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**Judith Pintar** (<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0308-8637>)

Judith Pintar, PhD, is an Associate Teaching Professor, and faculty Director of the Game Studies & Design Program in the School of Information Sciences at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. She directs the Playful by Design campus initiative. In 2020 she was named an Illinois Distinguished Teacher Scholar. Her research includes gameful pedagogies, studio-based learning, immersive storytelling, and science and technology studies (STS). She is the author of *Information Sciences: the basics* (Routledge, 2023).

**Lisa Bievenue** (<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4932-5095>)

Lisa Bievenue, M.A., M.P.H., is Director of Informatics Programs in the School of Information Sciences at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. She directs the cross-campus interdisciplinary Informatics minor and Ph.D. programs, the CU Community Fab Lab, and the Game Studies & Design minors (undergraduate and graduate) and is guiding the development of a new Master of Science in Game Development. Since 2000 most of her education research efforts have been directed toward research on making and design activities in middle school classrooms and project evaluation of education and outreach projects in computer and computational science.

# PLAYFUL BY DESIGN: A THIRD SPACE COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE FOR GAME STUDIES & DESIGN

JUDITH PINTAR, PHD

Teaching Associate Professor

Director of Games Studies & Design

School of Information Sciences

University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign

LISA BIEVENUE, M.A.

Director of Informatics Programs

School of Information Sciences

University of Illinois Urbana Champaign

## Abstract

This paper traces the history and development of *Playful by Design*, a cross-campus initiative at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign from which the interdisciplinary Game Studies & Design program emerged. Interdisciplinary collaborations bridge differences between academic cultures and can spur innovative research and new programs and initiatives. Games, understood both as objects of study and as a methodology for conducting research on topics other than games, are moving into the mainstream within multiple academic disciplines; that doesn't mean that interdisciplinary game studies must disappear as an intellectual endeavor. Playful by Design has become a local and global community of practice in which shared and overlapping interests in game-relevant research of all kinds, but also in design, pedagogy, and technology, provide a durable interdisciplinary third space. As a network, it can welcome multidisciplinary activities pursued by teachers, scholars, artists, and designers within their own disciplines and in their own ways. Through creative collaborations, the sharing of resources, and the growth of team-based studio work and other experiential learning, this approach facilitates the emergence of transdisciplinary and glocal aspirations. These include shared values of accessibility and inclusion, reflected in how we teach and conduct research, and in the design and creation of games, simulations, and other interactive and immersive experiences that address the critical shared challenges of our times.

**Keywords:** *Game Studies, Game Design, Game Development, Community of Practice, Third Space, Glocal, Collaboration, Accessibility, Emerging Technologies, Playful by Design*

## Introduction

Something remarkable is going on in higher education, which is that games – as object of inquiry, as pedagogy, and as research methodology – seem to be turning up everywhere. It is no longer considered odd for an instructor to ask college students to play a game in class, nor is it creatively groundbreaking to assign them a group project that involves designing or prototyping a game. It doesn't cause much uproar anymore if a graduate student announces that they are going to collect data through a video game they are designing for that purpose, on a dissertation topic that has nothing to do with games. Game-like simulations, interfaces, apps, performances, and media are now uncontroversial in a growing number of disciplines as a legitimate area of scholarly focus.

Game studies emerged at the turn of the twenty-first century, an era when interdisciplinary activities were valued, but unidisciplinarity remained the organizational norm. As scholars began to explore the “field imaginary” for an area of scholarship that could attend to the appearance and increasing significance of digital games in society, they attempted to establish “shared syntax” and “tacit assumptions” for the new field (Pease 1990). Boundary work between humanists and social scientists over the proper object of inquiry for game studies scholarship provided public spectacle, but had little productive effect (Murray, 2005; Williams, 2005). Two decades later, the task of establishing a consensus-based imaginary for a game studies *discipline* has receded even further from the realm of the possible; game-relevant scholarship has turned out to be extraordinarily capacious.

Depending on scholars' theoretical curiosities and methodological inclinations, the object of inquiry might be games, gaming, or gamers, including their motivations, identities, communities, relations, networks or cultures. Others look at game preservation, aesthetics, audiences, narratives, productions, pedagogies, design practices, the development and testing of attendant skills, tools, and technologies, the nature of play and playfulness (which might be cultural, social, psychological, physiological, psychotherapeutic, etc.), or any combination of these, as well as the critical, historical, social, and sociotechnical contexts in which they are all embedded.

