

From Plato's Republic to Quest Atlantis: The Role of the Philosopher-King¹

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Abstract

In this paper, we present a reflective account of our experience in developing a play space for learning that sits at the intersection of education, entertainment, and our social. We use Plato's *Republic* as backdrop to understand the struggles and opportunities of designing and supporting a globally-distributed, multi-user virtual environment to facilitate the learning of thousands of children ages nine to thirteen. This environment allows us to better understand the tensions involved in sharing power, facilitating distributed ownership, supporting voice, insinuating norms, and the assigning of roles and responsibilities within the confines of a monitored social environment designed to support learning. We (designers, teachers, and Questers alike) have faced implicit and explicit opportunities to learn about and experiment with social power in a context that is relatively safe, instructive, forgiving of mistakes, and capable of fast adaptation when changes are needed. Here, we provide an account that both advocates for and problematizes play spaces for education, sharing hope and providing empirical grounding to what are all too often unsubstantiated claims or highly theoretical aspirations.

Setting the Stage: The Value of

Play

Socrates: *Can you name
any life that despises
political rule besides that of
the true philosopher?*

Glaucon: *No, by god, I
can't.*

Socrates: *But surely it is
those who are not lovers of
ruling who must rule, for if
they don't, the lovers of it,
who are rivals, will fight
over it.*

Plato, *The Republic*,

521b

Educational discussions frequently center on the learner, the desired outcomes, and those conceptual and physical tools that can support the learner's obtainment of these outcomes. Educational innovations, a core focus of this paper, involve the development of particular tools and theories that can more readily or meaningfully facilitate this obtainment process (Barab, Barnett, Yamagata-Lynch, Squire, & Keating, 2002). However, activity theorists have taught us that the obtainment of any object, in addition to being mediated by the use of (conceptual and physical) tools, also occurs in the larger context of a community with its norms, rules, and division of labor (Engeström, 1987, 1999). Instead of being

treated as a functional part of the learning context, norms, rules and even division of labor are seen as implementation challenges that need to be managed by the teacher so that they do not hinder the learning of the particular content. Context, while important to learning, is not the direct focus of learning, which is targeted towards the acquisition of particular content. However, when one switches from an acquisition metaphor of leaning to a participatory metaphor then context and its integral elements become integral to the learning that occurs.

In our work, rather than treating context as something to be "blackboxed" so that the true content learning can occur, context is problematized and laid open for our understanding and the community's negotiation. In the Quest Atlantis Project, Children and teachers from all over the world and with different interests, beliefs, values, and rules for conduct are required to negotiate differences and debate issues in a playful context that supports learning. While educators have long known that context matters for learning (Dewey, 1938), less often discussed is the process and the challenges that emerge when working to establish a context that is collaboratively owned, emergent, and socially constructed. We, as designers of a multi-user, virtual environment to support learning, have had to struggle with our beliefs around local ownership, our commitment to empowerment, our interest in supporting play, and our responsibility as caretakers who want to distribute power. In this essay, it is not our goal to offer prescriptive steps, but to share our experiences in a manner that illuminates these struggles and opportunities and that will prove useful to others engaged in similar work. It is our belief that if educators can share power with children in playful contexts in which they are motivated to participate, then children can more readily learn to be meaningful agents in defining their own life worlds both within and outside of schools. While local ownership, empowerment, play/learning environments, and distributed power seem reasonable in theory, realities of implementation bring to the forefront tensions involved in sharing power, facilitating distributed ownership, supporting voice, insinuating norms, and the assigning of roles and

responsibilities within the confines of a monitored social environment.

While multi-user, virtual environments may be a new phenomenon, the tensions that we have confronted are those that have engaged rulers, leaders, and political philosophers for millennia. For example, a core debate posed by Plato in *The Republic* related to the question of who would rule the ideal state: philosophers or Kings. While perhaps biased, Plato's dialogue captures a belief that it would be better done by philosophers, who might themselves resist this very role, burdened as it is with its temptations, luxuries, and its burdens. In this age-old vision, we have found some parallel and guidance in our own experiences. It is important to note, however, that we do not accept or espouse Plato's vision in its entirety. While we do not doubt that Plato's ideas were indeed revolutionary and idealistic within his own contemporary context, many aspects of his Republic stand counter to our goals and ideals. For example, we do not consider ourselves idealists in quite the sense associated with Plato; nor do we see ourselves as philosophers who debate from the "ivory tower" about what is right for the rest of the world; and we especially do not agree with the hierarchical class structures that were so prevalent in his day. However, in a search of models and insights by which to understand the challenges associated with designing for and maintaining our "virtual" world, we have learned much from the debates between Socrates and Glaucon. The style of dialogue and presentation through which Plato presented his "lessons" with respect to the complexity of decisions associated with maintaining a just society, has proven extremely illuminative to us in our efforts to support member participation.

Our story, however, does not situate us in the idealistic world for which Plato planned in *The Republic*, nor does it occur in the typically recognizable world of day-in-day-out "real" life. Instead, our story begins in the virtual world that we refer to as Quest Atlantis—an online role-playing environment designed to immerse children, ages 9-13, in educational tasks. With respect to this role-playing environment, also known as a virtual world, we will briefly drop in on a synchronous "chat" discussion among three elementary students:

04/12/2003 7:19:29 PM Hula (Sean C.)
were gunna find you man and...
 04/12/2003 7:20:06 PM Skippy (Thomas F.)
lets beat him up
 04/12/2003 10:37:33 PM Skippy (Thomas F.)
hey you homo
 ... [later in the dialogue]
 04/12/2003 10:39:17 PM salledan (Ethan S.)
the people at iu monitor this stuff
 04/12/2003 10:39:45 PM Lori (Lori T.)
yeah and ur teachers see thes wholllee thang
 04/12/2003 10:40:12 PM Skippy (Thomas F.)
so
 04/12/2003 10:41:00 PM Skippy (Thomas F.)
i got busted by a austrailian teacher earlier for me, Hula, Hunter, and Sarah for beating him up

But, we jump ahead of ourselves. To understand this dialogue and our challenges more generally, it is important to contextualize this work in terms of a theoretical frame. We view the arguments of the Russian psychologist, Lev Vygotsky (1978), as providing a useful entry point to understand our Quest Atlantis project. In terms of Vygotsky's work more generally, the major theme was that social interaction plays a fundamental role in the development of cognition and that social relations constitute the human essence. Related to this belief is the idea that through social interaction with others the learner can expand into his or her zone of proximal development (ZPD); ZPD refers to the range of accomplishment that can be reached with social support as compared to acting alone. ZPD and this process of social and material "scaffolding" were core tenets underlying Vygotsky's life works.

Vygotsky's commitment to social interaction, his belief that action is "mediated and cannot be separated from the milieu in which it is carried out" (Wertsch, 1991. p. 18), and his related position that a core goal of instruction is to use scaffolding so as to expand the learner's ZPD are fundamental components of his work that have been integrated into the thinking and work of many educators. Less commonly discussed in the general education journals is his claim regarding the power of dramatic play. Vygotsky (1933/1978) argued that "the influence of play on a child's development is enormous...it is a novel form of

behavior liberating the child from constraints” (p. 94-95). It allows the child to engage in forms of communication, in rule structures, and in understandings that are unreachable in more explicit contexts, helping the child to realize tendencies and desires and to engage meanings that cannot be indulged in any other way. It is through acting in these fantasy worlds that a child can try on actions and engage behaviors even before she appreciates the meanings associated with these actions. Said simply, while engaged in play, a child can function “a head above himself” (Vygotsky, 1933/1978, p. 74).

