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Learning inside the magic circle: An interview with Curious Chimeras

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Abstract

Gaming cultures, much like Rodney Dangerfield, don't get no respect. Instead they are commonly blamed for a range of ill effects, from juvenile delinquency to moral panics around Satanism and gambling. This is part of a broader cultural constellation that devalues the place and importance of play in our lives. One of the key impetuses in organising the "Pedagogy & Play in Teaching Today" symposium was precisely to argue against these pre-conceived negative associations with play, instead exploring the ways that play is integral to learning and teaching. How can we find ways to draw from the engaging dynamics of play, and bring them into the classroom environment? With that idea in mind, we invited the members of gaming consultancy and design house Curious Chimeras to deliver the symposium keynote session. This interview with the Curious Chimeras was held the week after the symposium as a way to follow up and expand upon the materials presented.

Stevphen Shukaitis (SS): How would you introduce or describe what Curious Chimeras is or does to people who not yet have had the opportunity to come across it?

Curious Chimeras (CC): Curious Chimeras are predominantly a design house. We design tabletop games. We also do consultancy work for people who want to bring game elements into their work or their environments. Now and then we also do events. We run weekly tabletop RPGs (role-playing games). Sometimes people ask us to do very specific theme events for certain occasions. We've done birthday games, art events, and children's party games. Things like 'my wife is really into D&D (Dungeons & Dragons) and she wants to play a level six character. Can you make an entire game about this level six character?' We've gotten strange requests, but it's been mostly the design aspect. Being a design house is forefront, but what we apply the games to depends on what we are trying to say. If one requires a certain voice or vision that we want to share, or if it's what the client would like, we basically pursue that. Sometimes we joke that we construct and peddle certain very specific shared hallucinations.



Illustration 1: The logo of Curious Chimeras.

SS: I like the idea that you're peddling shared hallucinations. It's interesting that you describe yourself as a design house. Usually when I think of a design house, I think of a company that's hired to produce advertising campaigns, or who work on product design. It sounds like your approach to design is a different kind of cultural concept which is also a kind of shared hallucination.

CC: Yes. Ultimately when you think about a game – and it's not so easy as it sounds – there are a lot of things to consider. Someone comes in with a key objective. How do we turn that into a game that would achieve that very objective, while keeping in mind things like balance? Keeping in mind the players? Keeping in mind certain other themes that they want in it? Everything that we've done is a specific design for a specific objective. It's similar to product design, but with a game.

SS: Would you say it's like designing a world or designing an environment?

CC: Generally when we design roles or games, or the premise of a game, we don't go into specifics. It's part of constructing the shared hallucination. We give them key words and everything else is co-constructed with the audience or the players as well.

There are a lot of prompts in the situation. It's a bit like you throw a little bit of start-up culture, but aimed to a situation. A lot of work also involves making the situation as bounded as possible. When we go into a house that we have designed an event in and make it a game that we're playing part of our job is to separate the magic circle outside from the magic circle inside (Huizinga 2014). We also work to dissipate the boundaries so that people have something to take home. That's the one that's actually the key aspect of contact shift. It's what we notice to be sometimes the hardest aspect of the work because it means we're transporting people from one place to another but they didn't actually physically move that much. And then we have to bring them back from where they are to the moment. It has certain aspects of theatre and performance because it has that whole journey back and forth, using curiosity – hence our name – and using imagination. Seeing multiple perspectives and points of view.

In terms of design, most of the time it is somewhat like advertising: you want people to go towards a narrower range of feelings about something. Like wanting to associate this product with glamour. This service is associated with this kind of lifestyle. Whereas our approach is also about creating those shared associations and feelings through the games. Then we skirt around the edges of these keywords and themes and hope that people have some feeling of closeness to it.

SS: But the whole thing about shared hallucination is that it's something that's not complete initially but that it's completed through the interaction and realisation by the people who play. It's almost like you don't need to fill up everything you need to fill up enough so that people could realise their own ideas and desires in the shared format of the game-space.

