GUEST EDITORIAL PREFACE

Special Issue on Meaningful Play

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IN SEARCH OF HOPEFUL MONSTERS: A SPECIAL ISSUE FROM THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON MEANINGFUL PLAY

The fourth biennial International Academic Conference on Meaningful Play was held at Michigan State University in October of 2014. The conference hosted more than 300 attendees from more than 17 countries and 24 US states. As part of that process we review full papers identifying the top submissions. What you will find in this special issue of the International Journal of Gaming and Computer-Mediated Simulations are three of those essays.

Play scholar Johan Huizinga proposes "all play means something" and argues the "instinct of play" is a fundamental element in the development of human culture (Huizinga, 1955). In relation to games, Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman state that the goal of successful game design is the creation of game experiences that have meaning and are meaningful for the game player (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004). Serious games advances the use of games for purposes beyond purely entertainment, including games for learning, games for health, and games for change - creating even more forms of meaning from play. Whether designed to entertain or for more "serious" purposes, games have the potential to impact players' beliefs, knowledge, attitudes, emotions, cognitive abilities, and behavior.

In 2014, we settled on a conference theme around "monsters." The previous conference had used ninjas and wizards as a kind of thematic foundation. But, in my opening remarks at the conference in 2014, I discussed a different kind of

monstrous foundation. Borrowing from John Law, Donna Haraway and Nicholas Mosley I discussed what I termed "Hopeful Monsters" (Law, 1991). I discussed the ways in which Games make their way in the world once released, for better or worse. While at Meaningful Play we always explore the potential of games to entertain, inform, educate, and persuade in meaningful ways. How we "might work towards a form of modest" monsters where "necessary incompatibilities, inconsistencies and overlaps come gently and creatively together." You never know in advance what you are going to get. But, most of us make them in the hope that they make the world brighter.

"Designing and Studying Games That Matter" is the slogan for the conference, which encompasses both a practical and theoretic exploration of games. To that end, we endeavored to bring top research exploring games and in particular those exploring hopeful monsters. Of course, nearly a year ago now, so not so hopeful monsters were being birthed in and around the study of games. Such that many of our October keynotes in one form or another were forced to engage with or touch on #GAMERGATE (Chess & Shaw, 2015) and the fan communities that surround much of games. Strangely, in some ways, serious games and games for impact were viewed as particularly distasteful by a subset of this community.

Yet, when you explore the cross-section of games research presented here, there is no shadowy Illuminati, but rather a field of research that is quite broad, yet with an overriding interest in how games and play can help us think about making, learning, understanding and a host of other important and impactful topics.

For example, in Yap, Kadobayashi and Yamaguchi's essay on Player-side Emergence in *Papers, Please* and *Gone Home*, the authors critically explore the concept of emergence, as it relates to Game Studies, in ways that have been under theorized. They explore the emergent narratives from games relies on a deeply dialectic process that depends heavily on the players understanding of a game. Perhaps most interestingly they also make these findings accessible and meaningful to designers interested in finding ways in which to connect gameplay mechanics with narrative.

While players could see this research as somehow distant from an overarching interest in in "just playing," the reality is that the authors are arguing for a more nuanced understanding of how players relate to and understand narrative in games. Player's narratives about games or their understanding of a game's narrative is so critically rooted in the human mind that the process should not be understood as simple or straightforward.

In Mouws and Bleumers' essay on game co-creation with children, the focus is instead on cooperative learning amongst school children making games. The researchers explore the creative and learning possibilities when young children

become actively involved in the game design process. While many have indexed the roll that cooperative collaboration plays in game-play spaces, this research indicates that similar characteristics are exhibited when young learners are encouraged to design and prototype game play spaces.

As I have argued on many occasions, the process of game design and development remains an under-studied area of research. It is exciting to see this research exploring game design and development as a means for understanding cooperation and collaboration in the educational setting.

In Deen, van den Beemt and Schouten's essay the authors compared the learning effects of two different kinds (problem-based and drill & practice) of educational learning games. What is interesting with this research is that it seems to indicate that a variety of educational learning game interventions produce a variety of results. While on the one hand problem-based learning games encourage students to feel ownership over the learning process, "skill and drill" games can also produce positive effects in the form of increased intrinsic motivation toward the task being drilled, which in some ways seems to contradict assumptions about skill and drill educational games.

In all cases, these research projects represent the kind of depth and breadth that has come to characterize Meaningful Play. While each tackles a different empirical domain, the goal of understanding the breadth and depth through which we use games and play to understand and make sense of the world and even ourselves is a driving factor of the work. While I would not assume that the researchers explicitly focus on positive outcomes, each work seems to come from a hopeful perspective. On the one hand exploring new ways to allow for greater player narrative agency, on another children exploring learning and collaboration through games and in another how to more effectively engage with and think about educational game design. These are each studies rooted in a kind of hopeful monster perspective, which is indicative of the work that Meaningful Play attracts. For those unfamiliar with the conference, we will again be hosting the event in 2016, with a call for papers occurring in the latter half of 2015.

Best of luck to you and your hopeful monsters.

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