It is clear that Vygotsky accorded dramatic play a special place in the development of young children, with his colleagues referring to it as a “leading activity” in the child’s development (Cole, 1996; Leont’ev, 1974; Vygotsky, 1997). Play as an activity of learning provides “an optimal context for the emergence and continued growth of the most important cognitive and social processes of young children or their ‘developmental accomplishments’” (Leong, Bodrova, Hensen, & Henninger, 1999). This understanding and sentiment is echoed by the Association for Childhood Education International (ACEI), who states in their position statement regarding play that “play--a dynamic, active, and constructive behavior--is an essential and integral part of all children's healthy growth, development, and learning across all ages, domains, and cultures” (Isenberg & Quisenberry, 2002). Play can be thought of as a scaffolding activity that expands the children’s ZPD, engaging them in issues and debates that are not addressed directly through participation in society or even through the normal curriculum of schools. While what constitutes play is not simply defined, many researchers describe play as having the following aspects: 1) intrinsically motivated and self-initiated, 2) non-literal and pleasurable, 3) process oriented, 4) governed by rules, and 4) exploratory and active (Fromberg, 1998, 2002; Wardle, 1987).

For Vygotsky, and we would argue, for the actors in Quest Atlantis, play is not simply an imaginary activity somehow distinct from the “real world.” Nor is play an unrestricted, “free” activity. Instead, play offers a context that is punctuated with constraints of all kinds. Significantly, the context of play makes the engagement and adherence to these constraints desirable, with

children being extremely willing and motivated to operate within as well as assist in creating these rules. In reference to the back-story (myth) of Quest Atlantis, one student stated, “what we do is extremely important because it helps the Council [of Atlantis] fix the arch that Mara and Nakal [our story’s misguided kings] destroyed.” Another student stated, “On Atlantis they don’t have TVs,” and still another student stated that, “the Council has to be careful that Mara and Nakal don’t figure out what they are up to because they are not supposed to be using the OTAK [the 3-D environment] to talk with us.” These sentences illuminate children’s willingness to engage the fictional world of Quest Atlantis and their beliefs that this world has a history, cultural norms, and participant structures. While Quest Atlantis is being used by children in both formal school contexts as well as after-school environments, the data in this paper is taken primarily from children aged 10-12 participating as members of an elementary classroom context. In these contexts, Quest Atlantis is usually introduced by the classroom teacher as a computer environment for learning and children are given time to work on the embedded educational activities as well as to chat and interact with others through virtual avatars—virtual place holders that represent individual users in the three-dimensional environment.

Further, although the intimidating comments made by Hula and Skippy above do not appear as an obvious example, through play children can develop self-regulated behaviors and learn about what is and what is not appropriate. In fact, Ethan and Lori (other student “Questers”), who tried to curtail the rude commenting of Hula and Skippy, had both been previously banned from the system because of inappropriate behavior. However, after writing apologies, “working” as chat rooms monitors, and demonstrating a change in their behavior, these Questers have become role models in the chat space. Lori’s teacher commented, “I even see changes in the classroom where she is so much more helpful to other students.” In an interview with Lori, she said:

I think I have changed in that I am a lot more helpful both in QA and

out. I really try to correct others when they don't use the rules.

What she means by “the rules” is the list of appropriate and inappropriate chat behaviors that was developed by the team and several Questers immediately after a series of bullying, “flaming,” and bad language incidents occurred in the chat space.

A confession: As the founders of Quest Atlantis, we really envisioned ourselves as activists – philosophers as researchers, engendering voice and power for kids. However, in that quest to do “good” in the world, we have found ourselves in the uncomfortable position of playing both “king” and “philosopher.” As the creators and ultimate controllers of our virtual state, we have discovered that we can distribute, but cannot relinquish our power – it is technically, professionally, and socially inherent in our research/pedagogical practices. As we have encountered questions of discipline and punishment, we have faced classic questions of classroom management, as well as classical questions of political philosophy. Further, in our roles as researcher/developers, we have taken on the task of balancing our centralized power with optional involvement, and ultimate say-so, of our teachers, administrators, and even students. As activists, we have been excited by the possibility of shaking up classroom contexts and offering new modes of expression to students. At the same time, our participants have rightfully demanded a “safe” environment in which to explore. Safety has come to represent both a goal and a struggle, at times referring to appropriate language use, other times to amiable exchanges, and still others to ensure that children’s sense of agency, power, and joy are not undermined. In this process, interesting questions have emerged: are we gaining safety at the cost of personal expression? Whose values are upheld in an internationally-shared space when even participants within the same classroom have contrasting views? In the attempt to negotiate a safe environment for hundreds of kids in five different countries, we have had to monitor behaviors and even constrain voice so that all may benefit. This globally distributed context makes the normal struggles associated with classroom management (Fromberg & Driscoll, 1985; Glickman & Wolfgang, 1986) more pronounced.

Our commitment to local empowerment and personal agency further complicates these struggles. We have experienced that, as one enters the real world and leaves the philosophers’ world of ideals, things get messy. Our idealistic view necessarily alters and becomes a rough “reality” in which we hope to maintain some reflection of our hopes. It is in this world that we have deliberately stepped and that we have been working for almost two years. It is this world and its inherent struggles that we share in this account.

Enter the Philosopher: A Utopian World

Many years ago, we were wandering the virtual countryside of Haverstgain¹, an online role-playing game inhabited by tens of thousands of users each day, looking for treasure to loot and monsters to destroy. We thought about how valuable it could be if there were play spaces like this that were engaging, but that also involved their citizens in growing and learning. . . not simply killing. We hoped to develop a play space that many children would find compelling, interesting, challenging, which at the same time immersed them in an imaginary world that would push them to reflect on and even participate in the “real world.” Further, we wanted it to be deemed valuable to teachers who were accountable for covering particular curricula and addressing specific standards. In one teacher’s words, “What I love about QA is it allows me to integrate the same content I would in my classroom but it does so in a context that is fun for the students ... so they want to learn.” It was toward these goals and with an idealist notion of creating a Utopian society for kids that Quest Atlantis was born. There are many online role-playing games, the big three -- EverQuest, Asheron’s Call, and Ultima Online -- were attracting hundreds of thousands of participants each day. We even witnessed the sale of mythical items that granted one power in these virtual worlds for upwards of US \$10,000 on e-Bay. These environments, referred to as multi-

¹ Haverstgain was the name of a virtual village in the popular Asheron’s Call, a multi-user virtual environment developed by Microsoft (<http://www.asheronscall.com>).

user virtual environments (MUVES), drew on a foundation of work on computer interfaces as theatre (Laurel, 1991), the representation of the self in virtual settings (Turtle, 1994, 1995), the design of educational simulation environments (Orlansky & Thorpe, 1991), the design of shared virtual environments for entertainment (Morningstar & Farmer, 1991), the possibility for interactively unfolding narrative (Murray, 1997), and on role-playing games more generally (Koster, 2000).

A core component of many of these MUVES in general, and of role-playing games in particular, is that the user assumes a role (e.g., knight, wizard, animal) within the game context. This role and the character's attributes persist from one session to the next and are saved within the user's avatar, which serves as a virtual placeholder symbolizing the user's identity in the virtual space and allows the user to move about and interact with the environment (Damar, 1997; Poole, 2000). The avatar develops a customized look, a status, and a character as it interacts with the avatars of other members, allowing the individual to experiment with different aspects of his or her identity (Bruckman, 1998; Donath, 1999; Turtle, 1994). While we found many online role-playing games, we discovered almost none that had an explicit educational focus and none that also had a social commitment of making the world a better place. This recognition inspired our first steps toward Quest Atlantis and the first challenge in developing such an environment lies in creating a suitable back-story (myth) that engages the participant in the imaginary world—that is, creating an engaging context for dramatic play. We had the added challenge of tasking ourselves with designing such a context that students would also see as having relevance to their everyday worlds. We wanted success to be based on real-world participation and not simply virtual activity, creating a hybrid context that was both online and offline and very different than most gaming and learning contexts to which children are exposed.