CC: Yes. You need to nurture and be inviting to people to co-create or to share, especially in cultures where that might make people less comfortable. They'll be worrying about whether they will be judged. Will people think they're not creative? Sometimes that's a challenge for us. These days it's not as much. Maybe we've found more friendly crowds or more reception. People no longer have that much of a hang-up.

SS: In some ways that mirrors shifts within marketing practice itself. You can see that in the shift from making a factual claim about a product or service to more contemporary marketing where we're talking about co-creation with user communities or aspects of the experience economy. It's a similar dynamic based around creating a shared platform or space that the audience, or consumer, complete, more so than fully elaborating and describing a product.

CC: Yes. With marketing, we talk about experience, selling an experience. People are not so much interested in material items anymore. They want to feel part of a brand experience. What we are selling in that sense ties in with that idea of the shift in marketing as well. That now people are going towards experiences. Games are more the experience than other things people do for 'corporate bonding,' like to going to escape rooms, or creating a terrarium together. Whereas previously it was a barbeque, something quite fundamental. Now we see a shared creation process is taking place.

SS: Who would you say are your main influences? What made you to say 'let's create this thing and we'll call it Curious Chimeras and we'll do this?'

CC: In some ways it's because of the creature, the mythical beast itself, the chimera, which has multiple heads. What would be really scary? Let's put them all together. Goats are scary. They head butt people. Lions are terrifying. Dragons are always scary. And snakes, they're terrible. Let's put them all into a beast. It's an impossible beast. It's full of dangerous things. It embodies something that is transgressive, but can be many possible things. A chimera is a creature that has multiple aspects of different creatures put together. That drew us to the heretic crest, that logo.

That aspect of mutation, of hybridity, is very important. We would like – through the course of the work and the services we provide, the products we design – to encourage people to think. The process of playing and collaboration with others, or communication, is what leads to a creation of a stronger strand of cultural processes, which leads into a new set of perspectives, a new set of ideas. Especially in a context like Singapore where we have a chimera beast as a national logo as well. We have a merlion which is something that can't exist. It's an impossible beast. But we still think of it as a lion with fish parts. While the chimera, is it a lion? Is it a dragon? Is it a goat? There's a mammal-reptile aspect. We like the fact that it's a bit more democratic but still organised as a chaotic beast.

SS: Why did you want to create the Chimeras as a project, company, organisation? How would you describe it?

CC: It didn't really start as a company. Curious Chimeras it was more a collective of friends, a play community to work people who normally would really benefit from play in some ways but maybe they don't have the access. We started with a community focus. It became harder to run it as it went on simply because there's negative perceptions about play. You have adults telling kids they can't play because they need to worry about exams. We're lucky because many in the play community we had were educators. It was educators saying 'this is good for you. Playing can make you more creative. Playing can help you with maths because you're solving math problems when playing a role-playing game.' That was an easier sell but it was very hard to sustain. That's when we sat back and thought about how to find a sustainable way to do what we're doing, how to bring this across to a larger group rather than being essentially a neighbourhood non-profit that was self-funded.

SS: One of the things that Becky Shelley said at the symposium was the importance of play is understood very clearly in early childhood education but less so in secondary or university education (Shelley, Ooi & Brown, 2019). The way you describe this scepticism around the value of play reminds me of *The Golden Compass* (Carraro & Forte, 2007). The film, and presumably the book it's based on, revolves around children and their daemons, which are animal familiars that represent a part of every individual's spirit. But as they go through school, they lose their daemons. Or perhaps more accurately, they are stolen. To draw the comparison here, it's almost like play is this daemon that gets taken away. Why is there a certain point where we can't have it anymore? Why do people think that play stops becoming important in learning?

