

# Editorial

We're pleased to present this special issue, Learning through Play and Games, at a time when interest in play-based learning and game-based learning is growing in many New Zealand schools. The issue responds to the level of teacher enthusiasm and exploration that is increasingly visible in educational discussions and media commentaries. This special issue aims to contribute a research-informed perspective on pedagogies associated with play and/or games by sharing findings and reflections from research projects and practitioner inquiries across a range of settings and focuses. It does not, and can not, represent a definitive evidence base on the benefits or pitfalls of playing or gaming. Instead it adds to—and hopefully generates—a thoughtful, reflective, data-informed conversation. We believe this is a much-needed contribution in Aotearoa.

Both play and games have been studied and theorised about extensively over the last hundred years, through many disciplinary lenses—human learning and development, psychology, neuroscience, anthropology, cultural studies, mathematics and statistics, history, and animal behaviour—to name but a few. Yet despite the substantive multidisciplinary literature associated with both games and play, and their commonsense acceptance as foundations for early years learning (noting that Aotearoa has a strong early childhood research base in this regard), opportunities to learn through games and play may reduce as learners spend more of their time focussed on “serious” work at school.

The notion that games and play are childish, frivolous, or something to grow out of runs deep in modern western culture. Dutch historian and cultural theorist Johan Huizinga was one of the first theorists to critically study games and play in human culture, and outlined an argument about how and why a cultural division between games/play and “seriousness” took hold in Western culture. Huizinga was responsible for revitalising the word the classical Latin word for games—*ludus*—in his book *Homo Ludens*, first published in 1938. The word derives from *ludere* which has several meanings, including play, game, pastime, sport, fun, and school.<sup>1</sup> Huizinga noted that many modern languages

don't have one word that covers all different forms of play or playfulness. Instead, they have many different words that connote different kinds of play, for example differentiating between games of competition versus more free-flowing activities like hopping, skipping, or dancing, or the sense of joking, jesting, or being light-hearted in one's engagement with an activity. The Latin word *ludus* therefore stood out to Huizinga in that it seems to cover the “whole field of play”, covering “games, recreation, contests, liturgical and theatrical representations, and games of chance” (Huizinga, 1949, p. 35). That so many facets of human activity were connected through this language of play was notable to Huizinga.

Huizinga's central thesis in *Homo Ludens* was that play is both older than culture (noting that animals of many kinds engage in play), and a necessary condition for the generation of culture. Huizinga argued that various aspects of human culture and civilisation emerged from forms of play, including sports, various forms of the arts, religion, politics, and war. Over time, activities that were once playful became increasingly codified, systematised, structured, and “serious”. Play, he argued, is the more fundamental concept than seriousness, “for seriousness seeks to exclude play, whereas play can very well include seriousness” (p. 45).

French theorist Roger Callois (1961) built on Huizinga's work to advance a more detailed theory about the relationship between play and games. He introduced the term *paidia*, meaning spontaneous, open-ended freeplay, to distinguish it from *ludus*, meaning games that are governed by specific defined rules, and proposed that *ludus* and *paidia* occupy different ends of a play continuum.

This special issue has contributions that sit on both sides of the *paidia* (play) to *ludus* (games) continuum. The truth about games and play is that despite their simple, childlike surface features, both of these domains are theoretically and philosophically complex. Far from being “too frivolous” to focus on in educational research, we believe they are often overlooked because they become too hard to research and write about in ways that do justice to the subject matter.

## Why focus on games and their place in learning?

While many young people enjoy games and gaming, some games—particularly digital games—provoke a range of adult anxieties, including concerns that digital games are distracting, time-wasting, addictive, or promote unsavoury content. On the other hand, some educators see games and game design as a gateway for building learners' digital fluency. Recognising the power of games to engage players and sustain their attention, some educators have become interested in “gamifying” learning. What do educators need to know about games, gamification, and game design in order to use their affordances effectively in the classroom?

Rachel Bolstad begins by outlining some of the big ideas that have helped her to make sense of over 3 years of research on games, game design, and gamification in New Zealand classrooms. She suggests that many educators may be missing out on the wealth of knowledge about games and game design (and by extension, learning) that exists in the world, but often outside the learning communities of educators. Examples from New Zealand classrooms show what is possible when learners and teachers open the door to games, and have the tools, knowledge, and willingness to unpack and work with the learning affordances of games.

In the next article, Ruth Lemon and Rich Durham demonstrate what can be achieved when a game designer and an educator work together to design innovative game-based learning. Their dialogue describes the design of a bespoke tabletop learning game for Bachelor of Education students, which aimed to enrich students' critical thinking about Māori–Pākehā relationships, contextualised within the story of the Māori-led establishment of a school in Rangihoua in 1816.

We are pleased to include an international contribution to our games section. Peter Hourdequin and colleagues had an ambitious goal at their Japanese University: to break down the silos between faculties, and engage students in complex, real-world, action-oriented education for sustainability through the creation of an interdisciplinary game lab open to all students. As their article demonstrates, even if a game-based learning innovation is only partially successful in its first iteration, it can provide valuable learning and feedforward for further iterations. Their piece also highlights some of the bigger structural challenges that we face in seeking to educate students for a complex future.

