

Chapter 14

Game On! Collaborative Research and Resistance Through Play



Rachel Forgasz and Helen Grimmett

Abstract In 2019, we conducted a collaborative self-study using improv writing games as our method. Our game play became both a reflective device for our data generation and a structural device for our collaboration and our research writing. This form of collaborative self-study encouraged us to approach our research and our writing with the life-affirming and cooperative intent that personally motivates our work, rather than the self-aggrandising and competitive games of so much of academic life in the neoliberal university. In this sense, it offered not only an approach to collaborative self-study, but also an approach to scholar activism and an experience of genuine collaboration. In this conceptual chapter, we share our developing understanding of how improv game play can work to support purposeful collaboration in self-study research. Specifically, we explore the sense in which: play is a stance; play is a sense-making process; play is pedagogical; play is an attitude; play is a relational dynamic; and how particular kinds of games encourage reflection and discovery.

14.1 Introduction

*There once was research to be done,
But we both really wanted some fun.
We said, "What the hell,
Let's play games for a spell."
And we found we could do both in one!
The moral of this tale might be
To beware this false dichotomy.*

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*There need be no divides
Between play and work sides
To do research insightfully.* (Helen, Poem)

A lot has been written about the dehumanising and disempowering effects of neoliberalism on the work and lives of academics (Ball, 2012); how the publish or perish culture pits colleagues against one another (Hartman & Darab, 2012); and how performance metrics have domesticated us into docile citizens, complicit in our own oppression (Davies & Bansel, 2007). One troubling consequence is that various forms of practitioner research, including self-study, have been co-opted as instruments of audit culture, used to generate evidence of teacher effectiveness as measured by learner improvement over time. In the particular case of self-study research, Vanassche and Kelchtermans (2015) warn that despite its “enormous potential to develop a substantial critical-political, pedagogical and epistemological understanding of the complexities of teacher education ... the focus of self-study on analysing one’s own practice in order to improve it or solve specific problems of practice” makes it especially appealing to “the instrumentalist and effectiveness agenda” (p. 521).

But self-study is in fact deeply rooted in scholarly resistance, developed as it was by teacher educators who were determined to “take control of their professional activity and professional status” (Berry & Forgasz, 2018, p. 4). Reminding us of this history, Berry and Forgasz (2018) call for a political (re)turn in self-study against the deprofessionalisation of teaching and teacher education. One way to respond to that call is through the content focus we choose for our self-study research. Another is through the methods we use to undertake that research. Our collaborative improv writing game method is one such example, in which adopting play as a stance towards research is an intentional and explicit “form of resistance” (Berry & Forgasz, 2018, p. 4) against neoliberal research cultures of academic performativity.

Our idea to conduct collaborative self-study using improv writing games was inspired by the infinite/finite game metaphor developed by Harre et al. (2017) to describe the impoverishment of academic work in the neoliberal university. For Harre et al. (2017), the infinite game is one “in which our heartfelt, personal response to life, our deep listening to others (especially those who don’t fit in), and our careful observations and thought about the social, natural and physical world come together to create and recreate our institutions” (p. 5). Finite games are the opposite: competitive scoring games such as institutional league tables, student satisfaction surveys, productivity measures, and research performance standards. Like Harre et al. (2017), we have found that “finite games often serve to distract us from all that initially attracted us to the academy as a place of radical possibility” (p. 8). In other words, they distract us from the infinite game.

In 2019, we contributed to an edited collection of work by women scholars challenging the status quo of the seemingly entrenched hierarchical and productivity (finite game) structures of academia (see Grimmett & Forgasz, 2021). In designing our study, we wanted to develop an infinite game play approach for conducting

research. With our background as arts educators, we immediately thought of theatre improv games, which we adapted and played as writing games instead. For those who are unfamiliar with the format, when actors play theatre improv games, they are not competing to score points or trying to knock each other out in a finite game of winning and losing. They are more like musicians in a jazz ensemble, collaborators in the co-creation of a cohesive and satisfying performance. In our case, this improv game play method supported powerful reflective sense-making and also contributed to the creation of a strong and structured framework for collaborating as self-study researchers.

