The Playful Academic: An Editorial

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THE EMERGENCE OF THE PLAYFUL ACADEMIC

In recent years there has been a growing interest in playful approaches to higher education research, teaching and learning. Prominent works on the academic practice of playfulness in higher education such as *The power of play in higher education* (James & Nerantzi, 2019), *Playful learning – Events and activities to engage adults* (Whitton & Moseley, 2019), *Framing play design – A hands-on guide for designers, learners and innovators* (Gudiksen & Skovbjerg, 2020), 'The physiology of play: potential relevance for higher education' (Koeners & Francis, 2020) and 'Playful learning in higher education: developing a signature pedagogy' (Nørgård, Toft-Nielsen & Whitton, 2017) have emerged.

They share a sense that the traditional ways of studying, teaching and researching are not enough for contemporary education – or that such traditional academic activities should feel more engaging, enjoyable, rewarding and nurturing. We can, through these works and others, begin to glimpse more playful formats, processes and practices becoming visible within our institutions. Arguably, playfulness drives a change that goes beyond the locus of engaging and effective learning. Playful academia and playful academics put forward opportunities for rethinking the very conception of higher education teaching, learning and research (James, 2019; Whitton, 2018; Whitton & Langan, 2018). In particular, there is an emerging recognition for the valuable intersection between playfulness and academia in all its forms and expressions. New forms of academic interactions and experiences become visible through the practice and development of playful higher education. Or amongst students, teachers and researchers forming more play-based and playful communities and practices. The dissatisfaction with performance indicators, micro-management, accountability and efficiency that helped spark the emergence of playful academia, is now growing, and, in effect, helping playfulness as a form of antidote or spread of resistance (Baker et. al, 2018; Deci et. al, 2001; Nørgård et. al. 2017). We can see teachers and researchers across the disciplines coming together to take up

playful practices (e.g. the Playful Learning conference in the UK https://conference.playthinklearn.net/blog/ and Counterplay in Denmark: http://www.counterplay.org), engaging in nationwide initiatives around more playful education (e.g. the Playful Learning project in Denmark: https://playful-learning.dk and the Playful Learning Association – now with over 300 members – in the UK: http://pla.playthinklearn.net/) and sharing understandings and experiences of playful academia in different disciplinary, institutional and national contexts (e.g. the 'Playful Voices of Academia' and the thematic webinar series on 'Playful Higher Education' on the Playful University Platform: https://open-tdm.au.dk/blogs/playuni/). But also, more subversive playfulness in the form of tiny revolts, positive 'irresponsibility' and academic 'uselessness' in an effort to re-claim academic well-being and being well as researchers, teachers and students (Morini, 2016); Nørgård, 2021). The playfulness of higher education institutions and academics are bound together in a common cultural fate. Playful curiosity, playful creativity and playful communality can only be a viable option and become real if such attitudes and approaches are acknowledged and encouraged in institutions and the wider societal contexts, they are part of. As Fink (2016) points out, playful knowing, being and doing can only succeed through playful fellowships in, across and beyond institutions – only then are we truly academically alive and free:

Here a third aspect of the constitution of play can be stated: the fellowship of play. Playing as a fundamental possibility of social existence. Playing as interplay, playing with one another, an intimate form of human community. Playing is, structurally, not an individual or isolated activity – it is open to one's fellow human beings as fellow-players […] *Playing becomes a distinguished – because it is scarcely restricted – possibility of human freedom*. (Fink, 2016, p. 23-26)

Academia and academics become playful, when thoughts, words, actions and voices intermingle and become entangled in each other and the world – and we let others and the world play with and through us (Tsai, 2012; Vadeboncoeur et. al, 2016). When inviting playful experiences and interactions into institutional, academic and societal awareness and practice a potential for academic play imaginaries, playworlds and play companions is realized. Here, higher education institutions can function as exploratorium, experimentarium and collaboratorium for playful academic practice and a sacred, shared and safe space for free thinking, 'useless' research, open knowledge forms and 'magic circles' for alternative teaching and learning (Nørgård, 2021). A productive intermingling of lusory attitudes, ludic interaction and inter-personal play collectives. In other words, the emergence of the playful academic.