Toward this end, our team worked with parents, teachers, and children to create a legend in which the people of the mythical world of Atlantis are facing an impending catastrophe. In spite of their technological development, their world is undergoing moral, social, and environmental decay. In an effort to save Atlantis, a group of young people formed a secret Council to seek

knowledge and wisdom. The Council developed the "OTAK," a virtual portal through which Atlantians can communicate with the children of Earth. By engaging in Quests, children on Earth interact with real people, address real issues in their world, and report the lessons learned to the Council, who then use this experience and knowledge to rebuild the destroyed Arch of Wisdom and to better Atlantis. This myth is presented to children through an animated movie, a comic book, trading cards, and in the inquiry-based tasks called Quests which are presented as if designed by a particular Council Member. It was our focus to develop a play space that integrated the important motivational aspects (supporting a sense of challenge, curiosity, control, and fantasy) discussed by Lepper and Malone (1995) and adopted by game designers, while at the same time remaining grounded in pedagogy and tied to our evolving social commitments and to the children's embodied worlds.

It was out of these goals and two years of collaboration that the Quest Atlantis project and associated software were born. When the QA software first opens, Questers are presented with a split screen in the interface window: on the left is the 3-D environment through which Questers can explore, chat with others, and find Quests; on the right is a side-browser, opening pages to support the QA experience (see Figure 1). Teachers are responsible for choosing what Quests their students will see, for reviewing the Quests, for communicating the norms in the space, for choosing which of the various aspects of QA will be introduced to the children, and for providing a gate-keeping function so as to increase the likelihood of a safe and productive environment. We have traveled around the world and presented our project in different countries and currently have approximately 2000 registered members with our focus on supporting the teaching and learning of children aged 9-13. When we have presented QA to new groups, we do not present it as a game, or as simply a curriculum, or even as a value-based project, but instead describe it as sitting at the intersection of education, entertainment, and our social commitments (Barab, Thomas, Dodge, Carteaux, & Tuzun, in press). While QA is educational in nature, it is unlike most curricular

activities to which children are accustomed. We have integrated elements used by the entertainment companies to develop engaging products—establishing a sense of challenge, curiosity, control, and imagination (Cordova & Lepper, 1996; Koster, 2000).

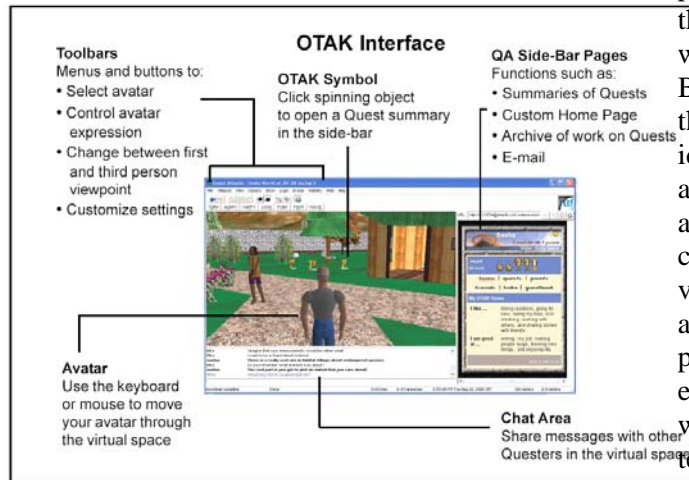


Figure 1. A Screenshot from Quest Atlantis, showing a scene from a village on the left and the homepage for a student on the right.

While clearly we have particular pedagogical and social commitments that we have worked to instill in QA, an important aspect of QA is that it is “flexibly adaptive” (Schwartz, Lin, Brophy, & Bransford, 1999). Our goal is to develop what Ball and Cohen (1996) referred to as “educative curricula” in which we have embedded our own commitments, at the same time that there is mutual adaptability. This is in part based on our idealistic belief that that curricular development should be viewed as a participatory process that continually evolves as researcher-designers and teacher-implementers interact. Barab and Luehmann (2003) argued that “A core challenge for designers is to package their curricular innovations in terms of activity sets with support for multiple customizable modules of implementation as opposed to only one project that contains multiple lesson plans.” Such a flexibly adaptive design allows the teachers who know their classrooms best to modify the curriculum to meet local classroom conditions, while at the same time seamlessly assisting teachers with diverse backgrounds and needs in a consideration of reform-minded practices and advanced pedagogical strategies. Even in this benign and potentially

“just” perspective, one can see the arrogance of the researcher in assuming that we know which reform-minded practices and advanced pedagogical strategies are needed by the teacher.

In fact, when we wrote the National Science Foundation grant that has supported this project, it was in part based on the assumption that there was much informed understanding of what constituted good learning (see Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000 for an overview) and that we needed to figure out how to get these ideas in the hands of teachers. While we can argue that these are research-based and that we at the university are in a special place to comprehend and impart policies that will be of value to teachers, there possibly is an inherent arrogance in this stance. Certainly, there are practical limitations to our ability to genuinely engage full participation and interaction. It would be wonderful to engage each student and teacher individually to ensure that they have individual and collective voice, but in our particular attempt to accomplish these broad goals we find ourselves working with thousands of students and dozens of teachers located all over the world. We are not simply participants, but are also designers and have taken on the challenge of developing a play space that will educate others who might be out of our reach otherwise. In the gaming business, this role is affectionately referred to as the “god” of the space. In our defense, the evolution of the project has been collaborative, ongoing, and participatory (Barab et al., 2002). Its design and implementation is more consistent with the metaphor of a bazaar than a cathedral (Raymond, 1999). Teachers can customize many aspects of their implementation and serve as guardians of their own classroom or after-school center. We can continually work to hand over power, to stimulate local customization, and to share ownership of decision making. However, this can also mean engaging and, at times, supporting adaptation that potentially undermines some of our commitments—what Brown and Campione (1996) referred to as “lethal mutations.” As just one example, the addition of an online rubric to facilitate the reviewing of Quests actually undermined the level and amount of qualitative feedback that one teacher provided her students in that what

once was 2-3 paragraphs of feedback became an assigned number.

Regardless of these challenges, six months after roll-out we consider the project quite successful. We are getting more requests for participation than we can support given the beta state of the software. Children at elementary schools and after-school centers have completed thousands of the academic Quests, many of which were completed at home in their free time and/or were not assigned by their teachers. We have collected data with pre- and post-tests, documenting learning gains in the content areas of science, language arts, and social studies and have witnessed incredible amounts of enthusiasm on the part of students and teachers. We also have interviewed children and collected questionnaire data on where they rank QA in terms of the dimensions of playing, helping, learning, and working (Barab, Thomas, Dodge, Carteaux, & Tuzun, in press). While some activities might have scored high on one particular dimension, QA

3:43:15 PM missy (Missy B) who are u
 3:43:19 PM andrew (Thomas B) Me
 3:43:21 PM Kanini (Julie A) Me?
 3:43:22 PM missy (Missy B) no
 3:43:24 PM missy (Missy B) YEAHh
 3:43:31 PM andrew (Thomas B) she means you
 3:43:33 PM Kanini (Julie A) I'm from Denmark..
 3:43:45 PM missy (Missy B) itsnt it like night time
 theer
 3:44:05 PM andrew (Thomas B) is it dark?
 3:44:05 PM Kanini (Julie A) It's 21:47
 3:44:12 PM andrew (Thomas B) What?
 3:44:17 PM andrew (Thomas B) oh
 3:44:17 PM missy (Missy B) thats arny time
 3:44:20 PM missy (Missy B) army
 3:44:22 PM andrew (Thomas B) i no
 3:44:27 PM Kanini (Julie A) Huh?
 3:44:31 PM missy (Missy B) nevermind
 3:44:37 PM Kanini (Julie A) KaY..
 3:44:58 PM Kanini (Julie A) is it 9:47?
 3:44:58 PM Kanini (Julie A) How old are U?
 3:45:03 PM missy (Missy B) io am going to ocean
 wolrd by
 3:45:09 PM andrew (Thomas B) she's 11
 3:45:09 PM Kanini (Julie A) By
 3:45:17 PM Kanini (Julie A) kay
 3:45:18 PM andrew (Thomas B) by
 3:45:22 PM missy (Missy B) i am 11 my name is
 Missy and i am a girl
 3:45:44 PM OTAK (BOT) < borden JUST
 ENTERED THE WORLD >
 3:45:48 PM andrew (Thomas B) yo

scored significantly higher on the sum of all four dimensions than any other activity in which the students engage (e.g., non-QA school work, playing with friends, taking out the trash, etc.). The fact that children see QA as playing even though they are doing school work and rated it almost as highly on this dimensions as playing video games is particularly interesting given that a significant amount of QA activity involves doing academic work that directly maps to academic standards. However, interviews with children suggest that the narrative context turns even the "academic" activities into more of a play activity. Additionally, we are seeing changing attitudes with surveys revealing higher academic motivation, technology efficacy, character empathy, and subjective judgments about how much overlap there is between school activities and their lives outside of school. Many students go home and literally run off the busses to log in and collaborate with other Questers from around the world.

