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Integrative Project Thesis
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Golingo! - Define Your Imagination

Every year our society becomes more reliant on technology for social interaction. As a millennial, I have observed how society has become increasingly more complacent engaging with each other through digital mediums, which has made me more appreciative of the physical experiences that bring us all together. Games are one of my favorite mediums for social interaction. My whole life I have been playing games; recreational sports, video games, boards games, and in recent years drinking games; all of which have allowed me to have fun, develop friendships, and gain skills that I otherwise would not have the opportunity to acquire. Gaming is a valuable and inherent aspect of the human condition that has served as a cultural, social, and educational tool for thousands of years. For my integrative project I have developed a board game, called Golingo!, that empowers players to explore their creative imaginations and collaboratively invent new words. Language is a fluid aspect of society, it is constantly evolving. My game allows players to participate in the surprising joys and discoveries that one can find in language, by taking part in the creation and evolution of new words. The process by which players develop new words is collaborative; players take turns placing and arranging letter cards, until a new word is created. Once a new word has been invented, each player develops a definition for this word to ascribe meaning to it. My game systematizes the intangible process of language evolution into a collaborative and fun experience.

How did humans communicate at the early stages of verbal language? How did we decide as a society that certain sounds have a particular meaning? All words were created at some point. With the rise of the Internet in the past couple decades, society has seen an explosion of new lexicon develop as billions of individuals interact in this new forum of communication. When did we as a society decide that 'LOL' was a real word? Was it when the term was first used or

did we decide that it was real once an entire generation of adolescents starting using the term on a daily basis? My integrative project challenges the notion of what makes a word real. Through my game, players create words that become tangible artifacts that can exist after the game experience is over. Each word has the potential to become real, if players choose to introduce this new vocabulary into their daily lives. Through this process, the words themselves become real to the people that created them. The goal of my game is to enable players to create meaning out of nothing, to explore language, to allow players to take ownership of something that they developed, to legitimize absurdity, and of course, to have fun. This has been a rewarding project for me to develop because it gave me the opportunity to design an experience that people can physically engage with and use to socially interact with each other. This project is an especially valuable opportunity for me as a designer as it perfectly integrates my interests in branding, illustration, packaging design, and gaming. This thesis will take you through my creative process over the past two semesters as I engage with the medium of game design for the first time in my life, and hopefully not the last.

Throughout history, humans have used games as a means of fostering social interaction, nourishing cultural tradition, and developing valuable skills and knowledge. However, it is only very recently that game design and the nature of play has been approached as a field of study. Johann Huizinga, one of the greatest scholars of play in the twentieth century, analyzes the role of play in human civilization in his 1944 publication, Homo Ludens. In his writing Huizinga states that "play is older than culture" and that "all play means something"[1]. Games are much more than an experience of fostering fun; they serve as a medium of achieving more substantial meaning. For example, the game of chess has existed for thousands of years, serving the function of developing strategic thinking skills among the military elite of society. The original version of monopoly was created as a social commentary, attempting to argue against the capitalist culture of modern economies. The sport that allows a young child to build friendships with his neighborhood peers is the same sport that might cause frenzied riots in city streets across the world. As we can see, there is so much more meaning at play in these games than what might appear of

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1   Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1944)

the surface level. Meaning is derived from games by the ways in which people interact with them and by the culture that encompasses them[2]. In other words, the context of society adds additional layers of meaning to a game experience. While my game does exist for the sake of fun, it also presents additional meanings by presenting individuals the opportunity to reevaluate the language that we might take for granted on a daily basis.

During the research phase of my project, which I will elaborate more on in the next section, I reflected upon and analyzed many of the board games that I played as a child. My family never owned many board games, but one would be safe to bet that scrabble would be making an appearance during the holidays or any other family affair. Scrabble is arguably the most widely popular board game that deals with language. I will not go describe in detail the rules of the game, as I assume whoever is reading this is quite familiar with it already. I always enjoyed the game for the most part, but then again, I did not have many other board games in my parents' lack-luster collection to compare it to. The fun always seemed to come to a screeching halt whenever it was my father's turn, who would take upwards of ten minutes to come up with a modest four-letter word. While my father would rack his brain to make a word, I would be preoccupied arranging the letter tiles in front to me to explore what kinds of nonsensical sounds I could create. What do you mean I can't earn points for made up words?

