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Interview by Jesse Ashlock / Portrait by Justin Hollar

*Earlier this decade, **Frank Lantz** helped pioneer the idea of “big games”—tech-driven multiplayer games that unfold in public space, like PacManhattan, an urban version of the classic arcade game invented by his students at NYU’s Interactive Telecommunications Program. Area/code, the company he founded in 2005 with Kevin Slavin, has developed these kinds of games for clients ranging from Qwest Wireless to CBS, as well as online social games like the wildly popular Facebook game the company introduced last year to promote A&E’s reality series Parking Wars. Lantz just launched NYU’s Game Center, a game-focused program that will eventually become a degree-granting department.*

**Have new platforms like Facebook and the iPhone provided opportunities for innovation in gameplay?**

Any time there’s a new surface, you can build a game on it, just like new buildings provide new opportunities for graffiti artists. The contours of people’s experience are changing because of these weird overlaps between digital life and material life, and those overlaps are canvases for new kinds of gameplay. Facebook provides a whole new model for a way of interacting with your friends, so when we created Parking Wars, we tried to design a game that was native to this form of interaction.

**You’ve said that area/code designs games with computers in them, rather than the other way around. Is that the direction game design is headed?**

I approach game design by thinking about software and computer games within the long tradition of games and play. I think that taking advantage of pervasive technology is both a step forward and a step back. It’s a step forward into a world where we always have one foot in the virtual. That’s what it’s like to live right now, and it’s going to become more and more like that in the future. At the same time, we’re looking backward to more traditional games that are stylized forms of social interaction in which people make decisions in real time that affect one another, just like a conversation or dancing or music does. That is such a rich palette

for creativity, and it’s very different from what people think of as computer games. I love computer games and video games, but if you consider the incredible beauty of tennis and poker and chess and golf, there’s still a lot to be explored in that realm. And the potential for overlap between these two kinds of activity is incredible. There will be opportunities for software-mediated experiences, which also draw on all the richness of the real world that will blow our minds.

**You speak regularly at the annual Games for Change conference. Is area/code actively involved in making games that address social issues?**

We just invented a sport for the National Association for Public Administration called Budgetball, which explores the complex issues around managing debt in the real world. We wanted to drill down to the heart of the problem, which is that it’s really hard for the human brain to make smart decisions about money that involve long-term consequences. Budgetball is a physical, team-based sport that uses the power of games as a lens to compress that decision-making process. A bunch of college students played a tournament in D.C. recently against the Office of Management and Budget, including Tim Geithner.

**Does area/code’s cross-media, pervasive approach lend itself well to games that promote social change?**

Yes, because it’s a form of gaming that’s already about engaging with the real world. But making games for change is a really interesting problem, because games aren’t inherently about delivering messages. Games are particularly fascinating and slippery in the way that they’re meaningful—they’re deeply meaningful, but not in the way that movies are meaningful. Take baseball, which is profoundly meaningful to many people, but not in the way that *Casablanca* is. The challenge is to take baseball and weave in more of what we get from *Casablanca* without losing what’s native to baseball. But I think it’s happening, both in traditional video games and in more experimental work like what we’re doing.

**What’s the thinking behind Game Center, the new game-oriented academic department you’re building at NYU?**

Our approach is based on the idea that games are not a subset of computer science or film. It’ll be a hands-on program that involves a lot of making games but also teaches sophisticated awareness of games as a form of culture. It won’t be a trade school for learning how to make space-marine simulators. Understanding the context for making games—why they’re made, what they mean, and how they function in culture—is as important as learning how to use Maya and C++.

*Jesse Ashlock is the editor-in-chief of I.D.*



Frank Lantz with the  
office dog at area/code in  
New York, July 8, 1989

area/code

