In June 2010, the sixth annual Games+Learning+Society Conference (GLS 6.0) met at the Memorial Union on the campus of the University of Wisconsin-Madison. As the premier international conference focused specifically on games and learning, GLS 6.0 provided an opportunity for the intersecting game-based learning, digital media and learning, and games, learning, and literacy communities to do what all exemplary conferences do: share valuable new research, challenge one another to further our collective growing fields, and continue conversations with a beer and bratwurst on the shores of Lake Monona (that last one might be specific to GLS). It was a wonderful few days, and one that has already provided new insights and new directions for this young field.

As guest editor for this special issue, I have been given the opportunity to step back and reflect on this year’s conference, and I have found myself contemplating just how much has changed since the first GLS conference in 2005. In this special issue, I have striven to highlight some of the best work presented this year, focusing in particular on papers that exemplified some of the new themes that emerged from GLS 6.0’s keynotes, presentations, symposia, chat-n’-frags, fireside chats, posters, and between-session conversations. With the sheer number of excellent submissions to the conference, this became a difficult task — as both the field of games and learning as well as the conference community has grown in recent years, so has the quality of the work presented at GLS. The 2010 conference thus provided a wonderful challenge — I have endeavored to sample from the breadth of approaches present at GLS 6.0 and identify several common threads, highlighting the work of six sets of exemplary researchers who presented at the conference.

In his opening keynote for the conference, Kurt Squire, co-director of the University of Wisconsin-Madison’s Games+Learning+Society Initiative, laid out a fascinating personal history with games and learning, while pointing the way toward new avenues for scholarship within the broader community. Squire argued that it is no longer sufficient to think of games as mere learning “tools” nor as simple entertainment, but that it would be productive for learning and literacy researchers to start investigating games as possibility spaces, ripe with the potential for driving our understanding of learning beyond just the conveyance of traditional educational content and content areas. Pushing this metaphor, Squire exhorted consideration of a Montessori-esque approach to gaming, focusing on how games and also digital media more broadly can foster a sense of curiosity, engagement, and play in the learner. This point struck home with many
in this year’s conference audience, and I drew inspiration from Squire’s comments to select the representation of authors in this special issue. Thus, the papers selected represented three related trends arising from Squire’s talk, and the conversations that permeated the Memorial Union hallways. I characterize these trends as Diversity, Design, and Possibility.

First, Diversity, as quickly becomes apparent with even a cursory skim of this year’s conference program, the field of games and learning is no longer solely the purview of the educational technologist (if it ever really was). Though some of the roots of this field arose from branches of educational technology discourse, the field has since stretched out its limbs to include scholarship in educational leadership, the learning sciences, literacy studies, game design, and cultural studies, to name but a few. The variety of research presented at the conference this year was a vibrant mix of applied, empirical, theoretical, and design-oriented work, addressing an impressive number of types of games: those explicitly designed for learning (in this issue, Christopher Holden and Julie Sykes’s Mentira as well as Manahatta: the Game, described by Colleen Macklin), commercial entertainment games such as The Sims 2, discussed by Elizabeth King, massively-multiplayer casual game spaces such as Webkinz, as studied by Rebecca Black and Stephanie Reich, or the collaborative board game Pandemic, analyzed by Matthew Berland and Victor Lee, to gaming-related fan communities such as those around massively-multiplayer inspired web series The Guild and its star, Felicia Day, as analyzed by Elizabeth Ellcessor and myself.

Additionally, the focus of what and who game-based learning was focused on varied widely — from teens and pre-teens (Black & Reich; King) through University students (Berland and Lee; Holden and Sykes) to, well, anyone with internet access (Ellcessor and myself). The variety of disciplinary approaches was thus wide as well; in this issue, I have striven to include participants that represent and (in some cases embody) the wide range of disciplinary perspectives that now make up the international GLS community — from Black and Reich’s Vygotskian approach to understanding tween virtual worlds, through Colleen Macklin’s insights drawn from game design practice wrestling with the problems surrounding interpreting large sets of data, as well as Elizabeth Ellcessor’s and my work toward finding common ground between digital media and learning and cultural studies in understanding the literacies present within online fan communities. As the field of games and learning has grown, this disciplinary variety has gone from a luxury to an absolute necessity for the field to expand and thrive. With the present economic and structural challenges facing many institutions of higher education, GLS 6.0 represents a model of how new, interdisciplinary collaborations can move forward and reshape academic discourse, providing spaces for potential new areas of research to burgeon and bear fruit.

Next, Design — Design, of course, has its own traditions independent of games and learning (as Colleen Macklin’s paper so wonderfully builds upon), and design-based research has long been an important thread running through the field of games and learning (Holden and Sykes’s Mentira project being an excellent recent case). But, beyond these important perspectives, design has increasingly reared its head in the broader GLS community, with elements of “design thinking” and the management of designed elements of these media cropping up in a variety of ways. Berland and Lee’s novel investigation of computational literacy in the board game Pandemic includes participants interpreting the designed rules of a board game, while Black and Reich present an analysis of the designed literacy constraints present within Webkinz World. Many in the GLS 6.0 community recognize that games (and their fan communities, discussed by Ellcessor and myself) require an attention to these media as designed artifacts, with affordances for learning shaped by players, designers, and cultural factors.
Finally, this brings us back to Squire’s notion of *Possibility* — as he discussed in his keynote (and which King so thoroughly explores in her contribution to this issue), any simplistic “injection model” of technology for learning is deeply flawed. Games are not simple delivery devices for content, they are social and cultural artifacts with their own histories and connections to broader worlds of learning and identity play. As University of Southern California media scholar Henry Jenkins discussed in his GLS 6.0 keynote, the social communities around games and digital media can provide exemplars for understanding the relationship between media fan communities and civic engagement, helping us to move games from the limited interpretation as mere instructional tools into a consideration of games as media that drive social action. The realm of “possibility” is thus, in some sense, the realm of the social — for Berland and Lee, players overtly collaborated, negotiating Pandemic’s rules; for Black and Reich, players utilized social tools to learn within Webkinz World; and for Ellcessor and myself, the social communities around media cause us to rethink traditional barriers between media production and consumption.

It is here, then, that we need to turn to that last, often far-too-neglected word embedded in the name of the conference: *Society*. Possibility often manifests itself through social interactions and social action, as both Squire’s and Jenkins’ keynotes implied. The ways in which learning with games allows for the learner’s agency to *matter* and for the learner to engage with a larger world (virtual, real, or some alluring combination of the two, as with both *Manahatta: the Game* and *Mentira*) are increasingly important considerations. The GLS community has grown and changed since the first conference in 2005, and these papers indicate that a newfound energy is brewing — toward understanding the ways that games are not just objects of learning but are important intersections of learning, design, and culture, laden with meaning and possibility.

GLS 6.0 conference chair Constance Steinkuehler reported that conference attendance was up significantly for GLS 6.0, and I can only hope that this community will continue to grow and provide such rich avenues for collaboration and discussion. As this collection of education scholars, learning scientists, practicing teachers, game designers, and cultural theorists moves forward, the papers in this special issue illustrate that GLS 6.0 has left us with multiple exciting paths to follow. The “possibility space” of the games and learning field itself has expanded to encompass many approaches, some empirical, some theoretical, and some creative. Through the hard work and playful approach to scholarship embodied by this special issue’s diverse collection of scholars, it is my hope that we may all begin to see how studies of learning with the designed artifacts that we call “games” can shed light on many new realms of possibility for our field.

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