ACUADS Australian Council of University Art & Design Schools

Advanced Play Design: Play as a Methodology for Creative Practice Research

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Abstract

Play can be generative and collaborative but also provocative and disruptive, transgressing established ways of knowing, doing and thinking to open up new possibilities. Although there is emerging recognition of the capacity of play in learning and teaching in higher education contexts, scholars have noted that play-based methods remain underutilized and devalued in university settings. This paper presents a pedagogic methodology in which play is adopted in a studio-based postgraduate program to challenge conventional and standardized approaches in animation, games and interactivity and expand student's creative practice in novel ways. Through a critical reflection on the aims, practice and impact of these playful methods, we highlight the importance of play in fostering community, experimentation and collaboration in creative practice research within higher education contexts.

Keywords: Play, Creative Practice Research, Playful Pedagogy, Studio-based Learning

Introduction

Play re-imagines how we might relate with the world and others, inviting expressive and different ways of seeing and experiencing things (Sicart 2022). Despite emerging interest, play remains an undervalued and contentious phenomenon in universities. Sometimes considered a peripheral diversion or lacking rigour in the context of academic pedagogy, the role of play in tertiary settings is not well understood (James & Nerantzi, 2019). Scholars have noted multiple tensions and impediments for this lack of understanding; the performance-focused and instrumental imperatives of neoliberal-driven universities that cannot easily quantify or measure playful exploration (Leather 2020, Jensen et al 2021), the constraints of traditional pedagogical models that privilege standardisation and one-way lecture delivery (Forbes 2021), a perception that adopting play in tertiary-level education

demands excessive time, space and resources (Swank 2012) and a limited understanding of the value of playful learning in universities (James 2022, Jørgensen & Skovbjerg 2023).

Although integrating play as a foundational pedagogical approach remains challenging, emerging studies have highlighted the capacity of play for engendering valuable and active learning and teaching experiences. Play can support inventive and imaginative approaches and perspectives (Whitton 2022, Holflod 2022), deepen agency and motivation through experiential learning (Forbes, 2021), cultivate social learning environments for communality and collaboration (Nørgård 2021, Whitton & Langan 2018) and ignite experimentation through embracing creative risk-taking (James & Nerantzi 2019).

With relatively few empirical studies on play within higher education settings, this paper presents a case study that shares the playful methodological approach of the Advanced Play Design course in the Master of Animation, Games and Interactivity (MAGI) program at RMIT University. The playful methods that drive the Advanced Play Design course are examined with an outline of the aims, activities and impact of these methods on students' practice and learning. In presenting a case study of playful methods in a studio-based higher education course, the paper offers a methodological consideration of how the practice of play can inform creative practice in new and novel ways. It also offers preliminary theoretical and conceptual frameworks that underpin the methods, with the intention of expanding our understanding of playful pedagogies in relation to creative practice research.

MAGI, Advanced Play Design and Creative Practice Research

MAGI is a postgraduate coursework program at RMIT University (Melbourne, Australia) that builds on three decades of rigorous studio-based teaching and learning in animation, games and interactivity. Focusing on reflective practice across theoretical and practical aspects of production, MAGI has guided and supported innovative practitioners through experimentation as a key force in student's creative endeavours.

The introduction of the Advanced Play Design course in 2015 extended this experimental and playful ethos into a central pedagogy within the MAGI program. Underpinned by experiential learning (Dewey, 1938), action research (Lewin, 1944), social constructivist learning (Vygotsky, 1978) and reflective practice (Schon, 1992), Advanced Play Design is a studio-based course encouraging playful community-building, collaboration and experimental practice. Students create short experimental production exercises in response to weekly themes, and situate these in the field with relevant theories, scholarship and practice. Positioned as a 'playground' for students to expand their practice in novel ways, the Advanced Play Design course invites students to examine and question existing patterns, habits and conventions. In acting as a 'counterpoint' to known, standardised and established ways of practice, students uncover unexpected, distinctive and idiosyncratic directions, methods and outcomes. It is an opportunity for unorthodox approaches they wouldn't necessarily undertake in other courses within the MAGI program.

Advanced Play Design uses play as both the means and subject of inquiry for students' creative practice research. Through their inquiry-based learning students critically reflect on

their making and experiences as they interpret and synthesise relevant research and theoretical perspectives of play into their practice. This integrated scholarship framework supports students' dual identities as both artist and researcher, emphasising their role as reflective practitioners in which creative thinking and action are intertwined through practice. Improvisation, tinkering, chance, social interaction and experimentation are at the forefront of this engagement, encouraging an unstructured, curious and autotelic engagement rather than following prescribed or known approaches. Students look for 'openings' and gaps in practice within animation, games and interactivity, seeking alternative and divergent possibilities rather than replicating existing and dominant industry workflows, trends and pipelines.