Historical and ongoing tensions at the borders of game studies over what counts as legitimate areas of inquiry and methodology reflect largely unreconcilable epistemologies that have defined traditional distinctions between the humanities, arts, social sciences, and science and technology fields. Deterding (2017) has questioned the degree to which interdisciplinary research is authentically occurring within interdisciplinary game studies, pointing to the tenor of the critique that some scholars in humanities lob towards gamification researchers in computer science and engineering (Bogost, 2015). From the other direction, the methodological norms of quantitative STEM fields can also be micro-aggressively deployed to devalue the qualitative contributions of humanists, and both groups may express skepticism towards faculty in the creative arts and design fields whose productive output doesn't always fit what they have been trained to recognize as scholarly research. None of this intra-disciplinary boundary-making is new (Gould, 2003).

Deterding also warns that promising interdisciplinary initiatives which succeed in establishing new areas of inquiry sometimes end up experiencing a Pyrrhic victory. As interdisciplinary ideas move into the academic mainstream, faculty with a stake in the tenure system, who are highly incentivized to research and publish within their own academic silos, will draw back from interdisciplinary collaborations as a result, and conform with disciplinary norms in describing what they do (Jacobs & Frickel, 2009). Game-relevant research proposals and reports, in disciplines as diverse as education, media studies, and engineering, for example, may avoid the words “game” or “play” entirely, a strategy that increases their chances of getting funded, and aids the disciplinary mainstreaming of their work.

As he attempts to sketch out a convergent, interdisciplinary “game science,” Klabbers (2018) ends up making a stronger argument for the impossibility of that project, given differences in epistemology between fields. But both Deterding and Klabbers conclude with the same practical advice: given the inevitable multidisciplinary of game studies, it would be more productive to recenter the field around *design* practice. For Klabbers, that shift involves expending resources to build interdisciplinary centers and other third spaces to support collaborative design in teaching and research. Gekker (2021) also grapples with the history of gatekeeping in the field of game studies, concluding that such squabbles are moot, since game studies will never integrate into a single discipline. He advises that an inclusive vision for the complexity of the field requires reorienting the whole intellectual gestalt from games to *play*.

The term “third space” has a complicated origin; it rests foundationally on the concept of third places first described by

Oldenburg and Brissett (1982), locations neither home nor work, where sociability unrelated to family or professional life takes place. It has also been influenced by the post-colonial writings of critical theorist Homi Bhabha (see Bhandari, 2022). In relationship to higher education, third space is the preferred term to identify locations within college campuses which exist outside the disciplinary and hierarchical organizational structure of higher education (Whitchurch, 2012). Libraries, maker spaces, centralized IT help desks, and other service-oriented units such as teaching or innovation centers, have all been identified as third spaces (Beavers et al, 2019). As service units, they are usually intended to serve the whole campus, even if their geographical location makes them more accessible to students and faculty in some units than others.

In this paper we trace the history and development of Playful by Design, a cross-campus third space from which the interdisciplinary Game Studies & Design program at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign emerged. We begin by examining the different needs of game studies programs and their students versus programs offering professional training in game development. After exploring the history of Playful by Design at the University of Illinois, we return to consider the challenges and potentials associated with interdisciplinarity in higher education, and the need for global networking and transdisciplinary collaboration.

## Game Studies & Game Design

Scholars who do game-relevant research approach their research questions through their discipline-specific lenses and corresponding biases. This can also be true within disciplines.

English department faculty who engage in literary criticism, for example, are generally not the same people whose job it is to teach creative writing. A similar division of labor can be found in the distinction between studio art and art history (Ramey, 2007). The tension that sometimes appears in academic environments between making things and critically studying them is relevant to the way that game studies and game design programs establish themselves on college campuses. There are distinct differences in pedagogical approaches and course content offered by academic programs that support academic game studies, whether in disciplinary or interdisciplinary programs, and those that train students for the game and game-adjacent industries by offering professional training in game development.

Academic game studies, with its multidisciplinary roots, has had a complex history. Education researchers, particularly in the fields of curriculum and instruction and educational psychology, had begun to lay the groundwork for investigating games in education by the middle of the 20th century, establishing the field of learning studies (Malone, 1981). In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, education scholars explore how games, game-like elements, playful approaches, and digital learning environments more generally, can affect motivation, empathy, embodiment, or immersion to improve learning outcomes (Di Natale et al, 2020). Humanistic fields such as literary criticism, semiotics, and performance studies, as well as social science fields including anthropology, sociology, psychology, and political science, addressed play and games long before the rise of video games, when human-centered approaches and user experience (UX) methodologies began to be applied to game research (Spiel and Gerling, 2021). The journal *Simulation & Gaming* was

launched in 1972, encouraging the use of games as simulations for experimental research across many domains.

