The Metagame: Discuss and Design

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Playing With Culture

The Metagame (Local No. 12, 2013) is a new series of games and associated card deck designed to provoke discussions of culture and play. Designed by Colleen Macklin, John Sharp, and Eric Zimmerman (also known as Local No. 12), the *Metagame* consists of a deck of 250 cards representing cultural artifacts ranging from *Citizen Kane* to the *iPhone* to the *Big Mac* to *Pride and Prejudice*, along with a series of comparison cards that include questions to provoke discussion between players (e.g., "Which better represents America?" or "Which will save the world?"). Originally designed as a massively-multiplayer conference game to provoke discussions of videogame culture and design, the new version of the *Metagame* tackles a much wider palette of human experience. The new *Metagame* cuts a wide swath across culture and fosters discussion *as* a form of playful interaction.

We see the latest version of the *Metagame* as an avenue for educators to engage with the idea of using discussion and argumentation as central game mechanics, while also providing a game design toolkit that allows anyone to create their own game that engages with art, architecture, music, food, fonts, games, and many other meaningful parts of our everyday lives. We seek to provide players, researchers, and educators with the experience of playing *and* designing using the *Metagame*, exploring new avenues to provoke, discuss, and instruct about culture.

Discussing and Designing

In this workshop, we wish to provide the Games+Learning+Society community an opportunity to explore playing with culture through this new *Metagame*, as well as promoting the goal that anyone can develop their own games toward educational aims, regardless of technological prowess and access to digital gaming hardware. Through experience with multiple forms of play and design with the *Metagame's* cards, attendees will be encouraged to consider instructional applications of the *Metagame*, to critique forms of instruction and play within the game, and to use design practices with the *Metagame* as a means of kickstarting their own game design skills.

Questions and topics we will address include:

- What impact might the broadening of the game's scope to a wider variety of cultural artifacts have for everyday classroom use?
- How might different academic disciplines approach the use of something like the *Metagame* in a variety of classroom settings?
- How can a teacher best modify the *Metagame* to help students develop gaming literacies and game design competencies?
- How can the *Metagame* best be used as a *game design toolkit*, for exploration by education scholars, practitioners, and researchers?

This interactive workshop will include illustration of play with the *Metagame* and discussions of its use in instructional contexts, but will primarily provide space for educators to determine *their own uses of the game*. Macklin and Sharp, two of the three creators of the *Metagame*, will run the workshop, and Duncan will assist, relating experiences using the *Metagame* in both undergraduate game design instruction and graduate level educational research instructional contexts. For this hour-long session, we propose the following schedule of activities:

Playing the *Metagame* (10 minutes)

We will begin with a brief introduction to the basics of the *Metagame*, its history, and the value of using non-digital games in the classroom. Volunteers drawn from the workshop attendees will play pre-designed game variants using the *Metagame* in order to help them become familiar with the way the game works, as well as to get a sense of its flexibility for teaching and design.

Teaching With the *Metagame* (10 minutes)

The workshop organizers will discuss experiences using the *Metagame* in the classroom, and their pedagogical goals and techniques. We will focus on the ways the *Metagame* might be used differently with different ages, types, and goals of learners, as well as across different disciplines (e.g., art, language arts, history, education, and game design).

Make a New *Metagame* (20 minutes)

Workshop attendees will work in groups organized around educational disciplines to design new *Metagame* variants for use in the classroom, using the new *Metagame* deck of 250 culture cards and comparison cards. Groups can change and refine any aspect of the game: content, number of players, how arguments are presented, how judging occurs, context for play, and so on. To spice things up, optional design constraints ("diversifiers") will be provided to participants, and additional tabletop game design materials (e.g., dice, index cards, tokens, Sharpies) will be provided in order to encourage new conceptions of *Metagame* play for the presumably many disciplinary contexts represented in the room.

Playtesting a New *Metagame* (10 minutes)

Each group will playtest their *Metagame* variants with other attendees in order to assess their games' effectiveness and to refine their game designs. Attendees will critique each others' *Metagame* variants, while also thinking critically about the affordances of and the potential limitations of the *Metagame* itself for the instructional or research challenges they face.

Discussing the New *Metagames* (10 minutes)

We will wrap up the workshop with an open discussion of attendee game designs with the workshop organizers and workshop attendees. What worked well, what didn't? Why? We will conclude by collecting the new *Metagame* variations designed by attendees with the goal of making new variants available as a resource online for educators and researchers interested in designing further educational *Metagame* variants.

Discussing and Designing

Throughout the course of this workshop, attendees will have the opportunity to engage in a hands-on workshop experience in which their interests and expertise will be brought to bear through the play and design of games for learning. Additionally, the workshop will give attendees the opportunity to provide the game's designers with direct feedback on how the *Metagame* could further be revised to better apply to specific instructional contexts.

Could the *Metagame* become part of the arsenal of 21st century learning tools as ubiquitous and versatile as a standard deck of playing cards in playful contexts and as essential as a textbook in learning environments? It would certainly be surprising if it did, with its quaint 18th century form as a simple deck of cards. However, a flexible and easily modifiable platform that asks us to reflect on the meaning and significance of our cultural world with one another seems to have special relevance in today's increasingly mediated moments, and provides an interesting counterpoint to many of the dominant, technology-heavy approaches to games and learning. The organizers wish to emphasize playful approaches to learning regardless of the game system's implementation in silicon or in paper.

By providing teachers with not just an educational technology to deliver content to their students, but a living, changeable, and eminently modifiable game deck, we hope to empower teachers to become game designers in their own right, and give them simple tools to develop games for learning that can better adapt to their needs. And, ultimately, we seek to provide Games+Learning+Society attendees with opportunities to both design games for learning as well as reflect on their experiences designing games for learning.

References

Local No. 12. (2013). *The Metagame.* New York: Local No. 12.