other purpose of the documentation was to give a suggestion to potential participants of the work that could be done at the table, but since I was usually in attendance to guide game creators, this is not needed. The cart on which the materials were kept was also largely unused; the markers, wooden cubes and large dry erase die were more often kept on the table, easily accessible for creators and players. I have not yet decided whether the column (on which the container of prompt cards was presented) should remain or be removed, leaving only the table. I think it is useful to maintain a separation of the cards from
the main work space, as it allows participants to focus on the prompt they have chosen, and it also allows for a flow to the experience (first choose a direction, then step up to the table to manifest it in game form). Whether or not to keep the column will largely depend on the next site where the piece is installed.

There is still much work to be done in this area. I would like to see the notion of social responsibility in game making to be on the forefront of game creators' minds, whether they are creating a specifically activist game, or a commercial blockbuster. I would like to invite others to join me in perpetuating a new cultural narrative, one in which harmful messages are not taken for granted as reality and games can be a guiding force for positive change. In the meantime I will continue to create space for game making – and for play.
Appendix: Catalog of Selected Games Produced

Assignments for Experimental Game Design and Sample Completed Projects

Game Experiment #1 -- Board Game Mod

In the tradition of Fluxus artists such as Yoko Ono and Takako Saito, students will create “mods” of existing board games. Working in teams of from 2 - 4, students will be provided with copies of popular children’s games and will be asked to modify the games with craft materials and found objects while developing new game mechanics for the game. A completed project will include modified board and pieces, and a rule sheet for how to play the new version of the game. Games should be playable in a maximum of 15 minutes.

Beanbag Candyland
For our first experiment, students were given copies of either *Chutes and Ladders*¹⁴ or *Candyland*¹⁵ to modify. Most groups quickly responded to the fact that neither of these children’s games required any meaningful decisions to be made, and that winning the game relied on nothing other than chance. The group creating *Beanbag Candyland* created a tilted wooden board with the colors from the *Candyland* game board laid out on it. Instead of drawing colored cards that indicated the next step to take on the *Candyland* path, players would have to earn their cards by tossing a hackey sack (beanbag ball) at the wooden board. On a player’s turn, he/she was given three tosses with the hackey sack. Whichever color the hackey sack came to rest on determined which color cards the player would receive. In this way, the creators of the game replaced chance (drawing a random card) with a skill challenge (attempting to receive the cards needed by tossing the hackey sack onto the correct color – without it rolling off the board entirely!)

(Experiment #2 involved analysis of favorite board games and did not result in new games)

**Game Experiment #3 – Game Walk**

*Using craft materials, found objects and prototyping skills learned in section, students will create physical prototypes based on our in-class “Game Walk” assignment. Students may work in teams of 3 - 5. A completed project will include all game pieces, a rule sheet for how to play, and brainstorming artifacts such as mind maps and vision boards. Games should be playable in a maximum of 20 minutes.*

**Shadow Cubes**

The game walk assignment asked students to walk by themselves for thirty minutes, observing the world around them and returning with an object or idea that they had discovered to serve as the starting point of a game design. *Shadow Cubes* was inspired by the movement of the sun. This game involved stacking small wooden cubes in such a way that the shadows of those cubes filled up a shape drawn on a card. The group tried many different light sources, and finally wound up playing outside in bright sunlight. This had the effect of not only creating an interesting puzzle game, but also making players very aware of the movement of the sun and time. Taking a long time to solve a particular puzzle would cause a player to have to rearrange blocks as the sun kept moving across the sky.

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¹⁴ Hasbro 1999

¹⁵ Hasbro 2010
Game Experiment #4 -- New Game

Students will create games in the spirit of the New Games Movement. Students are encouraged to work in groups of 3 - 5 to complete this assignment. A completed project will include a playable game and a written sheet describing the game. The only materials available for this assignment are the players themselves and the environment in which the game is played.