In the late twentieth century the study of play was furthered by the International Board Game Studies Association (Karabinus, 2022). Academic game studies journals began to appear a decade later, *Board Game Studies* in 1998 and *Game Studies* in 2001 (Aarseth, 2021). Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1982) suggested the term “ludology” to refer to the academic study of games, although it only came into common use in the late 1990s when a collision of academic cultures problematized the field imaginary of game studies. The narratology-ludology dispute was not the only tension in the period (Pintar, 2023); early conceptions also excluded the concerns of feminist scholars (Phillips, 2020), and ignored transnational perspectives on games and play (Lindtner and Dourish, 2011).

The practical result of these disputes is that game studies programs that view games as an object of scholarly inquiry do not always offer courses in game design. From the other direction, programs whose purpose is to train students in the professional skills necessary for a job in the game industry do not always recognize the value of coursework that addresses the social context within which games are situated. A 2015 survey of 73 game-related programs found that while the most highly ranked all offered game design and development courses, 39% of the surveyed programs did not include a single course on critical game studies (Steinkuehler, 2015, cited by Deterding, 2017: 526). The earliest college curricula provided skills-based professional training in game development that was responsive to industry needs. Significant financial investment from game industry sponsors occurred at the



turn of the twenty-first century, notably Nintendo's support of Digipen Institute of Technology, one of the first game design programs, which opened its doors in 1998; Sony's sponsorship of the game program at the University of California at Santa Cruz; and the contributions of Electronic Arts to the creation of the Florida Interactive Entertainment Academy at the University of Central Florida (Swain, 2009). With faculty members drawn from industry, these programs and others that followed provided an educated workforce for the game industry and improved the prospects for indie game developers (Pearce, 2020). Attention to academic game studies at these institutions followed.

There are clear signs that the salience of the divide between theoretically rich, critical, and research-based multidisciplinary game studies on one side, and the fast moving, skill-based training for professional game development on the other, may be starting to diminish, for several reasons. First, serious games and gamified simulations have become valuable research methods, applicable to any domain of academic inquiry. It is no longer uncommon for PhD students interested in games to want to both make a game (or gamified simulation) and then to study it, or to use it to collect data, even in disciplines where making things has not been an acceptable scholarly approach (Houghton, 2022). In a world where games are becoming a mainstream research methodology, PhD students increasingly want, and arguably need, the same skills-based courses provided to students in professional design-based programs.

Secondly, a recognition of the relevance of critical game studies within professional game design training is increasing.

Over the past few decades, feminist and queer scholarship have made visible and given voice to the experiences of people previously marginalized within the game industry (Cullen et al, 2022). It is now well-established that exclusionary practices based on gender, gender identity, sexual preference, race, class, and ability, run through gaming cultures, and that the content of games reflects a similar unchecked toxicity in the social order (TaeHyuk Keum & Hearn, 2022). Critical perspectives are crucial to transforming society, and for the same reason they are necessary for transforming the industries that reflect society (Fairrel, 2023).

Since Gamergate – the name given to a violent right-wing backlash against feminist critique of video game culture – consensus has grown on the importance of engaging students in discussions about inclusion and equity. This has provided an opening for critical game studies courses to enter professional game design training programs (Chess and Shaw, 2015; de Castel & Skardzius, 2019). It is true that the needs of students wishing to pursue academic careers are different from the skill-based training needed for professions in the game industry, but a curriculum that engages students in discussion about Gamergate, while also offering courses in Blender and Unreal Engine, is attending to the intellectual breadth and development of both sets of students.

The chances that a student's academic training will include game design *and* critical game studies courses are likely to be higher in an interdisciplinary school or program than in a program focused on a single disciplinary area (e.g. game programming courses offered in a Computer Science program, or 3D rendering taught within Art and Design). But

interdisciplinary programs can be challenging to create. In the interdisciplinary field of Environmental Sustainability, the challenge of creating a program that requires collaboration between Humanities, Arts, Social Sciences, and STEM departments, is that they may be situated in entirely different colleges, each with their own cultures and priorities (Reiter et al, 2012). The successful development of interdisciplinary Game Studies & Design at the University of Illinois, illustrates how productive a cross-college collaboration can prove to be.

