Working Examples: Come Play with Us!

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Abstract: Working Examples (www.workingexamples.org) is a community that bolsters innovation and the potential impact of your work. You share and improve your ideas through exposure to new perspectives from researchers, designers, educators and funders working across the field. We come together around 'Examples' (ideas, work and projects) to explore new ideas, learn from each other, collaborate and impact the future of education. Our GLS session kicked off the Working Examples thread of presentations and covered four major problems the site is designed to address. Working Examples was intentionally designed to build a diverse community of practice, support sharing of work-in-progress, connect research, design and practice, and shift how we publish the work we do. We wrapped up with a call to action: Get on the site, share your work-in-progress, and collaborate to create something truly innovative.

So…What Is WEx?

Working Examples (WEx, www.workingexamples.org) is a community that bolsters innovation and the potential impact of your work. You share and improve your ideas through exposure to new perspectives from researchers, designers, educators and funders working across the field. We come together around 'Examples' (ideas, work and projects) to explore new ideas, learn from each other, collaborate and impact the future of education.

We like to think of WEx as a sandbox; it's a community based around building and improving ideas about technology and learning (e.g. games for learning) by sharing your work-in-progress and introducing yourself to new people and perspectives. WEx is a tool for impacting the world in spite of 'the system'. The site's broad audience is useful for getting critiques and feedback on your ideas or for finding resources such as play testers, subject matter experts and funding. You help others with their work by sharing your game design documents, production techniques, evaluation methods, postmortems, or lesson plans. Sharing this documentation will also help you to think through your process and improve your own designs.

The WEx community's beta site was launched in 2011. We spent 2012 redesigning the site based on community feedback and reworking the design to provide better interaction. The new site launched in March 2013 and offers a unique space for game researchers, designers, developers and educators to connect, collaborate, and share work-in-progress. WEx can be used to cultivate best practices for game design, teaching with games and publishing games at different stages of development.

A Bit About Examples

Working Examples are demonstrations of what the author believes to be good work (Barab, Dodge & Gee, 2009). Gee (2010) argues that such examples can be used to collaboratively define and develop the field of digital media and learning, which includes games for learning. Examples are ways to test ideas early in development and to get research and design out in the open.

In the WEx community, users and teams post Examples, ranging from preliminary ideas (or "seeds") to ideas that have "sprouted" and "bloomed" into developed projects. An Example might document the creation of a video game (e.g. "Space Vector 2.0: A Video Game for Beginning Physics", (http://www.workingexamples.org/example/show/42), demonstrate how to assess learning from game play (e.g. "Crayon Physics--Assessing Creativity, Persistence, and Conceptual Physics", (http://www.workingexamples.org/example/show/102), or show how to implement games in educational settings. Examples are intended to be more than just text documents, and can include concept art, storyboards, preliminary game documents, lesson plans, videos, images, and activities—anything that could be helpful to tell the story of your work (See Figure 1).