In this conceptual chapter, we share our developing understanding of how improv game play can work to support purposeful collaboration in self-study research, an understanding which deepened in the course of researching, reading, and writing for this chapter. Through these processes, we came to appreciate even more than we had initially understood about the multifaceted ways in which our improv game play approach supports collaborative self-study. Specifically, we came to understand the sense in which: play is a stance; play is a sense-making process; play is pedagogical; play is an attitude; play is a relational dynamic; and how particular kinds of games encourage reflection and discovery. The substantive content of this chapter is structured around these six key dimensions.

14.2 The Games

To develop the content for our chapter, we began by reflecting on what we learned about using improv game play to support collaborative research through our original 2019 study. We had a couple of firm findings and a couple of hunches. To test those hunches, we decided to incorporate improv game play in our early planning and writing processes for this chapter too. As in our 2019 study, we were strategic in selecting games as part of the process of developing our chapter. Each game was chosen because we had an inkling of how it might support a particular aspect of our collaboration. Each week for 4 weeks, we met online for a two-hour ‘playdate’ during which we would play a writing game and then talk through our experiences of whether and how it ended up supporting the research process.

Throughout this conceptual chapter, we include extracts from the game play that supported us to develop our ideas, including the six dimensions which we go on to discuss. These extracts are intended to give you a feel for the games and the kind of thinking and writing they helped us to produce but should not be mistaken as an attempt on our part to report on our recent game-play as a stand-alone study. Here, we present a brief overview of the games themselves so that when you encounter the extracts, you will have some sense of their original context. They also contextualise our discussion of ‘games for discovery’ in the final section of the chapter. We also describe the games we played in the original 2019 study as a point of reference for our discussion of ‘games for reflection.’

Playdate 1: To structure our first formal conversation about our chapter, we played *Alphabet*.

How to play: Players take conversational turns by typing one sentence at a time. The first word of the first sentence must begin with the letter ‘A.’ The second player begins their reply with a word beginning with ‘B.’ Players continue taking turns, making their way through the alphabet, sentence by sentence, until they reach ‘Z.’

Playdate 2: By the end of our first meeting, we had identified four broad themes for our chapter. We took two themes each and agreed to do some deeper thinking and writing about them before our second meeting. To do that thinking and writing, we played *Poem*.

How to play: The players compose poems based on assigned topics.

Playdate 3: To engage in a deeper collaborative exploration of one of our themes, we played *Word-at-a-time-proverb*.

How to play: Players take turns typing one word at a time to create a proverb based on an assigned topic. Play continues until someone decides the proverb is complete and adds a ‘full stop.’ The next player begins a new proverb. Continue creating proverbs until you are done.

Playdate 4: To engage in a deeper collaborative exploration of a second theme, we played *In-the-style-of*.

How to play: Each player is allocated a style of discourse (e.g., a school report card, a defence attorney’s opening remarks). The players have 15 minutes to write about an assigned topic in the style of their allocated discourse. Both players write about the same topic, at the same time, but in different styles.

Helen’s game (2019): Fast Forward

How to play: Play begins by writing a short reflective narrative of an experience as it happened. The player is then invited to ‘fast forward’ or ‘rewind’ the scene to a different point in time and continues writing an (imaginary) narrative from that new time. They repeat this process several times.

Rachel’s game (2019): Genre Replay

How to play: Play begins by writing a short reflective narrative of an experience as it happened. The player is then invited to rewrite the same scene in the style of a nominated genre, with the characters, action and mood all influenced by the conventions of that genre. They repeat this process several times.

