Play Will Carry Us Through: On Play and Games in Higher Education Classrooms

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Abstract: Play, understood as aesthetic experience in an academic field, permits students to engage emotionally with subject matter, permits students to *feel* what they study. Play presents opportunities to imagine and learn from future, discipline-related scenarios and situations, to engage creatively with the unknown, not just play by the rules of a pre-established game. My students set up schools on new, previously uninhabited planets, and other such adventures. This way of structuring the semester is fertile ground for reimagining grading and assessment in our own, present circumstances, and lets us relate to each other with a playfulness that does not happen when writing/grading papers is at the core of course development.

Introduction: I Won't Tell You That

"But you didn't tell me that!" one of the audience members exclaimed, on the verge of upset, in the Q&A part of my conference presentation. He had just asked a question about students who could potentially be too shy to actively participate in an in-class game, and I was mentioning how I give my students plenty of options regarding participation in my play-based courses. "I didn't know that!" he continued. To be fair, I had indeed said nothing of the sort in my presentation — and it had been my choice to not do so.

This happened at an education conference where I presented about play in higher education. Specifically, I talked about how I transformed my courses into semester-long narrative games that invite students to play throughout the semester. However, more than talking to my audience, I invited them to play. In my allotted 20 minutes, I could either play, or talk about play — and I chose the former. I invited audience members to play an early version of *Playtocracy,* a game I have been developing to help faculty design courses as semester-long narrative games (Cabral, in press). Although I knew that this strategy would leave much unaddressed, it was important to me to allow participants to *feel* what it is like to play, more so than hear about play. After all, I was trying to convey the importance of play in the higher education classroom and why I find it fundamental to involve students in play.

Like Brown, "I hate to define play because it is a thing of beauty best appreciated by experiencing it. Defining play has always seemed to me like explaining a joke — analyzing it takes the joy out of it" (Brown, 2009, pp.15-16). So, that day, I decided to play. In this paper I somewhat go back to talking about play as I explain what led me to narratives games in higher education and how I contextualize these practices — but I do invite you to play *Playtocracy* alongside this reading, along with any other narrative games you develop in your own teaching and learning practices.

Learning from the Past, Reacting to the Future

When we think of a classroom in American higher-education, we often think of a group of students and a teacher working together (or not!) to expand the students' knowledge. If, as Davidson argues, "the infrastructure, curriculums, and assessment methods we have now were developed between 1860 and 1925" (Davidson, 2017, p.4), this is what many of our classrooms have looked like for a long time. Although there are many different iterations of this model,

some more progressive, others more conservative, we mostly live in predictable classrooms. These are also the classrooms we train our future teachers to teach in, even if we don't know much about the needs and characteristics of future schools and their students. In many ways, we train our teacher candidates to teach "in the past." Take grading and testing scores, for example: every time there is a low on national tests, we double down on drills, well add more math and literacy time, we reduce the arts and anything connected to living in our physical bodies — regardless of all the research that shows that that is not how true learning happens. What we do in teacher preparation classrooms has repercussions for years (decades?) to come — and yet, we often keep using models that are based on what worked (or, often, did *not* work) in the past. But thankfully, that is not always the case.

Reacting to the Past: Role-playing Games for Engaged Learning (n.d.) is an active learning pedagogy developed by Mark C. Carnes, a history professor at Columbia University's Barnard College in the late 1990s. It consists of elaborately designed role-playing games in which students embody specific character roles that are "informed by classic texts in the history of ideas" (n.d.) and through which they must persuade others of their arguments. Given that each student is assignment their role, they do need to align their arguments with the philosophical ideas at stake, but they are free to create and deliver them in a variety of public and playful ways. The goal is for students to engage with the past and react to it as they learn about it. Students have the opportunity to emotionally engage with the content under study in powerful ways, which naturally impacts their learning. In this roleplay, students learn as they take on specific identities and passionately support or attack ideas that they may have not been familiar with prior to class. Stepping outside of themselves and their realities, students learn about themselves and their realities, as well as their roots in the past. According to Carnes (2014) this approach has been transformative for many college students — not just in their learning of content but also, and maybe most importantly, in their social and emotional experiences on campus.

