

Creating a Culture of Design Research
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As this book abundantly demonstrates, design research can come in many forms, from quantitative market research to personal interviews to experimental design explorations. But design research is more than a set of strategies and procedures. It also represents a particular attitude about design, a willingness to look beyond the immediate concerns of crafting a specific project, an openness to integrating ideas and insights from the outside world into the design process itself. Successful design research in a commercial firm requires a company culture that embraces research in concert with design.

This brief outlines some of the strategies taken at gameLab, a game development studio founded by myself and Peter Lee, to foster a culture of design research. At the heart of the way we run gameLab is a relentless drive to connect the experience of working at our company to larger cultural spheres. Whatever it is that your firm designs, emphasize the links between your daily design practice and related cultures outside the company walls.

1. Create a space that encourages design research

gameLab designs and develops computer games, and the office space we inhabit is filled to bursting with games, toys, and other play objects. Company staff are encouraged to spend time playing every day, whether that means surfing online games, spending lunchtime playing a boardgame, or taking work breaks interacting with one of the many game consoles in the office. Work tasks always take precedence over this kind of play research, but generally staff end up spending several hours a week just playing. This activity serves many purposes for us, including competitive market analysis, technological research, and general design inspiration.

Any office is a nexus for the exchange of ideas, and at gameLab we encourage staff to share the insights from their informal play research. A section of our intranet is reserved for posting links and thoughts about new games and game sites. Furthermore, the open physical layout of our office lets us see what is happening on each others' screens, reducing the potential stigma of "playing at work" and encouraging discussions about games even as they are being played.

2. Build a design research library

One concrete strategy we've undertaken at gameLab is the development of a research library. Our library includes retail game titles, books and graphic novels, DVDs and videotapes, magazines (we have many subscriptions), board and card games, and toys of all kinds.

While some of our research library has come from the research needs of specific projects, most of it has evolved over time through staff purchases. Every month, each gameLab staff is encouraged to contribute to the research library by spending up to \$50 (reimbursed, of course) to buy something for the office. Thus the library is a reflection of the tastes and interests of the staff, giving them a way to express themselves and to shape the mindspace of the company as a whole.

The library fosters research by encouraging gameLab staff to seek out cultural objects and bring them into the company from the outside world. And of course the library itself is an ever-present opportunity for formal or informal research investigations as well. A sign-out sheet lets staff check out items from the library for use outside the office.

3. Attend and create events

Be on the lookout for cultural events relevant to your company's design work. In the past, gameLab has attended films, exhibits, conferences, and other events connected to games, design, and popular culture. These group activities (always optional and always paid for by the company) serve double-duty as research opportunities and as occasions for team-building. We keep outside field trips somewhat infrequent, so that they maintain their status as special events.

In addition, we also host our own design research affairs. Approximately once per month, game developers in the New York City area come to the gameLab offices for an evening of beer, pizza, and boardgames. These get-togethers not only let our staff learn about fundamental game design principles through non-computer game play, but also help foster the local game development community, giving us an opportunity to network, share industry gossip, discuss technical dilemmas, and even show off game prototypes -- all forms of design research.

4. Let them teach

A majority of gameLab staff teach. Peter and I encourage them to teach courses, attend critiques, participate on panels, and give talks and workshops. Teaching is a profoundly challenging and effective form of research, and gameLab staff have taught everything from game design and game programming to Masters thesis seminars and interactive narrative design.

Having your staff teach also builds bridges between your company and the local academic community. Teaching creates contact with students and faculty, meaning that gameLab has constant access to qualified interns and freelancers, potential new staff hires, and legions of enthusiastic student game testers. Our academic relationships have also fostered unique project opportunities as well, such as a studio class at Parsons School of Design in which students work with gameLab to research, design, and implement an experimental game.

5. Encourage side projects

We encourage our staff to pursue personal projects. These can take the form of articles, essays, and books (many of our staff are published writers); experimental design projects (our Director of Technology Ranjit Bhatnagar regularly exhibits his robot artwork); and the creation of non-computer games (such as gameLab Game Designer Nick Fortugno's self-published role-playing game).

As long as the side projects of full-time workers do not compete directly with gameLab's core business of making commercial computer games, Peter and I urge our staff to have creatively rich lives outside their work at the company, and we celebrate their accomplishments in such endeavors. Games are culture, and the success of our collective work at gameLab is dependent on the cultural sophistication of our staff. By engaging with culture productively on their own terms outside gameLab, our staff bring insight into the projects they complete within the company.

6. Create contexts for experimentation

Although gameLab is a commercial studio, from time to time we create opportunities for our staff to undertake experimental, noncommercial projects as a form of design research. For example, over the last three years, gameLab has designed and implemented a large-scale social game for our annual industry gathering, the Game Developers Conference. These massively multiplayer off-line games are events played by thousands of players, and vary in form from year to year.

Although the primary purpose of our conference games is to research forms of social game play, they have a number of side benefits as well. The games serve as potent publicity stunts for our industry peers, game publishers, and the game press, highlighting our profile as an innovative game company. The games also feed other research efforts: some of our staff are currently writing a paper about the design insights we have gained from these conference projects.

In sum, there are innumerable ways of incorporating design research into the everyday experience of your firm, thereby fostering a company culture that embraces research. The informal guidelines outlined above are not meant to replace more formalized research techniques, but instead to foster a company context in which design research is tightly integrated into design practice. A company that engages in design research on a daily basis will be much more open to bring research into specific design projects when the opportunity arises.

While all of these design research activities it may seem like a drain on your company resources, in fact the benefits of fostering a design research culture far outweigh the costs. gameLab is a small design studio of about a dozen staff, and if we can do it, you can too. All that is required is a willingness to open your company to the world beyond

its walls, to imaginatively mix cultures and contexts inside and outside the company.
Design shapes the world: shouldn't we let the world shape our design?