14.3 The Case for Undertaking Collaborative Research Through Play

In the remainder of this chapter, we make a case for the value of undertaking collaborative self-study research through play. It is organised around six key dimensions that simultaneously express both *why* we play and *how* we play as we do this

work. In our explication of the first three of these dimensions (play is a stance, play is a sense-making process, play is pedagogical) the focus is more heavily on our developing understanding of *why* we choose to play. The focus then shifts towards *how* we play as we discuss the dimensions of: play is an attitude, play is a relational dynamic, and how particular kinds of games encourage reflection and discovery. Using this structural approach, we hope to articulate the precise essence of each dimension, to emphasise the subtle but significant distinctions between them, and also to capture the interconnectedness between these six dimensions of improv game play as they support collaborative self-study research. To conceptualise each dimension, we reflected on our own experiences of collaborating through improv game play, and then looked to the research literature to locate our sense-making within relevant scholarly traditions. In each section, we combine this theorised discussion and reflective analysis of our own experiences as the twin bases of our practical advice to other researchers who might be interested in experimenting with the approach.

14.4 Play Is a Stance

All rules that contribute to inhumanity shall be broken by players who understand the power they have to corrupt the unfair endgame. (Helen & Rachel, Word-at-a-time Proverb)

The conceptual resonance – and delicious irony – of resisting the finite games (Harre et al., 2017) of scholarly research by conducting research through (infinite) improv game-play was enough for us to pursue the approach for our original 2019 study. It was only much later that we sought to theorise our understanding of play as an activist stance and how this relates to the aforementioned history of ‘scholarly resistance’ in the S-STEP field. We found Bakhtin’s (1984) notions of the carnival and carnivalesque very helpful in this regard. For Bakhtin, carnival is not seen merely as a time for letting off steam or momentarily escaping from the pressures of ordinary life. Rather, carnival holds “power to shape a complete world with its own space and time. ... Just as the space/time of the official world seems to enforce restraints, the coordinates of the carnival world conduce to freedom and fearlessness” (Holquist, 1982, p. 14). Viewing play in this way highlights its potential political overtones and recognises its possibilities for upending hierarchical, fixed, or oppressive structures.

Sicart (2014) explicitly links the concepts of carnival, play and politics: “Like carnival, play has a particular status in its relation to reality that allows political action while being relatively immune to the actions of power” (p. 75). In other words, the liminal context of play, in which rules and relationships are negotiated and agreed by the players themselves, creates an immune space that cannot be imposed upon by the power structures of the regular world. It’s just a game. Yet, as Sicart reveals, it is also much more:

Play is political in the way it critically engages with a context, appropriating it and using the autotelic nature of play to turn actions into double-edged meanings: they are actions both in a play activity and with political meaning and are therefore heavy with meaning. (p. 80)

Our original study provides a good example of this concept in action. By adopting play as a stance, we re-appropriated our relationship to scholarship in a way that subverted the norms and expectations of academic work in the neoliberal university. Its enactment also allowed us to engage in a particular kind of sense-making process, one that supported us to be inventive and bold in our research endeavours.

14.5 Play Is a Sense-Making Process

REPORT TO PARENTS:

Helen has made good progress this term in her ability to incorporate play into the important work of self-study research. This has enabled her to overcome her reluctance to engage in research and has helped her to reach out and connect with other classmates. This renewed sense of playfulness has enhanced her ability to put aside preconceptions, to take chances with new ideas and open her thinking to the notion of self-study as an opportunity for ongoing learning and development. Further work still needs to be done in overcoming her need to know how it is going to turn out before she enters the game. I suggest she draws on her growing number of successful experiences to remind herself that the learning comes through the doing, not the planning of it. She needs to remember to trust the process and allow herself to fully enter into the spirit of the game. Helen has consistently shown that once immersed in the game, ideas do flow and can lead to interesting insights and unexpected results. I encourage her to keep up the great work and look forward to seeing what she is able to produce next term. (Helen, In-the-style-of...)

Creative and arts-based approaches have been used as methods of data generation and representation in self-study since its very beginnings (Tidwell & Jónsdóttir, 2020). These include visual arts (e.g., Weber & Mitchell, 2004), drama (e.g., Bhukhanwala & Allexsah-Snyder, 2012), poetry (e.g., Hamilton & Pinnegar, 2013), and multi-arts (e.g., Pithouse-Morgan & Samaras, 2015). In many ways, our improv game play approach can be understood through the lens of arts-based self-study. Indeed, later in this chapter, we go on to explore the role of creativity and imagination in improv writing games as reflective practices.