A scrabble board complete with letter tiles arranged into words. This game would influence the way in which I interpret language as a child, and it helped shape the final form of my game.
Source: localscrabble.wordpress.com

I have always been fascinated by language. I have many memories of myself as a child repeating a word countless times until the sounds no longer held any meaning. I would always

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2   Eric Zimmerman, *Rules of Play*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003)

wonder how we ascribed concepts to a seemingly random order of letters and sounds. As I've grown older I have learned that the evolution of words is a long process that takes roots in ancient languages and dialects that are now extinct; but as a child, words filled me with a sense of wonder. One could presume that my early days of playing Scrabble with my family influenced my perception of language as a fluid structure.

Many modern day artists have explored language in their work. For example, the Dadaists of the early 20th century would collage random words together to create chaotic compositions as a form of artistic anarchy towards the social, political, and cultural values of that time. I have always appreciated absurdism; it calls attention to certain aspects of society that we take for granted. In the case of Dada work, it allowed the viewer to reevaluate visual communication and societal values through language and image.

I would like to take some time to discuss the work of Xu Bing, a Chinese artist whose work often deals with issues of language and text and how they influence our perception of the world. In 1994, Xu Bing presented an interactive installation in Copenhagen titled Square Calligraphy Classroom. The installation was a classroom setup that invited participants to learn calligraphy through an interactive lesson. Any person fluent in written Chinese knew that the characters the participants were creating were utter nonsense and held no meaning. However, any

Xu Bing's Square Calligraphy Classroom challenged our perception of written language through an interactive exhibit. Source: Xubing.com

English speakers would have hopefully noticed that the 'Chinese characters' were in fact English letters that had been visually abstracted to resemble Chinese calligraphy. The artist states, "As people attempt to recognize and write these words, some of the thinking patterns that have been ingrained in them since they learned to read are challenged...While undergoing this process of estrangement and re-familiarization with one's written language, the audience is reminded that the sensation of distance between other systems of language and one's own is largely self-induced."[3]

3   Xu Bing, *Square Calligraphy Classroom*, 1994, last modified 2009, http://www.xubing.com/index.php/site/projects/year/1994/square_calligraphy_classroom

Through this interactive exhibit, the artist draws attention to how individuals perceive written language, allowing the viewer to reevaluate the conventions of language that one has been taught by society. I am inspired by many of the themes that are present in Xu Bing's work. I want to embrace absurdity so that I may challenge how people perceive and interact with words. While his work was reserved for a select few individuals with the privilege to participate in the gallery space, my work, as a board game, will be much more accessible to a larger audience, and hopefully will have a larger scope of influence.

Let's take a step back now to the beginning of the school year. Back in September of 2015 I had no idea what I would be doing for IP, and I was beginning to get a little anxious about it. I needed to develop an idea that would challenge me and that would provide a creative process that'd keep me invested for a whole school year. I spent some time mind mapping my thoughts so that I could analyze what I was most passionate about and explore project ideas that integrated my various skills and would sustain my interest. I was interested in a large range of topics, so narrowing down my focus was challenging for me. After some time I came across the idea of creating a board game. It made sense to me, my whole life I have been playing games and it would be a great opportunity to integrate my branding, packaging design, and illustration skills all in one project. I was very attracted to the idea of designing an experience that I could observe people directly interact with. Additionally, this project had the potential to expand into the commercial market which would only widen my scope of influence, and maybe even I would be able make some money out of it. So at this point in my process I was decided upon my form, but I needed to develop a concept. What idea would my game explore? Why does it matter?

To move forward in the game design process I decided that I needed to develop a few key goals that my game would focus on. The two themes that I decided upon were 'collaboration' and 'content creation'. Growing up, I really enjoyed games that had players work together as opposed to pitting people against each other. Collaborative games allow players to have fun without the pressure of winning or losing, which promotes more effective social interaction. Fos-

