

Introduction

Games are a ubiquitous feature of popular culture, providing ephemeral entertainment that draws on quick wit, cognitive and motor skills, and the reservoir of emotions that lie beneath the surface of every human being, whatever their age or cultural background. This is a common understanding of games and gaming, illustrated with examples of games from the earliest period of all cultures. What is different today is the way games are delivered to players and how the manner of delivery has created opportunities to develop new forms of games and explore the nature of gaming itself. The manner of delivery, of course, is digital technology, and this special issue of *Design Issues*—compiled by guest editors James Malazita, Casey O’Donnell, and Elizabeth LaPensée—focuses on the theme of Critical Game Design. In their introduction, James Malazita and Casey O’Donnell describe the concept as “the deep synthesis of game design, cultural critique, and reflective design research practices.” This is difficult terrain because it crosses so many domains and disciplines, raising questions and making connections that can be surprising and sometimes troubling. It is worth noting, however, that the concept behind this special issue echoes deeply with the development of design itself in its diverse branches, bringing together design practice, different approaches to design research and theory, and the cultural and philosophical grounding of design.

Though not stated directly by the guest editors in this issue, one can argue that in design theory games are a special kind of interactive and interaction product, in a sense parallel with other kinds of interaction products such as “services.” In some cases, we use the terms “interactive” and “interaction” interchangeably, but each kind of interaction product has its own history and its own struggle for recognition and deeper understanding. There is, as yet, no convincing typology of interaction products, but when reasonable and well-grounded accounts do emerge one may expect them to include game design, service design, policy design, and other forms of interactive and interaction design thinking.

From its early beginnings in computer science, where graduate students in their off-time played with the technological possibilities of software, to the current state of technical complexity and huge financial investment, the development of digital games has been pushed and pulled by many forces, corporate, educational, and intellectual. Corporate interest is no surprise, given the huge market for novel games around the world and the immense amount of money at stake for companies. Similarly, educational diversity is no surprise, given the competition for student enrollment at universities and the desire of diverse departments to claim a stake in the popularity of gaming as well as subsequent employment opportunities. One need only remember the jealous guardians of design that surround design schools—engineering, art, cognitive science, other behavioral and social sciences, computer science, and management, to name some of the most evident. However, intellectual interest in gaming is quite complicated, going beyond corporate and academic interests. The STEM disciplines of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics have an obvious stake in development of the technology of games, whether in single-player or multi-player systems. The programming challenges are met with the economic rewards that motivate the growth of technology. The combination of these factors helps to explain the early history of game design and technology development. But the subsequent growth of games and gaming has raised questions and challenges for the social sciences and the humanities as human motivations, values, and cultural circumstances have quietly taken shape. It is not uncommon to see education in game development emerging, for example, in theater departments or in interdisciplinary humanities and social science programs. With this have come deeper questions for research in traditional disciplines.

It is apparent now—though perhaps not so clear in the beginning—that game development is an extension of design thinking, where the so-called “traditional” design branches are brought together in new forms of interaction design, involving communication, visual expression, process logic, psychology, and cultural expectations. Games are a special kind of product, a product steeped in human interaction, with a mixture of the tangible and the intangible. This is comparable in some ways with the forms and practices of “service design.” In this respect, one should pay close attention to the distinction (and close relationship) between “game” and “gaming” in these articles—an artifact and an activity, the noun

and the gerund. It is important to trace the themes of game design through the articles in this special issue and learn how the field or discipline or domain of games and gaming has developed. As the guest editors explain, there are six articles in this issue. They are thoughtfully divided into two sets. The first set of three articles focuses on processes and form in gaming design, recognizing “how marginalized perspectives, methods, and worldviews can be centered at the heart of game design.” The second set of three articles focuses on an institutional approach to the “epistemic and structural conditions of industry and academia,” and how those conditions can be related to new kinds of practice. A useful feature of this special issue is the *Design Issues* practice of encouraging extensive notes that support further exploration of the theme or topic. In this case, the notes reveal some of the anchoring studies of games (for example, Brenda Laurel’s work, already well known in the design community) as well as the venue of earlier publications in the study and practice of games and game design.

The articles in this special issue do not claim to firmly establish or define a new field of inquiry. As Malazita and O’Donnell say, “this issue does not seek to be a field summary or a defining moment of critical game design.” Instead, the goal is to open a “space for a plurality of approaches, methods, and models for the future of games scholarship and scholars working in academic and professional spaces.” Indeed, an opportunity closely related to the goal of this special issue is finding a broader connection between game design and the diverse branches of design theory and practice. The intent of the editors and their collaborators is entirely consistent with the vision and mission of *Design Issues*, to encourage a pluralism of theories and practices of design and broaden of our understanding of *design as a cultural art*.

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