But as experienced arts-based researchers (e.g., Forgasz, 2015; Forgasz, 2019; Grimmett, 2016), we came to the end of our 2019 study with the feeling that, methodologically speaking, something else had also been going on. Initially, we struggled to pinpoint exactly what this ‘something else’ was. Our understanding crystallised during Playdate 2 as we discussed our experiences of just having played *Poem*.

Rather than ‘poetry as method,’ we framed our creative inquiry as ‘playing a game of *Poem*.’ Until we talked about it, we didn’t realise just how important this distinction had been. We were thumbing our noses not only at the need to produce ‘real research’ but also at the need to create ‘real art’ and we found real value in doing so. We had liberated ourselves – both psychologically and

methodologically – from the need to produce ‘good poetry,’ the kind that could stand alone and be judged as artful. Much like neoliberal prescriptions about quality research, these kinds of aesthetic judgements are also subject to oppressive systems of power and hierarchy. In this sense, our improv game play method offered something quite different from those creative and arts-based methodologies that emphasise aesthetic and artful approaches to knowledge production and dissemination.

Excited by our discovery, we scoured a range of literature on creative inquiry, and on play and playfulness in research, looking for ways to deepen our understanding. One important distinction that arose from that inquiry was our appreciation of how the liminal qualities associated with game-play create a safe space for exploration and risk taking. As Mainemelis and Ronson (2006) explain:

Play, as a liminality context, temporarily suspends social conventions and rules, giving way to ambiguity, joy, frivolity, and exploration of alternative behaviors (Turner, 1982, 1987). Between-and-betwixt the inner and the outer, the old and the new, or the true and the false, play has a threshold awareness that sets it apart from life as usual (Huizinga, 1955). (p. 87)

This setting apart from ‘life as usual’ encourages creative experimentation within game-play because the real-life consequences of mistakes or poor choices do not apply.

In the liminal space of the game, play is autotelic, i.e., its own end or purpose is itself (Sicart, 2014). What we produce through creative game-play is the game itself, not an artwork that is intended to communicate to others or align with the aims of aesthetics. This is not to say that play can never be beautiful or that artmaking can never be playful, but in these cases, each is co-opting elements of the other, just as bringing playfulness to research co-opts the attitudes of play to the goals and purposes of research (see Sicart, 2014, for further explanation of the difference between play as an activity and playfulness as an attitude).

14.6 Play Is Pedagogical

OPENING REMARKS AT A TRIAL

Ladies and gentlemen of the jury,

You are being tasked with a grave responsibility: to determine the legitimacy of my clients’ designation of play as their research approach.

Now, the prosecution will argue that play is an approach to learning.

And that may well be so. Indeed, it is precisely what this case is about: the relationship between research and learning.

And we will prove, that in the case of self-study, in particular, research is learning and learning is research. (Rachel, In-the-style-of...)

A good self-study research design does more than generate powerful data about our practice. It also engages us in powerful learning about our practice. In this sense, self-study research is also pedagogical in purpose, contributing to the development

of professional self-understanding. In our approach we adopt Vygotsky's (2016) well-known view of play as developmental:

Play is the source of development and creates the zone of proximal development. Action in the imaginative field, in an imaginary situation, the creation of voluntary intentions and the formation of real-life plans and volitional motives – all appear in play and make it the highest level of preschool development. The child moves forward essentially through play activity. It is in this way that play can be termed a leading activity that determines the child's development. (p. 18)

While Vygotsky was referring to children's play, Newman and Holzman (1997) argue that this powerful developmental activity should not be limited to young children, but in fact can be a source of development throughout the lifespan. This notion of play as a developmental activity is significant in thinking about the pedagogic purpose of self-study research in relation to teacher educator professionalism. The point is not merely to *learn* new skills or strategies or content to implement in our own classrooms, but to support our *development* as professionals. In line with Vygotskian understandings of the dialectical relationship between learning and development, professional *learning* is the activator or source of professional *development*, which is enacted in the qualitative changes to a teacher's understanding and practice of what they do, how they do it, and why, across multiple aspects of their professional role (Grimmett, 2014).