CC: We don't know. When you look around, a lot of people are still playing. They are indulging in sports. They play on their phones and play PC games. For our community, we're playing a lot of tabletop games. But somehow along the way, the idea of play became separate from learning and education. The surrounding conversation of what is a child, what is an adult, has to come in here. Our understanding of this has shifted greatly in different historical phases, particularly after the industrial revolution.

Play falls into typography as well in terms of how we understand the difference between children and adults. People will say play is something you can do as a child because you don't have responsibilities. Once you have responsibilities, you can't play. But once you have the ability to fulfil responsibilities, you can play because there are casinos. You want to bet, you want to gamble, this is the right of the people who have achieved it because they have succeeded in adulting. Play is a distraction to many people, particularly those who stress that education must be very serious. Assignment rules are meaningless in themselves. You do them so that you can do better in exams. They don't actually care whether you learn anything, but for most folks, they are just pushing through it to get the degree. When you are inside that worldview, there's very little space for playfulness.



Figure 2: Alanna Yeo presenting at the Essex-Kaplan Symposium on Pedagogy and Play in Teaching Today, with Stephen Shukaitis in the background.

SS: But there's this aspect of play, or language of play, that is less about play as a separate activity and more about play as an attitude to what you are doing. That's why you can have a playful approach to something serious. But it's interesting how that's rendered in the official language of education, for instance in learning outcomes. We always know at the end you will do this. Rather than saying 'we are going to explore these materials and maybe we don't know where we're going to end up with. We'll see where they go.' That's a different attitude of not needing to get a certain place, an exploratory attitude where you're going to make something and see what it does but not necessarily being set that it has to do a certain thing. I've always associated that with more of a deep learning approach where you want to engage with something for its own sake rather than an end program, whether that's a test score or a degree.

CC: That's why we're obsessed with the idea of having range of mobility. Like having play in the limbs, having play in a similar situation. Possibility space is something which is very much at a premium in this cultural context of Singapore. Like very often, you get very low key messaging that if you don't do this, these are the negative consequences. For a society like ours which is very prone to anxiety, there are people who are anxious and thus don't like surprises because they could be bad. Play works on the idea that it's okay if it's bad. We have this idea of 'I'm good enough to play this as a game without letting it affect me.' That's the mentality of discipline and focus that comes from being a professional gamer.

These are two very different mental states. One is 'I'm a citizen and my country is very dependent on the global economy. If things screw up, I'm screwed up, everything is bad.' Very nervous. Compare with an approach that says 'yes, I am in control of myself in a situation where I can't control the situation, I can control myself and I can play well no matter what.' Those are two very different things. You can use play to teach people to approach mastery, to develop this kind of high performance. But the first one obviously is for the general crowd, maybe they're not that high level, so you can't afford play. You have to do the serious stuff, you need to follow what's already been done. There's a tension there between high and middle performance.

SS: But more than just performance, there are questions about imagination and its role. Historically, there were earlier ideas, for instance, people are not creative, only God is creative. Therefore you shouldn't even talk about imagination because that's really not the domain of human action.

CC: Our role is to live through and discover through science and reason what has been established for us. It's another metaphor. Because creativity is saying 'let's make a new ship.' Whereas they are like 'let's submit and find out what ship is there for us to use within our domain.' Those are two different metaphors.

SS: Going back to what you were saying before about shared hallucinations. Perhaps it's the difference between a co-producer mindset versus a consumer mindset. There

you can see the difference between someone who expects, or wants a world to be made for them, versus an approach based on wanting to build worlds together through shared interactions of players, fans, and the community more broadly.

CC: We live in a very transmedia world now. Let's say if I was a 14-year-old watching a Marvel movie, and I like to sketch. I'm posting my sketches on Tumblr or Instagram. My co-production process is me reconstructing an imaginary relationship between two characters. Maybe that becomes canonised in the next film. There are parts of gaming communities who strongly dislike that way of approaching media. They really hate teenage girls' way of consuming pop culture media.