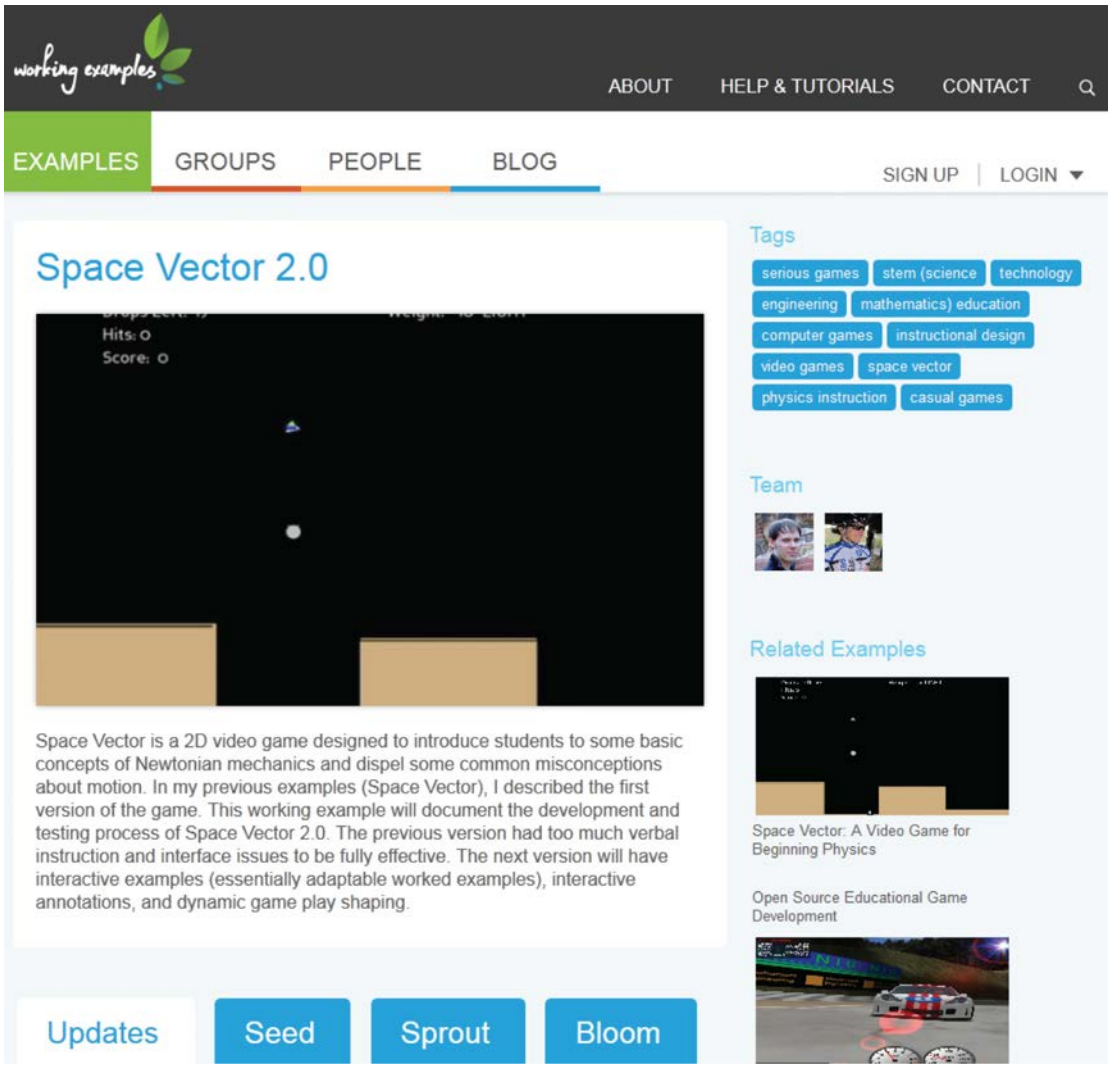

Figure 1: "Space Vector 2.0" Example Page.

Intentional Design

Good design is a mindset; it's an intentional process that spans from research to implementation. Working Examples is built to encourage and facilitate good design practice; to help people create work that will better impact the learners that we care about so much.

As a field, our collective design process needs some work. We don't often think of ourselves as part of a larger process. It's hard to find the time and resources to reach out and engage with one another; so we focus on our own ideas and outcomes instead. But the result is less impact—research that doesn't leave academia, games that don't get to their audience, or curriculum that stays in one classroom.

There are four roadblocks to impactful design in this field that WEx can help people overcome. They are:

1. Our work happens in isolation.
2. We forget about the big picture.
3. Research, design and practice are disconnected.
4. Academic publishing is slow, expensive and restrictive.

Our site is intentionally designed to address these roadblocks. Next, we describe these challenges in more detail and how the WEx community can help you overcome these challenges.

Roadblock 1: Our Work Happens In Isolation

The first challenge we face is that our work often happens in isolation. We're hesitant or don't make time to share what we're doing or engage others in our process. We live in a world built on old traditions and incentives that encourage us to keep our work and ideas secret. We compete for funding and recognition through publications. We worry that our ideas might be stolen. It's also uncomfortable to share our work when it isn't polished or finished. Even if we get past those incentives, we aren't always sure how to share our ideas in meaningful ways.

