

Preface

Game designers traffic in the space of possibility. They design systems that define rules and thus give rise both to play and to a sense that anything is possible. As a game designer, I believe in the value of such spaces. The design of *Quest to Learn* thus began with an inquiry into the idea of possibility.

What, for example, my team asked, might be made possible for *kids* if we found a way to conceive of school as just one kind of learning space within a network of learning spaces that spans in school, out of school, local and global, physical and digital, teacher led and peer driven, individual and collaborative?

What might be made possible for *teachers* if their creativity around how to engage kids were deeply valued and they were supported with resources—such as collaborating with game designers—to really understand what engagement around learning can look like?

What might be made possible for *communities* if school were to become a catalyst for activating a network of mentors, partners, peers, and leaders who are focused on helping kids figure out how to be inventors, designers, innovators, and problem solvers?

What might be made possible for *students* if they were challenged to teach others how to do the stuff they know how to do, and content were treated as an actionable resource rather than something to be memorized?

What might be made possible if young people not only were able to use games and media and models and simulations as drivers of their learning, but were able to *design* them, too?

What might be made possible for the *world* if we were able to support young people to be curious, to have ideas and build theories around those ideas, to fail often and early as a strategy for learning how something really works, to be given an opportunity to interact with the larger world in ways that feel relevant, exciting, and empowering?

What might be made possible if we treated *school* not just as a problem to be fixed or complained about, but as a partner in the learning lives of our kids, our parents, and our communities? What might actually be possible?

New York City was willing to hedge its bets and see what would be possible when a school stops talking about technology as a learning solution and instead looks to young people as the centers of innovation. Quest to Learn is the result of this bet, a new sixth- to twelve-grade public school that opened its doors in fall 2009 with 76 extremely excited sixth graders.

In the pages that follow, you'll see the design thinking behind the details that led to this excitement, but it is important to be clear about something now in order to address any possible misconceptions. Quest to Learn is not a school of video games or a school where students play video games all day. Games are one important tool in the school, most certainly, but they

represent something more than a resource. They are the basis of a theory of learning that is both situated and gamelike. As a result, we have designed the school around an approach to learning that draws from what we know games do best: drop players into inquiry-based, complex problem spaces that are scaffolded to deliver just-in-time learning and to use data to help players understand how they are doing, what they need to work on, and where to go next. It is an approach that creates, above all else, a need to know—a need to ask, Why and how and with whom?

In this first semester, for example, our sixth graders have been involved in a code-breaking Mission where they were motivated to learn how to convert fractions into decimals in order to break a particularly gnarly piece of code they found hidden in one of their library books. They were also recruited by a TV producer to create a location guide for a reality television series, a situation that created in them a need to figure out how to navigate an atlas, distinguish elements of a map, and create character studies for potential contestants. Several students asked for additional reading so that they might see some more examples of characters to draw from. They demanded to learn how to create more professional-looking video tutorials to help a hapless group of fictional inventors known as the Troggles, who live in a video game called *LittleBigPlanet*, learn the purpose of standardized measurement.

In the case of the Troggles, the students' need to know came directly from an interest in helping others learn. And they are deeply engaged in learning how to do this teaching of others well in order that they may claim they know the content, too.

Further, the curriculum at Quest to Learn creates feedback loops that connect intentionally redundant and overlapping learning opportunities, like the after-school program called Mobo Studio, which supports students in learning how to create videos, an integrated math/science class where the creation of video tutorials is the primary form of summative assessment, and which includes a specially designed social-network platform called Being Me, allowing students to post, rate, and review each others tutorials and video remixes against assessment-oriented rubrics.

This kind of feedback loop—one made up of various learning contexts across which kids move—is almost always reinforcing. The kids have opportunities to practice and synthesize content and skills in varied contexts that have been intentionally designed to point to other spaces to learn.

And then there is the *rise*. Structures and experiences emerge from the system because attention has been paid to the possibilities the spaces afford. Feedback loops act like connective tissue between the “bone” of state standards and core literacies. And when designed well, feedback loops can give rise to the kinds of supplementary, passion-based learning we know help young people excel.

Case in point: on the third day of class, the YouTube Club emerged, which now has 24 members. This club has assigned itself the job of “telling the story” of the school in mockumentary format. With more than two-thirds of the school year left to go, there is no end in sight to what the students will dream up next.

We need to do a better job of giving children and young people opportunities to rise, which means designing systems

that enable the rise—that enable them to move across networks and to engage in really hard problems with relevant resources.

Games are all about creating spaces of possibility, where players feel that they can do anything. I believe schools can aspire to design these kinds of spaces, too.

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