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It's 'game on' at Laurier Game Design program's new BGNlab

BRANTFORD – Professor Scott Nicholson of Wilfrid Laurier University has a clear goal for his students: to change the world, one game at a time. Nicholson is leading the university's new Game Design and Development program, which debuted this year at the Brantford campus.

On Friday, Nov. 20 at 3 p.m., Nicholson and others will celebrate the official opening of The Brantford Games Network Lab – known as the BGNlab (pronounced 'begin lab') – located on the main floor of Grand River Hall. The goal of the BGNlab is to spark engagement and collaboration between Laurier students, community organizations and local game enthusiasts to develop made-in-Brantford solutions to improve lives through games and play.

Nicholson studies gameful design – the application of game-playing elements to other areas of activity – and how these concepts can be leveraged in learning environments to make a difference. His students will learn how to craft games that create player experiences and develop a fundamental understanding of how to motivate people to be engaged. The skills students will gain in this program will not only be valuable to the entertainment industry, but also applicable to educational and training institutions, museums and other places of informal learning and marketing and HR departments within corporations.

Typically, gaming programs have taken one of three approaches: there are the computer science and engineering programs that teach students the steps to make a digital game; there is the Game Studies approach within the humanities, which focuses on studying the concepts around gaming and society; and finally there is the artistic approach, where students learn animation and study the artistry of games. Laurier's program offers a little bit of each of these approaches to prepare students to manage projects and lead teams of game creators, but primarily seeks to discover what motivates people to interact and engage in all types of games, not just digital ones.

The initial concept and development of the program were led by Kathryn Carter, Laurier's acting associate vice president of Teaching and Learning. The program comes out of the Faculty of Human and Social Sciences with a user-based approach to game design education. There's currently nothing comparable being offered in Ontario.

"What we're offering is really a motivation degree," said Nicholson. "We don't put the technology or art first. We're looking at the experience a designer is creating for the player. We don't like to say one game type is better; we look at how we want to affect the player with the game. We want our students to develop a toolkit of digital, tabletop, and live-action game mechanisms upon which to draw when designing games to change the world."

Laurier's program is offered in partnership with Conestoga College. Conestoga components will provide students with the technical skills required to understand how digital games are put together. The degree is also unique in that students are qualified to sit for a project management certificate exam so that they can lead game design projects in the real world.

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"The industry really needs people who understand how to make a game from start to finish," said Lauren Eisler, acting dean of the Faculty of Human and Social Sciences. "Students will learn how to manage that process, put together a team and meet deadlines. This program gives you skills you can take anywhere."

One of the most common assumptions people have about game design is that it's simply about playing video games or creating recreational games. Nicholson sees games as a way accomplish something; games are about stories, character development, empowerment and connecting with other people.

Those elements of connectivity and empowerment will be a major component of study for Game Design and Development students in their fourth year. The plan is to partner students with local organizations to leverage their learning about motivating players to develop a game that solves a problem or addresses a challenge. Students will work in conjunction with Laurier's LaunchPad to connect and collaborate with local commercial, industrial, academic, cultural or social organizations.

"The goal is to help Laurier students identify their own strengths and passions and combine them with the art and craft of game design, in order to do something that will change the world," said Nicholson.

More information on the Game Design and Development program is available on the Laurier [website](#).