### **Interdisciplinarity on the Prairie: The Case of the University of Illinois.**

The University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign is located two hours south of Chicago in the prairie lands of Central Illinois. In 1969 a group of students who shared a passion for World War II strategy-based board games formed the "Conflict Simulation Society." The group retained ties with its graduates through the organization of an annual regional event, *Winter War*. Launched in 1974, *Winter War* is the longest consecutively running independent gaming convention in the midwestern United States (Hoepker, 2023). Through the 1960s and 70s both town and campus explored the potential of PLATO, recognized as the first distributed computer-assisted instruction system. PLATO, an acronym for Programmed Logic for Automatic Teaching Operations, was created in 1960 for the Illiac I, the first computer to be built and owned by a university system (Bitzer & Skaperdas, 1969). By the end of the 1970s it had grown to comprise nearly a dozen networked mainframe computers and was connected to thousands of terminals worldwide; by 1975 more than 20% of PLATO's usage was game-related.

The space-based *Empire* (1973) is credited as the first networked multiplayer shooter style action game; *Oubliette* (1977) and *Avatar* (1979) were among the earliest multi-user digital role-playing games (Dear, 2017). Developed in 1976 by local junior high school students, *Avatar* by itself accounted for 6% of all the hours spent on the system between September 1978 and May 1985 (Bartle, 2003).

Given this early appearance of digital gaming amidst that list of technological and gaming "firsts," and the enthusiasm these developments engendered on campus and in the local community, it seems incongruous that Illinois was not in the first or even the second cohort of institutions of higher education to create game design programs. The problem was largely administrative. There has been no roadmap to guide departments in pursuing interdisciplinary degree programs, there was inadequate infrastructure to support them even if they were proposed; and there was little prestige associated with the creation of professional programs in general. Like other highly ranked research universities, the University of Illinois has been a leader in interdisciplinary *research*, but in the creation of interdisciplinary degree programs it came late to the game (Klaassen, R. G. 2018).

The Illinois Informatics Institute was established in 2007 to address the need for interdisciplinary educational programming related specifically to applications of information technologies across domains, including the humanities and the arts. An interdisciplinary Minor degree in Informatics was launched in 2008, followed by an interdisciplinary Informatics PhD in 2012. In this program students may draw committee members from across the campus. The programs are administered



by a director and small staff but governed by a cross-campus faculty curriculum committee. Between 2007 and 2015 the Informatics Institute hosted a series of meetings to discuss the possibility of creating a game design program tailored for students aiming for jobs in the game industry, but there was no incentive for academic units to create professional programs, nor for tenure-line faculty in any program to serve students in other programs and colleges. Students had no way even to pursue dual majors across colleges.

There was never doubt, however, about the need to establish a game program in an interdisciplinary way. It was clear from the outset that no single discipline could serve the breadth of training that is required to introduce students to game studies, but there was no consensus on the best organizational approach to structuring such an interdisciplinary program.<sup>1</sup>

After the failure of early attempts to organize interest, we began again by taking a census – identifying scholars working on game-related research, instructors teaching game studies or game design, and campus units who were attending to student interest in games in other ways. Political Science had long been teaching mathematical game theory; the department of Computer Science had begun offering a short session course on the game development platform Unity; and Gender and Women's Studies had just added a seminar on gender in games. The closer we looked, the more we discovered game-relevant courses

popping up in campus curricula. There was a New Media track within the Studio Art program, and History had recently begun to offer a course using materials designed by the Reacting to the Past Consortium, which supports roleplay in the history classroom (Carnes, 2014). We also found faculty working with emerging technologies in their own scholarly work: a linguistics professor was experimenting with computer-assisted language learning using *Second Life* (Sadler, 2013); in the School of Information Sciences faculty members were investigating the challenge of archiving games (McDonough, 2013); in the Dance department a faculty member had recently completed an interactive dance production featuring dancers carrying networked iPads with an augmented reality (AR) app that allowed the audience to affect the stage action (Toenjes, 2016); and an anthropologist was beginning to use VR technology to create virtual field experiences for her students, for whom the real-life kind would not be accessible (Shackelford et al, 2019).

What we learned about our curricular and human assets in 2015 and 2016 was that while game studies and game design were active on our campus, faculty were pursuing their interests largely in isolation, sometimes as the sole member in their department with an academic interest in games. Likewise, although game-relevant research and teaching was occurring in colleges all across our campus, students whose interests spanned disciplines were not able to access course content or receive faculty mentorship across the span.