Berry and Forgasz (2018) argue that teacher education “cannot and should not ever be understood merely as the technical application of knowledge to practice” and that self-study should contribute “to broader conversations about the contextualized, relational and moral aspects of [teacher educators'] professional knowing as a form of professional resistance” (p. 242). Taking a developmental perspective ensures that our self-study research is not satisfied with providing technical solutions to problems of educational practice, but that it is concerned with the deepening understanding and transformation of our own motives and practices across our professional roles as researchers and teacher educators. This perspective is especially important when we seek to challenge dominant societal or institutionally valued ways of performing these roles. The mechanisms of different kinds of game-play support these ends in particular ways, but one common feature is that improv game-play as method encourages the embodiment of a particular attitude towards research.

14.7 Play Is an Attitude

She who plays never stays stuck in laborious drudgery. (Helen & Rachel, Word-at-a-time Proverb)

Smith (2016) points out similarities between children's creative play and terms used by inventors, such as tinkering, experimenting, subverting rules, and diverging from norms.

Children at play, like inventors at work, navigate freely among the different dimensions of play and processes of innovation; they fiddle around in active, self-motivated, and unstructured ways with materials and ideas, prototyping and solving problems, roleplaying, socializing, and learning different ways to see and interact with the world around them. (p. 248)

Bringing this spirit of playfulness to our work enabled us to delight in the creative aspects of inquiry. As a consequence, we found ourselves being much less caught up in the usual concerns regarding research outputs. As Helen observed during our first playdate, “Play is not bound up in productivity. The point of it is that it is pointless. ... So that’s a real juxtaposition with the productivity agenda in the academy.”

In this sense, adopting a playful attitude is a form of scholarly resistance through which we subvert some of the most basic assumptions about the nature of academic research: that it is serious, that it is hard, that it is work. Crowhurst and Emslie (2020) describe the “pleasurable non-normative space” opened up by playful research as “a productive type of passionate refuge—a refuge from the irrational centrist standardizations of the neoliberal university” (p. 23). Our play space was precisely this kind of safe-haven in which we felt comfortable to resist neoliberal productivity norms and to enjoy the research process instead.

Simple things like marking research meetings in your calendar as ‘playdates’ can support this reframing of ‘research’ from the burden of work to the joy of play. This kind of relanguaging can have a potent effect. As Brown and Leigh (2018) explain, the phrase ‘playdate’ evokes “the essence of joy, creativity and play” (p. 56). ‘Catching up for a playdate’ is something to look forward to, something you can expect to enjoy. In our experience, undertaking research with this playful attitude of enthusiastic anticipation enabled an experience that could not have been more different from the competitive, self-aggrandising style of play we had come to expect of “the Academic Hunger Games” (Lemon, 2018). When we engage in research through game-play, we are not only adopting play as an attitude towards research, we also deliberately enter the liminal space of play as a research activity, inclusive of all its attendant features and their effects. Significant among these are the implications of engaging in the relational dynamic of play.

14.8 Play Is a Relational Dynamic

The ultimate satisfaction of togetherness is like honey drizzled on sour dough; it adds sweetness to the staple of subsistence. (Rachel & Helen, Word-at-a-time Proverb)

Collaboration is one of the most prominent hallmarks of self-study methodology (Bullock, 2020), although it is defined and applied very differently by different self-study researchers. In the case of our 2019 improv game play study, the purpose of our collaboration was deeply connected to our activist stance against neoliberal dictates and our determination to enact that stance not only through the content focus, but also through the design of our study. In other words, the relational dynamic of our approach to collaboration was an expression of our ontological

intent. Inspired by Harre et al. (2017), we aimed not to *be* research stars, but to *deploy* them; we collaborated in order to “generate and enact slow, tiny acts of resistance [S.T.A.Rs] in the company of others whom we enjoy and whose thinking and conduct can teach us. Their companionship will comfort and sustain us” (p. 12).