tering meaningful face-to-face interaction was one of my key goals with this project; I wanted to create an experience that would combat the digital bubbles that people find themselves sinking into. Additionally, I wanted to develop a game that enabled players to create something: a tangi-
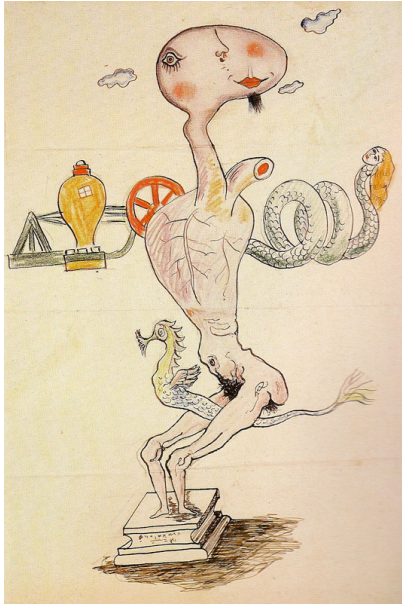
1928 game of Exquisite Corpse played by legendary surrealists Yves Tanguy, Man Ray, Max Morise, and André Breton. Source: tate.org

ble artifact that is able to exist after the gaming experience is over. For example, many people are familiar with the exquisite corpse game - one person starts a drawing, other players add on to it not knowing what they were adding on to. This game was very popular with surrealist painters of the early-mid 20th century as a creative exercise. The activity allowed the artists to explore their creative imaginations in an fun and free experience, while also instilling valuable skills on how to approach challenges from multiple perspectives. This kind of collaborative creation inspired the themes within my own game. I aimed to enable players to explore their own creativity, and hopefully have something that they can walk away from the game with that they can cherish and share with the world.

As I have never designed a game before, much of my time first semester was spent researching how to approach game design. The book, Rules of Play, by Eric Zimmerman was a very valuable resource for me; this book helped me understand how to develop meaningful play and create experiences that have intrinsic value in how players interact with them. There are five key steps that one must take when designing a game. First, one must develop a concept for a game, based around some theme or interaction. Once one has a general idea for a game, one must develop a rough prototype, a physical mock up that people can interact with. Then one must play-test the prototype with as many people as possible to analyze how people interact with the game experience and to figure what works and what doesn't. Then one must go back and forth between refining the game mechanics and continuing to play-test to further hone the experience. Once the mechanics have been fully fleshed out, then one can begin to develop the branding and

graphics for the game to create a polished finished product. If these steps are not followed in this order, than the process becomes messy and ineffective (Zimmerman).

Once I had decided the key goals of my game, I began to prototype a few ideas to better understand how people interact with each other and with a designed experience. At this point, I had not decided that I wanted to focus on language as a topic of exploration. I returned to this idea of the exquisite corpse; as a child my sister and I played our own variation of the game in which we would each take turns drawing features of a person's face until we arrived at some strange Frankenstein-esque creation. I thought that this would be a fun experience to further gamify, so I created a series of constraints that would push players into weird and fun situations. The game prototype challenged players to collaboratively create a drawing together, however a series of cards would place additional constraints on how players had to approach the activity. For example a player may have to draw a nose with someone else's hand, while another player might have to draw a eye while holding a pencil in their mouth. After playing this game with a few peers I found that the activity was rather fun. It pushed people to approach a challenge from new perspectives and placed them in uncomfortable situations that would lead to amusing social interactions. This game prototype fulfilled my goals of collaboration and content creation, but it just didn't quite feel right to me, so I decided to continue exploring other game ideas.

Play-testing my exquisite corpse game prototype with my classmates. The game mechanics would put players in physically challenging situations, such as drawing with your mouth. Source: Cullen Whitmore

Over the course of a couple weeks, I developed more prototypes of games that fit within my self-imposed goals. I created a game that challenged players to collaboratively create poetry; I enjoyed the tangible artifact that players got out of the game but something about it felt miss-

ing. It wasn't until fall break that I came up with the idea for my game that would become the idea that I have been developing for this whole year. I was in a cabin in the woods for a couple of day with three of my close friends; no Internet, which meant no attachment to the digital world. I thought to myself that this would be a perfect opportunity to create a physical experience that would enable people to come together and interact on a face-to-face level. Looking back on my previous game prototypes, I enjoyed how players were challenged to explore language through poetry. As I explained earlier, I have always been fascinated by language and words, questioning how they came to be and how we attribute value to them as a society. While in this log cabin with my friends I thought that it would be a wonderful idea to develop a game that challenged players to make up words of their own. So quickly I created a rough paper prototype, and within 20 minutes my friends and I were laughing about the weird words and definitions that we had created together on the spot. At this moment, I knew that I had created something special. This game experience had the potential to be really fun and conceptually rewarding at the same time. I chose to continue developing this idea so that I could share the experience with others.

