The *Metagame* as Teaching Game

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> "Games are popular art, collective, social reactions to the main drive or action of any culture. [They]...are extensions of social man and the body politic...As extensions of the popular response to the workday stress, games become faithful models of a culture. They incorporate both the action and the reaction of whole populations in a single dynamic image.... The games of a people reveal a great deal about them."
> — Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*

This paper and the workshop that we propose herein explores the *Metagame*, a card game in which players pose arguments about cultural artifacts like games, films, literature, design and fashion, as an educational tool for a variety of uses. We hope to use the workshop to introduce educators to the cards, to demonstrate and discuss some of the games and pedagogical goals that can be addressed through these games, and have participants develop new game variants and educational applications. We see the workshop as valuable for three key reasons: to expose educators to a flexible teaching tool, to the ways in which cultural literacy can be developed through playful debate and to gain insight in how to shape the game for future releases (two of the authors, Macklin and Sharp are co-creators of the game).

There are currently two versions of the *Metagame: The Culture Edition 1.0*, and the *Videogame Edition 1.0*. The *Culture Edition 1.0* was published in issue 17 of *Esopus* magazine. Each issue had one of three decks composed of 80 content cards and 40 comparison cards bound into it. The content of the *Culture Edition* includes 20th century examples of architecture, art, comics, fashion, film, games, literature, music, product design and theater. The *Videogame Edition 1.0* is composed of videogames from the 1970s to the present.

Each Metagame deck contains two kinds of cards.

Figure 1: First, there are content cards, which contain the cultural artifacts (all card images drawn from the *Culture Edition 1.0*).

Figure 2: The second type of card is the comparisons, which are used as the basis of debate and discussion.
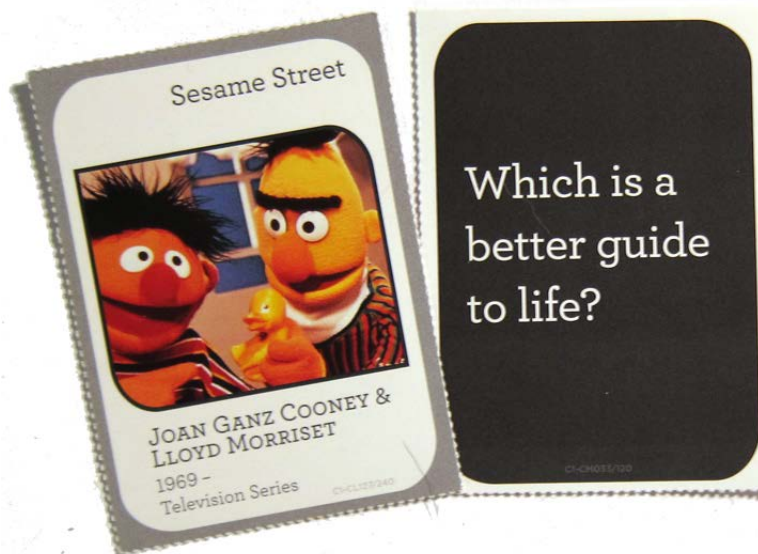

Figure 3: The basic game involves two players and one or more judges. The first player selects one content card and one comparison from their hand.

Figure 4: **The other player picks a content card from their hand that they believe better matches the comparison.**

The first player has up to two minutes to persuade the judge why their content card better fits the comparison. The second player then has two minutes to make their argument. The judges then decide who made the better argument.

The *Metagame* is at its heart a game about aesthetics. We use aesthetics here in the contemporary sense—the logical determination and evaluation of an artifact's purpose and value. In this light, the *Metagame* requires players to think deeply about the cultural artifacts in their lives, and asks them to construct concise, persuasive arguments to support their opinions. The construction of arguments can be difficult, but within the structure of the *Metagame*, the comparison and contrast structure facilitates; by having the players use a shared comparison, the game creates a frame around the debate, and gives the two players and the judge a set of constraints within which to operate.

We have discovered through our own design planning and player response, that the basic structure of the *Metagame* decks and its focus on the construction and adjudication of aesthetic arguments is immensely flexible. It does, however, require a substantial knowledge around the subject domains represented on the content cards. For example, for most young people in their teens and early twenties, the *Videogame Edition 1.0* presents few if any games that the players are unfamiliar with. The *Culture Edition 1.0*, on the other hand, tends to work better with players in their 30s and 40s who have a general interest in the arts and popular culture.

In the case of the *Videogame Edition*, we have noticed that players tend to want more granular cards within franchises. For example, we receive questions about why we included Naughty Dog's *Uncharted 2*, but not the original *Uncharted* or the more recent *Uncharted 3*. Similar questions arise around genres—why *Halo* and *America's Army* but not *Red Faction* and *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare*? Ultimately, both editions of the *Metagame* seem infinitely expandable. In March 2012, we released the *Videogame Expansion 1*, which broadens the cards in circulation by 30 games and 15 comparisons. As we further develop and expand the *Metagame*, we also foresee versions of the game that focus on more granular subject domains; to supplement the *Culture Edition*, which broadly but shallowly covers popular culture, we could create a Film expansion, or American Film expansion, or even American Independent Film expansion.

The challenges with the content cards appear to be a matter of cultural literacy within the subject domains. In order to play the videogame version, for example, a player needs to have played games across the forty years of commercial videogames from a wide range of genres and platforms. Or to play the *Culture Edition*, a player needs to be familiar with canonical artifacts from the breadth of twentieth and twenty first-century material culture and media.