This relational dynamic that emphasises companionship, comfort, and enjoyment is not to be mistaken for Bullock’s (2020) uncritical and untrustworthy “echo chamber where one knows one’s ideas will be valued in particular ways” (2020, p. 12). Rather, it is grounded in a politics of resistance that refuses the bifurcation of reason/emotion, and personal/professional in defining the nature and purpose of research collaboration. In this sense, our relational dynamic as ‘playmates’ has much in common with the “feminist epistemology of friendship” described by Taylor and Klein (2018, p. 102) and the post-human, “*more-than-critical-friendship*” that Mills, Strom, Abrams and Dacey (2020, p. 4) realised they had developed as collaborators and critical friends over many years and multiple self-studies.

The ultimate satisfaction of togetherness is more ideas. (Helen & Rachel, Word-at-a-time Proverb)

While the emphasis of collaboration in our improv game play method is on cooperation, companionship and enjoyment, the relational dynamic of play also provides a powerful framework for collaborative knowledge production, and for the enactment of critical friendship. Lunenberg and Samaras (2011) explain that because collaborative critical inquiry involves “receiving and offering honest, yet constructive, feedback that moves beyond technical advice and pushes the researcher,” it is dependent on the creation of “an intellectually safe and supportive community” (p. 847). Structured game play provides just this kind of environment. Rules offer the safety of structure; there are clear expectations and boundaries for what and how you share. Being ‘playmates’ affords another layer of safety as you are positioned to receive what is shared in a spirit of playfulness, rather than one of criticality and critique. Turn-taking in its various forms adds yet another form of support for the intellectual work of collaborative research.

In the original study, we each played an extended writing game, based on a theatre improv game format. Helen played *Fast Forward* and Rachel played *Genre Replay*. Adapting the rules as we went, we developed the following procedure for playing both games:

1. Player One writes a brief narrative account of the experience that is the focus of their reflective inquiry.
2. Player One revises their original narrative according to the rules of their nominated improv game. They write a reflective commentary on new insights generated through the rewriting, and pass all of this on to Player Two.
3. Player Two draws together their insights from Player One’s creative game play and subsequent commentary to offer a reflective analysis and an invitation for Player Two to take another turn at their own game.
4. Player One reviews the analysis, plays another turn as invited, and ends with a final reflection on their learning.

This turn-taking procedure provides a clear purpose and formal structure for collaborating in which Player One is the reflective practitioner and Player Two takes the role of critical friend, providing a collegial lens (Brookfield, 1995) for collaborative reflection.

In the process of writing this current chapter, we played spontaneous turn-taking games in real time. In these kinds of games, we discovered that turn-taking functions differently to support the enactment of a generative collaborative environment. Put simply, taking turns ensures that you really do share the intellectual work of knowledge production. *Word-at-a-time Proverb* is the most extreme example of this concept in action. As the excerpts from our game play attest, that degree of collaboration can support the development and articulation of new insights that are as profound as they are unexpected.

At the same time, we found that proposing and/or entering into real-time collaborative game-play entails an element of risk, and sometimes even discomfort. What if I can't see the point of the game? What if the other person doesn't want to play my game? What if I can't think of clever ways to respond in the game? We experienced these discomforts to various degrees a number of times during our research process.

A particularly impactful experience was during Playdate 4, when Rachel suggested that we develop our ideas around the theme 'play is pedagogical' by playing a game of *In-the-style-of*. We were both a bit hesitant. Rachel's hunch that it might help us to clarify our ideas was based on her experience of playing a similar genre game in the original study, but she struggled to explain her rationale. Sensing Helen's ambivalence, Rachel started second guessing herself and backed away from the suggestion. Meanwhile, Helen (who had not played a genre game before) was struggling to imagine how it would be useful. More significantly, perhaps, she was struggling to imagine how she would write in-the-style of any of Rachel's suggested genres.