Human Snakes

For experiment #4, students were asked to create a game in the spirit of the New Games Movement using only the players’ own bodies and the environment. One group decided to create a game of human snakes, a physical version of the classic digital game Snake\textsuperscript{16}. Choosing a fairly narrow walkway as the site for their game, two sets of two players would team up to start the “snakes”: the “head” of the snake (the player in front of the line) kept his/her eyes closed while the second player in line put his/her hands on the front player’s shoulders and attempted to steer him/her. When the two snakes were chosen, all other players became “food”, and scattered themselves around the playing area. The snake then attempted to eat the food -- if the head tagged a player, that player added him/herself to the tail of the snake. One further rule was that if the head of one snake tagged the tail of the other snake, then the tagged person was “stolen” and added moved to the tail of the second snake.

\textsuperscript{16} A game with a long history, but found for example on Nokia mobile phones starting in 1997. (James 2009)
This game was quite successful, both entertainment-wise and in meeting the values of the New Game Movement. The stakes were low, people of different physical abilities could play (although it may have been trickier for someone in a wheelchair) because players were constrained to move no faster than a fast walk, and players could come in or leave the game at any time. In addition, the game explored the value of trust and allowed players to practice being in synchronicity with each other.

**Game Experiment #5 -- Socially Conscious Game**

*Using any materials and format desired, students will create a game that engages with current social/political issues. Students may work in teams of 3 - 4. A completed project will include all materials needed to play the game, a rule sheet for how to play. Games do not have to have a set time limit, but the goals of the piece should come across in the first 10 - 15 minutes of play.*

**Gerrymander Dodgeball**

One of the many dodgeball variants created in *Experimental Game Design,* *Gerrymander Dodgeball* offered an interesting spin on the classic game that criticized American politics while offering a slightly different dodgeball experience. Six players volunteered to be throwers in the game, while anyone not throwing was invited to become an “investor”. Investors were each given three tokens (or “votes”) and were allowed to invest in any of the throwers they wished by handing them their tokens. Investors could choose to place all of their tokens with one thrower, or spread them out amongst multiple throwers. Once all the tokens were distributed, the thrower who had collected the most could create their “district” by drawing chalk lines on the court – which was shaped like the United States of America. The thrower with the second most votes could then draw their district, and so on until the thrower with the fewest votes had to accept whatever territory was left. Each thrower was given their own ball, and on the
count of three a game of dodgeball began with each the throwing players trying to hit others with their balls. If a thrower hit a player in an adjacent territory, the hit player was eliminated and the one who had thrown the ball would take add that territory to their own. In the meantime, investors cheered loudly for those they had backed and were allowed to run around the edges of the court, retrieving balls and delivering them to whoever their favorite thrower of the moment. The game ended when only one thrower remained. He/she and his/her investors were considered the winners.

The first player chooses his district in Gerrymander Dodgeball

Final Project -- Big Game!

Students will work in teams of 4 - 6 to create a Big Game in the spirit of the Big Games movement. Projects are to be designed to be played outside with a player base of 20 - 100 people. A completed project will meet all deadlines, and include a playable game experience as well as a written game description. Games may be completely non-digital or may include digital elements if so desired by the team. Students may check out materials from course instructor to complete their project if they wish.

Puzzle Defender

The final projects were deployed at Spring Open Studios, an annual event in UC Santa Cruz’s art department where art students show their work to fellow students, friends and visiting families. The challenge for this project was to create a game that would draw in the audience of open studios visitors, most of whom were there explicitly to view static art pieces and move on to other work. The games therefore had to have a flexible time investment and scalable number of participants.

Puzzle Defender was an example of a well thought out game that nonetheless did not play out the way as desired. The set up for the game had two main parts. Near the studio where we worked, a table was set up with the
assembled borders of two jigsaw puzzles lying out. A member of the game creation group would instruct members of the public to seek out puzzle pieces that were hidden in balloons, and to bring them back and fit them into the puzzles. In the meantime, other group members were amongst the open studios visitors distributing balloons with the instruction to protect those balloons no matter what.

In another time and place, this could have led to some very interesting dynamics, as players with balloons tried to protect them against players trying to do anything possible to pop said balloons and retrieve puzzle pieces. At open studios, however, lack of investment in the outcome of the game coupled with the general conscientiousness of the art students and visitors (no one wanted to pop another person's balloon) led to a fairly stagnant situation. I nonetheless encouraged the team members to learn from the experience and consider trying the game again under different circumstances.
Selected Prompts and Games from *Game/Reality Workshops*

**Make a game for a dear friend. Play it.**

Game for Susan

This game began with the prompt “Make a game for a dear friend. Play it.” One participant offered that her friend Susan had recently lost her grandfather, and was occupied with distracting herself from her grief rather than processing it. The game creation process began with a number of questions to Susan’s friend about the nature of Susan herself – her likes and dislikes, what made her a good friend, and what her needs were at this time.