In the art world, an example of experiencing the past while imagining different futures is *Before Yesterday We Could Fly: An Afrofuturist Period Room*. This exhibition opened in 2021 at The Metropolitan Museum of Art (The Met) in New York City, as a space that "examines the present and future rather than offering a filtered perspective on the past" (Hollein, 2022, p.3). This space turns to Afrofuturism to envision what the future could have looked like if Seneca Village, a predominantly Black mid-nineteenth century community that thrived in what is now Central Park (just West of where The Met was built), had not been displaced in 1857 to make room for the park itself to be created. Afrofuturism, a term coined by cultural critic Mark Dery in 1994 and defined as a "larger aesthetic mode that encompasses a diverse range of artists working in different genres and media who are united by their shared interest in projecting Black futures derived from Afrodiasporic experiences" (Yaszek, 2006, p.42), is applied "as a coherent mode of critical inquiry" (Yaszek, 2006, p.42) to question and imagine possible worlds. Using "informed speculation about the past" and "an ingenious design for the future" to provide both a visionary leap forward and a radical counterpoint to so much historical oblivion" (Alteveer et all., 2022, p.12), this exhibition is not a showing of the past, but a construction of the future(s). Afrofuturism, "predicated upon both realist and speculative modes of storytelling" (Yaszek, 2006, p. 41) has long offered ways for Black artists to envision possible futures from within the Afrodiasporic and science fiction communities, opposing the (often openly) racist stories imagined by much of the mainstream science fiction in its earlier years, in which racial issues were not meaningfully addressed (Yaszek, 2006).

In the business world, J. Peter Scoblic (2020) uses strategic foresight and scenario planning to help organizations learn from the future. Or, better said, from plausible futures. Scenario planning was first used as a strategic tool for businesses in the 1970s. It is maybe the most recognizable tool of strategic foresight, which was first identified in a post-World War II U.S. Air Force think tank grappling with the need to develop strategies to deal with the possibility of nuclear war — a plausible future for which there were no experiences to draw from (Scoblic, 2020). The goal of strategic foresight is to help us think about the future by forcing us to creatively imagine multiple possible futures in ways previously unimagined, acknowledging the inherent uncertainty as its own outset. Although schools and universities have obviously different missions and face different operational challenges than air forces and oil businesses, there's something to be said about planning for uncertain futures for which we have few true analogies — which certainly is a challenge we educators face.

The Octavia Project offers an example of how education can help us envision new futures that shape our present realities. Inspired by the work of Octavia E. Butler, an Afrofuturist author herself, the Octavia Project uses speculative fiction and blends different art forms to help young women, trans, and nonbinary youth explore possible futures with a deep commitment to social justice — a commitment that many of this youth do not experience in their current worlds. In their own words, "The Octavia Project uses the creative power of science fiction and community to envision new futures and greater possibilities for our world" (website landing page, retrieved June 2023). In this way, "young folks [not only] explore how the world around them is created by a series of choices that can be remade or replaced," but they also imagine futures that they may, with their own choices, help create. "As its name implies, Afrofuturism is not just about reclaiming the history of the past, but about reclaiming the history of the future as well," Yaszek (2006, p.47) writes. And that is just what the youth of The Octavia Project do.

College students and school children today are very different than a few decades ago, or even just pre-COVID-19 pandemic. The world they live in would be in many ways unimaginable to their family members of just a few generations ago. Yet, many of our colleges are still designed in outdated ways, our grading systems are still trapped in no-longer relevant ideas, and we still often teach for realities that no longer exist. We do have centuries of classroom experiences to lean on and draw from, but that may, in many ways, be the problem itself: the past analogies we have for what a classroom looks like are not necessarily fit or valid to think about the classroom sin which our teacher candidates will teach (will there even be classrooms?). In this way, we are not only starting from scratch, but perhaps even farther back, as we need to convince ourselves of the futility of perpetually iterating the ways in which we (and generations that preceded us) were taught.

This is not to say that neither our experiences nor all the research, philosophical thinking, and scientific understandings from previous generations of educators are irrelevant — that would be a foolish and detrimental thing to argue. But precisely because of these new experiences, we know that the world evolves, and we know that the future will be different than what we know now — even if we don't know in what ways. It is certainly crucial to learn the past, with the past, and from the past. It is equally important to learn from the future, in ways that directly impact what we do in the present. If we are able to imagine futures that could have been had the Seneca Village not been decimated, we may be able to act and teach in ways that will lead to a future that is more just than the ones we may have if we are not.