There's this Marvel character, Ms. Marvel, Kamala Khan, the Pakistani American girl. There are people who hate her and people will love her. A good portion of the anger towards that character is fuelled by racism and Islamophobia, the idea 'we need to protect Europe from evil influences.' And there's this anger that Marvel would be developing characters and stories that could reflect experiences beyond the typical youngish white male demographic. When you look at geek communities, it happens in role playing games as well.

SS: For what it's worth I think Ms Marvel is an amazing character and I'm looking forward to seeing how her story develops. Strangely that story somewhat mirrors what you were saying in terms of whose perspective and ideas are valued, in the sense that the 2013-2014 "Inhumanity" storyline involved an expansion of Earth's Inhuman population. And that leads to the 2016 "Inhumans vs X-Men" storyline, which ends with the Inhuman Royal Family abdicating their thrones and ceding leadership to a Chinese peasant girl. I find the possible storylines coming out of that much more interesting than constantly rehashing the 'superhero canon' and its tropes endlessly.

CC: To go back to the conversation about these games and imagination, the way people can be conservative in their imagination. You have people who spend significant time and resources, not on generating and creating any content but instead on creating opinions about how content should be curated and maintained. This is the canon. This is how a game should be done. And you have other fans who produce transmedia works, who make new works, rather than argue about how best to police things.

SS: In certain ways, we're back with Allan Bloom and arguments around literary canons, debating what should be included, and how dare you include these other people (1994). It's similar. Maybe Allan Bloom is a cop ultimately. But let's shift topics. Let's say if you were going to talk to teachers who were considering introducing gaming elements into their teaching practice. What would you suggest? Where would you suggest they start to think about?

CC: The games versus gaming elements distinction is important for us. They are different. We talked about gaming in the classroom versus games for the classroom. How would people be introduced into this? One of the things to do is

we would recommend first of all to not force it in. Go for it if you think that is something that you feel that you naturally gravitate towards. And if you do feel that way naturally then I would assume that you, the teacher, are familiar with games in your everyday life. You enjoy these games, that's why you want to bring them to the classroom. Having this in mind, one of the best things that we can do first is look at the games that you play with a bit of distance and think about why you play them. Think about what is it you enjoy about these games and how can you translate that into a different environment versus trying to force something in for the sake of trying to liven up the classroom. Ultimately, we believe that the power of games is motivation and the simulation that they can win. But if you force it, none of that is going to happen. The students are not going to be happy to do it, and it's going to be frustrating as well because the audience is not picking it up.

There's two key aspects here. One, of invitation, and the other of facilitation. Whatever we do has to have a basis in invitation. The person who does invitation has to know whether the guest would be happy with whatever they're going to be invited to do. For teachers, this is a bit harder because teachers have authority. You can't exactly go around as a lesson plan saying 'hi guys, we would like to do this or not do this?' Part of it is to adopt the teacher mindset where you get to point B but getting to point B, there's A1, A2, A3, A4. Then the games are all different to engage different approaches to get to point B, perhaps for people who are shy. They can use an anonymous game so you don't have to be the one putting it out there. Maybe for people who have a more expressive flair, something which requires you to repackage so it activates different learning capacities. The design approach for the teachers who want to use gaming in classrooms would be not designing a game first, but instead to look at your student community and make a game around those people. There's a rule that's very different for analogue games and digital games. For us as tabletop game designers we work in the analogue realm. There's a rule in D&D proposed by the writer Monte Cook. He says there is no table that is more important than your table right now when you are the game master. You are not making a game for the performance of everyone, you are making a game for your group. In today's transmedia world where streaming is very popular for roleplaying games, a lot of new players and game masters are focussed on looking cool, on getting more clicks on YouTube or Twitch. And there's a bit of old school approach for who the audience is intimate.