The game board was drawn as a music staff, as music is an important part of Susan's life. The top of the staff was labeled “distraction” while the bottom was labeled “wallowing in sorrow”. The sides of the dry erase die were labeled with social situations a player might have found themselves in during their life. Most of them were fairly universal situations, but two of them were events that were related directly to Susan’s hobbies. An additional die was created out of one of the wooden cubes, and had an equal number of plus signs and minus signs on its faces. A pawn, representing Susan (the blue one, since that is Susan's favorite color) was set up at the left-most end of the music staff.

On a player’s turn, he/she would first roll the two dice together. The large (or story) die offered a situation and the small (outcome) die determined a positive or negative outcome. The player would then tell a story from his/her

17 Name changed for sake of anonymity.
own life that related to the situation shown on the story die and had been experienced as emotionally positive or emotionally negative based on the outcome die. After telling the story, the player would describe how he/she coped with the situation. All the players would then agree whether this method of coping was a distraction technique, a wallowing in sorrow technique, or a balanced technique. Based on the technique style identified, the players would then move Susan either forward and up (towards distraction), forward and down (towards wallowing in sorrow) or straight forward on the music staff. The goal of the game was for the players to work together to get Susan to the other side of the board while keeping her from going either too far up, into pure distraction, or too far down, into abject misery.

Make a game about walking at sunset. Play it.

Heavy Metal Pig Magic!

Heavy Metal Pig Magic! is the perfect example of what can happen when strangers come together to create. The prompt drawn for this game was “Make a game about walking at sunset. Play it.” One participant offered that she would like to walk in the woods at sunset, which established the setting for the game. The idea of hiding from
something while trying to get home before dark was mentioned, and another participant offered up her fear of feral pigs. We collaborated to draw the beginning of the board, including hiding places to cloister oneself from pigs and a river was drawn in because one participant simply wanted a river. During the board creation process, the third participant suggested that we leave the board spaces blank and draw in board effects as a course of playing the game. His joy of competition\(^\text{18}\) led him to recommend a mechanic that allowed players who landed on a space to draw a trap of some sort for the players who came behind them. This mechanic was further expanded by his co-creators such that someone who landed on a space could place special icons on the board which would transform any player who landed on them into animals with special powers (in this way, the feral pigs were worked back in to the game). This game took great advantage of both the white board game table and the imaginations of the players, who continued to create the game even while it was being played. While the game could have used another iteration to smooth out some balance issues, a truly special experience manifested as a result of the combination of participants from differing backgrounds, a unique space to create games, and a simple prompt to spark creativity.

\[^{18}\text{In the interest of full disclosure, this participant was my father, who tortured my sister and I as children with his brutally competitive play of board games.}\]
Make a game about washing hair. Play it.

Shampoo Meltdown

The concept for Shampoo Meltdown developed as a synthesis of two participants' experiences with the washing children’s hair. One participant was a father of a small child, and had much recent experience with the challenges of the hair washing routine. The other participant, while not a parent herself, reminisced about her mother's strategies of keeping her calm while her own hair was washed. These two were able to pool their ideas around washing children’s hair to create a co-operative strategy game with the goal of moving through a child’s hair washing routine while managing the child’s mood and the time it took to complete from hair wetting to the final rinse. The closer the child came to emotional melt-down, the harder it was to manage her and the more time it would take to finish the hair washing. Each turn, the players would discuss and choose a calming strategy they would use in the current phase of hair washing. Each strategy had an associated level of risk (how likely it was that the child's mood would degrade) and the amount of additional time it would add to the current phase of the washing process. The result was a surprisingly intricate strategy game around the apparently simple task of washing a small child's hair – but one that was based firmly in the real-life experiences of both participants.
Works Cited

Games, Lectures, Art Exhibits, Software


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