3:45:48 PM missy (Missy B) Julie!!
 3:45:51 PM Kanini (Anne F) hey
 3:45:53 PM andrew (Thomas B) Juli
 3:45:53 PM borden (Julie A) hello?
 3:46:00 PM borden (Julie A) hi
 3:46:03 PM missy (Missy B) travis its Juli
 3:46:10 PM andrew (Thomas B) i no
 3:46:14 PM missy (Missy B) u said Juli
 3:46:16 PM borden (Julie F) kanini?
 3:46:20 PM andrew (Thomas B) so..
 3:46:20 PM Kanini (Julie A) Yeah..
 3:46:23 PM andrew (Thomas B) sorry
 3:46:26 PM Kanini (Anne F) I'm from Denmark..
 :)
 3:46:31 PM borden (Julie A) oh
 3:46:36 PM missy (Missy B) kanini how old are
 u
 3:46:41 PM Kanini (Anne F) 14.. :)
 3:46:43 PM borden (Julie A) whats your name?]
 3:46:52 PM Kanini (Anne F) Anne.. :)
 3:46:48 PM missy (Missy B) COOL!!
 3:46:57 PM borden (Julie F) oh, hi
 3:47:10 PM missy (Missy B) do u get on QA a
 lot??
 3:47:12 PM borden (Julie F) wana go to ocean?
 3:47:16 PM missy (Missy B) sure
 3:47:20 PM andrew (Thomas B) Is Denmark
 close to Poland?
 3:47:20 PM borden (Julie F) kk
 3:47:21 PM Kanini (Anne F) Yeah
 3:47:25 PM Kanini (Julie A) No..
 3:47:32 PM andrew (Thomas B) Oh

3:47:40 PM borden (Julie F) meet u in ocean
 3:47:47 PM missy (Missy B) u dont want to go to
 ocean wolrd anne??

3:47:49 PM Kanini (Anne F) Denmark is just
 above Germany.

Teachers have commented that this is the most useful outside activity that they have integrated into their classroom: "The kids love it and they are really learning important stuff." Another teacher commented in an email,

This has been a really positive step for ... the kids, and a GIANT LEAP for my Social Studies program! (Did somebody say that once before?) The platform Quest Atlantis is providing for kids [the opportunity] to reflect on what they learned, then look at what other kids have done, then evaluate what that means for the culture of the countries that they are considering... [it's] nothing short of awesome! Can you tell I'm enthused?!

While the connection to academic standards is one reason that teachers indicate they participate, they have universally stated that the social commitments and the engaging context have served as their primary reason for choosing Quest Atlantis over other activities. The compelling nature can be seen in the interaction that took place in the hallway of a participating elementary school and that was observed by a member of our team.

1st child: "Hey man, have you tried that new Quest Atlantis thing yet? Its pretty cool."

2nd child: "Oh yeah. I'm like on there ALL the time."

3rd child: "Yeah, me too."

2nd child: "You are not. You don't even know where the ocean is, man."

3rd child: "Yeah I do."

1st child: "Yeah, so how many points do you have?"

3rd child: "6!"

1st and 2nd children snicker a little: "Is that all, man?"

1st child: "I've got way more than that!"

However, even here in this potentially positive interaction, we can begin to see the inklings of trouble in our paradise as one student belittles another. Is a hierarchy being born? It seems that even in a Utopian world things can occur where a King, not simply a philosopher, may be needed.

Need for a King: Trouble in Paradise

An important challenge in Quest Atlantis is to remain true to our commitment to engender individual and local voice. This can be seen in some of the design choices such as avatar selection, home page customization, chat functions, students earning rights to build their own structures in the 3-D environment, and username selection—the last spurring a current controversy discussed more below. While as philosophers we have been excited and committed to local ownership and voice, we did not have to wait very long in order to see challenges to those built-in freedoms. We have quickly been forced to question our ideals in practice as our role began to shift from philosopher to King—the latter being a role that makes many of us uncomfortable.

In one particularly early instance, a female Quester in an Indiana school was accused of bullying other Questers and another of saying bad words in the chat space.

01/24/2003 4:10:06 PM jessa (Jessa T.) Bill is in here

01/24/2003 4:11:18 PM Tenna (Tisha C.) oh my goda, r u serious, Bill ???!!!!???

01/24/2003 4:11:29 PM jessa (Jessa T.) i'm not joking

01/24/2003 4:11:52 PM jessa (Jessa T.) its Bill

01/24/2003 4:12:21 PM Tenna (Tisha C.) oh my sgod!!!

01/24/2003 4:12:38 PM Bentar (Bill M.) WHO IS THIS

01/24/2003 4:12:48 PM Tenna (Tisha C.) Bill, go away

01/24/2003 4:15:02 PM Tenna (Tisha C.) Bill u r a sdork

[Jessa and Tisha run around through different worlds and the conversation goes on to other issues. They then decide to test the limits of the play space rules]

01/24/2003 4:34:50 PM Tenna (Tisha C.) hey, i dare u to say a really bad word>>>

01/24/2003 4:34:55 PM jessa (Jessa T.) kk

01/24/2003 4:34:57 PM jessa (Jessa T.) bitch
 01/24/2003 4:34:58 PM Sara (Stephanie R.) no
 01/24/2003 4:35:01 PM Sara (Stephanie R.) Jessa
 01/24/2003 4:35:10 PM Tenna (Tisha C.) oh my gosh!!
 01/24/2003 4:35:24 PM jessa (Jessa T.) it didnt kick me out
 01/24/2003 4:35:46 PM Tenna (Tisha C.) another wow!
 01/24/2003 4:35:52 PM jessa (Jessa T.) asshole
 01/24/2003 4:35:52 PM Tenna (Tisha C.) another I
 01/24/2003 4:35:54 PM Sara (Stephanie R.) if Tom [project officer] was here he would say smeting
 01/24/2003 4:37:41 PM Tenna (Tisha C.) maybe the bad word catcher has not been downloaded yet

[Then they enter a world in which Bill is in and the teasing again occurs]

01/24/2003 4:42:19 PM Tenna (Tisha C.) Bill , you dorkj
 01/24/2003 4:42:50 PM Tenna (Tisha C.) soooo...
 01/24/2003 4:43:09 PM Bentar (Bill M.) WHO CALLED ME A DORKJ
 01/24/2003 4:43:17 PM jessa (Jessa T.) Tisha
 01/24/2003 4:43:24 PM Tenna (Tisha C.) meee!
 01/24/2003 4:43:50 PM Bentar (Bill M.) IS GARY HERE
 01/24/2003 4:44:04 PM Tenna (Tisha C.) no, u dorkj
 01/24/2003 4:44:52 PM Bentar (Bill M.) STOP CALLING ME A DORKJ
 01/24/2003 4:45:31 PM Tenna (Tisha C.) Jessa, come here!!

[Jessa and Tisha then talk with some other Questers in another world. They then again run into Bill]

01/24/2003 4:56:12 PM Tenna (Tisha C.) dorkk
 01/24/2003 4:56:15 PM Bentar (Bill M.) EAT MY SHORTS
 01/24/2003 4:56:44 PM Bentar (Bill M.) Can i get on
 01/24/2003 4:56:57 PM Tenna (Tisha C.) ohh, no, there probably a tterd in there!!