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1) Among R1 institutions in the United States, for example, Old Dominion University offers a Game Studies and Design Major within a Bachelor of Science Degree in a department of Interdisciplinary Studies; the University of Delaware seats interdisciplinary Major and Minor degrees in "Game Studies & eSports" in the Department of Languages, Literatures and Culture; and at the University of Pennsylvania, the School of Engineering & Applied Science offers a Digital Media Design Major and uses an interdisciplinary club to bring in Arts & Sciences and Business. Northeastern University has forty-six "combined" majors, with 50% game-related course content.

We were pleased to discover that we were not the only interdisciplinary piece moving on the board. Faculty in the College of Education were applying for campus support for their Technology Innovations in Educational Research and Design (TIER-ED) initiative, to build a cross-campus research community focused on the use of emerging technologies to address critical issues in education (Lindgren & Johnson-Glenberg, 2013; Lane & Yi, 2017). The TIER-ED proposal was a response to the campus Strategic Plan which, in 2014, included as one of its four fundamental goals the development of “Transformative Learning Experiences.” Chief among actions taken to pursue this goal was the creation of a new centralized campus unit, the Center for Innovation in Teaching & Learning (CITL), whose mission was to support faculty across the campus in improving their teaching and their student learning outcomes.

In 2015 CITL professionals developed a prototype of an “active learning classroom” that would be furnished with flexible tables and chairs, collaborative writing services, and advanced audio-video technologies. The IFLEX (Illinois Flexible Learning Experience) initiative launched the following year, provided our courses with classrooms appropriate to their content. CITL also created an Innovation TechHub which provided a walk-in space for students to 3D print or to play VR games. An Innovation Studio with attached VR Lab for the use of tech-intensive courses opened its doors in 2017.

CITL was not the only third space on our campus investing in games. The University Undergraduate Library was also building capacity in game-related services, maintaining a gaming space for the use of students, and a list of game-related

resources on our campus. Informatics itself had already developed a key resource for the emergence of a game studies program through the Champaign-Urbana Community (CUC) Fab Lab, part of a world-wide network of “fabrication laboratories” and makerspaces (Mersand, 2021). In 2015 it began offering classes and became a popular host of youth summer camps teaching 3D fabrication, game design, and game building. The CUC Fab Lab which is open to community members of all ages regardless of their association with the university, is a significant asset for educational outreach to the Champaign and Urbana local communities, supporting a variety of initiatives for children, adult learners, and creatives (Ginger et al, 2012). The Fab Lab has been a frequent host of *CUDO Plays*, an annual board game competition, launched in 2014 by the Champaign-Urbana Design Organization (CUDO) which was to become a key partner in the development of Playful by Design.

Although we found that we had instructional assets and significant faculty interest, courses and instructors were awkwardly distributed across multiple colleges, and could not provide the critical mass we needed. We gazed with envy at game programs that had emerged at schools like University of Southern California (USC), which had the benefit of long-standing film production and animation courses and degree programs. Our campus had never invested in professional training for the entertainment arts, so we had no curricular foundation upon which to build, despite substantial resources on the technology side. There being no obvious path forward towards the creation of an academic degree granting program for either game studies or game design, we worked on community-building.

In 2017 we applied for a “Research Cluster” grant from the Illinois Program for Research in the Humanities (IPRH) – now the Humanities Research Institute (HRI). Titled “Playful by Design,” our proposal promised three things: first to “facilitate the growth of an interdisciplinary community of practice organized around the emergent capacities of play and the design of playful pedagogical spaces, both virtual and real”; second, to hold workshops for faculty, staff, students and members of the CU community (including CUDO Plays and Volition, a local video game development studio); and third, to share the work of our community members in a symposium at the end of the academic year.

We expected this initiative might draw a small group of interested faculty and graduate students to join us at monthly Playful by Design events. More than three hundred people attended the first Playful by Design Symposium, surpassing expectations (Wurth, 2018). When we applied for a second year of IPRH support, we reported that we had “mapped the perimeter of an interdisciplinary game studies community” and that a new collaborative vision had come into focus. The humanities-centered third space on our campus which had provided us with modest start-up funds, also lent us an interdisciplinary credibility which allowed us to move forward with greater confidence. The success of Informatics in creating interdisciplinary Minor and PhD programs, drawing from courses and faculty from across several colleges, demonstrated that interdisciplinary programming and governance could work; the Informatics Minor had in fact grown to be the second most popular minor degree

program on the campus. With unit support gained from our community-building, the cultural capital and intellectual support of IPRH, and the evidence of Informatics’ success, we secured a competitive grant from the Provost’s Office that allowed us to create an academic unit, Game Studies & Design (GSD), to be administered as a new program within Informatics.

