

Meaningful Cardboard: Towards a “Tabletop Games and Learning”

Panel Proposal: Meaningful Play 2014

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While the field of "games and learning" is ostensibly diverse, much of the work in this field to date has drawn from education discourses that have privileged digital technologies (e.g., Educational Technology, the Learning Sciences) or from design-oriented scholarship that has historically emphasized computational, digital play. And even though the Meaningful Play community readily acknowledges that games are significant social, cultural, and economic artifacts, we often focus inordinately on digital games and digitally-mediated forms of play to the exclusion of other modalities. In this panel, we aim to shift the discussion toward non-digital forms of play (board, card, role-playing, and other tabletop games), and begin to coalesce a subfield of "tabletop games and learning" scholarship and design.

We live in an era in which the tabletop game is undergoing a creative renaissance, with a growing market that is increasingly connecting to digital game developer communities (e.g., the "Doing It on the Table" event at the 2014 Game Developers Conference). At the same time, there is growing academic interest in the unique affordances, styles of play, and community activities that typify these forms of games. Costikyan & Davidson (2011) collected academic and designer discussions toward regarding better understanding tabletop gaming experiences. Additionally, recent studies have focused on understanding learning practices embedded within tabletop play, such collaboration in Reiner Knizia's *Lord of the Rings* (Zagal, Rick, & Hsi, 2006) and computational thinking in Matt Leacock's *Pandemic* (Berland & Lee, 2010; Duncan & Berland, under review). Other work has focused on communities of learners around these games — both advocating for the study of the dynamics of online communities around tabletop games as well as on developing interventions based around tabletop gaming in community spaces such as libraries (Nicholson, 2007).

In this panel, we will present ongoing work on the forms of interaction present within these games that distinguish them from their digital counterparts, while engaging with questions to push this subfield forward. These include: What are the different affordances of tabletop games vs. digital games, and how do these affect learning interventions using them? Do tabletop games draw different kinds of players, and, if so, how might this change or extend the reach of games and learning to new player bases and design spaces? How do we understand the impact of the differences in community practices and cultural cachet between digital and tabletop games? Are

there differences in the roles that fan spaces around these games serve in understanding learning and meaning-making within them?

We have collected a set of panelists who have all done recent work at the intersection of tabletop games and learning, presenting work on a wide range of approaches, domains, and types of play with tabletop games. The panel will include:

Sean C. Duncan (Learning Sciences Program, Indiana University) will describe recent work on "story games" and the unique affordances of tabletop play for fostering collaborative narratives. In particular, Sean will discuss the design of several commercial "story games" (narrative-heavy, mechanic-light) tabletop role-playing games, including *Fiasco*, *Dog Eat Dog*, and *Monsterhearts*, to first categorize and distinguish these games from their digital counterparts. Focusing on the specific affordances of tabletop role-playing experiences, he will discuss the ongoing results of a new study of story games focused on the learning of collaborative practices, narrative construction, and the evolution of identity play.

Mark Chen (Gameful Design Lab, Pepperdine University) will describe learning practices of members of two Meetup.com groups that schedule weekly informal game nights in a tech-biased urban area. Mark will detail interview and participant-observation data that explores how certain games spread in popularity in part due to spontaneous mentoring and sponsorships, how newcomers to the groups enculturate into the groups (some almost immediately and others more tentatively), and how members of the groups are variously connected to larger issues with gaming culture through their individual participation with online and local communities.

Matthew Berland & Adam Mechtley (Games+Learning+Society Center, University of Wisconsin-Madison) on the ways that language serves as a marker of enculturation to the popular board game community site boardgamegeek.com. In particular, they have used statistical text mining techniques with data drawn from boardgamegeek in order to assess the ways that users' language changes over the course of their participation within the community, finding that newcomers' vocabulary is both more diffuse and more diverse than the vocabulary of the more experienced participants in the space. This work illustrates that communities of board, card, and tabletop gamers represent complex sites of learning within which experience is tied to the use of specialized language.

Colleen Macklin (PETLab, Parsons the New School for Design) on the design of non-digital games for both learning and play. Focusing on the design of the cultural argumentation card game *The Metagame*, which was designed by herself, John Sharp, and Eric Zimmerman (as Local No. 12), she will describe striking a balance between designing games for fun and designing games to be adaptable for instructional purposes. She will describe the ways *The*

Metagame can and has been used for learning, while attending to the unique affordances that a card-based game provides over digital alternatives.

References

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