01/24/2003 4:57:10 PM Tenna (Tisha C.) nooo
 01/24/2003 4:57:29 PM Bentar (Bill M.) squak
 01/24/2003 4:57:35 PM Tenna (Tisha C.) i am going to run over u!!
 01/24/2003 4:57:49 PM Tenna (Tisha C.) crash and burn!!

The teacher's initial reaction was to consider banning both female Questers from the OTAK. Our team leader took this opportunity to go out on a limb – suggesting that these kinds of incidences might be used as pedagogical, if also as disciplinary experiences. A tense moment occurred when the teacher asked our team leader in front of an entire class what he thought should happen. He did not want to undermine her firm comments already made to the student, but at the same time wanted to use this as an opportunity for growth, commenting,

It is a tough question because we live in America. My first reaction at trouble is to ban free speech. However, we live in America and one of the challenges is to help each individual be responsible with their freedom. Sometimes people are extreme and we need to remove this freedom, but sometimes it is better to help them learn to change. This is a question for judges and juries and I don't know what to do in this case.

It is also important to note that this is an inherently American perspective, a point that our international colleagues have criticized us for on more than one occasion. The teacher decided to charge the Questers with “community service” in the virtual space. Students were tasked with monitoring the chat space for other inappropriate language and to work at a “help desk,” answering questions for new users. It is important to note that this same type of “work” activity can be signed up for as a job by other students who gain points for completing the activity—points that can be traded in for QA trading cards, rulers, pads, and t-shirts as well as other items the teacher adds such as late homework permissions. Since then, the first student who bullied another Quester has become a guardian of the space, a consistent, though sometimes overbearing helper. Overall, this mini-intervention was considered a success.

Shortly following this and some other early incidences of "inappropriate behavior" related to QA, members of the research team and a small group of Questers collaborated to create "I-BURST," a loosely codified set of norms for inappropriate and appropriate behaviors for the OTAK. This conversation was led by the teacher and then codified and put in the virtual space so that it is linked to every Quester's homepage.

Just days after the implementation of I-BURST, the research team became aware of some extremely inappropriate language in the chat logs, having come from Questers---and even from a teacher's account --- in Denmark. An email, a portion of which is pasted below, was sent to both the teacher and our "buoy" in Denmark. A buoy is basically a guardian of the space who supports the registration and training of teachers in their particular region. We have buoys located in Miami, Copenhagen, Singapore, and Queensland, Australia. The Questers were identified and temporarily banned from the space with the following message sent to the teacher and buoy.

I have disabled the following users for improper language:

02/19/2003 5:59:16 AM Griddi (Amin Fatser)
suck my dick

02/19/2003 5:59:28 AM Griddi (Amin Fatser)
bitch

02/19/2003 6:00:11 AM Tarlan (Eric
Masters) fuck dick bitch shit

02/19/2003 6:38:54 AM Sterns (Noel
Sternstrøm) Fuck

Let me know if I should re-enable them.

Our main contact in Denmark replied with an insightful and constructive apology and account of his attempts to right the situation.

Let me give you a more vivid explanation about this incident. Again I am sorry about what happened because I know how hard You as designers of the QA is trying to establish a community free from abusive language and behaviour.

We are guests and users in and of QA, and we had gotten special treatment by having the opportunity of exploring the Sandbox [a special world], and we feel

that we have compromised your trust by breaching the rules of conduct in QA and the principles of I-BURST. To put you more in the picture of how this particular phenomenon occurred let me briefly tell you a bit about under the conditions we are working at this school with this class.

Vesterbro is one of the most multiethnic districts of Copenhagen, the demographic structures between the different ethnic groups in Vesterbro are not "clued" together by the feeling of us from Vesterbro have a common feeling of being Danish, rather they see themselves as Pakistanians, Turks, Serbiens, Indians or Kurds living in Denmark. Then added to this 95% of the teachers in the school have Danish ethnic background. The pupils of the class we currently are working with are truly diverse as to the ethnic origin, and as the social economical background is homogeneously lower social class. The skills and capacities of the individual pupils are as diverse as their ethnic origin. The values of the Danish primary and secondary school system are based on differentiated qualification, and the traditions of fostering individuals to work in groups rather than performing individually towards shaping citizens who will carry democracy into the future, do clash with systems of values springing from other cultures. The codex of personal conduct in the classroom in the class we are working with can at times be shocking, even to me who have worked in this district before. Namecalling and foul language is inter-woven with the identity and structure of the class. I am sure that some of these situations occur in a lot of public spaces inside school or outside schools every day in many countries, among the adolescent.

We chose to work with the Unit Rights and Responsibilities, exactly because we thought that it would

scaffold putting matters like name-calling, templating, mobbing, etc.. on the agenda, and also try to give them tools to work with discussions, mindmapping, brainstorming and other cognitive tools...

[he then discussed more of the classroom dynamics and later in the email made the following comments]

... During the de-briefing between teacher and researchers we looked at the answers of the pupils on questions about using QA, and these two both had stated that "you should not use abusive language", and "think about how you treat each other when working together with others in QA"....

... So, to make this long short explanation end, I hope and yet again excuse for any harm, disbelief or insult this experience have caused. As we expected the possibility of using the Sandbox was truly the element that caught on to those pupils finding writing about different subjects a hurdle to the promising outlook of a game-like learning tool.

It was a very tense set of meetings for our team as we debated how much we should be policing the space, with some members wanting to allow Questers and teachers to work it out within the freedoms of the space and others expressing concern that teachers, parents, and Questers might become uncomfortable using QA should we fail to constrain some of the freedoms. Would Questers and teachers at one site become fearful and disengage even as administrators on the other side of the world worked through complex disciplinary issues with their teachers and students?

About two weeks later, we also noticed cursing from some of our Australian Questers. In engaging our Australian university collaborator to contact the teacher of these students, we were made aware of a new problem: usernames. She pointed specifically to a Danish student using the name "Islam4ever." Considering her view of the contemporary world context, she saw the username as at best provocative, at worst threatening to other students. We tentatively interpret her response as at once policing our mutual realm and implicitly

defending the status of the Questers under her local oversight. In our attempts to monitor online behavior from our centralized and administrative/design position, we have begun to find ourselves in a near constant negotiation of disciplinary decisions, as well as interpersonal understandings, with our buoys, teachers, and other colleagues. Should students be disciplined by QA for the rules they break in QA? In most cases, the answer has been "yes." In our position of oversight across schools, centers, cultures, and continents, much responsibility has fallen in our hands. In most cases, local teachers have also felt the need to react to instances of cursing, bullying, etc. To what extent do we involve ourselves in those decisions?

In some cases, our intervention in those "real world" contexts has been requested, demanded, and/or rewarded. In other cases, we may have overstepped our bounds, as questions have taken on emergency status or led to interpersonal disagreements. In this case of usernames, the team leader again contacted our Danish contact—this time asking if it would be possible to change "islam4ever" to something less provocative. The Danish contact's response lucidly questioned our normative practices, even as the research team was entering into regular and lively debates about these very issues.

Very well thank you. This is a hard case I think, would we change the username of some kid who had username with Christian connotations? Catholisime4ever? Well I will ask Evan [the teacher] and the boy with this username if they could understand the issue at hand, and then change it to one less "potential" ;-) Have you inquired to why the children are scared of this username? I understand that you and the ones responsible for QA do have to take into account the world politics, and as it seems that a war will come any day, I only pray that religious beliefs like the one held by this boy, in the future not be associated with terrorism and destruction.

Unfortunately, we have had limited participation from our Danish contact since that time. Also, the notion of controlling the choice of usernames has been a very tense discussion, with our Australian counterpart suggesting it would be

important as we scaled and other members being entrenched in one side or the other. Are we giving more voice or taking it away? By constraining username choice, are we empowering children or taking away an important means of finding local voice and expressing identity? If we change the rules now, are we expressing a mistrust of our Questers? Are we pointing a finger?