Thinking of different futures in this way is not completely unlike what economists call narrow bracketing: according to Sussman (2022), we often think of one-time expenses as unpredictable lines in our budgets that cannot be accounted for nor, therefore, budgeted. These "un-budgetable" expenses, however, are often the (unnecessary) cause of havoc in our budgets — unnecessary because although the specific expenses are indeed not predictable, the predictability of the existence of such expenses is very much a reality.

Similarly, we don't know what changes are coming to the world, to education, and to our classrooms — but we know "unpredictable change" is coming and we need to understand what we can do now that will equip us to educate teachers who will teach in that unknown future. In teacher education we don't just *prepare* for the future, as we would if we were planning for something we know will happen — we effectively *create* that future.

Play Is Not All Fun and Games

One way to imagine scenarios is to play — and play is serious business. But there is a distinction to be made between play that is free of predetermined outside-imposed rules, and play that is dictated by, for example, the rules of a board game. Several languages, such as, for example, Portuguese and Danish, have different words for these two types of play: in Portuguese *jogar* means playing the type of play that has predefined rules and structure, such as board game or sports (the Danish word for this is *spille*); and *brincar* means the free, open-ended play that you see in children's imaginative pretend play, with no explicit or premeditated goal (the Danish work for this is *lege*). For example, if we said *jogar* soccer we would mean to actually play the game of soccer, whereas *brincar* soccer would mean something like a soccer-themed pretend-play. Playing Monopoly would be *jogar*; playing in a mud-kitchen would be *brincar*. It is no coincidence, as both Resnick (2017) and Lange (2020, p. 41) point out, that the brand-name for LEGO, a popular toy that invites us to build creatively (although, as we will see, not always!), comes from a contraction of the Danish words *leg* and *godt*, meaning "play well."

Bears (2012) and Resnick (2017) also distinguish between these two ways of play, namely in the form of playpens versus playgrounds. As Bears describes it, although both are designed with play in mind, they offer very different possibilities: while the playpen physically limits the space and opportunities children have to play, a playground does the opposite — it is a landscape of all real and all imaginary possibilities at the disposal, whim, and hands of the player. Playpens can offer a space to *jogar*, but playgrounds offer a world where one can *brincar*. As an example, Resnick describes how sometimes children play in the LEGO playpen — following step-by-step directions to build the model shown on the box — while other times they build freely and creatively in the LEGO playground, constructing new and unscripted compositions.

"Like digestion and sleep," Brown (2009, p. 15) argues, "play in its most basic form proceeds without a complex intellectual frame." This free, unscheduled play that Resnick (2017, p. 134) defines as "one of the four P's of creative learning" is a fundamental way to be, to learn, and to relate to the world and others around us. "The beneficial effects of getting just a little true play," Brown (2009, p. 7) maintains, "can spread through our lives, actually making us more productive and happier in everything we do." Even just a small bit of play can change a classroom, and that can certainly happen within a game.

Long before they play any organized sports or board games, young children play in ways that help them imagine possible worlds and determine ways to act and react in such

circumstances. Alison Gopnik (2009) talks about how fictional worlds are a luxury for adults, who have to deal with the serious stuff in life, stuff that is practical, and useful and needs to get done — say building houses, making lattes, or putting down fires. But children are "completely useless in what comes to adult responsibilities and spend much time emerged in the imaginary worlds doing what we label as "just play." As they play, they are, however, "computing a wide range of possibilities" that help them (re)think themselves and the world, and "bring new worlds into existence" (pp. 71, 72, and 21, respectively).