The activities and projects in the course are student-led, with freedom in their directions and choice of medium, materials and approaches. Each week students are presented with a THEME to respond to, they describe a METHOD, find CONTEXT to their response, create their RESPONSE and provide a brief critical REFLECTION on what they developed. The methodological model of Advanced Play Design is underpinned by a set of principles and approaches aim to cultivate alternative, experimental and playful ways of engaging with creative practice. It uses a transdisciplinary model, drawing on practices in urban play, experimental animation, speculative design, public art and maker culture.

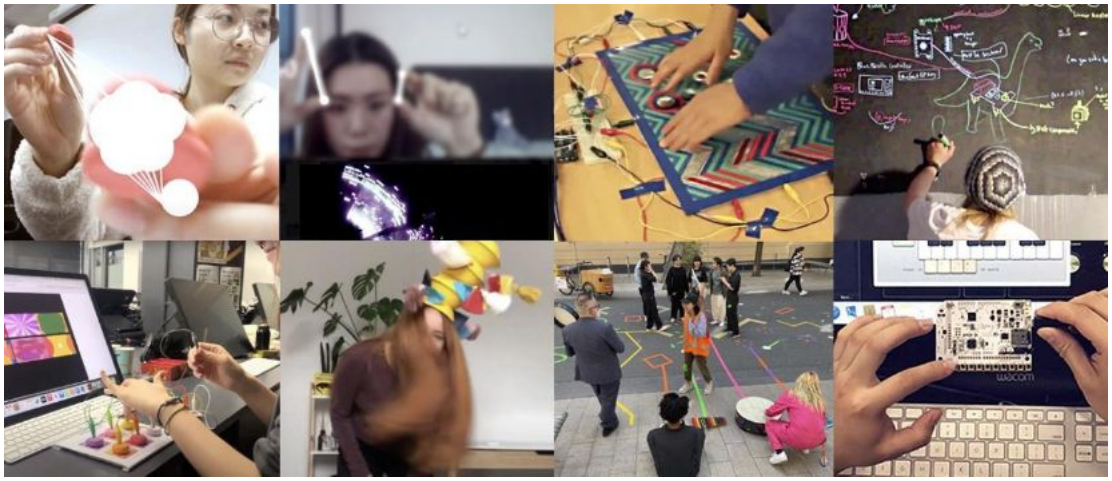

Figure 1: Projects and events from Advanced Play Design, RMIT University

Play as a Methodology in Advanced Play Design

What does it mean to think of play as a methodology in creative practice research? In Advanced Play Design, students explore play through diverse platforms, technigues and forms including analogue music games, experimental animation, interactive experiences, installation art, augmented and virtual reality works. However, it is the methods enacted in the course rather than the tools, platforms or technologies that are central to the playful pedagogical approach. The methods outlined below that drive the Advanced Play Design course are not prescriptive or intended as a formulaic 'model', play is far too nebulous and complex for this. Rather they are a flexible and preliminary set of methods that will continue to evolve and adapt.

Everyone is already Playing

Play is a way of experiencing aspects of our everyday life. We start Advanced Play Design with a discussion on how we often engage with play intuitively through familiar activities that we may not recognise as play. Simple and everyday activities such as tracing fingers on a fogged-up window, jumping in puddles down the street or more structured rule-based play such as sports are examples of this. This initial discussion with students uncovers and develops their current understanding and experience of play, giving students the reassurance that play is both innate and embedded in the everyday in diverse ways, encompassing not just enjoyment but also risk, provocation, dissonance and surprise.

This discussion is followed by students reflecting on and sharing how they already play in and through their own practice. For example, they might have animated 'on-the-go' with a straight-ahead approach instead of planning with a storyboard or animatic. Or they might have modified or customised the default effect parameters in 3D software. In the context of a postgraduate program, practice can sometimes be perceived as prioritising expertise and 'productive' techniques. Play and playfulness may seem incongruous with this, often associated with non-seriousness. However, this two-part discussion advocates for the capacity and benefits of play and playfulness for everyone, highlighting that students already have innate potential and tacit knowledge to draw on in exploring their practice through play.