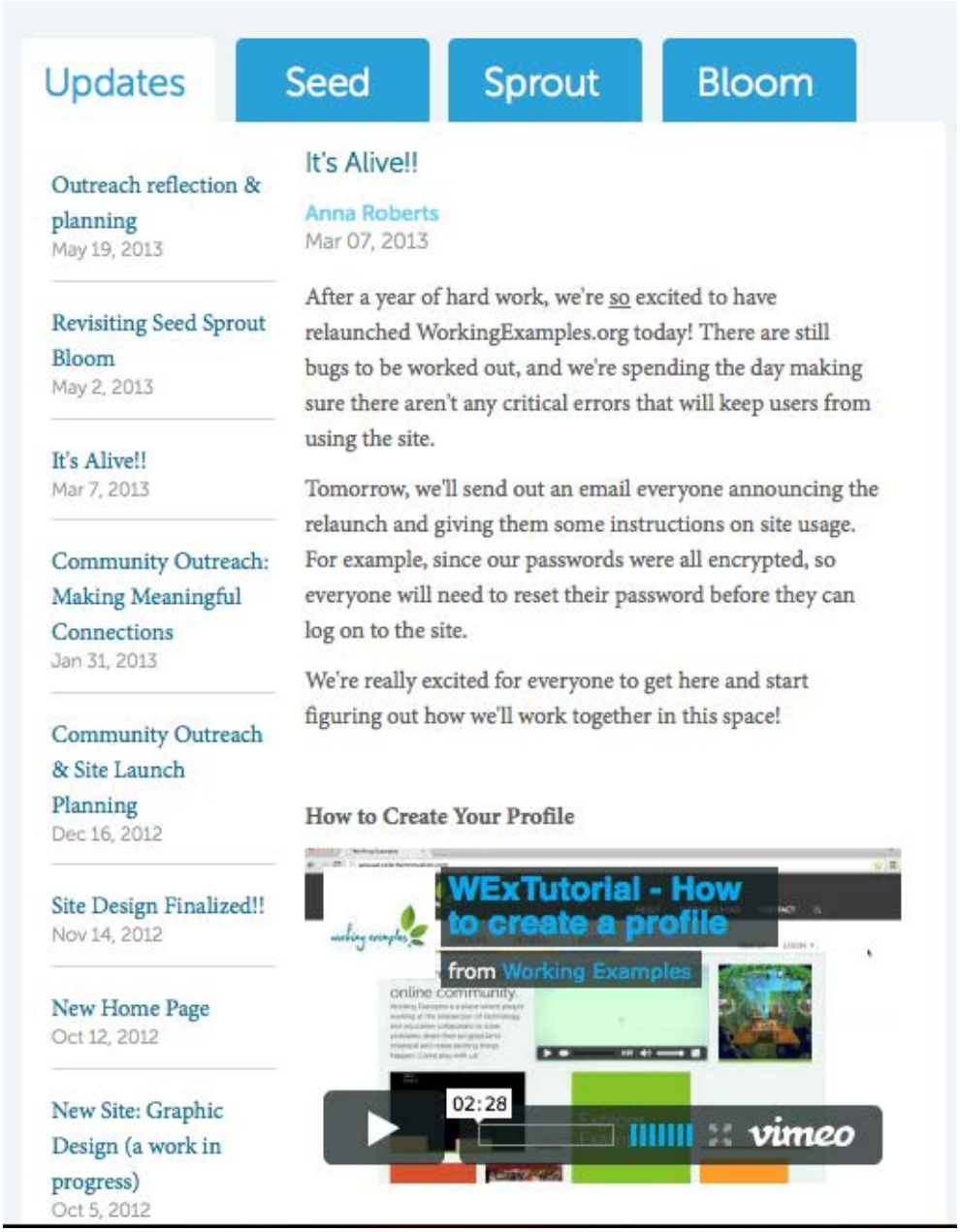

Figure 2: WEx Updates Section for Sharing Progress.

We get it; we have our own Example and struggle with how much to share, what's 'safe' to share, and finding time to work on our Example. But we also strongly believe that sharing your work and getting (and giving) feedback will help move the field forward and will result in better, more effective learning games. To make something truly innovative we need to share our work and engage other people in order to integrate their ideas.