Our first two game studies offerings were undergraduate and graduate Minor degrees. The program was organized so that the undergraduate minor can be paired with any major.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, graduate students pursuing the Graduate Minor in Game Studies & Design come to us from Master’s and PhD programs in colleges and departments across our campus. Their participation provides them with an intellectual community that they often lack in their own programs where they may be one of only a few students pursuing a game-related topic.

Three years later a second Investment for Growth grant allowed us to move forward on a professional Master of Science in Game Development program. We shifted to a fully online curriculum after the Covid-19 pandemic changed workplace expectations in the game industries; this also accommodated the needs of non-traditional students, such as those already in industry jobs desiring additional training. The Master’s program includes partnerships with game studios to create internships in students’ second year. They may also opt to work in our own student-run professional game development studio, the Stu/dio.<sup>3</sup>

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2) Game Studies & Design Undergraduate Minor. <https://informatics.ischool.illinois.edu/game-studies-design/>. Retrieved 10 May 2023.

3) Game Studies & Design - the Stu/dio, <http://games.illinois.edu/> Retrieved 10 May 2023.

Our pedagogical trajectory is towards studio-based learning for students in all our programs. Putting students into multidisciplinary teams and facilitating interdisciplinary and professional design projects provides them with portfolios and experiences that more closely match their future workplaces. Because convergence is accelerating in the creative and entertainment arts (Betzler & Leuschen, 2021), interdisciplinary programs may be better suited than traditional unidisciplinary programs to prepare students for the industries and professions of the future.

Just as we expect our game development students to consider critical approaches to game studies, we expect our game studies students to be conversant with game design practice. Since games are increasingly used as a tool for data collection, learning to design, build, and test games and game-like simulations is essential methodological training for students whose topical interest may be anything at all. Our game *development* students may begin working in the game industry or launching indie studios of their own, and circle back to academic game programs. Our game *studies* students might start out in academic careers and find themselves developing games. We want our students to be prepared for whatever opportunities arise.

Our strategic approach of creating undergraduate and graduate minor degree programs, and drawing core and elective courses from participating academic units, was appropriate for us, but this strategy won't work everywhere. Many

institutions worldwide do not offer minor degrees and in others the organizational structure doesn't accommodate course sharing across programs. Playful by Design doesn't provide a specific template for the organization of game studies or game development programs, since every institution must come up with a plan that meets their strategic needs and adapts to their unique constraints. In Portugal, for example, the undergraduate degree program in Videogames at Universidade Lusófona on their Lisboa campus, and the program in Videogames and Multimedia Design on the Porto campus, both offer their students comprehensive interdisciplinary course content. The programs differ because their campus cultures, program goals, resources, capacities, and the interests and pedagogical approaches of directors and faculty vary.<sup>4</sup> Difference is inevitable but can also be of benefit to students by providing them with meaningful choices.

A Playful by Design community can be created around an existing degree-granting program, or it can be the creative catalyst for the kinds of interdisciplinary conversations that allow a program to come into being, as occurred at Illinois. Our case testifies to the fact that it is possible to create a Playful by Design community of practice on a campus that has no academic game studies or game design programs at all. Just because an institution doesn't offer a diploma with the word "game" on it, or lacks infrastructure for interdisciplinary programming, doesn't mean that game studies and game design aren't happening there. When we had a clear need, but no program, we created a community instead.

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4) Universidade Lusófona Lisboa, Undergraduate Videogames, <https://www.ulusofona.pt/en/lisboa/undergraduate/videogames>; Universidade Lusófona Porto, Undergraduate Videogames and Multimedia Design, <https://www.ulusofona.pt/en/porto/undergraduate/videogames-and-multimedia-design>.