Had we not been so committed to understanding our improv game-play approach, we might have chosen to play a different game or else abandoned game-play altogether in favour of a traditional conversational approach. It helped, at this point, to remind ourselves to approach things playfully, by committing to a process of going with the flow, refusing to take things too seriously, and acknowledging that we could always stop if we were no longer having fun. Attending to all these aspects of playful engagement eased the pressure of expectations and allowed unexpected insights to emerge. This was especially true for Helen, whose familiarity with the school report as a genre provided a framework for spontaneous creative writing. Using the individual sentence starters and overarching conventions of a standard school report, Helen was freed up to think expansively and write creatively about our nominated theme. In the next section, we unpack more of our thinking about how different categories of games can support different aims and purposes of self-study research.

14.9 Games for Reflection

I

*The idea of playing a game
And reflection as one and the same
Gives reason to rhyme
It's a research pastime
That can help us reflect and reframe.*

II

*Swans reflecting elephants,
That Dali painting's called.
You see swans. Me? elephants.
First glances overhauled
And we see both simultaneously,
The two things also-and.
Multiple perspectives:
Bird in bush and bird in hand
Both kept in play, for inspection.
That's collaborative reflection's
Greatest gift:
Helps us lift
Our gaze
And see ways through the maze
That we cannot see alone.*

III

*So, when did it happen first? Rewind!
Fast forward! What happens next?
Replay! the whole thing to see how you fare
with a different smile, a different walk,
a bit more silence? a bit less talk?
Imaginary mirror on the wall
Reflect, distort, reveal, recall
Remember the future, imagine the past
The ending unwritten, the roles not yet cast
Fast
Forward
Back To Back
To be continued. (Rachel, Poem)*

Extended writing games like the ones we played in our original study support focused reflective inquiry by using “imagination and playfulness” as windows through which you can “safely observe and make sense of experiences” (Grimmett & Forgasz, 2021).

Genre games (e.g., *Genre Replay*, *In-the-style-of*) facilitate reflective self-understanding as we reframe our experiences through familiar narrative and character tropes. This reframing can help us to clarify our understanding of complex concepts, as evident in our game-play excerpts from Helen's *Report to Parents* and Rachel's *Opening Remarks at a Trial*. More than this, genre games can function like the use of metaphors in self-study research (e.g., Garbett, 2011; Tannehill, 2016) to surface the subterranean attitudes and assumptions that are the otherwise invisible drivers of our decisions and actions (Forgasz, 2019).

Character games (such as Helen’s *Fast Forward* game-play in our original study) are opportunities to imaginatively experiment with new ways of being, and to access new ways of seeing the people and situations in your life (including yourself). Newman and Holzman (1997) argue that this collaborative, performative play allows us to disrupt our habitual (and often highly skilled) ways of acting which end up being “commodified, routinized and rigidified into behaviour,” tied up with our identity as “this kind of person who does certain things (not others) and feels certain ways (not others)” (p.129). They use play and performance as a form of social therapy that allows participants to realise the possibility of breaking free of old ways of being and to collaboratively create new performances of themselves that bring about different results. Similarly, Boal (1995, 2002) uses role play as a form of critical pedagogy which enables participants to imagine and rehearse their liberation from oppression in the safety of the aesthetic space so they can enact alternative ways of being in the context of their real lives. Character focused improv writing games provide access to the same kind of reflective-imaginative sense-making.

14.10 Games for Discovery

*Preschool teachers know the power of play
It causes development every day
It’s the chance to try on,
With no right or wrong,
A new way of being... Hooray!
In play we collaboratively
Create spontaneously.
We give and receive,
Embrace make believe,
And end up at unplanned destinies. (Helen, Poem)*

Through our recent experiments playing spontaneous turn-taking games in real time (i.e., *Alphabet* and *Word-at-a-time Proverb*), we came to appreciate how collaboratively generating content within particular game constraints provokes playful creative engagement with ideas and with each other. Playing together in this spirit of inquiry in turn supports the development of new discoveries and connections, which, as Brown and Leigh (2018) point out, we may not otherwise be able to access.