WEx creates a community of practice and facilitates sharing our work while it's in-progress, so we aren't working in isolation. One way to engage people in the progress of your project is through an Example's updates, which work just like blog posts (See Figure 2). You can engage with the community by sharing what you're working on and how your idea is evolving, posting about major milestones, or asking when you need advice, feedback or expertise.

Roadblock 2: We Forget About The Big Picture

This roadblock is related to working in isolation, but it refers more to our process and how we relate our work to outside influences that might impact it. We often get bogged down with the details of our work and forget to consider the bigger picture. Whether you're doing research, designing a game or creating a curriculum, the success of your work can be affected by asking questions like:

- Is there applicable research I should take into consideration?
- What are the relevant industry or policy trends that will affect my work?
- Is there similar work happening already? And if so, how is my work different?
- Who do I want to be impacted by my work? What can I do to make sure it reaches them?

Beginning your process with this 'discovery' or research phase means that your work and decisions moving forward will be well-informed. Continuing to ask those questions throughout your process helps ensure that your work will reach its goals and its audience. If you're not asking these questions, how can you be sure that you're making something that will be new and something that people really need?

In WEx, the "phases" section of an Example helps you document your designs and iterations, but it also helps to keep you focused on the big picture. The questions in Seed, Sprout, and Bloom (see Figure 3) are derived from best practices from design and business to help you reflect on your process. All ideas start as seeds, continuing to develop as they sprout, grow, and eventually bloom into fully realized ideas and solutions. Seed helps you lay out your vision, the problem you're trying to solve and why it's important. Sprout has you describe how you're implementing your ideas and how they are evolving. And Bloom helps you reflect on your process, what you've learned, and your plan moving forward. All three phases help you to stay focused on the big picture, so you don't lose track of the "how" and "why" that are so important for creating designs and research that will positively impact learners.

Roadblock 3: Research, Design and Practice Are Disconnected

The third problem that WEx is designed to address is the disconnection between research, design and practice. Working with people in other disciplines is challenging. We have different ways of communicating and getting things done and unique vocabularies. It takes extra time and effort to coordinate cross-disciplinary collaborations. We also have to find people that can contribute to our projects, which means doing research and outreach to (most likely) strangers. As a result, we often don't make an effort to work with experts in other disciplines.

The WEx team has made a conscious effort to have a very multidisciplinary design process and it's amazing how we can get stuck on the littlest things. For example, our developer and director kept talking about 'development' and it was clear that even though they both thought they understood each other, they were totally missing the boat. It came down to defining what we meant by the word 'development' so we could understand each other and move forward.

WEx might not be able to help you directly with the messy personal stuff, but it can help you find people in other disciplines. Our community is made up of a huge cross section of this field—designers, researchers, educators and everything in between. You can browse or search people and Examples on the site to find the expertise you're looking for. There's also a recommendation engine that recommends people and projects that you might find interesting. The engine uses the tags that you put in your profile and your Examples to connect you with people who are doing work that might be interesting to you. The more active you are on the site, the better the recommendations will be. You can access the recommendation engine by browsing by "most recommended" or on the home page by clicking on the "stuff you'll like" button.