In another question of username choice, one of our team members working with a local private school decided to ask a teacher to request a new username from a student who had chosen "Go_Away" as her online name. Aware of the expression/community related issues broiling at different implementation sites, the liaison reluctantly sent an email to the teacher. Here is an excerpt from that email:

. . . I think that one is going to be a problem with Alex [project principal investigator]. In general, there has been an attempt to give Questers as much freedom as possible, but also to create a friendly, "safe" environment. Every time we do something to limit a kid's expression, it's a tough decision -- but we've had to do it in order to provide for lots of different users in very different contexts. If [your school] had its own, isolated version of QA, then I'm sure we wouldn't care about a username like that. However, I'm thinking that kids and teachers at [another Indiana school], in Australia, or wherever will probably not understand or appreciate the possible subtleties of an expression like that. If it's not a problem for [your student], I'd like her to come up with a different username. I can ask or you can -- no big deal. Just wanted to provide an explanation. We hate to play the policemen, but it something that we have an obligation to do. .

We didn't hear back from this teacher for some time. Our team liaison had been at the school on the day that "Go_Away" was chosen. The choosing process was a public event with many kids picking funny or personally meaningful names. "Go_Away" was met with a comment by the teacher, but no rejection. Had we "turned off" another one of our participant contacts in rejecting a student's choice? Upon speaking with the teacher, we found out that he had in fact spoken with the student. She decided that if she had to change her username, she would prefer to be known as "Censored."

Subsequent to these two username incidences and the related debates, discussions, and flurries of emails between team members, contacts, and teachers, the research team has been faced with a more acute decision. Do we take away the ability to choose usernames and create a uniform pattern of selection? Instead of policing and making difficult, and certainly imperfect decisions as to whether an individual name is appropriate, do we simply relieve the system of that level of choice? How can we continue to judge incidences like these on a weekly basis when we have 2000 users? On the other hand, is it the right answer to begin stripping QA of its built-in freedoms? This is an issue that has truly troubled the research team, with differing solutions engaging a variety of personal philosophies in a research context demanding of both pragmatic, timely responses and weighed, shared reflection. On this particular question, months have passed. Decisions have been finalized and become unfinalized. We are still searching for the morally and technically tenable response. In many instances, we have responded quickly, sharing the emotional and intellectual burdens faced by teacher and kids in an environment over which we have practical control. While being a critical theorist and striving to understand and affect issues of power, human agency, and notions of identity is certainly laudable in theory, it proves quite challenging in practice (Carspecken, 1996; Muffoletto, 2001). Out of our constraints of time, knowledge, and ability, some of our reactions have undoubtedly been mistaken or ill-explained to our participants.

More recently, the comments by Skippy and Hula at the beginning of this paper led us again to challenge our commitment to local empowerment and voice for all. In response to their threatening expressions, the principal and teacher expressed frustration and a little shame—knowing that these comments were being seen directly by a teacher who was virtually present in Australia and indirectly by us at the university and by any other of the 2000+ members who read the chat log for that day. In response to our expressed concern over this behavior, the teacher indicated that the consequences for his words would be quite severe. Fearing that this might turn into a simply disciplinary situation

and not an educational one, the project principal investigator included the following words in his message to the teacher:

In terms of the behavior of these students, I think the important thing is that QA is designed with the hope of engaging just these types of issues. If there is some way that this can be made into a learning and growing experience while retaining a tone of seriousness that is the ultimate goal. This would treat this situation not simply as a disciplinary matter but as an opportunity to engage relevant dialogue that would eventually empower these students as growing adults. I think you are doing this and I am very grateful.

Clearly, there was a tension between wanting to empower the teacher, not wanting to appear condescending, and hoping to influence the teacher to treat this as a learning opportunity. In fact, when a member of our team later met with the principal, he reported that Skippy was required to read his comment to his mother and was then banned from the chat space. Our team member then talked with the principal and it was decided that, if the teacher agreed, the other two students whose behavior was not so extreme would simply get QA community service hours and be expected to monitor the chat space and demonstrate not only appropriate behavior, but a willingness to help others as well. The principal also commented,

This is so neat for us because we have a whole new form of disciplinary opportunity. We know that a lot of these students say this stuff all the time but if you don't see it you can do anything. Here, we have it printed out so we can actually document it and confront them.

On its face, this enthusiastic comment gives us pause for reflection. It reminds us of Foucault's analysis (1977) of Betham's Panopticon and creation of disciplinary contexts where the potential for constant surveillance "assures the automatic functioning of power" (p. 203). Do we simply conspire in the creation of a more "subtle coercion?" (p. 209). Perhaps. Few doubt that

Foucault is offering a critique of discipline and its evolution. In our experience, the historian/philosopher does more simply to describe the way things are and have been – the mechanisms in which we will inevitably be caught. His critique is couched in an ontology of social power where asymmetries are inevitable. In reaction, we have striven to make our necessary norms more explicit even as we do much to determine and refine them. Participation in QA and its various functions remains voluntary. Our Questers are not isolated. They have the opportunity to view and review recorded interactions (e.g. chat logs) in the 3D environment. Their participation, inappropriate or appropriate, assures a voice within the broader QA community. Consistent with Vygotsky's (1978) beliefs, the principal is also treating the play space as a context that allows them to better understand social norms and help students come to appreciate their interactions with these structures. To the extent that these types of experiences are treated as learning and not simply disciplinary opportunities, we view the play space as providing a valuable outlet for exploring and learning about social norms. We believe that QA has certainly provided a context for breaking norms more fully controlled in usual school environments. In this, we see an embodiment of one of the Association for Childhood Education International's ideals, that the use of play enables children's' development by "allowing the expression of unacceptable feelings in acceptable ways and 2) providing the opportunity to work through conflicting feelings" (p. 3). As such, we have come to see problematic outbursts such as those comments made by Skippy and Hula as teachable moments to be harnessed and leveraged rather than avoided and punished.

Becoming Philosopher-Kings

Mourad (2001) argues that critical theory in education "tends to reproduce itself rather than pose compelling challenges to mainstream educational theory and practices" (p. 741). Certainly, we recognize the challenges of enacting alternative, radical, or democratic practices in the classroom. Thankfully, the

challenging experiences we have faced with QA's implementation have been accompanied and offset by what we see to be tremendous gains and enthusiasm on the part of kids and teachers. For example, one teacher working with QA said to a member of our team, "even if you pulled out now you can feel good because you have made a huge difference at this school." However, it has been pointed out that actual "classroom studies of democracy frequently do not address the problems that democratic approaches can engender" (Koshewa, p. 16). We feel that speaking to these challenges is an integral part of telling QA's story. The tough moral questions we have faced have forced us to reconceptualize our roles as philosophers and activists. To make QA possible in a real-world context – to make it safe for individual expression and the building of a safe community – age-old questions of the role of education and the state have emerged as limiting and guiding forces.

Glaucon: Then do you think that those we've nurtured [philosophers] will disobey us and refuse to share the labors of the city, each in turn, while living the great part of their time with one another in the pure realm?

Plato: It isn't possible, for we'll be giving just orders to just people. Each of them will certainly go to rule as to something compulsory, . . .

Plato, *The Republic*, 520d&e

Mourad (2001) argues that "the idea that the fundamental issue of the just civil state is to find the right balance between preserving individual freedom and constraining individual threat has served as a tacit foundation within which belief and debate about educational philosophy, policy, and practice develop" (p. 753). In creating a sort of virtual state, we have faced this issue in creating and re-creating a world of play and new relationships in the "realities" built out of it. As suggested in the opening passage of this paper, though we are not "lovers of ruling," we have taken up the messy necessity of rule almost unintentionally. We are educational/cultural pedagogues and political negotiators. Like so many

caring teachers, we sit at the uncomfortable intersection of care and rule. It has become a necessary part of continuing our visions. Educators may tend to be critical of and avoidant of power. Others may so embrace the power as to be unaware of their wielding of it. We believe that wielding power is a necessary, but not sufficient requirement for managing a globally distributed learning environment.