Playing Together

Play brings people together through social connections, collaboration and cooperation. While each student has their own creative practice, Advanced Play Design encourages students to also come together as a community in and outside of the studio. Through engaging in play together, they directly experience and see the affective, expressive and potential of play in not only their own practice, but others as well.

Collaborative events and activities are staged that connect with the weekly themes. This is an opportunity to learn about play by playing, students relating to and interacting with each other through simple activities that encourage social interaction and co-operation. For example, in the Play and Time week, each student was given a found object in the studio space such as a spoon, a mug or a stapler. One student was invited to keep time, playing a simple rhythm, and other students were then instructed to join in, making sounds using the given objects in any way they liked. The 'timekeeper' would then change the tempo of their beat, and everyone responded to that change through their play. This became a moment of co-creation, collective listening and collaborative sonic improvisation. Although students at MAGI share a common studio environment throughout their studies, opportunities for collaboration are often confined to project-based activities. In this context, the activities undertaken in Advanced Play Design represent relatively rare opportunities for social interaction and forms of 'non-serious' collective creativity within the academic setting. Students also collaborate with each other on their responses, often working with others that have different practices to open up divergent ways of thinking through making and blending techniques and approaches. Through inviting others to play-test and engage with their works, students challenge their assumptions about how others may engage with the interactive and playable works. Some also deliberately eschew the expected experiences of

players or participants in designing works that might behave or respond differently. Playing together in these ways encourages the social, participatory and shared experiences within the group.

Playing through Practice
Students explore ways of 'doing' their practice through play, discovering and developing a diverse range of actions and processes led by the propositions and guides of each theme. We discuss and demonstrate how play can be engaged with through an active and open approach to making - for example, flipping things around, mixing things up, jamming with, letting go of, freestyling and matching with. These process-driven prompts offer a helpful, hands-on start and means to experiment with methods and techniques. As well as using play as an 'action' in their practice, the notion of playfulness as an 'attitude' is also valuable. We discuss this in terms of being loose, incidental, or whimsical, among others. These often open up performative and experiential ways of practice which emphasise experimentation and question existing standardised pipelines and proficiencies.

As a starting point for conceptualising each of their responses, students engage with the weekly theme by first outlining their own connections between Play, the Theme and their Practice. These are some examples for the week focusing on Play and Stillness:

Mixing Up (Play) Ambiance (Stillness) in Mobile Augmented Reality (Practice)

Improvising (Play) Temporal Moments (Stillness) in Experimental Animation (Practice)

Flipping (Play) Slowness (Stillness) through Alternative Controllers (Practice)

Loose (Play) Attention (Stillness) in 3D Open World Environments (Practice)

Incidental (Play) Reflection (Stillness) in Interactive Projection Mapping (Your Practice)

Freestyling (Play) Exploration (Stillness) in Urban Street Games (Practice)

These self-directed intersections between Play, Theme and Practice provides a prompt for initiating some possible playful actions and processes the students then explore and construct through their creative response. Play is undertaken through their specific practice orientation.

Contextualise and Reflect
Play is harnessed as both a subject and means of inquiry in Advanced Play Design, with students situating their creative practice endeavours with scholarly and theoretical understandings of play. This combination of reflection/practice and making/knowing is a cyclic and interconnected process, enabling students to develop an awareness of their activities in relation to others and their field. In contextualising their making, students progressively build a wider understanding for impact and significance in not only their practice, but also for their field.

Through their investigation of existing play forms and theories to situate their responses, students are introduced to tenets of creative practice research. In doing so, they develop an understanding of practice that is driven through questions and inquiries, positioning their work in relation to their field. They reflect on their experience and activities each week: What are the elements and characteristics of your practice you are drawn to? Who else would find this significant? Where else would you take it from here? Adopting this reflective approach in and on their playful practice through writing, documentation, discussion and play itself offers valuable associations and insights which gives their activities a rigour that informs future directions. Even 'failure' is considered a valuable outcome with students evaluating experimentation that may not have 'worked'. It's an opportunity to be messy - to test and tinker without the fear of 'failure' or adhering to the 'right' way of production.

Creators who Play

The translation of these playful methods into practice has been demonstrated in not only the academic studio setting, but also in public contexts. Students have extended their playful practice outside of Advanced Play Design as playing creators and creators of play, this recognition of their practice outside of the institution indicative of the pedagogical impact of the methodology. These playful approaches, understandings and techniques gave students permission to take risks, test ideas, and respond to unexpected directions, which strengthened both their creative confidence and ability to adapt their practice to different contexts. This bridge between experimentation and professional practice has enabled students to recognise the opportunities for play to extend their practice in new ways and share this with audiences beyond the educational setting.