## Playful by Design

It had become clear by the second iteration of the Playful by Design Symposium, after we had “mapped the perimeter” of our interdisciplinary community, that it was intellectually diverse, but that participant interest fell largely into one of four buckets. In one group were faculty and students wanting to learn about game development and the video game industry, either because they wanted to design games themselves or because they wanted to teach students how to do so. A second group was more interested in games (by whatever name) as critical, aesthetic, or scientific objects of study. Many of our graduate students fit into this category, along with their faculty mentors, who were engaged in game-related research of their own. A third group that appeared in the Symposia were those whose interest was pedagogical. It comprised faculty and graduate students from the College of Education (many involved with the TIER-ED initiative), CITL staff and other third space professionals tasked with improving teaching and learning. Faculty from across campus were willing to share their playful techniques, gameful pedagogies, or gamified syllabi. Other instructors, or who were teaching in traditional ways, and were interested to learn what others on campus were doing differently. The focus of a fourth group was on game relevant technologies (e.g. interactive, virtual, augmented, and AI-driven) used in game development, on research using games as a methodology, and on improving teaching and learning.

We visualized these four intersecting groups within our community as petals in a lotus-shaped Venn diagram, as the activities that were happening at the intersections of design, research, pedagogy, and technology became more apparent.

We also began to think about how our experience might be relevant to organizing academic game studies communities beyond our campus. Not all universities have the kinds of infrastructure and resources that the University of Illinois provides, but the power of an academic network is that it can grow by creating new connections and establishing working relationships between scholars and institutions, and across borders, and can ideally work to rectify patterns of inequality that face young scholars and designers around the globe.

Playful by Design is a community of practice that *surrounds* game-relevant programs and initiatives. The model is simple, but also transgressive. It begins with the premise that common interest can cut across academic units, bringing together people who wouldn't cross paths if they stayed in their own disciplinary tracks.

Recalling Deterding's (2017) warning about the Pyrrhic victory of interdisciplinary game studies, it is reasonable to fear that scholars who engage in game-related or game-relevant research will be less inclined to publish in interdisciplinary journals once they can publish their game-related work in the flagship journals of their own disciplines. But there are basic structural impediments at work as well: tenure-line faculty are typically constrained by disciplinary obligations. Junior faculty are worried about promotion, while senior faculty are tasked with time-consuming administrative responsibilities after promotion. At neither stage can they necessarily take on the service tasks involved with leading an interdisciplinary charge. They may be passively discouraged from shifting their intellectual energy away from their own disciplines but are sometimes explicitly proscribed from teaching for other

units, or mentoring graduate students pursuing interdisciplinary degrees (James, 2015).

One unintended consequence of this dynamic, intensified by the successful mainstreaming of game studies within separate disciplines, is that it leaves an opening for specialized faculty, third space professionals, and graduate students to take on leadership roles within interdisciplinary game-related initiatives and programs. We view this outcome as counter-intuitively productive, possibly even crucial to the long-term prospects for game studies, and other interdisciplinary programming, for several interconnected reasons.

First, the Illinois case illustrates the clear benefits of launching interdisciplinary initiatives in partnership with academic third spaces and with the help and leadership of the professionals who run them, since fostering cross-campus initiatives is often included in their missions. Third spaces typically serve a whole campus rather than single academic units, so they are designed to foster collaboration rather than competition. They are also broadly inclusive, not only regarding commonly understood categories of identity (e.g. race, religion, class, ability, age, gender, gender-identity, sexual preference), but also with respect to professional status within higher education. Academic third spaces typically welcome all interested stakeholders without prejudice: tenure-line, specialized, visiting, and adjunct faculty; post-docs, graduate, undergraduate and non-degree students; academic professionals, administrative staff, and civil servants. On our campus this welcome has stretched into the local community, to include game designers, game players, local writers,

artists, K-12 teachers, school age children, and members of organizations.

When it is framed as “service,” the labor of third space professionals, much like the overloaded teaching sometimes expected of specialized teaching faculty, may be regarded much as the caretaking work in other social sectors: it is feminized and devalued (O’Donnell, 2019; Seymour, 2022). When scientists put their names on research that was chiefly accomplished by lab assistants, or when historians fail to credit the intellectual labor of archivists in locating and identifying key texts, that is third space labor being rendered invisible as well (Tansey, 2016). Looking to third space professionals for leadership, and acknowledging their contributions, rather than viewing their creative work as a service that they provide, flattens traditional, structurally reproduced hierarchies, and creates a more inclusive intellectual space (Whitchurch, 2023). This is particularly important in programs comprising both academic game studies and professional game development, since these programs often appoint clinical faculty, drawn from professional game studios, who lack postgraduate degrees but will have to work alongside people who do.

The hovering fear is, of course, that an interdisciplinary initiative will sacrifice status or prestige if it doesn’t play the academic game the way it has been designed to be played, utilizing only the hierarchical channels through which power and money flow. The value of having tenured professors in leadership roles when seeking external funding or making the case for internal campus support in creating a new academic program, center or initiatives is obvious; their status

engenders confidence in grantors, which can affect the outcome of their proposals.