At least in terms of Quest Atlantis, Plato has asked us to aspire to the role of philosopher-kings. One need not hang hopelessly to an idealism in order to accept the challenge of fusing these roles. Aware of the mass and confusion of messages offered to kids in our contemporary society, critical theorists such as Giroux (1983), McLaren (1997), and Lather (1998) have asserted that "the new 'educators' in the electronically wired contemporary era are those who possess the financial resources to use mass media" (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000, p. 285). While so many interests "fight" for our kids' attention, these theorists argue that the implicit challenge is to become educators in this new sense – engaging our children's tendencies toward entertaining, dramatic play – as well as to remain true to our purposes of helping children develop practical, meaningful, and life-fulfilling skills.

Plato conceptualized an ideal state led by a benevolent monarch – a philosopher first, a king second. In their famous dialogue, Socrates and Glaucon worry upon the idea that those trained to think so much of *the Good* might resist the role of active leadership – a role fraught with conflict, demanding of compromise, and often corrupting. However imperfectly, *constraining individual threat* has become a part of our imperfect, but caring practice. Outside of the *pure realm* of theory and idealization, philosophers and kings do not exist in separate roles or modes. Power, rules, ideals, and ideologies just are – they are enacted by everyone. According to Foucault, all people are "caught up in a power situation of which they themselves are the bearers" (1977, p. 201). Power relations are enacted and reinforced, even as people strive to do good, share power, and change lives for the better. We offer not so much a critique of critical theory, but an accounting

for what happens to it in action. We have worked to establish much local authority for asserting issues, while at the same time stepping in when local actions have global consequences. For example, we had an incident where students began “spamming” other students, referring to vacuous emails sent out to all QA users. At the beginning, users would reply (to all) with equally vacuous responses, but soon the messages were met with stiff consternation by other users (who actually only contributed to the spamming as they continued to reply to all with hopes of getting everyone to stop replying)—the irony was interesting.

If you want to be-mail everyone in the world that's fine but can you please COUNT ME OFF BECAUSE I AM SICK AND TIRED OF YOUR E-MAILS!!!!!!

We, through an email from an Atlantian Council member, sent out a request to have everyone stop and then we technically limited the email system so individuals could no longer send an email out to “all QA” but could send out to all people at their local school or after-school program.

Okay everyone. I really like how much the email is being used. When Kerbe and I added that function we weren't sure if Earth kids would use it much. However, this is getting a little crazy. I am learning about what you on Earth call “SPAM email.” Can you all stop responding to this email because it just goes out to everyone. Kind of crazy.

Kirbe just made it so you can't email everyone in the future. I think he is also going to erase this one so we can't just keep responding to it. Anyway, thanks for all your great information on Quests. We are starting to build back the lost knowledge and have some really cool ideas for how we will help Mara and Nakal see how this could be good for all. But I am afraid they are just getting worse. I think they may even know about the OTAK! I'll let you know as we learn more.

Time for me to go skating. Talk more soon and thanks for all your help.

Alim of Atlantis [one of the Council members]

In this way, we took responsibility for actions that had global implications, but let local teachers and

students police their domains. We hope that our Utopian visions have not so much been erased or obscured in the flickering of practice, but have become actualized in the difficult reality that we all (researchers, teachers, parents, kids) ultimately face. The hyphenation that subsequent scholars (not Plato) have installed in that conceptualized role of *philosopher-king* represents our collective discomfort with the ability to be both as one. Is it possible to embrace that discomfort as a playful process? We hope so.

By creating a virtual world, centered in the developmental importance and excitement of play/fantasy, we have allowed ourselves and our Questers the opportunity to negotiate rules and to choose roles – to discover the challenges and potentialities for growth within and across the boundaries of play and “reality.” And, we have made mistakes. As pointed out in Bateson's analysis of the complex cognitive work which comprises interactive play (1972/2000), this has become play which no longer recognizes or communicates itself as unreal. As would be familiar to anyone ever having engaged in a “play-fight” or the complexities of teasing, our experience with Quest Atlantis has begged the question “Is this play?” To be found in this question are both troublesome complexities as well as affordances for learning. In QA, the imagined boundaries of play and reality have become so confounded in each other as to realize some significant seriousness in our fantasies and some oversights of our mundane realities. In an initial response to a Quest, one angry child at an after-school center commented,

Mara destroy land because of greed. On Earth people are the same they hurt, steel or even kill people for moe. Money is what we buy stuff with. so earth is just like Atlantis.”

There were dozens of other times when other students made direct links between Atlantis and their lives, which is a core goal of the project. In terms of the rules of play, one student exclaimed to some other students making inappropriate comments, “you can't do that in QA!” Her emphasis on and interaction with the norms of our virtual environment suggested that QA rules were beginning to become both a part of the QA context as well as

a rule this child began to internalize—at least in the context of QA. Isenberg and Quisenberry (1998) argue that play provides “the rich experience children need to learn social skills; become sensitive to others’ needs and values; handle exclusion and dominance; manage their emotions; learn self-control; and share power, space, and ideas with others” (p. 3). For some Questers, the virtual space has become a testing ground for roles as leaders, enforcers, even norm breakers. Play is not a status of action or thinking that excludes people’s genuinely felt emotions or reasoning. It is exactly a state in which these experiences are often first actualized. It is a core focus of this research to blur the boundaries between the virtual and the real, facilitating students in transferring lessons learned through QA to their everyday lives. In one interview a student stated, “I think I am different not just in QA. Like, I am more helpful outside of QA as well.” Another student, commenting on a stealing incident that occurred in the class, “that is a bummer we need to break”—making allusions to the Bummer Breakers Quest in QA.

Epilogue: From Here

We have engaged a design experiment in which the focus was on empowerment, and in which we were philosophers, researchers, and designers. Consistent with other design experiments (Brown, 1992; Cobb et al, 2003), we had the joint responsibility of researching the same space in which we had the ability to alter those very interactions we were trying to understand. It was our intention to engage students in a play situation with the goal of providing them a safe place in which to reflect on difficult problems as they had fun working on serious educational issues of personal and societal significance. Critical, idealistic, and Utopian visions are so often beautiful and inspirational in thought and conversation.... and become disjointed or compromised in practice. There is an adage, “If you like politics or sausage don’t ask how they are made.” One might argue the same for a Utopian world, critical speech, or an online space such as Quest Atlantis. We hope that we have embraced this responsibility and challenge with the idealism of philosophers, but with the commitment of leaving the ivory tower or *The Republic* and entering the messy world of hosting Quest Atlantis.

In this world, struggles are reified through the back-story of the game and through the behaviors of participating children. While some may consider this simply play, our experiences show that the embedded struggles do not remain some external fantasy world for the participants. While we have created a fantasy world, it is one thriving with emergent meanings that have both meaning for the virtual environment as well as the everyday realities of the children who participate. In the words of one wise Atlantian council member, there are “Two Worlds, One Fate!”

It may have been naïve on our part, but we had little appreciation for the challenging role and responsibility that this design work would bring. We have continuously had to straddle the role of taking responsibility for making the space safe for all, while at the same time working to engender and empower participants. We have, in Plato’s terms, taken the roles of kings. This has produced a tension in that we do not want to be ethnocentric, controlling, and hegemonic. However, our world clearly needs governing, if for no other reason so that parents and teachers feel comfortable with having their kids participate in this space. Perhaps we have stretched things a bit to imagine ourselves into these lofty titles. However, we have conceived of QA as a way to facilitate dramatic play. Just as Vygotsky saw play as an integral part of the learning process, a way to expand experience into one’s ZPD and to experience and test beyond the range of everyday experience, we have attempted to design for this kind of flexibility and opportunity in Quest Atlantis. As self-proclaimed philosopher-kings, we have imagined ourselves into a role in this game. This imagining is already coming to inform decisions as researchers—not in imagining ourselves bouncing between idealized roles, but into the practical balancing act located at the philosopher and king intersection as we make crucial decisions for and with our participants. We have argued that this play space entails affordances which not only allow students to playfully explore traditional curricula, but also to try on social roles, test and create norms, and interact with each other in new, open-ended ways.