A notable opportunity for students is the strong relationship with Advanced Play Design and the Future Play Lab at RMIT University that "works with local government and industry partners connecting speculative design, creative placemaking, extended realities and urban play to explore new ways of being in the world". The director of the lab Dr Troy Innocent has invited students and graduates to develop and stage various prototypes, projects and workshops in public events including Urban Play School and Playable City Melbourne which explore how playful activations can respond to the context, communities and future of urban environments. Urban Play School brings together an interdisciplinary team of students who explore urban play as a mode of engaging with public space and culture. The most recent Urban Play School re-imagined the university as a 'playable campus' (Harwood et al, 2024), in which students developed experimental street games and installations as a creative place-making activity. Some notable projects included *Collectors* (Asperga, 2024) which explored the translation of cultural values in urban play, experimenting with how elements of theatre and the physical designs of an urban game (i.e. props, stage layout, costumes) could be experienced as a narrative and *Symphony With* (Lin & Leong, 2024) which is a playable music sculpture or 'sensory toy' that invites collaboration between people to generate an improvised composition of sound. As players touch patterns and icons on the cardboard sculpture, they activate a symphony of sounds. To activate all the sculpture sounds, players must physically come in contact with one another to create the composition.

A collaborative project developed in Advanced Play Design titled *Skit* (Stacey, 2024) was commissioned for Playable City Melbourne, a program of public events and creative works

staged in the streets of the city during Melbourne International Games Week. *Skit* is an outdoor social street game that creatively marks a public space like a boardgame as a novel invitation to use our bodies as a game piece. Players make decisions on which route to take based on what potential bodily challenges come with it (indicated by symbols marked on the ground) and are invited to perform movements and gestures of their choice when they land (according to the colours). The body becomes its own kind of game system, a performative mode of engagement with the game.

These outward-focused projects with public and community engagement create opportunities for contributing to the civic identity of cities through urban play. Engineers, architects, biologists, gardeners, artist, designers, and composers all contribute to the 'bigger picture' of urbanism through their different approaches and ways of thinking through 'problems'. As creative practitioners, what are the ways we can not only investigate problems and opportunities but also pose new propositions and questions? How can this be encouraged, practiced and learnt?

Conclusion

Although this playful methodology offers a model for engendering the potential benefits of play there are several limitations and challenges of a play-based pedagogy. For a number of students' spontaneity, novelty, improvisation, uncertainty and experimentation are uneasy approaches and attitudes to embrace in creative practice research, particularly those that value more predictable and 'efficient' methods. For these students, developing confidence with such approaches can take time, requiring an adjustment period as they gradually become accustomed to working with greater openness, ambiguity and uncertainty. In a broader context, implementing play within creative practice research can be difficult in a neoliberal university context because play often resists the demands for easily measurable outcomes, productivity and efficiency that increasingly shape academic work. Play may sit uneasily alongside performance metrics, quantifiable requirements, and expectations of research productivity (Leather et al 2020, Nørgård 2024).

Despite the performance-focused and instrumental imperatives of neoliberal-driven universities, there is emerging recognition of the power of play in higher education contexts. This playful methodology embedded within a postgraduate course offers a framework to make and think about creative practice research, supporting an ethos of surprise, inclusion, ambiguity, creative risk-taking and experimentation. In learning to become open to unexpected encounters and experiences in their practice, students discover novel approaches and insights that they may not have pursued by adhering to convention, known habits or standardised workflows. Ultimately, these play-based methods prompt not only ways of encouraging idiosyncratic and distinctive practice in animation, games and interactivity but also offer a critical and reflective lens that questions established ways of doing and thinking.

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Acknowledgments:
We want to acknowledge and thank the students and staff in the Master of Animation, Games and Interactivity (MAGI) program at RMIT University and Dr Troy Innocent, director of the Future Play Lab.

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Uyen Nguyen (Yomeci Play) is a designer, researcher and educator whose creative practice develops sound-based works, public art, interactive installations, experimental games and urban play works. Her site-specific works have been shared in national and international venues, events and exhibitions. Uyen is a PhD candidate in the RMIT's School of Design exploring the intersection of place-play-sound-people and a lecturer in RMIT's Master of Animation, Games and Interactivity and Future Play Lab.