For example, when we met for Playdate 1, we had already agreed on a broad focus topic (What will this chapter be about?) but we had no set expectations about what we would produce or whether it would be helpful. Instead of generating ideas through unstructured conversation, we explored the possibilities through a game of *Alphabet*. We played together on Zoom in real time, typing our turns into the chat box. Below, you can see the textual output of our game play, but this text alone doesn’t really capture or express the quintessence of our game play. Critically missing are the facial expressions, giggles, gestures, thinking time, cheeky asides, groans, responses of assent, waiting time, joking admonishments and physical

actions, each of which made a vital contribution to the aesthetics of our play as “a mode of conversation” (Brown & Leigh, 2018, p. 54).

*An approach to collaboration that makes work fun
 Brandon has provided some helpful guidelines
 Certainly has
 Dodgy!
 Eventually we will have to get to it so ok I'm going to get serious now...
 Fun is one of the main points of the exercise though, so was good to begin with a chuckle!
 Guidelines are really helpful and I especially like the idea of being explicitly asked to critique self study.
 Hell yes! It's good to get to nitty gritty honesty rather than skating over problematic issues
 I reckon it's an invitation for us to talk about writing games as a way to address the problem with 'long distance' ss data generation (esp now with coronavirus limitations) that's increasingly become a bunch of emails, text messages, etc
 Just another way of bringing creativity to perceived limitations that makes us realise they are not limitations at all
 Keep looking back at guidelines and keep seeing things that give me a sense that this could be a really nice chapter with good ideas for people about what a 'collaborative ss' might be about
 Like shaking up expectations of what serious study has to be.
 Mmm yes, that reminds me that part of Brandon's enthusiasm was about our proposition about this being a chapter about research through PLAY
 Nice! Cos playing is fun and inherently about creating something new, and so that's a nice idea to bring into the academy
 Perhaps we can draw on ideas from play based pedagogy (wow that's a lot of p's!) And make a case that research (esp ss research) is also about learning [Helen protests here that Rachel has skipped O!]
 Oh dear Re – P -t
 Play has a serious side too. It allows you to try out different roles and ideas in a safe environment. That is the essence of play pedagogy
 Quite interesting that arts based research, and creativity are accepted parts of the conversation about research methods but play and fun are not things that I think I've encountered in those conversations
 Really! I wonder what the hang up is? Is it that play is associated with children and not serious enough for the grown-up business of research. Children are researchers extraordinaire. Imagine if we took our lead from them.
 So I can already see 4 nice ideas about collaborating by playing improv games: fun = life affirming as per stuff that came out of our chapter; the pedagogical value of play; maybe part of that but maybe separate is the idea that playing these games supports perspective taking (reflective practice); and lastly that the 'rules' of the games provide structure/rigour for data generation
 That's a terrific summary. Thanks!
 Ur welcome
 Very funny!
 Well this is going quite well actually
 Xciting proposition
 Yes and I do truly have a sense that this has been a productive way to open up the thinking about the chapter
 Zealot quant researchers may not agree with what we have done, but it has indeed helped us get to the task and shown that worthwhile ideas can be dug up out of playful activity.
 (Rachel & Helen, Alphabet)*

While you might imagine playing a game would be the opposite of serious contemplation, it actually formalised the structure of our research meeting and was a

surprisingly efficient and effective way to collaboratively generate data. The clear rules for structured turn taking encouraged us to maintain an unusually high level of focus and enabled us to do a surprising amount of deep thinking in a short space of time. The additional constraint of having a predetermined starting letter for each turn sparked lateral and divergent thinking through which we generated several new insights, without ever feeling pressure to be clever or creative.

14.11 Conclusion

We undertake play-based self-study research not just because it is fun (and it really *is* great fun), but because it embodies our value of collaboration and supports and empowers us to challenge the status quo. The presence of a ‘playmate’ in this form of collaborative self-study emboldens us to be brave and take risks as we push back at the neoliberal research culture of academic institutions. Through playing together we know we are not alone and that we have each other’s back when we bend expectations and choose different values to pursue in our work than those that are typically rewarded in academia. Through our exploration of the various interlinked aspects of play as stance, sense-making process, pedagogy, attitude, and relational dynamic, we have come to a deeper understanding of why games can support our reflection and lead to discovery of new insight into our professional roles. We invite readers to join our play and experience these joyful and invigorating possibilities too.

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