To abstract our working theories from this complex context, we offer not only a characterization of our roles as designer/teachers, but offer a structure with which to mediate, understand, and teach about power. As we have seen, power infuses our context of play. Play also informs and enriches the opportunities for distributing power and questioning traditional or context specific structures. More broadly, we have focused on play and playful environments as a way to engage students in working, learning, and socially conscious activity. However, we have come to see play as not only motivating toward these other ends, but as specially affording to the experiential embodiment of power. QA has provided the designers with the opportunity to better understand the tensions involved in sharing power, allowing for distributed ownership, supporting voice, insinuating norms, and the assigning of roles and responsibilities within the confines of a monitored social environment designed to support learning. In the process of governing and debating the OTAK, we (designers, teachers, and Questers alike) are facing implicit and explicit opportunities to learn about and experiment with social power in a context that is relatively safe, instructive, forgiving of mistakes, and capable of fast adaptation when changes are needed. At one level we might have created a technical rule (law) and a virtual robot that would police the space, automatically assigning usernames and ejecting people for improper language. However, it has been our conscious decision to expose our dialogues and avoid pretending that we know what is best. We have attempted to lay open these tensions, engaging the community in the direct experience of negotiating the struggles that are associated with freedom in community.

Unexpectedly, we have come to see the need to become playmates in this complicated milieu. The context of play has allowed us to deal with our discomfort with power by offering opportunities to try on decisions, as well as archetypal, idealized roles. It has offered us the freedom to imagine ourselves as gods, kings, philosophers – regardless of our worthiness. In QA, we live *a head above ourselves* and this helps us move forward. QA has offered opportunities to exercise power in the perspective of a multi-voiced teaching/learning/administrative/technical

community. Our options for disciplinary action, restriction, norm creation, and enforcement have expanded beyond the usual restrictions (and comforts) of the traditional classroom. QA incidences, both heart-warming and painfully shocking, have been intensely meaningful. We do not take our roles lightly. However, our roles entail freedoms which are new and exciting. In many cases, children have been given the opportunity to work through their mistakes through the play environment, by taking on helping roles, doing “community service,” and completing quests related to feelings, the complexity of rules, etc.

Our convictions toward free speech and local control have been continually confronted. We have been unable to simply theorize or even observe without taking action. Marx argued that, “the philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it” (Marx, 1945). Others have argued that we need to move beyond good words and even basic understandings to critical accounts that support change at the same time they reveal (Carspecken, 1996; Fine, 1996; Levinson, 1998). In our case, that has meant taking an active and interventionist role in the virtual space; a role that has continually involved us in dialogue that moves beyond the “play” space. However, as hypothesized by Vygotsky, this “play” space has provided a fertile breeding ground for issues of power, agency, and learning to become exposed. In terms of our emerging role as philosopher-kings, we have come to the conclusion that there is no simple formula that will tell us how to strike a balance between the dangers of becoming a governing elite and from the potential tyranny of no rule or *laissez faire*—especially when the would-be rulers are children with conflicting struggles of their own. However, we also have much hope in that we have hundreds of active participants, Questers, located all over the world, completing meaningful Quests, and for the most part interacting in beautiful ways. We are collecting (and making) compelling evidence that even those who are engaged in confrontational or what appears to be negative ways of interacting, can change overtime. We view Quest Atlantis as providing a relatively safe context for helping students to learn from these interactions. We

also have many checks and balances on our own decision-making process and do not intend to close ourselves off from those the project is intended to serve. We intend to maintain our initial visions, at the same time we embrace a questioning of how we carrying out our role. Even as Plato envisioned a perfect city, he saw the necessity that this perfection be composed of difficult role-taking. We agree with Nietzsche (1886/1973), that "to renounce false judgments would be to renounce life" (p. 17). We will exert our power inasmuch as we maintain the opportunity to engage our power and negotiations in play space we have created. That reality is our complex, unwieldy, and sometimes beautiful domain.

It is our conviction that the play space, the virtual world of QA, provides an important and necessary context for both learning academic content and for developing an appreciation of social norms, compassion, self-control, collaboration, tolerance, and for finding appropriate ways of addressing conflict or working through feelings of exclusion. The Internet and multi-user virtual environments in particular create a powerful new opportunity to link play and learning, as well as globally distributed individuals, in ways that were not possible or have been largely unsuccessful. Brenda Laurel (2001), the creator of Purple Moon software for girls, suggests that children today have fewer means of expressing agency and engaging in play than they had historically. For many children, especially those that have been weaned on videogames, their physical space for exploration and play has been reduced from several square miles to what is all too often a mere electronic screen. In our work, rather than blindly embracing video games or even simply brushing them aside, we have worked to understand and leverage the learning opportunities and challenges associated with participation in these technology-supported play spaces. Toward this end, QA sits at the intersection of entertainment, education, and our social commitments to make the world a better place. While we have created a virtual space for participation, reflection, and exploration, the learning and experience for participants is very real. In other words, rather than create an "otherworldly" education system free of relevance to the problems of the world (Postman, 1992), we "find that the value of our work is in its ability to

bring the students' work and dialogue to bear directly on the problems threatening both the fictional world of "Atlantis" and our own world" (Barab et al., in press, p. 5).

If, as Vygotsky and others have argued, play is an important and necessary part of child development, then we as educators have a moral responsibility to create scaffolded spaces where these lessons can occur. In this essay, we have illuminated some challenges and opportunities associated with creating and supporting such a space. Our reporting here is meant to provide an illuminative account that can sensitize designers and educators to the potential challenges of designing and supporting play spaces for learning. Being forced to manage this space has required us to distribute our responsibilities at the same time have needed to accept and embrace our role as stewards of the space. Supporting local empowerment and distributed power has proven more complicated in practice than we initially imagined or than is frequently communicated by critical theorists or through abstract philosophical discussion of what should occur.

It is also important to mention that we are experiencing the power of play, and learning to take a sensitive, but playful view of our power as researcher/designers. We begin to theorize the play space as an educational context that affords teachers, researchers, and designers the opportunity to reflectively embrace power roles in ways that can make use of traditional/archetypal roles in provisional, partial, experimental ways. Play spaces, especially QA, can provide practical disciplinarians and emancipatory activists alike a context for taking theories of power into flexible contexts laden with power tensions. Developing healthy norms and sharing power is challenging enough in the context of a single classroom, but the distributed nature of QA and our commitment to empower QA members only serves to exacerbate the problem of heterogeneity of norms. In this essay, we have attempted to provide an account that both advocates for and problematizes play spaces for education, sharing hope at the same time providing the necessary empirical grounding to what are all too often unsubstantiated claims or highly theoretical aspirations. It has not been our

goal to provide prescriptive solutions, but to be creative in expressing our struggles so as to illuminate the lived process of maintaining a necessarily problematic and continually negotiated environment for learning.

We believe that our commitment to not find overly-simplistic, hegemonic solutions allowed for the emergence of dynamic tensions through which individuals and the overall system are allowed to continually grow and evolve. Therefore, we did not attempt to entirely eradicate tensions but instead have tried to turn them back to the community's negotiation process. This derives from our belief that it is, in part, the inherent tension and complementarity within and among a system that provides the system with its richness and dynamism (Barab, Barnett, & Squire, 2002). As Engeström (1987) has argued, it is these tensions that drive innovation and, in the context of a community designed to support learning, that we believe drives learning. Just as we have continually learned from these issues in the context of our participation with the QA community, here we have tried to lay open these tensions to our colleagues so that we also may collaboratively reflect and learn from them. It is our hope that others will identify and find value in what we have shared, drawing links and using our experience as a resource to make sense of and improve their local contexts. Rather than any particular fact, it is this lesson that we have learned from the dialogues of Socrates and that we imperfectly share with the community.

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