Once I had created the key concept of my game, I spent some time play testing my prototype with various groups of my peers to analyze what aspects of my idea were successful and what could be improved. After every play session I would interview each player so that I could make adjustments to the game mechanics to create a more meaningful and effective experience that fulfilled my key concepts. One such play-test with my classmates revealed a game-breaking mechanic. My original rules stated that their would be a judge every round, and that they would determine the length of the word. Quickly one of my classmates exploited that rule and decided to make a word that was far too long. Every play session that did not go well highlighted an issue that needing tweaking. In this case, I developed a new game mechanic that constrained the length of the word. The solution was to create a game spinner that determined a number value for the length of word. Not only did this resolve the problem, but it created a new opportunity for players to interact with the game features.

Play-testing my word game prototype with my classmates. Here we can see one of my rules being exploited by a player to create a word that is far too long for a reasonable gameplay. Source: Cullen Whitmore

After many sessions playing my game with my classmates and roommates, I was feeling rather comfortable with the state of the game mechanics. However, I had only been play-testing with a very specific demographic: students in their early twenties. I needed to expand my scope to better understand how other age groups interacted with my game. One aspect of my game that I really enjoy is that the types of words and definitions that are created vary extremely based on who is playing the game. The types of definitions a college-aged student would make would be quite different from what a ten year-old would make. And what kinds of words would be created when different demographics and age groups interacted with each other? To answer these questions I required more input from other demographics.

I connected with one of my former professors, Nick Tobier, who provided the great opportunity to play my game with him, his eleven year-old daughter, and her friend of the same age. As I mostly have access to college aged students, it was very exciting to see how a younger audience interacted with my game and with each other. We met in a local cafe and played my game for about an hour. It was a fantastic experience. Both my former professor and the children loved the game. They took to the experience immediately and made some really creative words and definitions. For example, Nick's daughter, Lucy, created a delightful definition for a word that we had created called 'mefel'. Not a particularly nice sounding word, but I loved the meaning that Lucy created for the word. She defined mefel as the indent that forms on your nose after wearing sunglasses for too long. We were all elated by the definition. We have all experienced the situation that Lucy is describing, the English language simply did not possess a word that described what it was. Lucy was so proud of her definition that she wanted to take it home with her, to share with her mom and other friends. I connected with Nick a few weeks later who told

me that Lucy had been using that word among a few others that we had created during that play session in the cafe. I was ecstatic to hear about Lucy's experience with my game, this is exactly the type of interaction that I was striving to foster. Lucy collaboratively created something new, and then implemented that tangible artifact into her daily life which in turn made that word real, at least to those of us who participated in the game. I felt rather confident with my game mechanics at this point, so I decided to start developing the idea as a product, exploring all aspects of branding, illustration, and packaging design.

When I first approached this project in the fall, I knew that I wanted to incorporate my illustrations into my work in some way. By the end of the first semester, during December review, I thought that the best way to incorporate my drawings was to illustrate every letter card. This idea however was met with some resistance as the drawings would impact how players interacted with the game in ways that I did not intend. That's when I arrived at a solution that benefited the game mechanics while also allowing me to explore my illustrations. One issue that I faced while play testing was that the game was too open-ended for some people. People who were less adept at thinking creatively would sometimes struggle to create definitions out of thin air. That is when I developed the idea to create a separate deck of images that would become topics or themes for a given word's definition. This additional constraint really benefited players because it gave them a direction to move towards, without having to rack their brain to come up with ideas. This solution enhanced the gameplay while also providing me an opportunity to create a series of cool illustrations.

I started to gather images of clean vector illustrations and iconographies that I was inspired by to gain a better understanding of the aesthetic of my game. I decided to start illustrating and allow that style to develop before I design the rest of the branding and packaging. During this time I was exploring color schemes that I could apply to visual identity of the game. I knew that I wanted my brand to be playful, approachable, and fun. These keywords influenced how I would approach the branding process.