Playing either version of the *Metagame* often feels daunting, but for players willing to commit, the game proves to be a catalyst for developing a deeper awareness of the content base. For example, at GLS 2011, we observed a number of players looking up games they did not know on Wikipedia and Moby Games. In later play sessions, players appear to have gained familiarity with content they previously were unable to confidently speak to. Variations on the game as well lend themselves to players finding a comfortable role for themselves in the *Metagame*. In other cases, we have seen "house rules" develop in which players can pass on a content card if they are not familiar.

The *Metagame deck* has proven to be quite flexible in terms of content, types of games that can be played with it, the number of players it can support, the contexts in which it can be played, and the pedagogical uses for which it can be utilized. We view the *Metagame* deck and its two parts—content and comparison—to provide a flexibility not unlike a traditional deck of playing cards and the hundreds of game variations played with the same 52 cards, from *Go Fish* to *Poker* and everything in between. Thus far, we have designed and made available to the public five versions of the *Metagame*: basic (as described above), Duel, Knockout, Snap Decision, Verdict and Massively Multiplayer Metagame. Players have also created variants to suit their interests, level of game literacy, limitations on the number of players and other factors. (Our variants and player variants can be found on the *Metagame* website, http:/metaga.me.)

Massively Multiplayer Metagame scales the basic game (two players and a judge, each player presenting a brief argument) from a dozen to several thousand players. We have successfully run or heard of MMM being run for upward of three thousand players at the Game Developers Conference 2011 and 2012 or approximately 250 players at GLS 2011 to a group of twenty or so students in the incoming cohort of the Interactive Media Program at the University of Southern California. In large-scale instances, we have noted a number of strengths for the use of the game including functioning as an ice-breaker for people to get to know one another, and to put a game wrapper around the deeply-engaged conversations people already like to have around culture and its artifacts.

Verdict is a strategic game for two players and a judge. Each round, the two players take turns putting down cards to match a set of comparisons selected by the judge. The judge then picks the winner of each comparison and players get points for each comparison they win.

Verdict dispenses with debating. As a result, players are able to engage with the game, and to assert comparative aesthetic arguments without having to speak. This version of the *Metagame* works well as a way to ease players into the basics of the *Metagame*, and allows quieter players an opportunity to participate without having to be too much in the spotlight. Verdict also puts players in direct contact with and develops comfort around questions and situations that do not have "absolute" or "correct" answers.

Finally, Knockout is an argumentative game for five or more players. Each round, players argue why their content card should win the current comparison. The player who makes the worst argument gets knocked out and joins the judges. The last player remaining is the winner. There are two key strengths with Knockout. First, the game keeps everyone engaged; to lose a round only means that you change roles from a debater to a judge. Second, the game allows players less comfortable with debating to ease into the role of judge, where they still have a meaningful role in the game.

Each *Metagame* variant allows different levels of engagement and participation. In fact, through forums and social media we've learned that some teachers are bringing the decks into their classrooms for a variety of subjects. These educators have also created variants on the game—turning a game designed for entertainment into a learning tool used to spark writing assignments, formal debates, and deep levels of criticism in the classroom.

To continue supporting the educational community and its use of the *Metagame* decks, we propose a two-hour workshop to both share the *Metagame* with new educators and to develop new uses of the game for educational contexts. Macklin and Sharp, two of the three creators of the *Metagame*, will run the workshop. Daer, Duncan and Nealen, who have all used the *Metagame* in college classrooms, will participate in the panel and help facilitate attendee activities.

- Introduction (5 minutes)
  A brief introduction to the basics of the *Metagame* and its history

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- Play the *Metagame* (15 minutes)
  Workshop attendees will play the basic version of the *Metagame* to help them become familiar with the way the game works.

- The *Metagame* in the Classroom Panel Discussion (20 minutes)
  A group of educators using the *Metagame* in the classroom will discuss their pedagogical goals and techniques. Emphasis will be placed on thinking through the places where the game can and cannot be of pedagogical use.

- *Metagame* Variants (15 minutes)
  To give workshop attendees a broader sense of the ways the *Metagame* deck can be used, we will introduce three to five games designed for either deck.

- Make a *Metagame* Exercise (20 minutes)
  Workshop attendees will work in groups organized around educational disciplines to design *Metagames* for use in the classroom. Groups can change and refine any aspect of the game: content, number of players, how arguments are presented, how judging occurs, context for play, etc.

- Playtest (20 minutes)
  Groups will playtest their *Metagames* with other groups to help refine the game designs.

- Conclusion (25 minutes)
  We will wrap up the workshop including collecting the variations designed with the goal of making the versions available online for other educators.

The workshop will help us better serve the education community by giving us an opportunity to get feedback on how we can support the game's use in educational contexts. It will likewise give educators exposure to the game and to the ways it can facilitate a variety of learning goals. Could the *Metagame* become part of the arsenal of 21st century learning tools as ubiquitous and versatile as a deck of cards in playful contexts and as essential as a textbook in learning environments? It would certainly be surprising if it did, in its quaint 18th century form as a simple deck of cards. However, a flexible platform that asks us to reflect on the meaning and significance of our cultural world with each other seems to have special relevance in today's increasingly mediated moments.