I have always incorporated short games in early childhood classes I teach, one-off playful activities that are peppered throughout the sessions and the semesters, in hopes of engaging students and making classes more fun and exciting. As an early childhood educator, I am convinced that play is a fundamental way for students to develop and own their learning, and to create knowledge that has meaning, importance, and relevance to their lives. Although that idea accompanied me in my transition from the early childhood classroom to full-time teacher education, the same was not true for the way I used play in my higher education teaching: yes, I consistently used short games in my classes or encouraged less traditional types of assignments and materials, and I certainly advocated for the imperative that play is essential in the early childhood classroom; but I did not place play at the core of my teaching, nor did I give my adult students enough agency in the designing of their own learning paths, until I fully turned my courses into narrative games in which students are invited to take charge of their learning journeys.

This shift happened during the abrupt transition to remote learning forced by the COVID-19 pandemic. Without the physicality of engaging in games together in the classroom, and with the added stress of lockdowns while the world around us was wrapped in uncertainty, the one-off games were just not enough to carry us through a semester of learning. We needed to engage in narratives and stories, more so than press buzzers on keyboards or complete bingo cards. We needed to engage creatively with the unknown, not just play by the rules of a game. We needed a playground, not a playpen.

Off to Unknown Planets: Narrative Games in Higher Education

The shift to a more immersive, semester-long experience that invites students in my teacher education classes to not only *jogar*, but also to *brincar* was transformative. Games were fun and important, yes. But they did not offer the sustained exploration of possibilities that officializes playful thinking and playful being in the classroom that is needed to genuinely envision ways of being in unknown future possibilities.

I knew this to be true because, in my training as an early childhood teacher, I had learned the importance of experiential ways of learning by doing such as the ones developed and theorized by authors such as Dewey (1997), Vygotsky (1978), or Kolb (1984). I had argued for the need for higher education to learn more from early childhood practices, and I had written about play-based learning and artmaking. Cognitively and theoretically, I knew this to be true. But, alas, I did not start practicing this way of teaching in higher education until I *felt* its benefits myself, for myself, and for my students. As an instructor of art methods to future classroom teachers who have little to no familiarity with art, I know this need for experiencing to be fundamental: in my experience, I can lecture teacher candidates on the importance of art all semester long, but if they don't *feel* how impactful it can be *to them*, they rarely see the need to bring it to their own students and classrooms. Arguably, the same goes for play — no amount of talking about it will

do. As Brown (2009, pp. 20-21) puts it, "there is no way to really understand play without also remembering the feeling of play. If we leave the emotion of play out of the science, it's like throwing a dinner party and serving pictures of food."

My way of offering a playground in the classroom was with a narrative game, aiming to bridge *jogar* and *brincar* within the realm of course material. On the first day of the semester, I asked my students if they were willing to take on a mission to set up schools on new, previously uninhabited planets. They decided on the routes to take, the tools to develop along the way, and what schools in the new environment would look like. There were games and tasks, but there was also the imaginary of unscripted narrative *brincar*. Importantly, this way of structuring the semester was fertile ground for reimagining grading and assessment in our own, present circumstances, and gave us opportunities to relate to each other in nonstandard ways, with a playfulness that does not happen when writing/grading papers is at the core of course development. Shared experiences allow for shared goals, and playing together helps putting each of us "in sync with those around us" (Brown, 2009, p.63).

Thinking of educational settings, Bisz & Mondelli (2023, p. 4) define "a basic learning game as a fun exercise where players practice skills under the constraints of the teacher's rules so they can succeed at an academic outcome." In this definition, it is important to point out the role attributed to "teacher's rules" and to the ultimate goal of achieving academic success, which is different from the freedom (both in rules and in expected outcomes) of unstructured play. But, as pointed out by Brown (2009), even just a bit of play in the context of a structured activity or game is enough: "We don't need to play all the time to be fulfilled," Brown (2009, p. 7) argues. "The truth is that in most cases, play is a catalyst. The beneficial effects of getting just a little true play can spread through our lives, actually making us more productive and happier in everything we do."

Coding, for example, can be seen as an activity in which parameters need to be followed for something to work. However, Bers (2018), observing children exploring coding and coding programs, observes how even in such a context play is fundamental and elicits greater executive functioning outcomes than coding by following directions. And, even in free play, there are rules galore. If you have observed a group of preschoolers play day in and day out, you will know that there are often strict rules in place — rules that the children themselves determine and mercilessly enforce. If the floor is lava, then you certainly cannot think you can ignore that fact and just walk around– except of course if you have lava-proof shoes on, are on a boat, or any other such rule, but one prescribed and administered by the players themselves. Even free-play is not a free-for-all.