A selection of illustrations from my image deck. These pictures would develop themes in which players would use to focus their definitions. Source: Cullen Whitmore

At this point I was feeling comfortable in the visual style that I was developing. But in order to move forward I needed a name for the game. I couldn't create a logo without a name, and I couldn't develop a visual identity without a logo. I spent a good deal of time brainstorming name ideas. I wanted the name to be somewhat nonsensical, seeing as how the game is about making up new words. I wanted something like scrabble or boggle. These words don't really hold any meaning, but we as individuals have built up emotional relationships with these brands, and through that meaning is derived; also they are just fun to say. After a couple weeks of bouncing ideas of my peers and family, I arrived at the name Golingo!. It fit all of my criteria for an effective name. It is a made-up word, it is fun to say, it subtly hints that the game deals with language, and the letter forms would look great in a word mark. Since I now had a name, I needed to develop a logo. In the end I developed a logo that was friendly and approachable, making use of rounded forms that invited the viewer in. I decided to add an exclamation mark to the end of the name because it made the name appear to be more fun, and additionally the shape mirrored the form of the lowercase 'i' in the name.

Final game logo. Utilizes lower case letters and rounded forms to create an friendly and widely appealing visual identity.Source: Cullen Whitmore

After I had my logo developed, the rest of the game pieces just started to fall in place. I developed two patterns to work in tandem with the logo in developing a brand. The first pattern is made up of a jumble of letters, which touches upon the language aspect of the game and how players will manipulate words. The second pattern is made up of the illustrations that I had developed, and is used on the backs of the image cards. In the end I felt that these patterns were the key aspect of my branding, and brought all of the game features together in a consistent style.

I started the production of my packaging a few weeks before the final deadline. This process was much more time-intensive than I originally thought. I ran into many issues when it came to printing my cards; I couldn't find the right coated card stock paper and I was having trouble matching the right colors on the printers. After many long hours, I finally had my decks assembled. This brought me to arguably my most important feature of my game, the dictionary; this game mechanic is what brings everything together. Once players have developed a word, the winning definition that the judge chooses gets to enter the golingo! Dictionary. This action serves a couple of functions. First off, the dictionary adds legitimacy and authority to the words that the players created. Secondly, the dictionary acts as a chronological keepsake, in which players can document their word creations and share them with their friends and family. When I played was play-testing my game, players whose definitions had won that round were very excited to see their definitions enter the dictionary, it was almost an added bonus to winning the round. Once I had the dictionary assembled, I had to assemble my box. Originally I intended to have a square 8" x 8" box. I quickly learned that I would have to increase the size of my box to effectively hold and present every feature of the game. I ended created something a bit more rectangular, like a scrabble box. I was very happy with how all of the pieces ended up fitting together in the box, the space was used efficiently and the components were presented very nicely. The final piece of my display that I need to produce was an informational poster to go alongside my game in the exhibition. I gathered a few of my classmates to conduct a play session with the final game. Using the photos from that session, I developed a poster that hung on the wall behind my

game display. The purpose of the poster was to show the audience what the game looked like when players interacted with it, as I wasn't having people play it at the opening. I included captions which described each component of the game and it's function. In the end I was quite please with it; I felt that it brought the whole display together into something that was appropriate for an art gallery.

Final display of the product in Slusser Gallery. The poster provides additional information, detailed the various components of the game. Source: Cullen Whitmore

As I look back on this year, I can confidently say that I am happy with how everything turned out. There were, however, many speed bumps throughout this process. I second-guessed myself quite a bit and had more than a couple stressful moments. In the end it was a challenging and rewarding experience. I learned that I had to rely heavily on the input and support of others to reach my goals, which was a challenge on it's own. My original intention was to develop a board game that brought people together to interact on a face-to-face level, and challenge players to create something new through a collaborative process. I wanted to present the process of language evolution in a new way, allowing players to reevaluate the language that they take for granted. I feel that I succeeded in fulfilling these goals. The final product was very well received at the opening reception; I was approached by many people who exclaimed that they would pay to play this game, and that I should try to get this product sold on the market. In the future, I hope to approach a game manufacturer and attempt to get my product sold in stores. That would be the final step in bringing this project to fruition. Until then, I will take some time to decompress from this year and reflect upon my process. I am sure that I will make more games in the future, either for commercial or personal purposes, as I will always have a passion for gaming and creation. This year was the most challenging experience that I have had at Stamps. I learned quite a bit about my own creative practice, what I enjoy working on, and the types of

ideas that matter to me. Following graduation, I am excited to get started on a number of personal art projects, that I make just for me and at my own pace.

Bibliography

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