However, the field of play and playfulness in higher education still lacks robust theoretical and conceptual foundation (Nørgård, Toft-Nielsen & Whitton, 2017; Whitton 2018, Koeners & Francis, 2020; James &

Nerantzi, 2019; Nørgård, 2021). Even though publications on playful higher education theory, method and practice (like the above) are emerging they are still scarce, scattered and mostly concerned with the practice of playful higher education, activities for playful teaching and learning, case studies on playfulness in higher education or how to design for playfulness. That is, publications concerned with describing, developing or inspiring practice are becoming more widespread, but the theoretical foundations or conceptual frameworks for playful higher education as a field is still in its infancy. This is problematic, as the current lack of philosophical, theoretical and conceptual grounding of play and playfulness entails that:

> *play in adulthood is stigmatised, little understood and lacks a coherent body of research* [...] *without the necessary background in play in adulthood, study of playful learning in higher education becomes even more complex and difficult.* [...] *Associations with play as an activity that is childish, frivolous or inauthentic may limit the motivation of learners - particularly adult learners - to engage with playful learning'* (Whitton, 2018, p. 9)

Accordingly, this special issue presents an important step towards a more conceptual, theoretical and methodological consideration of playful higher education. This requires, firstly, the development of thinking, concepts, language, discourse, frames and formats, secondly, the advancement of methods and processes for playful higher education of. Playful academics and playful higher education come together in instances of "playing at", "playing with" and "playing through" academia.

DEVELOPING AND ADVANCING THE FIELD OF PLAYFUL HIGHER EDUCATION – TOGETHER

The contributions on this special issue tackle head on the theme of playful higher education and the playful academic in multifaceted, diverse, but complementary, ways. As a whole they present a polyphonic and kaleidoscopic approach to playful academia and the playful academic: Playfulness as academic practice (James), playful educational experiences (Møller & Skov), playful research methods and practices (Lübbbert, González-Fernández & Heimann), teachers as playful academics (Dean & Parson), playful research (Hunsinger) and a philosophical approach to academia as a plaything (Linde). Together they represent important steps towards a more robust theoretical and methodological underpinnings of this nascent field as well as great hope for a more playful future for academics and institutions alike.

In the article "Play in research? Yes it is "proper" practice" **Alison James** presents an the appropriacy of play for research through an investigation of 'how people play', 'why people use play for scholarship and research' and 'when play won't work'. In James' article numerous themes and reasons are given by the respondents involved in the study – e.g. to critique the status quo, to re-energise practice and carve out new

ways of thinking, as connection to ideas, each other, themselves or the wider world or to nurture intuition and emotional intelligence . The article concludes with a number of recommendations to playful academics and institutions. Such as discussing and applying play theory in research activity, reassuring academics that they have permission to research playfully, allowing for a spectrum of play and playful practices as well as experimenting with free play practices and normalising the integration of play in academic life. Accordingly, the article gives important insights into the roles and positions playful academics and institutions can take in higher education.

Hasse Møller and **Signe Smedegaard Skov** build on domain-specific theories and case studies on play and higher education to develop a model that fuses views on education and play. In the article, "Education as Framed Sense-Making: A Design Based Research contribution to the theory and practice of play in higher education", three perspectives on educational experience are explored as connections between play and higher education: academic content as fact, as toy and as tool. The model was tested and iterated in a teacher training course and based on a rapid scoping review of the literature on play in higher education. Based on the review they found two modes of play in higher education: play as separation and play as correspondence. In the first mode, play is not regarded as valuable educational experience in itself, but as supportive structures for learning. Here, play is imported as a tool for fixing problems and being a midwife for learning within the educational system. In the second mode, play can be considered a collective attitude towards content that supports and promotes relevant frames of experience. This approach turned play away from the means to the ends, by valuing play on a broader pedagogical and human level. Here, play is embedded in ideas about how education should be approached, how experience should be formed and how humans engage with a world of content. As a whole, the article contributes with significant frameworks and distinctions in relation to the modes (separation or correspondence) and roles (fact, toy or tool) that play can take within higher education.

In "From What Is to What If to Let's Try: a Treasure-Box for the Playful Academic", **Annika Lübbert, Pedro González-Fernández** and **Katrin Heimann** presents and discuss a set of concrete activities to support playfulness in everyday academia. The article documents this through protocols, empirical evaluations and supporting documents that make the results available to other academics. This work resulted in 'The Protocol for the Playful Academic' - a set of concrete suggestions to support more sensitive and playful academic work. The protocol scaffolds unconventional interactions across personal and interpersonal dimensions. One outcome of engaging academia through the protocol was greater satisfaction with the academic profession and work, stronger intrinsic motivation and the courage to continue to challenge and surprise oneself. The protocol was evaluated and tested with researchers from sociology, anthropology, media science, art, philosophy, cognitive science, physics, music and dance. The article draws on contact improvisation, listening circles, somatic education, micro-phenomenology and improvisational theatre to build a protocol for playful academics. The protocol consists of six activities that help inquire into everyday

playful academia: 'Drawing in Circles', 'Drawing from Toe to Ceiling', 'Each of Us and All Together', 'Triangulating space', 'Reading between the Concepts', 'Creative Nonfiction' and 'Diamonds in the Raw'. In this way, the article contributes with both theoretical and methodological frameworks for how to work intentionally with scaffolding and promoting playfulness in everyday academia.