And it's the same for teachers. You should be trying to make a game that is good as a game that will work for everyone – but if you have a student who is a little bit weird and disruptive in class – it's better to keep him in mind. To facilitate a proper process rather than to say 'hey, we have a good game. The fact that we didn't play the game in the way it's supposed to be played means you are a bad student, you're a bad player.' That kind of language and approach is very force fitting. For us as a design house, using an artisanal approach, we look at the situation, look at the audience, look at the people involved, and make something that fits them. It always has to feel inviting. It has to be coached in terms of initiation. The facilitation is through doing this we'll be able to get you to something. The teacher has to think and know what they

are trying to achieve. Does this facilitate understanding of Singapore history better? Does this facilitate understanding of creative industries better? There are many skills that teachers already have. It requires working with what teachers already have rather than throwing what teachers have away over towards newer approaches.

SS: That reminds me of a few years ago when I was visiting the University of Groningen on the day the third-year undergraduate liberal arts students were presenting their final projects. I was most impressed by a group of about ten students who collaborated to design and code a computer game about energy markets. The way it worked was that you could choose to play as an energy company, using renewable or fossil fuel sources, or as a political party or an NGO. And based on your position you could undertake actions intended to achieve benefits for yourself, whether that would be influencing government in certain directions, or responding to shifts in consumer demand and prices, or even the effects of weather on energy markets. I ended up spending a few hours playing this game. It was immensely impressive, all the knowledge that had to be brought together to create this game, which ranged from understanding energy markets and political dynamics, to the coding and design of the digital interface of the game. Obviously not one person, or even a few, would have all those skills. But together a group of around ten students was able to create a functional and enjoyable game.

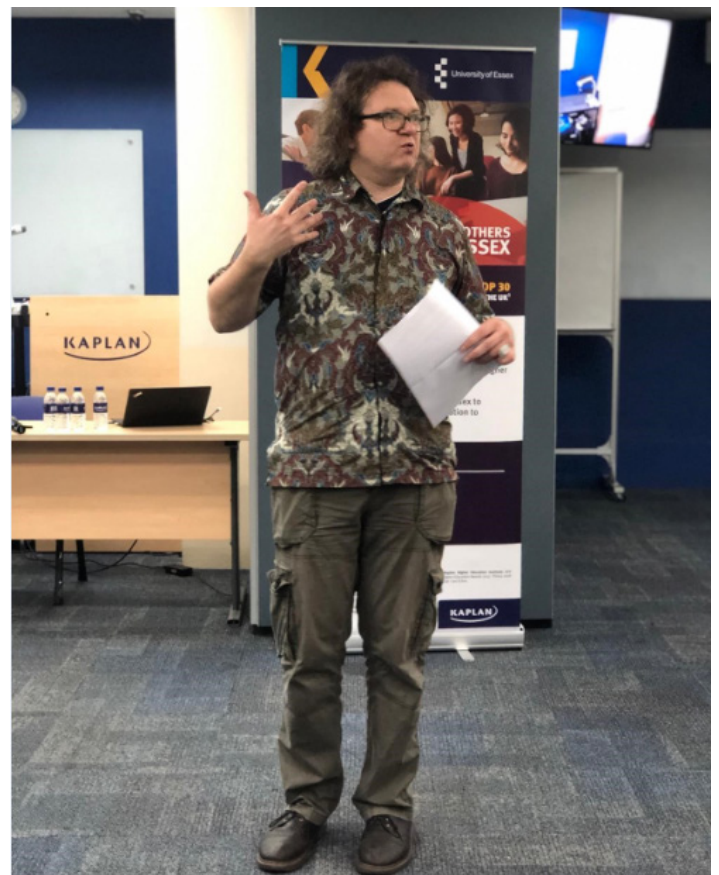


Figure 3: Stephen Shukaitis presents at the Essex-Kaplan Symposium on Pedagogy and Play in Teaching Today.

CC: There is a difference in games, like what we talked about earlier, with both implicit learning and explicit learning. That's an example of a game with explicit learning objectives.