These rules that grow with the play and shape it as it grows are fundamental in the playground that (hopefully!) the classroom is, and can provide contextualization and groundedness while pushing the creative process further. This is not unlike what Scoblic (2020) describes as "prim[ing] the imagination and maintain[ing] the guards of reality" in the context of scenario planning. This "pushing but not tearing the envelope of plausibility" allows us to play with futures drastically and radically different from now, but still plausible and imaginable. Like *Harold and the purple crayon* (Johnson, 1995), a book where a child's scribbles become the world he lives in, climbing mountains, eating pies, and running from disasters that he uses his own crayon to draw, plausibility is maintained by adhering to strict rules of reality: when Harold falls off a boat, he needs to swim, or climb onto another boat; when he climbs up the mountain he drew, he proceeds with care lest he slide down the hills of his very creation (Leher, 2012).

This is also how I invite my students to think about the courses we share: although the "rules of reality" still apply (I cannot escape assigning them a letter grade by the end of the semester; work still needs to be turned in with enough time for me to provide feedback before the grades are due; the days assigned to the class are the days in which we meet; and other such constraints) we navigate the course through the lines we ourselves scribble, drawing our adventures as we go. If, as Lehrer (2012, p. 23) posits, "the difficulty of the task accelerate[s] the insight process" (why else, he asks, would poets adhere to such strict forms of writing as haiku or sonnet?!), reality-imposed limits become our springboard.

Reflecting on interactive fiction in "computer story-games" and choose-your-own-adventure game-stories, Buckles (1985, p. 27) explains that although "by taking part in creating the story, the reader takes on some of the functions of the author," it is important to remember that "the reader cannot actually determine what will happen, but [they] can choose from alternatives implicit in the story and [have] the illusion of control over the events." In the classroom, to some extent, this is both reality and fiction — again, it is not a free-for-all. The instructor is still in charge of maintaining a community that is safe for all, respectful, and inclusive; there is still a commitment to helping students productively engage with course content and learn along the lines of the fields at stake. But, within this, the students' control of what happens is certainly not an illusion.

In the play-game courses my students and I share, they are in charge of the syllabus and the "grading" as much as I am. Ungrading (Blum, 2020) and other ideas on ways of engaging and empowering students in the classroom (Davidson and Katopodis, 2020) offer unlimited possibilities for how to use class procedures as a spark to play. Yes, I give my students parameters (to use these examples again, the semester ends when it ends and the students do not control that, there is no tolerance for harmful behavior regardless if the students like that rule or not, and there are sets of course content that we need to address regardless of them being on the top of students' lists of interests). And yes, my students decide on the types of assignments they want to do, when they turn them in, and how much work they want to do.

Most importantly, playing offers students possibilities to interact not just more, but *differently* — with course material, with each other, with the instructor, and with the world around them. Carnes posits, as he talks about how role-immersion games have transformed the college experiences of many college students, this connection with others is crucial not only for academic success but, fundamentally, for student well-being (Carnes, 2014). Portnoy (2020, pp.110-111.) summarizes the case for play as an effective form of instruction by saying:

> What we have known for ages is that learning is social and requires practice, or play. Play has the potential to tap into the best of situated cognition. While students may not be able to leave the country or even the classroom, they can still try on different roles, and in trying on these new roles, they begin to take different perspectives. In our current system of compulsory universal public education, this model is often posited as situated cognition. Research has acknowledged that constructing knowledge within the environment where that knowledge will be used is key. With research showing the importance of applied practice, which feels an awful lot like role play, one has to wonder why this type of learning is still not regular practice in classrooms nationwide.

Conclusion: Unanswered questions

More so than learning by experiencing, play allows us to learn by feeling. Knowing what it feels like to play, to make art, to connect, to *feel* is what gives us the ownership to push learning further and farther, and to bring it to every classroom we can. "You had me playing a game, I'll give you that," that same participant continued, noting how remarkable it was that he, an academic with (presumably) no inclination for playing, had participated in the game we played during my conference session. I wondered if he was convinced. Portnoy's question — Why do we not play in all classrooms? — is not an easy one to answer.

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