Katie Salen, University of California at Irvine, USA

she ji
[ʃə: ʤi:]

Designing a Place Called School: A Case Study of the Public School Quest to Learn

Abstract This case study will delve into the organization and engagement models developed to bring game-like learning to the New York City public school sector. It will explore design's capacity to transform artificial systems, in this case a public school operating within the context of the US Department of Education (DOE). The case explores the role played by Mission Lab, a design studio embedded in the school and staffed by game designers and learning specialists. It then goes on to look at the school's grade format (6–12) and its non-selective enrollment policy. Each defined a key aspect of the school model, from its innovative approach to collaboration, to it emphasis on continuity and diversity.

"Like most places dispensing big ideas, Quest's vision and its reality were more complicated than people realized. Like most public schools, Quest is not perfect, and on some days it can feel quite ordinary. But like the best games its creators admire, it exerts a kind of quiet pull that is hard to describe. There's a purposefulness that captures the imagination and won't let go. Quite simply, it feels alive."

– Greg Toppo, *The Game Believes in You* [1]

Introduction

When Quest to Learn (Q2L) opened its doors in New York City in the fall of 2009, it was the first of its kind — a 6th–12th-grade public school purposefully designed around the core principles of game design and play. Its engagement model proposed to not only support learning with academic, civic, and career implications, but also to support teachers and students in taking on identities as designers.

Through collaboration with the small New York City-based non-profit Institute of Play, the school sought to create a twenty-first century model for teaching and learning that placed kids' interests and expertise at the center. While the curriculum would tackle all the required state learning standards, it would do so in a way that empowered students to see the world as made up of interconnected systems. Learning how to understand, affect, and ultimately transform these systems through a design mindset was a primary goal.

I led the team [2] that designed Quest to Learn. This included the design of a pedagogical approach called *game-like learning*, the design of professional development structures, curricular structures, a student advisory program, an assessment framework, brand, and more. This case therefore presents a subjective viewpoint, albeit one informed by research. It will delve into several of the organizational and engagement models developed to bring game-like learning to the New York City public school sector — the largest in the US, with nearly one million students. In the interests of contributing to a better understanding of design's capacity to transform artificial systems, I've chosen to focus primarily on one key feature of the model — Mission Lab, a curriculum design studio embedded in the school — rather than on the school's pedagogical model, which is well documented elsewhere.

As an organizational model, Mission Lab broke new ground in the way it initially integrated game designers into the day-to-day workings of the school. From a social perspective, Mission Lab played a critical role in cultivating a culture of collaboration that became central to the model's transformative effects on its educators. Members of Mission Lab collaborated with teachers and students on the design of games and game-like curriculum, produced tools for use by students and educators in service of the school's learning model, and provided professional development for the school's educators. (See Video 1.)

The decision to integrate such a feature into a public school was made in tandem with numerous other, more seemingly banal design decisions made by any organization opening a school in the United States — its size, grade structure, enrollment policy, status (public, charter, private), to name a few. By highlighting one "innovative" structure alongside several standard policy-level decisions here, I hope to surface some of the productive tensions that resulted. The case explores two policy-level decisions in depth: the school's 6–12 grade structure and its non-selective enrollment policy. At the end of the article, I will reflect on the limits and possibilities of doing such work within a US public school setting.