We want to talk about energy markets and the interplay between energy markets, consumers, and government. But there are also games with implicit learning objectives. For instance, Pokémon Go, it's supposed to be a game about catching Pokémon. You walk along the real world and things like that, but implicitly you learn this place is a gym. Here's something important about the sculpture. In the game itself, it has pictures of that sculpture with a description of what that place is. The implicit idea to is go out and walk and meet new people and talk about your game.

With the energy markets game in order for the students to make that they first need to know understand the area, or multiple areas. It's a very good appraisal tool as well. It goes back to what Carl Sagan says, that before you can make apple pie from scratch, you have to make the universe filled with apples. Makes sense. Before they can make a game about energy markets they need to know the dynamics, processes and the way that it works. Implicitly in the process of making the game there's a lot of learning taking place. They are learning about coding and human behaviour, what factors lead to people making certain decisions.

Different kinds of games train different attributes and skills. First person shooters explicitly train aim. They explicitly train reflexes. See, click. But we also know as more and more generations of E-sport athletes are getting put out to pasture many of the skills don't last. The clicking doesn't last. But if you can get these older players to become coaches then they become very good at strategy. You should do this, you should do that, keep on training, to explicitly learn aiming skills. The implicit learning is more focused on developing strategy, team management, resource management, and stress management. There's a lot to reflect on two sides in terms of what is it that you want them to learn as the people playing the game. What is it you want them to learn after they play the game?

SS: As an undergraduate, I did a module in international diplomacy and our exam was to play a game of the board game Diplomacy. At the time I thought it was silly, but looking back on it, I can now see that you actually had to understand dynamics that were the main focus of the module. You were learning about negotiations between countries, with gauging and acting on national interests strategically. And so if you paid attention to the principles about those things in the classroom that could inform how you played the game. In that sense, as a demonstration of knowledge acquired through education, playing the game filled much the same function as writing an essay or taking an exam.

CC: The phrase we have in Singapore is for someone to be exam smart. Essentially you will become very good at task mastery and working within a context of a certain grading format. [In Shao's teaching experience] we had some assignments that students felt to be unfair because those notions were disrupted. We gave them assignments which were go to a place in Singapore within a given list including Golden Mile, Lucky Plaza, Peninsular Plaza, and places where there were large foreign diasporas or migrant workers. Go into the place, reflect on it, and write about your experience. Write 800 words of what you felt and how did

this help reflect on issues and identity and migration. The two lectures before that were on ethnicity and migration. If the students got it as a larger structure, they were able to see how these connected.

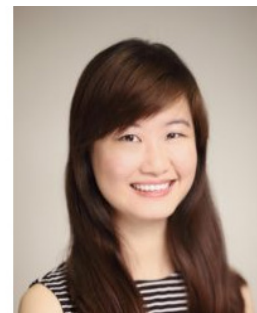


Figure 4: Tan Shao Han and Alanna Yeo (Curious Chimeras, 2018).

SS: In other words, you're suggesting drawing on those sorts of approaches when it's sensible rather than forcing it. In that sense, introducing a more playful approach to the classroom requires not just understanding where the students are coming from, but the teachers just as much. And only by doing that can you make it invitational.

CC: Maybe it's something about not really learning for teachers, but more certain aspects that need to be in place for play to happen. We need to know what the game is for, but we don't need to know how the play goes. A lot of stress in game masters who are new to role playing games is they want people to do certain things. And they try very hard to force you into a certain narrative structure. It gets even worse if they come in from creative industries. It's quite surprising. Some like to force people into a three-act structure. Very contrived. Now you feel bad, but then you'll feel good later. It works for digital games. But if you're in front of a person and attempt to enforce certain expectations on the gameplay, then the person's engagement drops. That's the same for learning games.

