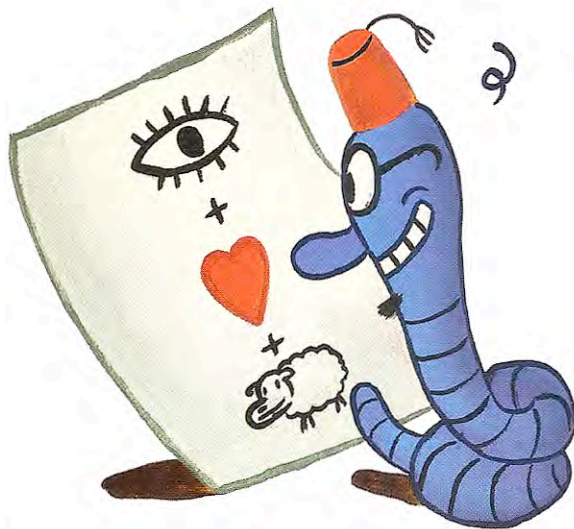


...campus



The "Word Worm," from the Cranium spin-off Cranium Cadoo

By Jesse Ashlock

Playing with Their Heads

Hasbro and RISD team up on an educational initiative modeled after the board game Cranium.

Just up Interstate 95 from Providence, where the Rhode Island School of Design has its campus, there's another venerable design powerhouse: toy maker Hasbro, which has delivered everything from Monopoly to Mr. Potato Head (along with many of the items featured in "Toy Stories," page 68) to children's bedrooms around the world. As he was taking the reins as RISD's new president last year, John Maeda met Hasbro's global chief development officer Duncan Billing, who was new to his job too. With both men pondering ways to move their institutions forward, a partnership made sense. For Hasbro, it could lead to new concepts and prototypes, and even future employees, but most importantly, it was an opportunity to expose the company to new perspectives on toy design. For RISD, it was a chance to leaven the seriousness of design education with a curricular initiative centered around structured play.

Hasbro proposed building a course around Cranium, the multifaceted board game invented in the '90s that draws on a mixture of language, art, memory, and performance skills, which the company had just acquired. "Being a Cranium fan myself, I could see how the hands-on nature of this brainy product mapped perfectly to the fierce 'critical making and thinking' that happens here at RISD," Maeda says. The course, which begins this fall, will be offered under the ponderous title "Multi-disciplinary Reinterpretation of Play for

Games in the Spirit of Cranium," but its format shares the game's loose spirit. Like Cranium, it is interdisciplinary, bringing together students from the illustration, industrial design, and digital media programs. "In discussing the class, we realized that each of our departments has these buzzwords we weren't sharing," says Susan Doyle of the illustration department. "So it's an opportunity to share language."

The class will open with students playing Cranium in small groups. That's meant to spark discussions about the rules and aesthetics of play, which will be augmented by speakers and scholarly material. A larger interdepartmental team will meet at an on-campus "play station," with the objective of designing a formal game and then testing it out with the larger RISD community and surrounding Providence neighborhoods via campus-wide workshops and play dates.

For RISD's faculty, the goal is not so much to train the next generation of toy designers (though nobody would mind) as to free students up in their design approach. "Play is a natural part of the design process," says Khipra Nichols, an associate professor in the industrial design department who worked for Hasbro for 20 years before coming to RISD. "Any creative person is really trying to play—with ideas, with concepts—but when people are studying design, they can get very serious about their work. They're preparing for a career, and there's an attitude of tension that comes with that. If they can be given permission to play at work, I think they'll discover that they get more done."

The RISD program is far from the first academic course to explore the nexus of design and play, as Maeda points out. But he thinks Hasbro's role makes the course unique. "We are connecting one of the great traditions of play in the United States with one of the oldest traditions of design in the United States. It's an opportunity to bond the strong ethical and inquisitive nature of RISD with the commercial world of play. Learning becomes alive when collaborating with an enlightened industrial partner."

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