Belinda J. Dean and **Judi A. Parson** considers how playful andragogy may lead to improved educational outcomes by including the art and science of play therapy techniques within teaching scholarship. In "Integrating play-based approaches into nursing education: Teachers as playful academics" it is hypothesised that the use of a humanistic stance with playful engagement such as, projective small world play, can facilitate optimal teaching conditions in the higher education sector. Specifically, the article presents how play-based approaches in higher education can foster emotional wellness, enhance social relationships and increase personal strengths. Through considering different types of play and playful interactions – embodiment play, projective play and role play – the article highlights how these can support different areas of personal identity – physical identity, emotional identity and role identity. This is done to show how play and playfulness can enhance learning through creating neurobiological safety within the teaching and learning environment. As such, the article contributes with a theoretical and methodological approach to how contemporary experiential, culturally safe, transformative learning approaches to teaching with creative, interpersonal, relational, play pedagogies and andragogy can be integrated within higher education institutions.

In the article "Toward a critical theory of playful research in the internet age: exploring playful research in Second Life, Minecraft, and Hackerspaces/Makerspaces", **Jeremy Hunsinger** engages the development of a critical theory of playful research as an intrinsic part of research ecologies. Hunsinger makes a case for how research can be joyful, liberating and transgressive in its pursuit of knowledge, illuminating how play occurs in a wide variety of knowledge spaces, and in producing a wide variety of knowledges. Presenting illustrative examples from research in Second Life, Minecraft, and on maker-/hackerspaces, the paper engages the relation between knowledge creation and play. Here, play is positioned as a realm of liberatory escape. Through combining an ecological perspective from Gregory Bateson, Felix Guattari and Miguel Sicart with critical theory, the article centers on play as liberating, also in research processes. Here, it is asserted, the ecological model of play contravenes the encapsulation of play by capitalism, allowing the article to develop critical models of play working against 'playbour' and gamification that are viewed as instrumental to capital. Overall, the article presents playfulness as the joy of learning through engaging with technical systems or hegemonic paradigms, building them, designing them, using them, hacking them, playing them, and sometimes destroying them. In its co-construction, playful research also allows for the creation of new paradigms and the scaffolding of playful knowledge communities.

The special issue concludes with a philosophical article by **Bill Michael Linde**, "The Well-Being of Play in Academia. Inquiring the concept of agalma in Plato's dialogues", that examines Plato's concept of 'agalma' –

the beautiful ornament of wisdom – through which the article discusses how academia can be seen as a jewellery box; a plaything. This is done with an analysis of a selection of Plato's myths, allegories, and imagery, which the article 'plays with' and 'plays through' in a playful, synecdochic form. Linde introduces the Apollonian structure and Dionysian chaos. Together the interweaving of the two help to imagine and present things in new and unexpected ways. To dig deeper into 'the well of play' in academia, this the philosophical concepts of regionalization and *de*-regionalization, actuality and non-actuality, Apollo and Dionysus, ludus and paidia and agalma and amalga are introduced. These are described as concepts that creates a 'to-and-fro-movement' in academic thinking that help us grasp and grapple with the inexhaustible well from which play springs. Through the conceptual framework, play is posited as an alternative to modern scientific method. Here, the playful academic is not just repeating or confirming existing knowledge, or blindly following dogmatic procedures of academia. By virtue of openness to '*Erfahrung der Nichtigkeit*' the playful academic becomes prepared to take chances and immerse into the whirlpool of unexplored material. Furthermore, the article challenges the reader as it is philosophically playful in both content and form. It takes the reader on a journey through Plato's dialogues, philosophical thinking, evocative tales and asks the reader to play along, play in and play through the text.

 Through the development of the present special issue on 'The Playful Academic', it has been an enormous honour and privilege to work with strong researchers into playful academia and playful higher education, who we have enjoyed playing with because of their academic work and research, which always has a playful note. Also, we admire them because they are playful in their academic being and becoming, in their research and learning as well as making this special issue come to life. The articles in this special issue contribute in diverse, but complementary, ways to the theoretical formation of the field.

From a playfulness as academic and institutional practice, to playful research methods and practices. From connections between play and educational experiences, to teachers as playful academic beings. And from playful research as part of research ecologies, to philosophical play and playful academic thinking. Thank you for inspiring us and creating such a prismatic and inspirational issue on the playful academic and playful higher education. We could not have hoped for a better contribution and foundation for the upcoming special issue of The Journal of Play in Adulthood on 'Designs for Playful Higher Education'

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