

# We are the Game Changers: An Open Gaming Literacy Programme

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## ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the first iteration of Game Changers Programme hosted by Coventry University's Disruptive Media Learning Lab (DMLL), an open game design initiative. The Programme had the goal of facilitating new models of teaching and learning, new practices in cross-faculty learning/collaboration to make game design and development more culturally open and accessible to staff, students and the broader informal communities surrounding the University. The paper will discuss the theoretical foundation of the GameChangers Programme, grounded in a conceptualisation of design as a holistic, modular and creative process, and in an ethos of sharing, collaborating and remixing. The paper will present the outline of the Course and the Community that constituted the core elements of the Programme, and discuss a plural showcase of a variety of outcomes from the GameChangers Community, focusing on the Programme's cultural impact and on how the Programme as a whole disrupted established notions of game based pedagogy, and the customary hierarchical relations between producers and users of learning games.

## KEYWORDS

Design-Based Learning, Game Design, Game-Based Learning, Gaming Literacy, Open Course

## INTRODUCTION

### “You Make Your Own Games”

It all started with a simple question, asked one too many times by one to many colleagues: “Could you please make a learning game for us about our course?” To which, after designing one too many games about one too many specific courses, we finally decided to answer with a different question: “Why don't you instead learn to make your own games?”

This paper will discuss the wide-ranging consequences of this further question and the reversal in the customary producer-user hierarchy of learning game production practices that it brought forth, which concretised in the first iteration of the “GameChangers” Programme of Coventry University. This Programme explored the role and the opportunities of game design thinking in fostering creative problem solving and cross-disciplinary design collaboration, and the complexities and criticalities which emerged while deploying such approaches in a formal learning institution. Born with the initial goal of helping lecturers adopt new, playful models of teaching and learning, GameChangers, as will be seen in the examples below, soon extended to:

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- Fostering new practices in cross-faculty learning/collaboration.
- Supporting students and lecturers in co-designing learning.
- The development of new perspectives in the use of creative means for problem framing and solving, applicable to a wide variety of different courses and real world situations.

However, to appropriately frame our approach to game design and learning, it is important to emphasize from the beginning the relevance, in our research and innovation endeavours, of acknowledging the multiple facets of the relationship between games and learning in formal contexts, a relationship that all too often is misconstrued and strongly skewed through a specific, singular, techno-deterministic lens (Oliver, 2011). In fact, beside the very pragmatic workload concerns touched on in the first lines of this paper, the GameChangers Programme had its core rooted mainly in a theoretical and pedagogical consideration: as a whole, innovation in learning research seems, particularly in this historical conjuncture, to be overwhelmingly technology-driven (Buckingham, 2013). With the rise of digital technologies, and particularly of the anytime-anywhere access to the web brought forward with the diffusion of smartphones (Crompton, 2013), learning contents, resources and practices are becoming more and more digitised and virtualised. This also happens in concurrence with the increased interest in digitally immersive technologies and the growing requests for distance learning (Lockwood, 2013). More specifically as pertaining to our field of studies, all too often game creation in educational contexts has been driven by the aforementioned techno-deterministic and hype-based approach, with a new gaming technology appearing on the market, creating a huge buzz (Cook & Triola, 2012). This has prompted educational institutions try to implement a (game-based) learning solution based on that technology in the hope of riding the wave of hype and increase impact and notability.

So, as the digital game industry is still growing into a huge market (predicted by Huntemann & Aslinger, 2016, to soon surpass cinema in total value), the education game industry turned to the digital, hoping to tap into this same mobilisation of resources.

In blindly following this techno-deterministic hype, however, learning institutions often come up with (costly) implementations that are not effective, not economically or structurally sustainable, and, most importantly, not designed with a true grasp of what could make them meaningful for teachers and learners, which is to say an understanding of the cultures and social dynamics that underlie both learning and game cultures (Steinkuehler, Squire & Barab, 2012). Indeed, in recent years, phenomena that run opposite to the foregrounding of technology are occurring within wider, informal game cultures, with the so called “Rise of the Indies” (games and game creators relying on low cost technologies and often embracing “retro” aesthetics; see Juul, 2014), and the “Board Game Renaissance” (Philips, 2015) in particular highlighting a deep need for recovering a shared, playful horizon of meaning, and even to return to local, face to face interaction.

As the cultures of play are moving away from a more technology-driven focus, prompting us to engage in a re-evaluation of playful aesthetic and social experience, likewise thinking “technology first and pedagogy later” tends to generate a stifled perspective of the consequences and ramifications of technology in any learning ecology, starting with blinding ourselves to what learners and educators actually find meaningful (Salen, 2008). To overcome this contradiction, we therefore endeavoured to find a solution that would be at the same time holistic and modular, so as to enable game designers in educational context to keep the broad vision that learning processes require, and at the same time coherently and strongly scaffold the design process in an accessible and pedagogically sound way.

To bridge the technically minded gap between play and learning, we therefore referred to (and refined) the transdisciplinary approach in serious games production developed by Arnab & Clarke (2016). This is a layered approach that, starting with the consideration of learning needs and dynamics, can inform learning design and the relevant enabling technologies, meant in their broadest sense.

Figure 1 illustrates this more modular and bottom up approach (layer 1 – layer 4) in looking at teaching and learning challenges and formulating both game designs and the relevant technologies that would enable the teaching and learning process. Before thinking about what the “solution” should be and what technologies could enable the process, it helps to focus on the process itself, acknowledging

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