What we have seen on our own campus, however, is that specialized faculty have consistently been the source of much of the interdisciplinary energy and activity within their own units, often serving as the key collaborating link with the Playful by Design community. Despite their liminality within the social order (or perhaps because of it), specialized faculty have made essential contributions to new courses, programs, and innovative organizational structures (Kligyte et al, 2022). They may be effective networkers, enrolling allies into collaborative schemes and leveraging third space resources. Their productivity and creativity, rather than their status, wins them the respect and support of tenure-track colleagues, directors, and deans. In organizational theory they might be classified as “boundary spanners” who can connect units and individuals across domains (Bordagna, 2019; Williams, 2013).

We would argue that when the social relevance of a status-based hierarchy is reduced within a community of practice, it may be easier to transcend differences between clashing academic cultures or incompatible methodological norms. In this light, an interdisciplinary initiative is strengthened by the spread of multidisciplinary interests in a shared area like games – as long as the center can hold.

Some academic conflicts are intractable because the epistemological differences that inform research questions and methodological differences are irresolvable. This type of conflict, however, only reduces opportunities for collaborative research. Interdisciplinary research can create discomfort

for scholars when they feel they are being asked to accept a methodological approach they disagree with or wouldn't use on their own. Listening to a colleague from another discipline describe their own research in a multidisciplinary setting is less likely to trigger a defensive or emotional reaction since the approaches of the speaker and the listener are not in contention in that context, even when there exists a larger area of overlapping interest.

This is why it may not matter so much if the research being done by individuals who are part of a Playful by Design community occurs within, and not between, their disciplines. In the magic circle of a community of practice, new and previously unimagined kinds of collaboration may occur between two scholars who will never publish together in the same journal, but who can work together without difficulty on the creation of a new technology, or the planning of an academic program, or the organizing of an event, or the designing of a game. Maker spaces, design studios, and immersive labs serve as the magic circles within the larger magic circle of our community of practice (Leorke & Wyatt, 2022).

Interdisciplinarity requires convergence; multidisciplinarity only asks for tolerance and collegiality. The creation of a third space community of practice can advance both of these experiences, providing opportunities for interdisciplinary collaborations and multidisciplinary sharing. More importantly, it creates opportunities for the emergence of *transdisciplinary* aspirations. Transdisciplinary research, associated with collaborative processes of knowledge production (Pohl et al, 2021) is not a new idea – it reaches back to the 1970s when systems approaches were being applied to the project



of transforming higher education (Jantsch, 1970). It is gaining new traction now, as the role of third spaces in facilitating transdisciplinary initiatives is better understood (Veles, 2022).

Transdisciplinarity is associated with *glocal* teaching and learning, an approach in which pedagogical and curricular development integrates local challenges with global considerations. Such transdisciplinary challenges include sustainability, social responsibility, and justice (Patel & Lynch, 2013). Dennison (2018) charts the progressive continuum of collaborative academic work, moving from disciplinarity to multidisciplinary to interdisciplinarity to transdisciplinarity, with each step on that path providing increased capacity to tackle more complicated challenges. As multiple knowledge streams and value systems come together in safe interdisciplinary spaces, transdisciplinary novelty emerges: new knowledge, new creations, new solutions.

Playful by Design is both a local community of practice and a global network; by combining these considerations it works towards becoming a glocal third space. The shared values of accessibility and inclusion are transdisciplinary aspirations which promote the creation and application of interactive and immersive narratives, games, and simulations to address the critical challenges of our times.

We are faced as educators with helping our students come of age in a world marred by intolerance, greed, and increasing inequalities. Humanity's social and political choices daily increase the suffering of the vulnerable and marginalized, destroy habitats, poison waterways, and not only fail to address the disastrous effects of climate change, but

deliberately misinform the public about the damage being done. Disinformation and propaganda around the globe are deployed through interactive, immersive and AI technologies – *using the same design practices that we use to create games for entertainment or education* (Berkowitz, 2021; Siegel & Doty, 2023). This circumstance demands our transdisciplinary attention and response.

The name "Playful by Design" has two meanings. It refers to the design of playful things, of course, acknowledging that the shared object of inquiry in the community is *play* in every sense of that word. But it also implies that the study and applications of playfulness should be intentional, done with purpose. At the heart of Playful by Design is the hope that our students will take what they learn and use it for the good of human society, other living beings, and the planet we share.

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