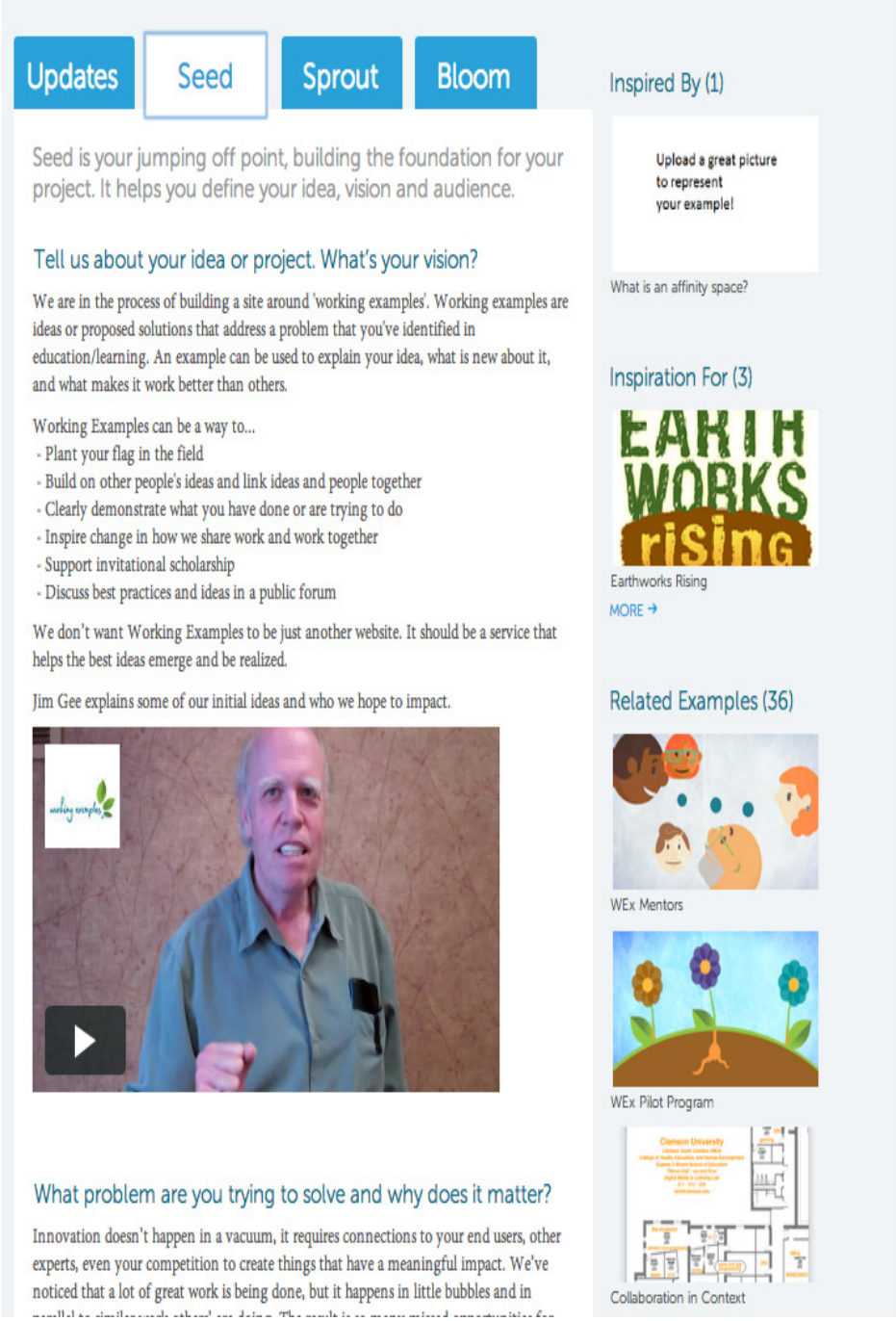

Figure 3: WEx Example Seed Section.

Roadblock 4: Academic Publishing Is Slow, Expensive and Restrictive

In addition, WEx attempts to address some of the challenges of academic publishing. Academic publishing is slow, inaccessible for non-academic audiences, biased toward the discussion of only successful results (discussion of failure is rare), and problematic for showing non-text-based work, such as video games (Jose, 2012; Nielsen, 2011); making important research difficult to apply to practice. Entire academic disciplines are turning to open access models to disseminate their work (Suber, 2012; arXiv.org, 2013).

WEx is an example of green open access: an open repository allowing you to show your work at any stage of development, to any degree that you are comfortable, and invite the larger community to collaborate as you wish. Through posting Examples and interacting on the site, we hope to collectively impact our world and shape the future of education and learning.

What WEx Can Do For You

WEx is an example of a solution to these four problems. It creates a diverse community of practice so you aren't working in isolation. It can help you think through process so you don't forget about the big picture. It allows us to learn from each other, so we can better connect research, practice and design. It's an open access platform that can serve as an alternative medium for sharing the important ideas we have and work we do.

But for all these things to happen we need *you* to engage and make this community what you want it to be. It won't work without you. *You* can change how we share our work and collaborate. Start by creating a profile. Be intentional, share your work, reflect on your process and start some conversations!

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