Once engagement disappears, and when you realise there's no link between your action and the outcome, there's no link between your learning, your feelings, and whatever is put in front of you... then the buy-in drops from the teacher and from the student. You are left with a poor overall experience. We've observed that happening in workshop sessions. Someone comes in and the instructor doesn't put himself into the perspective of the teachers. Then you can see a subtle shift in their faces. They disengage and turn to doing my marking in the background. We've all seen that face before. Teachers are a really tough crowd. When teachers take out their marking, it's very stressful when you're in front of them. And they're a tough crowd because of the demands placed on them. That's why invitation, engagement, and facilitation are very important.

SS: Which goes back to again why it's about interaction design.

CC: Yes. Experience design, direction design. Especially for tabletop games. Ultimately for electronic games, no matter how open the open world is, it's still a railroad. The difference is just how wide the tracks are.

SS: That was the part about *Fallout 4* that I found really frustrating. I kept wanting to create a way to work between the Underground Railroad and the Institute, but the game's structure prevents that from being possible. Admittedly that's pretty farfetched within the narrative, but so much else teeters on that edge of being unbelievable, why not?

CC: You can find the wide walls of design that surround you. It's an open world but essentially it's a design mediated universe which you have no choice but to be an object inside. For tabletop games we get away with being gonzo in our approach. Anything goes on tabletop if you have a game master who is ready to take on all of those. It's more of a dance in tabletop. The difference is that you can improvise a story as you go along rather than having it already coded, with all possible options mapped out.

SS: Well there goes all my cherished illusions about open world games.

CC: And it's also about different skills. We praise video games based on their stories because to some degree video games follow from the format of cinema. People will say that this game has a really gripping narrative, because we are consuming at the same level as a film, a book, or a comic. When people say they really like role playing games because of the stories we can respond that's very nice, but you do know that 50% of that is the writer and another 50% is what the players came up with as a response to that? It requires metaphors of creativity and ownership of creativity. In a Triple-A video game, the director is very important. They come up with that vision for how you are going to move. In a roleplaying game, that vision is useful but also not as useful as a collaborative aspect. A lot of what works in role playing games is being okay with your vision not coming to pass. There are many game masters who have a great number of players for the first one to two years of their career... but then it drops off because their stories are always the same. It goes back to designing the interaction based on where the participants are. Ultimately tabletop roleplaying games have a lot more collaborative emphatic co-working opportunities than digital games.

SS: Perhaps as a way to wrap up, are there any key values or concepts that you work with that you'd like to bring out that haven't come up yet?

CC: Co-creation was a big one for us. The idea of co-creation, the idea of artisanal games that we make. Let's say we get clients come wanting to start a conversation about advertising campaigns and designer houses. Every industry has its work practices. The way advertising new homes has them as well. There are creatives and people at the back thinking about text. There are norms about what works well, and what doesn't. In other words, there are a lot of craft specifics there. For us, for designing artisanal games,

the craft perspectives come from interplay and interaction. Different disciplines can bring about different foci. And bring about different approaches. For us, the degree of intimacy in the situation is art as well. If you weren't there at this playing, but you were there for another, things will be different and that is okay.

There is a range of acceptable experiences. We want people to have a positive experience. But we don't expect that all players need to come away with a particular experience, otherwise it's a failure. This is a dividing from other game houses. We align ourselves with the understanding that it's okay to have different takeaways. We've been to game design talks where people come in and they talk about Skinner boxes. They talk about how you use game items and game cursors and debugs to manipulate characters or people. For us, there's something inside that rises up instinctively against that kind of approach.

In our approach, we've drawn from art history and culture in Singapore. There's a quote from the playwright Kuo Pao Kun where he says "with the great systems everywhere and people becoming gadgets in these systems, there is actually an innate need for people to find themselves" (2001, p. 110). And for Kuo Pao Kun that's the role of art, that it has the power to make us not so much part of the system as ourselves again. We can make new systems to make sense of things. For us that was always an inspiration, the idea that 'let's not fall into other people's systems but make new systems that don't dehumanise people.'

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