



IMGD Creates Games for Change

WPI students, faculty present at prestigious gaming festival in New York City

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Games have a reputation of not being much more than a fun way to pass the time. Like other forms of media, though, in addition to providing entertainment, games can play an important role in bringing awareness to societal issues.

"The impact of games has always been profound," [Interactive Media & Game Development](#) professor [Lee Sheldon](#) says, "from how we mammals learn survival skills as children to games that educate, games that heal, games that tell vivid stories that move us emotionally, and, yes, even games with no other thought on their minds than entertaining us, to free us from the cares of the world, if even for a short while."



Lee Sheldon

In keeping with that statement, this year's [Games for Change Festival](#) in New York City focused on three different game tracks: neurogaming and health, civics and social impact, and games for learning. As a whole, the organization's mission is to "empower game creators and social innovators to drive real-world impact through games."

That mission made it the perfect place for Sheldon and two of his students to showcase their work from his "Social Issues in Interactive Media & Games" class held this past C-Term.

"The festival is very focused on academics and game developers," Sheldon says. "I wanted to focus on students, to give them a chance to show their work on a global stage, and to realize their work is not only excellent, but important to others, as well."

Natalie Bloniarz '20 and Kate Olguin '20 attended the festival with Sheldon to showcase the board games their teams created during the class. Bloniarz and her teammates, Leo Bunyea and Brian Rubenstein, designed "Gotta Go," a game where players are faced with hunting for a gender-neutral bathroom in North Carolina before their bladders explode; Olguin, Aidan Buffum, and Shiyi Liu created "Dollar Domination," in which players face economic inequality as the amount of money they have during the game differs greatly from player to player.

"Gotta Go" and "Dollar Domination" are two of 10 games that were created as part of Sheldon's class, which will be held again this coming C-Term. The class began with Sheldon asking the students which social issues were most important to them (he received 90 ideas with very few duplications); the issues were narrowed to 10 by the students, who then divided into groups of three to design 10 analog (non-digital) games addressing those issues.



Bloniarz and Olguin explain their games to Games for Change attendees

The class was made up of students from different class levels, majors, gender identities, political affiliations, races, cultures, and income levels. While focusing such a diverse group on hot-button social issues might cause rifts between classmates, Sheldon says that wasn't the case here.

"Participate with civility and an abiding appreciation for the power of words. Respect others, even those who hold opposing views," he included in his syllabus—something that, although discussions became spirited during class, he says the students ultimately adhered to.

"This class restored my faith in the ability of people of all kinds and philosophies to work together," he says.

Sheldon pitched the idea of giving a talk about the analog games his students created for the class to the festival, and it was accepted as a five-minute lightning talk. Although this is Sheldon's first time at the New York City festival, he has been a speaker at Games for Change Europe in 2011, 2014, and 2016. The New York festival provides a broad introduction to a wide array of topics while the European festival is more focused on fewer—or even single—topics and solutions.

In a world that tends to focus on the "video" prefix of most games, the students' work and Sheldon's talk reminded festival attendees that analog games can be powerful forces for change as well.

- By Allison Racicot