

Editorial Preface

Playful Learning

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INTRODUCTION

Welcome to this special issue of IJGBL. Curated here are the most interesting thoughts, ideas, research, and practice coming out of the first Playful Learning conference (<http://conference.playthinklearn.net>), held in Manchester in July 2016.

Playful Learning is no ordinary conference. It was conceived to fill a gap in the study of play in adults (16 and up) despite a growing interest in this area; distinct from the more widespread interest in play for younger children. It was also created with an idea to counter many ‘traditional’ and wholly un-playful aspects of other conferences (the expensive, sponsored talk-and-listen identikit). In reality, this resulted in a melding of ‘un-conference’ ethos with some of the more useful conference structures.

Amongst the storytelling, board gaming, marble runs and Lego building, a number of workshops were also contributing to on-going research and play testing. From these, we invited a select number to share their research and practice in this special issue, as we felt other researchers and practitioners should be able to access their interesting work. IJGBL was the obvious home for such an issue, with its agnostic approach to all forms of play and gaming.

Play. The role and influence it contributes to human life has been considered from early writings (see Tyler, Chapter 1 for a useful overview) through to the modern ‘beginnings’ of academic study with Huizinga (1938) and many other theorists since. As already noted, much study in the ensuing period concerns play in infants and children, with adult considerations emerging through game design theory and literature over the past four to five decades. More recently, and as a result of this, play in adulthood has attracted growing interest: and it was through the conference and this resulting special issue that we wanted to collect together researchers and ideas in this growing field of study. Both Playful Learning the conference, and Playful Learning the special issue, form a playground (Sicart, 2016, p. 62) where we can explore, connect, meld and create new areas of interest in play.

In curating this issue our aim is to provide researchers either already working in this and connected areas, or new to this field; and practitioners in higher, further and adult education contexts; with an overview of latest thinking, emerging ideas for ongoing research, and – for the practitioners especially – a selection of practical case studies that exemplify the range of playful approaches one might use within a learning context.

Approaching this Special Issue

This introduction will shortly give way to what could function as an introduction proper to the issue. Jo Tyler takes us through a history of play and play studies, and shares with us an approach she has developed to evaluate the effects and influence of play on learning contexts, through a consideration of the classroom as a psychosocial space. Tyler performed an evaluation exercise live at the conference,

Figure 1. Playful Learning participants tackle complex engineering. © Playful Learning 2016



and discusses the results of that here; making a compelling case for us all to consider evaluation whenever designing a playful approach to learning. In the closing section, she also sets us a challenge to undertake when reading the ensuing articles.

Tyler's piece forms a theoretical bookend with the final article in the main section. At the opposite end, Bernd Remmele presents a case for negative play, and playing against the game – suggesting that even poorly designed educational games (from a game perspective) can be turned into playful experiences by players, thus adding value in an unexpected way.

Between these two theoretical pieces stand a rich range of applied practice. Operating in higher education and adult learning contexts, all authors have applied particular playful approaches or game mechanics to a learning problem, and arrived at engaging and compelling solutions.

Costa *et al* tackle the universal concern of parents and educators across the world in ensuring that young adults manage their online activity and identity safely. Through a specially designed game, students were put through a series of scenarios to test and improve their knowledge and confidence in this area, and results showed good engagement with the game as a medium.

From the latest digital sphere, we then move to the other end of the spectrum. Gemma Lace-Costigan has been using Play-Doh with students on her university Biomedical Science programme, to engage them in creating representative models of biological structures. She argues that the kinaesthetic properties of Play-Doh contribute to enhance engagement and knowledge retention.

Narrative is a common mechanic in many games, and storytelling as an art form has a rich history within cultural and humanist disciplines. David Jackson works in creative writing, and wanted to harness the power of collaborative story making through a simple playful digital platform. By asking players to make potentially conflicting parallel choices, he uncovered some interesting behaviour and the potential for improved creative output.

These two ‘lower end’ approaches (in a digital sense) lead nicely into Arnab et al.’s fascinating approach to wide-scale improvements across the curriculum at Coventry University. Using low-end game development as an easy-entry way to engage both staff and students, their Game Changers programme is changing learning and teaching, and creating more opportunities for interdisciplinary work, across the campus.

Grey et al.’s workshop at the conference drew an interested crowd, and their card game based around the MDA framework and Schell’s ‘Elemental Tetrad’ is a fascinating experiment in trying to game (and out-game) students’ approach to learning computer science programming.

Following the main papers are four practice-based case studies that provide further examples of simple but effective approaches to the use of games and play in higher education. From the established LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY® in Seidl’s study, the simple approach of rolling a giant dice to introduce surprise in Barnard’s case, and the use of simple digital game developments in Jennett et al.’s and Javid’s approaches, it is clear that the use of games for learning doesn’t have to involve major and costly development work.

In combination, I hope that this fascinating and forward thinking collection of ‘play pieces’ will give you a sense of the interest and fascinating practice in this area currently. The authors may have coalesced at Playful Learning in July 2016, but their work and approaches are growing and mutating. I hope this helps to connect them and you to the growing playful community of researchers and practitioners in adult learning, and that the articles here will inspire others to embrace play critically within their own teaching and learning.

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REFERENCES

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