## Why focus on play and its role in learning?

Play has always been an important component of New Zealand's early childhood education, where it is respected

as an age-appropriate pedagogy intended to lay the foundations for lifelong learning. There is now—as at certain times in our past—growing popularity in learning through play within the junior primary years as educators come to value its potential for smoothing transition to school and enabling a familiar style of education that focuses attention on dispositions for learning. Here teachers are grappling with questions such as what ideally constitutes play in a classroom environment? And what exactly is the teacher's role in play based learning? At the same time play within “learning time” may not sit comfortably in all schools, nor does it necessarily flow smoothly into senior primary or secondary education. Underlying these uncertainties are another set of questions about how child development and education relate to one another: does “age and stage” development predispose certain age groups to particular learning styles and capabilities? And/or do different types of learning opportunities drive children's development, perhaps realising untapped potential or moving students beyond what might otherwise be expected? The play articles in this collection stimulate our thinking around such questions, each informed by the author's theory and research base.

Keryn Davis first offers a historically and theoretically informed overview of play and play-based learning in New Zealand. She draws from her research across a number of schools to argue that “teachers are the ‘makers’ of the play culture in their classrooms and thus need to reflect on their assumptions about what learning matters, and how best to elicit complex learning capabilities to make the most of the opportunities play presents as a mode of learning” (p. 31).

Bevan Holloway, a secondary teacher and Dr Vince Ham eFellow, disrupts the common association between play and the early years through a research project in his Year 11 English class. His findings demonstrate that students can continue to learn through play as they engage with a more complex curriculum. Bevan also experimented with several assessment solutions, fit for both NCEA and play pedagogy, and found value in writing learning stories for teenagers.

The final two research papers on play arise from the first authors' postgraduate studies, written in collaboration with university academics. Jess Milne and Tara Mclauchlan examine the role of the teacher in play-based learning through video observation and interviews. They build from an understanding of intentional teachers being “thoughtful, deliberate, purposeful, and planful in their supports for child learning” (p. 45). Mandie Blucher, Karyn Aspden, and Jayne Jackson explore different perspectives on play-based learning within one school via interviews with students, parents, teachers, and a school leader. Perspectives were both affirming and

corroborating, perhaps surprisingly so given the concern that parents' expectations of a "good education" can sometimes run contrary to play pedagogies. The authors conclude that "a collective, philosophical belief in the value of play in supporting children's learning is essential ... so that wrap-around organisational and professional learning supports can be established, and challenges minimised" (p. 57).

In He Whakaaro Anō, Auckland University's inaugural Professor of Early Childhood Education (ECE) Helen Hedges extends an invitation for primary schools to collaborate with the ECE sector while pursuing a research-informed, critical, and inquiring approach to the development of play based learning for over 5 year olds.

## Reflections on practice

We're pleased to include a series of reflections on practice from teachers and leaders experienced in developing learning through play or games in their schools. First Tara O'Neil, founder of the lively Learning through Play Facebook group, shares her pedagogical transformation from instructional teaching to play-based learning. Her article concentrates how she came to support junior primary students to learn to write through play. Tara makes it clear that play wasn't her starting point. Instead she sought to make writing authentic and engaging and was drawn to play—through her reading and inquiry—as "a developmentally appropriate way of building an engaging and authentic community to learn in" (p. 68).

Vicki Hiini and her counterparts from several schools in the Western Bay of Plenty introduce their network that works together to develop learning through play across the region. The authors outline a definition of play and the sorts of common practices that unite the schools. They also provide insight into the range of play "saturation" occurring across schools, differing approaches to assessment, and the needs and challenges that arise across contexts.

In the games arena, Simon Christie is likely to inspire many teachers with his clear explanation of how his school reconceived a Year 7 First Crest project as a quest, drawing on elements of live action role playing (LARP) and gamification.

Next, Marianne Malmstrom reflects on some of the deep shifts in her thinking and practice that have come about through her journey into game-based learning practice, first in the United States, and now in New Zealand. Those who are completely new to game-based learning, or uncertain how to navigate pedagogies in a game-using classroom, may benefit from a careful and close reading of the five big lessons she has learned along the way.

Sandra Silcock and Helen Mackenzie round out our collection of practice reflections, describing how they co-taught a unit that wove together a learning focus on music and digital technologies in the context of game design. Readers may be inspired by their school's innovative approaches to curriculum integration and pedagogies that involve co-teaching large groups of students in a flexible learning environment.

We complete the special issue with Q&A. Harko Brown shares a heartfelt vision for tākaro and mara hūpara as conduits for creating and sustaining a peaceful, loving, and harmonious society. The games and play he describes often use natural materials or objects the players might easily find or make. The games and play he describes are woven with stories and histories that provide pathways to deeper connections: to whakapapa, to natural and spiritual worlds, and between peoples from different cultures and traditions.

It is our hope that this Learning through Play and Games special issue will add to teachers' knowledge base and their practice toolkit. We also hope it might add impetus to more academic research and practitioner inquiry in the area, ideally with more to be shared through *Set* in the upcoming months and years. We welcome further contributions on the topic as practice deepens over time.

*Rachel Bolstad (Guest Editor) and Josie Roberts (Set Editor)*

## Note

- 1 The modern word *school* derives from the Latin word *schola*, but in ancient Roman times, children up to the age of 11 attended *ludus* where they would learn, amongst other things, mathematics, reading, writing, and poetry

## References

- Callois, R. (1961). *Man, play, and games*. New York, NY: Free Press of Glencoe.
- Huizinga, J. (1949). *Homo ludens: A study of the play-element in culture*. : Routledge.