

"Some Assembly Required": Starting and Growing a Game Lab

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ABSTRACT

This panel will present case studies of four different game laboratories, exploring the uses of the lab as a research venue and as part of a game or digital media curriculum. The examples will focus on game labs in Humanities departments, where the use of laboratories as a resource is less common.

Author Keywords

games research, laboratory, Humanities, reference

OVERVIEW

A game lab is an invaluable resource for games research, which can take many forms depending on its purpose. There are many functions it can fulfill: a venue for collaboration between disciplines, a resource to study games and players, as well as an environment to develop experimental games and foster innovation in game design.

Setting up a game lab also demands a considerable effort. Depending on the intended purpose of the lab, there will be different technical needs, human resources and funds required. Integrating the game lab into the context of a department and within a curriculum is an additional challenge in justifying the creation of a game lab, particularly in the Humanities, where the use of laboratories as a resource is less frequent.

This panel will share the stories of four labs, covering what has worked best for them and what has not worked. Each panelist will provide an overview of what they needed to put together their labs, how they have grown an identity for them, and how they have integrated them in their different institutional contexts.

The goal is to discuss the value of a game lab, and to encourage the participation of attendants who have a game lab as part of their resources, or may be thinking of setting one up.

PANELIST 1: BLENDING THEORY AND PRACTICE: INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH AND THE HUMANITIES

The Experimental Game Lab (EGL) extends the mission of Georgia Tech's Digital Media Graduate Program by blending theory and practice to both investigate and extend the expressive capabilities of games, to foster critical analysis, and to better understand and influence the role of video games in culture. Both a research community and a facility, the EGL creates a locus for diverse disciplines to meet, collaborate and exchange ideas, including: critical theory and media studies; psychology and cognitive science, anthropology and sociology; human computer interaction; computer science and engineering; art, media production, design and architecture. Topics explored include persuasive and activist games, game and virtual space, augmented reality, tangible media, pervasive games, cognition and creativity, AI in narrative and games, the cultures of virtual worlds, platform studies, procedural aesthetics, and interactive narrative. The EGL cultivates an environment for "critical play," maintaining an extensive library of video games and platforms, hosting special interest groups, lectures and discussions, visiting artists, and symposia on topics such as documentary games and multiplayer games and virtual worlds. This presentation will include an overview of current projects and activities, as well as pointers for "newbie" labs.

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PANELIST 2: A LAB IS AN EXPERIMENT WITH PROCESS

Tiltfactor began in 2005 as the first game research lab in New York, and the first academic center to focus on social activist games. Tiltfactor is now physically located in New Hampshire with several satellites, and serves as a think tank that develops critical play approaches to explore the intersection of science, art and design. Lab members are as interested in the process of design and creative practice as they are in the results; our investigation of human values in the design process is a core tenet of how the lab functions. We believe the mindset of the creator affects that which is created, and that objects are embedded with the beliefs and values of their designers. With that mindset, the Lab not only produces games, but studies and produces tools to empower other artists, activists, and academics to make more intentional expressions to facilitate the transmission of thoughtful interventions through play. We have created process tools such as Grow-a-Game and social game systems such as VEXATA. Our presentation will focus on 1) the practical working methods and processes we've developed, and 2) the balance between fundraising and research.

PANELIST 3: A SPACE TO WORK ON PLAY: THE ELECTRONIC ARTS GAME INNOVATION LAB

The Game Innovation Lab in the USC School of Cinematic Arts is a research space and think tank where experimental concepts in game design, play and interactive entertainment are developed, prototyped and play tested. The lab is the center of games research in the school's Interactive Media Division and the hub of a vibrant, investigative game community within the division. Housed at the Robert Zemeckis Center for Digital Arts, the facility includes a state-of-the-art usability lab, dedicated team rooms for ongoing projects and a research library of games and reference materials. Beyond all this, however, the lab's real infrastructure is its culture of playcentric design and a strong focus on creating deeply emotional gameplay that

may serve to expand our design vocabulary for playful experiences. Founded in 2004 with a gift from Electronic Arts, the lab has been instrumental in the development of several extremely influential independent and serious games, including Cloud, fLOW, Darfur is Dying, Hush and The Night Journey. Strong ties with industry, academic, and creative media partners include collaborations with Activision Blizzard, The Joan Ganz Cooney Center, UCLA CRESST, KCET, CPB, and Bill Viola Studio among others.

PANELIST 4: MAKING GAMES FOR RESEARCH

The Singapore-MIT GAMBIT Game Lab is a center of videogame culture, where people can share their interests and work collaboratively. The lab is founded on the international collaboration between Singapore educational institutions and MIT. As a research laboratory, it bridges theory and practice: we study games, players, games education and technologies. Our researchers have the opportunity to apply their theoretical work to game development.

At the center of this collaboration lies the interest on studying games, and using game development as part of our research. We have developed games to answer research questions (e.g. how can we make a game that can be played both by visually impaired and sighted people?), and to try new design methods (how can metaphors help us design games based on abstract concepts?). Our games also allow us experimenting with new technologies (e.g. new 3D animation methods). Games thus become artifacts that are part of a larger body of research, where theories and technologies are put to the test.

Game development is fostered by collaboration at many levels—between institutions, within MIT departments, and between scholars focusing on theory and the development team that makes the games.